

‘YOUR SWORDS DO NOT CONCERN ME AT ALL’: THE LIBERATION THEOLOGY OF ISLAMIC CHRISTIANITY

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1 Introduction

In this paper I will draw on the work of Robert Schreiter to discuss different forms of local theologies. I will suggest that one of those is a form of liberation theology. After some background on the overused word ‘contextualization’, it will be suggested that within evangelical mission circles the original vision of contextualization as organic has largely been lost as contextualization; it became an additional tool in the tool box of missionary strategies, to be done largely in a directed manner *by* the missionaries. I will then argue that the predominant form of organic contextual theology in Islamic Christianity is a form of liberation theology. This is characterized by its understanding of theology as praxis and wisdom, its use of poetry, narrative accounts, and apologetics in public discourse, and an *agape*-centred soteriology. The goal is a transformed society with freedom of religion and assembly and an acknowledgment of the reality of their conversion—all of which goals defy the Islamic shari’a.

2 What is Islamic Christianity?

My use of the term ‘Islamic Christianity’ comes with some reservations². For the person familiar with the topic of mission to Muslims

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‘Islamic Christianity’ is simply the religious forms of Muslim background believers (MBB’s) and their communities. The word ‘Islamic’ here refers to an origin: that the Christianity of the persons involved has been influenced by the fact said persons were reared and grew up and educated in an Islamic context. Regardless of how that experience of Islam comes to be viewed later, that common origin in an Islamic context marks a key difference from other forms of Christianity. Second, the word ‘Christianity’ here is understood broadly, meaning allegiance to Jesus Christ as he is portrayed in the Gospels (that is, not *only* as he is portrayed in the Qur’an). The form of that allegiance or commitment, its depth, motives, and so on, change from person to person, and need not be defined in advance. Finally, and this is important, ‘Islamic Christianity’ and ‘Muslim Christian’ are very rarely used as a self-label. Within this large disparate movement there are so many different self-identifiers (Jesus Muslims, Muslim followers of the straight path, Muslim disciples of Christ, *mutanassiriin*, New Christians, Christians from a Muslim background, etc) that to treat each group as unrelated to the other is to ignore two key factors: their common origin and faith in the Gospels as genuine, uncorrupted revelation.

3 Indigenization and the local church

The word *contextualization* was coined by Taiwanese pastor and scholar Shoki Coe in 1972. The setting was theological education and not missionary methodology. Coe understood contextualization as the next step beyond indigenization, and indeed this is a key factor for anyone who wishes to understand what contextualization is. This will be the first topic addressed in this writing.

Multiple analogies have been offered to describe contextualization: for instance, communicating the seed of the gospel while removing the cultural hull. The analogy has its limitations, some of which we will touch on. Nevertheless, it does offer a helpful beginning point,

² I first introduced the term in ‘Reappropriation: An Accommodationist Hermeneutic of Islamic Christianity’ and I develop the concept in greater detail there (pp 4-6).

at least in terms of understanding how evangelical missionaries and mission-strategists understand contextualization. We will begin with a discussion of the original meaning of the word as coined by Coe, then move on to some evangelical developments whereby the concept was co-opted as an auxiliary to missionary method. We will then examine attempts to differentiate between the more traditional models of indigenization/adaptation and genuine contextualization. Finally, using Robert Schreiter's analysis, we will note three models of local theologies which we find in Islamic Christianity. One of them is a form of liberation theology, and an explanation of that will occupy the second part of this paper.

By indigenization we understand the process whereby a local church is brought under the leadership and direction of persons indigenous to that region and/or culture. How the term 'local church' is defined is largely influenced by the ecclesiology of the missionaries who founded the work. It may be a single congregation, a cluster of city churches, or an entire region (ie, a diocese). Indeed, in the New Testament the word is used in all these manners, and Paul can speak of the church in Galatia (an entire region), the church in Rome (probably multiple congregations within a city), or a discrete congregation (the church that meets at so-and-so's house).

The key shift with indigenization is then the transfer of authority to indigenous agents so that the catechists, elders, pastors, priests, and bishops are not foreigners. Indigenization is a gradual process; it is quantitative, not qualitative. The Anglican Diocese of Iran has a bishop from Pakistan presently. He is not entirely indigenous, but his cultural locus is much closer to Iranian culture than would be that of a bishop from North America. Indigenization then is related to the extent to which the mission and witness of the local church is informed by individuals conversant with the local culture(s).

Three points must be made here for the sake of clarity. One: indigenization does not necessarily mean that the local church will *look* on the surface any more like the local culture. There are entire Catholic dioceses in Africa where the leadership, all the way up to the bishop or archbishop, is indigenous to the area. But the theol-

ogy taught is thoroughly Roman Catholic and the liturgy is, as they say, 'more Catholic than Rome.' Similarly, the Anglican congregations in Israel, while led by indigenous pastors, are much more thorough in their use of traditional Anglican hymnody than are many Anglican parishes in the Church of England, which have no problem with using tunes borrowed from Latin America, the USA, Australia, and Africa: these are praise choruses which, in their origins, have no connection whatsoever to Anglicanism—as broad as that term is. Does this represent a failure of some sort? Advocates of contextualization would say *yes*. More is needed. Indigenization is significant and important, but it is not enough.

The second point is this: The extent to which a church is indigenized or should be indigenized is itself fluid and depends on the local context of that church. Many churches (or communions of churches) place a good deal of import on the fact that they are *not* only local. The prime example of this is the Catholic Church, but one might then mention the Orthodox Churches and the Anglican Communion, and finally those churches which have 'world federations' of some sort—the Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, and so on. There is no such thing as an indigenous leader in this context. The limits and desirability of indigenization are informed by the global context. 100% indigeneity is, in the end, probably not possible in the globalized world of today.

Lastly, multiple examples of 'indigenization' being rejected by the indigenous Christians can be provided. One fine example is in Harper 1995, where the local missionaries want to build a church using indigenous materials and design. This is rejected by the local Christians because they associate such indigenous buildings with the negativity of their subservience to higher castes. They opt, not without much sacrifice, to build an English-style church building, which was much harder to build.

