In a world of violence the cross, that eminently counter-cultural symbol that lies at the heart of the Christian faith, is a scandal.” (Volf 1996:26)

It is an honor to offer the following reflections to Jerald Whitehouse, close friend, mentor, and in celebration of a life well lived. Over the years his passion for God’s Word, his unrelenting vision for Muslim peoples, and his multi-layered understanding of mission has impacted the landscape of Adventist Mission in two main ways. On the one hand, he has engaged Muslims and Adventists with new approaches (either through interfaith dialogue or in ministry), and on the other he has courageously brought to the forefront pressing issues for cross-cultural mission which he has always carefully addressed from the Adventist understanding of the Great Controversy and the Adventist self-understanding of its identity and mission as God’s end-time movement and people.

His vast contribution¹ will become even more apparent and relevant as

¹Jerald Whitehouse is a prolific writer. Over the fifteen years that he has served as the Director for the
the years unfold and as God continues to call the Adventist Church to step beyond the safety and comfort of ministry to Christian peoples and into the world of non-Christian faiths.

The theme of the cosmic conflict as the end nears and the central issues that God’s people in these last days must uphold before the world has guided much of Jerald Whitehouse’s vision and action. It is within this meta-narrative that I reflect on the crucified Messiah in a world of violence as I seek to explore how the cross of Jesus can be retrieved as a healing force for Christian and Muslim communities in the Middle East.

This paper asks two simple questions: What if the cross of Jesus were to be unpacked before Muslims and Christians as the divine model by which God shows solidarity with a broken world? And, if the cross were to epitomize God’s Roadmap for Peace, what kind of model of justice and peace building would it offer?

In other words, do Christians and Muslims share in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection not just as individuals, but as communities? If so, in which way is the crucified Jesus a key to understanding what God is about in the real world of politics, nation states, tribes, and global markets?

My quest is not theological per se but rather intensely personal. I, a resident of a region (Middle East) torn by escalating expressions of communal violence am left to wrestle intellectually with reconciling faith and mission with the current social conflicts that are tearing apart the lives of people I count as my own. But at a deeper level, as I strive to follow Jesus, I recognize his call for engagement with the world around me as God’s way to become a peace-maker not simply a peace lover.

Sadly, prominent spiritual leaders in the region (both Christian and Muslim alike) seemed to have lost their spiritual compass as they treat their own doctrinal conclusions as substitutes for their sacred texts and seem unable to offer a spiritual alternative voice to counteract the highly

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Global Center for Adventist Muslims Relations, he has articulated in numerous articles his missiological understanding in areas such as: What does it mean to be an Adventist in non-Christian contexts? How can Adventists retrieve their biblical identity? How to discern what God is doing in mission? What are the guiding principles for biblical mission? What are the guidelines for interfaith dialogue? What constitutes fruitful practices in mission among Muslims? Where is common ground between Adventists and Muslims? He has also written extensively on biblical and qur’anic studies. These topics, articles, and materials can be accessed through the Global Center for Adventist Muslim Relations of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

2Today the overwhelming majority of conflicts are clustered in the 10/40 Window, which is predominately Muslim territory. For an interactive map of the world’s major ongoing and recently terminated conflicts, see http://www.opendemocracy.net/info/our-guide-to-conflicts (accessed September 2, 2010).
The Divine Road Map

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The people who should have the solution have become the people creating the problem. Religion has become ideology and the so-called clash of civilization is more accurately a clash of fundamentalism.

Both Christian and Muslim fundamentalists seem to have tried to grab the moral and theological high ground and by creating an end-time scenario that pits “the people of God” as per their intolerant definition against “the enemies of God” in a desperate battle. More space needs to be carved out for less strident voices calling for peace and reconciliation.

I am aware that the term road map is a heavily loaded one; it became popularized in 2003 in reference to the peace plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It aimed at bringing forward a viable three-phase plan for the creation of a Palestinian state that was to exist side by side with the State of Israel by 2005. It failed. In this paper, divine road map is not used as a religious equivalent to this political plan, but in broader terms seeks to describe God’s model for peace building and for reconciliation as revealed in the way he treated his enemies and sought to bring restorative justice to a broken world.

But it could be argued that if the world is doomed to destruction, is not peace building a distraction to soul saving? I do not think so, for in the words of N. T. Wright, Christianity “became what the enlightenment wanted it to be—a private system of piety which doesn’t impinge on the public world” (1997:154). David Moberg in the The Great Reversal (1972) makes a convincing case for the need to recover world missions from the straitjacket of early twentieth century Protestant theology which artificially pitted social concerns against personal evangelism. After all, in the kingdom that Jesus inaugurated on earth, it was he who pronounced a blessing on those who make peace (Matt 5:9) and it was God who sent angels to announce “Peace on Earth” (Luke 2:14). So, I believe that spiritual leaders desperately need to recover the appropriate role of biblical faith for transforming communities.

\[1\] According to Prince Ghazy from the Common Word Interfaith Initiative, the hot buttons in the region are: (1) Jerusalem and the Palestinian question, (2) discontentment with U.S. foreign policy (especially the war in Iraq), (3) terrorism, (4) fundamentalism and fundamentalist propaganda (on both sides), (5) missionary activity (also on both sides), and (6) deeply rooted, historical, cultural, and racial misunderstanding, suspicion, and even loathing. Thus now, according to the results of the largest international religious survey in history (as outlined in a recently-published seminal book by Professor John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed), 60 percent of Christians harbor prejudice against Muslims and 30 percent of Muslims reciprocate (Volf, Gazhi, and Yarrington 2010:7).

\[2\] For a detailed analysis of the “Great Reversal” see Winter 2009:5-11.

\[3\] I am contrasting “appropriate role” with other more recent expressions of the so-called “social gospel” that have reduced the message of Jesus to social ethics. I grew up in South America at the time when...
I owe this quest to my Muslim and Christian Arab friends who deeply love their communities and who cry out during troubled nights to the Almighty: “Why have you forsaken us?” (Matt 27:46).

Christians in the region understand and experience the cross in shared but also in unique ways, partly due to the diversity of the many faith communities that make up the Eastern churches in the region. Historically, irreconcilable Christological views led to the schism between the Eastern and Western Church, and over the centuries the churches of the East developed a strong mystical tradition unlike the Church of the West which invested its energies in establishing and systematizing its theological orthodoxy in philosophical language and Western logic. This mystical tradition makes it plausible to seek to experience the force of the cross beyond its theological articulations and underpinnings.

It is beyond the scope of this reflective paper to address any specific view of the cross as understood by Eastern Christians in the Middle East, but I will attempt to focus on how to convey the power, beauty, and meaning of the cross among Muslims in the Middle East for peace building. My hope is that this message will resonate deeply with other Christians in the region who are also seeking peace. For this purpose, I will first identify some of the principal Muslim objections to the message of the cross and ask if the Qur'an (when interpreted without its later accretions) makes allowance for an alternative reading of the crucifixion that is in harmony with the biblical account.

**Islamic Objections to the Cross**

The cross of Jesus for Muslims is dishonorable, shameful, and a scandal because it mars God’s reputation, his mercy, his justice, and his authority in the world. After all, what is just in requiring the paying of a price by a non-guilty party? What does it mean that there is an eternal order in which life is gained in exchange for a life lost? An anonymous young Muslim weblogger described his views in rather simple terms: “According to Christian

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Liberation Theology was at its height, so I am aware that a social focus that does not start with a biblical worldview and an anthropological understanding can end up attacking the wrong evils.

There are several expressions of local Christianity among the ancient Eastern Churches of the Middle East: Assyrian Chaldeans (also known historically as Nestorians), Coptics in Egypt, Catholic Maronites in Lebanon, Orthodox Greeks in Lebanon, Syrian Orthodox, just to mention a few. After the nineteenth century, Protestantism took root in the region with the arrival of American and European missionary Protestant churches.
belief, the original sin of Adam and Eve of eating from the forbidden tree was so great that God could not forgive it by simply willing it, rather it was necessary to erase it with the blood of a sinless, innocent Jesus” (The Islamic and Christian Views of Jesus). Muslims believe that a God who needs human blood to be appeased so that his forgiveness can be realized, offends the reputation and authority of God. Even more, they believe that it reflects the tribal and pagan gods of the times of jahilyyah (ignorance) in Mecca that were challenged by the arrival of Islam in the seventh century.

Major Yeats-Brown in his The Lives of a Bengal Lancer, criticizes the Christian doctrine of the atonement in just a single sentence: “No heathen tribe has conceived so grotesque an idea, involving as it does the assumption, that man was born with a hereditary stain upon him: and that this stain (for which he was not personally responsible) was to be atoned for: and that the creator of all things had to sacrifice his only begotten son to neutralize this mysterious curse” (1939).

Bill Musk explains how “by such readings of atonement, the Cross has come to be primarily seen through the lens of sacred violence: the devil is paid off, or the Father’s wrath is satisfied. The creditor in this transaction could be either the devil or God the Father” (2008:124).

