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Pulling Back From the Brink: A Wesleyan Perspective on the Contemporary Evangelical – Islamic Confrontation

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We should chiefly exercise our love toward them who most shock
either our way of thinking, or our temper, or our knowledge,
or the desire we have that others should be as virtuous
as we wish to be ourselves¹⁵⁸.

As we enter a new century, the world is facing a new schism, a confrontation between Western and Islamic societies on a global scale. Evangelicals are at the centre of that confrontation: the standard bearer for western society is an avowedly evangelical leader, the leading western nation in the conflict is the one in which the church is the strongest, and popular evangelical theology has come to view Islam in apocalyptic terms. If it takes two people to dance this dance of conflict, then it is clear that evangelicals are moving in close step with their Muslim partners.

Our Wesleyan-holiness heritage demands that we approach this confrontation from a different angle. First, a Wesleyan spirit of humility and self-examination forces us to recognize that people who call themselves Christians are perpetrators as well as victims in this global drama. Second, the Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace forces us to recognize that God's grace is at work in the hearts and lives of Muslims also, continually drawing them towards him and his salvation. Finally, the Wesleyan spirit of social action and reconciliation demands that we see Muslims as part of our "global parish," that we seize every opportunity to do good to them too, actively assuming the role of peacemakers in the face of a potential cataclysm.

Evangelicals at the Point of a Global Schism September 11 and Global Terrorism

¹⁵⁸ John Wesley, Recommended Reflections #4, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection in the Wesley Century*, T Crichton Mitchell, ed. Vol II of *Great Holiness Classics*, Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1984, p 213.

On 11 September 2001, the world awoke to a frightening reality, a well-organized attack by Islamic fundamentalists that levelled a leading symbol of Western economic power - the twin towers of the World Trade Center. This attack simply underscored a new reality of the post-Communist era: the sharpest remaining global division lies between radical Islam and the Western economic system. Two wars in two years against perceived symbols of radical Islam have only served to reiterate this reality. For many evangelicals, the events of September 11 simply served to confirm what they had already concluded regarding the threat of global Islam. In response to September 11, evangelicals across the world have said with a sigh, "Perhaps this incident will cause the west to wake up to the true threat of Islam." With the demise of the Soviet Union, Islam has gradually replaced Marxism as the paragon of evil in evangelical mythology. In pre-millennial eschatology charts, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Mu'amar Gaddafi, and Saddam Hussein have succeeded each other as the personification of the anti-Christ. As the Palestinians and Israelis have continued their "dance to death," the post World War II evangelical alliance with Israel has drawn Evangelicals into ever-closer ties. Evangelical frustration with the slow process of evangelism among Muslims combined with persecution faced by evangelicals converting from Islam, have caused many evangelicals to come to associate Islam, persecution, and martyrdom as synonymous concepts.

Persecution and Martyrdom

The popular association of Islam and persecution is graphically portrayed in the November 2002 issue of *Holiness Today*, entitled, "Persecuted but not Forgotten". The centrefold sheet highlights sixteen countries in which persecution of Christians is occurring. Twelve of the sixteen nations are Islamic states.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ The Centrefold is based upon information provided by the evangelical watchdog group, "Voice of the Martyrs." The twelve Islamic nations highlighted by the article are Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Brunei, Iran, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The four non-Islamic states that were cited are China, India, Bhutan, and Nepal. Note that not one of these countries is an Orthodox or Catholic nation. In response to my "Letter to the Editor" of 29 November 2002 in which I raised some of the same arguments presented in this paper and questioned a few of the facts in this centrefold, Carmen Ringhiser wrote, "the magazine [*Holiness Today*] must stake its authority on sources like the Voice of the Martyrs." Carmen Ringhiser, personal e-mail, Tuesday, 17 December 2002. "Persecution and Martyrdom," in *Holiness Today*, Vol. 4, No.

When one compares the November 2002 issue of *Holiness Today* with a book such as *By Their Blood, Christian Martyrs of the Twentieth Century* an attempted global survey of persecution in the twentieth century, the differences are striking. Touted as a contemporary update of the classic *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* and written just twenty-five years ago, only 65 of its 580 pages deal with Muslim persecution of Christians.¹⁶⁰

11, pp. 24-25.

