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# Facing the Challenges in Christian-Muslim Dialogue

## Introduction

The current postmodern world poses a great challenge to each person living today—the challenge of self-identity (Paulien 2008:49-50). This identity crisis that is experienced by so many postmodern people leads to a loss of confidence and certainty about life (Omar 2010). This pessimistic picture of human existence is encouraged by the growing trend towards secularism with its strong tendency to diminish and even eliminate spiritual aspects from daily life.

In order to stop the process of self-destruction, human beings must turn back and pay attention to their spiritual makeup. This is where the role of religion comes into the picture to lead and direct people back to God and help them find faith.

Finding faith in a secular, God-denying world is an enormous task. One of the ways to decrease the skepticism of secular and postmodern people towards religion would be to demonstrate constructive dialogue between representatives of the Christian and Muslim faiths. Both religions place a strong emphasis on the vertical God-human relationship, and both emphasize the moral and spiritual components of human beings in contrast to materialistic and hedonistic trends promoted by the postmodern world. Both religions provide an important foundation for overcoming the current identity crisis. The doctrine of creation provides clear insight into the origin of human life as being God-initiated, thus giving tremendous value to each and every person (cf. Gen 2:7 with Al-Hidjr 15:28-29). Both religions provide an unchanging standard for eliminating the uncertainties in life—God’s moral law which is widely discussed and presented in both the Bible and the Qur’an (see Exod 20:1-17 and Al-Imran 3:3-4).

However, the Christian-Muslim dialogue that has become quite fash-

ionable in recent years is perceived by some Muslim intellectuals as negative and unproductive. Thus Ziauddin Sardar in his annual lecture, “Christian-Muslim Relations in the Postmodern Age” that was presented at the Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham, England, listed several general obstacles that prevent Christians and Muslims from finding common ground for a genuine discussion that could produce any pragmatic action (Sardar, Inayatullah, and Boxwell 2003:158). The first obstacle mentioned was the missionary outreach nature of both religions, which often causes dialogue to degenerate into an apologetic preaching exercise. A second obstacle was the dominant power of Christians in the modern period and the Christian belief that Muslims are unwilling to participate in dialogue because they are a *lesser* religion. The last, but fundamental reason was that recently dialogue is considered the product of an unnatural fear of Islam which has reached panic proportions in the postmodern world (Sardar, Inayatullah, and Boxwell 2003:158-159).

Two other general reasons Sardar identified as preventing the development of constructive dialogue is Muslim distrust of Christianity and Christian distrust of Muslims. In connection with Christianity’s distrust of Islam, Sardar, a faithful Muslim himself, courageously identifies humanitarian and theological areas for causing Christian mistrust of Muslims. Many Christians feel that Muslims have lost their humanity, especially in regard to serious violations of human rights. Many Christians also perceive that the Muslim judicial interpretation of the fundamental sources of Islam—the Qur’an and the Sunnah—have been frozen in space and time and thus are incapable of guiding faith in the 21st century (Sardar, Inayatullah, and Boxwell 2003:169-171). There is little to argue or debate about such intellectual conclusions. But what is more important for us as Christians are Sardar’s reasons for Muslim distrust of Christianity. His three fundamental objections provide an insight that should be carefully considered because they are a voice from inside Islam. These reasons for Muslim distrust of Christianity will also be the main focus of this article. Each one will be considered with the goal of determining whether Christians can agree or disagree with his analysis. Further, we will try to see what lessons can be learned so changes can be made.

### **Muslim Distrust of Christianity**

Ziauddin Sardar lists theological mistrust, experiential mistrust, and academic mistrust as specific reasons that have created the present state of mistrust between Muslims and Christians. The first two are widespread and exist in many different parts of the world regardless of the type or form of Islam. Academic mistrust is more specific and scientific. Yet it de-

serves attention because academic knowledge carries such powerful potential to be an influential agent of change in our information age.

