

## REVELATION IN ISLAM AND THE GOSPEL

David W. Shenk\*

Muslims and Christians believe that God reveals truth. For Muslims the Word of God has become a book, the Qur'an. For Christians the Word has become Person in Jesus the Messiah.

In 2005 the Christian advent season commenced just as Muslims were celebrating the solemn festivities of Id al-Fitr at the conclusion of their Ramadan month of fasting. The daytime fast during the month of Ramadan and the feasting at night, as well as the days of festivity at the conclusion of the fast, is a commemoration of the revelation of the Qur'an. Muslims celebrate the night they believe that the Angel Gabriel revealed the first portion of the Qur'an to the Muslim prophet in a cave on Mount Hira on the outskirts of Mecca during the month of Ramadan. That is the night of power unlike all other nights, and it is "more excellent than 10,000 months" (Qur'an: Qadr 97:3)!

The Christian advent season is also a commemoration of the gift of revelation when the "Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). The angels proclaimed His birth to shepherds on a hillside on the outskirts of Bethlehem as they sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14).

The celebration of these two advent dramas, one Islamic and the other Christian, reveal the core convergence and divergence between the Muslim and Christian faiths. The Id al-Fitr in early November was a celebration about the word sent down (*tanzil*); it is about the Word of God becoming a book. The Christian celebration of Christmas is about the Word becoming flesh (incarnation). This essay explores the implications of the Word sent down as book and the Word incarnate as person.

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\*David W. Shenk, Ph.D., has written or co-authored fifteen books related to missions and the Christian Gospel in a world of religious pluralism. He is especially interested in authentic Christian witness and presence among Muslims. He has served in missions in North America, Africa, and Europe as teacher, church planter, writer and administrator. At present he is global missions consultant with Eastern Mennonite Missions and travels extensively as a teacher, consultant, and encourager, especially in regard to the church's engagement with Islam.

## DIALOGUE AND WITNESS

Both Muslims and Christians believe that to be entrusted with revelation is to be entrusted with the responsibility to be witnesses to that revelation. Muslims believe they are called to be witnesses to the revelation God has entrusted to them; Christians also believe that they are called to be witnesses of the gift of revelation. So, at its core, the Muslim community is a missional community committed to revelation and witness. The same is true of Christians

The essence of the Muslim mission is witness (*shahada*) to the gift of revelation and invitation (*daawah*) to submit to that revelation. That mission is expressed explicitly in the five daily invitations to prayer from hundreds of thousands of minarets around the world:

God is most great! God is most great!

I bear witness that there is no God but Allah.

I bear witness that Muhammad is the prophet of Allah.

Come to pray!

Come to well-being!

Prayer is better than sleep!

Come to the best deed!

God is most great! God is most great!

There is no god but Allah!<sup>1</sup>

Christians likewise believe that God has called them to be witnesses to the gift of revelation. For that reason my life goal as a Christian is to live in faithfulness to 1 Peter 3:15, “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” For both Muslims and Christians, witness given respectfully provides the way for that witness to be heard; witness that is given in arrogance and polemically is seldom heard.

Several years ago I was invited by the United Kingdom Muslim Students’ Organization to a series of six public dialogues with a Muslim theologian. I asked them why they had invited me. They said, “We invited you because you believe the Gospel and respect us.” After

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., rev. and enl. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 26.

the first event in the Central London Mosque with four or five hundred present, my dialogue companion commented, “This audience is respectfully hearing the Gospel you are sharing, because they recognize that you respect us.”

Of course both Christians and Muslims engage in witness because they are each persuaded of the ultimate truth of the revelation that forms their lives and communities of faith: the Qur’an for Muslims and Jesus Christ of the Bible for Christians. As I see it, a hope that our Muslim friends in the dialogue would commit to the Messiah of the New Testament and the church does not abort the dialogue.

