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TOWARD RESPECTFUL UNDERSTANDING & WITNESS AMONG MUSLIMS

*Essays in Honor of
J. Dudley Woodberry*

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Christian Attitudes toward Islam and Muslims: A Kerygmatic Approach

BY MARTIN ACCAD

With widespread mutual misunderstandings and misrepresentations that inform contemporary thinking between Christianity and Islam, East and West, there reigns an atmosphere of fear in many circles with regard to Christian-Muslim dialogue. Dialogue has often become a dirty word that insinuates either syncretism or polemics. But between these two extremes, are there any other viable positions on a spectrum of Christian-Muslim interaction? The purpose of this chapter is to propose a balanced, suprarreligious approach to Christian-Muslim interaction, which will be called *kerygmatic* interaction.

Fear of Dialogue Today

The word dialogue today is often misunderstood, whether it is used in so-called conservative or more liberal or secular milieus. The conservative will view it as inevitably leading to syncretism, whereas the liberal will fear that it be used as a vehicle for polemics. The religious will fear to engage in dialogue, lest it forces them to compromise, whereas the secular will shun it as a platform for the assertion of exclusion. The relativist will use dialogue to flatten out differences, whereas the absolutist will use it to demonstrate the superiority of their own views.

I would like to suggest, however, that these two opposite positions stand in fact at the ends of a spectrum of potential positions and attitudes. Christian interaction with Islam need not be limited to a position of either syncretism or polemics. In fact, these two extremes hardly qualify as dialogue, since the first abolishes the distinction between two legitimate dialogical partners, and the second is too engaged in self-affirmation to be able to practice any form of listening. As such, both these extreme positions belong to the category of monologue

since no dialogical partner is ever seriously engaged. Since these two positions do exist on the spectrum, I am calling the continuum a Spectrum of Christian-Muslim Interaction rather than Christian-Muslim Dialogue, in order to preserve the neutrality of the engagement. In this chapter I will describe the various positions on the spectrum, giving particular focus to the middle position, the kerygmatic interaction, in an attempt to help the reader develop a balanced attitude to the Islamic realities that are becoming more and more part of our global world, East and West.

Interaction between Christians and Muslims should no longer be viewed as one option among many. In the midst of religious and political conflicts that are continually and increasingly challenging the world we live in, the question should no longer be whether dialogue is necessary but rather what kind of dialogue needs to be carried out between the peoples of the world.¹

The Urgency to Witness and the Challenges We Both Face

Given the sociopolitical importance of Christian-Muslim engagement, a topic in itself, the urgency of dialogue lies particularly in the fact that both religions are in essence mission-minded. Christians and Muslims cannot properly be called Christian and Muslim if they do not engage in witness to the world, including to each other. The Qur'an defines Muhammad's message as a universal message addressed to all of creation: "Verily this is no less than a Message to (all) the Worlds: (With profit) to whoever among you wills to go straight" (at-Takwīr [81]:27, 28 Yusuf Ali).

Qur'anic verses like the one above contain a clear summons to the Islamic *umma* (community) to spread the message of Islam to the entire world. Likewise, the Gospels are clear on this point as well, particularly in the famous passage known as the Great Commission. The message of Jesus also is to be proclaimed throughout the world:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt 28:18–20 NIV)

Both Christians and Muslims need legitimately to be able to proclaim and testify to the message that they have received with neither aggressiveness nor fear of reprisal, but rather in an atmosphere of mutual respect, love, and humility. It is no secret, however, that a Muslim who would turn away from Islam and adopt Christianity as his or her religion is going to

¹ Before reading any further, I recommend taking the *Test of Attitude to Islam and Muslims* (TAIM), which is found as Exhibit 1 (with its key as Exhibit 2) at the end of this chapter. The remainder of the chapter builds on the test results.

face, in most cases, some severe reprisals. Even though the Qur^ʿan is not explicit about this, all the major legal schools of Islam down through history have been unanimous on the fate of the so-called *apostate*. They must technically face the death penalty. Although such a penalty has seldom been implemented, it must be pointed out that the legal prescription is clearly challenged by Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; *this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief*, and freedom either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.²

Christians are also met with a serious challenge today when attempting to witness in a Muslim context. The message that the media and leadership—political and religious—set forth is one that either demonizes or idealizes Islam. In the Christian church context, the attitude is more often one of demonization. Christians have always advocated that we are to love sinners but hate sin. This is a moral distinction that is fairly easy to maintain, as it is accompanied by the notion that we are all sinners outside the grace of God. However, there is today a parallel notion, which is spreading alarmingly fast, that we are to love Muslims but hate Islam. This notion is disturbing, for it is a very short step from the demonization of Islam and Muslims altogether. In reality, one observes that most people are unable to maintain such a theoretical separation between an ideology and its adherents. The premise of the present chapter is the following:

Your *view* of Islam will affect your *attitude* to Muslims. Your *attitude* will, in turn, influence your *approach* to Christian-Muslim interaction, and that *approach* will affect the ultimate *outcome* of your presence as a witness among Muslims.

