

THE CROSS IN THE CRESCENT'S EYE:
Theology of the Cross in Muslim Context and its Significances
for Christian Mission

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Introduction

It is a historical as well as theological fact that the cross/crucifixion of Jesus Christ stands at the *centrum* of Christianity since its inception. The history of Christianity cannot be divorced from the cross and its related elements, such as, the person and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth and His horrible yet salvific crucifixion.

Leon Morris approves this fact as he writes,

That the cross is crucial to Christianity has never been in doubt for serious students of the New Testament. The Gospels all lead up to it and find their climax there, Acts tells how the first preachers proclaimed what God has done in the cross of Christ, while the Epistles with greater or less emphasis bring out the meaning of this great act of atonement. Through the centuries the greatest minds in the church have turned their attention to what God has done in the cross and have written their profound treatises on it¹

Alistair McGrath also echoes what Morris has just proposed. In his famous book, *The Mystery of the Cross*, McGrath emphasizes the fact that the cross is the integral part of (general) history in which church history exists. He said, "History ... is irreversible, and we cannot undo her handiwork. Part of that history is the fact that Christian faith was created, aroused, and shaped by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ."²

¹Leon Morris, *The Cross of Jesus* (Exeter/Grand Rapids: Paternoster/Eerdmans, 1988), 1-2.

²Alistair McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 17.

More specifically and explicitly, he then goes deeper by underlining the very fact that the cross is extremely important for Christianity in all respects.

The criterion of what is Christian and what is not is the cross of Jesus Christ, the crucial enigma which distinguishes the peculiarly Christian way of looking at human existence and experience from all other viewpoints.... The cross of Christ is the point of reference for Christian faith; Christian faith is based upon it and judged by it – in short, the cross is the foundation and the criterion of Christian faith.³

Thus, in different words, it can be stated confidently that the criterion of all theologies, which claims to be Christian, is the cross of Jesus Christ.

However, we also see, on the other side, that the cross of Christ has emerged many controversies, problems and even bloody tragedies in its relation with other religions. The cross of Jesus has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. It has been narrow-mindedly viewed as an arrogance, power, and ethnocentrism. We in fact have to confess that Christianity has a significant contribution in forming such Christian image. Specifically we will discern this matter in relation with Muslim world. This does not mean that the cross of Jesus has neither problem nor controversies with other religions. Like or dislike, however, history already noticed that it was in its connection with Islam (since its inception in 7th century until recent time) that the cross of Christ has created long and intense controversies and wars between these two religions. From the very beginning of its existence Islam has had problem in dealing with the cross of Christ not only theologically but in praxis as well. This has sparked an endless history of controversies and conflicts between the adherents of both religions. Two contradictory things seem to happen: for Christianity, on the one hand, the cross of Christ has already been a *par excellent* symbol of superiority, firmly held, and widely proclaimed, and on the other hand, among Muslim, it has been a terribly curse and adulterous symbol to be destroyed for the sake of the holiest name of God. Bloodily conflicts, locally, regionally, as well as internationally have already filled the pages of history of both religions related to

³McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross*, 18-19.

the matter of the cross of Christ.

This essay will explore the topic on how Muslims people have perceived the cross of Christ. It is assumed that the cross of Christ has become "a huge stumbling block" and "curse" to Muslim people across the history. Consequently this inherited negative presupposition has created many obstacles in Christian missionary enterprises among Muslims. I argue that there should be an active yet constructive way to break/deal with these historical obstructions for the sake of better relationship with and missionary work among Muslims. In accomplishing this goal, we need to creatively invent a new kind theology of mission. The theology that still faithfully upholds the cross of Christ yet is "user-friendly" for missionary work in the Muslim context. This, I believe, would not be an easy and smooth process. However, how difficult and complicated it will be, it deserves a try.

Luther's Theology of the Cross

Theology of the cross has always been connected to Martin Luther. Most churches, as well as theologians, especially those who are Lutherans take for granted the notion that it was Luther who coined this theology. Is this historically and theologically correct? Can we say that Martin Luther is exclusively the inventor of the theology of the cross?

Luther's theology of the cross stood at the center of all his religious thought. Paul Althaus wrote, "the theology of the cross permeated all of Luther's theological thinking."⁴ In an analogous way, Walther Loewenich acknowledged that it was "an integrating aspect of Luther's entire theology."⁵ Luther's *theologia crucis* was developed early in his theological career. His earliest and most articulate expression of this term came in his Heidelberg Disputation of 1518. Here, just a few months after posting the ninety-five theses, Luther made a schematic contrast between the *theologia crucis* and the *theologia gloriae*, which had dominated

⁴Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (trans.) (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 268.

⁵Walther Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (trans.) (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 49.

Christian mind at that time with its scholastic as well as its mystical speculation. Luther expressed the meaning and content of his major religious ideas in a public forum. Thus the intentions standing behind Luther's radical movement away from sixteenth-century church practice were closely tied to those of the theology of the cross.

In other words, when Luther began his attack against abuses in the larger church, he did so in light of the theology of the cross. Luther's struggle in these years involved discovering a God with whom he could stand in a justified relationship. As Karl Wengenroth stated, "Luther's theology of the cross emanated from a concern with the question, 'How can I find a gracious God?'"⁶ Luther lacked assurance of his right to standing before God, and he found the traditional methods for attaining this to be unsatisfactory and ineffective. His discovery of *justificatio fidei* changed all this. And at the heart of this truth was the event of the cross. In a letter written in 1545, Luther opened with a statement expressing this fact, "Grace and peace in Christ, who is our sole consolation and Savior!"⁷ Luther's religious focus turned away from the church and focused on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The experience of God's grace as revealed in the scriptures directed him toward the cross. There God revealed himself clearly, and one could find a merciful God.