I usually experience our Muslims in dialogue as very forthright in their witness and invitation to me to become a believer in the gift of revelation that they embrace. In fact, on two different occasions after an evening of dialogue, an *imam* has embraced me and wept as he has said, “David, you are too good a man not to become a believer and one of us. I plead with you, become a Muslim!” Those pleas by Muslims for me to convert and become Muslim does not short circuit our mutual commitment to witness—in fact such invitations to conversion add urgency and depth to the dialogue and witness.

I believe that our mutual commitment to revelation adds depth to our dialogue and witness with one another and takes us beyond polite conversations whose primary purpose is that we might understand one another more fully. Understanding one another is very significant. But we go beyond respectful understanding; in dialogue and witness, we invite one another into sober conversation in regard to ultimate reality.

Sometimes, apologetics in regards to our respectful commitments to revelation, become a dimension of the conversation as Christians and Muslims meet. However, I am never very impressed with the efforts of Muslims to prove the truth of Islam, and I suppose Muslims likewise find Christian apologetics to be less than impressive. Jesus is his own best apologist; he does not need defenders for he is his own best defense. However, Jesus does need witnesses, and so our calling is to bear witness faithfully.<sup>2</sup>

This is to say that the Holy Spirit takes responsibility to convince people of the truth. Conversion is the work of God, not a human action. This means that in the journey of conversation, listening, service,

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<sup>2</sup>E. Stanley Jones, *A Song of Ascents* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1968), 88-108.

presence, prayer, and witness as we share with one another in the presence of God—it is the Holy Spirit who convinces of truth.

I have often discerned that in the conversation with Muslims, Jesus, in unobtrusive ways and sometimes disturbing ways, enters into the conversation. He cannot be ignored. He is present, for God in the Messiah enters into the human experience dialogically.

A Lebanese Muslim academic, Tarif Khalidi, observes that neither Muslims nor Christians can own the Messiah for he transcends both the Muslim and Christian communities. Khalidi comments in regard to Jesus,

He remains a towering religious figure in his own right—one who easily, almost naturally, rises above the two religious environments, the one that nurtured him and the other that adopted him. . . . (Jesus) is endowed with attributes which render him meta-historical and even, so to speak, meta-religious.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus persistently occupies when Christians and Muslims encounter one another as people committed to the revelation of God. The Qur'an is also a persistent consideration for the dialogue proceeds from faiths nurtured by different centers: the Word become Book (Qur'an) and the Word become Person (Jesus the Messiah).

### THE NATURE OF REVELATION

We will now explore the nature of revelation within Islam and the Christian faith. Needless to say, our understanding of revelation profoundly affects our understanding of God, the human situation, and the nature of mission. There are convergences in the Islamic and Christian understandings of revelation; for example, both are committed to revealed scripture. However, within the convergence there is also profound divergence. We will explore dimensions of convergence and divergence in Muslim and Christian understandings of revelation and how these realities affect the approaches to mission.

#### Islam

First we consider revelation in Islam. The world view within which Islamic view of revelation is formed is couched in the Qur'anic descriptions of the first human, Adam.

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<sup>3</sup>Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 45.

The Islamic understanding is that Adam was created in paradise. To the dismay of Satan, God taught Adam the names of the animals, and Adam could remember the names. Satan and the angels were unable to remember the names. So, in jealousy, Satan tricked Adam into taking fruit from the forbidden tree in paradise. Thereafter God sent Adam to earth for a period of time wherein Adam and his descendents would be tested to see if they would submit to the will of God. So our time on earth is for testing; if we pass the test at the end of history we will return to paradise from whence we have come. So, our presence on earth is a parenthesis between a paradise lost and a paradise regained at the final judgment.<sup>4</sup>

### Revelation as *Tanzil*

The test is whether we will submit to Islam, which is the first, middle and final religion of humankind. God sent Islam down to Adam, so he is the first Muslim and the first prophet of Islam. In obedience to the Islam that God sent down to him, Adam built the first House of God (the Ka'bah) encompassing the black stone on the Plains of Arafat where Mecca stands today. That is why Islam is the first religion of humankind.

Abraham, the middle prophet of Islam with his son Ishmael, likewise worshiped God at the black stone. In fact, he rebuilt the House of God which is the Ka'bah. Finally, the Seal of the Prophets and the final prophet, who is Muhammad, reestablished the faith of Islam at the Ka'bah, just as Adam the first prophet and Abraham the middle prophet had done.

