

Theological Education in Muslim-Majority Contexts: Challenges and A Proposed Approach

Wageeh Mikhail

ABSTRACT

This article discusses some challenges facing Christian theological institutions in the Muslim World and addresses three in particular. Though these are true challenges, this article will demonstrate how they can become opportunities for success and service to God and the community. These challenges are: 1) Christian presence; 2) teaching certain topics in Christian theology; and 3) Muslim-majority cultures.

INTRODUCTION

Seminaries and other theological educational institutions are not immune to challenges. Their challenges can be financial, organizational, or administrative. Some seminaries do not have well-equipped faculty or staff. Some seminaries under totalitarian regimes may face frequent intervention from state authorities. Some of these challenges apply to seminaries in the Muslim World. However, seminaries in the Muslim World have their own unique set of challenges that arise from the Muslim context.

The list of challenges this article discusses is not exhaustive, but it does give an idea of some of the obstacles faced by seminaries in Muslim-majority contexts. In light of these challenges, this article will offer a new approach to theological education in the Muslim World – an approach that prioritizes the study of Islam in the seminary curricula. How seminaries in the Muslim World prioritize Islam will depend on their individual contexts, but centering Islam in the curricula, rather than sidelining it as only a matter for apologetics, will help Christian seminaries in Muslim-majority contexts serve their churches and communities more wisely and fruitfully.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Often, scholars of Church history highlight the missionary endeavors of Christ's disciples to the West; rarely, however, do they highlight journeys to the East, although early Christianity flourished in the East, in areas including modern-day Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Asia Minor. Four of the ancient patriarchates were located in the East and Asia Minor. Key Eastern theologians include Athanasius (297-373) and Augustine (354-430). All seven ecumenical Christian councils were organized in the East. A monk called Alopen from the Church of the East pioneered missionary endeavors to China and other Asian countries; he was based in Iraq in 781AD. The Church needs to emphasize these facts in order to celebrate God's unstoppable work in this region and to strengthen Middle Eastern Christian identity, as Middle Eastern Christians face ever-increasing challenges.

Despite this historical evidence, many people have associated Christianity with the West. Millions believe that Christianity is a Western religion, even though Christianity is the majority religion in several non-Western countries. According to the Pew Research Center, the majority population of many African, Latin American, and Asian countries adheres to Christianity (Pew Research, 2012). Nevertheless, many claim that "Christianity is a Western religion." This is simply not true.

One has to ask why this notion gained wide acceptance. One possible reason is that the history of Christian mission has been written selectively by Western scholars who have mistakenly not given appropriate attention to early Christian history in the East. According to several textbooks on Christian mission, missionaries were sent worldwide to spread the Good News about Jesus from the "capital" of Christianity, Rome (Phan, 2008). Yet Christians were spreading the Good News from the cradle of Christianity, Jerusalem in the Middle East, long before Christianity dominated in Rome. Later, when Western scholarship helped establish seminaries and shape theological curricula in the Majority World, textbooks that portrayed Christianity as Western were translated into local languages. In fact, at some theological institutions in the Middle East, "The History of the Church in the East" is taught as a separate course not integrated with classic Church history. So, even if a student takes this course, they will not see how the two histories intermingle as part of the story of the Christian movement. As a result, the content of seminary courses does not tell the full story but rather reflects a Western perspective. It is, of course, a true perspective, and one has to be thankful to God for the role that Western missionaries played in spreading the Good News and in establishing modern theological institutions. However, it remains a partial perspective.

Certain popular understandings assume that whoever is from the Arab context must be Muslim. “Arab”/“Arabic” is often synonymous with “Muslim”/“Islamic.” This association alienates the Church and its theological institutions from its Arab milieu and relocates it elsewhere, often to the West. Again, though, this assumption is inaccurate, as the Church and theological education in the Arab context have existed since the Day of the Pentecost (Acts 2: 11). Theological education needs to teach about Christian schools that were established in Alexandria, Egypt, in the 2nd century; Nisibis (now Turkey) in the 4th century; Edessa in the 5th century, and many other Eastern cities (Wickert, 1999; Becker). Failing to include these facts in their curricula, seminaries in the Middle East lose their sense of connection to their spiritual forefathers. The literature of the Eastern Church Fathers often gets overlooked, especially at Protestant seminaries (with the exceptions, perhaps, of Athanasius and Augustine). This omission gives students a false understanding of the history of theological education; they may think that seminaries started in their part of the world due to Western missionaries in the 19th century.

