

Response

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To begin, I congratulate Ubaid Al-Massiah on his most timely paper. The growing rift between Western Civilization and the Islam world is definitely dangerous. A “clash of civilizations” can only lead to destruction for both the West and Islam. September 11th, Afghanistan, and Iraq could be only the beginning of a much more horrific conflict on a global scale. This must be prevented at all costs!

But for me as a Wesleyan-holiness minister, even more disturbing is the growing tendency in Evangelical circles to “demonize” Islam which expresses itself in an active antipathy by Evangelicals toward Muslims – especially Arabs and Palestinians. Such anti-Muslim sentiments are completely out of character for followers of the Saviour whose commandment is, “Love your neighbour as you love yourself” (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31), as well as “Love your enemies...” (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35).

Each of Ubaid’s three main points are insightful applications of our Wesleyan-holiness heritage to what is perhaps our generation’s most pressing socio-political, cultural, and religious issue.

First, especially compelling is Ubaid’s call for Christians to humbly admit our own guilt – at least corporately – for directly persecuting Muslims as well as for supporting the cause of those who do. The Crusades, in which thousands of Muslims and Jews were slaughtered over a period spanning almost three centuries, are the classic historical example – and one which to this day Muslims have not forgotten – or forgiven! The massacre at Shrebrednitza of several thousand Muslim men and boys by Serbian¹⁷³ troops is a most horrible recent example. Less obvious, but perhaps more insidious, is the United States government’s policy of unwavering support for Israel while often turning a blind eye to the desperate plight of the Palestinian people. And the fact that the current US President is an evangelical Christian has not escaped the notice of the Muslim world.

¹⁷³ Serbians are traditionally Orthodox Christians.

So, Ubaid is right: Clearly, if we are to have any chance at all of reaching for Jesus some significant number of the more than 1 billion Muslims in the world today, we must face up to the fact that, historically, those who call themselves Christians have too often betrayed their Saviour in their treatment of Muslims. Acts of corporate Christian repentance for the pain and suffering that has been caused to Muslims in the name of Christ could go a long way to stop the downward spiral of worsening relations between global Islam and the so-called “Christian West”.¹⁷⁴ True Christian humility calls us to lay aside our politics and be willing to weep (as our Saviour does) with all those who have suffered persecution, and do what we can in our own context to mitigate or completely eliminate such persecution. And particularly as Wesleyans, we must seek to live out our theology of “love made perfect” in relation to all people groups, not just the current political favourites. This may set us against the majority in some (particularly US) Evangelical circles, but then we Holiness people are used to being in the theological minority!¹⁷⁵

Second, Ubaid is also very correct in his assertion that the Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace requires us to look for the Holy Spirit’s “prevening” activity among all peoples of all religions, including Muslims. God’s image is still clearly visible in all peoples, whatever their religion or ethnicity. Sin cannot erase God’s image in humankind – however much it may deface it.

We freely acknowledge that adherents of certain non-Christian religions, including Islam, can be basically kind, generous people, with very high morals, and sincere yearnings for communion with the divine. But we maintain that this is not due to any essential truthfulness of those religions,

¹⁷⁴ A notable act of corporate repentance for Christian persecution of Muslims was the three year Reconciliation Walk from Cologne to Jerusalem by over 500 Christians, which culminated on 15 July, 1999 with presentation to the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem and top Muslim clerics of formal apology for the Crusades. Also notable was the controversial apology for “sins of the Church” made by Pope John Paul II in March, 2000. In my view, such collective acts of contrition can only help to strengthen our witness to Muslims.

¹⁷⁵ In particular, we must be willing to critically examine much of what passes for biblical “exegesis” in today’s Evangelical community, particularly in reference to End Times prophecy and the presuppositions about Israel and Islam made by dispensationalist theology which right now holds sway in so much of the Evangelical world.

but rather constitutes clear evidence of God's prevenient grace at work in their lives, cultures and religions.

In particular, I agree with Ubaid that Muslims' strong sense of injustice and adherence to moral absolutes are indeed signs of God's prevenient grace at work in the hearts and minds of Muslim people. And surely, that most fundamental doctrine of Islam – that there is only one, true God – is clear evidence that Muslims are being helped on their way to the truth by a loving God who yearns for reconciliation with all His children. Certainly, Muslims are closer to a correct understanding of God than are, say, Hindus, Buddhists, or adherents of various New Age philosophies!