How then do we develop a *view*, an understanding, of Islam that will foster in us the right attitude and approach in order for our relationships to be fruitful? It is in the context of reflecting over this question that I have developed what I now call “The SEKAP Spectrum of Christian-Muslim Interaction.” SEKAP is an acronym that abbreviates the five dialogical positions identified along the spectrum (D1–D5): Syncretistic, Existential, Kerygmatic, Apologetic, and Polemical. The five positions were further defined by asking ten questions: (1) What is my view of religions generally? (2) What is my understanding of Islam? (3) How do I view Muhammad? (4) What is my perception of the Qur^ʿan? (5) How do I view Muslims? (6) What is my opinion about their eternal destiny? (7) Why do I relate to Muslims at all? (8) What approaches do I adopt? (9) What outcomes may I expect? (10) How much

2 Emphasis mine. See <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>.

knowledge of Islam does this require on my part? The *Test of Attitude to Islam and Muslims* (TAIM) was developed based on these ten questions.³

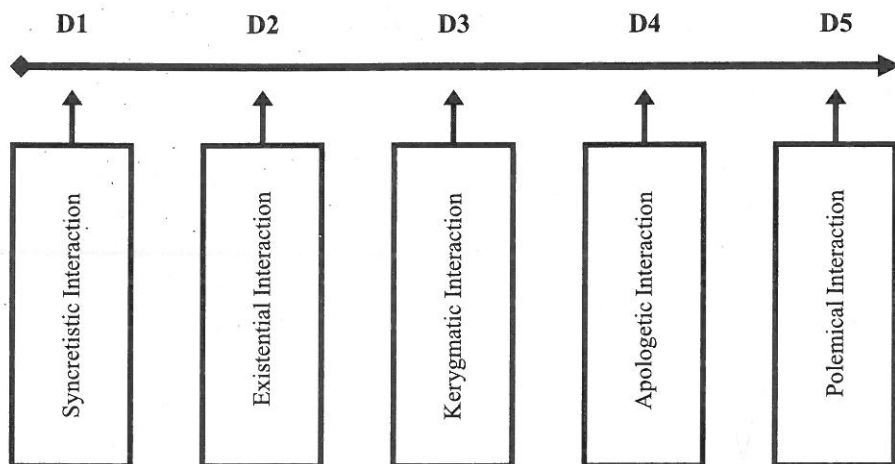


Figure 1: The SEKAP Spectrum of Christian-Muslim Interaction

The Syncretistic Approach to Christian-Muslim Interaction: All Roads Lead to Mecca

In his conclusion to a chapter on Christianity and other religions, theologian John Hick cites from the Hindu Bhagavad Gītā: “Let me then end with a quotation from one of the great revelatory scriptures of the world: ‘Howsoever man may approach me, even so do I accept them; for, on all sides, whatever path they may choose is mine.’”⁴

The fact that Hick has to resort to a citation from outside the Christian Scripture to summarize his pluralist view begs the question as to how Christian his position actually is. Syncretism differs from pluralism. Pluralism is a category with primary concern for the question of salvation, whereas syncretism is an approach to religions that more comprehensively treats their various aspects, in addition to salvation, with a desire to reconcile their differences.⁵ Syncretism relativizes differences between religions, whereas pluralism emphasizes the cultural particularity of each religious system while affirming their objective equality. As a general, all-inclusive, attitude toward other religions—and here particularly regarding the attitude of Christians and Christianity toward Muslims and Islam—I have

³ See Exhibits 1 and 2 at the end of this chapter.

⁴ John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, eds., *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 190.

⁵ The clear focus and concern for salvation inherently present in these different views is evident, for example, in the very title of Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

therefore chosen to call the approach to Christian-Muslim interaction at the D1 end of the spectrum syncretism rather than pluralism.

Whereas the syncretistic approach to Islam would consider all religions on an equal par, it would also be somewhat suspicious of all religions, viewing them as a potential obstacle to peace between individuals, communities, and eventually between nations. At the same time, this position would consider that the positive contribution of religions lies mainly in the moral standards that they can instill in individuals within their societies. In that view, Islam is primarily seen as a sociopolitical phenomenon like any other successful religious movement of human history. Muhammad is considered to have been a sociopolitical leader who knew how to use his contemporary economic and historical realities to the advantage of his community and personal ends. The Qur'an is viewed as a literary achievement of Muhammad himself or some of his entourage, which the prophet of Islam used in order to impress a society that was strongly attracted to poetic literature. And in that light, Muslims would be simply considered to be adherents of a religious ideology in the same way as other religious peoples.

Syncretistic interaction is carried out with the purpose of inviting Muslims to be a positive part of a multicultural and multireligious universal humanity in all of its rich plurality. This is done by relativizing religious differences by dialoguing primarily about social, economic, and political topics, without necessarily requiring any deep knowledge of Islam. Due to the secular nature of this dialogue, it will generally take place among lay or secular scholars who may belong to various religious communities. This type of dialogue is likely to alienate religious leaders on either side.

Although this type of dialogue may offer some helpful scholarly perspectives on religion, chiefly adopting a history-of-religions approach, no deep impact into the day-to-day relationships of communities at the grass roots will be achieved. For it is generally the religious leaders that are most influential at the popular level of a culture that is religious to the core.

