

Accad, Martin. *Sacred Misinterpretation: Reaching Across the Christian-Muslim Divide*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019, 396pp. By Keneth Pervaiz.

There is a long history of conflict between the Christian and Muslim communities. Historical studies reveal that these struggles are deeply rooted in the political, cultural, socio-economical, and theological spheres. Although Muslim-Christian conflict has existed since the rise of Islam, recent events such as 9/11, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, wars in Afghanistan and Syria, immigration, and the refugee crisis have further intensified the antagonism between the two communities. Amid these growing conflicts, Martin Accad's book attempts to create a "positive dialogical conversation by engaging in a text-based study of Christian-Muslim theological dialogue and its relation to the conflict between Islam and Christianity" (xxv). Accad employs theological exploration of the Bible and the Qur'an to minimize animosity between Muslims and Christians (7), as he believes that theology can play a constructive role in diminishing these conflicts (xxiv–xxv, 7).

The book includes ten chapters: Chapters 1 and 2 are foundational in understanding the premises and key concepts which Accad utilizes throughout. In the introduction (chapter 1), he explains one of his major claims, that effective witnessing to Muslims depends on one's accurate understanding of Islam (7). He describes "the Kerygmatic approach," highlighting it as a useful and practical approach to Christian-Muslim dialogue. According to Accad, this approach, being Christ-centered and supra-religious, would "allow every religion to shine in its own right by transcending institutional religious boundaries... it is a Christ-centered rather than Christianity-centered approach"¹ Chapter 2 provides the hermeneutical framework which will help to avoid theological misunderstandings between the two communities. The author argues that

¹ <https://christianmuslim.div.ed.ac.uk/an-introduction-to-sacred-misinterpretation/>. In his interview, Accad defines and clarifies what he means by the Kerygmatic approach to Christian-Muslim dialogue.

misinterpretation of the sacred texts occurs when a person approaches another religion's Scripture from their personal religious worldview.

Chapters 3–9 discuss key theological themes which have been crucial and controversial in Muslim-Christian relations from the seventh century until today. After discussing the doctrine of God in dialogical history (chapter 3), the author examines Christological understanding in the historical Muslim-Christian dialogue (chapters 4–5). The next two chapters (chapters 6–7) investigate the doctrine of Scripture, demonstrating how the early Muslim scholarship understood the Christian Scriptures, as well as how Christians must understand and communicate their Scriptural truths in light of this dialogical history. Chapters 8 and 9 examine Muhammad, the most prominent figure of Islam. These chapters offer the Islamic understanding and historical accounts of Muhammad's perception through Muslim-Christian dialoguing. The last chapter (chapter 10) concludes the discussion of theological themes, encouraging both communities to pursue peace and harmony for the present and future.

Critical Evaluation of the book

In *Sacred Misinterpretation*, Accad attempted to address a significant issue whose historical roots can be traced from the seventh century until today. The book has many positive features. The author's lucid writing and depth of knowledge of historical sources engage the reader's attention and motivate him to explore the subject. Firstly, in chapter two on *Hermeneutics and Dialogue*, when discussing the two misconceptions of Christians in reading and interpreting the Qur'an, Accad states that the legitimate interpretation should be "the interpretation that is admitted by the community of faith to which a sacred text belongs" (43). He highlights the Islamic hermeneutical principles (44–57) for the legitimate Qur'anic interpretation, which can enlighten the reader as to the nature and methodology of the Qur'anic interpretation. Secondly, since the book attempts to develop constructive Muslim-Christian relations by tracing the Christian-Muslim dialogue throughout history, the reader finds in it a wealth of ancient Islamic and Christian literary statements. Third and lastly, Accad's selection of theological doctrines which he deems to be the

cause of theological conflict between the two communities is noteworthy. For instance, the doctrine of God, the issue of Christology and the trinity, and the authenticity of Muhammad's prophethood have always been points of contention between Christian and Muslims. Thus, the author's in-depth discussion of these themes provides readers with a helpful analysis of Muslim-Christian dialogue.

Despite these features, the book is questionable in many of its interpretations, perspectives, and arguments, especially if we consider that Accad claims to be an evangelical, Bible-believing Christian. I will highlight several points to show how Accad's assertions and major arguments are specious and problematic.

