

**THE CROSS AND THE CRESCENT:
A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO ISLAM¹**

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INTRODUCTION

The September 11, 2001 suicide attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon altered the course of modern history. In response to these unprecedented assaults on its homeland, America declared war on terrorism. At the present moment bombs are falling on Afghanistan, a nation known to harbor terrorists, while Osama bin Laden, the most notorious of them, makes ominous claims that he has nuclear weapons. Lines are being drawn through the international community. On the one side are America, Britain and their allies, and on the other the terrorists and their supporters. The safety and security of the world appear to hang in the balance.

Christians who go to war, or support a war, generally require that the military effort in which they are participating has clear moral legitimacy—that is, that it is a “just war” and is therefore a worthy cause. This is as things ought to be, and we have no quarrel with such responsible ethical decision-making. In times of conflict there is another human tendency that we should be concerned about: the tendency to conceptualize our conflicts in the most simplistic and reductionist terms possible. A fundamental dualism is set up in the mind, and extends off into the distance like a railway track supported by seemingly-endless pairs of opposites. Thus the current conflict could be seen geographically as the West pitted against the Middle East. It could be viewed ethnically as Caucasians versus Arabs; in social terms as freedom versus oppression, tolerance versus fanaticism, civilization versus barbarism; in religious terms as

¹ “The Cross and the Crescent: A Christian Response to Islam.” *Heart and Mind*, Winter 2001-2002, 18-25.

Christianity versus Islam, and, finally, according to the ultimate moral categories of good versus evil.

Though convenient and compelling for some, this way of viewing the conflict is full of danger. According to this view the largely Caucasian West is associated with freedom, civilization and everything good and God-honoring. The Arabs and their Middle Eastern neighbors are associated with oppression, barbarism and everything evil and demonic. The lines are set, the categories hard. These generalizations are an understandable attempt to make sense out of life in the midst of confusion and complexity, but they are patently self-serving and amount to “profiling” on a global scale. Such thinking encourages discrimination against our neighbors and other persons who happen to match up on the other side. An equally serious danger is that it becomes almost impossible to recognize evil in ourselves or, conversely, any good or worth in others.

The current situation is further complicated by the fact that the majority of Americans, and those siding with them, are at least nominally Christian, while the overwhelming majority in Afghanistan and other enemy states are Muslims. And it does not help matters that many terrorists are seemingly sincere in their claims to draw inspiration from their Muslim faith, to view their terrorist acts as contributions to a divinely-sanctioned Holy War on infidels, and to find the courage to face death by trusting in Allah’s mercy and promise of eternal rewards. Given their predisposition to dualistic thinking, then, some find it tempting to construe America’s present war against terrorism as a religious war between Christianity and Islam, and war that can be carried out on the battlefield and advanced with weapons of physical destruction. When gangs of Pakistani Muslims gun down a congregation of innocent Christian worshipers at prayer, for no other reason than that they were Christians, and as churches in the United States are draped with American flags inside and out, the temptation becomes almost irresistible to see America’s war against terrorism as ultimately a religious war between Christianity and Islam. Even some secular journalists have begun to think of Islam as our chief enemy

and the root cause of all the trouble. A recent editorial in the *New York Times*, for example, was boldly entitled “This Is a Religious War,” and Salman Rushdie has weighed in with another piece entitled “This *Is* About Islam.”²

From the perspective of the history of Christianity such rhetoric evokes a strong sense of *déjà vu* and the acrid odor of an ancient conflict. Christians and Muslims have been engaged intermittently in violence against one another for almost fourteen hundred years now. Contemporary followers of Christ need to resist the rhetoric of those who think that Christians should enter with alacrity into yet another weary round of this ancient conflict.