The *Polemical* Approach to Christian-Muslim Interaction: Seek and Destroy

Polemical interaction between Christianity and Islam stands at the other end of the spectrum. The word "polemical" comes from the Greek word *polemos*, which simply means "war." The polemical approach to Christian-Muslim interaction is precisely that approach that adopts warlike strategies in relating to the other religion, where one seeks to destroy and uproot the tenets of another in order to replace them with one's own. Many examples of this approach are found in the history of interaction between Christianity and Islam. One of the most ancient and classical ones is the treatment of Islam by John of Damascus, a Graeco-Arab Eastern church father of the eighth century (675–753), whose father was a medical doctor at the court of the Umayyad caliph. John of Damascus dealt with Islam at the end of his treatise *Against Heresies*, calling it the heresy of the Ishmaelites.

The polemical approach will generally hold a triumphalist view of Christianity in total exclusion of other religions. The ideology promoted is often a highly institutionalized form of Christianity, the religious substitute to Islam. All other worldviews are seen as simply wrong and as having nothing good to offer to Christians through dialogue. In this view, Islam is viewed as an evil and a thorn in the flesh of Christianity. Early such approaches gave rise to an apocalyptic genre of literature that considered that God had allowed the emergence of Islam as a punishment for the complacency of Christians. As bearer of that religion, Muhammad is viewed as having been possessed by demons, an Antichrist whose mission was to deceive all people. The Qur'an was consequently inspired by the devil and is full of lies and deceit, to the point that merely reading it renders a person unclean. As a result, Muslims are the deceived followers of a religion that will lead them to hell.⁶

The chief reason why a Christian holding that view would seek to engage Islam is often to demonstrate to Muslims that Islam is false and deceitful. The message is communicated by accentuating religious differences and proclaiming that Muslims will go to hell if they do not reject Islam. A variant to this aggressive proclamation is often a loss of interest in evangelism altogether, with the consideration that Muslims are not even worthy to hear the gospel.

The most likely outcome of such a discourse is aggressive reaction. At the same time, promoters of this approach will often justify it by pointing out that many Muslims are being won to Christianity. That does seem to be the case through such TV programs as those of Coptic priest Zakaria Botros.⁷ Yet the cost in terms of intercommunal conflict is high, and the converts either have to remain secret Christians or have to be extracted out of their societies to avoid being harmed, leading to the accentuation of the chasm between religious communities. Those engaged in such an approach will often be quite convincing to the listener or reader, since they will have acquired a very thorough knowledge of all the weaknesses and problems in Islam. Though the negative outcomes of this approach will probably mark religious communities in the Muslim world for decades, it can nevertheless not be dismissed altogether. The nagging reality is that numerous Muslim converts to Christianity are staunch supporters of Father Zakaria, for he undoubtedly gives a voice to their repressed frustration that has resulted quite frankly from numerous experiences of oppression and persecution by their families, community, and governments. As we consider this approach as evangelical Christians driven by God's call to mission, however, we also have to keep in mind the very serious consideration that no one openly using the polemical approach will be able to maintain a transparent presence in the Muslim world.

6 Two striking examples of this kind of approach are the ninth century Byzantine writers Nicetas of Byzantium and George Hamartolos. The first begins by calling the Qur'an "abominable" and "barbarous," and Muhammad "perverse," "bestial," and possessing the "perversity of Satan" (J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia graeca*, vol. 105). The latter ends up referring to Muslims as "men whose slimy souls would befit pigs" (Migne, *Patrologia graeca*, vol. 110).

7 <http://www.fatherzakaria.net/>.

The *Existential* Approach to Christian-Muslim Interaction: Fostering Societies of Diversity

At the D2 end of the spectrum of attitudes regarding dialogue one would find the existential approach to interaction. I use the term existential here in a nontechnical and nonphilosophical sense, as it pertains to human existence. At the same time, existentialism as a philosophy, whether theistic or atheistic, arose in skeptic reaction to the affirmation of the primacy of reason.⁸ In that sense, the use of the term in the present context is appropriate, since that approach to Christian-Muslim interaction has as its primary focus sociological rather than theological concerns. The concerns are existential rather than rational. The questions asked by this approach are: How can adherents of both Christianity and Islam live better side by side? How can they acquire the level of tolerance that will promote peace rather than conflict among them? How can we build a better society for the future, which respects pluralism and diversity?

In this type of Christian-Muslim interaction, religions are distinctively defined and differentiated, but Christ may be seen as not the only way to God and salvation. For those who engage in existential interaction, goodness and morality are the essence of all religions. This position will allow for a more significant divine role in the emergence of religions. In this view, Islam is a religion that originated from God, but like all religions, it underwent many human influences as well. If Muhammad did receive to some degree a divine calling to be God's Prophet to the Arabs, then the Qur'an contains substantial elements of the divine truth and is to be respected as Scripture. Therefore, in the end, those Muslims who have been faithful Muslims will be saved.

Christians who engage in this type of interaction will do so in order to encourage mutual social and religious understanding and tolerance between Christian and Muslim communities. In order to achieve this end, they will interact at social, economic, and political levels, affirming common ground and avoiding divisive issues. It can be expected that some positive transformation of mutual perceptions and relationships will ensue from this dialogue, as well as greater tolerance and appreciation between religious communities. At least some knowledge of the broad lines of Islam is necessary at that level. An excellent example of this approach can be seen in the Second Vatican Council, where the view of other religions was primarily expounded by the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner. In its 1965 Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, the council declared:

If in the course of the centuries there has arisen not infrequent dissension and hostility between Christian and Muslim, this sacred Council now urges everyone to forget the past, to make sincere efforts at mutual understand-

⁸ For existentialism as a philosophy, see for example Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), s.v. "Existentialism," by John Macquarrie.

ing and to work together in protecting and promoting for the benefit of all men, social justice, good morals as well as peace and freedom.⁹

The conciliatory tone of this statement is evident. It results from the recognition of a long history of conflict between Christianity and Islam. With its focus on the promotion of social justice and good morals, peace and freedom, it typically represents this level of existential interaction.