4 Contextualization as the next step beyond indigenization

Many individuals, including Shoki Coe, have examined the process of indigenization and concluded that it failed to address the realities

of the educational and social needs of the churches. Let us remember here that Coe coined this term in reference to what he perceived as inadequacies in theological *education* and *social* challenges:

The theory of contextualisation did not develop in a vacuum. If one were to be true to the principles of the theory, one should admit that contextualisation was a product of its times. It was indeed a culturally conditioned notion that found its impetus in dissatisfaction with the status quo of theological education. Coe implies that the Christian churches in Europe and North America, in the estimation of many, were not theologically prepared for the turbulent 1960s and 1970s.³

It is clear from Coe's writing that he and the Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the World Council of Churches believed that indigenization, while an important step in the life of the younger churches, could not be the final goal:

Indigenous, indigeneity, and indigenization all derive from a nature metaphor, that is, of the soil, or taking root in the soil. It is only right that the younger churches, in search of their own identity, should take seriously their own cultural milieu. However, because of the static nature of the metaphor, indigenization tends to be used in the sense of responding to the Gospel in terms of traditional culture. Therefore, it is in danger of being past-oriented. Furthermore, the impression has been given that it is only applicable to Asia and Africa, for elsewhere it was felt that the danger lay in over-indigenization, an uncritical accommodation such as expressed by the culture faiths, the American Way of Life, etc. But the most important factor, especially since the last war, has been the new phenomenon of radical change. The new context is not that of static culture, but the search for the new, which at the same time has involved the culture itself. (1973: 240)

In light of these factors, a new way of doing theology is needed. This led to the introduction of two terms, contextuality and contextualization:

By contextuality we mean that wrestling with God's world in such a way as to discern the particularity of this historic moment; and by contextualization we mean the wrestling with God's word in such a way

³ Coleman, Verster 2006: 97.

that the power of the incarnation, which is the divine form of contextualization, can enable us to follow His steps to contextualize. (1974: 7)

“Indigenisation [...] was more about ecclesiological form than theological substance” (Stanley 2007: 22), and this is something that Coe addresses by arguing that it is not enough to yield authority to indigenous agents who, in their own patterns of religious thought and practice, had to a significant degree either ignored the indigenous *context*, or had compartmentalized practices and teachings into ‘Christian-imported’ and ‘indigenous-local’. Or, to put it positively, the indigenous leaders (like Coe) are committed to integrating, critically, the traditions and patterns of life found in their indigenous cultures and the Christian message in their praxis, history, universality and thought. Non-indigenous leaders are committed to humble and patient discussion with their fellow leaders. Such discussion is not entirely uncritical though. Contextualization, insofar as it is Christian, must always account for the local *and* the catholic, the historical and current, balancing them in the *ethos*, *praxis*, and *symbola* of the community.

So far so good. But what happened when evangelical practitioners of mission approach the topic (after a period of suspicion), and start asking, what if *we*, for the sake of Christian mission and evangelism, contextualize our message *ab initio*?

5 Two kinds of contextualization: organic and directed

At this point we must differentiate between organic contextualization, which is more or less the process described above. A church is established, the church is indigenized to the appropriate degree, and then the indigenous communities engage in contextual thought and practice; this adds to, affirms, challenges, or modifies other local theologies, eventually even making its contribution to catholic thought and praxis. But with the entry of figures like American Phil Parshall in the late 70’s and early 80’s, we must specify another sort of contextualization: one that is done by missionaries and evangelists preemptively, based on their knowledge and understanding of the culture of the people they are trying to evangelize.

To some extent this has always been part and parcel of Christian mission. A certain sense of adaptation has always been present, though it waxed and waned. A fine example of this is in Pope Gregory's message to Augustine (d. 604), the missionary bishop in Canterbury⁴. He instructs Augustine to destroy the idols in the temples, but to cleanse the temples themselves and convert them into churches since the people are familiar with them. Also, since these new converts were used to making animal sacrifices, Augustine should find some feast (Gregory doesn't seem to care which one) when the new Christians can gather and slaughter cattle, not as an animal sacrifice but because of the joyous occasion of the saint's festivity. Countless other examples could be provided. This fact is neither surprising nor are the churches ignorant of it. Reflecting on this history of mission Pope Pius XII wrote in 1951:

...the Catholic Church has neither scorned nor rejected the pagan philosophies. Instead, after freeing them from error and all contamination she has perfected and completed them by Christian revelation. So likewise the Church has graciously made her own the native art and culture which in some countries is so highly developed. She has carefully encouraged them and has brought them to a point of aesthetic perfection that of themselves they probably would never have attained. By no means has she repressed native customs and traditions but has given them a certain religious significance; she has even transformed their

⁴ "And because they are used to slaughter many oxen in sacrifice to devils, some solemnity must be given them in exchange for this, as that on the day of the dedication, or the natiivities of the holy martyrs, whose relics are there deposited, they should build themselves huts of the boughs of trees about those churches which have been turned to that use from being temples, and celebrate the solemnity with religious feasting, and no more offer animals to the Devil, but kill cattle and glorify God in their feast, and return thanks to the Giver of all things for their abundance; to the end that, whilst some outward gratifications are retained, they may the more easily consent to the inward joys. For there is no doubt that it is impossible to cut off every thing at once from their rude natures; because he who endeavours to ascend to the highest place rises by degrees or steps, and not by leaps." In Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of England*, ch. 30. Available online at www.ccel.org/ccel/bede/history.v.i.xxix.html, accessed 27 Oct 2010.

feast days and made them serve to commemorate the martyrs and to celebrate mysteries of the faith. (*Evangelii Praecones* §58⁵)

But there are limitations here. Returning to Gregory's advice to Augustine, further on in the letter we find the expectation that sooner or later the Angles will become sophisticated, mature Christians (like the Romans). In other words, the allowance was pragmatic, based on facilitating missionary efforts, but not necessarily born of the profound questions being asked by the Angles. This is also the sentiment expressed unapologetically by Pius XII above.

If organic contextualization is an extension of indigenization, then directed contextualization is a deliberate extension of this pragmatic adaptation. In the image of the analogy of the seed, it is the *missionary* who takes the kernel *sans* husk to the new land, and plants it there; that is *directed* contextualization. Organic contextualization is a much slower process; it does involve transplanting the entire seed, husk and all, and hoping that after many generations the genus will have adapted to the new soil and weather, and thrive. Directed contextualization, largely a product of American evangelicals, is characterized by its urgent focus on productivity that is not unrelated to the form of capitalism prevalent in that country.

Directed contextualization involves the construal, in the minds of the missionaries, of what it would look like if organic contextualization occurred. It represents a circumvention of what is a slow, messy and arduous process. For example, during one interview⁶ I conducted with a mission strategist from the UK who had spent many years in Turkey, he made an interesting comment about the early ordering of worship with the ex-Muslim Christians there. He recounted how he had arrived there, in a rather large city, and meet-

⁵ Accessed on 27 Oct 2010

<www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_02061951_evangelii-praecones_en.html>

⁶ Interview done by Skype in March 2010. Name of missionary withheld at his request.

ing with the Christian Turks⁷ had suggested traditional (rustic) Turkish meeting customs, like sitting on the floor and using traditional instruments. They looked at him like he was crazy. “What do you think? That we are from some village?” they asked. During the interview he explicitly said of himself and his fellow missionaries, “We had read our Parshall.”

