

The Right to Religious Conversion: Between Apostasy and Proselytization

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Introduction*

In the Spring of 2006 an Afghan citizen, Abdul Rahman, who had converted from Islam to Christianity was arrested under local *shari`ah* law which mandates the death penalty for apostasy. As a result of international pressure Abdul Rahman was released and given asylum in Italy.¹ This widely publicized incident highlighted the urgent need for Muslims to seriously re-examine the restrictive *shari`ah* laws on apostasy. It is unfortunate, however, that this case took place in the war ravaged context of Afghanistan, where relief aid for the victims of war is dispensed by Christian agencies some with a primarily evangelistic agenda. A similar program of aid evangelism has been undertaken in war-torn Iraq. The activities of such groups have reinvigorated the debate over whether it is ethical for philanthropical activities and humanitarian service to be undertaken with the primary intent to proselytize. The legitimacy of religious conversion and the ethics of mission are challenging issues. But they are also pertinent issues that should form part of an honest dialogical encounter between Christians and Muslims, since they have important implications for conflict transformation and interreligious peacebuilding.

Taking this conflict as its point of departure this paper argues that both the prevailing Muslim positions on apostasy and Christian engagement in aid with the primary intent of evangelism generate a harmful environment for Christian-Muslim

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relations and interreligious peacebuilding. The paper concludes by challenging Christians and Muslims committed to interreligious dialogue to go beyond mere *declarations* of the right of any individual to change his or her religion and decrying the use of inappropriate means to entice the person to switch his/her faith. The deeper challenge is to find creative ways of making such affirmations a key part of the *modus vivendi* of convivial relations between the two communities. It might be useful to commence by re-visiting the question of religious conversion in the context of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Religious Conversion as a Source of Conflict

The problem of the right to religious conversion and the ethics of Christian mission and Islamic *da`wah*² has been a longstanding topic of debate in interreligious dialogue. The subject was considered at length during a meeting between Christian and Muslim scholars and leaders in Chambesy, Switzerland in 1976.³ Since then, the issue has been raised intermittently, most notably at a Christian-Muslim Consultation on “Religious Freedom, Community Rights and Individual Rights” sponsored by the Interreligious Office of the World Council of Churches (WCC) at the Duncan MacDonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1999.⁴ More recently, the question has resurfaced at a number of interreligious forums. For example, at the “Critical Moment in Interreligious Dialogue Conference” convened by the WCC in Geneva from 7-9 June 2005, the problem of religious conversion and the ethics of mission was raised as one of the most divisive issues between religious communities.⁵

Both Christian and Muslim scholars of interreligious relations share concerns over the right to conversion and the ethics of mission. Elizabeth Scantlebury, for example, has argued that the matter of Christian mission and Islamic *da`wah* is central to the negative model of interaction between the followers of the two religions.⁶ Similarly, the Muslim thinker and scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr observed that “one of the most contentious issues in the dialogue between Islam and Christianity is missionary activity.” He goes on to describe it as one of the obstacles and outstanding problems in Islamic-Christian dialogue.⁷ While for many Muslims, Christian mission is the obstacle, for Christians according to the Evangelical scholar, J. Dudley Woodberry, the concern is in the area of religious freedom, and in particular the right of Muslims to convert from Islam.

The question of changing or disseminating one’s religion is not only a source of tension and distrust between Christians and Muslims it is also a bone of contention between Christians, Muslims and other religious communities in diverse parts of the world. In India, for example, religious conversion and Christian evangelism are viewed as sources of deadly conflict. The widespread violence directed against Christians in India, a direct result of Hindu protests against religious conversion, is documented in the Human Rights Watch Report (1999), *Politics by Other Means: Attacks Against Christians in India*.⁸