Theological education in Majority World countries needs to rediscover the full history of Christian mission. In fact, for the sake of the Global Church, the history of the entire Christian movement needs to be rewritten. Seminary faculty and the Church need to remember that Christianity began in the Middle East and spread from there to the ends of the earth. Such recognition has pedagogical implications, as it necessitates that seminary courses use world Christian literature, rather than limiting their resources to Western literature (Ayuch, 2010). For example, when seminaries teach apologetics with Islam, they have relied for decades on literature primarily produced by orientalists, German and English, or theologians who try to answer questions raised by Islam against Christianity. One is reminded particularly of Samuel Zwemer (Wilson, 1952). No doubt, these works have value, but by appealing to Western literature to answer Islamic objections, seminaries overlook a theological treasure: the vast body of apologetic literature written by Arab Christians in the Middle Ages. These treatises provide a tremendous opportunity to learn from Christians who interacted with Muslims for the first time in history. Their answers were crafted in the heart of the Muslim World, in Islam’s own language, Arabic. If seminaries in the Middle East gave proper attention to this literature, they would reconnect with their Eastern/Arabic heritage, and if seminaries outside the Arabic-speaking world would study these writings, they would benefit from the experience of those who first met Muslims face-to-face. A new phase of global cross-cultural cross-pollination would likely start between churches if these exchanges took place. One can only imagine a seminary in Indonesia studying the apologetic theology of ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī, the Arab Christian theologian and apologist who flourished in middle of the 9th century; or a Bible

college in Pakistan reading Christian literature composed by Theodore abū Qurrah (d. 825AD), the first Arab Christian theologian whose name is known (Mikhail, 2013; Griffith, 1980). Seminaries need to allow this literature to enter their curricula. Churches in the Arabic-speaking world of all denominations need to exercise Christian generosity by sharing their intellectual heritage with other churches.

By engaging the historical realities of the Church in the East, seminaries can better establish the continuity of Christian presence in the East, countering the dominant narrative that the Christian faith is a western religion. The history of Christian dogma, missions, and theological education all have Eastern roots. Emphasizing that historical fact both aligns better to the truth of the Church and opens new opportunities for the Global Church today.

THE CHALLENGE OF TEACHING CERTAIN CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES

A seminary's context shapes its curriculum, and seminaries in Islamic contexts are not exempted from this. To respond to Islam, some seminaries teach introductory courses on the history of Islam, the Qur'an, Islamic theology, Islamic philosophy, and other topics. These courses are taught by Christian scholars of Islam who strive to have an academic approach. At other seminaries, a systematic theology or church history professor teaches an introductory course on Islam because the seminary lacks faculty trained in Islamic studies. This situation can lead to students receiving a less complete understanding of Islam.

In addition, often, the curricula of seminaries in Islamic contexts become "apologetic" because Islamic theology questions the fundamentals of the Christian faith (the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the deity of Christ, to name a few). For this reason, Christian professors of Islamic studies at seminaries in Muslim contexts find themselves obligated to offer apologetics to respond to the Church's intellectual needs, to help believers defend their core beliefs. For example, a New Testament professor at a seminary in a Muslim context must often defend the doctrine of divine inspiration when discussing Biblical textual criticism and manuscript variants, assuring the students that the Christian understanding of inspiration differs from that of Islam. This helps the students appreciate the human role played by prophets and apostles in writing the Scriptures. Without such explanation, students might be vulnerable to accusations raised by certain Muslim polemicists who use textual variants as a reference to human "mistakes" in the Christian Scriptures. The prime example of such a polemical attitude to the Bible is the South African polemicist Ahmad Deedat (1918-2005), who claims that the Bible has

50,000 mistakes (Deedat, 50000 Errors). This tension between Christianity and Islam certainly impacts how Muslim-context seminaries approach the Bible and exegesis. Bible translations, which heavily rely on textual studies, are not easily welcomed in Muslim contexts, and differences between translations can be used to repudiate the Bible.

Yet such an apologetic emphasis comes at a cost, for it often does not allow students to engage intellectually with Islam, as their main interest becomes defending Christianity in the face of Islamic questions. Professors find that they must equip their students with apologetic arguments to refute Islam's allegations. This necessity leaves little room for serious intellectual engagement with Islam as a religion and as a lifestyle.