First and foremost, Accad's adoption of the "kerygmatic approach," which he borrows from Karl Barth (10) to inspire positive Christian-Muslim interaction, might alarm Christians who regard the text of the Bible as sacred. Barth's writings on the doctrine of Scripture illustrate his belief that the Bible was not the *direct* Word of God, and thus fallible and errant.² Following in Barth's footsteps, Accad informs his readers that the kerygmatic approach is "the equivalent of this Barthian revelation of God" (11). Accad does not clarify whether he shares Barth's view on the doctrine of Scripture; however, a learned reader may view Accad's treatment of Christian Scripture negatively. In his treatment of the Bible to advance his "kerygmatic approach," Accad distinguishes between Jesus and the Scripture. Biblical doctrines are less significant than the person and revelation of Jesus Christ (9–10, 101, 142–143). For instance, in his introduction, Accad emphasizes that, "although God is the absolute truth, no single religious system is infallible or completely satisfactory" (10). For Accad, a "religious system" refers to a set of religious texts and its doctrines which he does not consider infallible. This is evident in his discussion of the Muslim understanding of Jesus, as he suggests Christians should appreciate Muslims for affirming the importance of Jesus' full humanity (142), and overlooks the scriptural, traditional, and doctrinal evidence of Jesus' deity. From an evangelical perspective, although Christians believe in Jesus as

² For a comprehensive study of Barth's view of Scripture, see Klaas Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

the ultimate manifestation and representation of God through whom God carries out His redemptive plans, we cannot know Jesus without the Bible. The Christian Scriptures—as the inerrant and infallible Word of God—hold a prominent and authoritative place in directing people to God’s character and His salvific work: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). This biblical passage validates how God’s inspired Scripture, i.e., the Bible, directs Christians’ doctrines, teachings, and living; thus, it must be taken as the ultimate source to inform our Christology, as well as our views of Islam. The reader of Accad’s book will be often uncertain of how highly Accad views the Bible.

Accad’s low view of Christian Scripture is also evident in his discussion of early Muslim thinkers’ usage of the Bible (particularly between the seventh and fourteenth centuries). Accad begins the historical analysis by informing his readers that he will focus on “the Gospels only” because of: (1) the limited space, (2) the Muslims’ extensive use of the Gospels in their interaction with Christians, and (3) the Gospels’ role as the foundation of Christian doctrine (63). This is somewhat confusing and may leave a Christian reader wondering why he would ignore the rest of the New Testament writings. Even if one agrees with Accad’s first two reasons for choosing to focus only on the Gospels, the third reason is flawed. Are the Gospels more authoritative than the rest of the New Testament? Are the Pauline and Johannine epistles less important in what they say about Jesus than the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke? While the Gospels describe the life, ministry, and death of Jesus, much of the foundational Christian doctrines come from the rest of the New Testament corpus. Accad’s reliance on the Gospels alone, without consulting the remaining New Testament literature, is unwise. This results in a distorted picture. Ironically, the Muslim community and their enormous scholarship have always shown a keen interest in rejecting the Pauline and other apostles’ letters in order to justify their Islamic ideology. Accad follows the exact same approach. Just as Muslims misrepresent the Gospels’ teachings and narratives by denouncing, for instance, the Pauline writings, Accad eventually follows the same trend. The writings of Peter, John, James, and Paul drive the theology and teachings of the Church, just as the

Gospels do. Every book of the New Testament proclaims biblical truths which conflict with Islamic theological claims, particularly about Jesus and Muhammad's prophethood.

Accad also discusses whether the God of Christianity and Allah of Islam are the same. He states that "the difference between the Christian and Muslim understandings of God is far more a matter of emphasis than one of nature" (80). One may wonder what that means: is it a word game? He argues that the theological misunderstanding concerning the divine being lies in an overemphasis of God's attributes, and not his nature. Here, Accad's opinion—led by his ambition of bringing two communities together—is questionable because it deliberately ignores the biblical evidence of God's nature. The biblical God differs in nature from the Qur'anic God in two main ways: the Trinity and the Incarnation.