Explicating the conflict over the right to religious conversion, the Montreal-based philosopher of religion, Arvind Sharma, states that “most modern Hindus are opposed to the idea of conversion, from one religion to another per se.” He further argues that “the Hindu view of religious freedom is not based on the freedom to proselytize, but the right to retain one’s religion and not be subject to proselytization.”⁹ A similar viewpoint is

expressed by Swami Agnivesh, a renowned interreligious activist and the president of Arya Samaj, an international Hindu revivalist movement. Agnivesh confirms Sharma's position, arguing, "It is the prevalent view of most Hindu thinkers, including Mahatma Gandhi, who was known for his religious tolerance, that a true pluralist person seeking dialogue would demand that Christianity and Islam liquidate their missionary apparatus."¹⁰ As a direct consequence of such views legislation in several Indian states against conversion has been debated and in some cases implemented. The most recent case is that of the so-called "Freedom of Religion Bill" which has been adopted by the Rajasthan Cabinet of Chief minister Vasundhara Raje Scindia and is currently before the Legislative Assembly for approval. A number of non-government organizations have challenged the legal validity of such legislation all over India, and pointed out that it violates the fundamental right of freedom of conscience.¹¹

The topic of changing and disseminating one's religion as it relates to the Indian context is also a raging debate within scholarly circles. A multi-disciplinary symposium on the subject formed part of the 19th World Congress of the International History of Religions, in Tokyo, Japan in March 2005.¹² Arvind Sharma is one of the leading advocates for changing the existing formulation of the freedom of religion clause in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for he believes that the existing formulation favors those religions who proselytize.¹³

Yet other scholars, like the Dutch anthropologist of religion, Peter van der Veer, have questioned the validity of the central assumption on which the Hindu case against the legitimacy of religious conversion is based, stating, "I find it quite important to point out that the 'naturalness' or 'givenness' of Hinduism is a myth."¹⁴ Van der Veer's

suggestion that Indians have not been primordially Hindu, and that they converted to what came to be known as Hinduism at some point in history is a challenging proposition that needs to be further explored. Moreover, there are some Hindu strands such as the Hare Krishna who do engage in mission activities. Notwithstanding, the outreach activities of these Hindu groups, it needs to be unequivocally acknowledged however that Hindu mission's pales into insignificance in the face of the global proselytization efforts sponsored by Christians. Not surprisingly, therefore, the question of religious conversion and the ethics of mission, poses a different challenge for Muslims. Unlike mainstream modern Hinduism as depicted by Sharma and Swami Agnivesh, Islam also encourages its adherents to share the teachings and faith with others. But how similar or disparate is Christian mission to that of Islamic *da`wah*?

Christian Mission and Islamic *Da`wah*: A Comparative Perspective

Notwithstanding the fact that Christian mission and Islamic *da`wah* was the exclusive concern of a meeting between Christian and Muslim scholars and leaders in Chambesy (1976), the renowned scholar of Christian-Muslim relations, David Kerr, correctly argues that "little scholarly attention has yet been given to the comparative study of Islamic *da`wa* and Christian mission."¹⁵ A noticeable trend in the paucity of comparative studies that do exist is that while non-Muslim scholars such as William Wagner,¹⁶ J. Dudley Woodberry,¹⁷ and to a lesser extent Antoine Wessels¹⁸ have highlighted the parallels between Muslim *da`wah* and Christian mission, Muslim scholars, on the other hand, have been eager to point out significant differences. Three renowned Muslim scholars who have emphasized the differences are the Pakistani

economist and thinker Khurshid Ahmad, the late Syed Zainul Abedin, founder of the Institute for Muslim Minority Affairs, and the late Palestinian-American scholar Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi.¹⁹

In his editorial to the published proceedings of the 1976 Chambesy Consultation Ahmad, for example, called attention to the differences in the way Muslims and Christians “offer their message to others and at a deeper level, in the way they concern themselves with the world.”²⁰ In particular, he drew a sharp distinction between the methods of doing *da`wah* from what he called “the widespread abuse of Christian *diakonia*.”²¹ Ahmed’s position was reflected in the final declaration of the Chambesy Consultation which condemned in clear terms the misuse of *diakonia* (caritative service and support), and strongly urged Christian churches and organizations to suspend their misused *diakonia* activities in the world of Islam.²² Notwithstanding, the fact that representatives of two of the leading Christian bodies, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Interreligious Office of the WCC, were part of the Chambesy declaration, not all Christians agreed with the strong stance adopted by it. Some Christian scholars have since made similar charges of Muslim organizations offering monetary enticements to Christians in exchange for their conversion to Islam.