As a result of lack of trained faculty and pressures of the Islamic context, many students have only a selective knowledge of Islam that is restricted to theological differences and the weakest points in Islamic objections. This does not give seminaries in the Muslim World a chance to express themselves faithfully in the context of Islam or to engage with Islam on an intellectual level (Werner, 2009). When I say "intellectual engagement," I mean seeing Islam not as a religion whose objections the Church tries to refute but as a framework for the seminary's curricula. This approach does not diminish apologetics. Rather, it opens an opportunity for seminaries in Muslim contexts to widen their approach to Islam, moving beyond mere apologetics to intellectual engagement.

I propose three aspects to this type of intellectual engagement: 1) relevant self-expression, 2) seeking knowledge through listening, and 3) seeing Islam as a context, not a course.

Relevant Expression

Some say that the history of Christian-Muslim understanding is a history of misunderstanding. This claim has truth. Christians and Muslims seem to speak different languages even though they live in the same place. Because Christians isolate themselves inside churches and Muslims isolate themselves inside mosques, each community unintentionally creates an exclusive language that the other does not understand. This is a tragedy because it deepens the differences between the two religions. In such cases, Christians and Muslims have to cross language barriers within the same context to understand each other. What the two groups ought to do is to use relevant modes of expressions in their attempts to be understood.

Reflecting on this issue, 'Ammār al-Baṣrī, an Arab Christian theologian who wrote in the 9th century, argues:

We now come to what they (Muslims) find distasteful when we (Christians) say that Christ is the Son of God. They beleaguered people with this by telling them about us that we say that God took for Himself a female companion and a son from her. God is far too exalted for that. When we mention that God has manifested His economy in a body like ours, they distort it by making us say that He descended into the womb of Mary and limited Himself in her. When we mention that Christ was crucified, they distort this understanding to say that we impute weakness to God's [character]. And when we mention baptism, and taking the Eucharist as the Body and Blood of Christ, and our belief that our reward in the lasting world is not found in sexual intercourse or food and drink, they oppose us. (Hayek, 56-57)

'Ammār and the first generation of Arabic-speaking Christian theologians in the context of Islam remarkably expressed the tenants of Christian doctrine in Arabic, the lingua franca of the new world. The language they employed does not differ from the language used by their Muslim counterparts. The difference cannot be noticed in the terminology employed. The difference is in doctrine, not the way in which the doctrine is explained. So the Church and the Mosque do have different doctrines, but by engaging in doctrinal debate in Arabic, the Church can at least ensure that we correctly understand differences.

So Christian theology taught in Muslim contexts today ought to employ relevant terminology that make sense to the Muslim audience. Many Christian doctrines are difficult to Muslims anyway. The cross was deemed "foolishness" in the eyes of the Greeks of the Early Church, and it is much worse according to Islamic thinking, for it "weakens" God, subjecting Him to the brutality of the Romans. Therefore, when teaching the cross and other Christian doctrines, Christians in Muslim-majority contexts must choose vocabulary that is straightforwardly understood; otherwise difficulties of reception will be multiplied, and the "foolishness" of the Gospel will become a real stumbling block.

For example, I suggest using the language of 'Īd al-Aḍḥā (Festival of Sacrifice) to explain the cross in a Muslim-majority context. During this festival, Muslims commemorate Abraham's willingness to offer his son as a sacrifice. Although the Qur'an itself does not mention the name of Abraham's son, Muslims believe that Abraham prepared Ishmael as a sacrifice. Despite this common misperception, Muslims appreciate the concept of sacrifice and offering – a theme found in the heart of the cross. As Paul writes in 1 Cor 5: 7, "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." In fact, in Islamic theology, 'Īd al-Qurbān" (Festival of Offering) is another name for 'Īd al-Aḍḥā. It is extremely significant here

that al-Qurbān is the same word used by Arabic-speaking Christians for the bread of the Lord’s Supper. So it goes without saying that at the heart of teaching about the cross in Muslim Arabic-speaking contexts, one needs to focus on the idea of “sacrifice.”

Relevant expression must be at the heart of theological education in Muslim contexts.

Seeking Knowledge through Listening

Just as Christian theologians and seminary professors must express themselves in a relevant manner, they need to listen to Muslim scholars as they explain Islam. Christian intellectuals need to have careful ears with which to hear from Muslims about their doctrines.

Christian professors of Islam need to adapt their curricula in order to teach Islam as Muslims themselves do, for Islamic studies are broader than apologetics. Christian lecturers on Islam need to be students of Islam before they become teachers of Islam. They need to be immersed in Islam’s culture, its sacred book, the Qur’an, and its other foundational literature – not as those who try to find proofs for the credibility of Christianity but as those who seek to learn. Only this approach will guarantee success and relevancy of Islamic studies at Christian seminaries.