Joel Green and Mark Baker go further: “Many Christians join Muslims in questioning this doctrine: Are the sins committed by people who try very hard to live according to God’s standards deserving of a literal death debt they cannot repay?” (2000:26).

Over the centuries, the penal substitution theory of the atonement has obscured the final purpose and meaning of Jesus’ death and the character of God when presented without the wider biblical narrative of the Great Controversy and detached from a picture of a loving God who will go to any extent to reconcile by moral means his enemies to himself.

The Adventist worldview theme that has become known as the Great Controversy is crucial for redeeming the story and reality of the cross, not only for Muslims but also for other Christians because it provides the overarching structure (skeleton) for understanding and experiencing the biblical God in a way that preserves his honor and is truthful to his character.

The theme emphasizes that the death of Jesus does not enable God to

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7The only time I have come across the notion of debt in any significant Qur’anic concept is in the term Din (دين), often translated as religion (Al Imran 3:19), and at times as obedience (An Nisa 4:125). This term is associated with the noun لَزَائِمَةَ which means debt. http://dictionary.sensagent.com/لازيمة/ar-en/ (accessed September 12, 2010). See also http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/DefinitionFitrah.htm (accessed September 18, 2010).
forgive. God is not bound by his holiness or the demands of abstract justice to cause an innocent person to die in order to grant forgiveness. Mathias Zahniser (2008a) rightly explains that the death Jesus takes upon himself results from the suffering inflicted by the sins of others and from his own faithfulness to God’s way of being fully human.

The Great Controversy clarifies another serious Islamic obstacle to the cross, for they believe that by accepting the death of Jesus on the cross one must also accept that the Jews outmaneuvered God and managed to defeat him through the death of his prophet. After all, how can God’s reputation be enhanced when the one he sent ended up dying as a common criminal, naked, abandoned by his own followers, and rejected? Joel Green and Mark Baker (2000: chapters 2, 3) seem to suggest a similar concern: “Does exclusive emphasis on Anselm’s model not obscure the richness of NT teaching on the meaning of Jesus’ death?"

Muslims traditionally have discerned intimations of God’s approval in the miraculous victories of Muhammad when outnumbered by the pagan Meccans (Al Anfaal 8:26) and in the impressive victories of the Islamic empire; these became clear signs of being on the side of God. Political or historical victories over one’s enemies were vested with sacramental value, and one’s defeat came to signal God’s disapproval. Therefore, the seemingly gross defeat of Jesus at the cross offends Muslim sensitivities. What is glorious about a shameful death? Is the God of Jesus a weak God?

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8 Zahniser (2006) explains that the New Testament discourse on the atonement clusters around at least five “constellations of images”: (1) “justification,” drawn from Mediterranean legal language (e.g., Rom 3:23); (2) “redemption,” drawn from the marketplace (e.g., Rom 3:24); (3) “reconciliation,” drawn from personal relationships in the Greco-Roman world (e.g., 2 Cor 5:18); (4) “sacrifice,” drawn from worship familiar to both Jews and non-Jews (e.g., Heb 7:27); and (5) “victory,” drawn from the battlefield (Col 2:15) (cf. Green and Baker 2000:23, and chapter 4 where the death of Jesus is also treated as “revelation” [e.g., John 17:1]). None of these requires or enables God to forgive sins and none provides the only adequate interpretation of the death of Jesus.

9 There is in Islamic history a well-known event by which defeat was later interpreted as victory. On the 19th of March of 625 Muslims met the Meccans for the second time in what is known today as the Battle of Uhud. After the impressive first victory at Badr, the Meccans, who were seeking revenge, inflicted a serious blow on the emerging Muslim community. Muslims were confused, and sought to understand why God had not granted them a clear victory. Had He abandoned the Muslim cause and their Prophet? Later this battle was interpreted in the Qur’an as a victory in disguise (see Al Imran 3:121-180). “Your misfortune on the day the two hosts met was by God’s permission, so that He might distinguish the believers from the hypocrites. It was said to them, ‘Come, fight for God, or defend yourselves.’ They said, ‘if we knew fighting (with a hope of success, or, would actually take place), we would have followed you.’ They are thence closer to unbelief than to belief. They speak out with their mouths what is not in their hearts, but God knows what they conceal. Those who remained back and said about their brethren, ‘If they had obeyed us, they would not have been killed.’ Say, ‘Then prevent death from yourselves, if you should be truthful’ (Al Imran 3:166-168). Muslims came to believe it was a victory, not in physical terms, but spiritually, and an occasion by which “Allah might test what is in your breasts and purge what is in your hearts.
The Muslim line of reasoning is that God is powerful enough to decree forgiveness and it happens. Nothing can condition his will and authority; therefore he has no need of a sacrifice as a prerequisite for releasing his mercy. All he needs is to will something and it happens. “Be, and it is” (ِنُكَفِّهِ نُوكَفِّهِ kun fa-yakūnu).

But perhaps more subtle is the fact that in the Muslim mind the cross answers a non-existing question; it cures a non-existing illness; and in other words it is theologically unnecessary. In Islam, it is believed that all people have come into the world with an innate pure nature fitrah (تَرَفَفُ) by which a people are naturally drawn to God in submission when they receive guidance. Fitrah (ترَفَفُ) does not merely connote a passive receptivity to good and right action, but an active inclination and a natural innate predisposition to know God, to submit to him, and to do right.

People are capable of achieving an-nafs al-mutma’innah, (self-made tranquility), a form of inner peace since their redemptive potential is centered in themselves. Salvation in Islam depends on faith (iman), good conduct (ihsān), and embracing Islam.

The concept of sin in Islam is one that makes biblical salvation unnecessary. And yet, experience has taught me that even though the orthodox understanding of the nature of humanity is one of goodness, at a visceral level every ordinary Muslim knows that there is something seriously wrong at the heart level, something that constantly misses the mark, which is a biblical definition of sin. Muslims experience defilement that comes from within no matter how much they might seek to achieve purity (tahara), and in the end they will have to cleanse themselves ritually over and over. Appealing to that which they already know at a phenomenological level is far more relevant than resorting to apologetics.

For Allah knoweth well the secrets of your hearts” (Al Imran 3:154).

10“Yet the Initiator of the heavens and the earth: to have anything done, He simply says to it, 'Be,' and it is” (Al Baqara 2:117). "She said, 'My Lord, how can I have a son, when no man has touched me?' He said, 'God thus creates whatever He wills. To have anything done, He simply says to it, 'Be,' and it is'” (Al Imran 3:47). "He is the One who created the heavens and the earth, truthfully. Whenever He says, 'Be,' it is” (Al Anaam 6:73). "To have anything done, we simply say to it, 'Be,' and it is” (An Nahl 16:40). “It does not befit God that He begots a son, be He glorified. To have anything done, He simply says to it, 'Be,' and it is” (Al Maryam 19:35). "All He needs to do to carry out any command is say to it, 'Be,' and it is” (Al Fatir 36:82). "He is the only One who controls life and death. To have anything done, He simply says to it, 'Be,' and it is” (Al Mu'min 40:68).

11“Fitrah pertains to the deep, common spiritual essence of man. It is humankind’s natural and universal innate predisposition for goodness and submission to One God.” http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/DefinitionFitrah.htm (accessed September 18, 2010).

12For an insightful article on how to present the gospel from the shame-honor perspective, see Bruce Thomas’ article “The Gospel for Shame Cultures,” which is online at http://www.emisdirect.com/emq/
The Qur’an presents a composite picture of human sinfulness that echoes the biblical one: “man’s very soul incites him to evil” (Yusuf 12:53); “man is truly unjust and ungrateful” (Ibrahim 14:34); “If God took people to task for the evil they do, He would not leave one living creature on earth” (Al Nahl 16:61); “man is more contentious than any other creature” (Al Kahf 18:54); “If it were not for God’s bounty and mercy towards you, not one of you would ever have obtained purity” (An Nur 24:21); and “man exceeds all bounds” (Al Alaq 96:6).

The Qur’an is unambiguous when it says, “That no bearer of burden shall bear the burden of another, And that man will have nothing but what he strives for; And that the result of his striving shall soon be known; Then will he be rewarded for it with the fullest reward; And that with thy Lord is the final judgment” (Al Najm 53:38-42, emphasis mine).

Therefore, the idea that one person could die to remove someone else’s sin (substitution) or redemptive suffering is usually not part of the Islamic conceptual web, although for Shia Muslims the death of Imam Hussein had a redemptive purpose. Also, at a social level, Muslim communities in the Middle East seem to have no problem with the notion of the collectivization of shame or that the supererogatory deeds (nawafil) of the prophets could be imputed to Muslims on the Day of Judgment. If someone commits a sinful act, not only is he dishonored but his family, and at times his community, is also dishonored. One’s fault is not inconsequential to those related to him, just like one’s merits could bring honor to the whole community. In Islamic history there are also examples of people offering their lives to save others.