God, who sent Islam down to Adam, in later eras sent this same Islam down in the form of books through the mediation of the Angel Gabriel. This Islam is inscribed on a Mother of Books in the heavens, and the first portion sent down is the *Suhuf* (Scrolls) sent through the prophet Abraham. Alas, these scriptures have been lost. However, in due course God sent further portions of Islam down: The *Tuarat* (Torah) through the prophet Moses; the *Zabur* (Psalms) through the prophet David; the *Injil* (Gospel) through Jesus the Messiah; then finally the Arabic Qur'an (Recitation) through the Prophet Muhammad.

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<sup>4</sup>Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk, *A Muslim and A Christian in Dialogue* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997), 42-47.

The Qur'an is the criterion of all truth and clarifies and summarizes the earlier revelation.<sup>5</sup>

The Qur'an recognizes with appreciation that the Jews and Christians are the custodians of the previous scriptures and they are respectfully referred to as the People of the Book (Qur'an: Maida 5:48, 68). Although many Muslims charge that these scriptures have been corrupted, this is not the stance of the Qur'an or the Islamic Traditions (*Hadith*)<sup>6</sup> In fact, Muhammad himself is commanded within the Qur'an to seek clarification on questions that he might have from those who are entrusted with the former scriptures (Qur'an: Yunus 10:95). The Qur'an commands the People of the Book to make their scriptures available and not to hide their scriptures (Qur'an: Ali 'Imran 3:187). The Qur'anic recognition and respect for the Biblical scriptures does provide a fruitful basis for dialogue between Christians and Muslims. However, that dialogue is challenged when Muslims dismiss these scriptures as being corrupted.

Here are three factors that Muslims might refer to as a basis for believing that the Bible is a corrupted scripture.

1) There are significant challenges in reconciling the Qur'an with the Bible. For example, a key problem is the Qur'anic assertion that Jesus was not crucified, whereas in the Biblical scriptures the crucifixion of Jesus is at the very center of the Gospel.

2) The nature of historical narrative within the Bible does not fit the mold of a *tanzil* understanding of revelation. The Qur'an is not historical narrative; rather it is propositional statements of truth, a truth that transcends history. Some historical events are referred to in the Qur'an as parables to illustrate a truth, but the Muslim understanding is that the Qur'an transcends history. Yet the core of Biblical revelation is historical narrative; that is a keen perplexity for Muslims.

3) There are multiple translations of the Bible. This contrasts with the Muslim conviction that the Qur'an is only Qur'an in the sent down "Arabic" words of the original revelation. Multiple translations of the Bible suggest Christian disregard for the original language of revelation. Muslims point out that a translation never fully communicates the original meaning. Nevertheless, there are Muslims who do follow the

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 53-62.

<sup>6</sup>David W. Shenk, *The Holy Book of God* (Achimota, Ghana: ACP, 1995), 61-64.

counsel of the Qur'an and explore the Bible seeking to understand its message.

### Culture, Mission, and *Tanzil*

The Muslim understanding of revelation as “sent down” (*tanzil*) forms the Muslim approach to mission. The most obvious effect is that since the final revelation is sent down word for word in Arabic, then any translation of the Qur'an into another language would corrupt the pure revelation of Islam.

As Christians reflect on the Qur'an, they observe that it is an Arabic Qur'an “That ye may be able to understand” (Qur'an: Zukhruf 43:2, 3). Would it, therefore, be possible to translate the Qur'an into other languages so that non Arab speaking people should have the benefit of the Qur'an in the vernacular so that they also “may be able to understand?” However, that is not the position of the Islamic theological establishment. It is a sent down Arabic Qur'an! Any non-Arabic versions of the Qur'an are only interpretations; it is only authentic Qur'an when in the original Arabic.