As Christian professors of Islam learn through listening to Islam and Muslims, they will be able to understand why Muslims find certain Christian doctrines objectionable – an understanding that will challenge Christian professors of Islam to reconsider the content of their curricula.

Islam as a Context, not a Course

Many seminaries in Muslim contexts tend to teach Islam in isolation from the rest of the curricula. For example, classic approaches to systematic theology begin with theology, anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology. Rarely, if ever, do seminary students find Islam interwoven with these topics, although Islam addresses these same topics explicitly. Further, when the history of Christian doctrines is taught, it is done in a manner that ignores Islam as a prevalent religion during the time and in the region where these doctrines were being formulated. Students learn about Patristic literature, the Ecumenical Councils, Augustine and Pelagius, the Anthropology of the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and Post-Reformation theology (Berkhof, 1998). Yet the Arabic-speaking Church’s response to Islam has no place on this spectrum. But, at seminaries in Muslim-majority contexts, Islam needs to shape all of these topics.

Let us take the “Doctrine of God” course taught at a Christian seminary in a Muslim context as an example. If a seminary follows the classic Western design in teaching such a course, students will learn about the existence of God, His attributes, the Trinity, and the Incarnation. These topics are important for a student to know regardless of the seminary’s location.

However, theological education is not done in vacuum but in a context. The context of Christian seminaries in the Muslim World is Islam. Islam has its own structure of understanding the doctrine of God. Islam assumes the existence of God, defending the oneness of His *Dhāt* (Being). Muslim intellectuals have differed over the relationship of God to the universe, for while al-Qadarīya argued for the freedom of created beings, al-Jabriyah maintained a fatalistic view of events. Further, in Christianity, the Incarnation of God is fundamental for the economy of salvation, and while it is not accepted in Islam, Islam itself believes in al-Tajallīyat al-Īlahīyyah (the Divine Manifestations). These parallel yet different views between the two religions should form the content of the “Doctrine of God” course taught at a Christian seminary in a Muslim context. If Islam is not taken into consideration as a framework, then the course will be taught in total isolation from its context, thus losing a great opportunity of dialogue with Islam. But if the Islamic view of God, as outlined above, is taken into consideration, the student will be able to understand the

Christian theology of God in conversation with Islamic theology – a step which will be an excellent tool for developing Christian-Muslim intellectual initiatives in the future. See the chart below:

Christian Theology	Muslim Theology
The Existence of God	The Existence of God
Divine Attributes	<i>The Dhāt and Sifāt of God</i>
Divine Providence	al-Qadarīya and al-Jabriyah
God’s Word	al-Qur’ān
The Trinity	The doctrine of <i>Tawhīd</i> and <i>tanzīh</i> of God
Christology	<i>Īsā</i>
The Incarnation	<i>al-Tajallīyat al-Īlahīyyah</i>
The Holy Spirit	<i>Ruh al-Quds</i>

In short, we cannot deny that theological education and, consequently, the religious discourse of the Church in Muslim contexts, is linked to Islam (Sabra, 2000).

Reflecting on the challenge of teaching Christian doctrines in a Muslim context, we cannot forget that Muslim-majority contexts usually portray teaching evangelism as “proselytization” – a problematic issue. Missions is wrongly understood as a method of “converting” Muslims into Christians; equally, evangelism is seen as “telling” Muslims about Christ in order to convince them to leave Islam and adhere to Christianity.

These connotations have undoubtedly made the teaching of missiology a sensitive task. This sensitivity could be eased if a comparative study of evangelism and the Islamic da’wah (calling others to God) is done. Such a study would show the legitimacy of evangelism as an equal doctrine in Christianity to the Islamic mandate to call others to God. Christian seminaries in Muslim contexts must not shy away from evangelism; rather, they should focus on it as a genuine component of the Great Commission by which the love of God is holistically demonstrated by the Church to her context. Both the Church and the Mosque should denounce any opportunist approach to evangelism or da’awah. Money should not be used as an incentive to attract the poor to convert to other religions; rather, the Church and the Mosque should work together to make people live a better life, while asserting the importance of religious freedom and conversion.

