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Book Review: Muslims, Christians, and Jesus: Gaining Understanding and Building Relationships by Carl Medearis

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Larson; Book Review: Muslims, Christians, and Jesus; Gaining Understanding
great bonus to readers who are looking for a “formula” for success in world
missions. Goheen draws from his experience as a pastor, and his biblical,
exegetical, and theological acumen lends credence to the quality of this book.

Moreover, the author’s scholarship is decisively all-embracing. Goheen draws
ideas from a broad spectrum of scholars (e.g., Roman Catholic, ecumenical, and
evangelical). Although steeped in the Reformed tradition, the author manages to
engage scholars from different theological persuasions.

I observed three limitations in the book. First, the author fails to engage
scholars from the Global South, which restricts the universal appeal of this
fascinating book. The last two decades have witnessed the rise of scholars and
thinkers from “younger churches” whose voices are important to any missiological
equation. Secondly, the use of Abraham and Israel *only* as paradigmatic of essence
of the *Missio Dei* is limited. This book has not come far enough in constructing a
comprehensive and coherent theology of mission *before* Abraham’s time. In the
biblical story, the mission of God to redeem fallen humanity is pre-Abrahamic and
pre-Israel (Eph. 1:4–5).

Third, I found the author’s definition and corresponding features of a
missional church inconsistent. Early in the book, Goheen writes, “At its best,
‘missional’ describes not a specific *activity* of the church but the very *essence and
identity* of the church as it takes up its role in God’s story in the context of its
culture and participates in God’s mission to the world” (4). By the time Goheen
concludes his work (chapter 9), some of the descriptions of a missional church
offer *specific activities* like worship, preaching, prayer, and evangelizing (201–226).

Differentiating “mission” from “missionary” or “missional” may overwhelm
some readers, but many will find *A Light to the Nations* as a fascinating scholarly
work that speaks to the current concerns of today’s missional church. In simple
and contemporary fashion, Goheen succeeds in making God’s redemptive plan
accessible even to readers with no prior theological training.

Carl Medearis, *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus: Gaining Understanding and Building
Relationships*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2008, 191 pp., \$13.99.

Reviewed by Warren F. Larson. Larson is Associate Professor of Muslim Studies and former
Director of the Zwemer Center at Columbia International University.

Medearis begins this book by stating that during the Cold War many
Americans viewed Communism as the enemy. Since the fall of the Soviet Union,

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 2 [2012], Art. 13 though, many people now think Islam is the enemy. Such is not the case. The purpose of this book is to help readers understand that Islam is not the enemy and neither are Muslims. Having befriended, witnessed, and prayed with many Muslims over the years, I believe that Medearis sets a good example for the rest of us.

In an effort to help others engage Muslims in meaningful relationships, Medearis suggests a gentle steering of conversations toward Jesus, rather than focusing on apologetics or engaging in political discussions such as those related to a defense of Israel. He argues convincingly that if such is our goal, many Muslim-Christian tensions will fall by the wayside. In short, he wants to move Christians from fear to faith and advocates that a good place to begin is to look for common ground (e.g., God, angels, holy books, prophets, Day of Judgment).

Medearis suggests that by using the Qur'an, Christians can help Muslims think more deeply about Jesus. He notes, "[T]he Qur'an is quite possibly the greatest inroad we have to reach the hearts of our Muslim friends" (66). He arranges the nearly one hundred verses about Jesus (all of them positive) under the topics of His birth, character, death, and exaltation (70–73). He admits the Qur'an is problematic, confusing, conflicted, and that "a few verses do condone killing" (66). While understanding that it categorically denies Jesus is the Son of God, he insists there is a "gold mine running through the Qur'an: His name is Jesus (Isa)" (66).

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This book suggests many practical ways Christians can relate to Muslims. One worthy of comment is in the area of hospitality. Christians reaching out to Muslims should make plans to "have fun" (152), for many Muslims love to party. Such social settings provide opportunities for conversations. Medearis lists the top five questions often discussed: "Do you believe Muhammad was a prophet?" "Do you think the Qur'an is God's inspired book?" "Has the Bible been changed?" "How could God have a son?" and, "Was Jesus crucified?" He gives guidelines on how to respond to each question and includes a few do's and don'ts when witnessing to Muslims.

The greatest strength of this book is perhaps the author's ability to tell stories, including very humorous ones. For example, when attempting to sing a song to a group of Arab children in the desert, the Medearis family used the wrong word for "joy." So, rather than singing, "I've got the joy, joy, joy, down in my heart," they sang, "I've got a mouse, mouse, mouse, down in my heart" (29).

Other stories illustrate how much prayer means to Muslims. He writes about several meetings and opportunities to pray with a leader of the Hezbollah.

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Another story described encounters with a Lebanese Arab, government official, in which he was able to discuss the book of Luke and have prayer.

One particularly moving story (92–96) describes how he and a friend witnessed to a Saudi princess who was not at all open to hearing about Jesus. She was a highly-educated woman of the royal family with a degree in journalism and strong feelings against the West, especially the United States. As they addressed her hurts and frustrations, the princess broke down, and they were able to share Christ's love and the hope that only God can give. Before the meeting was over, the princess made a profession of faith in Christ.

Though this was a powerful story, it illustrates what may be the most controversial aspect of the book. While this woman made a profession of faith in Christ, she apparently remained very much a Muslim. Recognizing the seriousness of this issue, Medearis devotes an entire chapter (134–150) arguing that Muslims can retain their identities, but in their heart of hearts be disciples of Jesus. This is obviously one of the concerns many have in reference to some insider movements and the controversy swirling around contextualization.

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The only limitation is that this book contains some inaccuracies. For example, Medearis writes that Muhammad and his first wife had seven children together, six of whom died young (24). It is true there were no surviving sons from the marriage, but the couple had four daughters who lived for years. The book calls the Hadith one of the revealed Holy Books (42), but it is not in the same category as the four divinely-inspired books. He notes that Jews and Christians will not be in hell for eternity (44), whereas many modern Muslim scholars regard Christians and Jews as *mushrik* (those who add partners to God) who will be in hell for eternity. He writes that Islam is based largely on works, when the truth is it is based on both works and faith. Muslims must embrace the five pillars of Islam plus the six articles of faith (57). Medearis also notes if a Christian or Jewish woman marries a Muslim man, she is a Muslim (89). These can easily be edited out in a future edition.

In conclusion, this book should be read for at least two reasons. First, it demonstrates that attitude is more important than knowing all there is to know about Islam, and building bridges with Muslims is the most fruitful approach to sharing the Gospel. Second, this work stimulates ongoing Christian thinking as to the extent to which Muslims can *remain* Muslim as they follow Jesus the Messiah.