Witnessing God: Christians, Muslims, and the Comparative Theology of Missions

LEIDEN: BRILL, 2025, 268 PAGES.

ALEXANDER E. MASSAD

The first thing you need to know about this book is that its author is the preeminent Islam expert on the faculty at Wheaton College, sometimes called "the Harvard of Evangelical Christians." Wheaton College made headlines in 2015 for a controversy involving the censure of a faculty member who wore hijab in solidarity with Muslims, an act that ultimately led to her parting ways with the institution. So, it is no small feat for Alexander Massad to write a book such as *Witnessing God*. This book is a testimony to a personal journey, only some of which is reflected in the book's pages. This review is a continuation of that journey, as Massad seeks Muslim scholarly interlocuters with whom he can engage faithfully and critically.

Massad identifies personally with "common-grace-driven neo-Calvinism" (70), by which he means a particular tradition within the larger world of Evangelical Protestant Christianity. This tradition, rooted in the writings of Dutch theologians Abraham Kuyper (d. 1920) and Herman Bavinck (d. 1921), stresses the activity of Divine Grace in all aspects of life, including "non-Christian cultures" (81). What this means for

Massad is that he contends he can root his own engagement with the "sincere-truth-seeking religious other" (5) in his own Christian tradition. But in order to do so, he also engages Comparative Theology as a Christian-heavy academic discipline strongly connected to the Roman Catholic tradition. Francis Clooney, a Jesuit priest who has authored numerous academic studies of the Hindu tradition, serves as his central methodological model (4, 28). He contends that Clooney's model avoids the "endlessly deferred act of learning" (37) about others because of *a priori* theological presuppositions rooted primarily in notions of Christian theological exclusivism. To drive home his point, Massad reviews the works of Protestant theologians that exemplify this attitude, such as Daniel Strange. What is at stake is "epistemological exclusivism" vs. "affective learning across religious traditions" (75). Put simply, if the Bible and Jesus already contains all truth and goodness, why look elsewhere? Why become theologically vulnerable by reading and reflecting on non-Christian texts, and inquisitively engaging non-Christian intellectuals? Massad asks provocatively "does attention away from Christ entail infidelity to Christ?" (49). In many ways, the book is a theoretical and practical attempt to answer that question as a distinct "no."

Massad wants to make the case that a better response to religious diversity is to have an *a posteriori* approach (16), where the meaning of the "autobiographical" (37) scholarly encounter between the Christian and the non-Christian happens after the actual encounter. In doing so, he drives home the idea that "the individual identity of the religious other is confrontational in that it forces a recognition of another person's existence" (15). But in order to do so sincerely, he has to tackle the missionary-focus of Evangelical Christianity head on, and acknowledge that there is a "marginalization" of "Evangelical-missiological perspective" (53) in Comparative Theology as an intellectual discipline. He extensively reviews the work of another comparative theologian, Hugh Nicholson, on the "inevitable political moment of othering" (51) in all comparative work. For Nicholson, this presents as a problem, but for Massad it is not. It would seem to this reviewer that the Catholic strand in Comparative Theology is a bit too liberal for the conservative world of Wheaton College, but at the same time Massad must speak to both audiences. The

way Massad seems to split the difference is to focus on the idea of those "inspired by their faith to seek deeper understanding of God in the midst of their missionary enterprises" (40). In doing so, he affirms that Clooney was building on previous work of Jesuit missionaries in India, and therefore the missionary spirit of encounter and the comparative theological scholarly endeavor both are part of a "dynamic dialectical process" or "dynamic dialectic" (56). The Christian encounters the Other, and then is changed in some meaningful ways by that encounter. For Massad, the faithful Christian does not have to be "preoccupied with soteriological apologetics" (72), by which he seems to mean incessant theological truncations of global religious diversity into so many demonic pathways to eternal Hellfire, in order to be a real Christian.