To further intellectual conversations between Christian and Muslim students on such sensitive topics, seminaries need to offer a program on Christian-Muslim relations where students from the two faiths can study side by side. This would provide a tremendous opportunity for mutual understanding. In fact, such programs happen in some Muslim-majority contexts, such as Lebanon, where Christian and Muslim students study together at the University of Balamand and the University of Saint Joseph. The Center for Middle Eastern Christianity at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo is another innovator in this regard. The Center started a joint certificate degree in cooperation with the Coptic Studies Center at Bibliotheca Alexandrina. The certificate focused on Arab Christian studies. The program was open to Christian and Muslim students alike. This was unprecedented in Egypt, where relationships between Christians and Muslim have been tense. The program was well-attended by students from both religions, and it became evident that such cross-religious study is tremendously useful for all. It taught them to understand and be understood in a respectful setting. (The center invited a Muslim professor to teach in this certificate in addition to a Jesuit father and two Coptic Orthodox bishops.)

Another topic that causes tension for theological institutions in most Muslim contexts is so-called “Christian” Zionism and other topics of

dispensational theology. Christians differ in their views of Christ's second coming. Our purpose here is not to examine different Christian eschatologies or to discuss the legitimacy of the adjective "Christian" in relation to Zionism. Rather, it is to highlight another area where certain expressions of Christian theology and Islam collide with a negative impact on the theological curricula: Saying that the state of Israel will have a place in the Kingdom of God is interpreted as a justification of the atrocities committed by Israel against the Palestinians. Dispensational seminaries find it challenging to teach their eschatology openly in a context that interprets these teachings as support for the state of Israel and its Western political allies against an important cause in Islam – the land of Palestine and its Islamic holy places. Unfortunately, Arab Christians have found themselves in the middle of this conundrum, for they live within the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and they have been the ones to pay the price of Western political campaigns against the Eastern/Islamic world since the days of the Frankish Wars (wrongly called the "Crusades" (1095-1492AD)(Chevedden, 2008). To many Arab Christians, this political conflict comes with profound theological questions related to the place of the Old Testament and its discourse about the "Chosen People," the promise of inheriting the land, and similar issues (Sabra, 2000). The place and identity of Jews in Christian theology are theological issues that must be handled with thoughtful reflection in seminaries in the Muslim World.

To intensify the tension, we need only examine a linguistic dilemma. Most Arabic Bible translations (and therefore sermons, lectures, etc.) do not differentiate the words "Palestinians" and "Philistines" (Bonfante, 1946). Arabic-speaking Christians say "الفلسطينيون," "al-Filist-iniyūn" to refer to the two groups. This translation mistake makes many believe that the wars between the children of Israel and the Philistines mentioned in the Old Testament have been waged for thousands of years, and that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is nothing but a continuation of these wars. This mistake goes beyond written texts, for at theological institutions, the two terms are identically pronounced as though they refer to one people group. Seminaries in the Arab World must insist on the fact that these are two different people groups and that the current Palestinian-Israeli conflict has nothing to do with the ancient Philistine-Israeli wars. Given this state of affairs, Christian seminaries in Muslim contexts must address the issue of dispensationalism, asserting that this is not a collective Christian position; rather, it is a post-Reformation view that was developed in the 19th century.

In much the same way that the history of Christianity should teach the continuity of the Church's presence in the East, Muslim World seminaries would benefit from a more integrated approach to teaching about

Islam. Rather than seeing Islam as a threat against which an apologetic defense must be made, schools can find in Islam opportunities both to equip students for better engagement and to ground students in a deeper understanding of Christian doctrines, especially as they intersect with worldviews shaped by Islam.

THE CHALLENGE OF MUSLIM-MAJORITY CULTURES

One of the challenges facing seminaries in Muslim contexts is state accreditation. In the Islamic World, Christian theological institutions are seldom given state accreditation; thus, they remain within the local church or denomination. Many seminaries are “allowed” to function and give degrees without having any state recognition. In some contexts, this means that graduates of Christian seminaries cannot hold certain jobs or seek higher degrees at state universities.

State accreditation can be a lengthy process, but when the state does not grant theological institutions appropriate recognition, seminaries’ offerings are limited, and their graduates’ future prospects are limited. Lack of accreditation can prevent Muslim-context seminaries from excelling in their course offerings, and it keeps Christian institutions from assessing their work. Some Christian theological institutions seek alternatives to accreditation, such as joining local or regional Christian accrediting organizations (Middle East and North Africa Association for Theological Education (MENATE); the Euro-Asian Accreditation Association (EAAA); the Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA)).