This demonstrates an important point. What the missionaries *think* people will be comfortable with is subject to a very significant degree of error. The Turks were cosmopolitan and Western. Many of them had not been very religious as Muslims and had no great deal of affection for those patterns of behavior. His explicit mention of Parshall is also important, because it was Parshall’s 1980 volume *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism: Evangelical Approaches to Contextualization* that really injected on a large scale the idea of using (directed) contextualization to mold a kind of Islamic Christianity that would be palatable to Muslims. Accompanying this was a helpful solution to an historical riddle that had vexed the missionary community for centuries: why have Christians been so unsuccessful in evangelizing Muslims? Answer: they did not contextualize their message correctly. It is in this volume that Parshall proposes the famous (or infamous, depending on whom one asks) Jesus Mosques. The form of worship at the mosque is preserved with minimal modifications and, moreover, Muslims don’t have to use the self-identifier ‘Christian’; now they could be Muslim followers of Jesus or Jesus-Muslims⁸.

But let us return to the analogy of the seed, which actually appears in the foreword⁹ to Parshall’s *New Paths*. In this understanding of contextualization it is, as was mentioned, the missionary who takes the kernel (but not the husk) to the mission field. But what

⁷ And I do mean Christians of Turkish ancestry, not only Turkish citizens who are Christians belonging to an ethnic minority like the Armenians.

⁸ The 1997 July/October issue of *Mission Frontiers* has two articles on the topic: ‘Of “Jesus Mosques” and Muslim Christians’ and ‘A Different Kind of Mosque’. Both can be accessed online at www.missionfrontiers.org/pdf/1997/0710/sbt.htm as of 27 Oct 2010.

⁹ Written by Warren Webster.

exactly is the kernel? Is being 'a Christian' part of the kernel or not? Is belonging to 'the Church' part of the kernel? Is baptism part of the kernel? With Catholic and Orthodox forms of Christianity one can identify a fuzzy but usable core of practices, narratives and doctrines that connote orthodoxy. However, this is not so easy within evangelical Christianity. There are at least two reasons for this: one is structural, in that evangelicalism is rather fragmented. The other is that most evangelicals understand themselves as receiving direction from God through the Bible in a *non-mediated* manner. Because of this, appealing to historical consensus, confessions, documents, or councils may be insufficient for discerning orthodoxy. Furthermore, since the meaning of the Bible is *non-mediate*, it is sometimes difficult to establish a consensus on what this or that verse means, much less how it might be applicable to the question of mission to Muslims.

While the main concern of this writing is not to focus on instances of directed contextualization, I do think giving two final examples of the most creative forms of directed contextualization would be helpful. The first one is a harmony of the Gospels written in classical Arabic titled *Siirat al Masih bi Lisan Zarabi Fasiih* (or in English, *The Life of the Messiah in a Classical Arabic Tongue*). This harmony of the Gospels was composed by two scholars, one American and one Palestinian, who desired to present the teachings and life of Jesus to Muslims in a manner that they would understand and accept. Multiple steps were taken to make this occur: First, this is one book, so the traditional four gospels have been folded into one. This is more amenable to how Muslims understand the meaning of the word *injiil* as it occurs in the Qur'an, where it is portrayed as a single body of teachings given to Jesus by God. Second, each chapter is given a name much like the names of the surahs of the Qur'an. We thus have sections named *Al Kalima* (The Word) which is a rendition of the opening verses of John 1, *Al Midhrwad* (The Manger), *Al Sab3iin* (The Seventy), *Al 3arsh* (The Throne), *Al Xubz* (The Bread), and so on. Finally, the verbs and nouns and sentence structure used throughout are heavily influenced by Qur'anic language. The project is a fascinating one and warrants much further

research¹⁰, but the reason it has been mentioned here is to give an example of directed contextualization. The translation and adaptation of the Gospels into this one volume is one of the best examples of directed contextualization in relation to Christian mission to Muslims.

One more example should be provided. This instance of directed contextualization was devised as a way to plant home churches consisting both of local Western Christians and Muslim disciples of Christ, some of whom might call themselves Christians, while others may not. It is being used in several cities in the USA, though its long term success (or failure) has yet to be determined. The program begins with several teachings on the nature of Islam, the Qur'an, the Prophet, and customs found in many Islamic societies around the world. After that basic education, a group of people from a local church (or churches) then agree to meet at someone's home on a regular basis for a meal which is followed by a liturgical prayer where men and women are separated, portions of the Bible are read, and a 'contextualized' version of the Apostles' Creed may be used as a confession of faith/*shahada*. These people are committed to getting to know Muslims in their neighborhoods, intentionally speak with them, and form a genuine friendship with them. At the meals, the food is all halal and neither pork nor alcohol is ever served. The idea is that Muslims invited to participate in this sort of community will feel more comfortable than they would if invited to church on a Sunday morning, which is hardly an unreasonable conclusion. Furthermore, from the point of view of discretion for the Muslim who wants to know more about the Christian faith, having dinner with friends attracts much less attention than attending an actual church building. Eventually, the goal is that as an MBC is established, organic contextualization would then also become possible.

¹⁰ One of the individuals involved in this project is now deceased; the other (the American), no longer classifies himself as a Christian and in an interview (2010) told me he regrets the entire the endeavor.

Many more examples of directed contextualization could be given, but these two were chosen because they demonstrate how bold and creative evangelicals can be in their witness to Muslims, and specifically in their willingness to engage in directed contextualization. In a later section examples of organic contextualization will be examined, which is the central concern of the second part of this writing.

6 The syncretism-contextualization controversy

This reality has led to a controversy among missiologists and missionaries that goes by several names¹¹. The most concise name, though, which will be used here, is the syncretism-contextualization debate. The literature on this topic is massive. The battle has been carried out in the pages of journals like *The International Journal of Frontier Mission*, *St Francis Magazine* and *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*. The details of this controversy are beyond the immediate scope of this writing. However, as an introduction it should be said that the lack of consensus on *how* to engage in directed contextualization, and the related question of what the *limits* of said contextualization are, have led to some deep disagreements. Those supporting a vigorous project of directed contextualization see themselves as finally shedding the chains of a Western culture from the gospel, completely removing the husk from the kernel, and making that message intelligible to Muslims. Those who are suspicious of this project level accusations of syncretism and compromising the gospel. To return to the analogy of the seed, one side says, look we're planting just the kernel, and you're moving an entire tree! The other side says, you've killed the whole seed.

