

Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue

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Whose Islam? Which Christianity?

AFRICA’S RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

INTRODUCTION: CORY WILLSON

As the influence of modernity spreads its liberating message, religion will inevitably decline and reside only at the margins of society. So went the maxim popular among the cultured elite in Western societies for much of the twentieth century. If God or the gods were not dead, then they had at last been silenced and religion no longer influenced the social imaginary of the masses.¹ At the dawn of the new millennium, the collision of two commercial airliners with two New York towers signaled the collapse of such naïve secularization prophecies. Apparently, religion still mattered to some—even if there was no room for such “superstitions” amidst public discourse.

Of particular irony is that those secular societies are now proving to be laboratories of new religious developments rather than graveyards of religion. This is due in large part to non-Western migration to Europe and North America—many immigrants coming from African countries. For these immigrants, the world is more *enchanted*, meaning that spiritual realities exist that cannot be known empirically. Amidst these immigrant populations and the cultures from which they come, the gods are *not* silent and religion touches all facets of human life.²

Turning our attention to religious life in Africa presses us to attend to a diversity of expressions that precludes monolithic descriptions of what particular religions believe and practice. The appropriation of religious beliefs and practices by Africans for African purposes raises the questions *whose Islam* and *which Christianity* are we seeking to know?

Historically, Africa was not only a cradle for nascent Christianity—producing such early theologians as Augustine, Tertullian, and Athanasius—it was also the location of the church’s first interaction with Islam in the seventh century. As Dr. John Azumah argues in our featured article, present-day African contexts—where the Church and Islam struggle for peace in the events of everyday life among family and neighbors—are instructive to other parts of the global Church. As the world’s two largest religions continue to vacillate between tolerance and tension,³ proper attention must be given to those contexts where the gods are not silent and African expressions of both Christianity and Islam are extending their vitality and influence to distant lands. **EIFD**

AT A GLANCE:

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JOHN AZUMAH

offers an overview of the history of Islam in Africa that dispels notions of Islam as a monolithic system. He puts forward a model of "Immanuelogy" to guide Christian engagement with Muslims in place of the frequent either romanticization or demonization of Islam.

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THARWAT WAHBA

explores Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt by describing the variety of Christian approaches to interfaith engagement in a Muslim-majority country. Egyptian Christians are uniquely positioned geographically and historically to explore holistic approaches to engagement with Muslim communities.

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RAHMAN YAKUBU

argues that a "Theology of Immanuel" has potential for guiding constructive and healthy Christian engagement with Muslims because it resonates with the relational outlook on life common in sub-Saharan African cultures. Family and kinship bonds form a basis for more relational models of dialogue.

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AYMAN IBRAHIM

considers Azumah's description of "Africanized Islam" to accurately depict the diverse cultural expressions of Islam in Africa. The relational dimensions of Azumah's Immanuelogy hold promise for embodying a view of God and Christianity that speaks to African communal and relational values.

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Praxis:

DIANA FARHOOD presents an overview of Arab Baptist Theological Seminary's work to equip Christians for ministry in North Africa and the Middle East. ABTS's unique approach to education offers students opportunities to appropriate their studies within the country of origin.

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VISION STATEMENT

This journal seeks to create space for Evangelical scholars and practitioners to dialogue about the dynamics, challenges, practices, and theology surrounding interfaith work, while remaining faithful to the gospel of Jesus and his mission for his Church.

DESIGN

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Dialogue in Context: A Focused Exploration Continues

In the first year of this journal's life, we concentrated on issues related to dialogue that were "supra" in nature, ranging from religious pluralism to convicted civility.

Beginning with our first issue of 2011, which focused on Muslim-Christian dialogue in Europe, we began an exploration of global perspectives on interfaith dialogue, addressing context-specific issues that drive the needs and opportunities for dialogue in contexts around the world. Broadly speaking, giving primacy to a specific context allows for a measure of concreteness, creates space for cultural diversity, enables both theology and missiology to be in conversation, and highlights the concerns of the practitioner. We hope that by rooting interfaith dialogue in a particular context, we will accomplish the following:

- Give voice to the daily experiences, issues faced, and struggles confronted around the world. No two contexts are alike.
- Religious plurality is part and parcel of the historic foundation and lived experience of many non-Western societies. Toward that end, insights from the non-Western world may help the global Church understand how to engage in mission in religiously plural contexts.
- Part of being a truly global Church means that we must listen to one another, acknowledging both the sufferings and gifts each member contributes to the wider body.

Middle East Conference

The VIII annual Middle East Conference at Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) held in June of 2011 brought together scholars and practitioners from around the Arab world to discuss Christian-Muslim relations in sub-Saharan Africa. The upcoming IX annual conference will be held on June 18-22, 2012 at ABTS. For more information, go to: <http://www.abtslebanon.org/>.

The Church and Islam in Africa

BY JOHN AZUMAH, PhD



John Azumah is Professor of World Christianity and Islam at Columbia Theological Seminary. In addition to his work as a scholar, Azumah is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and has served as a pastor, church planter and missionary. He received his Ph.D. in Islamic and Christian-Muslim relations at the University of Birmingham, UK.

The opening statement of a landmark document issued in 2009 and signed by 138 leading Muslim scholars and Christian scholars, titled “A Common Word between Us and You,” states: “Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world’s population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.” Hans Küng, the renowned Swiss theologian, is convinced that there is

- No peace among the nations
without peace among the religions
- No peace among the religions
without dialogue between the religions
- No dialogue between the religions
without investigation of the foundations
of the religions¹

In a recent survey, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life notes that “Africa is clearly among the most religious places in the world. In many countries across the continent, roughly nine-in-ten people or more say religion is *very important* in their lives.” The survey found that more than 95% of Africans claim adherence to the Islamic or Christian faith. After highlighting the favorable views Muslims and Christians hold of each other in Africa, the Pew survey also notes:

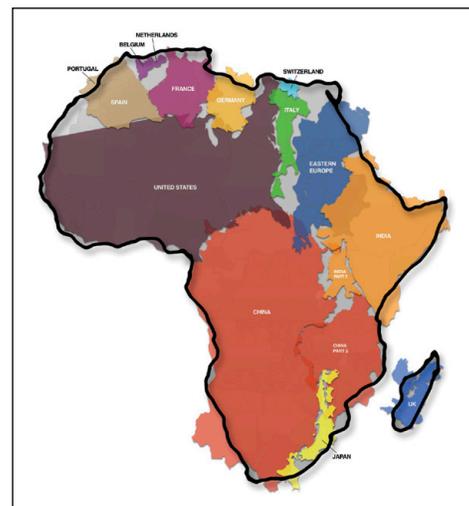
On the other hand, the survey also reveals clear signs of tension and division. Overall, Christians are less positive in their views of Muslims than Muslims are of Christians; substantial numbers of Christians (ranging from 20% in Guinea-Bissau to 70% in Chad) say they think of Muslims as violent. In a handful of countries, a third or more of Christians say many or most Muslims are hostile toward Christians, and in a few countries a third or more of Muslims say many or most Christians are hostile toward Muslims.²

In *The Next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins examines population growth of key Christian- and Muslim-majority countries against the background of prevailing socio-political, ethnic, and religious tensions, economic, and political challenges, and then ominously talks of the “Next Crusade,” singling out Nigeria as a ticking time bomb.³ If peace between Muslims and Christians is crucial for world peace, it goes without saying that peace between Christians and Muslims in Africa is something the rest of the world cannot afford to ignore. Indeed, the first al-Qaida bombs ever against United States targets exploded on African soil in 1998 in Kenya and Tanzania.

Consequently, when talking about Christian-Muslim relations and world peace, Africa is critical—not only because of the potential for conflict, but also the prospects for peaceful coexistence between the two faith communities. As the first church to have been in contact with Islam, the African church experience in this encounter should be of interest to the global church. In this article, I will first outline the different *phases* of the spread of Islam in Africa and how these contributed in shaping the nature of the relations between the two faiths. To help the church reexamine its engagement with Islam over the years, I will outline the different *faces* or configurations of Islam in contemporary Africa and suggest ways the church has engaged and can engage with Muslims.

Phases of Islamization in Sub-Saharan Africa

A common stereotypical perception is that Islam spread by dint of arms or through violence. To counter this percep-



The African continent consists of 55 countries (54 in the African Union, Morocco not included) with four family language groups encompassing over 2,000 separate languages. Geographically, the total land mass is large enough to fit the United States, China, and India within its borders.¹

DIFFERENT FACES OF ISLAM

More than one out of every five people on earth considers themselves Muslim. With only 20% of the worldwide Muslim community living in the Middle East, the great majority of Muslims do not speak Arabic. In fact, the largest Muslim countries are found outside the Middle East: Indonesia is the largest Muslim country, followed by Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.¹ Understandably, the way Islam is interpreted by these of 1.57 billion Muslims is not always the same. There are basic similarities, but also important differences.

Every Muslim (“one who is submitted to God”) tries to follow the five acts of worship. The first is the *Shahadah*, which is the basic creed of Islam: “I testify that there are no gods other than God alone and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.”² The second pillar is *Salat*, which is the performance of the prayer ritual five times a day. It can be prayed almost anywhere, as long as the direction is towards Mecca. The prayer is intended to remind Muslims of God throughout the day. The third pillar is *Sawm*, fasting, during Ramadan. Once every year for thirty days Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset while expressing their gratitude to God, asking for forgiveness of sins and taking extra care of the needy. Almsgiving, *Zakat*, is the fourth pillar. And lastly, Muslims are expected to try to go on pilgrimage, *Hajj*, once in their lifetime to Mecca, where they walk around the *Kaaba* seven times, among other rituals.

