After first articulating common challenges raised against Christian mission to Muslims, in this article I want to reflect on fundamental issues to be taken into account whenever Christians think of mission in Islamic contexts. Then instead of trying to arrive at a possible redefinition of Christian understanding of mission, I shall put forward some much more modest suggestions related to priorities in Christian thinking about our relations with Muslims at the present time.

Articulating the Challenges

All the main arguments from history and experience that have been used in the last two hundred years to question the concept of Christian mission sound specially convincing when developed in relation to Islamic contexts. Here are several of the more common, which need to be heard and addressed:

The devotion of ordinary God-fearing Muslims puts us to shame. If Christians recognize the genuineness of this devotion, why should they ever want to encourage Muslims to change their religion and become Christians? A Western Christian who has lived in Turkey for a number of years expressed this view when he wrote, in a comment passed on to me, about his experience of living among Muslim students: “It has become harder and harder for me to imagine or even want them to convert. Many of them live more ‘godly’ lives than I do, or than most Christians I know. We should be talking about coexistence rather than conversion.”

The social and political realities in the world demand that we should be talking about real issues in the world around us rather than trying to discuss theology. Terrorism, AIDS, poverty, corruption, Third World debt, inequalities in world trade, the population explosion, global warming, and injustices like the oppression of Chechnyans and Palestinians—surely these are the crucial issues that confront the human race, and they have little or nothing to do with our understanding of God.

Christianity has a terrible record in its relations with the Muslim world. Weaknesses in the Christian churches in the Middle East and North Africa allowed Muslims to gain control through their initial conquests and then gradually win converts over the next four centuries. European Christendom eyed the world of Islam across the Mediterranean with a mixture of suspicion, fear, and envy, and then it launched the Crusades. The mentality of crusading continued for many years, even after the Crusaders were finally driven out of the Middle East. Christian mission enjoyed a dubious relationship with the imperial powers that controlled Africa and much of Asia, and in these continents Christian mission in Muslim areas has been remarkably unsuccessful. The Muslim world sees the West as still being “Christian” in some sense, and as still engaged in a war against Islam.

When Christians and Muslim have so much in common theologically, it’s pure arrogance for Christians to claim that they have “the truth.” Anyone who has ever tried to explain the Trinity, the incarnation, or the atonement to Muslims knows how difficult it is. Anyway, what’s the point of trying to do so? Christians are far closer to Muslims in their beliefs than to Hindus or Buddhists. We share belief in one Creator God and a moral law based on his revealed will. How can Christians claim that their understanding of God is “better” or “truer” than that of Muslims, or that their way of life is closer to what God requires than that of Muslims?

The conversion of individual Muslims is very difficult and often causes extreme suffering. Since Muslim communities are so close-knit and since the penalty for opting out of the Muslim community is so severe, converts can seldom continue to live in their own communities and therefore often end up being extracted from their families and their culture. The Christian community finds it very hard to provide an adequate substitute for all that converts have to give up. Why engage in an activity that is so obviously...
provocative in the eyes of Muslims and leads to so much heartache for those who do respond?

Understanding the Deeper Issues

These various arguments raise important challenges and indeed should give us pause. Deeper issues, though, underlie the idea of Christian mission to Muslims. Reflection on these more fundamental points, several of which are outlined below, can provide the context for properly evaluating these and other seemingly intractable challenges.

Christianity and Islam are both missionary religions. In an address entitled “The Challenges Facing Christian-Muslim Dialogue” given at Al-Azhar University in Cairo in 1996, George Carey, former archbishop of Canterbury, urged Christians and Muslims to be honest enough to admit that the missionary element is part of the nature of both faiths: “The fact is that both Islam and Christianity are missionary faiths. We make absolute claims and are anxious to promote our faiths. This is integral to both our Christianity and Islam.

The former archbishop of Canterbury, urged Christians and Muslims to be honest enough to admit that the missionary element is part of the nature of both faiths: “The fact is that both Islam and Christianity are missionary faiths. We make absolute claims and are anxious to promote our faiths. This is integral to both our faiths. Muslims are commanded in the Holy Qur’an to ‘act as witnesses for mankind’ just as Christians are commanded in Holy Scripture to ‘go into all the world and preach the Gospel.’”