This controversy is not actually about contextualization itself. There is a sense among evangelical missionaries and missiologists that *organic* contextualization is, in general, positive and healthy for a local church. The debate is regarding who should do the contextualization. Should the missionaries engage in strategic adaptation

¹¹ For example, the C4-C5 debate, the Insider Movement controversy, the Contextualization-Extraction problem. All of these names are inadequate.

(as Pope Gregory recommended above), establish a church, transfer leadership to locals (indigenization), and then converse with them as they engage in contextualization, knowing that this process will take multiple decades? Or should missionaries preemptively contextualize the Christian message for their audience, going beyond the mere adaptations that have always been a part of mission, as in the examples just presented? That is the question that is perhaps the key burning issue right now in the world of evangelical mission to Muslims.

To some degree, directed contextualization represents a pronounced departure from what both Coe and Schreiter intended when they used the word. For Coe it was precisely the teaching, thought and praxis of the Western churches that had been unsuccessful. Because of this, the newer churches had to move beyond indigenization to contextualization. Furthermore, the term was coined to address questions relating to education and social order. Both of those are related to mission and evangelism, but when some evangelicals co-opted the idea, they made two alterations: first, it became directed; and second, it was enlisted to provide new strategies for evangelistic mission.

With these clarifications regarding the history behind the meaning of the word *contextualization*, we are prepared to explore Robert Schreiter's theory of local theologies, and then apply those insights to the Islamic Christian milieu.

7 Schreiter on local theologies and contextualization.

In searching for some system of classification whereby we can investigate the different forms of local theologies, we turn to Robert Schreiter's 1985 *Constructing Local Theologies*. Schreiter proposes that there are three types of local theology: translation, adaptation, and contextualization. Translation theologies are the most basic sorts of local theologies, they are often related to evangelism, and seek 'dynamic equivalents'. Curiously, Schreiter connects this most basic form of local theology to the 'kernel and the husk' image which is quoted in the foreword of *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism*,

and to which reference has been made above. The translation model relies on knowledge of tradition and works under the assumption that culture is easy to decode. Beyond translation, we find varieties of adaptation models. In adaptation models we find foreign and local theologians using indigenous concepts to re-formulate what is still substantially the imported theology. Adaptation models tend to begin with tradition and then use local terms and concepts to re-formulate the tradition. Only when we reach contextualized models of local theology, which we are most interested in, do we find that the theology *begins* with the local concerns and local concepts, and, only then goes on to draw on the tradition where that may be profitable. We find this insight echoed elsewhere: "What contextualization means is that you are asking the questions to which people want to know answers" (Abu Daoud 2009: 96).

Schreiter describes contextualized local theologies as 'embodying the ideals of local theology' (12). He also explains that there are two types of contextual theologies, the first being ethno-graphic, and 'concerned with local identity' (*ibid*). Its goal is usually maintenance of social identity and family bonds in the face of urbanization and globalization, both of which submit persons' identities to substantial pressure. The second form of contextual theology (and recall that Schreiter published this book in 1985) is liberation theology. This form of local theology focuses on 'dynamics of social change in human societies' (14), is concerned with salvation, and seeks to 'analyze the lived experience of a people to uncover the forces of oppression, struggle, violence, and power' (15). Let us note also that Schreiter, while allowing a role for the outsider in the development of a local theology, does not seem to allow that a genuine contextualized theology can be directed. As he explains it, the primary theologian of a local theology is the local, worshipping community. Liberation theology is also characterized by its method,

wherein, “biblical and theological reflection cannot be separated from the goal of transforming lives and history...”¹²

A difficult question has to do with the Schreiter’s ‘kernel and husk’ image, one that many evangelicals use to describe contextualization, as simply a mode of translation. Is it true that this image over-simplifies what contextualization represents? Let us operate along the hypothesis that the answer is yes: it tends to over-simplify the nature of the Gospel as something that is easily defined and supercultural. Also, it tends to see cultures as being easy to analyze and, to use a word that Schreiter resorts to often, decode. So, either Schreiter and the evangelicals are using this image in different ways, or evangelical efforts at direct contextualization in fact represent the most rudimentary sorts of local theologies. A full investigation of this question lies outside the scope of this writing.

Based on Schreiter’s categories of local theologies, I propose that within Islamic Christianity there are three distinct approaches to the formation of local theologies. They are: 1) A genuine, organic, contextual model of the liberation variety which is characterized by praxis, apologetics, conversion narratives and poetry; 2) A genuine, organic model of the ethno-theology variety, which is also characterized by its use of poetry, emphasis on continuity of identity, understanding of Islam as a civilization (and *not* a religion), and is sometimes conflated with the third variety; 3) a directed (pseudo-)‘contextualization’ which is carried out by some missionaries and is in fact a variety of Schreiter’s translation model; it is often conflated with the second model.

What is being discussed here are trends and generalities. These are not three discrete schools, as if that concept even existed within Islamic Christianity as it does in Western academia or theology. Nevertheless, they are all present and if we wish to analyze *approaches* to the formation of local theologies within Islamic Christianity, these three general classifications are of great use. The re-

¹² Goizueta, RS. ‘Liberation Theology’ in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, William A Dryness and Veli-Matti Karkkainen eds. (Downers Grove, Delaware: IVP 2008). P 493.

mainder of this paper will concern itself with an exploration of the first type of local theology: liberation.

8 Liberation theology as praxis and wisdom

It might seem that to mention liberation theology here is anachronistic. Is not the heyday of liberation theology over? Surely for Schreiter, writing in the mid-80's, it was understandable that he would include the genre, but today? But let it be noted that liberation theology need not be concerned *primarily* with material poverty, as was often the case in Latin America. Schreiter gets right to the point when he says that these models are primarily concerned with salvation from oppressive structures. Here is a recurring theme in this Islamic Christian theology: liberation from what is perceived as the slavery to Islam, the shari'a, and the Prophet. Disappointment with Islam, indeed anger at Islam, is not uncommon among ex-Muslims¹³. Since Islam employs slavery¹⁴ as the meta-theme for explaining the relation between God and humans, it is not unreasonable to call this practical rejection of Islam, its book, and its prophet, a theology of liberation. Furthermore, it is clearly not concerned with one ethno-graphic group. Practitioners of this theology range from Copt to Arab to Bengali to Persian. They will tend to identify themselves as Christians, seeing that different moniker as an important signpost signalling their movement from slavery to liberation. An example of this are movements in North Africa where the communities call themselves 'the new Christians', rather than opting for something like 'Muslim followers of Jesus.'¹⁵

Nevertheless, it is incorrect to picture this sought-for liberation in solely negative terms, i.e, liberation *from* the shari'a. That is in-

¹³ One pastor I interviewed who has very extensive experience ministering to Iranian Muslims and ex-Muslims in the West said that it is one of the key challenges involved from the angle of pastoral care.