In constructing his theology of the cross, Luther turned neither to church dogma nor natural theology as his primary theological authority. He preferred to lean on scripture not only as his theological point of departure but more than that as the sole source and foundation of his theology. Luther's theological insight brings about a new understanding of Christianity stemmed from a careful study of the Bible. The Pauline letters to Galatians and Romans, above all, led him to a brand new comprehension of the Gospel. Luther, after wrestling for years with a great effort, came to the recognition that the cross of Christ is the core of the Gospel. Consequently, this fresh discernment into the Gospel led Luther to avert from some of the traditions /

⁶Karl Wengenroth, "The Theology of the Cross," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 46 (October, 1982): 268.

⁷Martin Luther, *The Letters of Martin Luther* (London: Macmillan, 1908), 462.

teachings of scholasticism.

Luther's *theologia crucis* was used to criticize any theology not based on the cross of Christ. For Luther, theology of the cross was not his invention. It is as a matter of fact the heart of God's redemptive plan for the fallen and sinful humankind, which once had been recognized by the biblical author like Paul and the authors of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). There alone God had revealed himself in a manner leading to justification. There alone God had shown himself as the merciful Person seeking to have an assured, personal, and intimate relationship with humankind. This brings a very clear-cut consequence: the numerous other means of access into the knowledge of and the grace of God thus were not found in the Bible and therefore incorrect.

The church during the period when Luther lived largely found its theological basis in the *analogia entis*. The church, following the teachings of such theologians as Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas, emphasized the value of natural theology.⁸ These theologians argued that human beings and all creation shared a relationship of Being. Moltmann wrote the following comment regarding Thomas. There was an "ontic connection between motion and mover, between effect and cause, between the contingent and the necessary, the finite and the infinite, between ordered being and the one who gives it rational order."⁹ For the later medieval church, influenced by such ideas, God revealed himself in numerous ways, and there were numerous ways to access the grace of God.

Luther called any theology not based on the cross a theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*). In the *Heidelberg Disputation*, he noted that "a theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."¹⁰ A theology based on anything apart from the cross misinterpreted the nature of religious truth and ultimately all truth.

Cutting to the core of Thomas and much of later scholasticism,

⁸Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (trans.) (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1974), 209-211.

⁹*Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁰Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *Luther's Works*, v. 31, edited by Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 40.

Luther attacked the use of Aristotle in religious thinking. "It is an error to say that no man can become a theologian without Aristotle;" rather, "No one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle."¹¹ Here the theologian rejected any use of philosophy that gave its priority over theology. Moltmann noted that scholastic theologians commonly assumed that "intelligence allowed man to transcend creation, and by insight see through things to a part of the wisdom of God."¹² They utilized Aristotle's philosophy to approach the larger truths of faith.

Another aspect of Luther's critique addressed the speculative nature of scholastic theology. Later medieval religious thought, based on the *analogia entis*, moved from the known to the unknown. Using the *via eminentiae*, they moved from human creation and human knowledge to comprehend divine reality and divine truth. Luther held that it was wrong for so-called theologians "to look upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have already happened."¹³ He found this epistemological method to be uncertain and speculative. In place of this, he asserted that true knowledge of God came by his self-revelation in Christ. Here God communicated concretely, historically for the salvation of humankind.

Luther acknowledged that God had revealed himself in nature and in human, but he did not think these led people to God. Roland Bainton expressed this well by noting that "every particle of creation reveals the handiwork of God, if one had the eyes to see. But that is precisely the difficulty."¹⁴ Humanity, existing apart from proper relationship to God, could not access this naturally revealed God. People who claimed to have real knowledge of God by such means were "completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened."¹⁵ In another well-known statement, Luther asserted, "The world is like a drunken peasant."¹⁶ Humanity in a state of alienation from God

¹¹Martin Luther, "Disputation Against Scholastic Theology, 1517," *Luther's Works*, v. 31, edited by Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 12.

¹²Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 209.

¹³Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," 40.

¹⁴Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York: Abington, 1950), 216.

could not use its reason or sensory abilities to access divine truth. Only the revelation through the cross could provide such access.

Now we are to examine the positive side of Luther's theology of the cross. Luther's *theologia crucis* not only assisted him in attacking medieval religious thought, but also provided the basis for a constructive theological perspective. The cruciform theology allowed him both to reject the religious ideas of his day and to affirm a different set of ideas. The theologian viewed himself as working to correct abuses in the church and to restore the church to its earlier, purer religious faith. He saw himself as akin to Paul, who wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:18 that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." The cross condemned the scholastic approach, but it provided a new basis for faith.

Luther's training as a nominalist at his Augustinian monastery and at Erfurt University contributed to his understanding of the radical difference between God and man, divine knowledge and human knowledge. He emphasized the indirect and incomplete nature of all knowledge of God. Luther used Exodus 33:18-23 to support this, stating that like Moses of old, humans could only perceive the backside of God. God always remained the hidden God (*Deus absconditus*).¹⁷ God always approached humans by means of his masks (*larvae Dei*).

