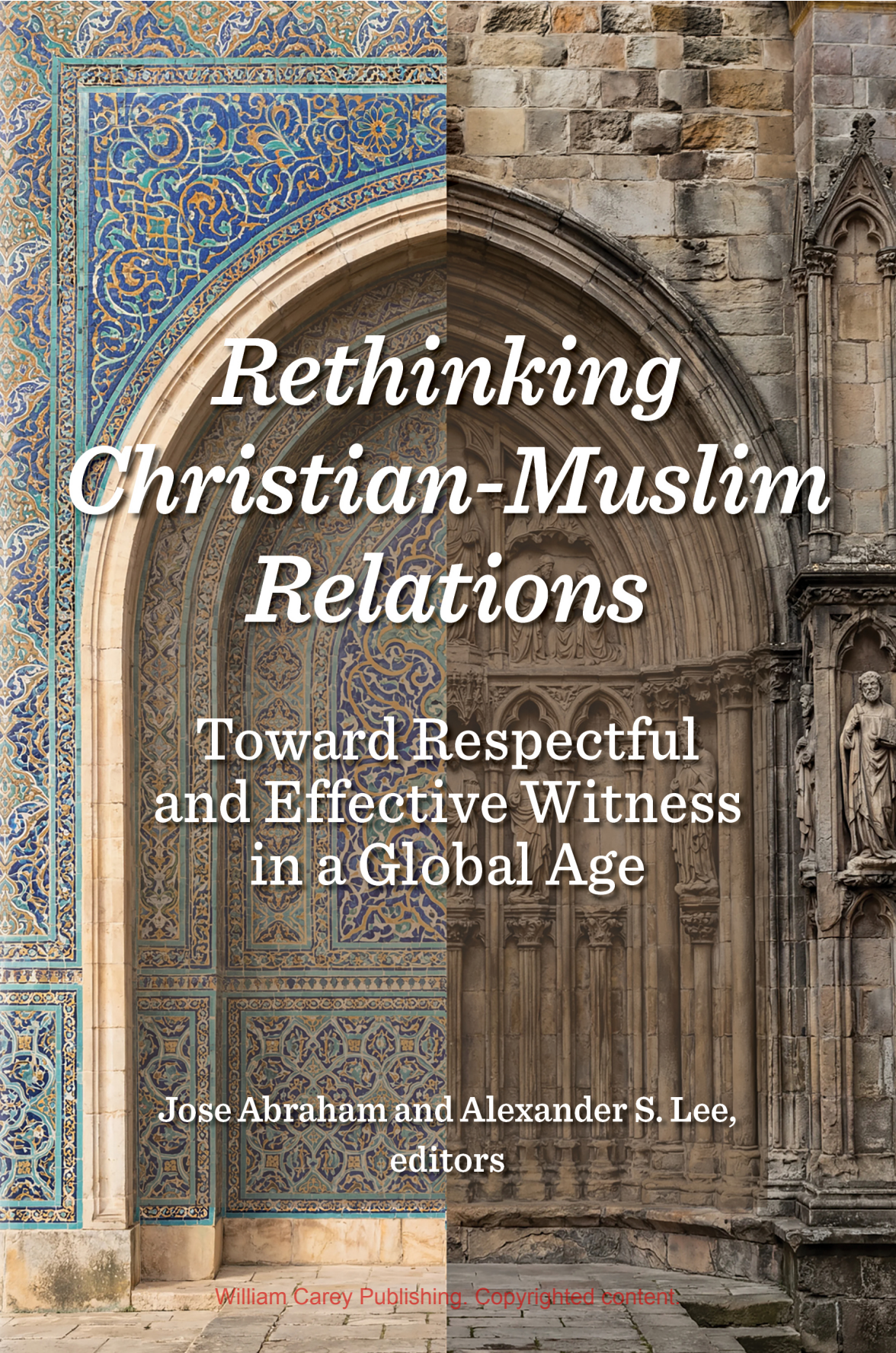


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Rethinking Christian-Muslim Relations:
Toward Respectful and Effective Witness in a Global Age

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1

Christians and Muslims Working Together for a Better World

Martin Accad

What is the ultimate purpose of the gospel? Human salvation? Personal salvation? How do we define human salvation and what are the marks of personal salvation? Yes, we need to be saved from sin and evil. But what are we saved for? Eternal life? Human flourishing? Fullness of life? The common good? Transformation of society? Elevation from poverty? All of these, I would argue, are fundamental to the gospel proclaimed and lived out holistically by the church in society. This is what the New Testament refers to as the kingdom of God. This is what we strive for when we pray, "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). The outcome of the divine incarnation and of Christ's life on earth was nothing short of total transformation and reorientation of history.