### Academic Mistrust

According to Sardar this sort of mistrust is a product of two phenomena: (1) European imperialistic racism and (2) Christian missionary zeal. Both can be united under one title: *Orientalism* (Sardar, Inayatullah, and Boxwell 2003:168). These components have more than 200 years of history. Yet the scholarly definition of Orientalism was first given by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978), where he redefined orientalism as a constellation of false assumptions that underline Western attitudes toward the Middle East. This body of scholarship is marked by a “subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture” (Orientalism). Orientalism is a sort of ideologized mentality that assumes *a priori* the otherness and exotic nature of “the Orient” (Zhusipbek 2012). As a result, Western academic establishments have largely regarded Islam and Muslim culture as retrogressive institutions and have viewed Muslims as people who cannot be trusted to be objective about their own religion.

These ideas have penetrated Christian mission thought as well. The notion of the superiority of the Christian faith sets the standard for measuring the validity of the different components of Islam with a “Christian ruler” and with Western (particularly American) “democracy standards.” The Christian understanding of such concepts as sin, salvation, prophethood, and many others are imposed on Islam with the same zeal as Western secular and postmodern values of gender equality, spiritualism, individualism, and self-dependence are imposed worldwide. Even among academic theologians the traditional Christian interpretation of Genesis 16 lays the foundation for considering Ishmael and his descendants as the *bad guys* and excluding them from the circle of God’s blessings and care.

The only way to avoid *Theological Orientalism* would be to return to a careful and thoughtful study of the Bible. Christians need to learn to do exegesis as the art of reading the Bible in a way to learn something new from the text itself (Paulien 2004:79), even though it might contradict one’s initial presuppositions. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts,” says the Lord in Isaiah 55:8 and thereby God warns us to avoid eisegesis (reading into the text) and subjectivity—the main characteristics of Theological Orientalism in mission.

### Experiential Mistrust

Experiential mistrust is a category Sardar develops based on the fol-

lowing assumption. Christianity has gone through a process of merging with secularism and embracing its ideals. Notice Sardar's criticism:

Christianity is, or ought to be, an antithesis to secularism. Yet it became tied to a particular culture, a particular scholarly trend and historic experience of a particular people. Instead of explaining the Bible and Jesus's ministry within changing circumstances, cultural settings and different languages, scripture and Jesus were made to serve the ends of European secularism. (Sardar, Inayatullah, and Boxwell 2003:164)

It is hard to disagree with this statement. Modern Christians in general appear to be more the lovers of the world than lovers of God. Religious devotion has been transferred from the concerns of God to the rational concerns of this world. From Sardar's Muslim perspective this world is concerned with power, domination, and subjugation imposed by the Western world on its non-Western partners. The same has happened to Christianity. "If Christianity has embraced the ideals of secularism with a vengeance, then it is not surprising that most Christian missionaries exhibit the major characteristics of liberal secularism—imperialistic tendencies, dehumanization, domination and meaninglessness" (Sardar, Inayatullah, and Boxwell 2003:166).

Thus Christianity must regain a reputation of a faith of personal salvation, strong moral values, meekness, and meaningfulness for the ordinary person. Jesus' call, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28) should become a motto for the process in which human theological reminiscences will be abandoned for the sake of biblical truth. The ultimate goal of such a process is to turn away from human inventions as religion and return to God himself and his Word that become flesh.

Another aspect that Sardar touches on in the above quotation can be identified as a lack or complete absence of contextualization of the Christian message for Muslims. This lack of contextualizing is a regression from early church practices. For example, when the gospel spread in the Jewish context, the concept of monotheism was contextualized in the New Testament through a Logos Christology, "one that identifies Jesus as how God reveals himself to his creation as creator, ruler, judge and so forth" (Parsons 2005:2). Later on, Christianity moved to Hellenistic territories where Platonism had a very strong influence that presented God as a distant being who could not be defined as the one having any relation with the world except through his ontological being. In that situation the patristic creeds were contextualized and to some extent described God as existing in three persons, putting emphasis on the distinctions within the godhead rather than on its unity (Parsons 2005:3-4). This is the Christian heritage

that has been brought into the Muslim world.