¹⁶⁰ James and Marti Hefley, *By their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979). Hefley and Hefley deal with persecution initiated by Muslims in the following manner:

REFERENCES TO PERSECUTION INVOLVING ISLAM OR NATIONS WITH SUBSTANTIAL MUSLIM COMMUNITIES		
Bangladesh	157-158	Atrocities committed against Christians by Pakistani troops during Bangladesh's war of independence
Indonesia		No mention of Islam on Christian atrocities. Deals with persecution of Christians by tribalists and Japanese
Malaysia	186	One page referring to imprisonment of believers in Malaysia
Singapore		"An oasis" of religious tolerance
Philippines	196-197	Deals with Catholic and Evangelical violence; two pages devoted to concerns arising out of social conditions in Mindanao; no specific reference to Islam
Middle East	317-334	Country by country study of the Middle East
Sudan	349-358	Study of persecution of church in pre- and post-independence Sudan
Ethiopia	367-368	Douglas Hill killed by mad Muslim in the Ogaden
	372-373	Don McClure killed by Somali bandits in the Ogaden
Somalia	374-378	Survey of persecution since the Ethiopia/Somalia conflict in 1975
Chad	381-384	Islam a factor in post-Independence persecution of the Church
Mali		Only persecution by Marxists specifically mentioned
Guinea		Only persecution by Marxists specifically mentioned
Nigeria		No specific mention of persecution by Muslims
Tanzania		"There have been no Christian martyrs to violence in mainland Tanzania"
Uganda	425-439	Islam mentioned as a factor in the numerous rounds of persecution in Uganda over the centuries
Total pages with reference to Muslims	65	

The classic *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* itself, written in a medieval English context, does not cite a single incident of persecution by Muslims. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, W. Grinton Berry, preparer, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988).

A more recent, if more anecdotal study of twenty Twentieth century martyrs lists only one from an Islamic context. See Susan Berfman's *Martyr's: Contemporary Writers on*

The world has changed in the last quarter of a century, but clearly our popular stereotypes have changed to an even greater degree. It was no small irony to me that as I was reading the November 2002 issue of *Holiness Today*, a close friend of mine who had been travelling through the Orthodox heartland of Northern Ethiopia found himself unable to visit the church leaders he came to see: a severe wave of riots had broken out against evangelical churches. One evangelical was killed and several pastors faced extended imprisonment without trial.¹⁶¹ Perhaps the reason that persecution by such traditional communities receives so little notice in evangelical culture today is because we view them as allies against the greater contemporary enemy of our culture, Islam, and we do not want to embarrass those we perceive to be our allies.¹⁶² But the gospel does not permit us to “wave the bloody shirts” of the church’s favourite martyrs in order to feed our culture’s war lust, while we ignore examples of martyrdom that square less easily with our world view.

The Rip in the Global Fabric

My great fear concerning Christian/Muslim relations at the beginning of the third millennium is that we are witnessing a rending of the fabric of Western-Christian/Muslim relations that will lead to tragic consequences.

Modern Lives of Faith (Marknoll: Orbis Books, 1996). Robert Ellsberg’s essay entitled “Little Brother of Jesus,” (pp. 285-298) deals with the death of Father Charles De Foucauld at the hands of Tuareg rebels in 1916. It may be pertinent that this work reflects a Catholic, as opposed to Evangelical, perspective on martyrdom at the turn of the century.

¹⁶¹ To corroborate this story, I asked another friend living in the area at the heart of the conflict to summarize the results of the unrest of November, 2002. His response was that this unrest cannot be separated from an extended wave of persecution that has lasted twenty-four months and has resulted in the deaths of five evangelicals in the surrounding area. Both of these two individuals wish to remain anonymous. It should also be noted, however, that the event that triggered the unrest of November 2002 was an extremely provocative denunciation of Orthodoxy in a public crusade by Evangelical leaders. The story of the persecuted church in Ethiopia, a story that includes persecution by animists, by Marxists, by Muslims, and by Orthodox, is comprehensively dealt with in John Cumber’s *Count it all Joy: Testimonies from a Persecuted Church* (Kearney, Nebraska: Morris Publishing, 1995).

¹⁶² This presupposition ignores the role played by Orthodox communities in the persecution of evangelicals in Islamic nations. Historic and registered Christian minorities often file complaints against unregistered evangelical groups to Muslim administrators. What we as evangelicals perceive to be persecution by an Islamic government, is sometimes perceived by those Islamic administrators to be actions taken to protect their own Christian minorities against proselytism by unregistered groups.