Luther actually held to a two-fold hiddenness in God. First, God in his transcendence always remained hidden. The divine presence could not be fully grasped by a human being. As John Dillenberger and Claude Welch noted, "God is never apprehended directly."¹⁸ Second, God in his revelation remained hidden. For God always communicated by means of masks, in a manner of hiddenness. The *Deus revelatus* always remained, simultaneously, the *Deus absconditus*. Even in the incarnation, God came

¹⁵Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," 40.

¹⁶Martin Luther, "Table Talk," *Luther's Works*, v. 54, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 111.

¹⁷Ernest L. Simmons, Jr., "Creation in Luther's Theology of the Cross," in *Dialog* 30 (Winter, 1991): 50-5.

in the human form. God even in his revelation maintained a significant element of mystery. Yet God did in fact reveal his true character in Christ. The cross showed the "love of the Lord, who is so concerned about us that he entirely overlooks his own danger, injury, and pain. . . ."¹⁹ Luther affirmed the two-nature doctrine of Christ, yet he also sought to make the relationship between the natures close. He did this by his acceptance of the *communicatio idiomatum*, the communication of properties between the two natures. Luther emphasized the divine participation in the cross event, noting that the priest (Christ) who made the great sacrifice was "the eternal Son of God."²⁰ By Christ's suffering, God revealed himself as a Deity who loved humans and wished to show mercy to them. Paradoxically, the transcendent God made himself most fully known in the place of humility and pain.

As an epistemological principle, the *theologia crucis* showed the way to true knowledge not only about God but also about reality itself. Luther wrote that the true theologians were those who "comprehend the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross."²¹ The visible things would include all creation, including human beings. Thus Luther argued that true knowledge of all things, earthly and heavenly, came only through the message of the cross. This epistemological method, placing the priority of knowledge on divine revelation, permeated all of Luther's theology.

The cross served to make the *Deus absconditus* the *Deus revelatus* in the lives of people. The message of the cross did this by revealing the depths of human sin and condemnation. One could only come to true knowledge of God by means of the judgment experienced through the cross. Luther asserted that "man must utterly despair of his own ability before he

¹⁸John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity: Interpreted Through its Development*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 38.

¹⁹Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Passion of Christ* (trans.) (Rock Island, Illinois: Augustana, 1956), 179.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 176.

²¹Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," 40.

²²*Ibid.*

is prepared to receive the grace of Christ."²² He also noted that "the main benefit of Christ's passion is that man sees into his own true self and that he is terrified and crushed by this."²³ This function of the cross seems negative but in fact was positive; one came to a realistic assessment of his own abilities and his own situation in relation to God. And on the basis of this, he could move forward to a new relationship with God.

Faith, for Luther, meant coming to understand God himself as expressed in the Gospel of Christ. Faith did not involve, predominantly, new information (cognitive knowledge) but rather a new relationship. Loewenich said that this new faith relationship provided the believer "the presence of Christ himself. . . ."²⁴ Faith meant encountering and positively relating to the true God. This also implied that faith looked "not at his 'masks,' but at his revelation. . . . It was one thing for God to be present, but quite another for God to be present 'for you.'"²⁵ Then we obviously recognize that "by faith" one understood that he stood *coram Deo*, and one discover that this God was *pro me* ("for me" or "on the side of me.")

Luther did not stop at the point of faith, but went on to describe the implications of the theology of the cross for the Christian life. He stated that "a person's whole life is one of repentance and a cross of Christ. . . ."²⁶ The believer lived the Christian life *simul justus et peccator*, and he lived it in the reflection of the cross of Christ. Additionally, Luther could address the Church, the community of believers, as a cruciform people. Douglas John Hall articulated this well, "The *theologia crucis* expresses itself quite naturally in an *ecclesia crucis*-the theology of the cross begets a 'people of the cross.'"²⁷ In this way, the meaning of the cross carried over not only into

²³Martin Luther, "A Meditation of Christ's Passion," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull, Foreword by Jaroslav Pelikan (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 168.

²⁴Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 51.

²⁵Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma*, The Christian Tradition, Vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 166.

²⁶Luther, "Heidelberg Disputations," 89.

²⁷Douglas John Hall, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," *Consensus* 15 (February, 1989): 7-19.

the ongoing life of the individual believer but even into the ongoing life of the church.

After quite extensively scrutinizing Luther's theology of the cross, it is obvious and indisputable-despite many interpretations of it done by theologians across the church history-that the cross is extremely crucial in Luther's thought.

The Cross and Islam

The existence of Islam as a religion since its inception cannot be divorced from Christianity. To be admitted or not, it is from the Al Qur'ân itself as the Islam ultimate authority that we can find many hints, which expose the fact that there are resembling figures and accounts as those of the Bible. These happen especially concerning several Old Testament stories such as of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Ishmael, and Joseph, and of the birth of Jesus' story. Despite the denial of Muslim scholars who asserted that these similarities were not borrowed from the Bible, most Christian scholars/theologians believed that Muhammad picked up those stories, directly or indirectly, from Christian sources and then reinterpreted and reinvented them according to his own purpose and agenda. The story of Jesus in the Qur'ân, for example, according to Leirvik as he shows the argument of Heikki Räisänen, a Finnish New Testament scholar, who maintains the argument that Muhammad did all those reinterpretations and reinventions in order to confirm his ultimate prophet-ness. Leirvik says,

His [Räisänen's] conclusion is that in the Qur'ân, 'like other previous messengers of God, Jesus became an example and a precursor of Muhammad, a guarantor of Muhammad's message who had experienced similar things'. Everything said about Jesus should be understood as a 'creative reinterpretation on the part of the Arabian prophet, triggered off by his strictly monotheistic conception of God'.²⁸

The historical fact confirms that the relationship between Islam and

²⁸Oddbjorn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam: Introduction, Survey of Research, Issues of Dialogue* (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 1999), 32.