But Muslim culture with its adherence to strict monotheism resembles Judaism more than Hellenism. Thus approaches for presenting the gospel and biblical values should be developed according to this type of context. Critical contextualization is also a must if there is any hope of success in spreading the Good News among Muslims.

### Theological Mistrust

When discussing theological mistrust, Sardar focuses on the fact that Christianity has been transformed into a *cult of Jesus* (Sardar, Inayatullah, and Boxwell 2003:159). This is a very serious charge so perhaps any discussion with Muslims should start with the pivotal Islamic concept of *tawhīd* or God's oneness. Such a concept prohibits ascribing divine attributes to anyone or anything besides God. That is why ascribing partners to Allah is viewed as obvious idolatry and constitutes an unforgivable sin in Islam (*shirk*).

How have Christians dealt with this matter and how has Jesus been presented to Muslims? In most cases Christian mission to Muslims have taught that Jesus is the Son of God with the meaning that he is God himself. For us as Christians, the sonship of Jesus is directly and unquestionably connected with his divinity.

However, it would be good for us to step back for a moment and think whether the theology of the church and biblical teachings on this topic are one and the same. Could it be possible that Sardar is right when he calls modern Christianity a "cult of Jesus"? The *Oxford English Dictionary* (n.d.) refers to a cult as "a small group of people having religious beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister" thus deviant social movements. How much deviation is there in our Christianity of today in comparison with biblical times, especially considering the issues related to Jesus and his sonship status? In order to answer these questions we need to look back into history and through the Bible. Sardar himself acknowledges that "the long history of debates on the nature of Jesus shows Christian understanding of who Jesus is, is not that simple; neither is there a single answer accepted by all Christians" (Sardar, Inayatullah, and Boxwell 2003:160).

Throughout the history of Christianity both concepts—Jesus as the Son of God and the Son of God as the sign of Jesus' divine nature—underwent serious transformation. I will start with the idea of Jesus as the Son of God. What do Christians mean by saying that Jesus Christ is the "Son of God"? The average Christian thinks that "Son of God" refers to Jesus' divinity. What does the Bible mean?

The Old Testament uses the idea of sonship in regard to three groups:

(1) angels—Gen 6:2; Job 1:6; Dan 3:25, (2) Israel—Exod 4:22-23; Hos 11:1, and (3) kings—2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7. When the Bible speaks about the sonship of Israel or of a king, it assumes the concept of election for the purpose of serving God, experiencing His special love, mercy, protection, and gifts (Green 2003:644). In Hebrew thought, the term *son of* indicated a peculiar relationship with God, especially for a king, who was called “son of God” after his enthronement, which signified his authority and role as God’s regent, God’s representative, one ruling on God’s behalf (2 Sam 7:12-16).

The New Testament tightly connects the idea “son of God” with Jesus personally. The Gospel of John has numerous statements about the Father and the Son. John’s Gospel is frequently considered to be the best narrative proving Jesus’ divinity as the Son of God. But if the text is carefully read, Jesus’ understanding of sonship and his relationship with God the Father can be expressed in the following ways:

1. Son of God is the one who completely obeys God’s will in actions, words, and lifestyle (4:34; 5:23, 30; 8:55; 12:50).

2. Son of God is the one who does the same things that God does (5:17, 19, 21-22, 24, 27-29; 8:16; 9:4; 10:37). Because God sets an example by doing something, the Son of God is able to do the same: “For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing” (John 5:20). The Son is functionally subordinate to the Father and does only those things that the Father gives him to do and say; but he does *everything* that the Father does, since the Father shows him everything that he himself does.