Abidin takes Ahmad’s critique even further and proposes that *da`wah* is witnessing the truth solely by means of the exemplary lives of individuals and communities. He contends that making religious conversion the explicit and measurable objective of *da`wah* violates both the prerogative of God, who changes the hearts of human beings, and God-given freedom of choice, without which the call of Islam to faithful submission would be meaningless.²³ Abedin also draws a sharp distinction

between *da`wah* and dialogue. He defines interfaith dialogue as different from evangelism and mission, and sees its primary function as that of social solidarity, joining hands in equality and respect to fashion a better world.²⁴ Abedin's definition of *da`wah* and its methodology is idiosyncratic but may provide us with a useful clue for the development of an ethic of mission and *da`wah*.

Of the three scholarly perspectives on *da`wah*, Faruqi in particular has accentuated its divergences from Christian mission. During his presentation at Chambesy he defined *da`wah* as "ecumenical *par excellence*. All religious traditions" he proposed, are "*de jure*", by which he means that "they have all issued from and are based upon a common source, the religion of God which he planted equally in all men...*din al-fitrah*." While committed to religious pluralism in principle, al-Faruqi opposes relativism and what he describes as "kitchen cooperation," a kind of lazy ecumenism. Based on this novel outlook on religious mission, al-Faruqi views Islamic *da`wah* as "an ecumenical cooperative critique of the other religion rather than its invasion by a new truth."²⁵

The tension between Christian and Muslim perspectives on their common commitment to mission is usefully illustrated by J. Dudley Woodberry when he claims that Faruqi's conception of the nature and ethics of *da`wah* "shows considerable parallels with Christian mission, though he does not recognize it."²⁶ Woodberry's assertion suggests that a significant gap in understanding between many Christians and Muslims on the way in which they perceive of their respective missions. David Kerr is one of the few scholars who have been attentive to this tension. Kerr develops a conceptual distinction between what he calls the "sending" notion of Christian mission and the "calling notion" of Islamic *da`wah*. "The former," Kerr suggests, "entails a centrifugal process while the

second is centripetal.”²⁷ He is acutely aware that these theological concepts are shaped by historical experience and actual practice. He furthermore proposes that Christian-Muslim reflections on mutual understandings of mission and *da`wah* may find renewed consensus in the Eastern Orthodox Church concept of “witness” (Greek *martyria*). The concept resonates with the Qur’anic concept of *shahada* and may provide a way of clarifying intentions and avoiding the malpractices of proselytism.²⁸ The ongoing challenge for Muslims and Christians is to find an ethical consensus on what Woodberry usefully describes as “mutual respectful witness.”²⁹

Recently, partly in recognition of the pressing nature of this challenge to interreligious dialogue, Dr. Hans Ucko, program secretary of the WCC’s Office on Interreligious Relations and Dialogue called on the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue to join the WCC in assuming responsibility to address what he described as “one of the most controversial issues in interreligious relations: conversion.”³⁰ But why have the questions of religious conversion and the ethics of mission and *da`wah* reemerged as critical issues for interreligious dialogue at this time?

The Context for the Reemergence of the Debate

A number of reasons account for the reemergence of the themes of religious conversion and the ethics of mission as critical issues for interreligious dialogue. Chiefly, the questions of religious conversion and the ethics of mission and *da`wah*, while extensively debated at Chambesy and elsewhere, have never been adequately resolved. Second, there is a gaping chasm between well-intentioned and benevolent statements of interreligious consultations and living realities on the ground. Third, is the negative

impact on Christian-Muslim relations resulting from the current belligerent environment generated by the terrorist attacks on the United States of America on September 11, 2001, and the Bush administration's subsequent decision to wage an "enduring war on terrorism" in Afghanistan and Iraq.