According to Islamic tradition the Prophet Muhammad sent messengers some years before his death to the emperors of Abyssinia, Egypt, Byzantium, and Persia (three of whom were Christians). In Islamic thinking the Prophet was obliged to give these nations the opportunity to accept Islam before the Muslim community undertook any kind of conquest. We are dealing with a faith that came into existence 600 years after Christ and that, from the beginning, has had a clear understanding of its mission to correct the errors of Christian belief. Part of its message to Christians is therefore very blunt: “Islam is the true faith. Your understanding of God is wrong because you have compromised the oneness of God by inventing the Trinity. You are seriously misguided in putting Jesus on the same level as God and in believing that God could have allowed him to be crucified. Muhammad is the last of the Prophets.”

If both faiths have from the beginning behaved as missionary faiths, and if Islam has a clear mission in relation to the Christian church, would it not be a strange irony if Christians now were to give up any commitment to mission, just when some Muslims are redoubling their efforts to win the West for Islam?

National Christians and foreign missionaries often have quite different agendas. Living within the Christian community in the Middle East for some years and working with foreign missionaries of different kinds has made me acutely aware that these two groups generally have very different perspectives and agendas. For the vast majority of Christians in this region, the major questions about Islam have to do with survival and coexistence: Can Christianity survive in this region? Is genuine coexistence possible? Does the Christian church have a future? Will there be any Christians left in a hundred years’ time?

Many of the foreign workers, however, come (often uninvited) with “mission” and “evangelism” as the main items on their agenda. When they first arrive, they have little sense of history and are blissfully unaware of the legacy of centuries in which Jews and Christians lived as dhimmis (protected communities) under Islamic rule—a status that made anything like mission almost unthinkable. Their impatience both with the ancient churches and with the Protestant churches often leads them either to establish new denominations or to bypass the existing churches altogether, working entirely independently of the churches.

If these two groups stand aloof from each other and even attack each other, the witness of the church is weakened, and both parties lose something of real value. But if they can try to understand each other’s perspectives and even begin to trust each other, both can be enriched, even if they accept a kind of “division of labor” and continue to work quite separately. Fortunately there are many examples in the Middle East of fruitful interaction between national Christians and foreigners—especially in cases where the foreigners don’t invite themselves into the country but come at the invitation of the national church. When this happens, the foreigners become much more sensitive to the total context and work within and alongside the churches, and nationals become much more articulate about the mission of the church and find greater confidence in sharing their faith.

Evangelism needs to be understood in the broader context of mission and Christian discipleship. In mission conferences I have attended over the years, I have sometimes felt a little uneasy about an exclusive focus on evangelism that is based simply on the Great Commission of Matthew 28:16–20: “Go . . . and make disciples of all nations.” Most of the discussion tends to be about the proclamation of the Gospel, about leading people to faith in Christ and planting new churches. What I have sometimes missed in these gatherings is an awareness of what it is actually like for national Christians to be living alongside Muslims in a huge variety of different contexts all over the world.

My experience of teaching in different places in the Middle East over a number of years has made me aware of very negative views about Muslims and Islam that are the product of 1,400 years of difficult relationships in this part of the world. Armenians, Iranians, and Sudanese, for example, do not have warm feelings about Islam and do not find it easy to love Muslims! In such situations it is often premature to be exhorting Christians from these groups to evangelize their Muslim neighbors. We probably need to spend much more time reflecting on the meaning of the second part of the Great Commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39) and asking what it means to live by the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12). Urging evangelism makes little sense if the Gospel has not yet challenged one’s own prejudices and fears.

Many foreign workers come (often uninvited) with little sense of history.
could hardly resist accepting the Gospel and Western culture along with the education, the medicine, and social services that were being offered. Another fundamental criticism is that so much mission activity in medicine, education, and social or relief work has exploited people in positions of weakness. The practical and material help that has been offered has produced “rice Christians,” with people being pressured to accept the faith that comes with the practical benefits.