3. Son of God is the one who has a very close intimate connection with God. The pinnacle of such a relationship is described by the metaphor in John 1:18, “who is in the bosom of the Father.” This metaphor includes knowing God (8:55), possessing what God has in his possession (13:3; 16:15), and glorifying God (12:28; 14:13).

4. Son of God is the one who is loved by God and this love constitutes the foundation of the relationship (3:35, 5:20; 10:17).

Thus it may be concluded that instead of divinity, obedience, unity, and mutual indwelling are the key characteristics in John’s Gospel for the term “son of God” and thus for Jesus as the Son of God. James D. G. Dunn comments that in early Christianity, “certainly ‘son of God’ as applied to Jesus would not necessarily have carried in and of itself the connotation of deity” (1989:22).

The biblical title of Jesus that did carry a divine connotation was “the Word of God” or *the Logos*, used by Christians for the first four centuries. Following the biblical tradition, *Logos* was identical with God among early Christians. In contrast with the tradition of Neoplatonism that described *Logos* as a mediator in the relationships among the three elements of the Plotinus’ trinity (see *Logos Neoplatonism*), the Bible ascribes to *the Logos*

divine sovereignty and supremacy. This contrast is particularly obvious in the prologue of the Gospel of John. Many modern Christian theologians deny any parallel or succession of John's *Logos* with its Hellenistic counterpart. The following table is one such example (Lopukhin 1912:319-320).

**Table 1. Comparison of the Logos Concept in Philo's Writings and John 1:1**

<i>Logos</i> of Philo	<i>Logos</i> of John
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The world soul or the universal intellect that acts in matter.</li> <li>2. The second God, aggregation of divine powers, divine intellect.</li> <li>3. Not eternal but created.</li> <li>4. Stands beyond mortal matter, cannot incarnate.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The personality, real living person of Christ.</li> <li>2. The divine Person, not equal to the Father.</li> <li>3. Co-eternal with the Father, not created.</li> <li>4. Accepted human flesh.</li> </ol>

Bruce Chilton summarizes as follows: the prologue of the Gospel of John identifies the Word with God but not with Jesus (Neusner and Chilton 1998:20). The Word is the original creative source of everything. Only fourteen verses later the Word is identified with Jesus, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." During the first four centuries Christians called Jesus Christ "the Word" (the *Logos*) when referring to his divine nature. This changed as a result of the Arian controversy.

The favorite term of Arius was "begotten" (*monogenes*), found in John 1:18. Arius argued that Jesus was God's offspring, someone created, not an eternal being (Hall 2000:161-166). He used Jesus' other titles, such as "Wisdom," "Logos," and "Son of God." In order to settle the bitter debates caused by Arius' position, the early church had to come up with an official statement. The Nicene Council declared that the Son was true God, co-eternal with the Father, and begotten from His same substance (*homoousios*, or *consubstantial*), yet different and separate from the Father. Arguing that such a doctrine best codified the scriptural presentation of the Son, as well as traditional Christian belief about him as handed down from the Apostles, the Council secured this understanding in the Nicene Creed. Rick Brown notes that "since Arius had based his position on the fact that Jesus is called God's Son, they replaced 'Word of God' in the Creed of Caesarea with 'Son of God,' but added an explanation that 'begotten' meant 'from the being of the Father.' . . . After this people began to

use ‘Son of God’ the way they had used ‘Word of God’ before, to refer to the divine nature of Christ” (Brown 2000:49).

Emphasizing separation rather than unity in the Godhead, the Nicene Creed has become a determining philosophy in the Christian Church. It was like a “veil laying on their mind” that prevented the first missionaries to Muslims—such as like Henry Martyn (1781-1812), Karl G. Pfander (1803-1865), Thomas Valpy French (1825-1891), William St. Clair Tisdall (1859-1928), and many others (Parson 2005:4-27)—from seeing the common ground between the Qur’an and the Bible contained in Jesus’ title “Word of God.” The Qur’an acknowledges Jesus’ exalted position as *kalimah Allah* or the word from/of Allah (see Al Imran 3:39, Al Imran 3:45, An-Nisa 4:171). No Muslim has a problem recognizing this truth. So instead of insisting on Jesus as the Son of God, why not to use the common concept which speaks about the eternal, creative, and exalted nature of Jesus? Is it possible that Christians should rethink what they really believe—biblical revelation or patristic indoctrination?