I argue that geopolitics are the key source of the renewed interest in the debate about the right to religious conversion and the ethics of mission and *da`wah*. In support of my contention I draw on the theoretical insights offered by Elizabeth Scantlebury. In a seminal article published exactly two decades after the Chambesy dialogue on *da`wah* and mission, Scantlebury argued that the contestation of the two faiths to gain converts at the other's expense always takes place within specific social and historical contexts, which in turn significantly affects the way those involved interpret the situation.³¹ The sociopolitical context may account for why many Christians and Muslims see the relationship between mission and *da`wah* differently. The negative experience of Christian mission due to its symbiotic relationship with colonialism may be propelling Muslims to distance their understanding of *da`wah* from the historical practice of Christian mission in Muslim contexts. Following Scantlebury, I contend that the challenge of religious conversion and the ethics of mission and *da`wah* have taken on even greater urgency precisely because of the heightened religious tensions resulting from the contentiousness of certain Christian aid agencies accompanying the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In this regard it may be expedient to note for example, the views of the American evangelical scholar Charles Marsh. Marsh has brought the problem of war as a context for proselytization into sharp relief in an editorial in the *New York Times* of January 21,

2006.³² He contends that not only did “[A]n astonishing 87% of all white evangelical Christian in the United States” provide overt religious legitimation for the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, but some of their most prominent leaders, like Franklin Graham³³ and Marvin Olasky,³⁴ drummed up support for the wars through Sunday congregational sermons touting such conflicts as creating “exciting new prospects for proselytizing Muslims.”³⁵

Given that the religious legitimation for the US war in Afghanistan was even stronger than that for the war in Iraq, since that country’s Taliban regime was more directly linked to the September 11 attacks, it is not surprising that these same members of the Evangelical community coveted the Afghanistan war’s evangelizing prospects more zealously. In fact the question of proselytization was already a contentious issue prior to the toppling of the Taliban regime. In August 2001, the Taliban charged eight members of a German aid agency, Shelter Now, of promoting Christianity under the cover of relief efforts. The workers were all later rescued by a US helicopter. This incident, however, was greeted with great antipathy by some Christian organizations who denounced the Taliban regime, and was touted as yet another example of the lack of religious freedom in Muslim countries.³⁶ The freeing of the aid workers was greeted with great fanfare by these groups. Not unexpectedly, almost four years after the US invasion of Afghanistan the question of the right to religious conversion found it’s most publicized case in Afghanistan. There have been many other similar cases, frequently charged under the Taliban’s harsh “blasphemy laws.” Yet, another of these cases of religious persecution would dominate the international headlines another four years on.

The Conflict between Religious Freedom and the Islamic Law of Apostasy

In February 2006, an Afghan national, Abdul Rahman, who had converted to Christianity in 1990 while working as a medical assistance for a Christian non-governmental aid group in Peshawar, Pakistan, was arrested and charged with apostasy under what was interpreted to be traditional *shari`ah* laws. The case received worldwide publicity, with an Afghan court threatening to execute Abdul Rahman if he did not repent. As a direct consequence of the vociferous international outcry over the persecution of Abdul Rahman, he was released after the judge dismissed the case on grounds of insanity. Despite his acquittal, the defendant was forced to leave Afghanistan and given asylum in Italy for fear of social recriminations from Afghan civil society.³⁷

The case of Abdul Rahman's conversion to Christianity has once again highlighted the urgent need for Muslims to seriously re-examine the restrictive traditional *shari`ah* laws on religious conversion from Islam. It is not good enough for Muslims engaged in interreligious dialogue to skirt this issue by hiding behind their support for the Chambesy statement affirming "the right to convince or to be convinced."³⁸ A close reading of the Chambesy discussions discloses that despite their support for the declaration the Muslim interlocutors were equivocating. At one point in the discussions, Bishop Kenneth Cragg felt compelled to spell out unambiguously the Christian concern about the Muslim position on religious freedom in the following manner: "...we are not talking about freedom of belief, or of religious practice, but the freedom of movement of belief; and there is a radical difference between these two. A faith which you are not free to leave becomes a prison, and no self-respecting faith should be a prison for those within it."³⁹