Finally, a major obstacle to the cross can be found at a very deep emotional level because of the memories of the Crusades. Muslim revulsion of the Crusades is extended to what became its more visible symbol: the cross (salīb, al-hurūb al-salībiyya), and wars under the banner of the cross. The cross of the Crusaders is a formidable barrier for community and peace-building

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When reading the Qur’an through the eyes of the Bible, there is more common ground than what might be apparent in a casual reading. In As Safat 37:101-109 Abraham’s son was ransomed by a gift of a ram provided by God himself. This gift is defined as “great or momentous,” a term that functions as a name and qualifier prominently attached to God. So here is an important redemptive window to address the issue of substitution. Another less known redemptive window is the aqiqa ceremony which is practiced in some Muslim contexts on the seventh day in the life of a male child. The child is said to be redeemed by his aqiqa (Zwemer 1920:87). The Qur’an also says, “In the Day of Judgment, Let them [the unbelievers] bear, on the Day of Judgment, their own burdens in full, and also (something) of the burdens of those without knowledge, whom they misled. Alas, how grievous the burdens they will bear!” (An-Nahl 16:25, emphasis mine).
since it became intrinsically linked to Christian violence and colonization.

In summary, following Larson’s assessment (2009:12) Muslims believe that “theologically it [the cross] need not happen; morally it should not happen; historically it did not happen.”

For those vested in offering a theologically sound understanding of the cross among Muslims, a seemingly good starting point is to establish from Islamic sources the fact that Jesus indeed died. The next step would be to explore its meaning. Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection had been preordained before his birth in accordance to a divine plan (see Maryam 19:15, 33, and 21). The events of his life follow a natural sequence: “Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” (Luke 24:26).

In order to establish that Jesus indeed died, it is not enough to explain the impact and meaning of the historical event. Todd Lawson explains that Muslims who deny the crucifixion often reveal that the issue for them is not really the historicity of the death of Jesus but the “Christian theories of salvation” attached to it (2009:144). The theology of atonement that was developed in the West and was based largely on the penal substitution theory often fails to convey clearly the meaning of the cross for Muslims, since shame and fear, not guilt, are what needs to be addressed.

The Cross in the Qur’an: One Ayat, Many Interpretations

Judging by the scarcity of the treatment given to the topic of the crucifixion in the Qur’an, it becomes evident that the cross is marginal for Islam. Not only does the Qur’an barely address this issue, but it offers no affirmation or counterargument to the meaning that Christians have attached to the cross. This is especially interesting since the Qur’an challenges other core points of doctrine that heretical Christian groups held in Arabia.14 Could it be that Mohammad was not even aware of the centrality and meaning of the cross for Christians?

The Qur’an uses the word death connected to Jesus four times. Three of them seem to indicate a chronological sequence in which Jesus was born, died, and resurrected.15

14This is in contrast with the strong denial of Jesus as Son of God which is understood in physical terms, or Jesus’ divinity, or the heretical version of the trinity (Mary, God, and Jesus as referred to in Al Maida 5:77, 72-73 which was widespread in Arabia at the time of Muhammad.

15Notice these three verses: “Behold! Allah said: ‘O Jesus! I will take thee [muttawaffika] and raise thee to Myself and clear thee (of the falsehoods) of those who blaspheme; I will make who follow thee superior to those who reject faith, to the Day of Resurrection: then shall all return unto me and I will judge between you of the matters Wherein ye dispute” (Al Imran 3:55). “Never said I to them aught except what Thou
The fourth and main reference is found in *Al-Nisa* 4:157, which is the only text that addresses the issue of the crucifixion. This *ayat* was offered as an emphatic denial that the Jews had indeed crucified Jesus as they boasted and is understood in the context of downsizing or reducing their power over those appointed by God as messengers. If the Jews thought that their boisterous claims could intimidate Muhammad and deter him from pursuing his mission, they needed to know that “they (the Jews) said (in boast), ‘We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah’—but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not—nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise” (*Al Nisa* 4:157-158, Yusuf Ali).

Here the Qur’an uses a rather puzzling Arabic expression, “it seemed to them” (ۚ ۡمُهَلُ َهِّبُش shubika lahum), an expression that continues to draw new interpretations 1,400 years later. What does “it seemed to them” mean? The text is ambiguous and elusive; and as Zahniser (2008a) has carefully argued, it can be legitimately read in a way that does not flatly contradict the biblical account; especially when read together with *Al Imran* 3:55 where the verb *tawaffa* is understood to mean death in twenty-five other uses in the Qur’an (three of them referring to Muhammad).16

The Qur’an offers itself as a book for guidance to all people. For it to fulfill its purpose, it has to be able to and enabled to speak to its receptor community at every stage of history. This has been achieved through the *tafsir* or qur’anic exegesis.

The most influential orthodox Muslim commentators (al-Tabari, Fakhr al- Din al Razi, al-Qurtubi, al-Baydawi, and Sayyid Qutb) in their exegetical treatment of these texts that refer to the death of Jesus have offered a study of all the possible renderings of the verb *tawaffa* and their views regarding what happened at the cross.

Tabari (d. 923) explores four possible meanings, one of which is a real, didst command me to say [Jesus said to God]: ‘I was a witness over them whilst I dwelt amongst them; when Thou didst take me up [tawaffaytani], Thou wast the watcher over them, and Thou art a witness to all things” (*Al Maida* 5:117). [Jesus said]:“So, peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die [amutu], and the day that I shall be raised [ub ‘athu] up to life (again)” (*Maryam* 19:33).

16Anis Shorrosh says, “As an Arab who has been raised in a Muslim culture, Arabic is my native language. The critical word *mutawafika* means “cause you to die… Even until this day, fourteen hundred years after the appearance of the Qur’an, you can ask any Arab about what happened to his uncle who passed away last week and he will use the same words as a past tense, “Tawafa,” which means he died. Since that term is used of Jesus, he must have died” (Shorrosh 1988:112).
literal dying. But one of his choices is the substitution theory. Fakhr al-Din al Razi (d. 1210) in reference to Al Imran 3:55 lists eight different possible meanings to *mutawaffika* but states that in his opinion, God is the one “causing you (Jesus) to die.” Al-Qurtubi (d. 1272) prefers the substitution theory, but he does acknowledge that other theories, including physical death, have had some support among Muslims. In reference to 5:117, he comments on the word *wafat* and indicates that it literally means death. Al-Baydawi (d. between 1284 and 1316) similarly lists all the various legitimate interpretations of various passages without giving a preference. Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) is one of the fathers of fundamentalism and is probably among the best-known Sunni commentator today. In reference to the crucifixion, he comes across as agnostic. His dispute with Christians is not over the history of the event but over the theology of it.

Muslim scholar Farid Esack (2005:155), in reference to Al Nisa 4:157 wrote: “Muslims in general deny the crucifixion, although the Qur’an merely stated that: ‘they did not slay him, nor crucify him, but it only seemed to them as it had been so.’” It is clear that the Qur’an is neutral in this matter of the crucifixion even though Muslims are not.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of Muslims today hold the view that in fact Jesus did not die, that he remains alive near God in heaven from where he is expected to return and usher in the Day of Judgment. Muslims believe that at the cross, God caused a substitute to appear in the place of Jesus, and that substitute that was crucified in Jesus’ stead was no other than Judas so that justice would be served, while God took Jesus directly to heaven alive. A less known view is that Jesus was indeed nailed to the cross, but that he only lost consciousness on the cross and subsequently revived in the tomb.

The non-death of Jesus is meant to safeguard God’s honor, as already explained, and yet it creates a disturbing scenario by which God misleads Jesus’ followers and even his mother Mary to believe a deception conceived by God himself. God then becomes the “Best of Schemers,” and it is on this basis that the Muslim writer, Mahmoud Ayoub (2007), agrees that the substitution theory is not plausible.

Since the focus of this paper is not to develop a theology of the cross for Muslims, this brief overview of the cross from an Islamic view will hopefully

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17 This idea was first found among the followers of one of the earliest Christian heresies (late first century and early second century) called Docetism. This term, Docetism (from δοκέω [dókeō] in Greek means “to seem”). They believed that Jesus’ physical body was an illusion, as was his crucifixion, and that Jesus only seemed to have a physical body and to physically die, but in reality he was incorporeal, a pure spirit, and hence could not physically die. For a detailed study of this group see Ehram 2003.

18 This is the view of the Ahmadyah group, which was more recently popularized by Ahmed Deedat.
provide enough background to allow this discussion to move forward toward the issue of fostering a receptor-oriented model for peace building rooted in the cross.

In the above discussion of the understanding, obstacles, and possibilities of the cross among Muslims in the Middle East, I treated as self-evident and unproblematic what is perhaps the most complex aspect of my object of study: the problem of evil and subsequent theodicy (vindication of God’s goodness and justice in the face of evil).

A peace-building model that takes the cross as emblematic needs to be solidly rooted in a doctrine of God that is consistent with his revelation and that is able to place the origin and agency of evil in its rightful place: “an enemy has done this.”

