

## Abstract

In the past 50 years millions of Muslims have migrated into the West igniting a wide range of political, cultural, and ethical debates. Muslim immigrants are routinely "framed" by Westerners as a problem to be solved or a challenge to be overcome. Right-wing nationalists tend to frame Muslim immigrants as a threat to Western security, culture, and religion. Left-wing multiculturalists tend to frame Muslim immigrants as helpless or misguided in need of education, empowerment, and enlightenment. This article provides an alternative Christ-centered framework for thinking about Muslim immigrants. It is argued that, through this Christological frame, Muslim immigrants can be welcomed into a relationship that escapes the political dead ends of the right and the left.

### **Following Jesus and Stereotyping Islam**

The evidence is overwhelming: Muslim immigrants in the West do not define themselves, Westerners do that for them. Throughout Western media and popular discourse Muslims immigrants are constantly being discussed, described, caricatured, and categorized. Denied the ability to speak for themselves, Muslims are spoken for. They exist for description, not dialogue.

As a Christian ethicist I am interested in a simple question: what is an authentically Christian response to this destructive and dehumanizing behavior?

### **Flat Muslims: The Stereotypes of the Right and the Left**

Western stereotypes of Muslims can be found on both the political right and the left. Both sides caricature their Muslim neighbors by placing them in simplistic frameworks to describe, explain, and ultimately solve the Muslim "problem."

To be brief, those on the political right tend to frame their Muslim neighbors with threat-oriented categories and stereotypes. Muslims are framed as a threat to national security, law, order, peace, and culture.

Those on the left occasionally create their own threat-based frames for Muslims. The European left, for example, has historically portrayed Muslim immigrants as a threat to the rights of women, gays,

lesbians, the arts, and free speech.

However, more often than not, the political left avoids threat-based frames and opts for need-based frames. Here Muslims immigrants are framed by a set of perceived needs. Needs, mind you, that can only be met by the West.

According to the need-based framework of the left, Muslim immigrants are defined and described as a group of people hampered by a wide variety of cultural, educational, religious, and political deficits—deficits that the left would like to eagerly fill. For example, Muslim immigrants are framed as ignorant and uneducated—therefore in need of Western education. They are also framed as medieval or pre-modern—therefore in need of Western modernization. They are framed as economically weak and helpless—therefore in need of economic empowerment. They are framed as religiously backward and malformed—therefore in need of a “reformation.”

While seemingly generous, when the left gets to define your hunger, it gets to decide your diet as well. From the left’s heightened position, it is empowered to not only diagnose the Muslim sickness, but to also prescribe the Western cure.

Whether the stereotypes come from the right or the left, three things hold true regardless. First, Muslims are not permitted to define or describe themselves, that will be done for them. Second, Muslims are often defined using simplistic and manageable frameworks. Complex Muslim individuals must be transformed and distilled into something simple—something the West can both understand and “fix.” Third, Muslims will consistently be framed as passive recipients while Westerners will be framed as active agents. It is the Muslim’s calling to be a problem. It is the Westerner’s calling to be a solution.

It should be clear, there is no moral equivalence here, the political right is clearly more aggressive and malevolent towards Islam than the left. However, neither side consistently allows Muslims to speak for themselves. Neither side allows for “Islam” to be what it is, namely, an extremely complex, diverse, and global public religion of deep brokenness and beauty, vice and virtue. Instead of contending with the vast complexity of Islam, Muslims are boxed in, simplified, and worked on. They are a project to complete, a question to answer, a sickness to cure.

### **A Christ-Centered Response**

What has been the response of Western Christians to these stereotyping efforts? For the most part they have obediently accepted the myopic frameworks of the political right and left. Western Christians have shown little interest in contending with the vast complexity of Islam. Instead, they have found the simplistic frameworks of the left and the right to be both clear and comforting. The simplicity of threat and need-based stereotypes are more desirable than the complexity of real living-and-breathing Muslim neighbors.

