

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 5

---

Volume 5 • Number 1 • April 1981

---

## Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews selected from publications  
worldwide for an international readership,  
interpreting the Christian faith for contemporary  
living.*

GENERAL EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by  
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

# The Hermeneutical Crisis in Muslim Evangelization

Samuel P. Schlorff

*Reprinted from Evangelical Missions Quarterly, July 1980, with permission*

One of the phenomena of our day is that, alongside a spirit of renewal and change which is sweeping through the Muslim world, there is a parallel resurgence of interest in the Church in getting involved in the task of evangelizing the Muslim world. Without exaggerating or dramatizing the situation, it can be said that today there exists a unique potential for significant advance in Muslim evangelization. At the same time, however, the mission to Islam is faced with a hermeneutical crisis which risks hampering its advance. A part of the problem lies in the fact that the hermeneutical issues have been clouded by other issues.

At the heart of the problem is the question of using the Qur'an as a "bridge" in Muslim evangelization. Actually this is nothing new. From the beginning of Christian-Muslim relationships, the Christian side has always made use of the Qur'an in one way or another. It figured prominently in the early Protestant anti-Islamic polemic. In our day, the leading Protestant advocate for the use of the Qur'an as a bridge is Bishop Kenneth Cragg, an Anglican churchman who has written extensively in Islamics. In Catholic circles it is French orientalist Louis Massignon (d. 1962), whose influence inspires Vatican-Muslim dialogue.<sup>1</sup> In the Arab world, the leading proponent of the method is a Lebanese Catholic cleric who has written a number of studies in Arabic under the name of Professor Al-Haddad.<sup>2</sup> Recently, the idea of using the Qur'an as a bridge has caught the imagination of a number of evangelicals who view it as presenting more or less a breakthrough in communicating the Gospel to Muslims. At the North American Consultation on Muslim Evangelization (NACOME), held in Colorado Springs in October 1978, one of the position papers, written by Cragg, advocated the use of the "Christian potential" of the Qur'an in Muslim evangelization.<sup>3</sup> The subject came up for discussion in only one session, when a controversial booklet entitled *Have You Ever Read the Seven Muslim-Christian Principles?*<sup>4</sup> was presented. In the discussion, a number of participants expressed sharp disagreement with this method, but unfortunately, no time was allocated for analysis and clarification of the theological issues.

---

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent survey of Catholic thought, especially Massignon, see R. Caspar, *Cours de Theologie Musulmane*, Tome I (Rome: Institut Pontifical d'Etudes Arabes, 1978), pp.48–63.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of Al-Haddad's views, see A. J. Powell, "The Qur'anic View of Other Scriptures", *The Muslim World*, LIX (April 1969): 98–105 and the reviews of his books by Kenneth Nolin in *The Muslim World*, LX (April 1970): 170–177, 184–187.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth A. Cragg, "Islamic Theology: Limits and Bridges" in *The Gospel and Islam: A 1978 Compendium*, Don M. McCurry (ed.)—(Monrovia, Calif.: MARC, 1979), pp.196–207.

<sup>4</sup> *Have You Ever Read The Seven Muslim-Christian Principles?* (privately printed by the author, n.d.), 32pp.

## USING THE QUR'AN "AS A BRIDGE"

To begin, what precisely is meant by "using the Qur'an as a bridge"? Unfortunately, there has always been a certain ambiguity in descriptions of the method. As a matter of fact, the Qur'an has been used in several very different ways. Without being exhaustive let me mention a few. One of the more innocuous ways is to use Qur'anic vocabulary, literary forms and style to express Gospel content. Another is to use Qur'anic data as evidence for historical facts, e.g. that Muhammad himself never claimed that the texts of the Old or New Testaments were corrupted. However, the latter has often been used for more questionable purposes. The nineteenth-century polemicists, such as William St. Clair Tisdall, liked to quote the Qur'an and other Islamic sources in a radical historical criticism of the Qur'an and of Islamic history with the purpose of bringing Islam "crashing to the ground."