COMMON GROUND

It has been said that nobody fights like close relatives. Perhaps the historic level of hostility between Christians and Muslims is partly due to the fact that we share (along with Judaism) so much in common, and trace our origins to common roots in the faith of Abraham. Judaism is the parent religion, Christianity its offspring, and Islam (which emerged another six hundred years later) is the heretical grandchild. These three religions of the West are monotheistic—they share the conviction that there is only one true God, and that this sovereign God is just and loving. All three maintain that humanity’s proper response to the one true God is to worship, submit and lovingly obey Him. All three believe that history is going somewhere, and that God and his good will are going to triumph in the end. All three are “religions of the Book,” and regard their Scriptures (the

²Andrew Sullivan, “This is a Religious War,” *New York Times on the Web*, 7 October 2001; available from www.nytimes.com/2001; accessed 19 October 2001; Salman Rushdie, “This Is About Islam,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 11 November 2001, G5. The alternative to Islam proposed by both these writers is tolerant modernism rather than Christianity. Sullivan makes his personal bias very clear when he comments: “It seems almost as if there is something inherent in religious monotheism that lends itself to this kind of terrorist temptation.”

Old Testament, the Bible and the Koran respectively) as the very Word of God in written form. Much of the content of the Koran, in fact, is actually derived from Scripture, though the transmission process was distorted in countless unfortunate ways due to Muhammad's confused grasp of Christian truth.

ACUTE DIFFERENCES

At the same time the differences between Christianity and Islam are profound. The most significant of these stem from our different understandings of Jesus Christ. Christians view Jesus Christ as fully divine—as God in the flesh—and the only one qualified to offer his life on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. Muslims regard Jesus as a prophet, but are emotively insistent that he is not divine and is in fact inferior to Muhammad. The teachings of Jesus are not the heart of the Koran or Muslim theology generally. Muslims deny that Jesus died on the cross, and insist that Allah would never allow his prophet to suffer such an indignity. But according to Muslim theology there is no need for a substitutionary atonement anyway. God forgives sin, in cases where he chooses to do so, purely on the basis of his mercy and compassion. Consequently there is never full assurance of salvation for Muslims, but only the challenge of positioning oneself as advantageously as possible, through good deeds and disciplines, for Allah's possible future mercy.

Jesus is such a breath of fresh air amid the religions of the world. According to Christianity God is most profoundly revealed through the human face of Jesus. God's love is of such a quality that he allows himself to suffer, and is willing to have his power revealed through weakness rather than strength. Jesus's provision of salvation, accessed by faith alone, also liberates Christians from the anxious legalistic severity that is invariably associated with humanity's quests for salvation through performance. The mysterious Trinity, which Islam emphatically rejects, is the greatest Christian symbol of unity in diversity, rather than unity through uniformity, and as such gives Christians a

mighty inspiration for tolerance of otherness. When Christians have remained focused on their Savior, these themes have made a profound difference in history.

MILITANCY AND TOLERANCE

This leads to a second significant difference between Christianity and Islam: Islam's historic militancy and qualified concept of tolerance. Islam emerged as a religion of the desert—as stern and austere as the bracing Arabian geography that nurtured it. Its “no nonsense” demands were designed by Muhammad to mold wild tribes of nomadic animists into self-controlled and united worshipers of Allah. To this end his religion stressed personal self-discipline, moral rectitude, obedience and submission to God. The peace Muhammad envisioned and sought was a peace beneath the aegis of a triumphant Islam. Outside of this sphere of peace militant aggression might be appropriate, particularly in cases where Muslims were attacked, Muslim missionaries were rebuffed, or in instances where a Muslim region had reverted to infidel control. The Koran and other authoritative documents of Islam make clear the conditions under which Jihads—or Holy Wars—are warranted.

The Koran contains a number of disturbing calls for Muslim aggression.³ To be fair, there are aggressively militant passages in the Old Testament as well, including the well-known call in Deuteronomy 7 for the complete and merciless annihilation of the Canaanites. Christians, however, have largely embraced the principle of progressive revelation in Scripture, which blunts the dull force and applicability of such violent measures to the present times. By applying this principle, and finding the highest point of revelation in Christ (Hebrews 1:1-2) Christians can embrace the doctrine of biblical inerrancy without feeling compelled for the sake of consistency to perpetuate such practices as the stoning to death of disobedient children (Deut. 21:18-21). Traditional

³See, for example, the following sections (suras) of the Koran: 2.190, 2.216 and 9.5.