The problem of evil does not assume a dominant position in Islamic tradition, as it often does in Western thought, since it would be unthinkable to question the justice or mercy of God, let alone his existence, in connection with this issue. In Islam, the problem of evil stems either from free will or human weakness, so evil results from forgetting the Creator. Furthermore, human beings have no right to accuse God directly for the evils of this world\(^\text{19}\) or the right to question God’s wisdom in allowing evil to achieve his purposes.

Islamic theodicy centers on presenting a consistent conception of the divine qualities: divine mercy, justice, power, and will. Said Nursi’s writing on this topic emphasizes the fact that only a correct understanding of being and how it is related to the Divine attributes of perfection can solve the question of evil (1992:64-65). This, in turn, is incumbent on solving the mystery of Divine unity (tawhid). The parting of the ways takes place when, in order to preserve the Divine unity of their strict monotheism, “the ultimate source of evil is God himself. However, what causes the creation of evil is man and jinn’s incaptibilities and actions such as destruction, the failure to perform duties, which are non-existent" (Covan 2010:116).\(^\text{20}\) Some Muslim thinkers, in trying to temper this strident position, have suggested that evil originates from non-existence, from the absence of goodness.

Only a biblical understanding of the Great Controversy has the power to rescue God from the dual dilemmas of preserving God’s unity and goodness

\(^{19}\)There is no one position on this matter, but this is the most accepted one. For more details refer to Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s works especially “Risale-i Nur.” Nursi explored the issue of theodicy and justice in modern thought in relation to the development of the state and society, and the crisis of Islam in the modern secular nation-state.

\(^{20}\)“Hallowed be he in whose hand all dominion rests, since he has power over all things”(see Al Mulk 67:1; At Taghabun 64:1; Al Talaq 65:12; At Tahrim 66:8).
while explaining the origins of evil as a mystery which allows for “saving his reputation”\(^\text{21}\) and from the Greek inspired Christian fallacy of matter/soul dualism in which the creation of matter is defective and inherently evil while the spirit (the platonic world of ideas or forms) is good. Creation and Creator in the Bible are good and with each Sabbath remembrance, God’s people participate in its celebration.

Why is this important? Because underlying the obstacles that I have already described in the previous section, there is a picture of God, of his character, and on how he governs the universe that needs to be broadened in order to enthroned God in human affairs again, for after all “He is God in heaven and God on earth” (Az Zuhruf 43:84).

The cross was not meant to transform the heart of God so that he could accept sinners, but rather it is the sinful heart that needs to be transformed as it contemplates the revelation of divine love at the cross.\(^\text{22}\) “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Cor 5:19). God does not need to be reconciled to us; we need to be reconciled to him.

**Reframing the Discussion: The Great Controversy and the Cross**

In this section I would like to shift the focus and put at the center of the discussion the “Great Controversy” as that organizing principle from which the cross can take its rightful place.\(^\text{23}\) I will concentrate on the dynamics of relationships which God the Father and the Son established between the godhead and their enemies. Then, I will suggest possible ways by which these findings could be materialized for faith-based peace building.

It is helpful for this discussion to mention that the Qur’an offers a cumulative and positive picture of the Great Controversy and what is even more important, it offers an accurate description of the true nature of pride and the character of Iblis or Shaytan (Satan). This is a particularly important

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\(^{21}\) I have taken this expression from Sigve Tonsted’s doctoral thesis.

\(^{22}\) The Islamic doctrine of God is neither static nor monolithic, it varies “between the original doctrine of the Qur’an and its early developments and influences from the philosophers, and the last changes Islam underwent under Sufism during the days of Al Ghazali (d. 1111)” (Rahbar 1960: 222).

\(^{23}\) I find it interesting that modern theologians (Wright, Sanders, and others) from the so called “New Perspective” seemed to be more keenly aware that there is an underlying narrative in the Bible, a horizon of meaning that cannot be ignored. This includes the story of God and Israel, God and Abraham, God and the covenant people, and the way in which that narrative came to its culmination when the time had fully come in Jesus. How all this works itself out is still controversial and a point of debate among them.
area of common ground between Adventists and Muslims. Between the human predicament and the final ransoming, there is a divine drama that unfolds in history. This drama starts with a war in heaven of cosmic proportions by which Lucifer questions God’s moral standing as supreme ruler and his wisdom in the way he rules the universe. Lucifer also brings false charges against the law which sustains the government of God. He is intent on changing the nature of the trusting relationship that exists between God and his “community.” Here is encountered the first case of character assassination for “political reasons.” How will God deal with the insurrection “party of Satan”?24 Could the social fabric of the heavenly community ever be restored?

A key concept needed to understand God’s way of dealing with his enemies is to study the evidence. “You shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?” (Matt 7:16). There are hints in the Old Testament that sin is still allowed time to display itself, so that when God judges he will be seen as just (Gen 15:16 and Dan 8:23). Ellen White explains:

God could have destroyed Satan and his sympathizers as easily as one can cast a pebble to the earth; but He did not do this. Rebellion was not to be overcome by force. Compelling power is found only under Satan’s government. The Lord’s principles are not of this order. His authority rests upon goodness, mercy, and love; and the presentation of these principles is the means to be used. God’s government is moral, and truth and love are to be the prevailing power. It was God’s purpose to place things on an eternal basis of security, and in the councils of heaven it was decided that time must be given for Satan to develop the principles which were the foundation of his system of government. He had claimed that these were superior to God’s principles. Time was given for the working of Satan’s principles, that they might be seen by the heavenly universe. (White 1898:759)

Peace building was to be secured on the basis of truth and allegiance without coercion. God granted time to Satan and his followers to display the evidence of Satan’s claims so that human beings could make appropriate choices.

(Satan) said: “O my Lord! give me then respite till the Day the (dead) are raised.” (Allah) said: “Respite is granted thee ‘Till the Day of the Time

24“Satan has gained mastery over them and made them forget the remembrance of Allah. Such people are the party of Satan. No indeed! It is the party of Satan who are the losers” (Surat al-Mujadala:19).
The Divine Road Map

Appointed.” (Satan) said: “O my Lord! because Thou hast put me in the wrong, I will make (wrong) fair-seeming to them on the earth, and I will put them all in the wrong Except Thy servants among them, sincere and purified (by Thy grace).” (Allah) said: “This (Way of My sincere servants) is indeed a Way that leads straight to Me. For over My servants no authority shalt thou have, except such as put themselves in the wrong and follow thee” (Al Hijr 15:36-42).

Let not the Unbelievers think that our respite to them is good for themselves: We grant them respite that they may grow in their iniquity: But they will have a shameful punishment. Allah will not leave the believers in the state in which ye are now, until He separates what is evil from what is good nor will He disclose to you the secrets of the Unseen.” (Al Imran 3:178-179a, emphasis mine)

At the cross “love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Ps 85:10).

**Fighting “In the Way of God”: The Moral Victory of God**

The idea of a cosmic/supernatural battle is not an exclusive biblical notion, for most world religions have their equivalents; neither is the idea that earthly conflicts are proxy wars that involve the spiritual realm. So what is specific to the biblical narrative, or in Jerald Whitehouse’s own words, what is “the value added” that could open up new possibilities for building peace? What is unique in the biblical account that other religious or philosophical systems fail to offer?

At the cross God deals with the problem of evil and with his enemies in a way that cannot be found in any other human or religious system. The cross leads to an encounter in a revelatory way that draws the human heart and invites undivided allegiance. Not only is a person’s fate overturned and the law elevated, but God’s character is vindicated. In the cosmic conflict, how the conflict is won is as important as who wins it.

God is God in his radical self-giving, descending to the most abject human condition and, in that human obedience, humiliation, suffering and death, being no less truly God than He is in his cosmic rule and glory on the heavenly throne. It is not that God is manifested in heavenly glory and hidden in the human degradation of the cross. The latter makes known who God is no less than the former does. . . . The radical contrast of humiliation and exaltation is

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25For instance, at the Battle of Uhud, according to the Qur’an, not only did the two warring parties meet (Muslims from Medican and Pagans from Mecca) but there were also supernatural forces at work: God (Al Imran 3:166), angels (Al Imran 3:124-125) and Satan (Al Imran 3:155, 175).
precisely a revelation to who God is in his radical self-giving. He rules as the one who serves. (Bauckham 1984:50)

Mark Baker (2006) is right in pointing out that the New Testament portrays Golgotha along two lines: one with God as the acting subject, the other with Jesus as the acting subject. It will not do, therefore, to characterize the atonement as God’s punishment falling on Christ (God as subject and Christ as object), or as Christ appeasing or persuading God (Christ as subject and God as object). In other words, Father and Son stand on the same side of the conflict.

At times Muslims have objected, and rightly so, that God could not be threatened by Satan. This notion of two opposing and yet comparable parties in conflict was at the center of Eastern ontological dualisms prior to Islam (i.e., Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism) but is not sustainable from a biblical perspective. Beelzebub (بابذلأ لعب) literally “Lord of the Flies”) is no match for the Almighty.