The missional implication is that Islamization requires Arabization. For a person to become Muslim, he must learn the prayers in Arabic, and the authentic Qur'an is only in Arabic. So, Arabic language classes must follow Muslim mission everywhere. It also means that the leader who knows the Arabic best takes the positions of greater authority. It is, therefore, impossible for the newly converted Muslims to critique the inclinations to cultural imperialism of the Muslim missionary. The missionary knows Arabic best, so the new convert cannot challenge his authority.<sup>7</sup>

Arabic is the vehicle for extending Islam. The Arab name for God, Allah, becomes the theological vehicle for extending Muslim belief. The consequence is that the local culture and indigenous faith is overlaid with a name for God and language that is alien to the society.<sup>8</sup> Said another way, to become a Muslim means that the person needs to become a proselyte. The process of becoming a proselyte begins when a person first makes the confession with intention in Arabic: There is no God but Allah, and Muhammed is the Prophet of Allah (*La Ilaha*

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<sup>7</sup>Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 211-14.

<sup>8</sup>Lamin Sanneh: *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 99-100.

*Illa'llah Muhammadan Rasulu'llah*). By proselyte I mean moving from one cultural system into another; in this case the new convert begins the process of moving into an Arabized culture when he makes the Islamic confession of faith. The process is not immediate; the Arabization journey might take several generations. However, islamization pulls a person, a society, and culture towards progressively encompassing Arabization.<sup>9</sup>

The sent down nature of revelation is the essence of the Islamic understanding of revelation and commences right at the origins of human history. When Adam is created, God teaches him the names of the animals. God does not entrust Adam with that responsibility; rather Adam is the recipient of God's instruction. My judgment is that this is the anthropological/theological reason why the study of Islamic law is the supreme discipline in Muslim universities, and that commitment supersedes disciplines such as natural science or medicine, and in fact even theology.<sup>10</sup> The study of God's instructions and how to apply those instructions supersedes all other disciplines.<sup>11</sup>

Those instructions are unchangeable; the same Islam that God sent down to Adam is the Islam that Muhammad received. To change Islam is innovation (*bidah*) and prohibited. The five daily prayers facing Mecca are a sign within the soul of Islam of the unchangeableness of Islam. The worshipper faces the Ka'bah, where Adam, the first Muslim, received Islam. This is the same Islam that Muhammad received as the final prophet. There is no pilgrimage beyond Adam. History is a parenthesis wherein we are commanded to submit to the unchangeable truth of Islam.

The resistance to innovation contributes to enormous challenges within the world wide Muslim movement. The world is changing. How does one live in obedience to unchanging Islam in our modern changing world? That is the question, which in some regions actually contributes to violent conflict, witness Algeria during the last decade, where modernizers and conservatives battled one another. Muslims are

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 288.

<sup>11</sup>Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 101-102.



confronted with enormous challenges as they seek to be faithful witness to an unchanging Islam in a changing world.<sup>12</sup>

Islam is guidance about right belief and conduct; it is not a revelation of God's self disclosure. Islam describes attributes of God, but it is not God's self revelation. God is all-powerful and sovereign, but in Islam God does not meet us. In his mercy he sends his will down to us through angels, but God does not encounter us. As Muslims understand it, revelation tells us about God, but it does not introduce us into a personal encounter with God. This is the reason that Islamic law, not theology, dominates Islamic studies.<sup>13</sup>

### The Gospel

The Qur'an invites people to experience the wellbeing that comes from submission to the perfect sent down will of God. The Bible invites people into a pilgrimage of learning to know God. This is why the Bible is preeminently historical narrative, a reality that is a perplexity to Muslims. We look now at the nature of Biblical scripture and the revelation of the Christian Gospel.

### Revelation as Incarnation

In the biblical account, Adam and Eve are both created in God's image. They are endowed with the gift of communion and fellowship with God, and can explore the mind of God in whose image they are created. God, therefore, entrusted humankind with the awesome responsibility to name the animals. To name means authority. God entrusted humankind with that astounding authority.