This article focuses on a third use which I shall call the Christian Qur'anic hermeneutic. Earlier polemicists such as Pfander also used this method but later writers have developed and refined it. The "bridge" idea refers really to this method. Using the "Christian potential" of the Qur'an is, strictly speaking, a matter of giving the Qur'an a Christian interpretation. What is involved is appealing to certain Qur'anic data or expressions having a verbal affinity with certain biblical data as evidence for a Christian interpretation of that data, and of the Qur'an as a whole. For example, Qur'anic references to Christ as "Word of God" and "a Spirit from Him" (Sura 4:169) are often given as proof of a high Christology. The booklet circulated at NACOME, already referred to, quotes passages from the Old and New Testaments and from the Qur'an as proof of seven "principles" (similar to the "Four Spiritual Laws") which are claimed to be "common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam".<sup>5</sup> However, these principles really represent an evangelical interpretation of Scripture and find no support either in Judaism or in Islam.<sup>6</sup>

It is this method which is at the root of the hermeneutical crisis in Muslim evangelization. Part of the problem is that many sincerely do not recognize it to be a problem. Who has not read of converts from Islam, here or there, for whom the Qur'anic witness to Christ has played a rôle in their conversion? While their number may not be large, their very existence does give pause for reflection. And, of course, who has not found that quoting the Qur'an is a sure way to get the Muslim's interest? Moreover, does not good pedagogy dictate that one proceed from the known to the unknown? At NACOME, several missionaries in the Near East reported a positive response from Muslim university students to the "Seven Muslim-Christian Principles".

However, when it comes to evaluating the method, a few favourable results are not sufficient evidence. When one considers the results throughout history, it must be acknowledged that, to say the very least, its effectiveness is ambiguous and even dubious. In the current surge of interest, is it not remarkable that no one has bothered to raise the question whether or not there might be some connection between the method and the admitted "sterility" of the earlier anti-Islamic polemic? However, in the last analysis, its validity must be established on theological rather than on pragmatic grounds.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> The author makes the common mistake of considering the Old Testament as synonymous with Judaism. Such is not the case. As a religious system based on a legalistic hermeneutic of the Old Testament Judaism rejects the hermeneutic of the Seven Principles, along with Islam.

## DOUBTFUL EXEGESIS OF QUR'AN

For the sake of brevity, we shall leave aside questions relative to the exegetical basis claimed for this method by its advocates, and shall limit ourselves to the more basic theological issues. First of all, it is very doubtful that an historical-grammatical exegesis of the Qur'an will support a Christian hermeneutic. Its advocates have to admit that Muslim commentators and theologians interpret the "Christian" elements of the Qur'an quite differently than they do. One device often used by the Christian interpreters of the Qur'an, however, is to try to put a wedge between the Qur'an itself and the classical Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an. They appeal to the admitted theological development that took place after the time of Muhammad, arguing that the Qur'an is much closer to the Christian view of Christ and of the Bible than are its later interpreters. They suggest that there is evidence that the Qur'an really supports Nicene Christology and the divine authority of the Bible.

It is true, as we already indicated, that certain Qur'anic words or phrases have a tantalizing affinity with certain biblical data, and might seem to invite a Christian interpretation. However, this affinity is ambiguous at best; for every plus for the Christian interpretation there are one or two, or more, minuses. Can one fault Muslim theologians, then, for applying what we would call "the analogy of faith" and interpreting these passages in a manner consistent with Islamic principles?

In sum, the Christian Qur'anic hermeneutic is sectarian; it is no different in principle than, for example, a Mormon hermeneutic of the Bible. The problem with such a method, is that, if valid, it must be applied to Qur'an and Bible alike. If it is valid, the Islamic hermeneutic of the Bible is also valid. In our day, Muslims are increasingly writing about the Bible and biblical subjects from an Islamic standpoint. A recent publication of the Muslim Students' Association, entitled *Jesus in the Qur'an*, applies an Islamic hermeneutic to the New Testament. The author develops the thesis that Nicene Christology is not found in the New Testament, and concludes: "There is ground for closer relations between Christians and Muslims because essentially Muslims believe the same things about Christ as did the earliest Christians. It is only the unfortunate encrustations of old pagan mythology that divide them."<sup>7</sup>

In his well-known book, *The Call of the Minaret*, Bishop Cragg makes the following observation concerning Muslims' claims to find a prophecy of Muhammad in the Paraclete passages of John's Gospel: "It is well to remember that the interpretation arises, in the end, not from exegesis but from presupposition."<sup>8</sup> True, but the objection applies equally to his own use of the "Christian potential" of the Qur'an.