Bill Musk (2006:330) argues that the difference between the Christian and the Islamic accounts of the crucifixion does not lie in the question whether Jesus was or was not crucified but in whether God displayed his sovereignty more clearly in giving Jesus to be crucified or in raising him to heaven. In other words, which outcome gives more glory to God: a rescue from death before the mortal moment or a rescue from death after the evil and death have had their way? Which process causes Jesus Christ to be a greater sign? Which God is worthy of worship, the one who brings rebels back by the use of coercive force or the God whose power is love?

The specific way of the biblical God is neither passive nor violent, but is passionately active and moral. God’s victory is moral because it is not the one who amasses a more decisive force who turns the tide, but the slaughtered lamb in utter dejection and utter weakness that overcomes evil in a way that defies all human logic: obedience to the point of death.

Jesus surrendered to the will of the Father, how different from those who seek to manipulate God by asking him to bless their actions, to perform according to their will. Jesus, who could have called the hosts of heaven to his side, chose to lay down his life. We deduce that to follow the way of Jesus is to follow the way of obedience not the way of worldly success.

In that sense, Mahmud Ayoub (2007) sees Christ as the “perfect Muslim” in that Christ embodies the highest form of submission to the will of God (Matt 26:39). Jesus died with an open-ended question, Why have you forsaken me? But his submission prevailed and the lack of a response from God did
not alter the outcome of his decision. Jesus remained submitted.

We learn from the cross that evil should not be allowed to determine the sort of person we shall be for sin no longer has any dominion over us. To be free is to be able to choose not to follow our natural inclinations any longer but to overcome evil with good.

Ellen White describes the final scenes of Jesus’ struggle in the Garden this way: “Thrice the prayer for deliverance was wrung from His lips. Heaven could no longer endure the sight, and a messenger of comfort was sent to the Son of God” (1898:760). In the presence of suffering God’s heart is moved to compassion and he sends his very Spirit to comfort. It is interesting that the title given to the Holy Spirit is Comforter. This should point to the fact that God was not taken by surprise by the suffering at the cross, but in his mercy he appointed One to deliver, to comfort.

The victory of the Lamb which was slaughtered speaks to those tempted to conform to the community average or to those defeated by a sense of powerlessness by challenging them to hold fast to the way of the Lamb and resist the temptation of trusting other notions of human fulfillment. The God of the Lamb is not defeated by the powers of sin, death, or evil. God is, in fact, moving history toward the full consummation of the victory of the Lamb—the healing of the nations.

The sign of Christ’s restored honor is his resurrection from the bowels of the earth. He is now raised up to God’s right hand—the seat of Sonship—and has been given a new name plus unique authority over all creation. He has, through his obedience, vanquished the devil completely. Now he releases human beings from their captivity to hostile spiritual powers and re-establishes them with God their creator.

The history of the Middle East provides examples of honorable people who, from a position of power, chose the path of sacrifice.

One night in the early 1980s, the king (the late Hussein bin Talal, King of Jordan) was informed by his security police that a group of about seventy-five Jordanian army officers were at that very moment meeting in a nearby barracks plotting a military overthrow of the kingdom. The security officers requested permission to surround and arrest the plotters. After a somber pause the king refused and said: “Bring me a small helicopter.” A helicopter was brought. The king climbed with the pilot and himself flew to the barracks and landed on its flat roof. The king told the pilot, “If you hear gunshots, fly away at once without me.” Unarmed, the king then walked down two flights of stairs and suddenly appeared in the room where the plotters were meeting and quietly said to them:
“Gentlemen, it has come to my attention that you are meeting here tonight to finalize your plans to overthrow the government, take over the country and install a military dictator. If you do this, the army will break apart and the country will be plunged into civil war. Tens of thousands of innocent people will die. There is no need for this. Here I am! Kill and proceed, that way only one man will die.” After a moment of stunned silence, the rebels as one rushed forward to kiss the king’s hands and feet and pledged loyalty to him for life. (Bailey 2008:418)

“Men said to them: ‘A great army is gathering against you’: And frightened them: But it (only) increased their Faith: They said: ‘For us Allah sufficeth, and He is the best disposer of affairs’” (Al Imran 3:173).

**Non-violence: God’s Way of Empowerment**

“When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, . . . He hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort. He plied him with many questions, *but Jesus gave him no answer*” (Luke 23:8-9, emphasis mine).

In the first century, the scandal of the cross was the apparent defeat of God’s Messiah. In the twenty-first century, the scandal of the cross is violence that is seemingly willed by and pleasing to God. Some have tried to portray the cross as a kind of child abuse—a perspective which is proper of cultic religions. This is but a gross distortion of the message of the cross, for the cross actually denounces the contemporary pervasiveness of violence.

People today face an epidemic of violence, but they also have a pervasive faith in violence which promises to be able to create peace. “The myth of redemptive violence,” as biblical scholar Walter Wink calls it (1999:50), permeates our consciousness and our culture.

The cross and the forgiveness it provides breaks the cycle of violence and models a way that is not conditioned by the enemy for it does not depend on their seeking forgiveness, but instead emphasizes the part of the one wronged to take the initiative. “For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Rom 5:10).

Jesus entered a world of power with its fallen social structures and yet he lived out the non-violent way of God’s reign until his death. He remained free from violence even to the point of allowing the social/political powers to put him to death rather than give them his loyalty. At the resurrection, God certified that the way of Jesus was victorious over the powers of darkness, including violence perpetuated by dominant social systems. Just before his
death he remained free in the presence of Herod when he chose silence.

The non-violent resistance of Jesus at the cross offers a counter-model for challenging violence, but even more important it clarifies Jesus’ command to offer the other cheek when one has already been slapped by the offender and not to resist an evildoer (Matt 5:38-42). “Jesus replied, ‘If I said anything wrong, you must prove it. But if I’m speaking the truth, why are you beating me?’” (John 18:23, emphasis mine). To offer the second cheek is to confront evil without succumbing to it. Jesus’ question, “Why are you beating me”? was an invitation to his persecutors to stop, to ponder, to face the consequences of their actions, to change, to be redeemed. Jesus modeled a way to seize the moral high ground that allowed him to retain his dignity while not resisting (antistenai) or using violence. This challenge to not give in to the degrading use of violence is the “third way” of the cross: no violence, no capitulation or resignation, but rather forgiveness and confrontation in dignity.

The crucified Messiah was God’s vigorous agent of redemption through his willed obedience unto death. The cross is the ultimate defeat of violence for at the cross Jesus absorbed its full force, at the cross Jesus swallowed up evil in his own body to its ultimate consequences: death, and this is how he disarmed it. The Cross—in the language of N. T. Wright—absorbed the power of death. “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:15). This is the dimension of the cross that needs to be clearly communicated to Muslims. God was not defeated, but vindicated and his honor was restored. This vindication is the basis of worship because God is who he said he was and demonstrated that he can be trusted. This is the ultimate triumph of moral force over coercive power in that he took sin and death on himself, he let it do its worst to him, but he imploded it on the cross and rose victorious!

Gustaf Aulen in his classic *Christus Victor* argues that for the first thousand years of Christianity the cross’ central theme was portrayed as God’s victory over the devil. Because of the unity of God, Christ’s sacrifice is not a legal offering to God in order to placate his demand for honor or justice, but as the decisive moment in the war against the powers of darkness (1931).

There is in the Good News a scandal of particularity in the way God relates to the world. Nancy Schreck in her study, “The Faithful Nonviolence of Jesus,” identifies three foundational dimensions of Jesus’ ministry that grounded his nonviolent resistance to violence: “First, the inclusive love of God that deems any exclusion as a form of violence.26 Second, a vision of universal

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26Central to Dr. King’s vision for peace building was the notion of the “Beloved Community” a place where no one is excluded. In one of his first published articles he stated that the purpose of the Montgom-
healing. Third, an understanding that God is not a God of vengeance but of radical love who calls us to a spirituality purified of violence at its very roots” (Schreck 1999:54-55).

Non-violence, which is a godly form of resistance, has the power to break the cycle of dehumanization and can also foster growth because it does not threaten the existence of the other while challenging unjust structures that prevent people from engaging each other.

Non-violence that ultimately seeks mutual transformation for the oppressed and the oppressor can be realized by a power which goes beyond resistance. By remaining non-violent—even in the face of severe provocation, intimidation, and threat—people can bring social transformation in a very profound way. Only one who does not mind being belittled can resist. In contrast to the coercive and domineering power of violence, non-violent resistance can unleash the power of truth, love, growth, compassion, justice, and creation.

Rejecting the assumption that human history is driven by coercive power, John Howard Yoder argues instead that it was God—working in, with, and through the nonviolent, non-resistant community of disciples of Jesus—that has been the ultimate force in human affairs. If the Christian church in the past made alliances with political rulers, it was because it had lost confidence in this truth (1994:104).