Notwithstanding this, I believe a cautionary reminder is in order. Even while we acknowledge certain good aspects of Muslim culture as signs of God's prevenient grace, still we must maintain our clear theological stand against the *religion* of Islam. We rightly reject Wesley's own culturally-conditioned bigotry toward the "Mahometans"¹⁷⁶ as individuals. But as Christians, we must stand against Islam, because it is a false religion, a satanic deception which leads its followers to eternal damnation.

Although Islam is by far the most successful deception Satan has ever perpetrated on mankind, we harbour no illusions that Islam is somehow *more* evil than other false religions. From a theological point of view, all non-Christian religions are equally satanic in origin. Whatever their genesis, whatever their doctrines, and even whatever part they play in the cultural heritage of a particular people, we must maintain that all non-Christian religions serve primarily to divert their followers from the only true, saving faith – faith in JESUS CHRIST. We must stand unequivocally for the salvific uniqueness of Jesus Christ, who alone is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6), in whose name alone there is salvation (Acts 4:12). All Christians, but especially *holiness* Christians in particular, must continue to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3), which declares that "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:11).

Third, Ubaid's final point is especially important. In today's world, if we are to avoid continuing escalation of the confrontation between politicised Evangelical Christianity and Islam, it is we Christians who must take the

¹⁷⁶ See footnote no. 13 of Ubaid's paper for relevant quotes from Wesley's works.

initiative in seeking peace and reconciliation with Muslims. We, not they, serve a Master who said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9). It is the New Testament, not the Koran, which enjoins, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18), and assures us that, “Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:18). So as Christians, specifically as *holiness* Christians, we should look for creative ways to “follow peace with all men” as we seek to make actual in our daily lives the “holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

A final note: As we work to carry out our Lord’s commission to us to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) and our own special task of “winning Africa for Jesus”, we must recognize that all non-Christian religions are in real competition with Christianity for the hearts and minds of humankind. The *followers* of these religions are not our enemies¹⁷⁷, but the false beliefs they teach are inimical to Christianity.

This is especially true of Islam. Islam is the most “missionary” of the non-Christian world religions, and its missionary enterprise is far better financed than is the Christian world mission. Islam is also the world religion most vehement in its denials of the central truths of Christianity. The Trinity, the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit, the need for a Saviour, Jesus’ death and resurrection – all these and many other key tenets of the Christian faith Islam categorically denies,¹⁷⁸ and actively seeks to persuade others to its point of view.

Further, Islam presents a special problem to Christianity precisely because of the otherwise true principle of *monotheism*. Christians agree with Islam that there is only one true God. But there our agreement ends. Islamic teaching insists that the *Allah* of the Koran and the God of the Bible are one-and-the-same. As Christians, we must strenuously deny this: Firstly, on the grounds of the name given to God. The personal name of the God

¹⁷⁷ Though they may consider us to be *their* enemies, we do not consider them to be ours. For Christians, only the *devil* is truly our *Enemy* (1 Peter 5:8), along with his demon hosts.

¹⁷⁸ See article by John Ankerberg and John Weldon, “Are Allah and the Biblical God the Same?” available at <http://www.johnankerberg.org/Articles/islam/IS0403W1.htm>.

of the Bible is “I AM”¹⁷⁹, not *Allah*. Secondly, the God of the Bible is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which Islam specifically denies of *Allah*. And thirdly, because many essential attributes of Yahweh the God of the Bible – love, holiness, Fatherhood, a desire for relationship with his creatures – are never mentioned in the Koran as being attributes of *Allah*, or are specifically denied to be true of him¹⁸⁰.

In Africa in particular, Islam represents a special challenge to Christianity because of its emotionally compelling (though historically spurious) claim to be “an African religion,” while characterizing Christianity as a Western, colonial, or “white-man’s” religion. We know this accusation against Christianity is false, but we must admit that much of the history of Christian missions in Africa does appear to support this charge. In order to belie this distorted view of the Christian faith, we must be careful in our evangelism and discipling to guard against any tendency (conscious and/or unconscious) to “westernise” our converts. And we must build up a strong core of African theologians who can contextualize Christianity in general, and Wesleyan-holiness theology in particular, for their own peoples and cultures.

In closing, I reiterate that Ubaid’s call to “pull back from the brink” is timely indeed. As Wesleyans, we must devote the time needed to form an authentically holiness plan of engagement with the Muslim peoples and their evangelisation around the world.

¹⁷⁹ Hebrew *YHWH*. Traditionally here in Africa, as elsewhere, we pronounce God’s name “Jehovah”. However, in view of the woeful inadequacy of this transliteration, most Christian scholars today transliterate it “Yahweh”.

¹⁸⁰ Ankerberg, *op.cit.*