Yet more seriously is the fact that the right to be convinced and to convert from Islam to another religion is held by only a minority of Muslim scholars. This view of religious freedom is however not shared by the vast majority of Muslim scholars both past as well as present. Most classical and modern Muslim jurists regard apostasy (*riddah*), defined by them as an act of rejection of faith committed by a Muslim whose Islam had been affirmed without coercion, as a crime deserving the death penalty. Almost all traditional books of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) deal extensively with the penalties to be imposed on apostates such as the disposition of the apostate's property and inheritance and the dissolution of their marriages.⁴⁰ Indeed the preponderance of classical Islamic positions proscribing apostasy makes understandable the harsh contemporary Muslim responses to Abdul Rahman's conversion to Christianity. Contemporary Muslim jurists are uncritically transporting medieval juristic positions that were negotiated in radically different historical circumstances to present day realities.⁴¹ How else is one explain the widespread attachment to the death penalty verdict among traditional Muslim scholars and the social ostracization meted to so-called apostates in many Muslim societies?

At the same time a number of modern Muslim scholars have argued for more lenient and humane positions on apostasy, marshalling strong support for their views.⁴² In this regard the viewpoint issued by Louay Safi of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) in the context of the Abdul Rahman, furor in Afghanistan was noteworthy. Safi declares unequivocally that a "Muslim who converts to Christianity is no more a Muslim, but a Christian and must be respected as such."⁴³ Notwithstanding these and other tolerant Islamic positions on religious conversion, Muslims engaged in interreligious dialogue need to be more honest and forthcoming about the enormous challenge they face

in reforming the hegemonic traditional Muslim position on apostasy. To use the same words of the Muslim scholar, Ataullah Siddiqi, in the context of Christian efforts to curtail aid evangelism, “there is a big gap between our pious hopes and our practical realities, something which we do not perhaps wish to face.”⁴⁴ In order to strengthen the Muslim reformist case to reform traditional laws on apostasy will require some Christian help. Their Christian interlocutors might need to labor hard to calm inappropriate Christian proselytization efforts. Without such a moratorium on inappropriate proselytization, as recommended by the Chambesy declaration, it will be hard to convince Muslim hardliners that the reform of apostasy laws are opportunistic Christian demands to make conversion possible.

A number of Muslim scholars, such as Mahmoud Ayoub, have pointed out that apostasy has been a political problem in both early and later Muslim societies, and has increased with the advent of colonialism and the expansion of Christian missionary activity.⁴⁵ While it would be incorrect to suggest that the harsh *shari`ah* views on apostasy were first formulated in the colonial-era, there can be no doubt that colonial-era Christian missions generated a harsher interpretation of the *shari`ah* law. Similarly, the recent debate triggered by the legal persecution of Abdul Rahman emerged from a war ravaged context where relief aid for the victims of the war was dispensed by agencies linked to the perceived aggressors. I contend that the Abdul Rahman furor did not occur in a social vacuum but in a concrete political context and was not surprisingly enhanced by it. Here again the challenging question of religious conversion and the ethics of aid evangelism arise in a war context. There are of course many other instances of religious conversion which do not take place in the context of aid evangelism, which still incur

religious persecution in Muslim societies. However, these cases are regrettably overshadowed by the former.

Mission and *Da`wah* in a War Context

Both Christians and Muslims have historically been implicated in spreading their faiths through war and conquests, though this is not the complete story of the growth and expansion of these world traditions. In fact more peaceful and humane methods predominate as ways in which Christianity and Islam have historically been transmitted. The problem, however, is the romanticization of our historical legacies and the consequent denial that such abuses ever occurred, a tendency that is compounded by polemical scholarship which attempts to show that one religion has been more culpable than the other. Such dispositions stand in the way of serious efforts at seeking interreligious coexistence and sustainable peacebuilding in the contemporary era. Our times demand instead sincere acts of contrition through apologies and forgiveness to heal the memories of our trespasses. Yet even more critical is the interreligious challenge of together finding ways to prevent such atrocities from ever occurring again. It is against this background that the proselytization efforts of some Christian aid organizations in war torn Iraq can become contentious and inflammatory.