When Adam and Eve turned away from God, by taking the forbidden fruit, God entered the Garden of Eden where they resided, and met them hiding behind the bushes. He rebuked them, but also promised a redeemer. God addressed the serpent, who was a sign of death, evil, and rebellion against God, and promised that a son born to the woman "will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid. and Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

<sup>13</sup>A. Christian van Gorder, *No God But God, A Path to Muslim-Christian Dialogue on God's Nature* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).

<sup>14</sup>Although some scholars will disagree, the mainstream of Catholic scholarship and a variety of Protestant scholarship believe that this is a promise fulfilled in the

God entering the garden of their history is the commencement of the narrative of God seeking people within their history in order to redeem them and form them into his covenant people. The redemptive acts of God within history are the core of biblical revelation. The Jewish theologian, Emil Fackenheim, observes that biblical faith is a response to “root experience” or event that elicits “abiding astonishment.”<sup>15</sup> These root experiences are preeminently the redemptive acts of God.

These root events are the center of biblical faith: God meeting Adam and Eve in the Garden, God meeting Moses at the burning bush, God delivering Israel from bondage in Egypt, God meeting Israel at Mount Sinai, God revealing to King David the promise of the Messiah who is to come through his line, God meeting Israel in the exile renewing the promise of redemption, God meeting us supremely in Jesus the Messiah and through the Holy Spirit’s creation of the church at Pentecost. The Bible is a description and response to the redemptive acts of God over several millennia.

The thread that unites this narrative of redemption is the calling forth of a covenant people whose salvation is centered in the Savior, who is to come (Old Testament), who has come, and who will come again (New Testament). The specificity of biblical revelation is remarkable. This is God’s doing. Those he elects as instruments of his purpose are not characterized as ideal people. Even Abraham the father of faith had a sadly dysfunctional family, and he was reprimanded by the pagans for his lack of integrity!

Nevertheless, God acts in history within our sinfulness electing those through whom salvation is extended to the whole world.<sup>16</sup> God called Abraham through whose seed all nations will be blessed. Abraham had two sons; the promise will come through Isaac. He had two sons; the promise will come through Jacob. He had twelve sons; the promise is extended through Judah. Then the promise is renewed to Jesse’s family and his son David. For the next thousand years the promise is renewed again and again—a son of David will extend

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Messiah as presented in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

<sup>15</sup>Emil Fackenheim, *The Presence of God in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 8 -14.

<sup>16</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 66-90.

salvation to the ends of the earth. Finally the Angel Gabriel appears to the Virgin Mary who is of David's line. The time is at hand; she will give birth to the Son promised through the ages from the dawn of human history.

The narrative of redemption is the drama of God meeting humanity. That meeting is most definitely and fully expressed in Jesus the Messiah who is the fulfillment and culmination of biblical revelation. He is the "image of the invisible God" in whom all the "fullness" of God dwells (Colossians 1: 15, 19). In the Messiah the Word has become Person.

This One, who is the Word incarnate, is revealed through biblical scripture; this scripture also has an incarnational quality. It is an account of people who receive, respond to, and communicate God's revelation. The inspired biblical scriptures do not negate human personality and even sinfulness. Paul writes like Paul and Peter like Peter. Even the sin of a broken relationship between Paul and Barnabas is not ignored; it is recorded (Acts 15:36-41). The Bible is a dialogical book: God and humanity in dialogue. Remarkably the Bible is both our history and God's narrative.

God is taking history to a grand fulfillment in the consummation of the Kingdom of God, that Jesus the Messiah has inaugurated. The church is at the center of God's grand design for history, the final judgment and consummation of all things in the eternal reign of the Messiah when every knee will bow and "...every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:11).

This grand plan of God means that history is not a parenthesis as Islam suggests; rather all of history is moving toward the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. The church is the sign of that destiny, for the church is the redeemed community in whom the "end" is already present. Although history began in a garden, it will be consummated in the coming to earth of the glorious city, the new Jerusalem, the bride of the Messiah (Revelation 21).<sup>17</sup>

### Culture, Mission, and Incarnation

The incarnational character of biblical revelation requires that this revelation becomes incarnated within every culture. It is for this reason

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<sup>17</sup>Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 308-320.

that the global missions' movement seeks to translate the Bible into the languages of people. Although the Word was incarnated within a Jewish carpenter living in Nazareth, God's intention is that this Word become clothed and incarnated within every culture—not restricted to or defined by the Aramaic language and Hebrew culture in which Jesus lived.