¹⁴ Rather than filiation/redemption, as is the case in Christianity. Christianity does employ the servant/slave imagery as well, but it is not as prominent as it is in Islam where it is perhaps the key term to describe man's relation to God.

¹⁵ Cf. Madany 2009: 50.

deed a recurrent theme, but it is with the goal of reaching somewhere else, of constructing a new society. As Ibrahim Arafat¹⁶, an ex-Muslim originally from Egypt, wrote to me in correspondence, “We are done with Islam and good riddance to bad rubbish, and the question that remains is, how do we fight for our rights and not yield to that Eastern fatalism in resignation to persecution” (May 2010). To use a favourite theme from the Latin American tradition, the goal of the Exodus was not the destruction of Pharaoh’s armies, but entering into the Promised Land. But the former had to happen to make the latter possible.

To understand the aim of this liberation theology, we must identify certain realities about life in Islamic states. In most of the Muslim world it is impossible to have one’s religious status officially changed from Muslim to Christian, while it is easy to have it changed from Christian to Muslim. Countries like Jordan and Egypt that have signed the Declaration of Human Rights have done so with the caveat that the said declaration is only valid when it does not disagree with the Islamic shari’a. Furthermore, all schools of shari’a agree that the male apostate must be slain¹⁷. Regarding female apostates, they must be slain or imprisoned for life¹⁸. While the state itself does not usually carry out the sentence, often times a family member will and the police force will turn a blind eye. All of this is mentioned to explain why individuals who identify themselves as Christians often are, on paper, Muslims. If anything, this reinforces the image that Islam is a jail from which one must be lib-

¹⁶ Whose conversion narrative can be read online at answering-islam.org/authors/abraham/testimony.html

¹⁷ “The excommunicated unbeliever is not only damned in the world beyond; he is outlawed in this world. He is deprived of all legal rights and barred from all religious offices; his very life and property are forfeit. If he is born a Muslim, his position is that of an apostate, a dead limb that must be ruthlessly excised” (Lewis 1953:59). “To this day, all five major schools of Islamic jurisprudence agree that a Muslim who abandons Islam must be executed...” (Fatah 117).

¹⁸ “There is also disagreement on whether a female apostate is to be killed or merely imprisoned until she returns to the faith. Her offense is not regarded by any school or jurist to be of less magnitude, the disagreement merely relates to whether the appropriate punishment is death or life imprisonment.” (An-Na’im 211).

erated. Kenneth Cragg explains the complexity of the apostate's situation well: "It is assumed that Islam is a faith that no Muslim would conceivably wish to question. Consequently the option to do so is neither valid nor feasible. It is nonexistent. Looked at from this side Islam is a faith that no adherent is free to leave. And that which one is not free to leave becomes a prison, if one wishes to do so" (Cragg 1956 [2000]: 307). The oppressive structure that this theology aims to overturn is nothing less than the Islamic shari'a. This theology of liberation announces its message primarily in three modes of discourse: poetry, conversion-persecution narratives and apologetics. Instances of poetry abound, what is unfortunate in that we must limit ourselves here to translations, but even with translations we encounter a sincere energy. Let us begin with one example from Fatima al-Mutayri (trans. unknown), a convert to Christianity and citizen of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, until her martyrdom at the hands of a family member in 2008. She was 26:

The ode that Fatima Al-Mutayri wrote before her martyrdom¹⁹

May the Lord Jesus guide you, O Muslims
And enlighten your hearts that you might love others
The online forum²⁰ does not revile the master of the prophets
It is for the display of truth to you and for you it was revealed
This is the truth which you do not know
And what we say are the words of the master of the prophets
And we do not worship the cross and we are not insane
We worship the Lord Jesus, the light of the world
We left Mohammed and we are no longer on his path
And we follow Jesus the Messiah, the clear truth
And truly we love our homeland and we are not traitors
We take pride that we are Saudi citizens
How could we betray our homeland and our dear people??
How could we, when for death for Saudi, we are ready???

¹⁹ *The Way of Fatima*...8, 9.

²⁰ It appears that Al Mutayri wrote this poem as a response to a poem posted on an online forum for Christians in the Gulf. That message accused those Christians of several things, some of which Fatima mentions here, and then threatens them with death.

The homeland of my grandfathers and their glories for which I am writing these odes

And we say, “proud, proud, proud, we are to be Saudis”

We chose our way, the way of the guided

And every man is free to choose which religion

Be content to leave us alone to be believers in Jesus

Leave us to live in grace until our time comes

My tears are on my cheek and, oh! the heart is sad

On those who became Christians,²¹ how you are so cruel

And the Messiah says: blessed are all the persecuted

And we, for the sake of the Messiah bear all things

And what is it to you that we are [considered] infidels?

You will not enter our graves or be buried with us

Enough, your swords do not concern me at all

Your threats do not concern me and we are not afraid

By God, I am for death, a Christian, oh my eye

Cry for what has passed in a sad life

I was far from the Lord Jesus for many years

Oh history record and bear witness, Oh witnesses²²!

We are Christians walking on the path of the Messiah

And take from me this information and note it well

You see Jesus is my Lord and he the best protector

I advise you to pity yourself and clap hands [in resignation]

And see your look of ugly hatred

Man is brother of man, oh learned ones!!!!

Where is the humanity, and love, and where are you

And my last words I pray to the Lord of the worlds

Jesus the Messiah, the light of the clear guidance,

That he changes your notions and set right the scales of justice

And spreads love among you oh Muslims.

Let a note be made of a number of qualities in this poem. First, is that the author has no reservation about using divine titles for Jesus Christ, specifically ‘Lord of the Worlds’, which is a traditional Islamic title for God and certainly not for Jesus. Second, the author

²¹ The word translated here ‘those who became Christians’ is *mutanassiriin* in the Arabic. It is significant to note that there is a single Arabic word meaning ‘convert to Christianity’.

