

Towards a Theology of Islam: A Response to Harley Talman's "Is Muhammad Also Among the Prophets?"

by Martin Accad

In this article, Harley Talman is dealing with what I believe to be one of the most important topics of Christian-Muslim relations today. It should therefore not be viewed as some exercise in intellectual gymnastics. Evangelicals have been divided over three major issues during the last decade: (1) the legitimacy for Muslims who become followers of Jesus to remain largely within their community (the so-called "Insider Movement(s)," often *domesticized* as "IM"); (2) the legitimacy of highly-contextualized, reader-driven Bible translations for a Muslim audience; and (3) the legitimacy of dialogue as a complementary approach to Christian mission to Muslims.

Generally, I have observed that evangelicals are quite consistent in being either *supportive* of all three issues, or systematically *against* them. What is striking is that despite the amount of ink already spilled on these questions, proponents on both sides seem to have a very hard time defining the terms of the conversation. I have arrived at the conviction that the essence of this disagreement is completely unrelated to the extent of one's motivation for God's mission, or the amount of one's experience in ministry, or the technical aptitude and effectiveness of one's missional methodology. Indeed, most people on either side of the spectrum have unquestionable pedigrees as missionaries, and most have a passion for mission that is next to blameless. That is what makes these disagreements and splits even sadder.

Instead, I believe that at the heart of this unfortunate divide is one's "theology of Islam." It is easy to notice that those evangelicals who lean towards being proponents of the three issues cited above (i.e., insider movements, reader-driven Bible translations, and dialogue) are also those who believe that there are some aspects of Islam's religious culture that are redeemable, whereas opponents of the three issues above tend to have a more demonizing view of Islam, seeing next to nothing redeemable in the entire phenomenon.

Very little has been done historically on the Christian side to develop a mature theological discourse on Islam, beyond the first couple of centuries when Islam

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was still taking shape. As indicated by Talman, there is strong evidence that Islam was initially viewed by Eastern Christians as some sort of variant of Christianity. This likely reflected Islam's self-perception in those early days as well. Given the strong Qur'anic affirmation of the Judeo-Christian tradition, it probably took a while before Islam was able confidently to assert itself as an independent religion separate from Christianity and Judaism. Thus, in the records of the encounters between Patriarch John of Se-dreh and a Muslim prince (c. 644 AD), in the writings of John of Damascus (early 8th century), or in Patriarch Timothy I's record of his encounter with the Caliph al-Mahdi (c. 750 AD)—all mentioned by Talman—we find an attempt at making sense of Islam within a Christian worldview. There we find a "Christian theology of Islam" of sorts.

Within the Byzantine Empire, on the other hand, where direct contact with Muslims was minimal besides the relationship of political and military enemies, Byzantine Christians such as Nicetas of Byzantium (c. 842–912) or George Hamartolos (9th century) developed an extremely harsh and exclusivist polemical discourse on Islam rather than any real "theology." And it is this very harsh Byzantine view that has generally had a significant impact on medieval Europe and hence on the development of the Western view. Alternatively, the Eastern attempts at theologizing, which were possible up until the end of the first millennium, became far more difficult to sustain after Islam became the unchallenged ruler in the region, and after the demographics also turned decidedly in its favor.

All this to say that Talman's attempt at developing what I see as a "Christian and biblical theology of Muhammad" is highly commendable. I hope that this will give rise to a constructive and creative conversation, not just about Muhammad, but also about the Qur'an, about Islam's and Muslims' view of God (Miroslav Volf's *Allah: A Christian*

Response was a great beginning), their understanding of sin and salvation, etc.

This is quite a different endeavor to the historic approaches of comparative religions or comparative theology. It consists in studying Islam's theology in and of itself, not solely for the purpose of *understanding* Islam (that has been the work of Islamicists), nor simply for the purpose of affirming Christian superiority (that has often been the purpose of "comparative religions" as well as of polemical and apologetic missions). What we need today, however, is to develop a "Christian and biblical theology of Islam." This would be based on a solid scientific understanding of Islam, and it would also (at least in evangelical circles) have a strong concern for the mission of



God. But it would also take the conversation a number of steps further.