To demonstrate this method, Massad then engages in the later part of the book with the "Sunni Reformist" (135) thought of Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) because one should "engage with Muslim scholars and not the Islamic tradition as a reified category" (129). He focuses on Riḍā's engagement with Christianity, Christian missionaries, and missionary institutions in the Middle East. He demonstrates that, "Christianity … did not bother Riḍā [but]… what bothered Riḍā were the defamation of the Prophet Muhammad, the denigration of Islam, and the marginalization of Muslims" (136). Massad shows how Riḍā was responding to a world where, "non-Muslims, especially more educated Western non-Muslims, had basic knowledge of the Islamic tradition that was pretty accurate." (162) In doing so, he coins a term - *ṭarīq al-daʿwa* (169) - to summarize Riḍā's attempt to call both Muslims and non-Muslims to his own understanding of Islam. In Massad's reading, "Riḍā believed in the inherent superiority of Islam…[and] that people would eventually become Muslims if they only heard the Prophet's message correctly and in a convincing manner." (171) This seems to be the critical link between Massad's concern for the "sincere-truth-seeking religious other" as explained earlier in the book, as Riḍā serves as a theological counterpart from within the world of the "religious other *par excellence*" (92) for Christianity, namely Islam. It should also be noted that Riḍā articulated his views in the Middle East at roughly the same time as the foundations of Neo-Calvinism in the Netherlands, giving the book a nice historical

foundation without waxing theoretical about the nature of modernity.

Massad then turns his attention towards more contemporary Muslims voices. First, he engages deeply with Martin Nguyen's book *Modern Muslim Theology*. He uses Nguyen to "understand how Muslim intellectuals creatively engage with contemporary exigencies through rethinking the tradition while maintaining fidelity to the Muslim tradition and revelation." (183) This sets up a section where he shows how Riḍā read al-Ghazālī's soteriology in light of the modern world, contending that "the problem preventing people was not a disease of the heart, as al-Ghazālī thought, but a faulty worldview," (189) which Riḍā's writings and efforts were meant to address. Then Massad reviews some work of Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (d. 2022) and Fayṣal al-Mawlawī (d. 2011) on the fiqh of minorities "as the justification for globalizing Muslim *daʿwa*," (194) and Tariq Ramadan's "framework for interreligious dialogue" as coming from a desire "reimagine the world as a mosque rather than a conglomeration of contested territories." (201) He concludes with centering Gamal Abdelnour's concept of *shahāda*, which "invites the religious other to reconsider her position in light of examining the Muslim's beliefs and practices." (205) This endpoint of engagement with various Muslim thinkers fits well with his own emphasis on *a posteriori* reflection that is central to the methodology of Comparative Theology.

Given Massad's emphasis on the particularity of the *a posteriori* methodological move, this reviewer will not divulge the contents of the concluding section of the book, as that would not seem in the spirit of the text under review. Massad is inviting Evangelical Christians interested in religious diversity, Sunni Muslims interested in engaging Evangelical Christians, and the broader academic community of comparative theologians to go on a journey with him. Chances are, they have no other Neo-Calvinist *nor* Wheaton College faculty member to encounter. Buying the book and sitting with it is the only way to take the journey yourself in a way that is faithful to Massad's vision - this review is merely an invitation.

The beginning of the book focuses on intra-Christian theologizing and methodological debate, and the middle of the book on a sincere Christian encountering Sunni Muslim intellectuals with charity and accuracy. It

is only by reading the book that one can experience that dialogue, both within Christianity and between Christianity and Sunni Islam. But the upshot is clear: whereas Martin Luther, John Calvin and Daniel Strange saw Islam as primarily punishing or correcting the church (117), Massad wants to open up a deeper space for theological reflection between the church and the world of Islam. As a Muslim, it is not my place to say if he will succeed with his colleagues at Wheaton and similar Protestant colleges and universities. But as a Muslim I warmly welcome the attempt, and embrace Massad as a "sincere-truth-seeking religious other" from across the theological aisle. The world of Evangelical Christian colleges and universities is still experienced as closed off *and* inherently hostile to many Muslim scholars, and this book's mere existence is a much-needed bridge between the two worlds. But let it be stated plainly that this book should not be written off as mere liberalizing of a conservative discourse, because Massad at no place dismisses the theological foundations of his worldview, but simply seeks to explore its contours with greater fidelity. Massad contends that Kuyper called to "our obligation to participate in the divine call to be obedient to the lordship of Jesus Christ in all areas of life," (80) and that seems exactly what Massad has done from within his own tradition, as best as I - an outsider - can surmise. Comparative Theology as a whole has the potential to be a radically inclusive intellectual discipline which is simultaneously radically protective of the theological commitments of its participants. If it is ever to become that it will be because of the bold and clear work of scholars like Alexander Massad.

R. David Coolidge
Research Faculty
Bayan Islamic Graduate School
Chicago, IL.

10.35632/ajis.v43i1-2.3889