Besides the five pillars, Islam also has six statements of faith: belief in (1) Allah, (2) his angels, (3) his divine books, (4) his messengers (among whom are Adam, Noah, David, Jesus, and John the Baptist), (5) the day of Judgment, and (6) divine destiny.³ The third statement regarding the divine books is of particular significance. Muslims do not believe in merely one book, the Qur’an, but also other *Kitab al-Moqaddis* (holy books). The first is the books of Abraham, which they believe are extinct or lost, the second is the *Tawrat* (Torah) of Moses, the third the *Zabur* (Psalms) of David, and lastly the *Injil* (Gospel) of Jesus.⁴ Although they are a part of the Islamic Creed, these three books are generally not given as much weight as the Qur’an. Disagreements between Islamic groups ensue because some, although not all, Islamic scholars believe these books have been altered and the original versions were lost.

As far as “denominations” within Islam, there are two major divisions: Sunnism and Shi’ism. The division originated with the debate as to who was the right successor of Muhammad. Shi’ites believe it to be Ali ibn Abi Talib, and the Sunnis believe it to have been the four Caliphs that followed Muhammad. Sunnis comprise 85% of Muslims worldwide and can be subdivided into four major schools of thought: the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’i, and Hanbali. Shi’ites comprise about 13% of Muslims.⁵ Shi’ites can be subdivided into three major schools of thought, each being distinct from Sunnism primarily in that they put a higher trust in the interpretations and revelations coming from a line of imams (religious leaders) since Muhammad. Sufism is a form of Islam that has a higher focus on seeking personal experience with God (mysticism). Some categorize it under either Sunni or Shi’ite, but others say it is a third stream within Islam.

tion, others have tried to show that Islam spread mainly by persuasion through peaceful means. As we shall demonstrate in the first part of this paper, the history of the spread of Islam in Africa does not fit into any one single mold. The spread of Islam in Africa can be divided into phases; different Muslim groups used different methods, both intentionally and by default, to spread the faith in different parts of the continent.

Muslims as Immigrants, Merchants, and Clerics

In 615 C.E., about eighty male followers were advised



by Muhammad to seek asylum in Abyssinia with their families to escape Meccan persecution. This is described as the first *hijra*. Upon their return, they reported, “When we reached Abyssinia the Negus [the king] gave us a kind reception. We safely practiced our religion, and we worshipped God, and suffered no wrong in word or deed.”⁴ The African church provided refuge to nascent Islam by extending hospitality to vulnerable converts facing severe persecution in Mecca. William Muir (and others) has speculated, “If an Arab asylum had not at last offered itself at Medina, the Prophet might happily himself have emigrated to Abyssinia.”⁵

Even though Islam made little to no impact on Abyssinian society during the first contact, in the ensuing centuries (7th to 19th), migrant and migrating Muslims became the principal bearers of Islam throughout sub-Saharan Africa. During this period, Muslims were generally itinerant groups who spread out into sub-Saharan Africa as traders and clerics. They sought patronage from the traditional courts, formed special relationships, and were accorded special privileges by the rulers. Some of the chiefs flirted with Islam, employed Muslim clerics in their courts, adopted Arabic names, and incorporated Islamic rituals into traditional ones. These Muslims

were not missionaries; rather, the saving of souls was a by-product of the quest for gold, ivory, and slaves. During this period, Muslim settlements represented “islands of Islam in a sea of paganism.”

The top-down approach ensured that Islam had greater impact on communities with more structured political systems, that is, chiefly societies, than on the less stratified and loosely knit ones (i.e. those without chiefs). Up until the sixteenth century, Muslim groups posed no direct threat to traditional political institutions from which they sought patronage. On the contrary, in West Africa, the most influential clerical tradition during this period was the Jakhanke, which is known for its suspicion of political power, avowed pacifism, and aversion to militancy as a means of religious and political change. Nevertheless, Muslims exerted much influence upon African societies, some rising to become kingmakers and to hold very powerful positions. During this period, Islam spread mainly by appeal as a higher civilization through trading networks. The art of literacy on the part of the clerics, the production of charms and amulets for blessings, healing, and war purposes, all contributed to the appeal and spread of Islam. Islam nevertheless remained a largely *urban* phenomenon, a stranger religion, and a cult for the ruling class, with little impact on wider society. From this peaceful encounter developed what some scholars have derogatorily referred to as “African Islam” or “Islam Noir,” i.e., the appropriation and blending of Islamic rituals with African traditional religious elements. Sufi orders champion this form of Islam in which the five pillars are observed and Islamic law haphazardly applied in family and personal matters. The vast majority of Muslims who subscribe to this face of Islam are against ideological and militant Islam. This form of Islam is inclusivist (syncretistic) and tolerant and is still widespread in much of sub-Saharan Africa, from Senegal in West Africa to much of East Africa.

The storage of Islamic rituals in African wineskins goes back to the very beginning of the adoption of the faith. From the very beginning, Africans adopted Islam from a position of authority and power, adapting the religion to suit their context. The ruling class adopted and adapted Islamic practices and ritual and divested the religion of its political and legal content, or so they tried to. Through this process, Islam was thoroughly Africanized.

During this phase, Islam in Africa developed a non-ideological, apolitical, and pacifist tradition. Consequently, Muslims in Africa have a longstanding history of living and even flourishing as minorities under non-Islamic political systems. In many parts of Africa where this tradition persists, there are cordial relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially Christians, at the family, regional, and national levels. This remains the trend in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa with the exception of places like northern Nigeria, Sudan, and Ethiopia.

Today, Islam is no longer a foreign religion in many parts of Africa. Together with African traditional religions and Christianity, Islam is an integral part of the African

heritage and reality.⁶ This is not just a heritage with adherents who live side by side, but an authentic African worldview that in many places forms the basic identity markers of individual Africans! Negotiating these identities continues to be a challenge in Africa today.

Muslims as Invaders, Slave Raiders, and Rulers

During the caliphate of Umar (634–644 C.E.), Muslims invaded and captured Egypt (640 C.E.). Muslim conquests spread westward to the rest of North Africa as far



as Mauritania. With Muslim rule firmly established in Egypt, Muslim rulers signed a treaty known as the *baqt* with Christian Nubia. This allowed Nubia to retain its sovereignty in return for allowing free passage and settlement for Muslim traders. The treaty also included the payment of an annual tribute in the form of 360 slaves to their Muslim overlords in Egypt. This arrangement lasted for centuries until Nubia was attacked and overrun in 1275 by the might of Mamluk Egypt, thus introducing the first direct Muslim rule into black Africa.

In 1493, Askiya Muhammad Ture, of the hitherto immigrant Muslim groups, took up arms against the ruling class of the Songhay Empire, overthrew Sonni Ali, and took over the reins of power. In 1529, Ethiopia, which had experienced sporadic attacks from Muslim groups, came under a full-scale *jihad* led by Ahmad Granj. His movement was defeated with the help of the Portuguese in 1543. These were followed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by a series of *jihad* movements around present-day West Africa—the most celebrated being led by Uthman Dan Fodio, which covered present-day northern Nigeria.

When Uthman Dan Fodio unleashed his *jihad* on Gobir in 1804, the ruler, or *Sarkin Gobir*, sent messages to

Children (opposite) at a madrasah (school) in the country of Mauritania in West Africa. The boys are holding their wooden boards used for reading and writing.

The “Great Mud Mosque” (above), built on the same site as the first 13th Century mosque in Djenné, Mali. The present mosque was built in 1907.

Response:
Tharwat Wahba

Egyptian Christian Approaches to Muslims

Tharwat Wahba is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical (Presbyterian) Church of Egypt. Wahba did his PhD studies at London School of Theology on the history of Presbyterian mission in Egypt and Sudan. He is currently teacher of mission and evangelism and chair of the Mission Department at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo (ETSC), Egypt. He worked as campus director with Campus Crusade for Christ in Egypt for twelve years.

Introduction

Egypt was the first country in the African continent to receive both Christianity and Islam. Egypt became the intellectual center for both religions and the gateway for both faiths into the heart of Africa. The religious situation in Egypt today is different from that of most African countries. Primarily, this is because Christians are a minority in Egypt. Dr. Azumah's article covers the sub-Saharan situations regarding Christian Muslim relations, while this response talks about Egypt as a North African country. Egypt can play an important role in giving a wide perspective on how the Christian church responded to Islam in a majority Muslim country. The Egyptian Christians represent about 10% of Egypt's population of eighty million. The minority perspective or mentality deeply affects relationships with those of the dominant faith. The Egyptian church has approached Islam in many ways throughout its history. However, in recent years the church in Egypt went through different phases in its relationship with Islam and the Egyptian government. The situation even became harder after the January 25 Revolution earlier this year. The Egyptian church is going through cutting edge developments in its approach to Islam and Muslims. There is much uncertainty for the future of the church under the coming political regime—whether it be Islamists or liberalists. In general, the Egyptian church faces Islam *naturally* and *intentionally* in many ways.

Natural Approaches

Isolation

Historically, Egyptian Christians have largely withdrawn from public life. Having experienced discrimination and hostility for centuries from the dominant majority, Christians developed what is termed a “battered minority” syndrome. In part, this includes a sense of inferiority and a heightened sensitivity to persecution and discrimination. The necessary outward acquiescence to laws enforced by the majority and the lack of participation in the political decision-making process are experienced as keenly humiliating.

The majority of Egyptian Christians live with as little interaction with their Muslim neighbors as possible. Most find their identity in the church. They are satisfied with what they have inside the walls of the church, which is not only a place for worship, but also the locus of their social life. Churches in general are centered on social activities such as trips, education, and employment. These practices, the pressures of espousing different values than the majority, and the discrimination experienced at the hands of the Muslim majority have propelled Christians into increasing isolation and withdrawal from political, social, and public life.

Emigration

Another response to the situation is the emigration of Copts to the West in search of new opportunities. Since 1965, hundreds of thousands of Copts have migrated to Canada, Australia, the United States, and Europe. The Egyptian Christians who live abroad play an important role in the political and economic support of their churches and families. They openly accuse the Egyptian government of intolerance towards the Christian minority. Likewise, they have organized themselves into various organizations and exert pressure on the government to give more rights to Christians. Furthermore, they provide vital financial support to both families and churches back home.