The implications are amazing. Wherever the Gospel is proclaimed the linguistic medium for transmitting the Gospel is the local language! Even the local name for God is the vehicle for communicating revelation of the biblical God!<sup>18</sup> This is astounding. For example, my parents went to the Zanaki people of Tanzania in 1937 as the first emissaries of Jesus the Messiah to that linguistic people group. They started a school to teach the Zanaki people to read in their own language. Then my father with Zanaki colleagues translated the Gospel of Matthew into the Zanaki language. That is the first book ever written in Zanaki. In that translation, they used the local name for the creator God, Murungu.

The cultural implications were profound. People were converted to faith in Jesus the Messiah within their local culture, and did not become proselytes to an alien culture. Their conversion to Jesus did not mean abandonment of their creator God, Murungu, whom they had always venerated. However, their understanding of Murungu was profoundly transformed. In their traditional faith they believed that Murungu had gone away and would never return. When they read the first chapter of Matthew they were astounded to discover that Jesus is Immanuel, Murungu with us! Their experience of Murungu was forever transformed as they read Matthew's Gospel. The Zanaki experience of meeting their God in Jesus whom they believe had gone away is the story of African peoples across sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>19</sup>

Joy permeated the emerging church as they developed Zanaki songs of praise to Murungu, who they discovered is present fully in Jesus the Messiah. A revolution ensued, as God in Jesus became incarnate within the culture. There was conflict, as the newly converted believers began to reject practices within the society that were contrary to the Spirit of Jesus, as for example female circumcision. The Jesus,

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<sup>18</sup>Sanneh, 95-107.

<sup>19</sup>David W. Shenk, *Justice, Reconciliation, and Peace in Africa* (Nairobi: Uzima Publishing House, 1997) and David W. Shenk, *Global Gods, Exploring the Role of Religions in Modern Societies* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 72-95.

who was becoming incarnate within their culture, empowered the Zanaki believers to critique and transform their own culture, as well as critique any cultural imperialism of the missionaries.<sup>20</sup>

Infant mortality among the Zanaki was about 80%. My parents firmly believed that God intended for the Zanaki people to “name the animals.” That is to have dominion over creation in ways that cared for creation and took responsibility to transform destructive dimensions. Malaria was the primary killer of infants, as was a diet of thick gruel that mothers fed their babies. So, a scientific teaching program began. A microscope revealed the parasite in the blood that causes malaria, and quinine zapped that parasite. My mother taught mothers who came to our home daily with their ill babies—God has created your milk good—feed your babies from your breast. The transformation in infant mortality rates was dramatic, as people began to learn and apply the gifts of modern science.

Passionately people sought modern education. The emerging church developed schools, and people thronged to these schools. The biblical scriptures were taught as were a great variety of subjects: hygiene, science, mathematics, geography, history, languages, health, theology, and Christian ethics.

One of the most significant gifts of the Gospel was hope.<sup>21</sup> In the traditional religion, people believed that God the creator had gone away and would never come back. There was no hope. Islam, in the towns of Tanzania, taught that history is a parenthesis for testing whether the person will submit to the will of God. Both Islam and traditional African religion did not invite a hope that encouraged an investment in human and cultural development toward a new and hopeful future. (For Islam, cultural development was in the direction of an idealized past, a society wherein every area of life was brought into conformity to the Islamic Shari’ah, a Law that had been codified a thousand years earlier. For African traditional religion the society faced the ancestral past, not the future.)

However, the Gospel as received by the Zanaki invited hope. God has not gone away. He loved the Zanaki people and was becoming incarnate among them in Jesus, who spoke Zanaki through the words of their Zanaki scripture; he ate ugali, and lived among them. In fact he

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<sup>20</sup>Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 157-209.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 321-340.

was born in a cattle corral; he was present fully within their context. He was the presence of the Kingdom of God among them, and the kingdom that he inaugurated would be fulfilled in his second coming.