Clearly, if a sectarian hermeneutical method is valid, then the Christian and Muslim interpretations of each other's books mutually cancel each other, and communication and knowledge are impossible. As Walter Kaiser has effectively shown in a recent article in *Christianity Today* on the new hermeneutic, if communication and knowledge are to be

---

<sup>7</sup> Sulaiman Mufassir, *Jesus In The Qur'an* (Plainfield, ind.: MSA, 1972), p.15. For an introduction to well-informed Muslim interpretation of Scripture see *Christianity: Some Non-Christian Appraisals*, D. W. McKain (ed.)—(N.Y.: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964), pp.225–88, and I. R. Al-Faruqi, "A Comparison of the Islamic and Christian Approaches to Hebrew Scripture", *Journal of Bible and Religion*, XXXI (1963): 283–93.

<sup>8</sup> K. Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p.285.

possible at all, we must insist that “the significance of the text is grounded in the text itself as judged by the author’s use of grammar”.<sup>9</sup> Kaiser recognizes that culture has a rôle in interpreting a text but demonstrates that its rôle must be discovered by an historical/cultural study preceding interpretation; culture can never, however, nullify the ordinary principles of interpretation based on grammar which “are as natural and universal as is speech itself”.<sup>10</sup>

Surely, if we who are evangelicals hold the principle that the Bible is its own interpreter and the final judge of the validity of every system of hermeneutics, so we must allow the Qur’an to be its own interpreter and the final judge of the validity of every system of Qur’anic interpretation. When we do this we find that its tantalizing “Christian potential” is only a mirage.

### **A CONFLICT OF AUTHORITY**

A second problem with the Christian Qur’anic hermeneutic is that it introduces an authority conflict into the Church. It tends to compromise the unique authority of the Scriptures by an implicit recognition of the divine authority of the Qur’an. This problem has sometimes troubled those who use it. Some of the earlier polemicists such as Tisdall and Walter A. Rice, acknowledged this problem but never resolved it; while cautioning against appearing to give authority to the Qur’an, they nevertheless appealed to the Qur’an without, however, seemingly noticing the inconsistency in their action.<sup>11</sup> Tisdall counselled missionaries to tell Muslims that the “truths” of Islam are very much more true than Muhammad suspected, but denied that this gave any real authority to the Qur’an; he claimed that he was only showing the Muslim that “from his own standpoint, many of his arguments against Christianity are untenable.”<sup>12</sup> Bishop Cragg does not admit the problem. He repeatedly seeks to assure us that the openness to Islamic meanings which he vigorously advocates and practices does not involve any thought of compromising biblical revelation.

It is acknowledged that interpreting a text does not necessarily involve commitment to its authority. One can understand its meaning without being committed to its authority, although commitment is doubtless necessary to accurately assess its full implications. However, the Christian hermeneutic of the Qur’an is a different matter, because, as we have indicated, it does not employ the normal rules of interpretation; at the very least, one can say that it accepts the authority of the Qur’an insofar as it has been interpreted in a manner consistent with “Christian” principles. In any case, some Muslims have understood Cragg’s approach to imply an acceptance of the inspiration of the Qur’an.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Meanings from God’s Message: Matters for Interpretation”, *Christianity Today*, XXIV (Oct. 5, 1979): 31/1320.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 32/1321.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Walter A. Rice, *Crusaders of the Twentieth Century* (London: The author, 1910), pp.113, 114ff.

<sup>12</sup> W. S. C. Tisdall, *A Manual of the Leading Muhammedan Objections to Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1904), p.19.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Mohamed Al-Nowaihi, “The Religion of Islam: A Presentation to Christians”, *International Review of Mission*, LXV (April, 1976): 221.