This chapter proposes a holistic approach to Christian engagement with Islam and Muslims. The challenges that our world faces today require that the church's *kerygma* should go beyond evangelism as verbal proclamation, or worse, polemics. The missional engagement of the church with other faith communities should be "conversational" rather than just "invitational." Current realities of religious fanaticism, social disorientation, and global violence, whether intercommunal, cultural, and environmental, require that courses on Islam and other religions should go beyond learning *about* each other at our respective institutions of theology, jurisprudence, and ministry formation. We are called, instead, to meet and experience one another, to a critical engagement of the minds, and to collaborate on the grave issues that threaten our world's survival.

After examining some of the responses to my kerygmatic approach over the past few years, I will focus on one particular response that

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stands out from others. In the framework of a discussion of that response, I will expand what the kerygmatic might mean for us today by exploring the concept of "religious literacy" and the way that Islam is taught at our seminaries. After that, I will discuss kerygmatic engagement against the background of what recent literature has called "covenantal pluralism," exploring how this concept can be adopted as a foundation for kerygmatic engagement with a view to the church's mission as mutual witness and holistic transformation.

What the Kerygmatic Is Not: Hearing and Learning from My Critics

When I first published my chapter entitled "Christian Attitudes Toward Islam and Muslims: A Kerygmatic Approach" in 2012,[1] I had already been teaching that material for nearly ten years, both at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, at Fuller Theological Seminary's School of Intercultural Studies in Pasadena, and at numerous conferences, consultations, and workshops. In 2019, I republished the essential elements of the kerygmatic approach and SEKAP Spectrum of Christian-Muslim Interaction, with some additional reflections, in the first chapter of my monograph, *Sacred Misinterpretation: Reaching Across the Christian-Muslim Divide*.[2] Through these publications and since then, my kerygmatic approach has been received in academic articles and reviews with varying degrees of enthusiasm[3] and criticism.[4] It has also attracted the attention of *Christianity Today* magazine and

1 In Reisacher, *Toward Respectful Understanding*, 29–47.

2 Accad, *Sacred Misinterpretation*, 1–33.

3 See examples of positive book reviews in academic journals by Harmakaputra, *Anglican Theological Review*, 489–91; Walker, *Missiology*, 229; Wilson, *Reviews in Religion and Theology*, 26–29; Sensenig, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 118–20; Beaumont, *Studies in World Christianity*, 367–68; Reitsma, *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 218–20; Ford, *Near East School of Theology Theological Review*, 84–86; Marshall, on the Book Reviews section of the website of the Centre for Christian-Muslim Studies, Oxford; Cornwall, *Pondering on a Faith Journey* (blog).

4 More negative receptions of my kerygmatic thesis can be gleaned primarily from more conservative evangelical websites. See, for instance, Nickel, "New Testament Implications"; anonymous author, "Five Christian Approaches to Islam." Compton, on the Jenkins Center for the Christian Understanding of Islam website, offers an overall negative review of my book, *Sacred Misinterpretation* (though the author acknowledges that "this book has great value" in some of its contents).

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a few blogs, podcasts, and online interviews.[5] In this chapter I want to focus on one particular critique of my kerygmatic approach because it stands out from others.

Until Syrian theologian and friend, Najib Awad, took my approach to task,[6] the critics of my kerygmatic approach had been primarily conservative evangelicals, who argued that I was promoting a position in the church that "compromised" on the gospel. I will engage with Awad's chapter, not so much to defend myself or the cause of the kerygmatic approach, but rather as a springboard to clear up some misunderstandings of my writings and to explore some gaps in my thinking that the chapter succeeds in bringing out.

Awad's 2022 chapter addresses my approach along with three other models of interfaith engagement in Lebanon: those of Sunni theologian Radwan al-Sayyid, Shi'a theologian Mahmoud Ayoub, and Orthodox theologian and archbishop George Khodr. In the process, he often paints me as a theologian influenced by Western conservative (even fundamentalist) evangelical approaches to Christian-Muslim engagement. "One cannot," he asserts, "just apply to the Christian-Muslim relations in this context a ready-made or preconceived static understanding of interreligiosity that is developed in the Western context of scholarship or any other intellectual centers of idea-creation around the globe."[7] This generalized statement unfortunately reinforces a stereotype about the West. On the one hand, the "preconceived static understanding of interreligiosity" is not simply "developed in the Western context of scholarship." Rather, I would argue that this has been the dominant framework of engagement between Christians and Muslims throughout most of our interrelational history. On the other hand, I accept the challenge of seeking a paradigm shift, but not simply by attributing it to "the West" and claiming that "the East" had gotten it right under the Islamicate world, as Awad claims.