To see the potential consequences of such a rift, one need only look at the total breakdown in Palestinian/Israeli relations since the beginning of the second Intifadah in 2001. With successive acts of terror and western retaliation against such terror attacks, we are witnessing a steady downward spiral in western/Muslim relations. Following terrorist attacks in Bali, Indonesia in November 2002, and numerous attacks in Pakistan in 2002, the numbers of westerners in these countries has substantially diminished. If further terrorist attacks occur following US military action in the Middle East, one can imagine a much greater loss of civil rights for Muslims in majority Christian nations than has already occurred. It is easy to blame our responses on the other party. But we must acknowledge that "it takes two to tango," and we evangelicals are dancing the dance of death with the Muslim world.

A Wesleyan Response

There are three elements of Wesleyan theology that compel themselves to be recognized in the context of this present crisis. Wesley's method of self-examination carries with it a sense of personal humility in relationship to holiness. This sense of self-examination and humility forces us to admit that Christians are perpetrators as well as victims when it comes to persecution. Second, while much of the evangelical tradition focuses on the total depravity of humanity outside of God's grace, which results in the demonization of Islam, we as Wesleyans recognize that there are aspects of God's prevenient grace at work in the life of all humanity, even those far from God. Finally, the Wesleyan tradition is also immersed in the call to engagement and reconciliation with our opponents, and the call to be active peacemakers in the world.

The Wesleyan Method of Humility and Self-examination

In his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, John Wesley begins his "Advice for the Entirely Sanctified" with the words, "Watch and pray continually against pride."¹⁶³ Serious introspection demands our confession that we live in a world in which Christians and Muslims are mutual persecutors and mutual victims. To give a very common example, in both my country of citizenship (the USA) as well as in my adopted country, there are communities that will say with pride, "there will be no

¹⁶³ John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," in *The Wesley Century*, T. Crichton Mitchell, ed. Vol. II of Great Holiness Classics, Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1984, p. 204.

mosque built in our town,” even as they decry the failure of Islamic nations to permit greater freedom for the construction of churches.¹⁶⁴

At a much deeper level, we must confess that people calling themselves Christians are also persecutors in the global confrontation between Christianity and Islam. This is nowhere more clearly seen than in countries along the fracture line between the Orthodox Christian tradition and Islam, such as Chechnya in Russia, and Bosnia and Kosovo in the former Yugoslav republic. In these locations, Orthodox believers have rallied their supporters for Crusades against the Islamic world, and terrifying atrocities have been committed. Who can forget the untold thousands of men pulled away from their families on the hillsides of Shrebrednitza never to be heard from again?¹⁶⁵ Before we wave the bloody shirt of Christians persecuted by Muslims, we should also confess that there are places in the world where evangelicals in power imprison each other’s evangelists and restrict the freedom of sects with which they disagree.¹⁶⁶ Finally in the context of Islam, we must confess that our Jewish friends view their position in Islamic societies as far more secure from persecution than their position in Christian societies.¹⁶⁷ Did not Jesus teach us to pray, “Forgive

¹⁶⁴ Sometimes, this is expressed in a more self-righteous manner, “until Saudi Arabia permits us to build churches in the heartland of Islam, we will fight any construction of a mosque in our community with all of the powers at our disposal.” Members of my own family have been among the most vocal evangelical leaders opposing Saudi efforts to build an Islamic University in Washington D.C. This is a controversial issue, but there are many evangelical missiologists who are quite concerned about the western church taking a position of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” in this regard. To paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi, “an eye for an eye leaves none of us with a place to worship!” To deny Saudis the right to build mosques in the US might appear justified. But what about the Indonesian or Nigerian Muslim who would have worshipped along side the Saudi in that mosque? Why should that person, once denied their place of worship now support the rights of Christians to build a church in their own previously tolerant nation?

¹⁶⁵ Many evangelical leaders are fond of placing the blame for the Shrebrednitza massacre squarely on the shoulders of the United Nations. Before we do so, we should carefully examine which nations were the ones who were the leaders in restricting funding for this mission, thereby preventing adequate arms and resources from reaching the UN peacekeepers. We should also examine the positions of these same evangelical leaders regarding funding for UN peacekeepers in Bosnia.

¹⁶⁶ If anyone demands an example of this, I will be glad to share personal experiences that I am not at liberty to put in print.

¹⁶⁷ Perhaps the most definitive recent study of the historical status of Christians and Jews under Islam is that of the Princeton University scholar, Mark Cohen. Cohen argues that across history Jews have enjoyed a secure, stable, if “second class,” citizenship in Islamic

us our trespasses, even as we forgive those who trespass against us”?

