
Samuel Zwemer and the Challenge of Islam: From Polemic to a Hint of Dialogue

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Samuel Zwemer (1867–1952) provides the student of mission with a fascinating study of a person caught between two worlds. Beginning his Middle East ministry in the spirit of the triumphalist Protestant missionary movement of the nineteenth century, he ended his career in the more chastened spirit of missions after World War I, anticipating a more dialogic approach to Islam. This change should not be overstated. Zwemer never abandoned his belief that Islam was fatally flawed. But there was a development in his thought and approach that needs to be acknowledged, if for no other reason than to counter tendencies within the post-9/11 evangelical community to revive the triumphalist spirit of an earlier age. Here was a man who

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committed his life to an evangelical witness to Muslims in the heartland of their faith. He never compromised this witness, but he did modify it. This modification is the concern of this article.

Early Years and Training

Samuel Zwemer was born into a family of Dutch immigrants who had belonged to an evangelical subculture in the Netherlands that echoed the values of a similar subculture in America.¹ The emphasis was on a personal faith undergirded by a disciplined devotional life. “The major decisions of [Zwemer’s] home were all made after seasons of prayer, and there was a constant feeling of fellowship with Christ and divine guidance in the family. . . . Three times a day, at each meal, there was Bible reading and prayer. In such a home it is little wonder that the youth felt himself committed to Christ from the time of his earliest reflection on the subject. Nor was it out of the ordinary

that he should join the church and hear the call to the Gospel ministry and later enter foreign service."²

Zwemer attended Hope College in Holland, Michigan. In 1886, during his senior year, he joined the Student Volunteer Movement, a student-led movement that in its heyday attracted the best and brightest of America's university graduates into missionary service. He was one of the first to join, became a leader in its early stages,³ and remained actively involved throughout his career.⁴

This movement emerged from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revivalism in America, which fit well the spiritual emphasis in Zwemer's home. At its heart was the goal to call people

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of all cultures and language groups to a personal faith in Christ that would at the same time allow them to participate fully in the blessings of a "Christian" civilization best represented by European and American societies. These two things—conversion and civilization—were intimately connected.⁵ This is not to say that nineteenth-century missionaries were agents of colonial governments, but they were unapologetic about the benefits Christianity as a system brought to both individuals and societies that came under its benevolent sway.

Zwemer's education in Islam began during his seminary years at New Brunswick Seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey. He was one of three students who met regularly to prepare for mission service in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, which they considered to be the most challenging mission field in the world. In this task they were mentored by John G. Lansing, their Old Testament professor, who had recently returned to the United States from a mission stint in Egypt.

What was theoretical in seminary became practical when Zwemer, along with fellow seminarian James Cantine, moved to the Arab world upon his graduation from seminary in 1889. After studying Arabic for a year in Beirut, the pair settled on Basra, Iraq, and Manama, Bahrain, as the initial sites for what they came to call mission stations. Bahrain became Zwemer's operational base.

Zwemer served in the Middle East until 1929, when he accepted an appointment at Princeton Theological Seminary as professor of missions and of the history of religion. After retiring from Princeton in 1937, he continued to teach and write, constantly encouraging mission work among Muslims.

Harsh Critic of Islam

Once in the Middle East Zwemer soon discovered the essential social, political, and religious cohesiveness of Islam, the "mightiest of non-Christian faiths." In his eyes this cohesiveness was a curse, for he perceived Islam to be a spiritual and sociological straitjacket, keeping its adherents from reaping the benefits Europeans had enjoyed under the tutelage of the Christian faith. In 1907 he approvingly quoted William Clifford Palgrave as saying, "When the Koran and Mecca shall have disappeared from Arabia, then, and only then, can we expect to see the Arab

assume that place in the ranks of civilization from which Mohammed and his book have, more than any other cause, long held him back."⁶ Zwemer considered Islam to be a form of spiritual slavery from which its victims needed release. To engage in mission work in the Arab world was therefore to commit oneself to a war of spiritual liberation.

View of God. Zwemer's critique of Islam began with what he perceived to be its warped doctrine of God. In his early writings Zwemer stresses the foundational nature of Islamic theism, which he felt was its strength, "its tremendous and fanatical grasp on the one great truth—Monotheism."⁷ Yet this strength was also its greatest weakness, as the theism Islam promoted fell far short of what Christians understood about God through biblical revelation.