Christianity is antagonistic in nature and colored by a great number of terrible bloodily conflicts. Christianity accuses Islam of being heresy. For them, Muhammad is accused as a false prophet. In contrast, Muslims continually expose that Christianity embraced fake Gospel (*Injil*) and definitely reject the very heart of Christian belief that Jesus is the Son of God, who died on the cross yet raised from the death to be the redemptive sacrifice for all human beings. Islam has no problem to accept Jesus as a prophet. It however denies him as the Son of God uplifted by Christian Creeds. Since its birth until recent time, the history of relationship between these religions has been colored by many harsh disputations and even comes to bloodily conflicts in various scales and intensities due to the contradictory stand concerning to Jesus, both of His nature and deeds.

In connection with the Islamic view of the redemptive crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus (Theology of the Cross), we will examine briefly yet critically the various rejections by Islam represented by its leaders from various places and eras concerning their views of the cross of Christ and its implications.

Generally speaking we can assertively say that in general, Muslims think the Christian belief in the crucifixion of Jesus is irrational. They maintain that the salvation of humankind depends on a crucifixion in which God allowed Jesus, who had committed no sin deserving punishment, to suffer. Rather than reconciling the divine justice and mercy, it [the crucifixion] invalidates both. This classical view has been encountered by prominent Christian leaders/scholars for ages. There are a huge numbers of oral as well as written disputations between both camps (Islam and Christianity) on this matter. Furthermore, the controversial topic of the Crucifixion has interrelated implications and impacts to other matters; one of them is the missiological implication. It is not the purpose of the author to present a complete/comprehensive account about this topic. That is why we are to deal with one or two Islamic scholars, whom are considered as representatives of each period.

Jesus Christ and the Cross in Qur'ân and Hadith

In the Qur'ân it is reported that Jesus (Isa) was rejected by the majority of his Jewish contemporaries. The Qur'ân also refers to the fact that they wanted to kill Him (4:137 cf. 5:70) but God protected Him from their violence (5:110). However, in al-Nisa 4:157-159 (especially verse 157), we find verses that, in simple reading, strongly testify to the crucifixion of Jesus and its corresponding episodes.

... (157) And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger - they slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain. (158) But Allah took him up unto Himself. Allah was ever Mighty, Wise. (159) There is not one of the People of the Scripture but will believe in him before his death, and on the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them.²⁹

The context of this passage, according to Mark N. Swanson, "is a polemic against the Jews, rebuked for their offenses of deed (breaking the covenant, disbelieving God's signs, and killing the prophets wrongfully) and speech (saying that their hearts were hardened, speaking a great calumny against Mary, *and claiming to have crucified Christ*)."³⁰ A simple reading of this passage will obviously lead to the impression that it simply denies the death of Jesus on the cross. The fact about Jesus' death is not denied in the Qur'ân. It asserted the fact several times, for example, in 3:55; 5:117; 19:33. However, whether he died by the way of being crucified is the matter in question.

While the Qur'ân offers us no details on this point, it clearly states that Jesus was neither killed nor crucified. Moreover, those who attempted to kill him were never sure if they had accomplished their goal or not (4:157-58).

²⁹Otherwise it is mentioned, all Qur'ânic quotations are taken from Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall's translation of the Qur'ân.

³⁰Mark N. Swanson, "Folly to the Hunafa: The Cross of Christ in Arabic Christian-Muslim Controversy in the Eight and Ninth Centuries A.D." (A dissertation, Pontificio Instituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamica, Roma 1992; reformatted with corrections in 1995), 97.

We know that someone was crucified, but just who this person was remains uncertain. Jewish and Christian sources continually demand that the person was Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary (Maryam, in Islamic version). This view, however, is not accepted by any Muslim at all.

As we revisit Sura al-Imran 4:157, which is the only verse in the whole Qur'ân which addresses the topic of crucifixion, it is obvious that this verse denies crucifixion as a historical fact. The reading of this verse will lead one to believe that this is the book's expressed intention. The text has to be somewhat tortured to make it yield an alternative interpretation, especially where this turns out to be a hidden meaning completely contrary to its obvious teaching. Reading "They neither crucified nor killed him" can lead to only one convinced conclusion, that is, the Qur'ân's intention to distinctively reject both the crucifixion of Jesus and his death on the cross. One discovers that the foundation of orthodox belief in Islam on the ultimate destiny of Jesus has always been that the Qur'ân teaches that he was never nailed to or died on the cross. Additionally, Sura al-Imran 3:54 reads, "And remember when Allah said: 'O Jesus. I will take you and raise you to myself and clear you of those who disbelieve.'" This also implies the belief that Jesus was not executed. Thus the Qur'ân absolutely denies the fact of Jesus' crucifixion and death completely. Concerning this point, Mark Hamza Dougherty, a Muslim scholar quoted the words of Al-Johani as follows,

Who was the person crucified instead of Jesus (pbuh [peace be upon him – editor])? The Qur'ân does not elaborate on this point nor does it give any answer to this question. The interpreters of the Qur'ân have suggested a few names. But all these are individual guesses not supported by the Qur'ân or the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).³¹

Finally, Al-Johani expresses the summary of what the Qur'ân (and the Muslim as well) teaches about the death of Jesus,