While this development is discouraging, even more disheartening is this: *The person, work, and teaching of Jesus Christ plays almost no discernable role in how Western Christians are publicly framing or responding to their Muslim neighbors.*

As a Christian ethicist, I believe that Christian ethics should have at least something to do with, you know, Jesus Christ. In light of this conviction and out of a desire to correct this oversight, the remainder of this article will explore the following question:

*What if Jesus Christ was the interpretive framework through which Christians viewed their Muslim neighbors?*

With this question in mind, the remainder of this article explores how a wrestling with the complex life and work of Jesus Christ can help Christian citizens enter into a more complex engagement with their Muslim neighbors than is currently on offer from either the right or the left.

### ***A Complex Christ for a Complex Neighbor***

When surveying the conflict over Muslim immigration in the West, thoughtful observers are immediately struck by its complexity. The debate involves terrorism and security, workplace and family law, clothing and food, race and gender, language and class, artistic and intellectual expression, and so much more. With each passing year the complexity of the debates and questions only seem to proliferate.

Approaching a complex issue like this with a simplistic and flat understanding of Jesus will not do. Fortunately, the Jesus of Scripture is a multifaceted, dynamic, and varied figure. He is a healer and a friend, a prophet and a priest, a liberator and a mystic, a servant and a king.

The various Christological images explored below come from four theologians who are particularly passionate about exploring the complex work of Christ and its implications for public life. All four theologians were influenced by the early Reformation leader John Calvin. Calvin himself formulated a wide variety of complex images of Christ. One commentator notes that Calvin regularly cobbled

together a kaleidoscopic Christological mosaic from stones not necessarily cut to fit. He wants to depict Christ as fountain, brother, criminal, and king as Christ exhibited these realities in the varied details of his life. This eclecticism is essential to Calvin's thinking, for it represents simply the fullness of Christ's history. . . . To commit oneself to [Calvin's kaleidoscopic Christ] is to commit oneself to a broad, diverse, detailed reality that threatens at all times to exceed one's grasp.<sup>ii</sup>

The complexity of Christ always exceeds the Christian's grasp. And this will be our primary point: *an honest wrestling with a complex Christ demands an honest wrestling with a complex Muslim and the complex call to love them.*

Simplistic understandings of Christ breed simplistic understandings of Muslims. Complex Christologies help us push for a nuanced openness to the mystery, complexity, and dynamism of that thing we call "Islam."

The following vignettes provide hints as to how the complex Lordship of Jesus Christ breaks open our myopic visions to the pluriformity, dignity, and rights of our Muslim neighbors. Each of these brief vignettes receive a more robust exploration in my book, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear*.

### ***Christ the King: Abraham Kuyper***

A great deal of the conflict over Islam's presence in the West is really all about power—who's in control. When a nation is divided between different religious and ideological groups, who gets to decide? As we noted, many Westerners frame Muslims as coming to "take power." When Muslim immigrants are framed as threats to power, the solution that follows is quite simple. Exclude Muslims from power and ensure that they cannot get anywhere near it. Framed as a power struggle, it is not long before Muslim centers of power and social spaces (e.g. mosques, Muslim schools, organizations, business, charities, families, etc.) become suspicious gatherings that need to be monitored, controlled, and suppressed.

Abraham Kuyper's Christ-centered approach to power offers a way beyond this simplistic and destructive framing of Islam and Muslim spaces. Abraham Kuyper was a Christian prime

minister who rose to political prominence in the 1890s in the Netherlands. This was a period when the Dutch people were evenly divided between four rival ideologies: Calvinism, Liberalism, Catholicism, and Socialism. With four *very* different ideologies each competing for political power, these four communities had to find a way to live together.

It was within this context that Kuyper developed a *Christ-centered case for the just and generous distribution of political power and space across religions and ideologies*. In short, Kuyper argued that Christ alone was in sovereign control over the nations and its diverse social spaces. Christ alone, not the government, would judge the various public religions and ideologies at work in the Netherlands. Therefore, Catholic schools, Socialist labor unions, Liberal newspapers, and Calvinist churches all deserved their Christ-given freedom to live out their ideals in community. Christ alone was in control of the nation—not Christians.