Developing a "Christian and biblical theology of Islam" would consist in making sense of the various dimensions of the Islamic *phenomenon* within the framework of faithful biblical Christianity. The purpose of such an endeavor would be neither to discredit Islam, nor to eliminate the theological differences between Islam and Christianity. Rather, from an evangelical perspective, it would aim at continuing to carry out our calling to fulfill the mission of God in communities where Christians and Muslims live side by side. But we are called today to do this on new foundations of understanding that would

increase creative conversations, trigger renewed and honest inquiry, and challenge the historic situation of conflict between both communities.

This is particularly important in the current situation because interreligious conflict is sharply on the rise. So for Christians to try and make sense of Islam, honestly, boldly, scientifically, and humbly, is not a theoretical matter to be taken up in ivory towers. If we do not take this endeavor seriously, we will continue to recycle and rehash (as we increasingly are doing) the insults that we have hurled at each other and that are well attested to in historical texts. The outcome of this approach is also well documented in our historical records: war in the name of religion.

As with any topic as controversial as this one, we should be careful not to judge trailblazers like Harley Talman too quickly. We must ensure that we do justice to the limitations and boundaries he has put upon himself. He makes it clear from the beginning that he does "not view any kind of Islam as an alternative way of salvation apart from personal faith in Christ." Talman clarifies another significant limitation to his endeavor in the conclusion of his article:

This paper has provided theological, missiological, and historical sanction for expanding constricted categories of prophethood to allow Christians to entertain *the possibility of Muhammad being other than a false prophet.* (emphasis mine)

It is clear that Talman is aware of the potentially inflammatory nature of his exercise, and in these words he therefore sets humble goals for his work at this point. Though he pushes the usual boundaries of evangelical thinking on prophethood, particularly Muhammad's, he seems keen to affirm that he is still within the boundaries of predecessors such as Kenneth Crag, Bill Musk, Geoffrey Parrinder or William Montgomery Watt in their view of Muhammad; and he works within the boundaries of biblical prophethood as

defined by recognized Bible scholars like Donald Carson, Craig Blaising, Darrell Bock, and Wayne Grudem.

One significant contribution that Talman makes is that he takes seriously contemporary research on Islamic origins. Many Christian polemicists against Islam make the mistake of basing all of their attacks on the traditional Muslim narrative about Islamic origins. So, for instance, some of the recent satirical descriptions of Muhammad as a demon-possessed man are based on testimonies about convulsions and trances that he experienced while receiving revelations (as attested in the *hadith*, the Muslim traditions). But strong evidence has been advanced by “revisionist” scholars (often secularists without a religious axe to grind) that question the historical reliability of such accounts, which may have been constructed up to a couple of centuries later to match the popular expectations of the day with regards to Arabian charismatic figures. Even the critical scholars of the late nineteenth

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and the first half of the twentieth century (the so-called “orientalists”) based their study of Islam largely on an acceptance of the reliability of Muslim traditions. This uncritical acceptance has begun to be rectified by the seminal work on the *hadith* undertaken by the likes of Wansbrough, Schacht, Crone, Cook, and others, and recently has been made more accessible by both Gabriel S. Reynolds (*The Emergence of Islam*) and Daniel Brown (*A New Introduction to Islam*).

The honest reader of this article will quickly notice that, despite Talman's conciliatory approach to Muhammad and Islam, his conclusions are by no means “orthodox” or “mainstream” from a Muslim perspective. So by suggesting that there may be some space in the Christian biblical worldview to consider Muhammad as *in some ways* a prophet, the

author is not conceding much at all, and certainly not for the purpose of “pleasing” Muslims. Harley Talman's work and conclusions are indeed more useful for Christians who are trying to make sense of Islam in their desire to reach Muslims with the gospel, than for Muslims who are trying to convince Christians about Muhammad's prophethood. In this sense, Talman's work—and the continuing conversation which I hope his article will provoke—should be viewed as belonging to the field of missiology *par excellence*, and only in a secondary degree to that of comparative religions or Islamic studies. But it also reveals clearly that those who wish to engage in this conversation in any helpful way will need to be well read in Islamic studies, as well as in Christian theology, and in the fields of philosophy and theology of religion. **IJFM**



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