

Mark Durie's "Polemic-Apologetic" Discourse on Islamist Violence and Its Role in Christian-Muslim Interaction

By Julie B. Ma

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In a conversation about whether Islam promotes violence, someone mentioned Mark Durie—the Australian pastor and Islamicist—and all eyes fixed on me. I was the only Australian in a room full of Christian pastors, missionaries, and seminary professors from around the world. Do I agree with Durie? Surely, we must know each other, right? Wrong. All I had was a vague recollection of a newspaper article or two that had made me feel uncomfortable. I knew I needed to find out more. Also in that room was Dr. Martin Accad from the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Lebanon. Accad's life experience and his views on Islam's relationship to Christianity differ markedly from Durie's. This essay is the result of my using tools I learned from Dr. Accad to help me get to know and engage with Dr. Durie.

The Task

This essay seeks to engage with Rev. Dr. Mark Durie's views on violence in Islam with respect to their helpfulness in Christian-Muslim dialogue. Dialogue is defined according to Martin Accad's SEKAP scale, which I describe later. I write from the perspective of a Christian evangelist



reaching out to Muslims who claim their religion promotes peace. The debate over whether Islam encourages violence, with which Durie began engaging in September 2001, has become even more urgent since the Israeli-Hamas war which broke out in October 2023 and the sometimes-violent demonstrations that have sprung up around the world, including in Australia.

The topic will be addressed in several steps. First, I describe Durie's setting: the multicultural, secular society of Australia, whose policymakers promote a progressive ideology of religious diversity which embraces moderate Islam. This necessitates mentioning the varieties of Islam that fall into this moderate category. Second, I outline a spectrum of Christian–Muslim dialogue, using Accad's SEKAP scale. Third, employing the vocabulary of the SEKAP scale, I analyze Mark Durie's approach, including the contribution of Durie's own identity and experience to its formation.

Finally, I offer some thoughts on engaging with Durie's work as we minister among Muslims. I speak as an evangelist whose views differ from Durie's at points, but who wishes to promote unity in the body of Christ and honest conversation among disciples of Jesus, when our Muslim neighbors are watching as well as when they are not.

The Setting

In order to understand Durie's work and his approach to Islam, it is important to understand the Australian context where he lives and serves. Australia is a secular nation insofar as it allows "the free exercise of any religion" (Commonwealth Consolidated Acts n.d.). Australia does not have a state religion as the United Kingdom does, nor does it insist on removing religion from the public sphere, as does French *laïcité*. The kind of secularism found in Australia may be described as religious pluralism (Barker 2015).

Muslims make up a mere 3.2% of Australia's population, numbering only 813,400 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022). Australia's Muslim



population is small compared to the 43.9% of Australians who claim a Christian affiliation, but Islam is increasing while Christianity is in decline.

The Australian census does not collect data on varieties of Islam, but the Christian organization Prayercast suggests that "most Australian Muslims are Sunni, though there are small communities of Shias, Sufis, and Ahmadiyya" (Prayercast n.d.). Migration statistics may provide further clues. Most of the 126,000 Muslim immigrants to arrive since 2016 were born in Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and Bangladesh (ABS 2021). Earlier waves of migration occurred from the Middle East, especially Turkey, after World War II and from Lebanon during the civil war between 1975–90 (Prayercast n.d.). These facts align with suppositions that Australia's Muslim population includes individuals with intimate experience of extremism (such as some Afghans) as well as moderate Muslims for whom extremist views are foreign (for example many Turks).

A working definition of moderate Islam is necessary. Although notoriously difficult to define, if we focus on our topic of violence, moderate Muslims are those who are not Islamists or violent extremists. Moderate Islam overlaps with liberal, progressive, and secular Islam. Liberal or progressive Islam means "approaching the Qur'an as a source of broad ethical principles," making it compatible with other faiths and even humanism (Brown 2017, 430). Secular Islam follows Egypt's 'Abd al-Raziq (and Atatürk's secular Islamic state of Turkey) in asserting that Islam can be practiced fully and authentically under any kind of government (ibid, 343). Moderate Muslims also include those who have simply never thought deeply about their ideology, particularly many Muslim women.

Approaches to Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Christian-Muslim dialogue is a surprisingly new phenomenon.

According to historian Hugh Goddard, it was initially met with suspicion and division when it became a concern of the World Council of Churches



in 1971. Dialogue differs from the interreligious disputations and debates of earlier centuries by fostering "greater philosophical sophistication" and "greater willingness to listen as well as assert" (Goddard 2000, 177).

Martin Accad (2012) has developed a helpful diagram for understanding dialogue. His five-point SEKAP Spectrum of Christian-Muslim Interaction encompasses a range of engagements from syncretism (S) to polemic (P). In between sit three categories which Accad classifies as true dialogue: existential (E), apologetic (A), and in the center, kerygmatic (K). He explains the kerygmatic approach in detail as the most Christ-centered option, embracing the best elements and avoiding the pitfalls of the other four (37–39). Accad's presentation of a range of dialogical positions naturally meets suspicion from parties at either end. His response is not to refute critics but to slow them down enough to allow deep consideration. This is one reason he chose the enigmatic biblical Greek name *kerygmatic* for his central position (Accad, personal communication, February 2023).