In his book *Arabia: The Cradle of Islam* (1900), Zwemer challenged the assumption of a number of his contemporaries that Allah was the same deity as the God worshiped by Christians and Jews. "Nearly all writers take it for granted that the God of the Koran is the same being and has like attributes as Jehovah or the Godhead of the New Testament. Nothing could be further from the truth."⁸ Zwemer develops this point in *The Moslem Doctrine of God* (1905). For Zwemer, Muhammad's "Allah" was borrowed from three sources—natural theology, paganism, and a secondhand knowledge of the Bible—and was nothing like the God of the Bible. Zwemer noted, for instance, that the Qur'an could only describe Allah in negations. "Whatsoever your mind can conceive, that Allah is not, you may well believe." He contrasts this portrayal with the positive attributes of God found in the Bible (God is light, God is love, etc.).⁹

The deity portrayed through this negativist theology was an impersonal, "infinite, eternal, vast Monad" who could be known only through his (negative) attributes. Out of the list of ninety-nine attributes that Muslims used to describe Allah, the "terrible attributes" were both more frequent and more frequently used. Zwemer does admit that some attributes were positive, but they were superseded by those that described Allah as a deity who "abases, leads astray, avenges, withholds His mercies, and works harm." Muhammad "saw God's power in nature, but never had a glimpse of His holiness and justice."¹⁰

Muhammad's Allah, being unbound by any moral restraints, was arbitrary in the extreme. If Allah wished to abrogate moral law (which he did time and again for Muhammad), he was perfectly free to do so.¹¹ This god, unchecked by the quality of agape love so central to the Christian understanding of deity, was inaccessible to humankind.

Rejection of the Bible. The inadequacy of Islam's doctrine of God was rooted, in Zwemer's view, in Muhammad's failure to base his theology on biblical revelation.¹² Natural theology was Muhammad's operational framework. The result was a god who bore only a passing resemblance to the far superior God of Judaism and Christianity. Whatever positive things might have been said about Muhammad's grasp of monotheism as the central organizing truth of human existence was negated by this failure to base his teaching on the full and complete revelation of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures.

Muhammad. Muslims believe Muhammad to be the channel of God's final and most complete revelation to the world, an actor given a divine script to read. Zwemer believed that Muhammad himself was the source of this so-called revelation. He was the organizing genius who not only defined Islamic theology (based

largely on ideas borrowed from various contemporary sources)¹³ but put the stamp of his own character on it. "The religion which Mohammed founded bears everywhere the imprint of his life and character. Mohammed was not only the prophet, but the prophecy of Islam."¹⁴

In his early writings Zwemer shows a grudging admiration for Muhammad's genius, admitting that the prophet had a sharp mind, charismatic personality, and natural leadership abilities. For Zwemer, these positive qualities are negated by what he perceives to be Muhammad's immoral character. The proof of Muhammad's dissoluteness is seen in the ethical system he created, which contrasted poorly with other moral codes of his day. What was worse was Muhammad's behavior, as he was unable to live up even to his own low standards. One only had to look at his marital irregularities for proof of this failing. The Qur'an put the limit for polygamous unions at four wives for one man. Muhammad had fourteen wives, at least one of whom was a child bride.¹⁵

Qur'an and Hadith. Zwemer dismisses the Qur'an as a jumble of distorted history, fables, and superstition, which he saw as a mirror of Muhammad's debased morality. In Zwemer's eyes the Qur'an "perpetuates slavery, polygamy, religious intolerance, the seclusion and degradation of women and petrifies social life."¹⁶ Even more serious was the solidification of Muhammad's immoral behavior in the collection of traditions known as the Hadith, which held him up as the shining example of Islamic living.

Muhammad's teaching in the Qur'an and his example in the Hadith led millions of people who came under the influence of his teaching into an immoral lifestyle that required the liberation of the Gospel.¹⁷ Many of the names Muhammad's followers used to describe him were similar to those attributed to Jesus in the New Testament. Words spoken by Jesus found their way into Muhammad's mouth in the Hadith. Muslims were thus unable to recognize the uniqueness of Christ because Muhammad had usurped his elevated status. "The sin and guilt of the Mohammedan world is that they give Christ's glory to another, and that for all practical purposes, Mohammed himself is the Moslem Christ."¹⁸

Islamic moral code. The fruit of Muhammad's Islam was a weak moral code, the denunciation of which was a preoccupation of Zwemer's writing throughout his career. Islam, Zwemer contended, was "the most degraded religion, morally, in the world."¹⁹ This was strong language, but justified in Zwemer's eyes by what he observed in the lifestyle and behavior of Muslims in his travels through the Arab Muslim world.