²² Arabic: *Shaahidiin*.

is very aware of the reality of violence, but follows the ethic outlined in the Sermon on the Mount,²³ praying for her enemy to repent and, presumably, join her in her embrace of the Christian faith. Third, the author has no problem calling herself a Christian (*ana masihiyya*). Fourth, we see something like what we have in the early church. The Christians were then accused of being bad citizens because they were Christians. Similarly, in a country like Saudi Arabia, embracing Christianity is often seen as an act of treason against the state. The author here follows (probably without knowing it) the pattern of Tertullian²⁴ who exclaims that Christians are not bad citizens, but perhaps the best of all citizens! Fifth, there is a strong hermeneutic of the love of God being the heart of the Christian faith that resurfaces again and again in writings as diverse as the Pakistani Bilqis Sheikh's *I Dared to Call him Father* and the Egyptian Emir Rishawi's *A Struggle that led to Conversion: Motives for a Gospel-based Faith*²⁵. Lastly, there is an unabashedly evangelistic tone here. This comes across better in the Arabic of the final line: *wa yubashshir al mahabba baynakum ya muslimiin*. The word translated 'spread' can also mean *evangelize* in Arabic. Furthermore, it refers explicitly to Christian evangelism, because the normal word for Islamic evangelism is entirely different (*da3wa*).

As we read Al-Mutayri's writings the motif of disappointment with Islam becomes clear as well:

Muslims claim that Islam is a religion of peace and love and to this day. Muslims never hesitate to mention this in their media to the extent that they drive us crazy with it. When I was a Muslim and sleepwalking through my days, I repeated the same words. I used to claim that Islam does not attack others, but after doing a study about Islam, I discovered the opposite is true. (12)

An extended amount of time could be spent on an analysis of the few writings we have of this young woman. But let us examine an

²³ Mt 5-7.

²⁴ See for example *Apologia* 42, 43.

²⁵ Originally published in Arabic under the title *saraa3 'adda 'ila al ihtida': dawaa3 lil imaan al injiili*.

instance of liberation verse that focuses very clearly on persecution and evangelization, two themes which are so close to the heart of these theologies:

Selections from 'Steadfast'²⁶

Advance! With the streams of living water...it's the time for evangelism

Don't be afraid...it's a dangerous time

Fill your heart with love...the revolution of love drives away fear

Any other god is evil

Opium for people and naïveté of the mind

Your Christ is a path of reformation and a sun of enlightenment

Don't be afraid...all the enemy's wells are dry

Whitened tombs...decorated...papers on which death is written

Steadfast...steadfast

We'll evangelize

In our cells, we'll evangelize

In solitary confinement, we'll evangelize our body cells

We'll evangelize the particles of the air...we'll baptize the steel bars

We'll save the walls...we'll light the tombs with your light

We won't keep silent

These verses were written (in Arabic originally) by someone who simply used the name Mozafar.²⁷ Let us note how directly and closely evangelism and persecution are linked to each other in these verses: 'it's time for evangelism...it's a dangerous time.' Also, the hermeneutic of love again comes to the forefront: 'the revolution of love drives fear away.' The liberation motif is formulated in terms of transitioning from being in a drugged state to clear sight and light radiating from Messiah who is 'a sun of enlightenment.' The image of the sun is especially important for anyone who has spent time in a jail or prison in the Muslim world, since they often times have no ventilation or windows.

Finally, note the uncompromising language. A Muslim reading this might well suspect (perhaps correctly) that the 'papers on which death is written' are nothing other than the Qur'an. The ex-

²⁶ In Copeland, ed. 2003: 171, 2. Trans. Unk.

²⁷ His entire conversion narrative can be read in Copeland, ed. 2003.

PLICIT mention of baptism also puts forth a sensitive topic with no sense of timidity. Bilquis Sheikh, an ex-Muslim from Pakistan, explains how baptism is seen by Muslims: "I knew that the significance of baptism is not lost on the Muslim world. A person can read the Bible without arousing too much hostility. But the sacrament of baptism is a different matter. To the Muslim this is the one unmistakable sign that a convert has renounced his Islamic faith to become a Christian. To the Muslim, baptism is apostasy" (Sheikh 61). One ex-Muslim pastor strongly connects baptism and the Church, writing, "In the process of baptism one should take oaths like, 'I have received Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord. I will lead my life according to the teachings of the Bible, and *I will do whatever the Church instructs me* to do consistent with it', etc. How can a person dare to leave Christ after receiving instruction and taking oaths of this kind?!" (Emphasis added, Ayub 2009: 30). Similarly, when Masood is told by the Western pastor at the Methodist church in Pakistan that he should be baptized in private, he resists, insisting on a public baptism during the Sunday worship (150). Thus, while some of the doctrinal elements in this theology are informed by Western evangelicalism²⁸, there remains a tendency to interpret rituals as being very important regarding the construal of identity - and this in contrast to most of Western evangelicals who tend to have a low estimation of ritual acts *qua* signifiers. It is not clear precisely what the source of this difference regarding baptism is. But American anthropologist, Edwin Zehner, who has studied con-

²⁸ One could expand on the relation between Western evangelicalism and this Islamic Christian theology of liberation. "What contextualization means is that you are asking the questions to which people want to know answers" (Abu Daoud 2009: 96). Western evangelicalism and this liberation theology are really not asking similar questions at all, nor do they have the same methodology or epistemology of theological knowledge. This liberation theology rarely involves itself with complex dogmatic questions, though on one occasion when it does (Rishawi 1993: 171-5), the author ends up disagreeing with no less a doctrine than penal substitution! That having been said, most of the traditional hallmarks of evangelicalism are here, ie *sola scriptura*, a high Christology, an emphasis on a personal act of conversion to Christ, etc.

version from both Buddhism and Islam to evangelical Christianity, offers one suggestion:

I personally suspect that new MBBs value baptism more than even the missionaries do, because they are already used to the notion of a "ritual of entry" (two of them, in fact—the *shahada* and circumcision). The missionaries, on the other hand, almost all come from backgrounds that [regard] baptism as a symbol, delaying it, and even [...] shifting some of its New Testament symbolic resources to other "acts of entry" such as the "prayer of conversion."²⁹

This is a theology of praxis: "As understood today, praxis is the ensemble of social relationships that include and determine the structures of social conscience" (Schreiter 91). In relating praxis to liberation we read further, "Since oppressive relations occur in every society, and in many societies characterize the larger part of social life, praxis can come to be defined as revolutionary or transformative practice, aimed at the changing of those patterns" (*ibid*). The main oppressive pattern here is not economical as was often the case with the Latin American varieties of liberation theology. Rather it is the entire edifice of Islamic shari'a. Shari'a stipulates death for these apostates, but Fatima commands, "Leave us to live in grace, until our time comes." To the efforts of the shari'a to silence the propagation of the Gospel, Mozafar announces to God, "We'll light the tombs with your light."