The *Apologetic* Approach to Christian-Muslim Interaction: Drawing from the Wealth of History

There is much in the New Testament to justify adopting a fourth type of interaction that I have called apologetic interaction (D4). The Apostle Paul uses that approach numerous times in his epistles as a tool for the confirmation of the gospel, and Peter makes the famous exhortation to “always be prepared to give an answer (*apologia*) to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” Significantly, he adds in the same breath, “but do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Pt 3:15 NIV). That approach, then, should not so much be defensive, with the negative undertones of the English usage of the term. But rather it should be used as a tool to clarify and clear out misconceptions regarding the Christian faith. In the Gospels, the only place where a Greek form of the term is used is in Jesus’ two sending discourses in Luke 12:11 and 21:14. Jesus exhorts his disciples not to linger on what defense (*apologia*) they will present to those who arrest them, for God will give them in time the words of wisdom that they need.

The main problem of this approach is the way that it has been used historically, locking up the discourse of both Christians and Muslims in generally sterile arguments that were passed along over the centuries. By the eleventh century, as I have demonstrated elsewhere,¹⁰ what we keep coming across is a relentless repetition of the same arguments on both sides, often reflecting even a literary borrowing of age-old arguments. As I have shown, by that time the conversation based on Christian and Muslim Scriptures is taken out of any original interpretive endeavor, leading to extreme eisegesis rather than proper exegesis, to the point where the discourse emerges at best as two separate monologues.

Essentially, this position holds that there is one ultimate Truth: God. Judaism and Christianity are the only divinely established religions, and Christ who is at the center of Christianity is the only way to salvation. Islam is viewed as a human phenomenon whose

⁹ Hick and Hebblethwaite, *Christianity and Other Religions*, 82–83.

¹⁰ Martin Accad, “Corruption and/or Misinterpretation of the Bible: The Story of the Islamic Usage of *Tahrif*,” *The Near East School of Theology Theological Review* 24, no. 2 (2003); M. Accad, “The Gospels in the Muslim Discourse of the Ninth to the Fourteenth Century: An Exegetical Inventorial Table (Parts I–IV),” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 14, no. 1 (2003); and M. Accad, “The Interpretation of John 20:17 in Muslim-Christian Dialogue (8th–14th Centuries): The Ultimate Proof-Text,” in *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2003).

understanding of God is misleading, due to the fact that Muhammad himself was misled. The phenomenon of Qur'anic revelation perhaps reflects that Muhammad had some psychological problems that led him to believe that he had received a prophetic calling. Hence, the Qur'an is a plagiarism of the Bible and contains many mistakes and inaccuracies. Within that framework, Muslims are being misled by a worldly religion that drives them away from the worship of the true God.

In this type of interaction, Christians will engage with Muslims solely for the purpose of evangelism, seeking to demonstrate to them the truth of Christianity and to refute the validity of Islam. Primary methods used are public debates that make heavy use of apologetic arguments, as well as a reliance on apologetics and polemics in private attempts to convert Muslims to Christianity. Although some Muslims will be convinced to become Christians under the influence of heavy apologetic demonstrations of the truth of Christianity, circular argumentation should be expected due to the long history of learned arguments and counterarguments on both sides. Both Christians and Muslims at that level will often study and memorize standard answers to age-old questions.

The *Kerygmatic* Approach to Christian-Muslim Interaction: The Gospel as God Proclaimed It

Finally, we come to the kerygmatic level of interaction which, I believe, has the potential of being most fruitful for Christ's gospel as good news and most conducive to peace in our age of great conflicts. Without dismissing the other four approaches altogether, I believe that it is through this kerygmatic approach that we will be able to think the most Christlike about Islam and Muslims. "Kerygmatic" comes from the Greek word *kerygma* and the verb *kerysso*, more often found in the Gospels in the form of the present participle *kerysson* (proclaiming). The *kerygma* in the New Testament is both the act of proclaiming and the proclamation itself. It is connected with the proclamation of God's good news concerning repentance, the kingdom, and Jesus—first by John the Baptist (Matt 3:1; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3), then by Jesus himself (Matt 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:14,39; Luke 4:4; 8:1), and later by the disciples in the book of Acts (20:25; 28:31). One significant characteristic of the *kerygma* in the Apostle Paul's usage of the term is that it is not designed to be enticing through the use of wise human words, but rather relies entirely on the power of God's Spirit (1 Cor 2:4). This is why Paul entreats Timothy to proclaim (*keryxon*) the message in season and out of season (2 Tim 4:2). And when he finds himself before the tribunal in Rome, even though the session is officially supposed to be his first defense (*en te prote mou apologia*) (2 Tim 4:16), he considers it an opportunity for the proclamation (*kerygma*) to be heard fully by all the Gentiles (2 Tim 4:17).¹¹

11 On the various meanings of the concept, both inside and outside of the biblical text, see Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds.; Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Eng. trans., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), s.v. "Kerygma," by Gerhard Friedrich.

