

Session Four: Session Four: Practical and Social Theology II
RESPONSE TO ABED EL DIEN AND HAIDAR HALASAH

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The authors do us a great service in bringing insights from within the Middle East to bear on the important and timely subject of the relations between Christians and Muslims, and I wish to express my great appreciation for their significant contribution. These are not matters of importance only for the Church in Muslim countries, but of utmost importance for us all. The papers presented to us address two very important issues for the church to work through with regard to Islam—but applicable beyond this to any ‘Other’ we face: the Church’s readiness to welcome BMBs into the family; and the Church’s willingness to be ambassadors of Christ for the sake of Muslims. Each is worthy of full attention in this session; both need urgently to be addressed.

I will begin my observations with the second, as logically prior to the second—the willingness of the Church to engage positively with Muslims with the good news of Jesus Christ. The situation can be likened to that of the Cold War—the rhetoric of democracy vs communism was as fierce as that we hear today (remember Reagan’s ‘evil empire’ speech?). For those of us in the West, the Communist East was viewed as a monolithic structure of godless opposition to the gospel. It was impossible to conceive of any change. Yet, 25 years ago the edifice collapsed, and we discovered the strength of the Church that was already there. And here in this conference we have papers presented from our Russian church! What can we expect of God for Islam? Both today’s papers contrast Muslim-Christian engagement that is ‘strictly apologetic’, or polemic (what Haidar calls ‘dialogue’) with that which affirms the gospel (‘kerygmatic’ in Abed’s terms, as agents, or ambassadors, of reconciliation in Haidar’s terms).

Haidar treats this subject at greater length, with his summary of the five types of dialogue. It is possible that each of them may be represented among us in this room today; certainly they all exist within the Church of the Nazarene. It is my suspicion that the fifth, the position of equality, is less represented. Haidar does not endorse any of these explicitly, and rather goes on to offer the model of ambassador of reconciliation as an alternative to dialogue (which includes all five models). But, he does expand on the position of equality as important for mutual understanding. My own observation in much that Christians say and write about Islam (certainly in the West) is done without actually talking to Muslims. In the world as it is today, with Islam perceived as the primary threat to Western freedoms and to Christianity,¹ and Christians perceived as neo-colonial invaders in the Muslim world, there simply must be conversation between Christians and Muslims to gain understanding of each other—and to learn how to live together without killing each other. Thus, the fifth model is vital.

Both papers argue for more than dialogue, or conversation, even that which is respectful of the other. Both go on to be unashamed in speaking on behalf of Jesus Christ. We are to seek

¹59% of American Evangelical pastors follow Franklin Graham’s description of Islam as ‘a very evil and very wicked religion’, while 51% of ‘mainline’ pastors agree with G W Bush’s description of Islam as based on ‘peace, love, and compassion’.

<http://www.charismanews.com/culture/52849-growing-number-of-pastors-believe-christianity-and-islam-are-similar>.

to be agents of the reconciliation of all humanity to God that is offered through Christ Jesus. We are to think in ways that show how Christ is the *telos* of Islam's narrative. In either case, the way forward is not a whole-scale denial of any good or any light in the world of Islam, but that even in Islam can be found that which points towards hope, towards life, and that we can point to Christ through these commonalities, what is called the *preparation evangelium*. Haidar makes a controversial suggestion that is worthy of discussion—that Muslims do not need to convert to Christianity to become Believers, but can 'complete' their Islam by accepting Jesus.² How do we, here, respond to the possibility that Muslims might become followers of Jesus without becoming members of Nazarene churches? Or, what sort of 'Nazarenes' might we all be?

Basic to this discussion is the affirmation that we, as followers of Christ, desire nothing less for the world than that they know him, too, and come to love him as we do. It affirms that we love Muslims as our neighbours, and desire God's best for them.

Abed addresses the vital matter of what the Church does when Muslims do choose to follow Christ. The Church of the Nazarene has long been very good at bringing people to faith in Christ; there is also a long record of people leaving the church at a similar rate. We have not been good at discipling and retaining young believers.³ In the Western context, such people often go to other churches; or, perhaps stop going to church but still consider themselves Christian. But, for BMBs this pattern is nothing less than tragic. As Abed states so clearly, becoming a follower of Jesus is a total change of identity that encompasses a loss of a sheltering community. If the Church does not become the community for that believer, the consequences are little less than fatal.

The matter of identity cannot be overstated. To choose to follow Christ, for the Muslim, is not simply to exchange one set of beliefs for another—it is to leave behind everything of faith and culture and friendship and family; that is, lifelong identity. The Church becomes all of these things—or, rather, the Church must become all of these things. But this is not our normal pattern of church life. There is too much of a tendency to think of the Church as what happens in the building at various times of the week, mostly Sunday. But, as Abed spells out, to be the Church is to be the renewed people of God, a community that embodies and lives out the Kingdom of God. The new identity of every believer is tied up in community—this should be seen as the case for *all* believers, not just BMBs.

Every new believer, whatever their former life, becomes part of the new kingdom community whose identity is that of Christ, not of tribe or race or culture or nationality. Every bit as much as every Muslim is part of an *Ummah*, so is every Christian part of an '*am*, a people, a community.

Abed points to the sad truth of the difficulty of the Church in accepting BMBs fully into fellowship. He speaks of marginalisation and suspicion; and of suffering. A young Pakistani came into our church three years ago, asked how to become a Christian, and came to faith

² These would be described as C-5 on the C- Spectrum first described by John Jay Travis in 1988. See 'The C1-C6 Spectrum after Fifteen Years', *EMQ* 51,4 (2015), 366-377, for his update.

³ I do not have current statistics for this comment. It is based on memory of past reports, and particularly of my own work with the statistics at the request of my district some years ago.

that very first day. He shared this with his family, who instantly disinherited him, and had a *fatwa* issued against him should he return to Pakistan. The British government sought to send him home, saying he could go to Christians there. But, as we learned, there is suspicion of professed converts because they have often been betrayed to the authorities by those posing as new believers. There was no safe place for our new Christian to go. He lost family, fiancée, income, and home. We, as the church, have supported him through the whole process—and are now family and home. But, are we enough a support for friends and his hope of a family of his own?

This is not a new matter. In the Early Church there were those who identified the Other as ‘Jewish background Believers’, or ‘pagan background believers’, even ‘barbarian background believers’. The united message of the Scriptures is that we do not identify each other by what we once were, but by what we are in Christ Jesus.

Can we, as the Church, be as good at *being* the kingdom people as we are at *inviting* people to become part of the church?