Both these criticisms acquired new poignancy in this part of the world with the murder of three Southern Baptist medical workers from the United States at a mission hospital in Yemen. And on November 21, 2002, an American nurse was shot dead in a clinic attached to a Protestant church in Sidon, south of Beirut. It looks as if some Islamists are angry about Christian missionaries working among Muslims and may have deliberately targeted Americans as a way of expressing their anger over the policies of the present American government. The fact that the victims have been dedicated to healing the sick, that several of them were women, and that the vast majority of American missionaries in this part of the world are extremely critical of their government’s policies in the Middle East (especially over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and now the war in Iraq) is probably dismissed by the Islamists as being irrelevant.

A different kind of response to the Islamic critique is respectfully to ask Muslims if they are prepared to own up to their own imperialisms in the past (e.g., in their first three centuries across the Middle East and North Africa and in the Safavid, Mogul, and Ottoman Empires). Are they willing to examine more critically the processes by which populations in the Middle East (which were largely Christian) became majority Muslim communities over a period of around four hundred years? If Syrian, Palestinian, or Egyptian Christians of the seventh to tenth centuries could speak, would they not use tones that are very similar to those of Muslims who have been at the receiving end of Western imperialism and Christian mission? Are Muslims willing to be as critical of their own Islamic mission as they (and Christians) have been of Christian mission?

We need to hear the message of converts and inquirers. If we need to listen to what Muslims have been saying about Christian mission, we need also to be listening to the message of Christians from Muslim backgrounds. Their testimonies generally speak about a personal encounter with Christ that has changed their thinking and transformed their lives. Sometimes (but certainly not always) they have met Christians who have shown sacrificial love in action. Very often the reading of some part of the Bible (and especially the Gospels) has been highly significant. And in many cases they believe that they have experienced the power of Christ through a vision, a dream, or some kind of healing. In almost every case there has been a price to pay in terms of rejection and sometimes even death. But they are willing to accept all this because of the joy they have found in Christ. Some of their stories read like the parable of the treasure hidden in a field: “someone found and hid [it]; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matt. 13:44). Others sound like the parable of “a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matt. 13:45).

A number of missions focus their efforts on proclaimation to Muslims through literature, radio, or satellite television. When Muslim listeners and viewers respond, some are angry, threatening, or argumentative, while others are deeply curious about the Christian faith and life. One example of this last type is a Tunisian man who responded by letter to a Christian radio program as follows: “I came across your broadcast that enlightens the Arabic mind and increases his spiritual education. One day I was very depressed and alone, so I turned on the radio, which is my only companion. While I was listening to different world stations I found your station. It is really a great treasure. I was fascinated by it, and since that day I became an addict to it. It is like my vitamin C that activates my mind. It is incredible. I would like you to send me some scientific, health, and spiritual books. Also I would like you to send me some cassettes and videos and the teaching of the Gospel, because I want to deepen my knowledge.” If this is how converts speak about their pilgrimage in faith and how inquirers express their initial openness, both groups would be among the first to encourage Christians to persevere in their efforts to communicate their message.

Genuine dialogue does not rule out evangelism. One of the most common arguments put forward by those who argue for dialogue over against evangelism is that it is impossible to engage in genuine dialogue if you enter the discussion in order to convince the other person of what you believe. If this comment simply means that dialogue involves genuine openness, listening, and a willingness to change one’s mind where necessary, most if not all would accept this conclusion without question. Often, however, the idea is pressed further to suggest that only those who are completely open-minded can engage in dialogue, and that those who are convinced about what they believe can never engage in real dialogue. My own experience with Muslims (both in Europe and the Middle East) suggests precisely the opposite. Many of the Muslims I know say that they are tired of talking to Christians who do not know what they believe and would far rather talk to convinced Christians who will argue passionately for their convictions.

Some days after the murder of the American missionary in Sidon, I received a phone call from a Shiite Muslim sheikh whom I had come to know recently, who expressed his condolences over the murder and said, “This was not an Islamic action but a terrorist action.” Then later, at a seminar in July 2002 for graduates from the Near East School of Theology, this same sheikh was asked what he thought about Iblishir (evangelism), a word that has quite a strong, negative connotation in Arabic. His reply was very significant: “I have no problems at all with Christians sharing their faith with me and trying to convince me about what they believe. I too want to convince them about my Islamic
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beliefs. But what happens when they find that I don’t want to change my faith? Is that the end of the relationship when they find that I’m not willing to convert? Or will they go on talking to me and remain friends? If there’s a genuine personal relationship between us, I have no problems at all with evangelism.”