The subversive praxes whereby this liberation theology seeks to undermine the shari'a are evangelism and apologetics. The most well known theologian-practitioner here is the Coptic priest Abuna Zakaria Botros. Without going into great detail, the systematic theology of Botros, which appears to be a curious if compelling form of Coptic Orthodoxy with evangelical sensitivities, is not the issue. This man was born into a Christian family in Egypt and has never been a Muslim. What is important is the theological message that he is communicating, not in his words, but by the very *act* of engaging in overt, unapologetic, bold evangelization of Muslims. Equally

²⁹ Correspondence with author, March 2010.

scandalous to many Muslims is how successful he has been³⁰. His apologetic ministry, which is broadcast on satellite TV all over the Muslim world, enables a Copt to challenge Muslims regarding everything from the Qur'an to the Prophet to shari'a. This state of affairs represents a huge reversal of the order envisioned in the Qur'an (at least as many Muslims interpret it) wherein Muslims ("the best of all peoples"³¹) enjoy a privileged position above the People of the Book, who "pay the jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued" (9:29). Here then is an example of a person who is technically an outsider contributing both to the formation of this theology and, significantly, to its *praxis*. His preaching and teaching not only seek to (and do) convert Muslims to Christianity, but also to model for Christians how they can do the same thing. The application of this liberation theology is nothing less than bold evangelism which strikes at the heart of the system of dhimmitude, which Kenneth Cragg describes well³²: 'Their [the dhimmis'] authority to worship, to solemnize marriages, to own property, and the like, is contingent on their observing a policy of "introversion." By a legacy of the millet concept it is difficult for them to be at once communities of worship and communities of evangelism. This is a cruel dilemma, but a real one.' When it comes to Islamic milieus, overt evangelism is the apogee of subversive praxis.

Let us turn to the topic of pastoral issues briefly, because it is here that we better understand why the shari'a is perceived as an oppressive structure which must be overthrown. For people in the West it may not be immediately clear how significant it is what

³⁰ During a conversation with him in 2006 he told me he had baptized over 500 Muslims himself.

³¹ The Qur'an 7:89.

³² 2000 [1956]: 320, 1. Note that the millet system is simply the Turkish application of the *dhimmi* principal. Christians are not usually called dhimmis in Islamic countries anymore, though several indigenous, Arab pastors explained to me that they felt that Muslims still had that concept in mind (of Muslims being superior to Christians and entitled to greater rights and status), and that the governments operated accordingly. Thus in Egypt a Muslim can burn down a Christian shop with little fear that the police will do anything at all.

one's religion is officially, rather than personally. As one well-intentioned American evangelical told me, "Who cares what their ID card says, they have Jesus in their hearts!" Let us not denigrate the very significant change that has occurred in their conversion, or to use that rather rustic evangelical phrase, "having Jesus in their hearts." But when one examines the quotidian realities attached to 'official religion' we are left with a sobering picture. This picture is related to the social order imposed by the shari'a. For one, a man who is Muslim, on his documents, may indeed marry a Christian woman, but there are numerous practical difficulties. First, many Christian parents will not agree to have their daughter marry such a man, especially evangelicals. And two, even if the two are wed, their children will inherit the status of Muslim from their father. This means that even if they are baptized and raised in the church, they will take classes on Islam periodically, under a religious teacher, at their school. Second, it means that in all questions of family law, like divorce, custody, and inheritance, cases will be handled according to the principles of Islamic shari'a, and not by Christian church courts.

In the case of an ex-Muslima, she cannot be married to a Christian, as the shari'a prohibits anyone other than a Muslim to take a Muslim wife. Her options are either a Muslim man (which most Christians understand as being contrary to Scripture and/or culturally reprehensible) or a fellow ex-Muslim. If she ascends to marrying a Muslim man who has little or no sympathy for Christianity, she may well be pressured constantly to 'revert' to Islam, and/or be beaten (which the Qur'an permits³³), and she will probably be rejected by the local Christian community—that is if she is even able

³³ "Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them. Surely God is high, supreme." (Dawood's translation of the Qur'an, 4:34) The Qur'an contains a great deal of obscure Arabic words, but the word for 'beat' or 'hit' (*darab*) in this verse is very clear and easy to translate.

to visit them anymore. If she marries a foreigner then she will likely leave the country and she will face all the challenges of a new society in a new country; also, her ability to evangelize her friends and family, so important to this local theology, is drastically diminished. In many ways the second option is ideal. But the difficulty remains that the children will be, in the eye of the law, Muslims. How do you go about raising children who are taught Islam at school, have an Islamic name, have Muslim extended family, and yet attend church, are possibly baptized (depending on the kind of church they attend, probably), and whose parents tell them, "People treat you like a Muslim, but we are Christians." There is a depth here to the difficulty of this sort of pastoral situation that is foreign to most persons used to a secular society. Moreover, this is only *one* instance of how an already difficult situation (conversion from Islam to Christianity) is made all the more difficult by the shari'a. It is not surprising, then, to understand why the very legal system of Islamic society is the object of subversion of this liberation theology.³⁴

In addition to poetry and apologetics, we find a theological source in the use of the conversion narratives, which, using Schreiter's categories, represents theology as wisdom³⁵. Now conversion narratives serve multiple purposes. One is evangelistic, and this is a staple of evangelical Christianity. But in Islamic Christianity they also serve the purpose of a wisdom theology. That is, by a narrative story it tells one *how* to go about converting to Christianity, and

³⁴ For more detailed information on the difficulties faced by converts as they seek to form their new religious identity see Kraft 2007, ch. 8. Kraft, who interviewed numerous converts in Egypt and Lebanon, argues that converts face anomie, disappointment with other Christians, both local and foreign, and especially are challenged by the issue of how to raise Christian children who are treated as Muslims by the State.

³⁵ As opposed to certain knowledge, as is the tradition of Western systematic theology. Western theologies also contain wisdom theologies, the best known being perhaps 'St John of the Cross,' books like *Dark Night of the Soul* and *Ascent of Mt Carmel*. We also find poet-prophets in Western theology, like TS Eliot. He is often quoted by religious scholars and theologians, though seldom referred to as a theologian per se. If Schreiter is correct then it is entirely appropriate to call Eliot a theologian.

within the narrative answers complex questions about relating to hostile family members, evangelism, persecution, imprisonment, employment, how to interact with unsympathetic Islamic governmental authorities, how to interpret visions and dreams, and so on. Shorter conversion narratives can be found on the internet³⁶ and in print³⁷, but it is the book-length ones that offer the fullest treatment. We should also note that sometimes the convert will tell what he or she did, and then explain why it was not the best thing to do, and what they should have done. There is clearly a pedagogical element in these narratives. Thus we should not interpret these narratives as vainglorious auto-hagiographies, but as genuine attempts of ex-Muslims to communicate how they dealt with the difficulties associated with their liberation. Two examples were mentioned above (Sheikh and Rishawi), but we could also point to books like *Once an Arafat Man* by Tass Saada³⁸ and one which is, in many ways exemplary, *Secret Believers: What Happens when Muslims Turn to Christ?* by Brother Andrew and Al Janssen.