However, state accreditation is extremely important, as it opens the door for graduates to be hired widely, not just in church-related jobs. It improves the reputation of the institutions as their programs and their work become credible to the outside academic community. State accreditation also provides seminaries with a chance to excel in their work as they have to match higher standards. These opportunities are not fulfilled if seminaries stay within local or regional Christian accrediting associations because their opportunities for excellence will be limited. Christian seminaries in the Muslim World ought to strive to address this issue by establishing an honest discussion with government agencies which, in most cases, do not withhold accreditation on any anti-Christian grounds. Perhaps the way many seminaries started, as Bible colleges linked to specific Christian denominations and established by Western missionaries, contributed to this problem. Government accreditation agencies did not see seminaries as a genuine part of their countries’ educational map. Perhaps, in their early stages, seminaries themselves

did not think that state accreditation would be important. The context is now different. Seminaries that have state accreditation give the wider academic world a better impression of theological education. Secular scholars will realize that Christian theological education is serious and that its purpose is to create scholars who can engage intellectually with the issues that face their communities. Through government accreditation, Christian theological education would become more esteemed as an avenue for pursuing the common good of the society.

Perhaps turning seminaries into “Christian universities” is the way forward. Many Christian-based elementary and secondary schools exist in the Muslim World, and they are highly esteemed. It is probably time for many seminaries to widen their ministry and change from exclusive religious institutions to multi-discipline universities, preferably focusing on humanities and social work. This model was achieved in many countries, and it has been successful.

Muslim societies are conservative by default. For centuries in the Muslim World, the door to *ijtihad* has been closed. According to The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, *ijtihad* is an “Islamic legal term meaning ‘independent reasoning,’ as opposed to *taqlid* (imitation).... It requires a thorough knowledge of theology, revealed texts, and legal theory... a sophisticated capacity for legal reasoning.” The Sunni judgment on *ijtihad* is negative. They “believe *ijtihad* is fallible since more than one interpretation of a legal issue is possible. Islamic reformers call for a revitalization of *ijtihad* in the modern world.” This attitude has led to the refusal of any innovative or creative interpretation of the text of the Qur’an, thus giving the supremacy in the Muslim World to the traditional approach to the text – an approach that has not been challenged since the Middle Ages. In fact, some scholars of the history of Islam argue that Islam will witness real reform once *ijtihad* is exercised (Husseini 1956). The appeal to traditional commentators of the Qur’an has left little chance for Muslim scholarship to present itself to the modern world.

This facet of Muslim interpretative culture has shaped Christian theological institutions in Muslim-majority countries. This impact can be seen in the fact that seminaries in the Muslim World tend to be “conservative.” The term “conservative” can be fluid, but it suffices here to describe the attitude that many Christian scholars and seminary professors have regarding traditional theological issues. Their approach can be described as conservative – an attitude that dominates Muslim societies. Sabra clearly indicates that in the Muslim milieu, “Conservation is a value, thus, change and renewal are very slow and difficult processes often fraught with many obstacles. What is handed down from generation to

generation is considered unique” (Husseini 1956, 70). We must clarify here that the opposite to “conservative” is not necessarily “liberal.” An innovative and creative theologizing is what the Church needs. Christian theological institutions in the Muslim world need to reconcile Christian tradition with the contemporary issues facing theological education and the wider world.

CONCLUSION: A PLEA FOR ENGAGEMENT

Islam continues to form the Church’s context in many parts of the world. Theological conversation between Christianity and Islam is a necessary part of their relationship and of the life of the Church in these contexts. Seminaries and churches in Muslim contexts have a great opportunity to witness to their Islamic neighbors through true intellectual engagement with Muslims. Since the doctrine of the Incarnation is foundational in Christian theology, the model of such engagement ought to be “incarnational.” Theological education in Muslim contexts needs to depart from approaching Islam polemically because polemics produce counter-polemics, and disputes will never end. In fact, in certain contexts polemics have devastating results on the Church. Polemics is not the call to the Church. We are instructed “always to be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15-16). Reflecting this hope, seminaries and churches in Muslim contexts need to engage Muslims thoughtfully and directly, upholding Christian convictions. One natural place for this type of cooperation is seminaries, where young leaders are equipped to lead the Church and society. They will have the keys of change, if they themselves are changed by theological curricula that have Islam in mind and that seek to express Christian theology in relevant ways.

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Wageeh Mikhail

Wageeh Mikhail joined ScholarLeaders in 2019 to guide the ministry in religions. Before joining ScholarLeaders, he was Director for the Center of Middle Eastern Christianity at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, Egypt. He has published and spoken widely on medieval Arab Christianity and Christian-Muslim relations. He received a LeaderStudies scholarship for his PhD at Birmingham. He and his wife, Colby, have two sons.