I want to retain from this Pauline usage the difference between the *kerygma* and the *apologia*, the difference in attitude between an apologetic defense of one's beliefs on the one hand, and a positive proclamation of it on the other. The kerygmatic approach to Christian-Muslim interaction is thus devoid of polemical aggressiveness, apologetic defensiveness, existential adaptiveness, or syncretistic elusiveness; not because any of these other four approaches is necessarily wrong, but because that is the nature of the *kerygma*: God's gracious and positive invitation of humanity into relationship with himself through Jesus. It needs essentially no militant enforcers, no fanatic defenders, no smart adapters, and no crafty revisers.

For the kerygmatic Christ follower, religions are recognized to be an essential part of the human psychological and sociological needs. At the same time, God is seen to be above any religious system. Although God is the absolute Truth, no single religious system is infallible or completely satisfactory. I would contend that the Gospels indicate that Jesus himself, who is never seen as denying his Jewishness, had this attitude. He was at peace with his religious identity as a Jew, practiced the requirements of the law from childhood, entered the Jewish places of worship, and was trained in Jewish theology and methods. At the same time, whenever Jesus expressed frustration in the Gospels, it was generally either toward some stratified religious institutional form such as the Sabbath, or toward stubborn institutional religious leaders. His message cut through the safety of the legalistic boundaries of righteousness, and his invitation to relate to God was extended to the marginalized and outcast of his society. Further, through carefully crafted parables, Jesus proclaimed himself to be the inaugurator of God's kingdom in fulfillment of God's promise to the nations, and he established himself as the final criterion of admission into that kingdom as the way to the Father.

Therefore, in recognition that social organization is a natural human phenomenon toward which we are all inclined, the kerygmatic position and attitude does not consist in rejecting one's religious heritage, for it would soon be replaced by another form of ideology. In the kerygmatic approach it is Christ himself who is at the center of salvation rather than any religious system. The *kerygma* is never a message of condemnation, but it brings condemnation to those that are stuck within religious boundaries. The principal difference between this position and the other positions on the dialogical spectrum is that the conversation is removed entirely from the realm of institutionalized religious talk. One theologian who captured this worldview was Karl Barth. In a chapter he titled "The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion," he said, "We begin by stating that religion is unbelief. It is a concern, indeed, we must say that it is the one great concern, of godless man."¹²

The kerygmatic approach that we are here advocating is therefore the equivalent of this Barthian revelation of God. The *kerygma* upheld by this approach is nothing less than God's own revelation in Christ. How, then, does a kerygmatic, suprarreligious approach to

¹² Hick and Hebblethwaite, *Christianity and Other Religions*, 35.

the way of Christ develop a meaningful view and expression of the Islamic phenomenon? To this we now turn.

View of the Islamic Phenomenon

Whereas the kerygmatic position adopts a suprarreligious approach to understanding and relating to God in Christ, it views Islam as an institutionalized religious phenomenon *par excellence*. It can adequately be said that Islamic law, Shari'ah, is the most authentic manifestation of Islam. In a very real sense, this places it in the category of a sociopolitical phenomenon dressed up in religious clothing. This does not make the religious manifestation of Islam less real or genuine, at least from the perspective of its adherents. One could say that Islam was particularly successful because of its strong religious, ideological component.

Based on a reading of the Qur'an itself, the kerygmatic approach considers that Islam preserved many important and positive elements from the Judeo-Christian tradition. As such, Islam contains much truth about God and his revelation. On the other hand, because the kerygmatic perspective seeks to be supremely Christ-centered, it also considers that Islam lacks many of the essential truths of God's good news as revealed and proclaimed in and by Jesus Christ in the Gospels.

Islam's prophet in the Kerygmatic approach

The kerygmatic approach would maintain that Muhammad, Islam's messenger, believed that he received a genuine divine calling to be God's prophet to the Arabs. Muhammad's personality is complex and cannot be defined entirely through one single period of his life. He was a charismatic, prophetic leader in Mecca and in the early Medinan period, but then became much more of a political, military, economic, and social leader particularly in the later Medinan period. Qur'anic evidence seems to indicate that he saw himself very much in continuation of the Judeo-Christian prophetic line, whose mission was to turn his people away from idolatry and to the worship of the one God.

From a purely human perspective and laying aside a theological understanding of revelation and inspiration, Muhammad's personality is not unlike that of some of the Old Testament prophets and men of God. Helpful insight regarding this question can be found in an ancient dialogue between Timothy I, the patriarch of the Church of the East, and the 'Abbasid Caliph Al-Mahdī, a conversation that took place near the end of the eighth century. Having been asked by the caliph about his opinion concerning the prophet of Islam, Timothy draws a parallel between him and some of the Old Testament prophets. Like them, "he taught the doctrine of the unity of God," "drove his people away from bad works, and brought them nearer to the good ones," "separated his people from idolatry and polytheism, and attached them to the cult and the knowledge of one God," and "taught about God, His Word and His Spirit." Timothy compares Muhammad to Moses, as he "not only fought for God in words, but showed also his zeal for Him in the sword." Further, Timothy adds, like