Islam tends not to have such an ameliorating perspective. Every part of the divinely-dictated Koran is viewed by traditionalists as equally valid and perpetually applicable. Traditional and Fundamentalist Muslims also tend to favor a literal hermeneutic when it comes to matters of interpretation.⁴

Muslims believe that obedience to Allah should encompass all of life. For them this has often meant the acceptance of theocracy, according to which the dictates of the Muslim religion must be implemented in the laws of a Muslim state. By its very nature this conception of religious-political unity finds the equal treatment of diverse religions to be impossible. The often extremely hostile Muslim reactions to Christian missionary efforts (proselytizing) clearly expose this mind-set for what it is.

To be fair, Christianity has its own long history of intolerance. For centuries Christendom operated on the assumption that no state could tolerate non-Christians, nor even more than one brand of Christians. A vestige of this state of mind is the fact that Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain is still the official head of the Church of England. Only in recent centuries has the modern West developed the model of religious tolerance in a secular state as a way of coping peacefully with the reality of religious pluralism. As late as the nineteenth century Swedish Baptists and others in the Free Church movement were still struggling to establish this freedom from the state churches of Continental Europe. In matters of militancy and intolerance, Christianity's contemporary encounter with Islam is rather like stumbling into a time warp and meeting our primitive selves.

Despite these systemic deficiencies, Islam has at times in its history promoted a high level of civilization. During its Golden Age prior to the Crusades, for example, the Muslim world developed the disciplines of science, medicine, astronomy and mathematics to levels far above those attained by Europeans at the time.⁵ They acquired

⁴Muslim reticence to embrace historical criticism of the Koran is explored by Toby Lester, "What is the Koran?" *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 1999, 43-56.

⁵Dennis Overbye, "How Islam Won, and Lost, the Lead in Science," *The New York*

an enthusiasm for Greek culture, and it was their preservation of classic philosophical texts that later sparked the European Renaissance. To this day the Spanish cities of Seville, Granada, Toledo and Córdoba retain evidence of distinctive Muslim artistry and architectural achievements.

It is rarer to see this enlightened side of Islam today. It is more common to encounter it in its strident Fundamentalist form. To a large extent this is due to the current social crisis in Muslim countries. Radicalism becomes a serious option only in climates of desperation. In the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, Muslim countries—some more than others—cautiously modernized and began to make some economic advance. The locus within which Muslim law (*shari'a*) could be applied was narrowed to the private sphere of family life. The assassination in 1981 of Egypt's progressive president Anwar Sadat, however, proved to be a turning point. Thereafter the Muslim countries veered away from democracy and modernization, and the quality of life in these countries has been deteriorating ever since. Muslims are aware that they are falling behind in the global picture, and are desperate to turn things around. The recent rise of Islamic Fundamentalism is due primarily to its appeal to those trapped in seemingly-hopeless circumstances. The Muslim religion should certainly bear some responsibility for nurturing the Fundamentalist mind-set and its characteristic behaviors, but a lot of the violence and terrorism emanating from the Middle East is not directly derivative from Islam. It is rooted more in the desperate poverty, political despotism and inadequate education of over a billion people.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

From the beginning Christian-Muslim relations have been difficult. Muhammad founded Islam in the early 600s AD partly as a reaction against the decadent Christianity

Times, 30 October 2001, D1-D5.

he encountered in Arabia. Admittedly Byzantine Christianity was corrupt and weak, and in some cases Christian communities actually welcomed the Muslim invaders out of desperate hope for something better. One can only wonder how different history might have been if Muhammad had originally encountered a vibrant, authentic Christianity instead.

Later on, and for about two centuries (1095-1291 AD), the Christian nations of Western Europe carried on crusades against the Muslims who controlled Palestine—the Holy Land, as it was known to devout pilgrims. Church leaders and popes joined ranks with Christian kings and princes to wage holy wars (crusades) against the Muslim “infidels,” hacking, slashing and crushing their enemies before them. These sad chapters of Christian history have been the lens through which Muslims have tended to view Christians ever since. For this very reason Billy Graham just recently decided to change the name of his large-scale evangelistic campaigns from “crusades,” as they have become so widely-known, to “missions.”⁶

The Inquisitions of the fifteenth century were draconian measures by which the Christian orthodoxy of those in power was imposed on proto-Protestants, Jews and European Muslims (known as Moors) still hanging on to their cities and territories in Spain. About the time that Columbus came to America the last remaining Muslims were forcefully pushed back across the straits of Gibraltar to North Africa. The bitterness lingers on.