A Wesleyan Notion of Prevenient Grace

When I first met the General Board of the Church of the Nazarene while preparing for missionary service in 1992, I still remember a question posed to me by Dr Janine Van Beek. “You are preparing yourself for missions among Muslims. Is there anything positive that you can say regarding Islamic cultures and traditions?” Dr Van Beek was expressing a question that is solidly within the Wesleyan tradition. In what way is God’s prevenient grace already at work in the lives of those individuals that God has sent me to evangelize?

I find among most Muslims I meet a profound outrage at injustice, even if that injustice is sometimes selectively expressed. Most of my Muslim friends also have a strong commitment to public standards of morality. In these senses, I can acknowledge God’s prevenient grace at work in the lives of many of my Muslim friends, often as a direct result of the Islamic teachings within which they have been raised. This sense of injustice and this commitment to public standards of morality serves my Muslim friends better than the hopeless moral relativism of Western secularism. In that sense, I may praise God for the good side of their Islamic upbringing, and pray that God will help me find touchstones within those traditions that I may use to lead my Muslim friends for Christ.

A Wesleyan Call to Engagement and Peace-making

Finally, Wesleyans can best understand our obligations with regard to Islamic cultures when we observe Wesley’s tradition of engagement and involvement with people. It is impossible to argue that John Wesley was an internationalist, or a complete pacifist, or that he escaped the ethnocentrism and religious prejudices of his day.¹⁶⁸ His anti-papist

cultures. In Christian cultures, by contrast, Cohen argues that Jews have been treated as “chattel,” the personal possession of the ruler of the day, to be disposed of at his whim. Upon first reading Cohen’s assertions, I was offended by his thesis and refused to accept it. While I am critical of certain details of Cohen’s argument, after extensive study of his sources, I have become convinced that it is broadly true, and that it reflects the classical worldview of Jewish scholars in comparing the position of Jews under Islam and under Christianity. Mark R Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 52ff.

¹⁶⁸ While Wesley was not a complete pacifist, it is noteworthy that he is highly critical of war. In his Sermon “On Original Sin” (1759) (*Works of Wesley*, 9:192-464), he probes, “Now, who can reconcile war, I will not say to religion, but to any degree of reason or

positions are well known.¹⁶⁹ Not unnaturally, Wesley expresses the same type of bigotry towards Islam.¹⁷⁰ However, we cannot escape the

common sense?" (9:221). However, his primary focus in this regard is to raise the question of how Christian princes can make war on each other.

Of particular relevance to the right of conscience in opposing war are Wesley's criticisms of the policy of King George with regard to the American War for Independence. In his essay "On National Sins and Miseries" (November 7, 1775) (*Works of Wesley*, 7:400-408), Wesley forcefully and unequivocally condemns King George's war in the colonies.

That he was not afraid to criticize his sovereign when the Red Coats were in harms' way may be seen in a second essay of the following year entitled, "A Seasonable Address to the More Serious Part of the Inhabitants of Great Britain Respecting the Unhappy Contest Between Us and Our American Brethren With an Occasional Word Interspersed to those of a Different Complexion By A Lover of Peace" (1776) (*Works of Wesley*, 9:119-128)

¹⁶⁹ An interesting note with regard to Wesley's position on the rights of Catholics is his statement in his journal for Sunday, November 5, 1780, where he states that he preached from Luke ix. 55: "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of;" "and showed, that, supposing the Papists to be heretics, schismatics, wicked men, enemies to us, and to our Church and nation; yet we ought not to persecute, to kill, hurt, or grieve them, but barely to prevent their doing hurt." (*The Works of Wesley*, 4:193) The relevant question, naturally, concerns what rights he is willing to deny Catholics in order to "prevent their doing hurt!" There is much insidious persecution that occurs under the justification of "preventing" our opponents "doing hurt." *The Works of Wesley*, 3rd ed. complete and unabridged (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986).

¹⁷⁰ In the manner of his day, Wesley referred to Muslims as "Mahometans," or followers of Muhammad. In his sermon entitled "The General Spread of the Gospel," (*Works of Wesley*, 6:287-287) in his second series of sermons, published 1788, he refers to a world survey of religions by a widely travelled man by the name of Mr. Brerewood from just prior to his era. According to Wesley, Brerewood divided the world into thirty parts, of which nineteen were heathen, six Mahometan, and five Christian. (6:277). Of the Mahometans Wesley goes on to observe, "A little, and but a little, above the Heathens in religion, are the Mahometans. But how far and wide has this miserable delusion spread over the face of the earth! Inasmuch that the Mahometans are considerably more in number (as six to five) than Christians. And by all the accounts which have any pretence to authenticity, these are also, in general, as utter strangers to all true religion as their four-footed brethren; as void of mercy as lions and tigers; as much given up to brutal lusts as bulls or goats. So that they are in truth a disgrace to human nature, and a plague to all that are under the iron yoke. (6:278). The cure for this state of affairs, says Wesley, is the leaven of true holiness, outward and inward, in which the gracious promise of God to write his law upon our hearts will be poured out upon his church. (6:283) "The grand stumbling block removed out of the way, namely, the lives of the Christians," he writes, "the Mahometans will look upon them with other eyes, and begin to give attention to their words.... And then, the grand stumbling-block being removed from the heathen nations also, the same Spirit will be poured out upon them; even those that remain in the uttermost parts of the sea." (*Works of Wesley*, 6:284-285).