Conversion of Christians

Through the centuries and under the Muslim pressures, a huge number of Christians converted to Islam. The tenth century witnessed the change in the demography of Egypt, as Muslims became the majority. Poverty, the desire for economic gain, the longing to escape discrimination, and even the choice of a marriage partner have all motivated thousands

of Christians to convert to Islam.

The religion of every citizen is on their identification card, which makes the change of religion from Islam nearly impossible. The identification cards lead Christians to be treated by officials as second-class citizens. On the other hand, it is much easier for Christians to convert to Islam than for a Muslim to convert to Christianity. This causes the government and Muslim society to support those who want to convert to Islam. Meanwhile, Muslims who convert to Christianity are denied all rights. They are denied the right to a new ID with their new religion. They are also denied the right to marry or to have their family inheritance in a legal way. Society discriminates against them and takes away their ability to participate freely in their work, study, and family life. Although there are no specific statistics on the number of converts to Islam, it is estimated in the past that there were a few thousand conversions every year. In recent years, this number has declined, as Christian leaders have more actively intervened, and the Christian community has provided more support to those facing pressures to convert.

Intentional Interactions with Muslims: A Holistic Approach

Active Christian churches and mission-oriented individuals have approached their fellow Muslims in different ways. Depending on the theological perspective and the opportunities for ministry, these interactions can be either direct or indirect. Likewise, the approaches can vary from dialogue, which uses tolerance and mutual respect, to the more confrontational tactic of polemics.

Dialogue

In Egypt, numerous dialogue programs have been initiated between Christians and Muslims. The dialogue between Al-Azhar and the Anglican Church is one of the strategic dialogues that has continued for many years, contributing to more understanding between some Christians and Muslims. For many years, the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS) has held many meetings between Christian and Muslim scholars and leaders, resulting in numerous publications. The Coptic Orthodox Church has also established its own forums for dialogue, where both church and Muslim leaders meet for official occasions such as the breakfast (*Iftar*) during Ramadan. Likewise, numerous international NGOs and

church groups have sought to study Islam and foster dialogue between the two religions.

While dialogue is important, there is also reason for concern. All dialogues have been initiated and financed by Christians. Furthermore, the dialogues tend to concentrate on issues where there is a common ground between the two religions, but fail to discuss contentious theological issues. Unfortunately, these dialogues also take place between elite scholars and leaders, with little to no impact on the common people or on public debate.

Evangelism

Evangelism of Muslims takes many forms. Egyptian law forbids public evangelism outside the walls of the churches. This includes both public evangelistic meetings and the initiation of evangelistic conversations by Christians. The government tolerates Christian evangelism of other Christians, or of nonbelievers, whose political identity is that of Christian. However, any attempt to actively evangelize Muslims is illegal. Nonetheless, Christian churches, organizations, and individuals seek to use any open door for evangelism. The Cairo Book Fair and both Islamic and Christian religious festivals provide excellent opportunities to make Christian literature accessible. Christian satellite channels such as Sat-7, Al-Hayat, Al-Karma, and Miracle also have a strong impact upon both Christians and Muslims. It is hard to measure the results of this work, but the correspondence received by these channels suggests that they are indeed surprisingly successful.

Besides public events and media initiatives, one-to-one evangelism and distribution of both the Bible and the *Jesus* film are among the most effective methods of evangelism. Again, it is impossible to measure the results of these evangelistic efforts. However, some estimate the total number of Muslim converts to be in the millions. This is more striking when it is understood that a Muslim who converts to Christianity can face extreme reprisals from family, employers, and friends—with no legal recourse. When their conversion becomes known, many are forced to move or even emigrate.

Social Work

Taking a more holistic approach, many Christian organizations started with social ministries as a way to interact with Muslims. This method was first used by Western missions, including

the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the American Presbyterian Mission. Schools, medical clinics, and literacy programs were established, family awareness programs begun, and micro-credit projects organized in order to help and support needy Christians and Muslims. The Presbyterian Church continues to use this same approach, as seen in its numerous schools and the multiplicity of projects of CEOSS. Catholics were also pioneers in reaching out to Egyptian society through a wide range of organizations such as Caritas, schools, clinics, and other special needs projects. Likewise, the Coptic Orthodox Church also ministers to the needy, but most of its programs target only their own people. These social work projects have played an important role in the country's socio-economic development. They promote a more

the many Muslim scholars, writers, and groups who have reacted against these polemical tactics and are seeking to mobilize Muslims against them. On the other hand, an unknown number of Muslims have sought answers to questions raised by these programs, and some have indeed converted to Christianity.

Conclusion

The majority of Christians in the Middle East now live in Egypt. In their long history with Islam, Egyptian Christians have kept their Christian faith and even contributed to global Christianity despite centuries of persecution and oppression.

It is to be hoped that the Egyptian Christians can overcome the pressures that have kept them from proclaiming the gospel freely. They need



peaceful coexistence between the two faiths, which provides a starting point for evangelism.

Polemics

In recent years, with the advent of satellite channels and the Internet, some Egyptian Christians have begun to use a polemical approach with Muslims. They attack the five pillars of Islam, as well as its Prophet, the Qur'an, the Hadith, and Islamic practices. These attacks range from pointing out contradictions and illogical tenets to ridiculing beliefs. This approach has gained popularity among the vast majority of Egyptian Christians because it allows them to express the pressure they themselves have suffered for fourteen centuries. However, some Christian leaders believe that this approach could make Muslims more aggressively defensive when they are evangelized, and point to

February 2011—National unity banner reads "Muslim + Christian = Egypt." With the political future of Egypt unresolved, Muslims and Christians continue to wrestle with how the two religious communities will co-exist.

to defeat the inner fears that bind them. With their knowledge of Islam and the Qur'an and their extraordinary experience in dealing with Muslims, Egyptian Christians can cooperate with other Christians in their interaction with Muslims. Egyptian Christians are especially fit for the task due to their proximity to the Middle Eastern, Islamic, Arabic, and African cultures, traditions, languages, and economic situations. The global church needs to discover the Egyptian church anew, looking to a common future while learning the lessons of the past. EIFD

other Hausa chiefs telling them that he had neglected “a small fire in his country until it had spread beyond his power to control. Having failed to extinguish it, it had now burnt him.” The chief’s letter ended with a dire warning: “Let each beware lest a like calamity befall his town too.”⁷ The battle cry of the jihadists was “the religion of the ruler is the religion of the land.” In other words, if the ruler is

“Muslim” as the jihadist defines Muslim, then that land is *dar al-Islam* and cannot be subjected to jihad. However, if the ruler of a particular land is not a Muslim, that land is *dar al-harb* and therefore a legitimate target for jihad.

The Sokoto Caliphate was established and Islamization was accompanied by aggressive Arabization, which included the implementation of Islamic law and the banishment of traditional African customs and practices. The jihad movements degenerated into slave raiding on a massive scale, first by the Fulani on the Hausa, and later by the Hausa-Fulani on other tribes in the middle belt of present-day Nigeria. Islamization during this period had much to do with the destruction of traditional structures, dislocation of

communities, and the conversion of slaves to Islam in massive numbers. The slave trade escalated during this period through the trans-Saharan routes, across the Red Sea and Indian Ocean into North Africa, the Middle East, Turkey, and Muslim India.⁸

Many leading Muslim clerics of the time opposed the jihads and paid with their lives. Ordinary Muslims across the western Sudan were therefore just as pleased and relieved as their traditional counterparts with the emergence of European colonial powers, primarily the French and British, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century. They brought an end to much of the jihadist mayhem and devastating slave raiding and trading. It is worth pointing out at this juncture that post-colonial mainstream Western scholarly works on Islam in Africa branded the militant Islamic tradition of the jihadists as “normative”, “official”, “orthodox” Islam while the Islam espoused by Muslims who argued for co-existence with traditional believers was branded as “mixed” and “corrupt”.

The jihadists version of Islam, made accessible largely through the works of Western scholars, continues to inspire an ideological, political, and militant Islam that is now championed by graduates from Islamic North Africa and the Middle East as well as the wind of global Islamic resurgence. This revivalist, reformist face of Islam comes with a clamor for the implementation of Islamic criminal code. The objectives include, in the words of Ali al-Khatim of Cameroon, “to Islamize the political authority.” Proponents of this face of Islam harbor and express strong anti-Sufi sentiments, are very



The Grand Mosque in Ouagadougou, the capital city of Burkina Faso.

Response: Rahman Yakubu

“Theology of Immanuel”: A Viable Option for Muslim-Christian Relations?

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Dr. John Azumah has presented to us not only a valuable history of Muslim-Christian relations in Africa but also the different trends of Islam and Muslims in Africa today. An important aspect of his article is the historical and contemporary survey of the various responses of the African church to Islam. The article underscores the global importance of Christian-Muslim relations of sub-Saharan Africa. He rightly points out that in a globalized world, “Africa, in many ways, still serves as a theater for proxy wars and laboratory for theological and ideological theories from other parts of the world.” His Danish cartoonist example says it all! In his conclusion, he advocated for a new way of doing theology if the African church is going to be constructive in dialoguing with Islam and Muslims. My response to his article has to do with this “new hermeneutic and theological framework.” As Dr. Azumah notes, since Africa is at the cutting edge of Christian-Muslim encounters, developing such a theological framework will be of global interest.

It is a fact that the African church’s approach to Islam and Muslims is neither satisfactory nor successful because, as Dr. Azumah observes, the various approaches are based on theological mindsets that do not fit or reflect the African worldview. Dr. Azumah’s proposal is crucial if the African church is to engage with Muslims in a constructive manner. This “theology of Immanuel,” as he calls it, is both feasible and constructive, for it is based on an African

relational outlook on life. In fact, the reality of sub-Saharan Africa as a good platform for the constructive engagement of Muslims and Christians has long been recognized, and as I have already noted, the experiences of the church in Africa can therefore contribute to the global interfaith dialogue.