In April 2003, almost exactly one month after the United States of America launched a pre-emptive war against Iraq, *Time Magazine* reported that two Christian aid organizations, the International Missions Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Samaritan's Purse, were waiting on the border between Jordan and Iraq for a green

light from the US military command to enter Iraq in order to engage in what they called “aid evangelism.”⁴⁶ The Reverend Franklin Graham, son of the influential evangelist Billy Graham and head of the Samaritan’s Purse, justified their actions by claiming that the goal of the aid ministry in Iraq was “to heal people, and hopefully they will see God.” The controversial context and insensitive timing of Samaritan’s Purse’s proselytization program was not accidental. It was a deliberate and well-orchestrated strategy. Samaritan’s Purse and its leader Reverend Franklin Graham are some of the most ardent religious supporters of the US war in Iraq. Moreover, this was not the first time in recent history that Christian evangelists had used a war context as a means for spreading the Christian gospel. It is well known that during the 1991 Gulf war, Rev Franklin Graham’s organization gave US Soldiers deployed in Iraq 30,000 Bibles in Arabic for distribution in Iraq and the neighboring Muslim majority countries.

As has already been noted the proselytization actions by these Christian evangelists, are further compounded by the fact that many of their most influential leaders and institutions at home have made belligerent pronouncements against Islam. For example, prominent evangelical leaders such as Franklin Graham⁴⁷, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and Jerry Vines have all made derogatory statements against Islam. Graham, for example, has called Islam “a very evil and wicked religion.”⁴⁸ In a recent book, *Secrets of the Koran*, evangelical missionary Don Richardson claims, “The Koran’s good verses are like the food an assassin adds to poison to disguise a deadly taste.”⁴⁹ And prominent evangelical Churches such as the Southern Baptist Convention regularly convene seminars and lectures on Islam that criticize the religion as regressive and violent.⁵⁰ It is therefore not surprising that the vice-president for governmental affairs of

the National Association of Evangelicals, Reverend Richard Cizik, is on record saying, “Evangelicals have substituted Islam for the Soviet Union,” and that “The Muslims have become the modern-day equivalent of the Evil Empire.”⁵¹ The belligerent positions of these prominent Evangelical leaders drown out the more balanced perspective on Islam advocated by the National Association of Evangelicals in conjunction with the Washington D.C. based Institute of Religion and Democracy. The latter have formulated positive guidelines for Christian-Muslim dialogue which emphasized the necessity to “affirm some points of theology and morality that Islam and Christianity have in common” and furthermore called on Christians to “work together with some Muslims on certain public issues in which they have similar concerns.”⁵²

All of this raises two pertinent and interrelated questions. First, can the evangelical outreach to Muslims be seen as a new crusade against Islam, however intentionally? Or even as a recurring colonial theme of Christian mission and military dominance, seen often, but not always, as going hand in hand. Second, is it ethical for philanthropical activities and humanitarian service to be undertaken among victims of war with the ulterior motives of proselytism? These are challenging but pertinent issues that should form part of an honest dialogical encounter between Christians and Muslims, since they have important implications for conflict transformation and interreligious peacebuilding.

The Ethics of Aid Evangelism

As has already been noted, aid evangelism was one of the key questions addressed by the Chambesy Dialogue, and the conference took a firm position. It strongly

condemned any *diakonia* (service) undertaken for any ulterior motive and not as an expression of *agape* (love).⁵³ The conference urged Christian churches and religious organizations to immediately suspend such efforts in the Muslim world. It was indeed a courageous and ambitious resolution. But did the Chambesy participants really believe that they or even the institutions they represented had the power to implement the resolutions with immediate effect? Subsequent events have suggested otherwise.