Islam considers Jesus (pbuh) as one of God's great prophets. His mission was to preach the Oneness of God and to lead man to his Lord. [According to the Qur'ân] he never claimed to be other than a servant and a Messenger of God.... The Muslims do believe in and are awaiting the Second Coming of

³¹Mark Hamzah Dougherty, "Jesus (peace be upon him): A Prophet In Islam," from http://www7.bev.net/civic/icb/artilces/Jesus_in_Islam_Hamza.htm

Jesus (pbuh). Muslims believe he will come back not as God ..., but as Jesus (pbuh), God's servant. His coming will, according to Muslim belief, correct the misconception which people have developed about his personality and his mission.³²

In the late of seventh century, a Muslim Caliph named Mahdi (781 AD) preserved the denial of the cross. He reasoned that ethically the crucifixion could not be accepted because "It [the cross] was not honorable to Jesus Christ that God should have allowed Him to be delivered to Jews in order that they might kill Him."³³

Ali Ibn Rabban Al-Tabari (d.885), a convert from Christianity and a well-known Qur'anic scholar, wrote a notorious book entitled *An Answer to Christians*, in which he denied the concept of Trinity and so consequently the crucifixion of Jesus. He argued that the idea of a God suffering and dying on the cross was absurd and contradictory to the divinity of God. God, for Tabari, does not suffer and certainly does not die.³⁴

There is also another Tabari, known as the great historian al-Tabari (d. 923). He is the author of a famous book called *The History of the Prophets and the Rulers* in which he includes a section on Jesus based on the Qur'anic Sura 4:157-158. In this book, al-Tabari attempts to interpret these verses using various sources. He presented three accounts concerning the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus.

The first explanation is that all the disciples were changed into the image of Jesus, and so when those who wanted to kill Jesus came to look for him, one of his disciples went out to them and was then killed in the belief that he was Jesus. The second is that when one of Jesus' disciples pointed to Jesus in order to betray him, after the rest of the disciples had scattered, a likeness was shown to them ... and when they reached the wood on which they wished to crucify Jesus, God raised him up to Himself and they crucified 'what was made to appear to them'. A third account contains ten

³²Dougherty, "Jesus (peace be upon him): A Prophet In Islam."

³³J. Windrow Sweetman quoted this in his book *Islam and Christian Theology* Part 1, Vol. 1 (London: Lutterworth, 1945), 31.

³⁴George Bebawi, "Atonement and Mercy: Islam between Athanasius and Anselm," *Atonement Today: A Symposium at St. John's College, Nottingham*, ed. John Goldingay (London: Spck, 1995), 196.

different versions of one person who was made to look like Jesus: the sixth version is that it was a volunteer from among Jesus' disciples, by the name of Sergius, and another version is that it was Judas Iscariot who was crucified.³⁵

Thus, Tabari rejected the fact that Jesus died on the cross.

The Majority of modern/contemporary Muslim scholars follow the classical view that Jesus did not die on the cross. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a prominent Indian Muslim leader and the founder of Ahmadiyyah movement held this view. He wrote a crucial book on Jesus (Christology) in Urdu language entitled *Jesus in India* (1899). In this book, Ahmad leaned heavily on information taken from the New Testament and the Gospel of Barnabas. He argued that *subbiha lahum* (4:157) should be taken to mean that Jesus only seemed to be dead. He said, "The Jew, seeing Jesus in a swoon, thought that he was dead. It was dark. And there was an earthquake and great excitement."³⁶

Syed Ahmad Khan, a distinguished as nineteenth century Muslim educator, social reformer, religious scholar and founder of the Ali Garh Muslim University also explicitly attacked the Christian belief of the death of Jesus on the cross as he wrote,

Now we must turn to the Holy Qur'ân to see what it says. The Qur'ân makes mention of Jesus' death in four places. ... Firstly in Sura Al Imran, secondly in Sura Ma'ida, ... thirdly in Sura Maryam ... fourthly in Sura Nisa.' Jesus was not killed by the Jews, either by stoning or by crucifixion, but he died his natural death, and God raised him in rank and status ... From the first three verses it is clear that Jesus died a natural death. However, as the Ulama of Islam had followed the Christians, in accepting that Jesus had gone up to heaven alive, before looking at the Qur'ân, so they have tried to interpret some of the words in these verses to accord with their unsound belief.³⁷

³⁵Hugh Goddard, *Muslim Perceptions of Christianity* (London: Grey Seal, 1996), 24.

³⁶As quoted by Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 127.

³⁷Syed Ahmad Khan, *Tafsir Ahmadi* vol. ii, 48. See Maulana Hafiz Sher Mohammad, "The Death of Jesus according to Islamic sources – 5" accessed from <http://www.muslim.org/islam/deathj-5.htm>

After examining some rejections about the fact that Jesus died on the cross by the Jewish people, we basically can classify the rejections in three categories as done by Christine Schirrmacher. From the Arabic terms used in this verse (*'subbiha lahum'*; *'mâ qatalûhu yaqînan'*), it is obvious, that it is quite difficult to prefer a certain translation, since translation means at the same time interpretation. From the wording alone, one can either think that the Qur'ân defends the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ or that it rejects both because of the Arabic expression "subbiha lahum" (which means, "it" or "he seemed to them as if" or "he was made similar for them"). Muslim Qur'ân commentators have given several different interpretations³⁸:

1. Nobody was crucified: Then Sura 4:157-158 means: it remains uncertain, what happened at the time of the crucifixion. The Jews aimed at crucifying Jesus, but "it seemed to them only as if" the crucifixion of Jesus had taken place. The Jews thought that they had crucified Jesus, but because of the darkness and the earthquake, which the Bible also reports, he escaped his execution and was in time raised to heaven by God. Only a minority of Muslim theologian advocates this opinion, that nobody was crucified.
2. Jesus was crucified, but because of God's decree: With the expression "subbiha lahum" could also be emphasized, that Jesus was crucified, but not because the Jews intended to do so, but because of God's own decree. The emphasis then lies on the first word "they slew him not" (but God caused his death and the Romans did the job). This opinion is today more an outsider's position in Muslim theology.
3. Another person was crucified instead of Jesus: A further interpretation of the expression "subbiha lahum" could be: It seemed to them as if Jesus was crucified. Then the verse would mean that Jesus was not himself crucified, but someone else; Jesus was either unintentionally mistaken for

³⁸We can easily identify the category for the placement of previous Muslim scholars.

another person (this is today the option of the well-known Muhammad Taufiq Sidqî or of the great Si'ite theologian Muhammad Husain Tabâtabâ'î). Or God transformed intentionally another person into the image of Jesus, so that he looked similar to Jesus and was crucified in his place. Jesus was raised to heaven alive, but everybody thought, that Jesus was crucified himself (this opinion is for example, defended in the classical Qur'ân commentary of at-Tabarî). This interpretation of Sura 4:157-158 is today in the Muslim world the most frequent one. But there are also many different opinions when it comes to the question, who was crucified in Jesus' place? The so-called Gospel of Barnabas, a forgery from the late middle Ages, claims to be the only true Gospel of Jesus Christ, but contains many Muslim doctrines, which attack the Bible. This Gospel has become very famous in the Muslim World especially since its translation into Arabic in the 20th century. It argues that having been made so similar to Jesus that the Messiah's own family and disciples considered him to be Jesus, Judas was crucified against his will in Jesus' place. Then Judas was led to the Mount of Calvary.

Theology of the Cross and Muslim-Christian Relationship

The main Christian belief that the death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection brings salvific/redemptive consequence for humankind yet at the same time it becomes stumbling stone for Muslims to understand and even more to interact with Christians. Jesus' teaching that the death of the Son of God on the cross and his resurrection have power to bring salvation to humankind will contradict to the strict monotheistic belief of Islam. The belief that God is one and has no son nor ever was a human being is firmly held by Muslims as a strong and ultimate denial to the Christian Theology of the cross. For Islam, the teaching that Jesus is the Son of God as well as that of the cross is a blasphemy that not only must be rejected but also destroyed. This very matter then ignited the lasting conflict between Islam and Christianity. The proclamation of the Gospel, which emphasizes the divinity and crucifixion-resurrection as its core message

(which is also a sacred duty/calling of every Christian) is considered as the ultimate threat and even blasphemy by Muslims.

The more ironic thing is the fact that the Crusade and Colonialism are perceived by Muslims as two most cardinal of the Christian ways to establish enforcement and lift up the banner of Jesus' cross.³⁹ This brings very deep and severe conflict that goes down from generation to generation between both sides. The cross of Jesus has been seen and perceived both politically and religiously as well. For religious reason, the cross is assumed as a spiritual blasphemy, which is in essence the act of idolatry. Islam cannot tolerate such belief since it is categorized as a grave sin. Politically, its close connection to the vision or dream that Constantine experienced, in which he saw a symbol of the cross with the voice informing him that by this sign he would be able to gain the victory over his Muslim enemies. It is reasonable therefore to draw an implication that the theology of the cross played a very important role in terms of the ongoing terrible

³⁹There are as a matter of fact many other occasions as exposed by Don McCurry as he writes, "Because of the long history between Christians and Muslims, the Christian witness is viewed with great animosity by the Muslim. The roots of this tragedy go back to the Emperor Constantine, who after allegedly having had a dream of the cross (313), wed the sword to the cross. One of his successors, the Christian Emperor Heraclius (reigned 610-641) was a contemporary of Muhammad (reigned 622-632). ... Following Muhammad's death (632), Muslim armies swept the Christian Byzantines out of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt (636). Christians and Muslims have been at war with one another ever since.

Leaving aside the question of Muslim atrocities against Christians of both the East and the West, let me review the grievances of Muslims against the West, perceived as Christian. The Crusades (around 1050-1291) are painfully and permanently inscribed in Muslim memories. The Colonial Period (around 1450-1970), during which Western nations occupied about ninety percent of the Muslim world, has left the Muslim psyche with a deep sense of shame and humiliation that needs to be avenged. But above all else, the loss of Jerusalem to the Jews in 1967, after more than thirteen hundred years of possession, rankles daily in Muslim minds. This, of course, is blamed on the "Christian" West because of the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 — perceived as the greatest sin ever committed against humanity." [Don McCurry, "Witnessing to Muslim Part I-III," *Christian Research Journal* (June 30, 1994), <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/crj/crj-jrnl/web/crj0123a.html>]

Christian-Muslim relationship both in spiritual/religious as well as political realms. Consequently, the history of Christian-Muslim relationship has been plagued by many controversies, dissension and wars over the centuries.