Applied to our current context, if God is truly sovereign over Muslim mosques, schools, marriages, organizations, and fashion choices, that means Christians and Christian churches are not. Within this Christological framework our Muslim neighbors can now be “reframed” as subjects of Christ’s rule rather than Christian rule. At the end of time Christ alone will judge Muslim spaces and communities. Christ has empowered Muslims to be parents, students, artists, business leaders, and politicians. Christ has not empowered Christians to do these tasks for them. Christians must honor Christ’s empowerment of Muslim citizens. Christians must let go of their lust for power and control. Furthermore, according to Kuyper’s Christology, when Christians actively defend the rights and freedoms of Muslim individuals and institutions, they are positively honoring the sovereign reign of God.

### ***Christ the Healer: Klaas Schilder***

Clubs and torches, swords and shouting, fear and anger, attack and reprisal. This is an apt description of the scene on the Mount of Olives on the night that Christ was betrayed. This also serves as an apt description of the current political climate and debate over Muslim immigration. Lots of heat, little light. Fraught with a sense of political fear and fragmentation, our debates over issues of religious diversity and immigration often leave us feeling isolated, wounded, and more frustrated than when they began.

Amidst the midnight struggle between the disciples, soldiers, and servants of the High Priest, a slave named Malchus is injured by Peter’s sword. His ear falls to the ground. How does Jesus respond amidst the cacophony? He rebukes Peter’s violence, he reaches out an unarmed hand and heals the ear of the slave who came to arrest him.

The theologian Klaas Schilder remarks that in this act Christ demonstrates the true nature of divine kingship as both healing and liberating. In his final miracle, Christ the king liberates the slave who came to bind him. He heals the one who came to injure. He gives life to the one who came to kill. Here, Schilder argues, true kingship, true power, is on display.

It is not uncommon today for Islam to be framed as a religion of conquest. Muslims, it is said, are coming to attack, bind, and “take over” the West. Likewise, Westerners are framed as cultural defenders responsible for erecting walls around Western civilization and preempting attacks against their would be aggressors.

This story of Malchus offers an interesting rebuke to this framing of conquest and fear. Malchus is clearly coming to attack and bind Jesus. His orders are to take Christ’s freedom away and lead him to his death.

How does Jesus respond to this aggression? Jesus reaches out his unarmed hand to heal the one who came to injure, to liberate the one who came to bind.

Many Christians would rightly argue that national security in a violent world sometimes requires a coercive defense. However, the story of Malchus stands nonetheless. Christ's healing and liberation of the slave reminds us that "security" is not the ultimate goal of Christ's politics. His ultimate end is healing, liberation, and restoration.

Rather than frame our Muslim neighbors as a security threat to be neutralized, the tale of Malchus offers an alternative Christological frame for our Muslim neighbors. Muslim immigrants need not be framed as a challenge to be overcome but as a profound opportunity for the followers of Jesus to humbly and vulnerably reach out an unarmed hand to connect, to engage, and to heal. Christ's historical healing of Malchus reframes our historical moment, not as a challenge to the gospel, but its great opportunity.

### ***Christ the Naked: Klaas Schilder***

It is common today to frame Islam as uniquely violent and the West as uniquely peaceful. Citizens in the West robe themselves with the labels of rationality, tolerance, and freedom while they robe their Muslim neighbors with the labels of irrationality, hate, and oppression. Robed in all that is right and good, the West is free to strip Islam bare and expose the naked truth about Islam.

Klaas Schilder wrote a powerful and raw theological meditation on the nakedness of Christ on the cross entitled "Christ Disrobed." In this reflection, Schilder explores a rather unwelcome question: What is the significance of the Christ's disrobing on the cross? What does it mean that the sovereign God of the universe allowed himself to be stripped naked?