Perhaps Muslim participants naively believed that their Christian interlocutors had such an authority. Five years later, the Islamic Foundation based in the United Kingdom decided to republish the proceedings of the Chambesy Dialogue in protest, saying; “The misused *diakonia* ties in the world of Islam not only have not been discontinued, but in fact expanded since 1976, on a vast scale and with the knowledge and participation of the very same institutions whose members were participants at Chambesy.”⁵⁴ In support of its claim the Islamic Foundation cited the research findings of one of its members, Ahmad von Denffer. Von Denffer had uncovered a multi-million dollar campaign launched by the Lutheran Churches in Germany, an affiliate of the WCC, to evangelize Fulani Muslims all over West Africa using *diakonia* as a cover.⁵⁵ It is against this backdrop that the interreligious movement needs to once again address the question of the ethics of the aid evangelism undertaken by some prominent evangelical institutions in war torn Iraq. There clearly does not seem to be a consensus with regard to the ethical efficacy of aid evangelism on the part of all Christians. The one-time consensus expressed at Chambesy has clearly unraveled.

To its credit, both the WCC and the Pontifical Council on Interreligious Affairs have since Chambesy consistently reaffirmed their commitment to eschewing unethical

forms of mission, including that of aid evangelism. In fact, during a 1999 WCC-sponsored “Christian-Muslim Consultation on Religious Freedom” held at Hartford Seminary, Connecticut, the participants recommitted themselves to “the relevance and value of the 1976 Chambesy statement” and affirmed the importance of distinguishing between proselytism and witness as the WCC has done within the Christian context, and emphasize the necessity to express an ethics of mission and da'wah to which both Christians and Muslims can agree.⁵⁶ Even more recently, the recent President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Relations, Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, proposed that “Christians do not engage in works of mercy as a pretext for preaching about Jesus Christ but, like the Good Samaritan, out of compassion for those who are suffering. So it can be said that interreligious dialogue is not aimed at bringing the partner in dialogue into the Catholic Church.”⁵⁷

Unfortunately, this Catholic understanding of the Christian narrative of the Good Samaritan is not shared by the evangelical relief organization bearing the same name. The Samaritan Purse’s international director of projects, Ken Isaacs, interprets his divine calling as not merely to address the physical needs of the Iraqi Muslims but also to tend to their spiritual penury. In response to concerns raised about the ethics and strategic wisdom of their relief efforts in Iraq he responded by saying “We do not deny the name of Christ. We believe in sharing him in deed and word.”

Conclusion

In conclusion it seems clear that while various Christian denominations disagree about the ethics of aid evangelism in the context of war, Muslims are far more united in

condemning it. The reverse is the case on the question of the right to religious conversion. While Muslims are ambivalent about the right of their co-religionists to change their religion, Christians affirm this right. Of course the different theological postures adopted by Christian and Muslim scholars are profoundly influenced by historical reality and power relations, as was so impressively illustrated by Elizabeth Scantlebury. Honest dialogue can only begin with a clear recognition of this reality. A joint Christian-Muslim assessment of power imbalances should include not only misuses of mission and *da'wah*, but also a strong rejection of all forms of violence and terrorism, including state terror. The belligerent environment resulting from these acts of barbarism threatens the relations of Christians and Muslims around the world.

As a way forward, I advise Muslims to heed the late Professor Isma`il al-Faruqi's call to engage in an "ecumenical cooperative critique of the other religion." For Christians I recommend the invitation of Father Henri Sanson, SJ of Algiers to reflect on their vocation towards Muslims "in the mirror of Islam," that is, taking into account at every step the missionary vocation which their Muslim partners, in faith, know themselves to be charged with.⁵⁸ And for both communities, I commend J. Dudley Woodberry's recognition that there are times when only the deed is appropriate, as was the case when Jesus healed a leper and then instructed him to tell no-one. The deeper challenge for both Christians and Muslims committed to interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding is to go beyond mere *declarations* of the right of any individual to change his or her religion and decrying the use of inappropriate means to entice the person to switch his/her faith. Instead, Christian and Muslim interreligious leaders and activists

need to urgently find creative ways of making such positive affirmations a key part of the *modus vivendi* of convivial relations between the two communities.