Zwemer was particularly critical of what he perceived to be Islam's casual attitude toward sin. Islam maintained a hierarchy of sins that tended to narrow ethical concern to those designated as *kabira*, "great sins," on which Muslims had no agreement. Such things as lying, deception, and lust (which Zwemer felt to be integral elements of Muhammad's character) were regarded by Muslims as easily forgivable sins, not all that critical to Allah.²⁰ In addition, Islamic ethics failed to recognize any clear difference between moral and ceremonial law.²¹ Eating pork held the same moral weight as stealing, sometimes even more. This attitude led Zwemer to conclude that Islam was "phariseism translated into Arabic."²²

An important work in this respect was Zwemer's *Childhood in the Moslem World* (1915), which focused on the corrupting influence of Islam on the lives of innocent children. "Moslem

children come into the world handicapped. The curse of Islam, through its polygamy, concubinage, and freedom of divorce, already rests upon them . . . it is hardly conceivable that a child can grow up pure minded in such an atmosphere."²³

Zwemer was concerned also about the role of women in Islamic society. What victimized children victimized women as well, whom Zwemer considered to have been better off in pre-Islamic Arabia than now: "It was Islam that forever withdrew from Oriental society the bright, refining, elevating influence of women. . . . The harem system did not prevail in the days of idolatry. Women had rights and were respected."²⁴

Hints of Change

World War I was a philosophical watershed for Protestant mission, a time of deep soul-searching for many in the missionary community. At issue was the fact that "Christian" nations were drawing colonial subjects into a conflict of the colonialists' own making, which forced a revision of previously held convictions about the superiority of Western "Christian" civilization. For John Mott, the long-serving chairman of the Student Volunteer Movement, this change of attitude came as early as 1914. At the SVM convention in Kansas City, Mott observed, "The situation is more urgent than ever because of the rapid spread of the corrupt influences of so-called Western civilization. The blush of shame has come to my cheeks as I have seen how these influences from North America and the British Isles and Germany, not to mention other countries, are eating like gangrene into the less highly organized peoples of the world."²⁵

Zwemer was not as quick as Mott to pick up the anticolonialist spirit. His address to the same convention in 1914 found him waving the imperialist flag, claiming that it was essential for Western countries to remain in the ascendancy in the Muslim world.²⁶ This view arose in part from Zwemer's fear that Muslim nations, freed from a colonial infrastructure, would close their doors to further gospel witness.

In his book *The Disintegration of Islam* (1916), we begin to discern a subtle alteration in Zwemer's thought, evidence that Mott's critique was beginning to hit home. After affirming that Providence had placed Great Britain in a position of political, moral, and spiritual leadership in the Muslim world, Zwemer goes on to express feelings of betrayal, suggesting that Britain

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had not done all it should have or could have to aid the advancement of the gospel witness: "Surely Christian missions and Christendom have a right to demand that nominally Christian governments, although they may not help forward the spread of the Gospel, should at the very least not be permitted to oppose or thwart the efforts of missionaries."²⁷

A crack had opened up in Zwemer's optimistic appraisal of the colonial venture. In the years immediately following the turmoil of the war, what began as a doubt became a growing conviction—that he had been wrong to put his hopes here. The course of his ministry was about to take a turn in a new direction.

Lyle Vander Werff notes that the later stage of Zwemer's career was marked by a more "anthropological-Christocentric approach" to Islam, a stage that began in 1916: "It is almost as if Zwemer is a liberated man. No longer is it his duty to make battle against Islam as a system. He can now concentrate on the message which is Christocentric and eschatological, a message of Good News for the Muslim as a man."²⁸

Al-Ghazali. One sign of Zwemer's move in this new direction is the positive references he makes to the life and thought of the great Muslim mystic and theologian al-Ghazali (1058–1111). We see it already in *The Disintegration of Islam*, where he briefly references al-Ghazali and his work. It soon becomes even more evident, in a work Zwemer devotes entirely to the life and work of al-Ghazali, entitled *A Moslem Seeker After God* (1920). In both of these books al-Ghazali is seen to represent the best Islam has to offer. Zwemer praises him as someone whose teaching moves toward a Christian perception of truth. Zwemer even goes so far as to compare al-Ghazali favorably with the apostle Paul: "In giving his thoughts on the spiritual character of prayer, [al-Ghazali] attains almost to the height of St. Paul."²⁹

It is important to note here that Zwemer praises al-Ghazali for his contributions *as a Muslim*. Zwemer recognizes that there is value to the writing of a Muslim thinker who never left the faith. "Of all those who have found a deeper spiritual meaning in the teachings of the Koran and even in the multitudinous and puerile detail of the Moslem ritual, none can equal Al-Ghazali."³⁰ Zwemer was clearly beginning to break free from his blanket condemnation of Islam, seeing shades of gray where he once only saw black and white.