The foundation for such theology of relationship is based on what a Ghanaian theologian, the late Kwame Bediako, has called the “meeting of Christianity and Islam on a common terrain.”¹ According to Bediako, in sub-Saharan Africa, for the first time Christianity and Islam are meeting on equal footing as missionary religions. Therefore, both faiths have equal opportunity for a constructive engagement. African society, being pluralistic in nature, provides the basis for constructing a theology of relationship. Pluralism is based on the great value placed on shared family and kinship. Lamin Sanneh, the Gambian professor at Yale, has noted that the family in Black Africa upheld the cultural value that makes relationships preeminent over religious allegiance. He writes: “Within the family a variety of religious confessions existed in an amicable way. Religious differences were overtaken by stronger bonds of mutual tolerance and personal interdependence.”² He concludes that “this is a precious heritage in a divisive world.” Such a heritage should be guarded and treasured.

So how can this new theological framework work in a pluralistic society where both Christians and Muslims stand on equal terrain and where relationship is preeminent to religious allegiance? I would like to share three concepts or ingredients from my experience that I believe can enhance the formulation of this “theology of relationship” or “theology of Immanuel.”

First, for any theology of relationship to be appropriate and effective it has to be holistic. The church in Africa needs to engage with Muslims holistically. This should encompass engagement in social action together, sharing of life together, participating in theological exchange, and sharing of spiritual experience. These are classically termed dialogue of social action, dialogue of life, dialogue of mind, and dialogue of heart. There should be no separation or compartmentalization of any of these forms of dialogue; they should be seen as one and the same thing. This entails

the meeting of whole human persons, not just some aspects of our beings. It should take into account the mandate to bear witness to the salvation message of the cross and at the same time to be agents of peace. Therefore, such engagement should allow both the need to share one’s faith and the need to promote peaceful coexistence, thereby grounding Muslim-Christian dialogue on both “missiological” and “existential” grounds.

The second ingredient necessary for a theology of relationship is that the church must be willing to be vulnerable. Vulnerability is inevitable in a pluralistic society. The church should understand that part of the reason for its existence in a multireligious society is to live a life of “kenosis.” By this I mean to live with such Christlike humility and vulnerability that it provides an opportunity for others to recognize that Jesus is their Lord as well as ours. The church must be willing to expose itself to Islam and Muslims. Vulnerability does not compromise our Christian witness, but rather strengthens it by creating an opportunity to be Christlike in humility. A willingness to be vulnerable means that we should not elevate ourselves to a higher position because of our belief that

"African society, being pluralistic in nature, provides the basis for constructing a theology of relationship. Pluralism is based on the great value placed on shared family and kinship."

we possess the truth. This calls for a change in attitude. The church needs to engage with Islam and Muslims as equals in a relationship of reciprocal and mutual understanding and acceptance. As a matter of fact, one cannot engage with the religious other without being humble and allowing one to be questioned by that other.

How does this vulnerability and

willingness to be questioned on an equal level combine with our mandate to bear witness to the salvation message of the cross? There is an apparent tension here. On the one hand, you need to accommodate the religious other; on the other hand, you need to hold on to the claim of the truth of your faith. This is a necessary tension that comes with our willingness to be vulnerable.

The third ingredient is that the Church must be willing to be challenged concerning our perception of the religious other. As Dr. Azumah has shown both historically and from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life Survey, Christians tend to have more negative perceptions of Muslims than Muslims do of Christians. Our perception of the other, consciously or unconsciously, affects the way we deal with and relate to the other. So if Muslims are seen as violent people, our tendency will be to avoid developing redemptive relationships with them. Through my theological training and life experiences—before becoming a Christian I was brought up as a Muslim and have worked in a predominantly Muslim context—it is my conviction that relationships cannot be built in the absence of trust and respect for both the person and his or her religious tradition. Also, people do not come to faith in Jesus devoid of relationships, and this makes relationship “everything.” The church should try to understand Muslims and Islam in such a way that they can recognize themselves in our perception of them, and to give witness to and share the best of our faith with them.

So let us return to our initial question: is a theology of Immanuel—that is, a theology of relationship in relationships—a possible approach to Muslim-Christian relations in Sub-Saharan Africa? This approach certainly is in line with the African context and worldview—in fact, not only the African worldview, but the worldview of most Muslims worldwide. This congruence suggests that this approach may likely also be effective in places other than Africa. I believe this approach would be most effective when taking into account the three points discussed above. While these are obviously not the only ingredients, these do reflect the character and attitude of our Lord as he lived alongside human beings as Immanuel, God with us. “Therefore, be imitators of God” (Eph 5:1). EIFD

antagonistic towards non-Muslims in general and Christians in particular, and generally associate the West with immorality. The militant manifestation of ideological Islam is represented by the Boko Haram of Nigeria, who are responsible for violent attacks in northern Nigeria.



Sufi ritual being performed (above) in Khartoum, the capital and largest city in Sudan.

Shona witch doctor in Zimbabwe (opposite).

The legacy of this ideological and militant phase of Islamization accounts in large part for frosty relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims in places where the jihad met with success. Such relationships include present-day northern Nigeria where the Hausa-Fulani look back to the jihad period as the golden age of Islam. The vast majority of other tribes, who were victims of Muslim raids and are now largely Christian, look back to it as a period of barbarism and wanton destruction of their way of life. Christians in Nigeria generally perceive Muslim calls for the implementation of Islamic Law as signs of Muslims trying to

re-enact the jihadist rule.

Islamization under Colonial Rule

Direct colonial rule started in Africa from the 1880s. European military interventions, the abolition of the slave trade, and attempts at controlling the powerful *marabouts* all contributed to increased social dislocation. Islamic civilization was viewed by the colonial rulers as having a higher standard as compared with indigenous traditions, and consequently Muslims were given preferential treatment during colonial rule. In places like south Sudan, northern Nigeria, and northern Ghana, the British, under the policy of indirect rule, extended Muslim rule over non-Muslim communities. Missionaries were barred from operating in predominantly Muslim regions. These colonial policies were predicated on the philosophical premises that Islam, while too low a civilization for European minds, was more suited to the “untutored” native Africans.

During the colonial period from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, Islam made dramatic gains in Africa. In 1900, Muslims made up about 32% (34.5 million) of the total African population, while Christians constituted about 9% (8.7 million). By 1962 when Africa had slipped out of colonial control, the Muslim population had risen to 145 million, while the Christian population had grown to 60 million. In effect the Muslim population in Africa more than quadrupled during the hundred years of colonial rule. Since then, the number of Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa has increased more than twentyfold, rising from an estimated 11 million in 1900 to approximately 234 million in 2010. The exponential growth of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa,

soaring to 470 million in 2010, took place during the postcolonial era.

This point is made to establish the fact that despite popular notions that Western colonial powers deliberately impeded the spread of Islam in Africa the evidence on the ground shows that Islam spread more during the one century of European intervention in Africa than it did in more than a millennium.

Other Manifestations or Faces of Islam in Africa

“Islam means PEACE” is the often-heard mantra. We also often hear people say or write things like “Islam teaches X, Y, Z” or “Islam does not permit X, Y, Z.” These kinds of statements are often made by Muslims and non-Muslims, advocates and opponents of Islam alike, especially fundamentalists on both sides for their particular agendas. In such situations, Islam is often talked about as one unified monolithic system. For Muslims who use these clichés, Islam is presented in totalitarian terms with no room for differences. Those who dare to be different are either deviants at best or heretics and unbelievers at worst. For opponents and critics of Islam, these clichés are used to tar Islam with one big brush to justify such statements as, “Islam is a violent religion,” the “Qur’an inspires violence (*jihad*),” and therefore explain suicide bombings, and so on.

There is no denying the fact that there is indeed some consensus among Muslims in the profession of their faith. Broadly, Muslims agree on and share one Qur’an, belief that Muhammad is a prophet from God, the five articles of faith and the five pillars of Islam, the qibla or prayer direction (i.e., towards Mecca or the *ka’bah*), the practice of saying liturgical prayers in Arabic, and others. At these basic levels there tends to be agreement.

At the same time, there are deep and profound differences or different faces of Islam that must be recognized. The obvious differences include the various groups and sects within Islam: Sunni, Shia, Ahmadiyya, Nation of Islam, etc. There are four schools of law in Sunni Islam: Maliki, Shafi’i, Hanafi, and Hanbali. Even more importantly, there are regional and cultural configurations of Islam: West and East Africa, Nigeria and Ghana, Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani, etc. And finally, there are the different orientations of Muslims even within the same school of law and same region or even same family (e.g., fundamentalists, traditionalists, cultural Muslims, secular Muslims, and those who will call themselves progressive Muslims).

Therefore, Islam in Africa is not only made up of different colors of the African soil; African Islam is made up of different threads, new and old, woven together into an African fabric. Taking it apart will not only mar its beauty, but will tear the fabric into pieces. But understanding the tapestry of the Islamic component of the African heritage is crucial for the church’s response to Islam and engagement with Muslims.

One such face of Islam is the missionary and polemical Islam that seeks to propagate Islam by employing Christian missionary tactics such as public preaching and

debates; establishment of Muslim educational, health, and agricultural institutions; translation of parts of the Qur'an into vernacular languages; use of Islamic songs; formation of Muslim youth and women's organizations, and imitation of Western-Christian wedding styles. In east and southern Africa, the use of polemics is their hallmark. Polemics have caused problems within Muslim communities and with Christian communities.

The progressive face of Islam is the least known. We can safely credit Mahmud Taha of Sudan who was executed in 1985 for "blasphemy" as the godfather of progressive Islam in Africa. Among other things Taha argued for the reversal of the theory of abrogation, that is, for the more peaceful face of Meccan Islam to abrogate the more belligerent face of Medinan Islam. The progressive face of Islam in Africa is now championed by a new generation of Western-educated South African Muslim scholars like Ebrahim Moosa and Farid Esack. They undertake a critical reading of the Qur'an, are openly opposed to all forms of discrimination and injustices inherent in Islamic law against non-Muslims and women, and support democratic principles of governance.