Endnotes

¹ For a detailed account of the Abdul Rahman conversion and trial in Afghanistan see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdul_Rahman_\(convert\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdul_Rahman_(convert))

² *Da'wah* is an Arabic word meaning “call” or “invitation”, and the noun form, *da'i* (plural *du'at*), refers to “one who calls or invites to Islam.” I will discuss its nature more extensively later in this paper.

³ For the full proceedings of the Chambesy meeting see *Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah: Proceedings of the Chambesy Dialogue Consultation* (Leicester, UK: Islamic Foundation, 1977).

⁴ I was privileged to co-chair this meeting together with Tarek Mitri of the WCC's interreligious office. For the final report on this conference see *Current Dialogue* (34), February 2000 (Geneva: World Council of Churches). <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd34-19.html> (accessed March 2006).

⁵ For a brief report see World Council of Churches, *From Harare to Porto Alegre 1998-2006: An Illustrated Account of the Life of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: 2005), 89. For more details on the “Critical Moment in Interreligious Dialogue Conference” see <http://www.oikoumene.org/interreligious.html> (accessed March 2006)

⁶ Elizabeth Scantlebury, “Islamic Da'wah and Christian Mission: Positive and Negative Models of Interaction between Muslims and Christians,” in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1996, 253-269.

⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Islamic-Christian Dialogue: problems and obstacles to be pondered and overcome,” in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 11 No. 2, July 2000, 213-227.

⁸ For the full report online see: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/indiachr/>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Swami Agnivesh, *Religion, Spirituality and Social Action: New Agenda for Humanity*. (Delhi: Hope India Publications, Second Edition, 2003, 30).

¹¹ For details on this controversial bill see “Hindutva Conspiracy Clear in Rajasthan ‘Freedom of Religion Bill,’” in *Milli Gazette Online*, April 6, 2006. http://www.milligazette.com/dailyupdate/2006/20060406_hindutva_rajasthan.htm

¹² See “Proselytization Revisited: Rights, Free Markets, and Culture Wars,” symposium of the 19th World Congress of the International History of Religions, Tokyo, Japan (March 25-30, 2005) <http://www.1.u-tokyo.ac.jp/iahr2005/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Peter van der Veer, “Tradition and Violence in South Asia,” unpublished paper delivered at the “Women and the Contested State: Religion and Agency and South Asia,” conference convened on April 11-12, 2003, Kroc Institute, University of Notre Dame.

¹⁵ David A. Kerr, “Islamic Da'wah and Christian Mission: Towards a Comparative Analysis,” in *International Review of Mission*, 89.353, pp. 150-171. For the full proceedings of the Chambesy meeting see *Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah: Proceedings of the Chambesy Dialogue Consultation* (Leicester, UK: Islamic Foundation, 1977).

¹⁶ William Wagner, “A Comparison of Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah,” in *Missiology*, 31 (3), 339-347, 2003.

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- ³² Charles Marsh, "Wayward Christian Soldiers" in *New York Times*, January 21, 2006.
- ³³ The Reverend Franklin Graham delivered the invocation prayers at the inauguration of President George W. Bush.
- ³⁴ Marvin Olasky is the editor of the conservative World magazine and a former advisor to President Bush on faith based policy.
- ³⁵ Charles Marsh, "Wayward Christian Soldiers" in *New York Times*, January 21, 2006. Marsh is professor of religion at the University of Virginia and is author of *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today*.
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⁴⁹ Laurie Goodstein, *Seeing Islam as 'Evil', Evangelicals Seek Converts*, N.Y. Times, May 27, 2003, at A3.

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⁵³ Ataullah Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 101.

⁵⁴ Ahmad von Denffer, "Preface" in Ataullah Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997).

⁵⁵ Ahmad von Denffer, *The Fulani Evangelism Project in West Africa*, Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1980).

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⁵⁷ Unpublished keynote address delivered by Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald at a conference titled "In Our Time: Interreligious Relations in a Divided World, sponsored by Brandeis and Boston College, March 16-17, 2006. Just before addressing the conference Archbishop Fitzgerald was appointed by the Vatican as its Nuncio to the Arab League in Egypt.

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