Concerning the Trinity, while Muslims entirely refute the Trinitarian aspect of God by accusing Christians of believing in polytheism, the Christians, based on the Scriptural evidence, firmly believe in the triune God (2 Cor. 13:14; Matt. 28:19; Jn. 14:16-17; Rom. 14:17-18; Lk. 3:21-22). Surprisingly, Accad ignores the triune nature of God in his discussion on the doctrine of God, where Christian and Islamic theology run opposite to each other. Is this further evidence of Accad's low view of scripture?

Concerning the Incarnation, the God of the New Testament differs completely in nature from the Allah of the Qur'an. The Bible teaches that God became flesh—that is, he assumed a human nature and became a man in the form of Jesus Christ—who will be called Immanuel, meaning "God with us" (Matt. 1:23; Jn. 1:14; Rom. 1:3-4; Phil. 2:5-7). Although all-powerful and holy, God remains interactive with human beings. On the contrary, Allah is transcendent and can neither be comprehended by imperfect humans nor relate on a personal level (Q 59:23; 112:1-4). Consequently, the theological differences regarding the doctrine of God lie not only in emphasis but also in nature.

In the same vein, Accad argues that, while Muslims give centrality to God's power, justice, and wrath, Christians, on the other hand, highlight God's mercy and love. He further adds, "...Christians tend to overemphasize the contrast between the *loving* Christian God and the *just*

and *wrathful* Muslim God” (80). Accad’s indictment against Christians for overstressing God’s loving character is unjustifiable. While upholding God’s loving, merciful, and benevolent character which was manifested in Jesus’ life and sacrificial death, Christians do not ignore God’s justice, holiness, wrath, and punishment. Both the Old and New Testament writings portray God not only as loving and merciful to His people (1Jn. 4:7-21; Ex. 34:7; Ps. 103:7-14), but also just, powerful, and wrathful (Rom. 12:19; Lk. 18:1-18; Zech. 7:9; Lev. 19:15; Nahum 1:2-8; Eph. 2:1-4). Christians who study and understand the true biblical doctrine of God always view God’s attributes in balance.

Accad sums up the discussion of God’s doctrine by stating that “the question of whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God” is a subjective matter (104) and our worship does not rely on “the correct intellectual understanding of God” (105). Perhaps Accad needs to be reminded that, in sound biblical theology, our understanding of God is deeply connected to our worship of Him. The correct understanding of God’s character (which is *objectively* grounded in the scriptures) leads to true worship.³ The above arguments authenticate the critique that Accad, under the influence of the “kerygmatic approach,” holds a low view of the Christian sacred text, and thus fails to follow his own recommended hermeneutical principle which states that the interpretation of a sacred text must be done within the framework developed “by the community of faith to which a sacred text belongs” (43).

Furthermore, in the introductory chapter, Accad highlights the importance of maintaining a positive attitude towards Islam, which he believes is necessary in order to have healthy relationships with Muslims. Thus, he claims that:

Your view of Islam affects your attitude to Muslims; your attitude, in turn, influences your approach to Christian-Muslim interaction, and that approach affects the ultimate outcome of your presence as a witness among Muslims (7).

Accad’s belief that one’s perception of Islam affects his/her relationships with Muslims is unpersuasive (7). This belief may hold true in a broader sense, but Accad’s proposed link

³ For a detailed analysis of the subject, see Nabeel Qureshi, *No God but One: Allah or Jesus?: A Former Muslim Investigates the Evidence for Islam and Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 49-69.

between one's attitude towards Islam and his relationship with Muslims is misconstrued. He seems to believe that, in order to have a positive attitude towards Muslims, one must hold a positive view of Islam. I think a person can love Muslims even if he or she views Islam negatively. At times, the most loving thing one can do is to help Muslims view their religion realistically. Hence, forcing oneself to view Islam positively *merely* for the purpose of pleasing Muslims is futile in the long run. Our attitudes and relationships should be grounded in truth and objectivity.