It is only in light of the different phases of Islamization and its resultant configurations and colorations in contemporary Africa that the following various Christian responses can be understood.

Various Church Responses to Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa

Church responses to Islam in Africa are no different from those in other parts of the world. African Christian engagement with Islam has tended to be *reactive* more than proactive. There is a consequential lack of systematic or coherent church responses to Islam in Africa, mainly also because, just like Islam itself, the church is very diverse. On the whole the responses seem to be determined and driven by the type of Islam or Muslims Christians encounter.

Hospitality and Hostility

Muslim tradition claims that the very first meeting between Islam and the African church in 615 C.E. was more than just a hospitable reception and provision of asylum for a vulnerable minority religious group—it was a meeting of minds. The traditions recount that upon further questioning by the Ethiopian Christian monarch on what they believed about Jesus Christ, the leader of the Muslim asylum seekers proceeded to quote some passages from the Qur'an: "Verily Christ Jesus, son of Mary, is the apostle of God and his word which he conveyed into Mary and a spirit proceeding from him." And when the emperor asked him about Mary, he recited the Qur'an 19:16–34. When the emperor heard this, in the words of the Muslim chroniclers, "he wept so that his beard was wet with his tears" and then exclaimed with joyful astonishment, "Verily this and that which Moses brought emanate from one Lamp, go, for by Allah I will not suffer them to get at you, or even contemplate this."⁹

In a reciprocal gesture, a tradition attributed to Muhammad states: "leave the Abyssinians alone as long as they leave you alone," which came to represent the Muslim attitude towards Christian Abyssinia during the early Islamic period. Abyssinia was granted the special



TRADITIONAL AFRICAN RELIGIONS

The family of religions pre-dating Christianity and Islam in Africa—sometimes called African traditional religions—have been passed down from generation to generation orally and through a wide array of ritual practices, rather than relying on creeds and texts. Westerners have on occasion labeled these religions pejoratively as animism, paganism, ancestor worship, or simply superstitions. The enduring power and sophistication of these African traditional religions are evidenced by the participation of many Africans today—including some Muslims and Christians—in the ritual practices of ancestor sacrifices, the use of amulets and charms, and consultation of religious healers. These religious rituals are thought to ensure human well-being and guard against evil curses and spells.

Although not a monolithic system of belief and practice, these religions promote a worldview in which, between the supreme (and distant) creator being and humanity, there is a spiritual realm that is filled with spiritual beings and ancestors. As part of the human community, the ancestor spirits are objects of ritual focus believed to serve as emissaries between humans and the supreme being. Ritual practices involving sacred objects and religious healers and medicine are also thought to have power over physical illness by going after the spiritual source responsible for the sickness. The persistence of the religious practices of African traditional religions by African Christians poses a challenge to simplistic views of Christianity as a "fulfillment" of other religions. The process of appropriation, assimilation, and inculturation of Christianity within African cultures in many instances defies that of a "replacement" of traditional African religions.¹

status of "Territory of Neutrality" (*dar al hiyad*) in the classical Muslim division of the world into *dar al Islam* and *dar al-harb*.

The sixteenth-century jihad by Ahmad Granj purposed to change attitudes on the part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Kingdom. By the late seventeenth century, a

Response: Ayman Ibrahim

Engaging with Muslims: Islam or Islams? Messiah or Immanuel?

Ayman Ibrahim is a PhD candidate at Fuller Theological Seminary, focusing on Islamic Studies, and a graduate of Southwestern Seminary (MDiv concentrating on Islamic Studies). His dissertation research investigates Muslim-Christian interaction in the first century of the Islamic era, with a special emphasis on the impact of Muslim conquests on Christianity in the Middle East and North Africa. Ibrahim has published several articles and book reviews, in addition to speaking in both academic and church settings in the Middle East and the United States. Before coming to Fuller, he worked as a telecommunication engineer and then a project manager for the International Bible Society in the Middle East and North Africa region.



In such challenging and confusing days of trying to understand Islam, John Azumah's article is timely, eye opening, and thought provoking. Out of his African background and firsthand experience engaging with Muslims, he has a great deal to contribute to the various hotly debated matters concerning Islam and its history, legacy, and nature. I have greatly

benefited from Azumah's scholarship and have agreed with just about everything he teaches and writes. I had the privilege of listening to his lectures at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Lebanon earlier this summer, where his unique level of academic prowess, theological acumen, pastoral qualities, and Christian character were evident in his lectures and interactions with those in attendance. I am thus grateful for this opportunity to interact with his article on "The Church and Islam in Africa"—an article that encapsulates a huge amount of research in a little space, providing historical, theological, and practical insights about Muslim-Christian interaction, with a special emphasis on Africa. I will briefly reflect on two major contributions of this article, followed by two questions that could be explored in a future publication.

The first major contribution of this article is that Azumah not only identifies the multifaceted religious nature of the Muslim community but also its cultural diversity—thus offering a unique understanding of

Islam and its diverse adherents. The worldwide Muslim *umma* (community) involves various cultures and different religious sects. In the post-9/11 world, common questions are being posed regarding the nature of Islam as a religion and the mindset of Muslims as a community; for example, Is Islam a violent religion? Does Islam instruct Muslims to kill non-Muslims everywhere? Does Islam encourage suicide bombing? Does Islam undermine women? And so forth. For all these questions, Azumah responds: which Islam are you talking about? In an excellent turn, he identifies several faces and various trends within Islam, using a better

term: Islams. He explains the complex nature and connectedness between African Islam and African cultures, pointing out that "Islam in Africa is thoroughly Africanized."

African culture is not homogeneous and neither is Islam—there are various cultures and multifaceted Islams. The obvious diversity among African countries results in diversity

of cultures and, consequently, religious differences in doctrinal issues, theological interpretations, and matters of practice. The version of Islam we encounter in Egypt differs in various aspects from the one we see in Ghana. It is evident that culture influences the way religion is perceived and even practiced. The "theological" questions asked by a Ghanaian Muslim may differ from those posed by an Egyptian; moreover, the interpretation of some Qur'anic verses or *hadiths* can also vary as they will be encapsulated with cultural terms. Azumah is right in pointing out that "Islam in Africa is not only made up of different colors of the African soil, African Islam is made up of different threads, new and old, woven together into an African fabric."

Christians seeking to apply insights from Azumah's article will be challenged to cease stereotyping Muslims by placing them all in one category. Such stereotyping will only distance the church more and more from interacting with Islam and Muslims. Islam cannot be viewed as one monolithic religious system or coherent cultural body. For instance, in 2001, some "Muslims" planned the 9/11 attack, and some "Muslims" died as victims in it. One could argue that some militant "Muslims" planned and executed the attack, but still there are also many cultural, Qur'anic, and pious "Muslims" who condemned it. In Egypt, in different waves of sectarian violence, many Coptic Christians were killed by some people claiming to be "Muslims." However, it should also be noted that other Egyptian "Muslims" decided to come sympathize with those heartbroken Christian families who lost loved ones. Azumah's examination of the various faces of Islam is very helpful not only to avoid demonizing Muslims or Islam but also to show the strong connectedness between Islam as a religion and the culture in which it is embedded.

A second important contribution of Azumah's article is that he offers a new hermeneutical framework to interact with and respond to Islam, namely, "*Immanuelology*." Africans would relate to the "Immanuel" idea or concept more than to "King of Kings" or "Messiah." That is indeed a unique understanding that Azumah brings to help the contemporary church interact with Muslims in a Christlike way. In an excellent turn, Azumah suggests this model to respond to Islam specifically in *sub-Saharan Africa*.

It seems, though, he excludes North Africa from this model as he is aware of the different nature of North African Islam—especially the version of Wahhabi and Salafi Islam found in Egypt. It rings true that this “*Immanuelology*” hermeneutical framework would best fit a sub-Saharan African mindset and worldview. It speaks of Christlike living in an African context in a way that Africans would relate to the most, especially in dialoging with Muslims. Africans prefer the God who lives among them, eats with them, and feels with them; not the one who lives far away in an ivory palace that they hear about from a distance.

I still find this hermeneutical framework applicable and valid in other contexts. In fact, and speaking missiologically, I would argue that this model has much to say to various Christian groups in different contexts. I will mention only two. First, learning to engage with Muslims through an “Immanuel” model is greatly needed among non-African missionaries who have a heart to serve in Africa. These missionaries usually come to Africa with pre-prepared sets of solutions to “theological” debates either to present the gospel or to preach to African Muslims; they know how to defend their faith and how to show the possible flaws in Islam. However, these missionaries need to realize that African Muslims are Africans before they are Muslims. Muslims in Africa are influenced by relationships more than intellectual formulas and equations. They elevate honor and dignity above being theologically correct and accurate. They view the name of their family, ancestors, and tribe as much more important than their individual names. Simply put, they are Africans. This may be a major reason for the sharp dissonance between the versions of Islam we have in sub-Saharan Africa and those versions we encounter in places such as Saudi Arabia or Iraq. Islam succeeded in spreading to many places in Africa because it was Africanized—a lesson that today’s church needs to understand.

Second, some Christian groups in the West also need the “Immanuel” hermeneutical framework. Groups that consider Muslims and their religion among the major threats and evils facing the nations—many of which exist in the United States—tend to attack Islam, its prophet, its sacred book, and its adherents, believing that philosophical debate and polemical apologetics against Islamic

ideology would settle the matter. For those groups who advocate such approaches, I would commend Azumah’s “Immanuel” model and urge them to understand that Muslims need something beyond mere words, simple formulas, and logical proofs; they need a model of the Incarnate-Love among us—Immanuel. They need to see Christ-in-Us before hearing about Christ-of-Us. In the West, many debates with Muslims could end with “Christians” winning the debate but alienating Muslims. Various Western Christian leaders believe they need to confront Islamic ideology and fight hard to convince Muslims of the darkness, desperation, and hopelessness of Islam. Those leaders believe that Islam and Muslims are driven by a satanic spirit that harms the entire society—they believe in, as Azumah puts it, “A God who is ‘with us, against others.’” I would argue that Azumah’s “Immanuel” model is crucial for those leaders in communicating with Muslims. In Luke 9, when the people of a Samaritan village did not welcome Jesus, the disciples James and John said to Jesus, “Lord, should we call down fire

in sub-Saharan Africa? Second, what are some of the factors that made North African Christianity less capable than Egyptian Christianity of surviving the impact of the early Muslim conquests? These political, cultural, and historical questions are important for accurately apprehending the diversity of Islams that we see throughout Africa today, and these will help the church find ways of pursuing an *Immanuelology* appropriate for engaging them.

