Introduction

In 2008 Harper Collins published a landmark book, A Deadly Misunderstanding, written by Mark Siljander. Siljander, former U.S. congressman and alternative U.S. representative at the U.N., chronicles his personal journey from deep suspicion and mistrust of Islam as a violent enemy of Christianity to a new viewpoint. This new understanding replaces the old “deadly misunderstanding” which has poisoned Muslim-Christian relationships for centuries and paves the way for new cordial interaction.

The high levels of personal contacts and relationships demonstrated in the book are impressive. The book is endorsed by James Baker III, the 61st U.S. Secretary of State and Edwin Meese, former U.S. Attorney General. Both an endorsement and the preface are written by Ban Ki Moon, Secretary General of the United Nations.

From the Muslim side, praise for the book comes from Muslim academics and validation stems from personal contact with Muslim heads of state from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia as reported on in the book.

In this essay I will review in some detail the contents of the book and
then evaluate it. I conclude by suggesting some things that can be learned from the book and steps that might be taken to further enhance Muslim-Christian relations.

**Siljander’s Personal Journey**

The true organizing principle of the book is the personal journey of Siljander himself. The book records Mark’s pilgrimage from a rabid anti-Muslim politician/Christian who wanted to either defeat or convert Muslims to a bridge builder whose life quest is to bring peace and love to Christian-Muslim relationships. This volume records the step by step blow-by-blow unfolding of this journey.

This pilgrimage is personal in at least two ways. First, it is most obviously what Siljander as an individual himself experiences. Second, it is a record of personal encounters with a wide variety of Muslims, most of them key leaders in the Muslim world in either the political or religious realm. Siljander has a passion to actually interact face to face with Muslims and he records for us in detail many of these meetings.

**Paradigm Crashes**

The first part of the book emphasizes three key life-changing encounters that Siljander had with three important people in his life and development. Each of these encounters led to what he calls a “paradigm crash” (chapter 2). He calls these crashes because in each of them key concepts that are part of his original (mis)understanding prove to be false.

In the first crash Siljander’s friend Doug challenges Mark with the question of whether the Bible supports the idea that Siljander says is the core of Christianity—the conversion of Muslims (and other non-Christians) to the Christian faith. For a solid year Siljander attempts to find a biblical basis for this idea. In the end he concludes that Jesus never sought to start a religion but planned rather to found a movement that was a relational revolution of the human heart (18). Siljander concludes that if he had been wrong on this point there possibly were other areas where he might also be misinformed.

Along with this religious paradigm change Siljander also became disillusioned with typical diplomatic procedures. Such procedures he found, neglected personal relationships and personal interaction which most diplomats believe can demonstrate weakness. So instead diplomacy often
promotes adversarial impersonal relationships which only allow room for one’s own political agenda. As a result, Siljander makes a decision that in his quest for understanding he will make true personal relationships essential.

The second worldview shift that Siljander describes comes through his American born Assyrian pastor friend, John Booko. Booko introduces Mark to the Aramaic language. Siljander comes to realize that Jesus and his disciples spoke Aramaic and begins to believe the viewpoint that the New Testament was originally in Aramaic before it was translated into Greek. Using nuances in language based on Aramaic understandings Siljander comes to the conclusion that some ideas that divide Christians and Muslims disappear if terms are properly understood.

The third worldview change came when a Nepali friend told Siljander that Jesus was extensively mentioned in the Qur’an. That prompted him to begin an intensive ongoing study of the Qur’an and Arabic and led to a major shift toward growing appreciation of the Muslim holy book.

**Building Peace and Love**

Based on these three worldview changes Siljander begins to put his new discoveries into practice in high level personal contacts where mutual respect, love, and friendship rather than adversarial relationship based on traditional diplomacy prevail.

Two main issues dominate the last half of the book. First, Siljander spells out his answers to the long-standing core theological issues which have divided Islam and Christianity. Foremost are questions about Jesus. Who is he and how are we to understand him? What should we call him? What does the Bible mean when it calls him “begotten”? What about the crucifixion? How are we to understand the trinity? Siljander speaks to these issues and more in some depth. He also attempts to defuse the emotional issue of jihad and demonstrate the false definitions held by militant Muslims.

Second, Siljander defends his views by sharing stories of both Christians and Muslims, who at least in general have come to support his message. He describes these encounters where dialogue is possible and where the general response he reports is that his teaching is seen to be revolutionary.