Alongside a “mission to Muslims” we can think of a “mission to Islam.” This vision has been part of Kenneth Cragg’s thinking for many years. He would say that preoccupation with making individual converts can lead to discouragement and despair when there is little or no tangible fruit in one’s ministry. He suggests, therefore, that while not giving up the hope that individuals will become disciples of Christ, Christians can and should hold onto the hope that perhaps Islam itself can change. Sufism, for example, has been deeply influenced by Christian ideas and practices at various stages in its development, and many Sufi ideas have come into mainstream Islam. This example shows that Islam has never been either static or monolithic, has changed in the past, and is still changing in the present.

Although Muslims that we relate to at the present time may not seem open to consider the Christian message, perhaps because of what they now see and hear, their children and grandchildren may be more open to ask questions and open their minds. Could we not believe that Muslim ideas about God and our relationship with him might change over the years and come a little closer to those revealed in the Gospels? Such reappraisals are valuable and necessary. What would happen if, instead of constantly thinking in terms of “us” and “them,” Muslims and Christians in a given place were to work together in facing the pressing issues in their society? The challenge would then be to work for the well-being of the whole community and for genuine nation-building, not simply for the interests of one’s own family and faith community. We cannot go on forever putting the blame for our problems on other parties; we need to shoulder our responsibility now for things that we really can do—where possible, together.

In the Lebanese context, for example, this engagement would mean addressing the depressing economic situation of the country, the corruption that exists at many levels of society, the inequalities between rich and poor, the destruction of the environment, and the legacies of a long civil war. Then of course the Palestinian problem hangs over everything like a menacing cloud, and we wonder if there can be real progress on any front as long as the conflict continues, affecting everything that happens in the region. When we understand the reasons for America’s support of Israel and discover the extent of the support that its present government receives from the so-called Christian Right in the United States, we begin to recognize the enormous responsibility of Christians (and especially Protestant evangelical Christians) in one of the major grievances of the Muslim world against the West.4

Serious dialogue. Official dialogue conferences with communiqués issued in front of television cameras no doubt have their place. But what is probably more important here is the kind of conversation that takes place between Christians and Muslims living in the same building, studying together at school or university, serving together in the army, or working in the same office. Although these situations are ideal for what is called the dialogue of life, conversation with my students suggests that the kind of dialogue that takes place in these settings often does not go very deep because neither side is very interested in a real meeting of hearts and minds.

Witness to Jesus. Part of my answer to the challenge about the devotion of committed Muslims is that at the end of the day the most significant thing that Christians have to offer—if not the only thing—is their testimony to Jesus. We feel like Peter and John, who, when forbidden to speak or teach in the name of Jesus, replied: “We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). We are not offering a superior culture, a richer civilization, or a more powerful ethic. All we have to offer is the conviction—based on our experience and our understanding of revelation—that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). It is Jesus of Nazareth who gives us the clearest picture of what God is like and communicates the love and mercy of God to our troubled conscience.

This basic urge to bear witness to Christ is summed up beautifully by Kenneth Cragg in a memorable passage from his Call of the Minaret, first published in 1956 and revised and reprinted many times since then, most recently in 2000:

This is the inward tragedy, from the Christian angle, of the rise of Islam, the genesis and dissemination of a new belief which claimed to displace what it had never effectively known. The state of being a stranger to the Christian’s Christ has been intensified by further failures of love and loyalty on the part of institutional Christianity in the long and often bitter external relations of the two faiths through the centuries.

It is for these reasons that the call of the minaret must always seem to the Christian a call to retrieval. He yearns to undo the alienation and to make amends for the past by as full a restitution

Could we not believe that Muslim ideas about God might come closer to those revealed in the Gospels?

Defining Immediate Christian Priorities

I trust that consideration of these various “deeper issues” might lead to a more rigorous evaluation of our present methods and motives in mission work among Muslims. Christians, for example, might be more hesitant to sum up everything concerning Christian-Muslim relations under the slogans of “Muslim evangelism” or “dialogue.” Such reappraisals are valuable and necessary. At this point, however, I wish to turn to several immediate, more limited priorities that could make a difference “on the ground.”