In Indonesia, we are encountering what some people call "another Crusade" in some parts of this country. Muslims generally believe that the Crusade has not ended yet. It still happens now. In a magazine, a Muslim scholar associates the Muslim-Christian conflict in Molucca (Maluku) with a Crusade. He suspects that this conflict as a reflection or even a sequel of the past Crusades by saying:

"Perang Salib ... berlangsung berabad-abad hingga mereda di abad ke-16. Tapi sebenarnya tak pernah berhenti benar. Karena sesudah itu ada Perang Salib gaya baru berupa ekspedisi kolonialisme bangsa Eropa ke daerah Timur yang diprakarsai Portugis dan Spanyol. . . . Sampai abad ke-20 semangat seperti itu tak pernah padam. Bagi orang Indonesia yang dijajah 3,5 abad, kolonialisme Belanda di negeri ini tidak lepas dari nuansa penaklukan orang Kristen Eropa ke dunia Islam." ("The Crusades. . . happened in centuries until decreasing in sixteenth century. However, in fact it has not completely ended. Because after those events, a new model of colonialism appears in the form of colonialism expedition performed by Western people to eastern region, which was initiated by Portuguese and Spain . . . Until twentieth century that kind of spirit has not been depleted. To Indonesian people, who had been oppressed for 3.5 centuries, Dutch colonialism in this country was not free from the nuance of the European Christian conquest to the Islamic world.")⁴⁰

Because of the bitter experiences under the past Western Colonial era and it was intensified more by the fact that there were missionaries who came along with the colonialists and had many benefits from the aids and facilities of the oppressors. The impact is unfortunate for the prospect of the mission work as Christian missionaries with their cross oriented Gospel are suspected and rejected. Muslims reject the preaching of the cross both by political (Western missionaries was regarded as the agents of Colonialism) and theological reasons (blasphemous act and contradictory to Islamic/ Qur'anic belief). Now, Christianity is still seen as the enemy, which has to be opposed and annihilated. No Muslim leaders express their displeasing

⁴⁰*Suara Hidayatullah*, February 2000.

openly toward Christians. But behind the veil they agree either directly or indirectly to many horrible mistreatments done to Christians.

The “Weak of the Cross” and Its Glory: Where Do We Go From Here?

We have seen that the theology of the cross as articulated by Martin Luther and other theologians is in fact the core teaching of the Bible. We found many incredible paradoxes of the theology of the cross. This theology fully leans and depends on the power of God. It is not result-oriented. In this theology, Koyama says, “God rejects ideologized stheology in which humanity, not God, is at the center.”⁴¹ Theology that exposes God incarnate to be a human being- in terms of human political understanding and even died tragically like a criminal on the cross- is not a popular one.

Furthermore, in the cross of Jesus a new God is introduced to the world. He is God who is revealed as the One who loves to the point of death, and the One who is the God for humanity, the God for us.

Thus, theology of the cross implies that we as the cross-bearers must also follow our Great yet humble Master. Faithfully believing and embracing the cross means that we are ready to suffer on behalf of others for the glory of God. We are ready to love and reach our fellow human beings whoever and wherever they are. And we do all of these in a humble and self-denial attitude; fully aware that our ultimate power and glory is derived from “the shame of the cross.” Thus, all implications of the cross must be expressed in our mission.

How then will we be implementing the very meaning of the theology of the cross in our missionary enterprise, especially that of related to witnessing the Gospel among Muslims? As we look back to the past history of missionary work to the Islamic context, we regretfully

⁴¹Kosuke Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Critique of Idols* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 247.

have to confess that it was full of defects and mistakes. George Fry and James King in their book, *Islam: A Survey of Muslim Faith*, exposes several inappropriate models for contact with Muslims, which happened across the history.⁴² First, the strategy of confrontation or argumentation. In this strategy Christians employ many confrontational methods or tactics to defeat their Muslim opponents through clever arguments, logic and proof-texts.⁴³

Second, the syncretistic approach. This approach states that all religions are basically alike and that every religion should try to be as much like all the other as possible. This approach in fact just wants to learn other religions superficially. It ignores the fact that beyond some similarities among religions, there surely exist the fundamental irreconcilable differences.⁴⁴

Third, the avoidance approach. In this approach "each side carrying on its monologue, ignoring the other side, shunning contact."⁴⁵ This happened, for example, before the nineteenth century, as Christians harshly critiqued Islam without any direct or personal contact and *vice versa*.⁴⁶

Fourth, the obligation approach by which some Christians establish

⁴²They devoted one whole chapter, i.e. chapter 8, to deal with this matter. See C. George Fry and James R. King, *Islam: A Survey of the Muslim Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 129-139.

⁴³Fry and King, *Islam: A Survey of the Muslim Faith*, 130.

⁴⁴*Ibid.* In relation to Islam, for example, whereas there are some points of convergence in beliefs – the understanding of God, there exists some real and substantial differences between Christian and Islam teaching. For further information concerning this matter, see the document based on five regional meetings between Christians and Muslim sponsored by the WCC in *Issues in Christian-Muslim Relations: Ecumenical Consideration* (Geneva: WCC, 1992), 7-8 as quoted by Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva/Grand Rapids: WCC/Eerdmans, 1997), 422.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 131.

⁴⁶Fry and King, *Islam: A Survey of the Muslim Faith*, 130-131.

evangelism among Muslims in order "to fulfill the obligation to proclaim the Gospel by handing out tracts and broadcasting radio messages."⁴⁷ Some crucial elements of witnessing are missing in this approach, such as, personal contact and involvement, which are the expressions of Christian love.