Siljander closes with an appeal to all readers to be personally and individually involved in building bridges of understanding. He stresses that if people would begin to love their enemies and begin to interact face to face with them they would have a part in changing the world.
A Moving Story

Siljander’s book has a way of pulling us into his story. His openness is admirable and makes it easy to identify with him. The whole narrative approach makes the book interesting and appealing. In the end it is hard to argue with an appeal to love and an approach that can help change our world with its many fractured relationships.

The stories of Siljander’s meetings and encounters with Muslim leaders sound almost too good to be true. I was especially moved by his apology for the killing of Qaddafi’s daughter Hanna (94) and the results of that meeting. That story alone is worth the price of the book.

I agree with this book in broad outline. I like his methodology—a personal narrative framework. His diagnosis of the problem is correct—there is a general misunderstanding between Muslims and Christians that can and has been deadly at times and it should be addressed. In general I approve of the idea that openness and the careful study of the Bible, the Qur’ām, and language is a key part of the solution to the challenge. I salute Siljander for a creative approach to a real problem. I believe all who care about this issue should read this book.

Serious Questions

Having said many positive things, I must admit on the other side that I have serious questions about the specifics of some of his arguments.

One of those questions concerns Siljander’s first paradigm crash. In a narrow specific sense he is correct—we as Christians do not have as our main duty the conversion of people to Christianity. Jesus does not come to establish a religion in the institutional meaning of the word. His goal was not a formalized structure with all that entails. It would certainly follow that conversion to something he did not intend to establish is not our main task. Jesus came to start a movement.

Although I agree with Siljander’s basic point it strikes me as somewhat superficial and narrow. The actual question and conclusion may be related to the continuation of a fundamentalist mindset which carries over from Siljander’s earlier life. If Jesus wanted to begin a movement, as Siljander argues, didn’t he invite people to join that movement? Didn’t he want people to “convert” or change to follow his teaching? What it means to join that movement seems to be a very key question which Siljander does not specifically answer. To explain what joining the Jesus movement meant seems extremely relevant at this point but that question is not dealt with by
Siljander. If this issue is discussed in the proper context it does not seem to necessarily destroy the mutual respect between Muslims and Christians that he seeks to foster. Siljander seems to support something he calls “messianic Muslims” or people who remain culturally Muslim but who also follow the teaching of Jesus (204, 216). Is this not a form of change that might be called “conversion”? It seems to me that at its core what Siljander is arguing for is a new definition of conversion rather than the abolishment of it.

A somewhat similar problem exists with Siljander's treatment of Aramaic. It is true that Jesus and his disciples spoke Aramaic which is closely related to Hebrew. For decades scholars have talked about possible Aramaic originals of the Gospels (see Black 1998). There is nothing secret about this. Why does he title his chapter on Aramaic “The Secret Language of the Bible”? I was required to study Aramaic as part of my work for a graduate degree in Old Testament because parts of the Bible are only extant in Aramaic including Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26; Dan 2:4-7:28. To call his study of Aramaic words revolutionary strikes me as an exaggeration or ignorance. Insights he mentions based on Aramaic may mostly be true but have been known before and do not seem to be decisive for his argument.

Siljander is on much firmer ground when he relates language to culture (29) in a brief section of his work. He is right in pointing out that translating “Eastern” thoughts into “Western” languages or thoughts opens the way for serious misunderstanding. My personal belief is that in large part the present misunderstandings between Christians and Muslims stem from core worldview differences deeply imbedded in the respective cultures. Language differences are simply one part of cultural differences. To really comprehend the depth of the misunderstanding we must move beyond just linguistic differences to the broader area of all that is entailed in worldview. The culture of Jesus and his disciples bears a striking resemblance to current Middle Eastern culture. Middle Eastern Muslims can, therefore, in many ways relate to Jesus and his teachings with clearer insight than people from Western cultures (see Bailey 1983).

There is one important cultural topic that Siljander does not discuss. A major issue in biblical and Middle Eastern culture is the honor/shame concept. Much of the animosity between the West and Islam is due to this honor/shame issue. As a result of colonialism and modern history the average Muslim feels deeply shamed by the West. There is a deep corporate sense that Muslims have been dishonored and disempowered by the so-called Christian nations. Honor has been lost. Since this sense is corporate most feel solidarity with other Muslims and the loss or disgrace of other
Muslims is their own dishonor. Their personal sense of worth is threatened. I am convinced that this explains why many, even moderate Muslims, who do not support the militant view of jihad find it hard to decisively denounce al-Qaeda. At a deep level they sense al-Qaeda is striving to restore power and honor to a shamed Islam and they empathize even when they personally do not buy in to the ideology and methodology of militant Islam.