The church became the sign of the presence of the Kingdom within the Zanaki community. This fellowship of redeemed people was the harbinger of hopeful change throughout the Zanaki society. It was the only authentic development community, a sign of hope and change moving forward into a blessed future; the presence of the church infected the whole society with hope. A new concept entered the society: development.<sup>22</sup>

### CONCLUSION

*Tanzil* (sent down) revelation protects God from personal engagement with people or any vulnerability. God is never affected by what we do or personally involved in our suffering. God is merciful; he compassionately responds to our prayers; he sends blessed instructions down to us so that we may live in peaceful wellbeing. Yet he is personally immunized from our plight.

However, incarnational revelation means that God is profoundly and personally engaged with people. In the cross we meet the vulnerability of God most fully revealed. He suffers redemptively with us and because of us.<sup>23</sup>

Several years ago I was engaged in a public dialogue with a Muslim theologian on revelation in the Bible and the Qur'an. I alluded to this event above. The venue was the Central London Mosque. The three-hour event captivated that audience of some 400 attendees.

My Muslim colleague described scriptural revelation as *tanzil*, teaching and instruction sent down to humanity through the mediation of the Angel Gabriel, a revelation sent down in the form of books of revelation by a merciful God. The final revelation that clarifies all previous revelations is the Qur'an. He described God as sovereign and all powerful, a God who is not affected in any way by frail humanity, yet who in his great mercy has sent books of revelation down.

My colleague's images of revelation remind me of a school house, wherein students need and receive instruction. That is the Islamic

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<sup>22</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: SCM, 1966).

<sup>23</sup>Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in our Context, Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

understanding of the human situation. The world is a school house; we need instruction; when we receive instruction and obey that instruction that is peace. In biblical faith, the world is not only a school house; it is also a hospital needing a physician. Our problem is too deep to be remedied by mere instruction in the school house of life. We need a physician before we can enter the school house<sup>24</sup>

I began my presentation describing God meeting Adam and Eve in the Garden where they were hiding behind a bush. God was profoundly grieved for they had turned away from their loving and life-giving Creator. In that moment of grief, God promised to send a Savior who would redeem humanity from our sinfulness and death. Yet the Savior would be wounded in the struggle against evil (Genesis 3:15).

I asserted that this is the drama of biblical revelation, God entering the garden of our lives in order to redeem us; his supreme and definitive entrance into our garden is in Jesus the Messiah, who was wounded and crucified as our sins crashed into this Man who is the fullness of God among us. However, in the reconciling, inviting, and forgiving embrace of that Man on the cross, we are redeemed.

The next day my dear Muslim dialogue companion said, “We Muslims were offended by what you said last night, that God sought for Adam and Eve in the Garden and met them there.” In Islam, God sends his will down; but God himself does not meet us. What we do never affects the sovereign all powerful God. It is for this reason that Islam denies that Jesus was crucified; there can be no cross for the Messiah, because he is anointed with the glory and power of God.<sup>25</sup>

So I responded, “I know that was offensive. Yet that is the very heart of the Gospel. God so loves us, that he goes far beyond sending his will down to us. Rather he enters our history, our garden, wherever that might be, and seeks us and meets us, even though we are hiding from him, even though we reject him. God seeking and meeting Adam and Eve in the garden is preliminary to his supreme act of seeking, self-giving, redemptive, suffering love revealed in Jesus the Messiah crucified and risen, who in his dying moments cries out in forgiveness for those who have crucified him.”

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<sup>24</sup>Kenneth Cragg, in a lecture at a colloquium on Islam at the International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prague, Czech Republic, on February 3-5, 2004.

<sup>25</sup>David W. Shenk, *Journeys of the Muslim Nation and the Christian Church: Exploring the Mission of Two Communities* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 129-142.

Muslims assert that God cannot love that much! Ultimately the dialogue between faith responding to revelation as *tanzil* and faith responding to revelation as incarnation is really about the nature of God and how much God loves us.

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