Following World War One and the Jewish Holocaust, the modern state of Israel was established as a Jewish homeland in Palestine in 1948. Most Muslims regard this event as an unacceptable encroachment on Muslim territory. While no love is lost between Muslims and Jews, Muslims tend to hold the “Christian” nations, particularly

⁶Doug Hoagland, “Crusade Changes, But Not Mission,” *Fresno Bee*, 11 October 2001[document on-line]; available from www.fresnobee.com/special/graham/story; accessed 30 October 2001.

America, responsible for supporting the original intrusion and for subsequently sustaining the Jewish state in their midst.

DIFFUSING THE RHETORIC OF A RELIGIOUS WAR

Muslim radicals deliberately paint the current military conflict over terrorism in terms of a religious war between infidel Christians and Muslim followers of the true God. The language of jihad is invoked as a catalyst for Muslim outrage. Bin Laden himself tries to scratch old wounds by profiling the Western military response as a new “crusade” against Islam. It is a deliberate effort to bring the international Muslim brotherhood—the *ummah*—to his side. In the cases of some other Muslim clerics, the rhetoric may actually be sincere. Many Muslim leaders honestly view political states as either Muslim or infidel, and see the moral deficiencies of America as evidence of the shameful inferiority of Christianity—America’s religion of choice.

In a time of national outrage such as the present, it is tempting for Christians in America to buy into the presuppositions of Islam and view this conflict as a religious war between Christianity and Islam. To think and speak this way will have tragic consequences for the cause of Christ. Regardless of how outrageous the behavior of certain Muslims may be, we must emphatically reject the rhetoric of a religious war. Otherwise we will simply contribute to yet another cycle of the violence and recrimination that have typified the tragic history of Christian-Muslim relations, and sabotaged every historic Christian effort at effective evangelism.

This is America’s war with terrorism. This is not Christianity’s war (crusade) against Islam. We know from Scripture that the military battlefield is not where victory will be won for Christ. As the Apostle Paul explained: “Though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary we have divine power to demolish strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:3-4). In his famous Grand Inquisitor scene in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Russian

novelist Dostoyevsky has Jesus decisively rejecting the worldly option of victory through force in his response to the Devil's last temptation in the wilderness.⁷ Christ and Muhammad had very different approaches to waging spiritual war. We must not "buy into" the Muslim strategy of pursuing spiritual victory through violence. Love must be shown to be more powerful than hate. The weakness of the cross, we believe, will triumph over the power of the sword (I Cor 1:25). In the struggle for souls, we must not stoop to a war of angry rhetoric either. Tempting though it is, our responses must not be of the same incendiary language that may be directed towards us. We are to be known for "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

Christians should be patriotic. Christian citizens may rightly engage for conscience's sake in just wars. But the true followers of Christ should know from history that going into battle against Muslims in the name of Christ does not serve our Savior's cause well at all. As Christians we certainly should be grateful for the privilege of living in America, and for the veterans who have defended this nation's freedom. At the same time, we must do all we can to maintain the crucial distinction between the church as the pilgrim people of God and the nation-states in which we are privileged by God's grace to sojourn. America has been more influenced by Christianity than most countries, and thankfully it shows. But America is ultimately a secular state by design and increasingly so in substance.

Those Christians in traditions that have championed and suffered for spiritual freedom should be particularly vigilant never to give a blanket endorsement to the values and actions of any ethnic grouping or nation state. We must always maintain a sufficient distance to be able to speak prophetically to the nations of the world—including our own. The separation of church and state is one of the "fragile freedoms" that we should never concede in the flush of any national enthusiasm.

⁷Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, book 5, chap. 2.

Christians will no doubt help to win the current war against terrorism. Let us pray that God will help us find ways to do this that do not alienate Muslims from Christ. We must not come against them, as in past centuries, with the cross of Jesus painted on our shields. Perhaps we should be a bit more reticent about flag-waving in our sanctuaries. Whenever we sing “God Bless America,” let us add a prayer for the innocent people trapped in desperate countries like Afghanistan. If the cross is ever to rise above the crescent, as someday it shall, it will be as Muslims discover the compelling love of Jesus Christ in those who bear his name. Perhaps in this new millennium God will give his church its greatest opportunity ever to relate to Muslims as we should.