5 Casper, "Best Advice on Engaging Muslims," *Christianity Today*; *Beer Christianity* podcast by Jonty, "Episode 49: Martin Accad—Christian-Muslim Relations and Kerygma in Lebanon"; Bush, "Global Peacemakers Speak with Martin Accad," *Bethlehem Institute of Peace and Justice*; Reese, "Christian and Muslim Kerygma for Building Peace in Lebanon," *Peacemaking Across the Christian-Muslim Divide*, 114th Annual Abilene Christian University Summit.

6 In Raheb and Lamport, *Surviving Jewel*, 353–77.

7 Awad, "Interfaith Relations," 367.

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Quite apart from the fact that I feel honored to be found in such venerable company as al-Sayyid, Ayoub, and Khodr, Awad's criticism is interesting to me because he takes the opposite position from most of my other critics, considering that "[a] careful reading of Accad's thesis reveals that what he offers is a strategic recipe on the *modus operandi* of converting, not on the relational and interrelational preconceptions of the relatedness to the other." My "conservative" critics argue the opposite, that I have given up on mission and the essentials of the gospel. "For him," Awad adds about my proposed engagement, "the dialogue event is a call from one side of the supposedly dialoguing partners to the other side to concede the truth and embrace belief in single revelation, namely Jesus Christ." "This kerygmatic approach," Awad continues, "was the driving force of the American missionary work in the region, and it did not leave positive results on the broader contextual scene of interreligious connections."[8] I completely disagree with his description of the American missionary work as having adopted a kerygmatic approach. Whether consciously or not, the Western missionary approach, with some rare exceptions, was largely based on an a priori stance of religious and cultural superiority that essentialized other religions and religious adherents within a "world religions" framework. What I propose, instead, is a Christ-centered kerygmatic engagement with no a priori claim to "religious superiority." My starting point is one of "invitation" into engagement on equal terms, in freedom and equality, between followers of different faiths, but driven by a specific understanding of Christ's message as kerygmatic and supra-religious, in which Jesus was critical both of his own Jewish and of other "closed" religious systems.

When Awad and my conservative critics both fail to grasp correctly the starting point and implications of my approach, it is because they fail to remove themselves from the closed circle of religiosity when they approach the question of interfaith dialogue. Awad's blind spot, in my view, is an a priori rejection of the importance of dialogue to the benefit of what he calls the "a priori interreligious relationality."[9] I am reminded of a conference where I presented my kerygmatic approach

8 Awad, 368.

9 Awad, 369.

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and triggered a similar reaction from the late Professor Mahmoud Ayoub, who shared with Awad the impression that my kerygmatic was just a repetition of the classical missionary model in disguise. To move beyond such reactions, one needs to be able to reread the Christ's message as a profound critique of institutional, exclusivist, closed circle religion, as I do when I expound on Jesus's encounters with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman in John 3 and 4, respectively.[10]

Whether one agrees with the hermeneutic or not, the Qur'an and the Bible contain verses that may readily be used to argue the finality of the message they contain. Most Christians are familiar with New Testament passages that claim soteriological exclusivity in Christ. What they might disagree on is how such passages as John 14:6 ("I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me") should be read in today's pluralistic world. The same tension exists between text and context in Islamic hermeneutics. Radwan al-Sayyid's observation, as reported by Awad, that the "centralization of communicative relationality is direly missing in the Arab societies and cultures, where the culture of dialogue is either weak or totally absent," but that this is "far from the communicative reciprocation the Qur'an speaks about," I would argue, does not do justice to the diversity of the qur'anic witness.[11] If there were only "communicative reciprocation" in the Qur'an, how was Islam motivated to spread politically, militarily, and ideologically beyond the early followers of Muhammad in Arabia? Yes to "communicative reciprocation," but as much as we might wish it away, that can never be viewed as communication bereft of any desire to "convince" and "convert," and therefore—to use Awad's language—to "proselytize." Are "equality" and "freedom" in interrelationality, as coveted by Awad and attributed to al-Sayyid[12] and Khodr,[13] only reached by canceling mutual witness and convinced argumentation? Equality and freedom are virtues to be cultivated within human interaction, not methodological substitutes for dialogue. They can be taught and promoted within agreed mutual witness and argumentation, through

10 See Accad, *Sacred Misinterpretation*, 18–19.

11 Awad, "Interfaith Relations," 359.

12 Awad, 360.

13 Awad, 364.

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