Abraham, Muhammad “turned his face from idols and their worshippers, whether those idols were those of his own kinsmen or of strangers, and he honoured and worshipped only one God.” Timothy ends his treatment of this subject by stating: “Who will not praise, O our victorious King, the one whom God has praised, and will not weave a crown of glory and majesty to the one whom God has glorified and exalted? These and similar things I and all God-lovers utter about Muhammad, O my sovereign.”¹³

This perspective offered by Timothy I, Patriarch of the Church of the East, is helpful in our attempt to make sense of Islam’s messenger. A kerygmatic approach believes in the finality of Jesus Christ, in whom the fullness of God’s good news was revealed. But this needs not prevent us from admitting the greatness of Muhammad, and perceiving him, if not as a prophet, nonetheless as a *messenger*, a *rasūl*, who carried an important divine message to his people, leading them away from polytheism and drawing them to the worship of the one God.

Islam’s Holy Book, the Qur’an, as viewed in the Kerygmatic approach

“By the Book that makes things clear, We have made it a Qur’an in Arabic, that ye may be able to understand [and learn wisdom]” (az-Zukhruf [43]:2,3 Yusuf Ali).

“So have We made the [Qur’an] easy in thine own tongue, that with it thou mayest give Glad Tidings to the righteous, and warnings to people given to contention” (Maryam [19]:97 Yusuf Ali).

“Verily, We have made this [Qur’an] easy, in thy tongue, in order that they may give heed” (ad-Dukhān [44]:58 Yusuf Ali).

“And We have indeed made the Qur’an easy to understand and remember: then is there any that will receive admonition?” (al-Qamar [54]:17 Yusuf Ali).

Numerous verses in the Qur’an seem to indicate that Muhammad’s message was his genuine attempt to provide what he believed to be the essential elements of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures to his Arab people in a language that they could understand, namely Arabic. Some scholars have advanced that the very word “Qur’an” is actually a borrowing

¹³ Alphonse Mingana, ed., *1. Timothy’s Apology for Christianity. 2. The Lament of the Virgin. 3. The Martyrdom of Pilate*, Woodbrooke Studies 2 (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1928), 61–62; cited from <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~sshoemak/102/texts/timothy.html>.

from Syriac “*qeryānā*,” which means simply a “lectionary.”¹⁴ In that view, the Qurʾan was originally largely an Arabic lectionary of the Bible, not entirely unlike a Jewish Targum.

In the first verse cited above, the wish of the Qurʾan is, literally, that those who receive this Arabic book would perhaps come to a proper understanding (*laʿallakum taʿqilūn*) of matters about God. The next three verses are God’s assertion to Muhammad that he has provided him with the Qurʾan in Arabic in order to make it easy for him (*yassarnāhu*, lit. “we have made it easy”) as he proclaims the message.

There are several verses in the Qurʾan that seem to support the view that in the initial, Meccan and early Medinan, period, Muhammad perceived his message to be a continuation of the Judeo-Christian tradition. God encourages his messenger by telling him that if his own tribe Quraysh does not receive his message, they should ask the People of the Book (Christians and Jews), who will confirm to them that the message is authentic. There is an assumption at that stage that Christians and Jews will naturally receive his message since it does not stand in contradiction with their own Scriptures.

“And before thee also the messengers We sent were but men, to whom We granted inspiration: if ye realise this not, ask of those who possess the Message” (an-Nahl [16]:43 Yusuf Ali).

“And thus [it is] that We have sent down the Book to thee. So the People of the Book believe therein, as also do some of these [pagan Arabs] and none but Unbelievers reject our signs” (al-ʿAnkabūt [29]:47 Yusuf Ali).

Both of these passages, according to Muslim commentators, were revealed in Mecca. A third verse, cited below, is less optimistic in outlook. It is a Medinan verse that reflects Muhammad’s disappointment with the way that Jews and Christians have rejected his message, as though it contained some elements that were foreign to their own Scriptures.

“And when there came to them a messenger from Allah, confirming what was with them, a party of the People of the Book threw away the Book of Allah behind their backs, as if [it had been something] they did not know!” (al-Baqara [2]: 101 Yusuf Ali).

From that point onward, namely the later Medinan period, Muhammad begins to dissociate himself from the Judeo-Christian tradition. One of the most striking manifestations of this is the change in the direction of prayer (*qibla*) which is introduced in *Sūrat al-Baqara* [2]:143–45. Initially, the community of Muhammad had prayed in the direction of Jerusalem, as did the Jews and the oriental Christians. Al-Wāḥidī’s treatise on *Asbāb an-Nuzūl*

14 For this view in recent scholarship, see Christoph Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2007).

[The Occasions of the Revelations] mentions with regard to verse 144 that Muhammad received this new instruction sixteen months after his arrival in Medina. This was roughly the time period when Muhammad's relationship especially with the Jews of Medina had seriously deteriorated.¹⁵