In conclusion, Azumah, based on a historical and theological unique understanding of Africa and Africans, has provided practical insights and helpful tools for Christians to interact and engage with Muslims—especially his offer of “*Immanuelology*” as a new hermeneutical and theological model. He has provided a helpful overview of various versions of Islam and different kinds of Muslims that would inform Christians, encouraging them to dispel stereotypes, and helping them sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ by Christlike living in an “Immanuel” paradigm. **EIFD**



from heaven to burn them up?” Jesus turned and rebuked them, saying, “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of.”

Azumah’s article raises two questions that could be discussed in more depth in future publications. First, why has the Arabicization process—driven by the expanding Islamic state—succeeded in North Africa while not

A group of Muslim protestors in Tahrir, Egypt (opposite). In some places, Christians and Muslims took turns holding hands as a protective barrier for each other as they prayed. Larabanga mosque (above), one of Ghana’s oldest, is said to date from 1421. Restoration in 2002 served as a catalyst for construction of other mud-plaster buildings.

BOOK REVIEW

Allah: A Christian Response

by Miroslav Volf, HarperOne, 2011.

Book Review by Ayman Ibrahim

In *Allah: A Christian Response*, Miroslav Volf attempts to provide a simple, definite, and explicit answer to a very complex question: “Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?” Using a blend of practical theology and political philosophy, he applies political theology to articulate theological concepts in ways that inform both political and cultural discourses. In writing about Islam and Muslims, he seeks “to be both truthful and charitable” (12). He clearly affirms that “Christians and Muslims worship one and the same God, the only one God” (14).

In a genius and creative turn, Volf begins his book by stating clearly his delimitations and identifying his intended audience. He asserts that he writes as a Christian from the mainstream tradition. He writes for Christians, not for Muslims; however, he is aware that he writes in “the presence of Muslims” (12). The goal of this book is to promote the knowledge of the One God in a “socially relevant” way and to encourage Christians and Muslims to live in peace together in the world. The discussion centers on peacebuilding rather than on eternal destiny and the “saving knowledge of God” (13).

Volf establishes his argument primarily on his conviction that both Christians and Muslims, in their “normative mainstream,” describe the Master of the Universe similarly, even if there may be some differences in how they understand this same Divine Being. Since the description of God is similar within the “mainstream” of the two faiths, he argues, they certainly worship the same Divine Being, and “have a sufficiently robust moral framework to pursue the common good together” (15).

In his attempt to build bridges of peace and reconciliation between Christianity and Islam, Volf, on the one hand, examines various examples of people who were primarily seeking to promote peace and mutual understanding, such as the U.S. president Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) in his second inaugural address, the German philosopher and theologian Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) in his defense of Islam against the pope’s harsh statement, Pope John

Paul II (1920–2005) in his affirmation that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, and others. On the other hand, Volf evaluates and critiques some examples of oppositional statements against Islam or the God of Islam, such as those of Pope Benedict XVI (1927–), Pastor John Piper (1946–), the famous Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546), and others.

In an excellent argument, the book examines the semantic controversy about “Allah” and “God,” before moving on to distinguish between the matters of “beliefs” and “practices” with respect to believing in the same God. Volf presents a comparative, and thorough, study of various texts from the Bible and the Qur’an, in addition to some authentic sayings of Muhammad (the *hadith* collection). He also explains how, with some diligent effort in explaining the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, Muslims and Christians can achieve a common ground in their description of the one God, and thus stop fighting and peacefully pursue the common good.

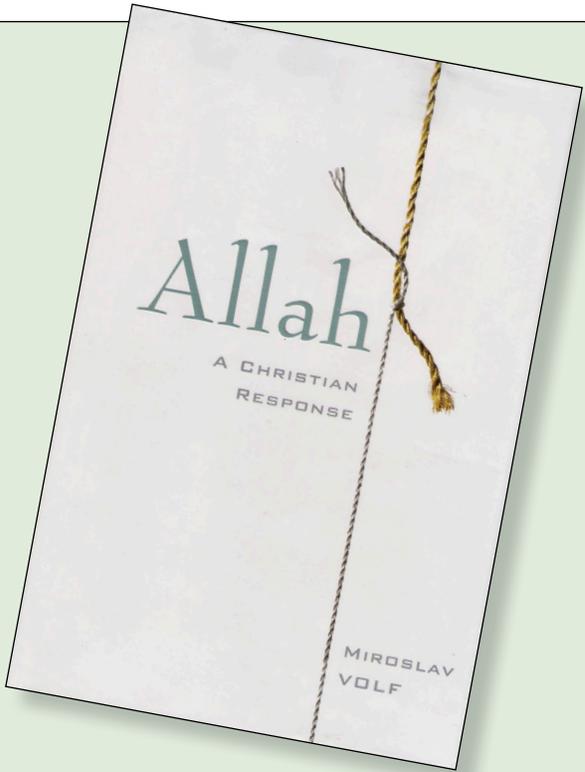
A major strength of this book lies in Volf’s ability to present complicated ideas in clear and nontechnical terms. Christians without background knowledge of Islam may find insights about important historical incidents and theological arguments in Muslim-Christian engagement. Volf interacts with crucial statements of religious leaders as well as political figures—attempting to evaluate and critique them in a balanced way, with the main goal of the book always in mind. Chapter 4 of the book is meticulously researched, and part 4 on “Living under the Same Roof” is a must-read.

The book is an excellent project, though it is not unprecedented and has several flaws. First, Volf builds his entire argument on what he calls “normative mainstream” Islam and chooses the influential thinker Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1056–1111) as his model example of Muslims. Though a great choice to represent tolerant, moderate, and reformer Muslims, al-Ghazali cannot, as a key figure by himself, stand as a paradigm of normative mainstream Islam. In his search for the truth, al-Ghazali embraced Sufism, which by all means does not represent

Miroslav Volf is a professor of theology at Yale Divinity School. His work at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture has included involvement with the Common Word initiative. Since 2007, this initiative has brought together Christian and Muslim scholars to work for reconciliation between these two worldwide religious communities.

mainstream Islam by itself. Moreover, not only did he receive praise from some Muslim scholars, but he was also criticized by several Muslim Salafis (fundamentalists), such as Ibn al-Jawzi in his book *Talbis Iblis*, and Imam Ibn Taymiyyah in *Majmu’a al-Fatawa*, among others. Without a doubt, those who follow al-Ghazali’s school of thought, or Sufi Muslims in general, could easily agree with the notion that Muslims and Christians worship the same God according to the Qur’an (Surah 4:163; 22:34; and 29:46). However, the case would be different when exploring some other Muslim schools and their interpretations, which could also be seen as representative of “normative mainstream” Islam.

Second, in an attempt to build bridges of mutual understanding between Muslims and Christians, the book insists on a simple and single definite answer for a very complex question, which does not seem to do justice to the complexity of this issue. The question of “do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?” cannot be framed in a yes-or-no manner—it involves various parameters and different variables. For example, Volf affirms that he believes in the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation (11), which implies that he believes Jesus Christ is God incarnate; would Muslims, then, accept that they worship the same God that Christians worship, who is, in his essence, the Lord Jesus Christ?



Third, the book does not seem to engage in depth with essential differences and points of divergence between Christianity and Islam—points that are substantial in defining the Deity, such as the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The book seems to avoid exploring that topic, perhaps because it is a very controversial topic in Muslim-Christian dialogue. However, from a Christian standpoint, trying to solve Muslim-Christian disputes by simply avoiding them and emphasizing God's eternal mercy and unconditional love will primarily dilute the biblical witness, and stand as a clear compromise of the "normative mainstream" Christianity—a case that Volf never intended, and will definitely not accept.

The book is a valuable attempt to promote peace-making and establish Muslim-Christian mutual understanding. However, some parts of the book have adopted a reductionist interpretation of historical events and tendentious readings of major principles of Christian faith. Volf affirms that he is a Christian who writes for Christians, yet sometimes the reader would wonder who the real audience actually is. The book includes some strange statements, such as, "If Muslims and Christians have a common God, are not Islam and Christianity just two versions of the same thing?" (191)—a question that would necessitate revision as it does not uphold the uniqueness of Christianity or conceive the supremacy of Jesus Christ. In the pursuit of peacebuilding and mutual understanding, particularities and differences essential to each religion cannot be set aside. **EIFD**

royal decree of religious discrimination forced Ethiopian Muslims to live in ghettos in order to contain the "Muslim threat." This policy continued and an even harsher edict was issued in 1878, requiring all Muslim subjects to convert to Christianity or be killed. Militant Islam seems to have radicalized large sections of the Ethiopian society, including the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, of which large sections had become very schizophrenic in its relations to Muslims.

The same can be said of sections of the Nigerian and Sudanese churches that have encountered various forms of militant Islam. Some Nigerian Christians now strongly believe in what some term "speaking the language the Muslims best understand" (i.e., use of violence). Some have even gone further to propound what is called the "Third Cheek Theology," which argues that Jesus' teaching of turning the other cheek no longer applies in their context, since they have been slapped on both cheeks and have no third cheek to turn! Radical and militant Islam, therefore, has the potential of radicalizing not only young Muslims, but Christians as well, a fact Christians everywhere need to be mindful of.