Yoder sees in Paul’s thought concerning justification the clear sense that God in “making things right” centers primarily on the establishment of faith communities where former enemies are reconciled, where genuine shalom/salaam finds expression (1994:70). For Paul, human social structures, the “principalities and powers,” are seen both as part of God’s good creation and as fallen, thereby often failing to serve their created purpose of ordering social life for the sake of human flourishing.

Yoder concludes his masterwork, The Politics of Jesus, by saying:

To follow Jesus does not mean renouncing effectiveness. It does not mean sacrificing concern for liberation within the social process in favor of delayed gratification in heaven, or abandoning efficacy in favor of purity. It means that in Jesus we have a clue to which kinds of causation, which kinds of community-building, which kinds of conflict management, go with the grain of the cosmos, of which we know, as Caesar does not, that Jesus is both the Word (the inner logic of things) and the Lord (“sitting at the right hand”). (1994:246)

d by the civil rights bus boycott “is reconciliation, . . . redemption, the creation of the beloved community” (Smith and Zepp 1974:361).
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The God of the cross opened the gates of radical forgiveness even when a victim is no longer either able to forgive or alive to do so. “Father, forgive them!” This is a fulfillment of the prophecy: “He made intercession for the transgressors” (Isa 53:12). But for us this is the “specific” way of the cross. Is Jesus trying to convince God to forgive? No, Jesus is echoing the Father’s heart, speaking on the side of God. At the cross God redefined the lines of exclusion.

When God sets out to embrace the enemy, the result is the cross. On the cross the dancing circle of self-giving and mutually indwelling divine persons opens up for the enemy; in the agony of the passion the movement stops for a brief moment and a fissure appears so that sinful humanity can join in (see John 17:21). We, the others—we, the enemies—are embraced by the divine persons who love us with the same love with which they love each other and therefore make space for us within their own eternal embrace. (Volf 1996:129)

Only when entrusting ourselves to the One who judges with justice is it possible to follow the path of the crucified Messiah and refuse retaliation when ill-treated. The certainty of God’s just judgment at the end of history gives us the needed perspective and reframes our role.

Paul says that Christ “disarmed” the powers of evil (2 Col 2:20) therefore, “we no longer have to accept the rule of oppressive structures or of deceiving and dominant social systems. Their transformation is also included in Christ’s work” (Myers 2008:36).

God Meets Evil Not Only as Judge but as Creator

The biblical eschatological Judge is foremost the Creator God. He is not a Creator whose transcendence places him above the reach of his people, but a God who gets his hands dirty, dips them in mud to touch matter and transforms it into a new creation: humanity. How does this God respond to the presence of evil? How does he create shalom/salaam?

N. T. Wright points out a pattern of God’s response to evil: God as Judge judges evil, confronts those who do wrong, and allows them to see the course of their action if they were to remain in that course; on the other hand, God the Creator creates something which did not exist before (rainbow, garments, ark, even a rescue plan that culminates in his self-sacrificial death) to bless, restore, and redeem (2006:48-53). In other words, as Creator he opens up new possibilities even in impossibly evil circumstances.

Allow me to exemplify this crucial concept with a real story that will
render any further explanations redundant.

During the terrible riots of 1992 [in] Gandhi’s home state of Gujarat a “Hindu” mob descended on a rural village. Almost all the village men were out in the fields. The women reacted quickly however, and took in their Muslim neighbors to hide them from the mob. As they lived mostly in one-room cottages, it often meant “hiding” them in plain sight, underneath their household altar. The mob stormed up to one home screaming, “Are you hiding a Muslim in there?!” “Yes,” the woman calmly replied. Somewhat nonplussed, the men barked out “We are coming in to get them!” Then the woman said, just as calmly, “First kill me, then only you may enter.” This happened repeatedly, as though by some prearrangement. Virtually every Muslim in that village—and some others—was saved. (What Is Nonviolence?)

The women later explained that this experience created an unbreakable community bonding with new meanings and led to a novel sense of autonomy that changed forever their self-perception. They no longer felt they were powerless ignorant women, but now an empowered community of women who could transform negative forces into constructive action. In the face of evil, they created new social dynamics—reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-20).

As Cameroon theologian David Tonghou Ngong writes, “The closest we can come to knowing how God wants us to act in a particular situation is how God has already acted in God’s eternal movement to give life to humanity and the rest of creation. This is the only way we can participate with God in God’s life-giving activity to promote the attainment of meaningful life for humanity and the rest of creation” (Ngong 2004:374).

Beyond Crime and Punishment: Restorative Justice

God’s justice is not that of a “cosmic vending machine” from which rewards or punishment are dispensed as good or bad actions are fed into the “heavenly deeds slot.” God loves justice but his definition breaks open all other definitions, since God’s justice is restorative, it is aimed at healing relationships, and does not just deal with the actions.

At the cross the inadequacy of retributive justice is exposed and superseded forever, for which “eye or tooth” could Hitler offer to assuage the pain or compensate for the death of six million Jews?27
The *lex talionis* (Lev 24:19-21; Exod 21:22-25; Deut 19:21) establishes a level of basic proportionality so that an eye will not be repaid with a life. These passages describe a raw form of justice but it was never God’s intent that these principles would constitute the highest form of justice.

At the cross the logic and strict application of this model breaks down for what scale can equalize humanity on one side and God in the flesh on the other? Some may argue that at the cross God did not die but only his beloved Son, but again can even the agony of God be compared to the price of humankind? How can clay be redeemed at such a cost? Instead the cross requires that we seek another way to understand the heavenly dynamics and logic for ransoming us: God’s tremendous love.

Retributive justice is a system of rules that determines blame and administers pain in a contest between the offender and the state. It emphasizes repairing the harm caused by crime. However, in restorative justice the focus is on transforming the relationship between the parties in question. When victims, offenders, and community members meet to decide how people can live in harmony again, the results can be transformational. Restorative justice is the way by which we can love our enemies.

Howard Zehr (2002) explains how the restorative justice model posits a paradigm shift that is in contrast to the common three questions asked for the typical system of justice. Those common questions are: (1) What laws have been broken? (2) Who did it? (3) What do they deserve? Instead Restorative Justice asks, (1) Who has been hurt (listening to the story of the victim)? (2) What are their needs that this wrongdoing has created? (3) Whose obligations are these (accountability and confession)? (Restorative Justice).

In Miroslav Volf’s terms if you are ultimately after justice, you must ultimately be after embrace. Actions against injustice must be placed in the framework of the will to embrace the unjust. That is, one should continually be ready for embrace, even as one pursues justice.

Jürgen Moltmann (1992:20-29) explains how a theology of the cross for peacemaking holds up the innocent victims, but it also approaches humans trapped in their own wickedness and lack of empathy for the suffering they have caused.

God responded to the cross with restorative forgiveness bringing people back into right relationship. The dying Jesus asked forgiveness for his tormentors, the resurrected Jesus returned to the disciples as a forgiving

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December 30, 2006, Hussein’s dream came true but soon he came to the stark realization that retributive justice had no power to heal. Saddam was gone but the memories of pain were still present.
presence—intent, not on reproach, or seeking reprisal for their betrayal and desertion, but on reaching out in love and inviting them back to renew their relationship with him. The powerful waves of that forgiveness extend to us today as the living Christ continues to respond to human betrayal and rejection with forgiveness.

“Moreover, it was because the father rejected the older brother’s demand for plain justice and instead insisted that ‘relationship has priority over all rules’ that reconciliation—the ultimate goal of justice—could be made complete” (Volf 1996:164).

But how does God bring justice? This theme alone could fill many pages, but allow me to point that the establishment of justice by decree, as at times Muslims have suggested, is arbitrary. God’s way is the path of faithfulness. “In faithfulness he will bring forth justice” (Isa 42:3) as fulfilled in Jesus (Matt 12:20). Is the faithfulness of God which was made known to us in Jesus the base of justice? “The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever” (Isa 32:17). In the specific way of the cross, God’s faithfulness cannot be divorced from his law. Peace building requires the upholding of the righteous laws of the Creator.

Because Jesus’ cross was a direct consequence of his confrontation with the social status quo, it actually reflects the presence of the kingdom of God. Jesus loved his enemies, embodied a justice greater than the scribes and Pharisees, identified directly with the poor and oppressed, and even forgave those who killed him. In doing so, Jesus displayed the core values of the new social and political order he had been commissioned to bring into being.

Only those who are forgiven can overcome the temptation to pervert justice into injustice. In that sense, the cross is not for us and against the other but rather it is the place that summons oppressed and oppressor alike. “In the presence of God, our rage over injustice may give way to forgiveness which in turn will make the search for justice for all possible” (Volf 1996:124). Peace is thus deeply linked to justice, since peace is not the absence of violence but the presence of justice.