implications of Wesley's commitment to live out the social implications of the gospel in his own nation, and his commitment to a life of reconciliation and peace making.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," Wesley asserts in his "Sermon on the Mount III," because, "they endeavour to calm the stormy spirits of men, to quiet their turbulent passions, to soften the minds of contending parties, and, if possible, reconcile them to each other. They use all innocent arts, and employ all their strength, all the talents which God has given them, as well to preserve peace where it is, as to restore it where it is not."¹⁷¹ Even more convicting than the responsibilities of the peacemaker is the all-embracing sweep of those whom we are obligated to make peace with. "[I]n the full extent of the word," he writes, "a peace-maker is one that, as he hath opportunity, 'doeth good unto all men'; one that, being filled with

In "Part 1: The Past and Present State of Mankind," in his essay "On Original Sin," (1759), (Works of Wesley, 9:192-464) he condemns Sales "whitewashing" of Islam in his translation of the Quran. Regarding Muslims, he asserts that they, "not only appropriate to themselves the title of Mussulmen, or True Believers [*note Wesley's inaccurate translation of the word "Muslim", which means, "one who submits [to God]."*], -- but even anathematise, with the utmost bitterness, and adjudge to eternal destruction, all their brethren of the Sect of Hali, all who contend for a figurative interpretation of them." (6:216). He proceeds to condemn Muslims not only for their gross misunderstanding of God, but for lack of love of each other, as demonstrated by the fact that Turks and Persians slaughter each other in cold blood over the shape of each other's turbans. (Works of Wesley, 6:215-216).

However, regarding the final destiny of Muslims, Wesley writes in his sermon (Third Series), "On Living Without God," (Works of Wesley, 7:349-354), Let it be observed, I purposely add, to those that are under the Christian dispensation; because I have no authority from the word of God, "to judge those that are without;" nor do I conceive that any man living has a right to sentence all the heathen and Mahometan world to damnation. It is far better to leave them to Him that made them, and who is "the Father of the spirits of all flesh;" who is the God of the Heathens as well as the Christians, and who hateth nothing that he hath made. (Works of Wesley, 7:353)

¹⁷¹ "In its literal meaning," Wesley writes in full, "[peacemaker] implies those lovers of God and man who utterly detest and abhor all strife and debate, all variance and contention; and accordingly labour with all their might, either to prevent this fire of hell from being kindled, or, when it is kindled, from breaking out, or, when it is broke out, from spreading any farther. They endeavour to calm the stormy spirits of men, to quiet their turbulent passions, to soften the minds of contending parties, and, if possible, reconcile them to each other. They use all innocent arts, and employ all their strength, all the talents which God has given them, as well to preserve peace where it is, as to restore it where it is not." (Works of Wesley, 6:284)

the love of God and of all mankind, cannot confine the expressions of it to his own family, or friends, or acquaintance, or party, or to those of his own opinions, -- no, nor those who are partakers of like precious faith; but steps over all these narrow bounds, that he may do good to every man, that he may, some way or other, manifest his love to neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies.”¹⁷²

John Wesley sought to live out the whole gospel in the world that was his parish, the towns and villages of the United Kingdom and the new settlements of North America. We must seek to live out that gospel in the world that is our parish. The full gospel compels us to include the Muslims of our community in our own immediate parish, and to reach out in reconciliation and peacemaking to Muslims in other parts of the world.

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¹⁷²Wesley continues, "He doeth good to them all, as he hath opportunity, that is, on every possible occasion; "redeeming the time," in order thereto; buying up every opportunity, improving every hour, losing no moment wherein he may profit another. He does good not of one particular kind, but good in general, in every possible way; employing herein all his talents of every kind, all his powers and faculties of body and soul, all his fortune, his interest, his reputation; desiring only, that when his lord cometh He may say, "well done, good and faithful servant!" (Works of Wesley, 6:284-285)