Old Missionary Model: Confrontational Approach

Muslim-Christian encounters in sub-Saharan Africa from the fifteenth to the mid twentieth century were basically the encounters between European Christians and African Muslims. This encounter pitted Islam and Christianity against one another in competition for political dominance, commercial interests, and converts. The Edinburgh 1910 Mission Conference report is littered with competitive zeal and a combative mood. The Commission I Report declares in part:

If we do not counteract the advance of Islam with all our energy and along the whole line, we shall lose not only the large parts of the now Pagan Africa but even the territories already Christianised. The main battle against Mohammedanism in the immediate future will be fought on East African soil. Here the enemy is already before our doors.¹⁰

Missionaries made it their duty to undermine the Islamic religious system and sought to prove by argument and controversy that Christianity was superior to Islam. This confrontational and polemical approach was roundly rejected by leading African mission workers at the time such as Edward Blyden (1832–1912) and Samuel Adjaye Crowther (1806–1891). Blyden argued that Islam was an integral part of the African reality and should be engaged with as a partner and an ally rather than demonized as an enemy. Crowther on his part started by using polemics and debates in his engagement with Muslims. The outcome of one debate, in Crowther's own words, "sobered me down a great deal in my zeal." He then went on to develop what Andrew Walls calls "an African Christian approach to Islam in an African setting. . . there was no denunciation, no allegation of imposture or false prophecy. . . For the future he looked to an African Christian community with an effective knowledge of the Bible."¹¹

"The church in Africa needs to engage with Muslims holistically. This should encompass engagement in social action together, sharing of life together, participating in theological exchange, and sharing of spiritual experience. These are classically termed dialogue of social action, dialogue of life, dialogue of mind, and dialogue of heart. There should be no separation or compartmentalization of any of these forms of dialogue; they should be seen as one and the same thing. This entails the meeting of whole human persons, not just some aspects of our beings."

In recent times, however, the competitive and confrontational encounter has resurfaced in many parts of Africa, further stoked by recent Muslim clamor for the implementation of the Sharia in Nigeria and the Khadi Courts in Kenya. This encounter takes two forms: the missionary polemics and debate (*mihadra* in East Africa) and political activism on the part of mainly Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians in West Africa, Nigeria, since the 1990s.

In Nigeria, based on an interpretation of Galatians 4:22–31, Islam is often referred to as the “usurper,” the “religion of the bond-woman,” “the religion of the slave,” “the religion of force and violence,” “the slaves,” and “the spirit of anti-Christ.” This biblical vision has become a potent symbol for depicting Islam as the “unwanted” and “violent” religion. Islam is presented mainly as a challenge, a threat, and an enemy to Christians and Christianity.

Aggressive evangelism of Muslims is pursued, led mainly (but not exclusively) by organizations, churches, and ministries founded by Muslim converts to Christianity. In August 2010, a female law student is reported to have disguised herself and joined a Muslim assembly in prayer in Ibadan, Nigeria. In the middle of

the prayer, she started shouting out that all must accept Jesus in order to be saved and that Allah is not God but Jesus is God. She was saved from lynching by the Imam, but her action sparked violence in the city.

Negative views of Islam and Muslims are presented in sermons, pamphlets, and magazines and taught at seminaries. The activities of Christian anti-Muslim polemicists are promoted and funded by Western anti-Islamic organizations based in South Africa, Germany, Britain, and the United States. The Pew Forum (2010) found that overall 43% of Christians hold negative views of Muslims as compared to the 20% of Muslims who hold negative views of Christians. In Chad 70% of Christians hold negative views, as compared to 40% of Muslims’ negative views in Djibouti. Among Nigerian Christians, 38% have negative views of Muslims as compared to 13% of Nigerian Muslims holding negative views of their Christian counterparts, and 61% of

Ghana’s Christians have negative views compared to 11% of negative views from Muslims. In the overwhelmingly Christian state of Zambia, 47% of Christians hold negative views of Muslims as compared to 2% of Muslims holding negative views of Christians in the largely Muslim Senegal.¹²

Institutional and Official Dialogue

At the institutional (continental, regional, and national) levels, mainline Protestant Churches founded the Islam in Africa project in 1959 (renamed in 1987 as Project for Christian Muslim Relations in Africa, and in 2003 as Programme for Christian Muslim Relations in Africa [PROCMURA]), which works closely with but is not part of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). PROCMURA operates in 24 African countries through the various arms of the National Council of Churches. It organizes various training programs, seminars, and academic programs to give Christians a better understanding of Islam, engages constructively with Muslims, and develops appropriate forms of Christian witness in Muslim contexts.

The Roman Catholic Church, through the various Episcopal conferences, has invested in Christian-Muslim relations through publications, the training of personnel, and active participation in dialogue and other interfaith programs with Muslims at regional and national levels. Interfaith resource centers are set up for the use of both communities. Local churches also have different levels of engagement with Muslim leadership.

There is active engagement at the institutional and official level between mainline Protestants/Roman Catholic councils and organizations and different local, national, and regional Muslim bodies. African Christians, almost without exception, agree on the need to share their faith with Muslims and, unlike their Western co-religionists, are neither apologetic nor secretive about that. PROCMURA and the Catholic Bishops Conferences all call for dialogue while at the same time insist on the need and freedom for Christians (and Muslims) to share their witness.

A Call for a New Hermeneutic and Theological Framework

In many ways, Africa still serves as a theater for proxy wars and a laboratory for theological and ideological theories from other parts of the world. When a Danish cartoonist draws an offensive depiction of Muhammad, Christians in Nigeria and Pakistan who may never have heard of Denmark—let alone the cartoonist—had to pay with their lives! In other words, African Christians and Muslims still view themselves and each other as extensions of the West and the Middle East.

Africa is therefore at the cutting edge of Christian-Muslim encounters and, in places like Nigeria, at the crossroads! This is especially so because the vast majority of African Christians and Muslims share a lot in common, ranging from citizens with equal rights, ethnic bonds, family ties, through relationships forged over the years



A Muezzin from Mali, in West Africa. Muezzins are non-clerical Muslims who lead worshipers in the five daily times of prayer from one of the mosque's minarets.

as class and school mates, and as members of the same professional bodies and political parties, and so on. In their encounters, in contemporary Africa, Islam and Christianity assume the face of a neighbor, relative, an MP, president, teacher, or friend. African Christians can neither afford the Western hermeneutic of guilt which tends to romanticize Islam nor the hermeneutic of hate which seeks to demonize it. African Christians and Muslims have to face the dangers and threats of ideological, political, and militant religion with, not against, each other.

But more importantly, the African church needs to develop a new hermeneutical and theological framework in its encounter with Islam and engagement with Muslims. We have inherited from Byzantium a Christ who is on the side of the ruler, the powerful, the victorious, and the Christ of empire, exclusivity, triumphalism, and intolerance. A God who is “with us, against others.” A message such as this one has nothing new or radical to offer in an Islamic context. The theological import is that God is aligned with the majority worldview. What is needed in the majority world in general and Africa in particular is the proclamation of a God who is “with us”—not against—but “for the sake of others.” We need a Christ who is on the side of the weak, the marginal, and who is most powerful in self-giving death.

Constantinian Christianity and its creeds were developed in the context of power and expressed through Greek philosophical mediums. Hitherto, African theologians have taken a very critical view of the dismissive and negative attitudes towards indigenous religious heritage. A similar critical approach is needed in developing a new hermeneutic and theological framework for Christian engagement with Islam in Africa. I am by no means suggesting a wholesale jettisoning of the creeds as having little value in the African church! I am simply echoing the view that all theology, is by default, contextual. The creeds and dogmas developed in the fourth and fifth centuries were answers to pertinent questions at the time. The creeds and traditions could serve as crucial sign-posts to the African Church in her quest for answers but shouldn't be the normative touch-stones they are currently held to be in all respects.

For instance, Christology is a theological edifice constructed on the title of Jesus, Christus or Messiah. In African and Semitic contexts, however, the true identity of persons lie in their proper names rather than their titles. It makes sense therefore for the African church to consider developing a theology based on the proper name of Jesus: Immanuel. There is a need to develop an *Immanuelology*, that is, a “theology of Immanuel,” a theology that takes on flesh, a face, a name of a Muslim relative and neighbor. And we need a hermeneutic of relationship—a hermeneutic that takes seriously and wrestles with the African reality of religious pluralism. For as an African proverb puts it, if you cannot leave each other behind on a journey, then you better learn to wait for one another. **EIFD**

Endnotes

Introduction

- 1 For a thorough examination of secularization and the modern social imaginary of Western societies, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), esp. 1–89 and 159–211.
- 2 A growing body of literature being amassed today is displacing such naïve views that overlook the role that religion played in the development of modernity. For more on this, see James E. Bradley and Dale K. Van Kley, eds., *Religion and Politics in Enlightenment Europe*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001). Furthermore, Phillip Jenkins's book, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), has shown that the state of religion in Europe is alive with new religious movements rather than being in a state of religious decline. Finally, Jehu J. Hanciles's work on non-Western migration and religion argues convincingly that the future of Christianity in the West will bear a distinctly African influence (*Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008]).
- 3 The 2010 report from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, offers a glimpse into the current socio-religious climate in sub-Saharan Africa: http://pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Belief_and_Practices/sub-saharan-africa-full-report.pdf.

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- 1 Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, trans. John Bowden (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), xii.
- 2 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population* (October 7, 2009), <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=450>.
- 3 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, rev. and expanded ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 201–4.
- 4 Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 148.
- 5 Quoted in J. S. Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1965), p. 45.
- 6 Ali Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (London: BBC, 1988).
- 7 J. S. Trimmingham, *A History of Islam in West Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 199.
- 8 John Azumah, *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa: A Quest for Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 63–107.
- 9 Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 146–50.
- 10 World Missionary Conference 1910, *Report of Commission I: Carrying the Gospel to all the non-Christian World*, on [openlibrary.org](http://www.archive.org/stream/reportofcommission1worlwoft#page/243/mode/1up), <http://www.archive.org/stream/reportofcommission1worlwoft#page/243/mode/1up> (accessed October 1, 2011).
- 11 A. F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 146.
- 12 2010 report from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa* (April 2010), http://pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Belief_and_Practices/sub-saharan-africa-full-report.pdf.