Abdul-Wahab. Another example of Zwemer's more open attitude appears in comments about Abdul-Wahab bin Mussheerif, the person behind the Wahabi movement, which later solidified into something approaching an official theology for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Zwemer shows his approval for Abdul-Wahab's reforms, noting that he was "an incarnate whirlwind of Puritanism against the prevailing apostasy of the Muslim world." Where he had compared al-Ghazali to the apostle Paul, what Zwemer sees in Wahab are parallels with Martin Luther. His reform, notes

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Zwemer, was iconoclastic, fruitful beyond his territory, and represented a return to a purer, more primitive form of the faith. He acknowledges Wahab's positive accomplishments in a surprising way, given his earlier unequivocal critiques of Islam and all it represents: "Islam in its primitive state is nearer the truth than Islam with all its added superstitions and additions of later date. The Koran can more easily be made our ally in the battle for the Gospel than the interpretations of the four Imams."³¹

It must not be assumed from such a passage that Zwemer's earlier objections to Islam had ended. The denunciations of his earlier works continued in modified form throughout his career. But it is important to note that the blanket condemnation of Islam was giving way to a more subtle critique, one that was willing to

recognize that there were gradations of light within the darkness, at times approaching the dazzling light of Christ. In the often overlooked little book *Call to Prayer* (1923), Zwemer signals the end of one era and the beginning of the next: "Two methods stand out in clear contrast: the polemic and the irenic; the method of argument, debate, contrasts and comparison on the one hand, and on the other hand the method of loving approach along lines of least resistance."³²

Seeing Points of Contact

Much in this irenic little book reflects this new approach. For the first time Zwemer addresses his Muslim neighbors as "brethren," which is something few missionaries today would be comfortable doing. Even more telling is his reluctance to say what he had said numerous times before—that Islam has had a wholly negative effect on the lives of those who come under its sway. For the first time Zwemer openly and freely admits to positive contributions made by this "greatest of all non-Christian faiths," making its valuation much more complex than he had originally assumed. In this context he approvingly mentions current Islamic reform movements, what he calls New Islam, saying that those who were caught up in these movements could be considered allies with Christians in their desire to bring social and ethical reform to their societies. This signals an end to Zwemer's earlier assertion that the only hope for the Muslim world is the radical displacement of Islam. He now openly admits that Muslims working within the confines of their Islamic worldview can be the source of positive societal changes.³³

This book signals Zwemer's attempt to break with his triumphalist past. No longer will he support the colonial venture. It was a mistake, he says, to ever have relied on that avenue to forward Christ's aims. "We must not put our trust in politics. They are uncertain at best, and whatever may prove the final adjustment of the present tangled situation neither our hopes nor our dread lie in that direction."³⁴

Muhammad. In his last comprehensive treatment of Islam, *The Cross Above the Crescent* (1941), the missionary-now-turned-professor shows that his earlier critique of Muhammad remained consistent. He is still convinced that Muhammad's character was flawed, even though the criticism is more muted than in previous works. The near-deification of Muhammad in Muslim piety remains a source of irritation. Muhammad had stolen the glory due Christ in the minds and hearts of most Muslims. However, Zwemer balances this with a positive appraisal of Muhammad's genius. Zwemer the reluctant admirer of Muhammad in the early 1900s has become a genuine admirer in 1941. Muhammad was "one of the greatest creative spirits in the history of human culture. The impress of his mind and life has been colossal." Even more astonishing is Zwemer's assertion that Muhammad was sincere in his prophetic calling and, despite a growing arrogance, did in fact exhibit signs of personal and spiritual integrity.³⁵ Noticeably absent in this book is the deprecating polemic of earlier works.

Islamic theism. We see a change in Zwemer's attitude toward the Islamic doctrine of God. The mature Zwemer, while still feeling that Muhammad's portrayal of God was inadequate, no longer believes it was inadequate enough to justify the harsh language of his early years. In an article he wrote for the journal *Theology Today* in 1946, we see an emphasis less on what Muhammad got wrong than on what Muhammad got right. In a complete rever-

sal of his earlier conviction, Zwemer is now convinced that Allah is merely a different name for the same God worshiped by Jews and Christians. Zwemer celebrates Muhammad's role in calling the Arabs "back to the worship of one *living* God."³⁶ Zwemer also now finds that the ninety-nine attributes of Allah, with only one or two exceptions, are equivalent to the attributes of Jehovah in the Hebrew scriptures.