Followers of Jesus should be sensitive to this issue because Jesus himself understood the deep need to receive honor. The apostle Paul admonishes believers in Jesus in Rome to “outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom 12:10). If truly practiced this principle could revolutionize relationships. Paul can urge this because the power of God in Jesus has taken away his shame of sin and honored him as a child of God (Rom 1:11-16). In essence, though he has not stated it, Siljander has followed this principle in his personal face to face meetings with Muslims. Showing them honor has removed their sense of shame and disrespect and enabled a relationship of mutual honor and respect to develop.

Siljander’s Quest and Contributions

Reading Siljander gives one the sense he believes he is on a lonely quest with few fellow travelers. The people he quotes to represent Christianity are usually those who think similarly to the old fundamentalist Mark Siljander. I would suggest to him that Franklin Graham (218) and Pope Benedict XVI (217) do not represent all of Jesus’ followers. There is a small but growing group of Jesus believers who think in many ways like Siljander. They recognize the good in Islam and the Qur’an. They love, honor, and respect Muslims. They rejoice in the “messianic Muslim” movement that does not expect Muslims to become cultural Christians and they just look to support Jesus’ followers no matter the cultural label. Siljander needs to expand his already wide friendship base by seeking out and interacting with this special band of people.

In many ways Siljander’s book parallels the writing of Philip Jenkins. His 2002 book, The Next Christendom, published by Oxford University Press has made a significant impact. Jenkins argues that Christianity is not in serious decline as many in the secular “global north” believe but is advancing rapidly in the former mission lands of the “global south.” Colonial collapse was political not religious and a dynamic form of the Christian faith, somewhat different from mainstream Christianity of the global north, is flourishing and spreading in the former colonial areas of the world. Knowledge of this
fact did not begin with Jenkins. Many Evangelical Christians, often led by Ralph Winter (Winter 1969), knew and wrote of this phenomenon for at least the last thirty to forty years. It is simply the fact of who Jenkins is—a history professor in an Ivy League university published by Oxford University Press rather than a mission professor in an evangelical seminary published by a Christian press—that he has been able to catch the attention of the mainline media and academia.

Siljander’s book is much the same. Many of the facts he presents and the attitudes he promotes have been known and often been espoused by a small but significant group of Christian scholars for a number of years. Siljander is a non-theologian and former congressman and diplomat moving in high circles. He is published by a secular press and supported by Muslim and Western academics. What has been in general known and taught for years by a small group of Jesus followers has now, because of Siljander’s work, become widely known and explained to a wider audience.

In my opinion, both Jenkins and Siljander have greatly benefitted Christianity and the world by communicating widely and effectively several key concepts and understandings that can hopefully bring healing.

**Conclusion**

While much more could be said, I close with two simple things we can learn from Siljander’s work. The first applies to the global north in general—to the whole population but especially to Christians. Most people are woefully ignorant of not only Christianity but of non-Christian religions in particular. Most people in the global north know little or nothing not only about Islam but also Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism, etc. If this book does anything it points out how crucial religion is to all of life, including politics, economics, international relations, etc. All areas of life are deeply and irrevocably related to religion.

Two basic reasons lie behind this ignorance. First, America and Europe have a long standing Christian history. Christianity has had a semi-monopoly on religion so many do not see a need to learn about or interact with those who are different from the Christian majority. Second, the dominant secular culture is dismissive of religion. Religion is often seen as a narrow specialized area of life which has less and less influence. This is patently false. No one can seriously read Siljander and not be impressed with the broad comprehensive sweep of Islam’s influence not only on Muslim life but also in the global village of our world if not on our life in the West as well.
The study of world religions should be core educational curriculum along with math, language, and history. This should be true of all educational levels even in government schools. This is even more imperative for Christian schools because of the international character of Jesus followers. The deadly misunderstanding that Siljander so eloquently explains is much broader than just Christianity and Islam but stretches to include all religions.

The second lesson is one that especially applies to my particular field of missiology. We as missiologists must learn to communicate better to our broader society and culture. We needed Jenkins and Siljander because we have not done well at telling our story to others. We must work to avoid other deadly misunderstandings and hopefully help prevent additional clashes between religious groups. The least we can do initially is to encourage not only the reading of Siljander’s book but also to personally become involved in a movement to practice love and understanding in our broken and angry world.

Works Cited