While the reader ponders the nakedness of Christ, Schilder argues that in fact *humanity* is "really the one who was disrobed on Golgotha."<sup>iii</sup> For, as we "look carefully upon His naked death, upon His essential nakedness,"<sup>iv</sup> we see that in our stripping of Christ, our own aggression and violence is being stripped bare. Christ's naked body exposes our own true selves. We see on the cross that it is "*We*" who "have robbed God," and in the naked exhibition of God, all "souls are being discovered."<sup>v</sup>

Schilder argues that the stripping of Jesus lays bare humanity's false pretensions of morality, tolerance, and reason. Christ's nakedness exposes our acts of benevolence as a thin and tattered cloth feebly covering our deeper desires for domination and oppression. In the shadow of Christ's nakedness, I am forced to look at my naked aggression and finally admit "to those who ask about it: I am the soldier who removed His clothes."<sup>vi</sup>

Moreover, Schilder declares, having allowed this disrobing, Christ has now "taken all my clothes from me, and has put me, naked and cold, on display before the universe."<sup>vii</sup> For in his disrobing we are exposed.

Here on the cross, our Western pretensions of love, tolerance, and peace are laid bare. We are forced to look upon ourselves for who we truly are. Engaging our Muslim neighbors, followers of Christ the naked carry a deep recognition of our own naked aggression and selfishness. We know that there is no potential for violence in Muslims which is not also present in ourselves. We know that, while we might clothe ourselves with the veneer of Western tolerance and multiculturalism, all citizens, ourselves included, are capable of the violence exposed at Golgotha.

### ***Christ the Hospitable: Hans Boersma***

[God] stretched out His hands on the Cross, that He might embrace the ends of the world;  
for this Golgotha is the very center of the earth.

Cyril of Jerusalem<sup>viii</sup>

How might a Christ-centered understanding of hospitality reframe a Christian's response to Muslim immigration? Hans Boersma is a contemporary theologian whose recent work explores the theme of hospitality in the atoning work of Christ on the cross.

Atonement studies are historically concerned with two primary questions. First, what work has the cross accomplished? And second, what is the significance of the cross for the Christian life? Responses to these questions have historically fallen into one of three lines of argument. The first line argues that the cross functions as a moral example or model of the sort of non-violent and sacrificial life a follower of Jesus should lead. The second line argues that the cross was the moment in which the moral debts of humanity were paid. The final line insists that the cross was the site of Christ's victory over the spiritual and political powers of this world. This diversity of interpretation is no accident. It reflects the diversity of metaphors, images, and messages attributed to the cross in the Scriptures themselves.

Hans Boersma's theological contribution to this debate is the unifying theme of hospitality. In the end, Boersma concludes that the cross must be understood, first and foremost, as an act of divine hospitality. For Boersma regards "hospitality as the soil in which the various models of the atonement can take root and flourish."<sup>x</sup> He argues that at its very core the cross represents an opening up of God's very self to a world that has closed itself off from the divine embrace. The cross, in other words, makes space in a world that regards itself as full.

Boersma sees cruciform hospitality, not only as the essential calling of Christ, but as the essential calling of the Christian, as well. For him, "Christ's death and resurrection constitute the ultimate expression of God's hospitality and form the matrix for an understanding of all God's actions and as such the normative paradigm for human actions."<sup>x</sup> Moreover, Boersma concludes that disciples of the hospitable One must embody his hospitality not only in their ecclesial—but in their public lives as well.

Christ made space for humanity on the cross, and the proper human response to that hospitality is to make it one's own. One's personal experience of divine hospitality must overflow into the social, economic, cultural, and even political lives of our Muslim neighbors. Because Christ opened his nail-pierced hands to friend and foe alike, his disciples must reflect that posture in all of their interactions with Islam. Put simply, Christians make space for Muslims, because Christ first made space for them.

Framed by the hospitable cross, our Muslim neighbors are no longer unwanted intruders but honored guests. If we fail to make space for Muslims, we deny the cross that made space to us.