The Church of Christ has often been ambivalent as to how to relate to non-Christian sources. From the second century on, many of the Church's theologians adopted a position that more or less assumed that the Scriptures and the conclusions of pagan Greek philosophy were in essential agreement, that is, when the "errors" of philosophy had been "corrected" by Scripture. The Reformers tried to counteract the resulting compromise and influx of unbiblical teaching into the Church, by affirming the theological principle of *sola Scriptura*. Nevertheless, the Protestant churches have still not been totally protected from compromise because hermeneutical principles have been admitted which undercut the principle of *sola Scriptura*. The Christian Qur'anic hermeneutic is identical to this approach of the Church to philosophy: it assumes an essential agreement between the Qur'an and the Bible on many points. In so doing, it creates an authority conflict for Muslim inquirers and converts, and for the emerging Muslim convert churches.

The fact is that commitment to Christ inevitably involves commitment to the authority of the Bible. When a Muslim inquirer is confronted with the claims of Christ through the Scriptures, he is faced with a choice: he must either commit himself to the Bible and the biblical view of Christ and forsake the Qur'an, or commit himself to the Qur'an and the Qur'anic view of Christ and reject the Scriptures. Even when the Muslim is initially led to the Scriptures and to Christ through his own study of the Qur'anic witness to Christ, the choice is still clear-cut; he is unambiguously confronted with a supernatural Christ only in the Scriptures, so if he would follow this Christ, it *must* be through the Scriptures.

However, when *Christians* try to lead Muslims down the ambiguous path of the Qur'anic witness to Christ they only inject ambivalence into the picture. For, as we have already shown, the Christian Qur'anic hermeneutic involves an implicit acceptance of the authority of the Qur'an; one may very well hold to the unique authority and inspiration of the Bible, but when using this method, on the *behavioural level* one accepts the authority of the Qur'an alongside that of the Bible. This creates an authority conflict in the new convert which is especially acute for the emerging Muslim convert church. We hold it to be axiomatic that if there is to be a strong national church, it has to be solidly grounded in the Scriptures. At NACOME, I raised this issue in a private conversation with the author of the "Seven Muslim-Christian Principles." He agreed that it is necessary to lead the Muslim convert to transfer his allegiance from the Qur'an to the Bible, but said that he deals with this *after* the Muslim has come to Christ. But, are we candid or honest with the Muslim if we do not let him know the implications of his decision *before* he makes his choice? Well-intentioned or not, such ambivalent behaviour creates an authority conflict in many a convert which he finds difficult, if not impossible, to resolve satisfactorily.

## THE HERMENEUTIC AND EVANGELICAL OBJECTIVES

Another relevant question which must be raised is whether or not the Christian Qur'anic hermeneutic is appropriate for our objective as evangelicals. Evangelicals who favour using this method in evangelizing Muslims hold to the evangelical objective of planting the Church in Islamic lands. On the other hand, others who use this method have another objective in view, which is in essence to create a new universal world order, motivated by a new universal spirituality to which all religions and ideologies contribute.<sup>14</sup> The only way for this new synthesis to come into being is for the various religions to evolve closer to one another.

---

<sup>14</sup> Peter Beyerhaus, lecture on Ecumenism at Aix-en-Provence, France, March 1978.

The principal tool which is used to realize this inner revolution within the religions is the new hermeneutic, of which the Christian Qur'anic hermeneutic is an expression.

There are two important ecumenical structures behind this second orientation of the Church's missionary enterprise. One of these is the World Council of Churches. While many churches and theologians within the Council are undoubtedly evangelical in theology and objective, the Council's secretariats and leadership are thoroughly engaged in the new orientation. A key instrument for the creation of the new spirituality is the WCC Sub-Unit for Dialogue with Peoples of Living Faiths and Ideologies (DFI). In the past fourteen years, the DFI has organized a series of Muslim-Christian dialogues to explore common ground with a view to creating the new spirituality, and the Christian Qur'anic hermeneutic has had a significant rôle in these dialogues.<sup>15</sup> The strong but ambiguous condemnation of proselytism in the Chambesy Statement (1976) can only be understood as an expression of the Council's will to create this new synthetic spirituality.<sup>16</sup>