Muslims seen through the Kerygmatic perspective

If we believe the traditional Islamic account of the development of Muhammad's early community, we may conclude that Arabs who received the initial Meccan message essentially found themselves at a similar place as the kinsmen of the biblical patriarch, Abraham, with a clear invitation to abandon polytheism and take up the worship of the one God. During the early Medinan period, however, the community surrounding Muhammad found itself in conflict with those with whom it had sought continuity, particularly the Jews of Medina. Furthermore, not unlike the Jews of Jesus' time, they had to reckon with a picture of Jesus that conflicted in many aspects with the one that was developing within Muhammad's message. Due to growing economic, social, and political conflict with the Medinan Jews, the result was a rejection of that picture and a growing distance from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Today, a kerygmatic perception of Muslims would say that even though Muslims have as their foremost concern to please God, they lack the ability to enjoy that deep and personal relationship with God, which according to the Gospels is only possible for those who respond to Christ's invitation to approach God as Father through a brotherly sonship with himself. It is this view of the Islamic phenomenon as I have developed it here, including the understanding of where Muslims are in their search and journey toward God that motivates a follower of Christ to be a witness, to share this divine *kerygma* with Muslims. We now turn briefly to the purpose, methods, and outcomes of this endeavor.

Purpose of Relationship with Islam and Muslims

Against the background of the position developed above, those Christ followers who hold a kerygmatic understanding of Islam will engage with Muslims on two solid foundations: respect and trust. On the one hand, neither the syncretistic attitude to religions that plays down the uniqueness of a person's spiritual experience, nor the polemical attitude that seeks to emphasize the negative aspects of another person's worldview, will foster mutual respect between two people. On the other hand, both existential and apologetic approaches will shy away from true engagement, the first seeking to stay away from God talk, and the latter (in its extreme form) raising a defensive wall without ever engaging creatively and positively. These are of course somewhat generalizations, but they are helpful to identify further the middle way. Kerygmatic persons do not shy away from engagement. And because they do so based on a thoughtfully developed framework and understanding of Islam, they can do

¹⁵ An English translation of this work can be found at <http://www.altafsir.com>. See especially <http://www.altafsir.com/AsbabAlnuzol.asp?SoraName=2&Ayah=144&search=yes&img=A>.

so respectfully, with a genuine desire to learn through a mutual exchange of perceptions about God and faith. Engagement with Islam at a kerygmatic level will almost always be enriching for all involved.

In the context of this mutually-enriching relationship of respect, trust will develop, to the point where meaningful conversation can take place. Meaningful, life-transforming, conversation can hardly take place outside such respect and trust. And the kerygmatic person knows that any meaningful conversation about Christ should be life-transforming, as the uniqueness that Christ brings to our human relationship with God is shared. But it is important to emphasize that this engagement does not go merely in one direction. The relationship of trust and respect that is developed through the kerygmatic approach should precisely be mutual. Kerygmatic engagement creates an opportunity to listen to what Muslims have to say about religious issues as well, the opportunity to learn and stand corrected, rather than stick to our own perceptions of what they believe, so that misunderstandings and misperceptions may be dissipated.

Methods Used in the Kerygmatic Approach to Islam and Muslims

The practice of the kerygmatic approach in Christian-Muslim interaction knows few boundaries. Every occasion is suitable to bear witness respectfully to Christ's good news. A Christ follower using that approach will happily make use of the Qur'an and other elements of the Islamic tradition as appropriate and acceptable bridges of communication.

This approach will not shy away from discussion forums on theological, doctrinal, social, cultural, and other issues. No topic is taboo, since a respectful exchange is prepared and assumed. At the kerygmatic level, dialogue takes place between religious and scholarly leaders that have a deeply rooted faith and are willing to share uncompromisingly with genuine people. As a result, the outcome of such exchange is deep and reaches the grass roots.

My emphasis on a middle way, the kerygmatic approach, does not negate the legitimacy of using other types of interaction found on the D1–D5 spectrum. In my experience, different settings and audiences may require different styles and approaches. I personally would in most cases avoid D1 and D5, save in some exceptional circumstances where the depth of a friendship may allow and call for the tackling of a hot and problematic issue at a D5 level. In general, I would favor a combination of D2 and D3 in a public setting, where the tackling of social issues (D2) is crucial and more likely to be fruitful. In private settings, I would favor a combination of D3 and D4, the apologetic approach often serving to clarify certain deep-rooted misunderstandings that Muslims have about Christ and the Bible. Whereas tackling such issues in public is often futile, it can be quite appropriate in conversation with a nondefensive Muslim friend who is genuinely seeking to understand. Finally I find myself leaning toward D2 in conversation with Muslim religious leaders, and more toward D4 in conversation with less prominent Muslims.

From a missional perspective, the nonaggressive and suprarreligious nature of the keryg-matic attitude and discourse has the potential to avoid the immediate alienation of a Muslim who wishes to explore the implications of God's good news in Christ by other members of that person's community. This means that extraction of such a person from his or her community—whether induced or self-imposed—can be avoided, so that the community as a whole may benefit from Christ's transforming power.

Exhibit 1:

Test of Attitude to Islam and Muslims (TAIM)

For each issue, circle *one* letter that best reflects your position.

1) My view of religions is that:

- a) All roads lead to Rome.
- b) Goodness and morality are the essence of religions.
- c) They are an essential part of the human psychological and sociological need. Although God is the absolute Truth, no single religious system is infallible or completely satisfactory.
- d) There is only one ultimate Truth, and that is God.
- e) There is only one religion that is truly from God: Christianity.