### **Christ the Complex King**

Christians prefer to "professionalize" their connection with Islam. By this I mean, we like to pay professional missionaries, pastors, activists, scholars, and non-profit leaders to professionally engage with our Muslim neighbors—so we don't have to. In this my fellow Christians and I mimic the politics of both the left and right. The political right hires soldiers, police officers, and immigration officials to deal with Muslims. Likewise, the political left hires social workers, teachers, and counselors to deal with Muslims. We all farm it out. Right, left, and Christian we want to delegate our engagement with Muslims to hired professionals—once again, so we don't have to.

Herman Bavinck was an early 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian whose Christology was marked by something called the "munus triplex." This was a belief in the threefold office of Christ as a prophet, priest, and a king. This three-sided nature of Christ combined his "wisdom, righteousness, and redemption; truth, love, and power."<sup>xi</sup> As a prophet Jesus speaks words of wisdom and truth. As a priest he performs the ultimate sacrifice of love and mercy. As a king he rules in power and justice. He is and does all three.

Bavinck argues that all of those who follow this Christ as prophet, priest, and king are called to actively respond and reflect his truth, his love, and his power. Disciples are not merely recipients but agents of this prophetic, priestly, and kingly reign.

Diverse Christians are called in diverse places to the ministries of love and mercy, justice and

power, wisdom and truth. Some will be called into law or business, politics or education, science or service. All will be called to reflect the diverse callings of Christ in diverse places.

What does this mean for this debate over Muslim immigration? Some Christians will be called to prophetically criticize Islamophobia as activists. Here they will be called to reflect and speak Christ's prophetic truth on behalf of Muslim dignity. Others will be called to positions of power in politics, business, and leadership. Here they must reflect Christ's royal justice which is for the flourishing of Christian and Muslim alike. Others will be called to positions of healing, service, and restoration in hospitals, schools, and neighborhoods. Here they must reflect Christ's priestly sacrifice of peace and reconciliation between the West and Islam.

Rather than framing their Muslim neighbors as the objects of their own visions of truth, justice, and redemption, Christians are called to offer them up to Christ and humbly assume the posture of a servant and a steward. For it is ultimately Christ (and not the Christian) who will declare and enact the ultimate truth, love, and justice.

Engaging Muslims is not only for the professionals; it is for all disciples who have been called by their savior to the ministry of reconciliation, justice, and truth.

## Conclusion

We have only just begun to taste the vast conceptual and spiritual richness that is available to those who will explore the kaleidoscopic grace and mercy of Christ for this debate over Muslim immigration. The narrow, flat, and myopic frameworks of both the right and the left will not do. Both threat and need-based frameworks fail. They fail to make real space, they fail to cultivate deep humility, they fail to inspire honest vulnerability, and they fail to call for deep engagement.

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<sup>i</sup> Jesus is, of course, much more than a lens or a framework. He is not simply a "way of seeing" other people; he is a way of *living* with other people as well. Furthermore, a Muslim is not a flat two-dimensional figure to be framed from a distance; Muslims are complex, dynamic, and three-dimensional living-and-breathing human beings who must be listened to, befriended, and engaged. In short, Christ calls those who follow him to "step through" their interpretive frameworks and actually engage their neighbors in an embodied relationship.

<sup>ii</sup> Stephen Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 224.

<sup>iii</sup> Schilder, "Christ Disrobed," 186.

<sup>iv</sup> Schilder, "Christ Disrobed," 187.

<sup>v</sup> Schilder, "Christ Disrobed," 169.

<sup>vi</sup> Schilder, "Christ Disrobed," 187.

<sup>vii</sup> Schilder, "Christ Disrobed," 187.

<sup>viii</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, "Catechetical Lectures" in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, trans. Edward Hamilton Gifford, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Ware (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 7:89

<sup>ix</sup> Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 18.

<sup>x</sup> Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 26.

<sup>xi</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 367–368.