Fifth, the pragmatism approach. Fry describes it in this way, "[this approach] ... is based on the determination to extend the church at all cost, creating a specific number of new congregations in Muslim lands, with a specific number of converts.... This strategy of numerical expansion leads to useless confrontations with devout Arabs"⁴⁸

And finally sixth, the eliciting approach. Once again we get an impressive explanation of it from Fry as follows, [another strategy] which we do not believe sensitive, thinking Christians can adopt, the simple determination to turn people who are not Christians into Christians, to elicit from them, by whatever means of aggression are available, the confession that "Jesus Christ is the Lord."⁴⁹

It is obvious that the above approaches or methods do not share/reflect the spirit of the theology of the cross. We, as Christians, imperatively need to struggle in developing the proper approach in dealing with the Muslim people. As we examined the theology of the cross, there are certainly some missiological significances that could be inferred from it.

First of all, Christians who embrace theology of the cross must develop deep understanding and appreciation toward Islam. The presiding assumptions that labeled Islam as "heretical religion," and the Prophet Muhammad as "false prophet," must be abandoned. This attitude is not appropriate to the spirit of the theology of the cross. Gordon D. Nickel reminds us to Patrick Sookhdeo, an Indonesian convert to Christ as he warns a combative method, which he calls "a crusade mentality" used by Chris-

⁴⁷Fry and King, *Islam: A Survey of the Muslim Faith*, 131.

⁴⁸Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, 131.

⁴⁹Ibid., 131.

tians in their witnessing among Muslims.⁵⁰ Rather, we need to focus on an appreciated understanding and acceptance of Islamic beliefs and practices. This is a decisive and crucial step in further inter-relation with Muslims. How else we could present the Good News without taking this basic step.

Secondly, our theology of the cross needs to be expressed in a form of intensifying inter-religious dialogue as well as relationship with our fellow Muslims. It is a *conditio sine qua non* for all supporters of the theology of the cross. We live in a highly pluralistic society in which Islam is the second largest religion in the world. Everywhere we go we will not miss encountering Muslims. They exist very close to us. They are surrounding us and living among us. Consequently, Christianity is brought into the atmosphere of unavoidable contact/relationship with them.

In this situation, attitudes such as antipathy, extremism, and fundamentality are neither popular nor profitable. These attitudes are in fact contradictory with the crucial aspect of theology of the cross, which are love and humility as well as the total presence and participation of God in the human history. This condition needs inter-religious dialogue as a vehicle for (1) creating mutual understanding and relation among adherents of both religions and (2) building a bridge for mission/evangelism efforts. Inter-religious dialogue has firm biblical and theological bases since the Bible does teach and confirm that there are common grounds among human being, which make a constructive inter-religious dialogue possible. Terry C. Muck stresses this truth by arguing that through three concepts derived from the Bible, i.e., the concepts of *logos spermatikos*, *sensus divinitatis*, and *imago dei*, all adherents of both religions are able to come in this dialogue. I think that he provided a very fine summary concerning the significance and inter-connection of these three concepts as he wrote:

The *logos spermatikos* affirms that Truth exists ... The *sensus divinitatis* affirms that we can know the Truth ... The *imago Dei* reminds us ... that all God's children are similarly engaged and that the proper response to any

⁵⁰Gordon D. Nickel, *Peaceable Witness Among Muslims* (Waterloo: Herald), 101.

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human being, Christian or non-Christian, is to consider how God is working in their life and aid them in growing in relationship to the one true God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.⁵¹

In this case we have to come to the dialogue whether in formal or informal setting with conducive spirits. The most important one is the readiness to humbly listen and learn from our fellow Muslims about their religion with all its dimensions. This is an extremely important prerequisite for a constructive dialogue in the future.

Thirdly, the supporters of the theology of the cross should also promote more meaningful cooperation/networking with all Islamic parties and social-ethnic groups. Based on the one humanity principle taught in the Scripture, Paul Hiebert highly recommends and encourages this cooperation.

If we start with the view that some people are Other, then all our attempts to build bridges of reconciliation between "us" and "them" will ultimately fall. Beneath all the bridges we build, we know that there is still the chasm of Otherness which will divide us when things go bad. If we begin by realizing that the fact we *are one* humanity, no matter how we feel about one another. We can then celebrate our differences because they are secondary ... We can then begin the difficult task of bringing our mental images and social structures into line with that reality.⁵²

This cooperation is important in order not only to promote social activities but also create, broaden, and intensify contacts and communications which can create a conducive environment for deeper relationship, a primary prerequisite for communicating the Gospel.

Finally, the appraisals of the theology of the cross should not forget that the very essence of the Christian mission is not to communicate a (Western) culture, or a creed, or a church, or a moral code, or customs. Also, we need to be aware that our ultimate goal is not the dialogue *per se*, i.e., a success-

⁵¹Terry C. Muck, "Is There Common Ground among Religions?" *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 40/1 (March 1997): 111-112. Also, see Averell U. Aragon, "Toward An Asian Evangelical Theology of Religion," *Journal of Asian Mission* 2/1 (2000): 38-39.

⁵²Paul G. Hiebert, "Are We Our Others' Keepers?" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 22 (1995): 334-5.

ful dialogue in term of just mutual understanding and acceptance. Rather, our ultimate missionary goal is to share "a person," Jesus Christ, the one who experienced humiliated death on the cross yet raised in a glorious resurrection for the redemption of sinful humanity. Our commitment to this goal will surely encounter many oppositions and difficulties from our fellow Muslims. However, by the glorious power of the humiliated cross of Jesus Christ we will be strengthened and empowered to prevail our mission.