Shame and God’s Solidarity with the Sufferer

Christ was so committed to the inclusion of those oppressed and rejected that he was willing to die rather than comply with the norms and practices of those who shamed them, again showing that God’s love is stronger than death. At the cross Christ fully identified with us in our experience of shame and exclusion as the hateful mob acted out the ultimate expression
of exclusion through a humiliating and shameful death on the cross. Jesus was displayed naked before the crowd, a crown of mockery was placed on his head, a soldier slapped his face, but he “endured the cross, scorning its shame” (Heb 12:2).

The cross, however, offers more than a promise of God’s solidarity and God’s empathy of knowing what it means to experience shame. The resurrection of Jesus after his death on the cross exposes false shame and breaks its power to instill fear (Col 2:15). Jesus’ death and resurrection invite and enable us to live in freedom from dehumanizing shame that Jesus took upon himself on the cross (Heb 12:2; 1 Pet 2:6).

The theme of shame often goes unnoticed in Western circles, but it needs to be retrieved if the message of the cross is to be communicated clearly among Muslims and Christians in the Middle East. At the root of much of the existing tension and violence in the region is the real sense of being ashamed, and a strong desire to recover lost honor and dignity.

The cross shattered the notion of the impassibility of God. One of the specifics of the biblical God is his capacity to make himself vulnerable, not out of necessity, but as a loving choice. Only Christianity has a God who has suffered, proving his commitment to us in our brokenness. “To our wounds only thy wounds can speak, and no God has wounds but thou alone” (Shillito 1958:235). This is a foreign notion to the Islamic doctrine of God. The God of Greek philosophers is a God that evades the possibility of being moved by suffering and pain and who is therefore incapable of offering personal comfort. Add this to the fact that in Islam God’s vulnerability is rejected because it is viewed as weakness.

“God is a fellow sufferer who understands” not because God cannot be otherwise, but because God wills to share in our lot and in doing so he reveals a largesse of heart that compels us to worship. The Arabic concept ghurba (which Edward Said translates as estrangement) is helpful to convey the state of being a foreigner, homeless, lonely, separated, and a stranger in one’s own land (Hammer 2005:60). God in Jesus knows what it means to be in a state of ghurba, to be crushed, but unlike us who often are unable to change our circumstances, God chose this path.

For Jürgen Moltmann, in his classic The Crucified God the cry of Jesus from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” was decisive. If the Son of God knows what it feels like to be abandoned by God, then he can understand Moltmann’s own pain and despair. “The crucified God, however, shares in the suffering of the world, and in Jesus’ dying question he himself takes up humanity’s protest against suffering and the open question
of God’s righteousness in the world. Thus for the sufferer God is not just the incomprehensible God who inflicts suffering, but the God, who cries with him and intercedes for him with his cross where man in his torment is dumb. *God himself maintains the protest against suffering*” (Moltmann 1993:252, emphasis mine).

However, if God were only “the fellow-sufferer who understands” as suggested by Alfred Whitehead in his often quoted phrase (1978:351), it is arguable that the problem of suffering would not be alleviated, but aggravated. It is no consolation to the sufferer to know that God is as much a helpless victim of evil as he is himself unless he understands how God’s suffering mitigates evil and how God transforms the character of suffering.

But, why is that suffering still among us? I do not know, but the cross is the proof that God is committed to ending it.

Those who live within the *pathos* of the crucified Messiah are enabled to experience real love that is sensitive to suffering, love that is ready for the pain of loving those who are unlovable, love that can make us vulnerable and yet open to the anointing of the joy that characterized Jesus’ life. Because God was at the side of the suffering Christ, we too should be by the side of those who suffer today, accompanying them even when we are not clear as to what mode God’s presence takes when we are present. We have peace with God and with other human beings through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 5:1; Isa 32:17).

**Breaking the Cycle of Victimization Through Forgiveness**

The road to sustainable transformational peace must include trust. Without trust there can be no possible engagement between parties, no possible relationship. It is a mistake to assume that trust can be delivered through policies, especially foreign policies. Trust comes from God and starts with the stark realization that the human heart is deceitful and in need of healing before it is able to trust. When we turn to God he can rebuild our ability to trust, a trust that requires that we forgive and re-humanize the other.

Dehumanization of the victim leads to self-dehumanization of the perpetrator.

In light of the justice and love of God . . . hate recedes and the seed is planted for the miracle of forgiveness. Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from
the community of sinners. But no one can be in the presence of the God of the crucified Messiah for long without overcoming this double exclusion—without transposing the enemy from the sphere of monstrous inhumanity into the sphere of shared humanity and herself from the sphere of proud innocence into the sphere of common sinfulness. When one knows that the torturer will not eternally triumph over the victim, one is free to rediscover that person’s humanity and imitate God’s love for him. And when one knows that God’s love is greater than all sin, one is free to see oneself in the light of God’s justice and so rediscover one’s own sinfulness. (Volf 1996:124)

The passion’s narrative is about the Lamb who goes to death rejecting violence, loving enemies, returning good for evil, praying for his persecutors, and forgiving all. Forgiveness and self-awareness of one’s true heart condition has the power to uproot the pervasive psychological dynamic of victimization. Those who have been grieved are not condemned to live in this state forever. George Irani says that

victimization is a crucial concept to grasp when dealing with protracted conflicts, whether personal or political. Overcoming feelings of victimization, which, unfortunately, are endemic to the human condition, is the most important step towards healing. Usually, acts of violence (whether inflicted on an individual or a group), are the results of deep feelings of being victimized, regardless of who is the victim or victimizer. (2000)

For some in the region (Muslims, Jews, and Christians), victimization has been abused by legitimizing the immoral use of past atrocities as a moral justification for present brutalities and violence. The memory of real human tragedies is therefore trivialized and the endless cycle of victimization becomes unbreakable. It was never God’s intention that anyone’s identity be one of a victim.

In Jerald Whitehouse’s own words, Adventism offers “a reconciling message that restores peace and quality of life amidst increasing chaos and destruction as evil displays itself more strongly in the world” (Who Are We and What Is Our Identity?). The story of the Cross is meant to generate a praxis of the Kingdom of God in every historical and cultural context.

The church has a role to play in creating a space and preparing for reconciliation by being a community where the guilty can be open to asking for and receiving forgiveness, and where those who suffer are allowed to enter into new relationships of trust and healing. When Jesus said that “these words are fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21), he made clear that the eschatological fulfillment he had in mind was not at the end of time but
rather the transformation of social life during his lifetime and onwards.

“The major role of the Church in relationship to the greatest issues of justice and peace will not be in its formal pronouncements, but in its continually nourishing and sustaining men and women who will act responsibly as believers in the course of their secular duties as citizens” (Newbigin 1989:139). This lays a heavy responsibility on the churches in the Middle East because they are often the victims of vicious attacks themselves.

Forgiveness in the Qur’an and in the Bible is an important area of common ground and unavoidable for peace building.\(^{28}\)

### The Prince of Peace

Traditional Muslims believe that Jesus had a role in the past, will have a future role, but has no role in the current state of affairs. In the future, at the appointed time, Muslims believe he will come alongside the **Mahdi** to destroy the Antichrist (**dajjal**) and bring about a reign of peace. In the past he had an exalted role as a prophet sent by God with light and guidance and a clarifying role about what is right and wrong.

The Qur’an offers a positive and cumulative witness to the peace-loving Jesus while on earth but it is not clear how he ended his ministry. Muslims widely believe that he is near to God but not sure what he is doing there. Therefore, establishing Jesus’ current role and involvement as the Great Controversy plays out in these last days offers a rich area for Seventh-day Adventists to have a clarifying role among Muslims.

In my personal experience, I have found it useful to direct Muslims and Christians back to the exalted and unique roles that Jesus had on earth (healing, forgive, interceding, loving, showing mercy, purifying, creating, judging, etc.) while pointing to the fact that these exclusive and exalted roles did not end once he was taken up to heaven, but rather he received even more authority now that he is near to God.

Mark Siljander (2008), in his widely circulated book *A Deadly Misunderstanding: A Congressman’s Quest to Bridge the Muslim-Christian Divide*, offers a compelling case for upholding the way of shalom/salaam/shlama (peace) as taught and embodied by the Messiah from God. For over a decade Siljander has proven the success of peacemaking by clarifying areas of apparent misunderstanding which were blocking the path to the spiritual

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\(^{28}\)For an excellent survey on this topic see Moucarry 2004.
heart. Removing stones frees the soil to receive the specific way of the cross for reconciliation, which is Jesus.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace at the present. He is the Prince of Peace because he is Lord (Acts 2). Jesus is Lord, and this is what the Good News is all about. Not any Lord, but One that emptied himself of all desire to dominate and became a Servant. Because Jesus is Lord it is he who owns each community. It is he who has every person’s transformation under his authority; because Jesus is also a Servant, this has strong implications as to how that change is to be implemented.

We need to be clear that the problem of evil is not something we will solve in this present age as long as the line of demarcation between good and evil continues to run through the human heart. Evil is neither a problem of just “us and them.” The constant awareness of this reality should provide us with a dose of much needed humility when we meet “the other.”