The other ecumenical structure engaged in the new orientation is the Vatican. Through its Secretariat for Non-Christians, created by Paul VI in 1964, the Vatican has also organized a series of Christian-Muslim dialogues similar to those of the WCC.<sup>17</sup> (Each organization usually sends observers to the high-level dialogues organized by the other.) The Catholic Church's approach to dialogue is illustrated by the Muslim-Christian Research Group which brings together Muslim and Catholic scholars in France, Algeria and Tunisia on an unofficial, non-representative basis. This group adopted a set of guidelines for dialogue, one of which was that "with regard to the historical facts which found our faith, and with regard to our Scriptures, we accept 'readings' other than our own".<sup>18</sup>

Considering the authority conflict that it engenders, the conclusion seems inevitable that the Christian Qur'anic hermeneutic favours the creation of the new type of spirituality envisaged by the ecumenical movement, but is not favourable to the planting of the Church in Islamic lands. The first thrives on theological ambiguity, but the latter requires clear biblical authority. Hence, whether or not we will consider this method to be appropriate depends on our objective.

## CONCLUSION

Evangelical missiologists and communicators must face the question whether the Christian Qur'anic hermeneutic is worth its high cost. No doubt, one cannot expect unanimity as to the answer to this question. Some may require further clarification, refinements or modifications and discussion before acceptance; others will reject our conclusions outright. In any case, evangelicals can no longer afford to ignore the theological issues inherent in this method. Certainly, the channels of discussion must be kept open. It is also clear that there

---

<sup>15</sup> *Christians Meeting Muslims*: WCC Papers on Ten Years of Christian-Muslim Dialogue (Geneva: WCC, 1977), 158pp.

<sup>16</sup> On proselytism see *Ibid.*, pp.139–140, and *IRM*, LXV (Oct. 1976): 452ff.

<sup>17</sup> For Vatican activities see especially *Islam Christiana* (published by the Pontifical Institute of Arab Studies at Rome) I (1975): 87–91, 103–13, II (1976): 135–185, III (1977): 197–228, IV (1978): 165–186.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, IV: 185; for English version see *Encounter* (also published by the PIAS)—Oct. 1979): 11.

needs to be more research and theological reflection to identify uses of the Qur'an which may not be afflicted with such problems and which may be compatible with the evangelical objective. Above all, those engaged in Muslim evangelization need to heed the call of Walter Kaiser to join evangelical theologians in what he calls a "hermeneutical reformation," if the whole enterprise of Muslim evangelization is to avoid getting bogged down in the morass of relativity.

-----  
Samuel P. Schlorff is a missiologist on the staff of the North Africa Mission.

## Evangelical Theology in Africa: Byang Kato's Legacy

Paul Bowers

*Reprinted from Trinity Journal, No. 1 (1980), with permission*

For those interested in Christianity in Africa, and especially for those interested in evangelical Christianity in Africa, it would be hard to overemphasize the significance of Byang Kato's *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975).

Byang Kato was a young Nigerian theologian of unusual ability and vitality, with a profound concern for the continuing growth of biblical Christianity in Africa. In this study he has focused on what he takes to be major theological pitfalls threatening the very survival of such Christianity on the continent. His thesis is that a pernicious syncretistic universalism is being promoted, almost unnoticed, within African Christianity. He seeks to call the evidence for this development to the attention of African Christians and to show how far it departs from true biblical teaching.

It must be said at once that Kato is by no means opposed to a legitimate contextualization of the Christian message in Africa. To the contrary, he says that an indigenous theology is a necessity. To fail to recognize—as some have—that this is fundamental to Kato's theological perspective is to fail to understand the man. I well remember Dr. Kato igniting a large evangelical congress in Nigeria, at the conclusion of a notable address, with the ringing appeal: "Let African Christians be Christian *Africans*!" He wanted a Christianity that was, as he puts it, "truly African and truly biblical".

It is to the second element of that prescription, the biblical element, that Kato directs attention in *Pitfalls*. Kato begins by describing factors which are proving conducive to the emergence within African Christianity of a syncretistic universalism. He singles out the theological issue of the relation of African Christianity to Africa's traditional religions as that feature of the current trend which he wishes especially to explore. An overview of traditional religions is then furnished, made more vivid and concrete by a careful description of the religious beliefs and practices in which Kato himself was reared, namely those of his own tribe, the Jaba of Nigeria. (The chapter on Jaba religion is of independent value as an addition to the descriptive literature on African traditional religions.)