Is a “Theology of Immanuel” a Possible Approach to Muslim-Christian Relations in Sub-Saharan Africa?

- 1 Kwame Bediako, “Christianity, Islam and the Kingdom of God: Rethinking their Relationship from an African Perspective,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 7, no. 2, ed. Gillian M. Bediako (Accra: Type Company Limited, 2004), 5.
- 2 Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (London: C. Hurst & Company 1983), 221.

A Seminary's Work to Equip Women and Men for Ministry in the Arab World

- 1 abtslebanon.org.
- 2 abtslebanon.org/imes.
- 3 abtslebanon.org/emrc.

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- 1 <http://pewforum.org/executive-summary-islam-and-christianity-in-sub-saharan-africa.aspx>. Accessed August 1, 2011.

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- 1 <http://o.tqn.com/d/goafrica/1/0/b/Q/true-size-of-africa.jpg>. Accessed August 1, 2011.

Different Faces of Islam

- 1 *Mapping the Global Muslim Population*, a report published in 2009 by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life: <http://pewforum.org/uploadedfiles/Topics/Demographics/Muslimpopulation.pdf> (accessed October 1, 2011).
- 2 Frederick Mathewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 118.
- 3 Y. I. al-Siekh, *The Pillars of Islam* (El-Mansoura: Dar Al-Manarah, 2006), 14.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 5 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco), 2003, 10.



Praxis: Diana Farhood

Project Coordinator, ABTS

A Seminary's Work to Equip Women and Men for Ministry in the Arab World

Our journey as the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS)¹ began in 1960 when the late Rev. Dr. Finlay Graham, a Baptist educator of Scottish origin, developed a vision to equip Christian leaders in Lebanon and the Arab World.

Since 1960, ABTS has made a significant contribution: approximately 240 graduates and over 500 alumni from various Evangelical backgrounds (Presbyterian, Baptist, Anglican, and others) are serving across the Arab world and beyond—in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and Arab ministries in the West.

The great majority of these graduates are now actively engaged in ministry in the Arabic-speaking world. Instruction is in Arabic and is contextualized to meet the needs of the Arab world. Leadership formation at ABTS also emphasizes the development of personal spirituality, effective ministry to the majority Arab religious community, knowledge of the history and particularities of Christian minorities in the Arab world, and sensitivity to special areas of Eastern spirituality.

One exciting characteristic of our students is that not all of them are training to be church pastors. Some will go on to ministry in the marketplace and other types of mission fields.

At ABTS we desire to be missional. This means that a different type of church is needed, one that is out-of-the-box, focusing on incarnational ministry that sends leaders out into the world. Our Institute of Middle East Studies (IMES)², for example, challenges us to reach out to the Arab world. Through ABTS's Educational Ministries Resource Center (EMRC)³, we provide strategic networking and support to local and regional churches. We feel that God is using us to be his light in the world, a world that for many in our region is often lacking in brightness and hope.

ABTS has a significant place on the map as Lebanon is the only country in the region where students of a non-Christian background can be enrolled in seminary formation. We are thankful for the role that this allows us to play in supporting and training future leaders.

At ABTS we have a huge vision—*To see God glorified, people reconciled, and communities restored through the Church in the Arab world*—but limited resources. We are more than just a seminary. We see ourselves as an educational movement and a resource center as well. Everything we do works toward our mission: *to serve the Church in our region as it realizes its biblical mission of having Christ acknowledged as Lord by offering specialized learning resources and equipping faithful men and women for effective service.*

All students at ABTS come from countries that are major- ity Muslim. Although they have this in common, there are a

plethora of differences as well that can contribute to some of the challenges ABTS students face. Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Palestine, and Iraq (the countries that have historically composed ABTS's student body) are drastically different culturally not only from each other but also from Lebanon, where all come together under one roof to study theology, experience spiritual formation, and grow as leaders.

ABTS Dean of Students Bassem Melki observes that culture shock is a very real challenge experienced by the students. "A lot of their culture is highlighted by seeing themselves in a different light [e.g., in Lebanon]. They're on a three-year journey of rediscovering themselves and who they are in their original contexts," says Melki. In many ways ABTS challenges them to be fish swimming against the current when they return to their home countries. Melki adds, however, that one important and intentional choice of ABTS leadership is to send the students home every summer so they are not out of their home context for three years straight, in which case they would run the risk of returning after graduation as foreigners to their own country. Integral to ABTS's philosophy is leadership formation *in* and *for* the region.

ABTS's academic dean, Dr. Hikmat Kashouh, feels that for many students the real challenges occur when they return to their home contexts: "They've changed, acquired new skills, and transformed their way of thinking in the three years they spend at ABTS. Then they must go back to their home countries and resettle." Dr. Kashouh adds that many students come from countries that have extremely different philosophies of education. "In-depth research is not something that all of them are comfortable and familiar with; oftentimes they come from societies that stress memorization over critical thinking. This can at times be challenging upon first arrival in Lebanon, but I presume even more once they have become critically thinking individuals who are placed back into their original contexts," says Kashouh. Nevertheless, just as God stretches them and grows them during their time at ABTS, he undoubtedly continues this work upon their return to their home countries—and they are equipped to negotiate how their educational experience in Lebanon fits into their unique home contexts.

Elie Haddad, president of ABTS, believes that in fact the biggest difficulty for many ABTS students is to read the Qur'an and truly study it. "Whether they come from a Christian or a non-Christian background they've been discipled to reject Islam, and that means everything that goes along with it." Dr. Martin Accad, professor of Islamic Studies at ABTS, agrees. "Perhaps the greatest challenge for ABTS students is their sentiment towards Islam and Muslims. Students often carry feelings of fear and suspicion, which can often end up manifesting in hatred towards Muslims, and certainly much prejudice regarding Islam," Accad observes. "These feelings can, of course, not be simply dismissed. Although much of the prejudice is inherited from popular and communal feelings shared by their families, friends, and coreligionists back home, a certain amount is the result of personal experience of hurt and sometimes direct persecution. Therefore," he

"Our ultimate purpose is to help the Church in our region be transformed from a 'reactive' community (which we have often been through history), into a proactive, constructive, creative, transformational community that boldly believes we can make a positive difference by embracing the way of Jesus, beyond the negative inter-religious conflict connotations of our historical burden."

Dr. Martin Accad
Professor of Islamic Studies and Director of Institute of Middle East Studies (IMES)

believes, “our responsibility as a seminary in the business of forming leaders for the region is not in helping our students repress their feelings or deny their experiences. But rather our responsibility is to help students reframe their experiences and feelings within a biblical worldview and to help them develop responses that are Christlike.” Dr. Accad goes on to explain that it is ABTS’s role to also help students see that many of the more negative realities that they have had to live with may be due to cultural and sociological factors rather than specifically religious-Islamic factors.

Consider the example of Kamal (pseudonym). He came from a prominent Muslim family in his country but later came to faith in Jesus Christ. He was disciplined to reject Islam, which effectively amounted to rejecting his family. This is when problems began, and the harassment he experienced from his family and relatives became so intense that he eventually had to run away from home and leave his country. He came to Lebanon, where we got to know him, and several on the ABTS team started working with him.

Within a few months, Kamal was able to reframe his discourse about religion in light of his experience of Christ in such a way that he was able to reconcile with his family. This journey of reconciliation initially began over the phone, he was then able to visit a few times, and eventually members of his family even came to visit him at the seminary. When he graduated, several of the family members, including both parents, were sitting in the audience. From total estrangement, Kamal was able to win back his family with the reconciling message of Jesus whom he had experienced in his own life—and there his family was three years later, sitting in the audience and celebrating with him being launched into ministry. Even though the family’s preference for their son’s future may not have been what they were witnessing on that day, at least they did not perceive anymore Kamal’s encounter with Jesus as equivalent to the loss of a son, but were able to recognize it as part of his spiritual growth journey.

“We feel that it is our calling with students like Kamal to journey with them as we help them reconcile with their past and with their family,” says Accad. “We help them develop a spiritual worldview and discourse that breaks away from the burden of a religious history full of conflict, one that is able to begin to make sense of their experience of inner transformation in a way that is not offensive to the religious sentiments of their family, parents, and larger community. How can Kamal develop a discourse, supported by a profound understanding that expresses his newfound allegiance to Jesus, without rejecting the culture and world of his family, and without insulting his father’s religion? How can he express that new allegiance without it sounding like he is embracing just another religion? For indeed a change in religious allegiance is far from actually reflecting the true experience of inner transformation that God’s gospel in Christ calls us into. That is what our formational calling is about at ABTS. Kamal is but one of many who have gone and continue to go through this journey of healing and growth, without which it is impossible to move into effective ministry without hurting others.” **EIFD**



All of these photos come from the VIII annual Middle East Conference at Arab Baptist Theological Seminary that took place in June of 2011. A panel of Christian pastors and scholars (top) during a question and answer session; students and faculty from ABTS (above and below) talking with Sunni guests during the conference; Martin Accad (right) offers an opening address.





This photo, taken just outside of Kampala, Uganda, is part of a larger body of work in which photographer Kurt Simonson has been engaged for the last three years. The project focuses primarily on the work of one family to address the needs of the many orphans within their larger family. Kurt is an assistant professor of photography at Biola University. His work can be viewed at www.kurtsimonson.com.

Throughout this issue of the journal, emphasis has been placed on the necessity of engaging with the particularities of the Islamic faith that can only be found in a personal encounter with our Muslim neighbors. In these encounters we come to see their irreducible beauty and complexity as image bearers of God. It is only when we recognize our neighbor's humanity that we can engage them Christianly. This piece, as well as much of Kurt's larger body of work, brings into focus various aspects of a person's beauty and uniqueness as a product of God's creative imagination.

Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue

In the Next Issue

In 2012, we will continue to focus on global perspectives on interfaith dialogue and the specific issues that arise from experiences of interfaith work throughout the world.

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