Such conclusions all give weight to Zwemer's argument that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. The most convincing proof, however, was something he had observed during his long years as a missionary in Arabia: no Muslim convert ever claimed to have changed gods. "No Jew since Paul's day, any more than Paul himself, was conscious of a change of 'gods' when he accepted Christ as Savior and Lord. The same is true of every Muslim convert today."³⁷ Zwemer had moved into new territory here. His abandonment of a polemical approach to evangelistic outreach had allowed him to see points of contact, where before he had seen only reasons for conflict. He was more of a listener now, anticipating the dialogic approach of those who would pick up where he left off.

A Caution

The case for Zwemer's transformation of thought should not be overstated. It was a modification more than a transformation. Many of his original critiques, though less harsh, remained

consistent throughout his life. In 1941 he was still echoing earlier themes: "In spite of all its elements of worth and strength and vitality, Islam has failed conspicuously and proved itself hopelessly inadequate to meet the social, the intellectual, the moral and spiritual needs of humanity. Its inward weakness, its denials and falsehoods have corrupted the best that is in it, and proved the truth of the Latin proverb: 'The corruption of the best is the worst.' The failure of Islam is the justification and plea for missions to Mohammedans."³⁸

Zwemer remained consistent in his evangelical calling to people whom he perceived to be held in the grip of a faith he considered fatally flawed. But years of living among and interacting with Muslims he learned to call friends and neighbors forced him to modify his harshest views. (A particularly touching tribute to Muslim friends appears in *A Call to Prayer*, where he notes with heartfelt appreciation the support his Bahraini Muslim neighbors gave him and his wife during their time of grief after the death of their two daughters.)

Nurtured on nineteenth-century triumphalist polemic, the mature Zwemer evolved into a more thoughtful critic, exhibiting a greater respect for people he had always loved and an increased admiration for the faith that shaped their lives. In these days, when the "clash of civilizations" is being touted as the most accurate description of Muslim-Christian relations, we would do well to follow Zwemer's lead, moving further down that same road. Zwemer himself, I believe, would approve.

Notes

1. Adrian Zwemer, *Genealogy and History of the Zwemer-Boon Family* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Nungesser Printing, 1932), p. 25.
2. J. Christy Wilson, *Apostle to Islam* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), p. 21.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
4. Lyle L. Vander Werff, *Christian Mission to Muslims* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1977), p. 225.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 210–14. See also Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The Great Century*, vol. 4 of *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), chaps. 1–4.
6. Samuel Zwemer, *Islam: A Challenge to Faith* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1907), pp. 1, 130.
7. Samuel Zwemer, *The Moslem Doctrine of God* (New York: American Tract Society, 1905), p. 7.
8. Samuel Zwemer, *Arabia: The Cradle of Islam* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1900), p. 171.
9. Zwemer, *Moslem Doctrine of God*, pp. 19, 24–25, 28, 30.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 48, 49.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
13. Zwemer, *Arabia: The Cradle of Islam*, p. 170.
14. Zwemer, *Islam: A Challenge to Faith*, p. 51.
15. Zwemer, *Arabia: The Cradle of Islam*, pp. 180–81, 183.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 187–90.
17. Zwemer, *Islam: A Challenge to Faith*, p. 119.
18. Samuel Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ* (London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1912), pp. 140–70, quotation on p. 157.
19. Samuel Zwemer, *Childhood in the Moslem World* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1915), p. 159.
20. Zwemer, *Moslem Doctrine of God*, pp. 51–53.
21. Zwemer, *Islam: A Challenge to Faith*, pp. 121–22.
22. Zwemer, *Moslem Doctrine of God*, p. 52.
23. Zwemer, *Childhood in the Moslem World*, p. 170.
24. Zwemer, *Arabia: The Cradle of Islam*, p. 161.
25. Fenell P. Turner, ed., *Students and the World-Wide Expansion of Christianity*, Kansas City Convention (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1914), p. 86.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 70–78.
27. Samuel Zwemer, *The Disintegration of Islam* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1916), pp. 118–19.
28. Vander Werff, *Christian Mission to Muslims*, p. 243.
29. Zwemer, *Disintegration of Islam*, pp. 64–71, quotation on p. 71.
30. Samuel Zwemer, *A Moslem Seeker After God* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1920), pp. 21–22.
31. Zwemer, *Disintegration of Islam*, pp. 77, 88, 91.
32. Samuel Zwemer, *Call to Prayer* (London: Marshall Brothers, 1923), p. 30.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 49, 22.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 25–28, quotation on p. 27.
35. Samuel Zwemer, *The Cross Above the Crescent* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1941), pp. 68, 69, 28 (quotation), 66–67.
36. Samuel Zwemer, "The Allah of Islam and the God of Jesus Christ," *Theology Today* 3 (April 1946): 66–72, quotation on p. 66 (my italics).
37. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
38. Zwemer, *Cross Above the Crescent*, p. 48.