Since sin is not something humans can solve, our primary task is to bring forth signs of God’s activity and seek his healing power in the world. Our task is to lift up that Light that has the power to pierce darkness and swallow it; to bring back the Sabbath as “a metaphor of paradise and a testimony of God’s presence” (Heschel 2005: xv).

It seems pertinent to conclude with John Howard Yoder’s words:

To follow Jesus does not mean to renounce effectiveness. It does not mean sacrificing concern for liberation within the social process in favor of delayed gratification in heaven or abandoning efficacy in favor of purity. It means that in Jesus we have a clue about what kind of causation, which kind of community building, which kind of conflict management, go with the grain of the cosmos, of which we know, as Caesar does not, that Jesus is both the Word (the inner logic of things) and the Lord (sitting at the right hand). It is not that we begin with a mechanistic view of the universe and then we look for cracks and chinks where a little creative freedom might sneak in . . . it is that we confess that the deterministic world to be enclosed within, smaller than, the sovereignty of the God of the Resurrection and Ascension. (Yoder 1994:246)

**Obstacles on the Road to Peace: Three Common Errors**

Before I offer my final reflections on peace building, I wish to address three misconceptions that could have a negative effect in peace building. First, the common view that democracy, as a model of governance, is the solution to heal the deep sense of brokenness among the communities of the Middle East needs to be challenged. Neither should people expect peace to emerge out of the ashes of violence and war. The “strongman model”
might be effective in restraining insurgency but can it deliver reconciliation, forgiveness, trust, justice, or any of the other components that are needed for peace?

A political solution has its proper place, but that place is much more limited than what politicians are ready to admit. Greg Mortenson, the founder of Pennies For Peace and co-author of the New York Times best-seller, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace . . . One School At A Time*, and *Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace with Books, Not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, is an inspiring example of the difference between peace building and state building. Trudy Rubin, from *The Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote: “Sometimes the acts of one individual can illuminate how to confront a foreign-policy dilemma more clearly than the prattle of politicians. Such is the case with Greg Mortenson, whose work gives insights into an essential element of fighting terrorism with peace.”

Second, it is important to learn from the failures of secular peace-building strategies what happens when these models are at odds with local needs, local perceptions, and indigenous ways of making peace. In a previous section I surveyed some of the theological issues Muslims and possibly some Christians face when they explore the meaning of the cross. I hope that a better understanding of this subject can help Christians offer peace in the name of Jesus while avoiding the existing misunderstandings; but let’s make no mistake, sustainable peace requires more than theological clarification.

Peace initiatives based solely on economical and political enticement or purely strategic considerations cannot last if they are not accompanied by an honest and profound exploration of the underlying, emotional legacies of fear, hatred, and mistrust resulting from decades of warfare and unending cycles of victimization and vengeance. What policymakers are starting to discover is that if they want to foster peace in the Middle East, they will have to harness the indigenous spiritual capital of the people they seek to influence. But even more, they need to look beyond politics. Sami Awad (Holy Land Trust), an extraordinary Palestinian peacemaker, rightly explains that the two state solution for Israel and Palestine is just one step toward building peace but not the final solution. 29

It is not enough to be able to co-exist side by side with one’s neighbors. God created us for engagement. This is a clear Islamic notion: “O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of

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you with Allah is that (believer) who has At-Taqwa (the pious). Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Awake” (Al-Hujraat 49:13).

Roberts (2010) suggests that the failure to achieve political peace is due partly to the fact that often polices are irrelevant to the everyday lives of people, especially those who live far removed from the state institutions. The fact is that political top-down peace building mainly happens in capital cities, while largely ignoring the vast majority of the rural populations whose priorities are neither in political institutions in distant capitals nor in liberal values couched in the language of human rights.

This means that a peace initiative based on the cross, which does not incorporate local language and images, and which does not address heartfelt needs will be perceived as illegitimate and irrelevant. “In assessing the applicability of Western-based conflict resolution models in non-Western societies, theoreticians and practitioners alike have begun to realize the importance of being sensitive to indigenous ways of thinking and feeling, as well as to local rituals for managing and reducing conflicts” (Irani 2000). The rituals of *sulh* (settlement) and *musalaha* (reconciliation) are examples of Arab-Islamic culture and values and should be looked at for insight into how to approach conflict resolution in the Middle East as a step towards peace building.

In other words, (again I am indebted to Jerald Whitehouse for this insight) if God’s story, and our story does not blend with the community story, we will not see sustainable transformation. When our stories are blended together, our story and their story are enlarged, we are changed, and we all grow.

Third, it is important to challenge senseless biblical interpretations that obscure the doctrine of God. The current crisis in the region cannot be simplistically attributed to God’s vengeance falling upon today’s children of the East as punishment for the sins committed hundreds of years ago by their ancestors, even by high ranking ancestors such as Abraham.

This negative and distorted view estranges people from our common humanity, from God’s mercy, and condemns them to be God’s appointed enemy against the people of God. We desperately need to recover the heartbeat of God and live out his compassion but also we need proper exegesis of the Bible stories, especially a new look at the story of Hagar, Abraham, Ishmael, and God.

To contribute towards a more peaceful future requires a re-interpretation. The current narratives regarding who God is and who the other is, while containing elements of truth, are not sufficient to deliver peace because often they are too narrow in their understanding of how God deals with the
material world, of how he engages and transforms cultures and diversity, and how he deals with the problem of evil from within.

Under the Cross

I do not pretend that I can give a definitive conclusion, but I offer a modest attempt to list some practical suggestions within the Muslim and Christian context of the Middle East for promoting peace. I wish to spotlight possible productive areas for peace building at the intersection of personal faith, missiology, biblical theology, and contemporary society (more specifically community peace building) in the region. I am grateful that as we engage with real people in building peace, God’s precious Word and his Holy Spirit guide and empower us all for the task ahead.

At the beginning I posed two simple questions which I wish to restate: What if the cross of Jesus were to be unpacked before Muslims and Christians as the divine model by which God shows solidarity with a broken world? If the cross were to epitomize God’s “Roadmap for Peace,” what kind of model of justice and peace building would it offer?

If the cross was to be unpacked in its larger framework of the cosmic conflict it could answer two crucial questions which “frame and anticipate all other questions” (Mayers 1999:23). Who is God and what is he doing? A biblically sound theology of the doctrine of God cannot be divorced from peace building which ultimately should lead us back to him.

Diana Francis in describing a faith based peace initiative in Madagascar quotes Vololona Razafindrainibe: “Belief in a higher God, more loving and egalitarian . . . is slowly being promoted and a new movement is growing for a lasting peace, based on spiritual values” (2010).

Adventism contributes with a third key question. “What are the issues at stake in the cosmic battle between God and Satan?” Answering this question is crucial for peace since it restores the rule of law to its rightful role, retrieves Jesus’ rightful place, unmasks sin, and discloses the truth about Satan for who he is, and finally, helps us to better understand the origin and end of evil. Answering this question enables us to disarm some of the Muslim’s fiercest arguments against the cross since the cross and God are on the same side of the battle, not against each other. In terms of eschatology, the way of the cross challenges the idea that the end of history is found in the clash of nations rather than in the coming return of the slain Lamb. But even more important, the pathos of the cross offers a concrete model by which communities can be healed.
The specific way of the cross is non-violent; it heals, for victims no longer must live under the shadow of their past but are freed to choose a different way of life. The way of the cross is the way of forgiveness by which relations are prioritized over actions. It is the way in which enemies are no longer enemies but “loved enemies,” which by definition destroys the notion of hatred since no one, not even enemies, should be outside the reach of love. The way of the cross is non-coercive; it disarms evil, and empowers the sufferers to beat their swords into plows. It redefines what victory is, and how to receive peace. Peace building ultimately must point back to the Prince of Peace who is also Lord. Those who seek peace through the cross will receive a new identity. They are not simply marked by their ethnicity or nationality, but are now identified by their inclusion in the family of God.

Unlike other regions of the world, the Middle East is a deeply religious area and not interested in engaging with the secular West. If anyone is going to engage with their story, they cannot be oblivious to God’s story. In other words, this region needs a new narrative that could offer reconciliation and peace on earth, and the Bible has it.

Specific expressions of peace-building initiatives should include a multiplicity of forms as diverse and creative as music or visual art as presently used by “visual peacemakers” (see http://visualpeacemakers.org/index.php?documentaries/story/take_the_journey). Considering the growing impact that TV has in the region, it is likely that media will be an important vehicle for peace building. But it must be media that combines the best of communication with local values and with the message of God reconciling the world unto himself in Jesus.

I wish to conclude this reflection with an appeal to the biblical remnant to partner with God in peace making, to seek new venues to live out and promote peace in the Middle East, to uphold the way of the crucified Messiah who alone can draw Muslims, Adventists, and Christians closer to each other. This call is not to a project but a way of life. Finding common ground that ensures the dignity of the other calls us to the generative work of de-centering self and truly participating in the life of God.
Works Cited