Secret Believers is at once like and unlike other conversion narratives. For one, it is written by two outsiders. Also, as the book freely admits in the introduction, it is not strictly historical but is a *mélange* of different narratives from real converts. This actually makes it stronger as a wisdom theology because it allows for many topics to be touched on, some of which are quite complex. For example, what is the appropriate way to interact with the government when a bribe is expected? Answer: pray but don't give a bribe, and expect to wait more. How should indigenous leadership interact with foreign funders? Answer: the direction of the ministry is the

³⁶ Probably the largest single repository of such narratives is at <http://www.answering-islam.org/Testimonies/index.html>.

³⁷ For example, the *Costly Call* books by Caner and Caner (2005 and 2006) and *In The Den of Infidels*, Lynn Copeland ed (2003).

³⁸ Saada comes from a Palestinian background, and thus the form of liberation he is focusing on is more related to reconciliation in the Holy Land. While still remaining within this tradition (in my view) because he is addressing a different context, the shari'a is not a main obstacle. Rather it is decades of hatred and mistrust and arrogance between Jews and Palestinians.

prerogative of the indigenous leaders; also, a strong emphasis is placed on converts staying within their cultural matrix, even if in a different country. How can a congregation move from antipathy towards Muslims to energy and witness? Answer: Fasting, prayer, good leadership, and challenging the youth to read and memorize the Bible. Once you have a convert in a safe-house, what do you do? (A long answer—read the book.) And so on.

While the book is obviously written from a Christian perspective, it is brutally honest about the difficulties involved, as when the young Christian girl is kidnapped and forced at knife-point to ‘convert’ to Islam and is likewise forced to marry a Muslim cousin who tired of her, divorced her, and then passed her on to his Muslim friend (as his new wife). This may seem inconceivable or ‘Islamophobic’, but this sort of thing does indeed happen. Finally, the authors have an appreciation for the role of the traditional churches (Orthodox, Latin, Greek Catholic, Coptic) in this work. Such a sense of respect is sometimes lacking from other evangelical literature on the topic and ignores the fact that one of the most productive churches in the world in terms of outreach to Muslims is the Coptic Orthodox Church. Finally, we find resurfacing again and again the hermeneutic of love, or if we wish for a more precise term, a liberation/agape soteriology.

This theology of liberation is not isolated only to the Arab world. It is found in the Iranian diaspora all over the world, in locations in Europe, Africa and South Asia as well. We see it being enunciated in ‘A Letter from the Afghan Persecuted Church in Christ’, an address to then-US president George W. Bush³⁹. The background was the new constitution that was going to be passed which would have no provision for religious freedom for Afghan Christians. They are writing to President Bush to ask him to intervene because, “The sword of Islam should be removed from Afghanistan and Afghanistan should be a democratic country instead of Islamic, where all the sects have freedom” (267). The Afghan Christians ask, “...if it is possible to make mosques in US and Rome,

³⁹ Found in an appendix of Andrew and Janssen 2007, pp 265-8.

why could there [not] be a church in Afghanistan???” (268) The letter says there are about 3,000 Christian Afghans at the time of its writing (2003).

One more theme that we encounter multiple times in these conversion narratives is the issue of the Bible, specifically how important it is to the inquirer or the convert, and how multifaceted its role is in these conversion narratives. *Into the Den of Infidels* (Copeland ed. 2003) is a collection of multiple conversion narratives. In it we find the rather lengthy narrative of ‘Paul’. He talks about how nervous he was when he first brought a Bible into his house. His religious teacher had given him a special job to read the Bible and reveal all its errors: “The first day was the most difficult. I was under the impression that the Bible was not from God, and that it might bring demons into my house so I wouldn’t be able to pray. Therefore, I kept it outside my bedroom. For many days I was paranoid. Whenever I heard a sound in the house, I thought God had sent demons to punish me for having this book around” (91). But then, as he reads the book, he experiences a change of heart: “I finished reading the Gospel of Matthew...I read the rest of the Gospels and the Epistles and was amazed to find philosophy and rhetoric superior to those of the Qur’an. Since the Bible was written 630 years before Islam, how could we say that the Qur’an was unique in rhetoric?” (99) The implication (for the Muslim reader, at least) is that there is no danger in having or reading the Bible, and that the ‘philosophy and rhetoric’ of the Bible are at least equal to those of the Qur’an. He later goes on to learn more about the life of the Prophet and becomes disillusioned with him. Near the end of his narrative he reminds readers that as a Christian he now loves his Middle Eastern country more than he ever did before, another recurring motif in these texts.

9 Conclusion

This contextual, local, organic liberation theology understands itself as *praxis*, expressed by apologetics, evangelism and poetry, and as *wisdom*, as is most commonly found in conversion-persecution

narratives. What is the shape of the liberation sought? Acceptance as co-citizens, acknowledgment of their conversion by the instruments of state, and a free and open public square wherein religious agreements and disagreements can be discussed with security and respect and without recourse to coercion, imprisonment, torture, or execution. Furthermore, it is organic. While there are influences and interactions with certain outsiders, like Brother Andrew and Abuna Botros, the narratives, poems, and approaches embodied here are genuinely born from the context of Islamic Christianity and seek to address the questions that originate in that context—persecution, family relations, citizenship, migration and so on.

Whether right or wrong, many persons in this group feel certain that the only thing holding hundreds of thousands of people—maybe millions—from leaving the ‘slavery of Islam’ for ‘the love of God in Christ’ is fear of punishment and persecution. Some have crossed that threshold. Their message is, “Now is the time for evangelism,” and “Love alone can remove grudges, and forgiveness alone can blot out transgression. To die for the killer is the only way to annul killing” (Rishawi 175), and “A man who can disagree and yet remain gracious with you is a hundred times greater than a god who cannot bear divergence of opinion or criticism—the dictator’s fragile throne” (qtd in Andrew and Janssen 15). The dictator’s fragile throne is the entire oppressive system of the Islamic shari’a, and in the words of Fatima al-Mutayri, the goal⁴⁰ is “civility that is transparent in appearance // and a new civilization in all measures and laws.” It is this new civilization that is the Promised Land to which these exiles are travelling. Whether or not they will ever arrive, only time will tell.

⁴⁰ *The Way of Fatima...* 18.

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