Relationships with people. While in certain situations Christians and Muslims are living together and mixing freely, I suspect that in many more situations they do their best to avoid meeting face to face with each other. For reasons that are very understandable, they may tolerate each other, but they do not really want to get too close to each other. Where this is the case Christians and Muslims in positions of leadership and authority need to do all in their power to enable people of all kinds (and not just scholars) in both communities to meet each other.

Engagement with immediate issues in the context. What would happen if, instead of constantly thinking in terms of “us” and
as he can achieve of the Christ to Whom Islam is a stranger. The
objective is not, as the Crusaders believed, the repossession of
what Christendom has lost, but the restoration to Muslims of the
Christ Whom they have missed.5

Acceptance of suffering. When Christians think about suffering in
the context of Christian-Muslim relations, they are usually think-
ing about the suffering involved in situations where Christians
live as minorities in predominantly Islamic societies, the suffer-
ing involved in any Muslim opting to become a disciple of Christ,
or the suffering experienced by the messengers. Western in-
volvement in the Muslim world over the last two hundred years
has led to distinct improvements in the status of Christians in
Islamic societies, and no country practices the dhimma system
any longer. A number of moderate Muslims speak of banishing
the concept to the cupboard of history, although it will take
many years for this thinking to percolate down to Muslims on the
street. If Christian minorities want to stay rooted where they are
and not emigrate to the West, they therefore need to develop
positive attitudes that will enable them to cope with the difficul-
ties of their minority status. Somehow they have to work out
whether “turning the other cheek” inevitably means passive
submission or whether it can suggest attitudes and responses
that show both firmness and respect and spring not from weak-
ness but from inner strength.7

The problem of suffering associated with conversion out of
Islam has stimulated a widespread debate about contextualization
or inculturation, which has led in recent years to creative think-
ing about different possible options for Muslims who want to
follow Christ and remain in their situation.8 In the end, however,
Christians will never be able to escape the simple fact that some
suffering is inevitable for followers of a crucified Savior. After
fatal attacks by Islamists on Christian workers in Pakistan,
Lebanon, and Yemen, Christians are inevitably bracing them-
theselves for similar attacks in the future. But they do so now with
a keen awareness of the ambiguities of the situation: in one sense
some will certainly be martyrs; but from another point of view
they will simply be victims of their own governments’ policies.

If the Middle Eastern context has brought some of these issues
about Christian mission to Muslims to the surface, I trust it has
also suggested what it may mean for all Christians to reflect on
the meaning of Christian mission in different contexts at the
present time. Despite the many objections to such mission, we go
forward, not forgetting the one who said, “As the Father has sent
me, so I send you” (John 20:21). No, it is not time to give up!

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article appeared in Ung Teologi, no.1 (2003):
47–57. Used by permission.
(address given at Al-Azhar University, Cairo, October 4, 1996).
3. Christian Mission and Islamic Da’wah, Proceedings of the Chambesy
Dialogue Consultation (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1982).
4. See further Colin Chapman, Whose Promised Land? (Oxford: Lion
Publishing, 2002), chap. 6.3, “Christian Zionism and Dispensa-
tionalism.”
5. Kenneth Cragg, The Call of the Minaret, 2d ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis
6. See, for example, Mohamed Talbi, “Islamo-Christian Encounter
Today: Some Principles,” in “Christian-Muslim Encounter in the
Middle East,” special issue, MECC Perspectives, no. 4/5 (July/August
1985), pp. 7–11; Tarek Mitri, ed., Religion, Law, and Society: A Christian-
Muslim Discussion (Geneva: WCC, 1995); and Fahmy Howaridy,
Muwatinun la Dhimmiyun (Fellow-citizens, not Dhimmi) (Cairo: Dar
al-Shorouq, 1980).
7. See, for example, “Suffering and Power in Christian-Muslim
Relations,” Transformation 17, no. 1 (January–March 2000).
8. Phil Parshall, New Paths in Muslim Evangelism: Evangelical Approaches
to Contextualization (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).