It is obvious that Accad's preoccupation with finding common theological ground to create constructive Muslim-Christian relations conflicts with some of the core biblical doctrines such as the Bible's sufficiency, the biblical view of Jesus' divinity and crucifixion, and so on (101–102, 103–105, 142, 144–45, 183–84, 258–59, 287). Concerning the Bible, the author states that Christians do not need to view “their Scriptures as though they were another descended Qur'an,” and that Christians should believe Christ is the only reliable, eternal, and living Word of God. He argues that “other means of revelation are subservient to God's salvific act in Christ” (258). Such statements implicitly demonstrate that Accad, while emphasizing Jesus as the culmination of revelation, holds a low view of Christian Scripture and orthodox doctrines (101–103). Also, his analysis of the biblical text from the perspective of Christian-Muslim dialoguing and harmony, in some instances, overlooks Christian Scriptural evidence which clashes with the Islamic ideology. For example, in his attempt to resolve the Muslim-Christian conflict concerning Christology, Accad advises Christians to appreciate the fact that Muslims affirm Jesus' humanity (142). However, he ultimately leaves out the discussion of Jesus' deity. Can any Christian or Muslim truly follow, understand, and worship Jesus without His divinity? The Christian hymn Accad quotes from Philippians to advance his point not only mentions Jesus' humanly humility (2:6–8), but also His divinity (2:9–11).

In chapter 3, Accad devotes a whole section to “The Qur'an's vindication of Jesus,” where he argues that both the Qur'an and the Muslim tradition portray Jesus positively in the sense that He is never slandered (82–89). He further writes that, although one can find negative remarks about Jesus' disciples and the early Christians in Islamic history, “Jesus himself always remains

blameless” (82). I think Accad, focused on maintaining an optimistic attitude towards Islam and ambitious about Muslim-Christian interaction, fails to understand that a “positive portrayal” is not necessarily an “accurate portrayal.” In other words, Jesus’ positive representation of the Qur’an does not prove it as accurate and reliable. The Qur’an refutes Jesus’ divinity, crucifixion, and resurrection—how can this representation be respected?

Another observation is that, in developing positive dialogue between the two rival communities, Accad’s suggestions are one-sided: he not only pushes Christians *alone* to take the initiative for theological harmony, but also expects them to compromise their core biblical doctrines in order to resolve theological issues (104–105, 142–43, 145, 183–84, 259). In the “Concluding Thoughts” in chapter four, Accad asks Christians to focus on the sacrificial death of Jesus and not “on the historical event of the Cross” (144–45). Can Christianity stand without the theological significance and historicity of the cross? Not only that, he recommends that Christians should revere and celebrate Muhammad’s prophethood because the Qur’an affirms Muhammad’s prophethood (183). Accad does not care whether the Bible confirms this idea or not—for him, the Qur’an’s approval is sufficient. Moreover, it is worth noting that Accad devotes a whole chapter to the amendments and the corruption of the Christian Scripture, but never mentions the Qur’an’s infallibility or the ambiguous history of its compilation.⁴ Therefore, Accad’s handling of the discussion does not demonstrate the true nature of Muslim-Christian dialogue. Instead, it commands Christians alone to bear the burden of the Muslim-Christian conflict.

Overall, Accad’s effort and intention “to build up a constructive foundation for dialogue through an exploration of theology” (7) is a good step forward. Nonetheless, the Christian-Muslim interaction he desires is only possible in the Western world. In predominantly Muslim countries, such dialogue can invite persecution and even death. As a native of a predominantly Muslim country, I have witnessed discrimination, violence, physical affliction, persecution, and death as

⁴ See, Keith Small, *Textual Criticism, and Qur’ān Manuscripts* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011).

Christians have attempted to engage in dialogue with Muslims without compromising the biblical doctrines.

I think Gabriel Reynolds' comment, in his foreword of this book, on the analysis of the Islamic narrative of Christian delegation from Najran is profound and represents a symbolic picture of Muslims' overall understanding and attitude towards Muslim-Christian dialogue. He states that the narrative of Christian delegation from Najran presents Muhammad "as a debater and missionary" who is "not interested in dialogue with the Christians" but "in their conversion" (xviii). More or less, Muslims' response to dialogue even today is similar to Muhammad's: their interest lies not in intellectual or relational conversation, but in religious conversion.

Finally, I believe that Muslim-Christian dialogue through theological exploration can help resolve political, social, and theological tensions. I also believe, however, that such relational restoration between the two communities should not be carried out at the expense of exploiting or distorting the truth about Christian doctrines. From the Christian perspective, the radical message of the Gospel has no room for peoples' desire to dwell in the greyish area of negotiation; rather, it calls Christians to bring people to the cross through the message based on biblical truth.

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