2) Islam was:

- a) A religion that originated from God, but like all religions, it has undergone many human influences as well.
- b) A sociopolitical phenomenon, successful because of its strong religious ideological element, which was carried over essentially from the Judeo-Christian tradition.
- c) A human phenomenon whose understanding of God is misleading.
- d) A scheme developed and carried out by the devil.
- e) A sociopolitical phenomenon like any other successful religious movement of human history.

3) Muhammad was:

- a) A charismatic prophetic and political leader who genuinely believed he had received a divine prophetic calling for his people.
- b) Misled and may have had some psychological problems that led him to believe that he had received a prophetic calling.
- c) Possessed by demons, an Antichrist whose mission was to deceive all people.

- d) A shrewd sociopolitical leader who knew how to use his contemporary economic and historical realities to the advantage of his community and personal ends.
- e) To some degree the recipient of a divine calling to be God's Prophet to the Arabs.

4) The Qur'an:

- a) Was a plagiarism of the Bible and contains many mistakes and inaccuracies.
- b) Was inspired by the devil and is full of lies and deceit. Merely reading it renders a person unclean.
- c) Was a literary achievement of Muhammad himself or some of his entourage, which Muhammad used in order to impress a society that was strongly attracted to poetic literature.
- d) Contains substantial elements of the divine truth and is to be respected as Scripture.
- e) Was Muhammad's genuine attempt to provide what he believed to be the essential elements of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures in the Arabic language.

5) Practicing Muslims are:

- a) The deceived followers of a religion that has nothing good to offer the world.
- b) Adherents of a religious ideology that offers a viable code of ethics and makes them into good citizens.
- c) Viewed positively by God when they faithfully strive to be pious and devout.
- d) Primarily concerned to please God, but they lack the ability to enjoy a deep personal relationship with him through Christ.
- e) Being misled by a worldly religion that drives them away from the worship of the true God.

6) In the end:

- a) Muslims will all go to hell, because they have fallen to deception.
- b) Muslims will not be saved, because they did not come to the knowledge of Christ.
- c) Muslims who are genuine seekers may come to a knowledge of Christ even based on the Qur'an.
- d) Muslims will be saved if they are faithful to the religion of Islam.
- e) Muslims, like all other people, will be saved by the unlimited benevolence of God.

7) My purpose in relating to Muslims is:

- a) To evangelize them by demonstrating to them the truth of Christianity and refuting the validity of Islam.
- b) To have an opportunity to witness about the unique elements that Christ brings to enrich human beings' relationship with God.
- c) To encourage mutual social and religious understanding and tolerance between Christian and Muslim communities.
- d) To invite Muslims to be a positive part of a multicultural and multireligious universal humanity in all of its rich plurality.
- e) To demonstrate to Muslims the falsity and deceitfulness of Islam and save as many of them as possible from perdition.

8) In interacting with Muslims, the best methods are:

- a) The use of the Qur'an, the Bible, and other elements of both traditions as a foundation for discussing theological, doctrinal, social, and cultural issues.
- b) The affirmation of common ground and avoidance of divisive issues.
- c) To dialogue on social, economic, and political issues.
- d) To accentuate religious differences and use polemics to discredit Islam, or not to relate to Muslims at all.
- e) Public debates that make heavy use of apologetic arguments.

9) I believe that my interaction with Muslims should lead:

- a) To positive transformation of mutual perceptions and relationships.
- b) To greater tolerance and appreciation between communities.
- c) To the accentuation of differences between religious communities and to the prevailing of Christianity.
- d) Muslims to convert to Christianity by being convinced of the prevailing truth of Christianity above all other religions.
- e) To deep impact into Muslim societies without creating immediate enmity between members of the community, and avoiding "extraction" for those who might take up Christ.

10) In order to interact effectively with Muslims, I believe that:

- a) I need to comprehend Islam as a political reality.
- b) I need to learn all the weaknesses and problems in Islam.
- c) I need to acquire a thorough knowledge of the answers to Islamic questions and challenges.
- d) I need to acquire a thorough insider's knowledge of Islam.
- e) I need to comprehend the broad lines of Islam as a religion.

Exhibit 2:**Key to the TAIM**

Assign yourself the numerical value that corresponds with your answer to each question, and then calculate your total.

1) My view of religions:

a=1, b=2, c=3, d=4, e=5

2) Islam:

a=2, b=3, c=4, d=5, e=1

3) Muhammad:

a=3, b=4, c=5, d=1, e=2

4) The Qur'an:

a=4, b=5, c=1, d=2, e=3

5) Practicing Muslims:

a=5, b=1, c=2, d=3, e=4

6) In the end:

a=5, b=4, c=3, d=2, e=1

7) Purpose:

a=4, b=3, c=2, d=1, e=5

8) Best methods:

a=3, b=2, c=1, d=5, e=4

9) Outcome:

a=2, b=1, c=5, d=4, e=3

10) Extent of knowledge of Islam:

a=1, b=5, c=4, d=3, e=2

Total: _____

INTERPRETATION OF TAIM RESULTS:

10–12: *Syncretistic Attitude to Islam and Muslims*

13–22: *Existential Attitude to Islam and Muslims*

23–32: *Kerygmatic Attitude to Islam and Muslims*

33–42: *Apologetic Attitude to Islam and Muslims*

43–50: *Polemical Attitude to Islam and Muslims*