The patristic creeds were good in their time. They indicated that the church was adjusting to new challenges. Like the Living Word of God that always works, moves, and develops, the early Christians who lived by that Word were rethinking, reorganizing, and reconsidering biblical revelation; they lived through the Bible. Unfortunately Christianity has lost this blessed capacity and has turned personal faith into a state religion with its frozen dogmatic beliefs and rigid theology. The Reformation was required to shake up the “white tomb” of Catholicism to give a fresh breath of air to the relational concept of Christianity. As Seventh-day Adventists we believe in permanent growth in Jesus Christ through close intimate relationships with him as a vital necessity. The Word, which is life, should live in us and we through him. The Word is a change agent for our character and nature, but it is also a change agent for people around us, to whom we give ourselves in loving service. Religion does not have power to change people, but the Word does. God has the power to change us and make us better people. This statement is hard to argue with from both sides—Christian or Muslim. And nobody would dare call Christianity a cult. So instead of promoting religious beliefs that separate people let us lift up a God who is able to unite us.

### Conclusion

As I finish writing this article the Muslim-Christian world is shaken and torn by a wave of protests throughout many Muslim countries against an anti-Islam film, *Innocence of Muslims*, that was produced in the USA. September 14, 2012, became a “black Friday” for many American and European embassies all across the Muslim world. After Friday prayers, pro-

testers lashed out at the U.S. and other diplomatic targets. Among news reports and Internet pictures of brutal violence and burning anger that tear my heart, I can catch glimpses of God's hand working in these circumstances. Muslim men and women stand with posters expressing sincere condolence for Chris Stevens' death in Benghazi. Rapper and activist Lupe Fiasco tweets his take on the violent protests: "Would the prophet be angry at a depiction of him? I think he's seen worse. . . . You're playing into the hands of your enemies. . . . Prophet Muhammad taught me to be respectful of others and be patient in the face of ridicule" (Fiasco 2012). I see photos of an ordinary Christian girl holding a sign: "Sorry people of Islam. This hateful video does not represent America or Christianity." Two elderly American men carry signs: "Stop attacks on Muslims" and "Stop Anti-Muslim bigotry."

Our interconnected globalized world can make people extremely distant and hostile to each other in an instant, but it can also draw them incredibly close together in a second. Someone's values in a far-off corner of the globe can be deeply appreciated or they can be cruelly attacked using the Internet access. While some things can be considered the essence of one's life, they can cause death to others. It seems that every particle of this world becomes a double-edged sword. It is easy to become disoriented. It is easy to feel lost.

That is why we must realize and acknowledge that none of the problems in this globalized world can be solved individually, whether we are talking about a single person or a single political/state/religious system. Dialogue is a must for our survival. The Peoples of the Books—Muslims and Christians—can set a productive example. While remaining unique, we can be united and can put our houses in order. Working together we can find answers to fundamental questions: "How should we live?" or "What should we do as believers?" or "What kind of communities should we build?" The most important thing in any dialogue is the ability to hear the others who are at the table. For interreligious dialogue it becomes crucial to listen to others because only then will we be able to hear the heartfelt needs of their side. To satisfy them is a practical step that reflects one's theoretical background. Theory merged with practice will help to win the battle and will never lose the war. As Adventists we know that the real war is the Great Controversy between God and Satan. In that battle God does not need us to defend him. He wants his children to unite forces to withstand the attacks of the evil one. Taking heed of constructive criticism can help Christian-Muslim dialogue to be productive.

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