Mark Durie's Approach to Islam

Who is Mark Durie?

Mark Durie is an Australian academic with 20 years' experience as a linguist, followed by another 20 years as an Anglican pastor, having a keen interest in Islamic studies throughout his career. For about nine of his 20 years in church ministry, his pastorate included dozens of believers from Muslim backgrounds. Apart from his current teaching role at Melbourne School of Theology and academic works on Islamic doctrines (2010) and texts (2018) as they interact with Christianity, he writes and speaks publicly on platforms ranging from mainstream newspapers to Christian magazines, church events, and political forums.

His writing is prolific, hard-hitting, and academically rigorous. In person, Durie demonstrates a pastor's heart who cares deeply for the oppressed and marginalized, especially those within the church. This



essay focuses on Durie's public rhetoric about Islamist violence which is freely available online.

Violence as Example

Under the headline, "Muslim violence a fact, not prejudice," Durie writes that "Islam itself—not just poverty or social exclusion—provide[s] ideological fuel for extremism and violence" (Durie 2011). His view echoes Samuel Huntington's belief in a 'Muslim propensity to violence' due to the historic origins of doctrines of *jihad* and warfare seen in the life of the Prophet Muhammad and early formation of Islam (Huntington 1996, 258, cited in Meral 2018, 4).

Durie's direct critics include Susanna Latham (2011) who says his writing "will help to perpetuate human rights abuses against Muslim Australians." This echoes the sentiment of Ziya Meral, who studied conflicts in Egypt and Nigeria and believes "the use of discriminatory and often outright Islamophobic discourse by Copts ... in Egypt ... can fuel hatred in the country" (Meral 2018, as paraphrased by Deller 2019).

After hearing Durie and his critics, I became compelled to ask why he makes such inflammatory remarks and how he gets away with it as a pastor of believers from Muslim backgrounds.

Reasons for Durie's Approach

Durie's approach grows from his own experience in Aceh, Indonesia and Melbourne, Australia, as well as his beliefs about his audience. His target audience comprises English-speaking Westerners, especially Christians and those in leadership positions. Muslims who are poorly informed about traditional Islamic doctrines and their Western sympathizers form a secondary audience. His concern for Muslim-Christian relations began during his linguistic research in Aceh in the 1970s and heightened after September 11, 2001 (Durie 2019). In Aceh, he lived as a Christian among Muslims. He studied Islam and experienced tensions



in the Muslim treatment of Christians in the Acehnese community. On September 11, 2001, Durie "watched the towers burning and knew immediately the one ideology in the world that could do that" was Islam (Durie 2019). He felt a weight of responsibility to warn the West of the threat of Islamism.

Durie wants Westerners to reject Islamic secularist propaganda, especially the myth that "Islam means peace." He argues it more accurately means "surrender" in a warfare sense (Durie 2015; 2019). As the post-9/11 world finds itself "in a sort of permanent war between the West and radical Islam" (Brown 2017, 335), Durie believes truthful information helps the victims on both sides.

Durie's convictions about Islam were further formed through his experience as pastor to over one hundred Iranian Christ-followers from Muslim backgrounds in Melbourne, along with extensive reading about revolutions in Islamist regimes and movements of Muslim people coming to Jesus. Through these experiences, Durie has observed that when some Muslims see that their faith leads to abuses under sharia law and reduced human flourishing for all, some leave Islam and come to Jesus. He speaks extensively about written biographies of Muhammad, saying, "Muslims are leaving Islam now because they are reading these texts for the first time ... on the internet" and "You don't need to put labels on Muhammad. You just let his story be known" (Durie 2019).

Fitting Durie into Accad's Scale

Where, if anywhere, does Durie's attitude fit on Accad's SEKAP scale? Or, in the words of one of his confused readers, "Are we to read Mark Durie's article ... as olive branch or flaming sword?" (Winn 2011)

Durie's purpose is decidedly not syncretistic or existential. He does not relativize differences between religions (cf. Accad 2012, 32), nor make promoting tolerance and peaceful coexistence his primary aim (c.f. Accad 2012, 35).



Would a "polemic" view be more fitting? Accad describes the polemic approach as one in which "Islam is viewed as an evil and a thorn in the flesh of Christianity," (2012, 34) and "[t]he chief reason ... to engage Islam is often to demonstrate to Muslims that Islam is false and deceitful" (ibid). Durie has written on deceit in Islam (2010, 56–69; 2022, 111–112), and his work on discontinuity between the Qur'an and the Bible (2018; 2021a) could be taken to imply that Islam is false.

According to Accad, polemicists justify their approach by "pointing out that many Muslims are being won to Christianity" (2012, 34). While neither advocating for nor justifying his approach this way, Durie is sometimes heard speaking of Muslims leaving Islam when they learn of Islam's failings. His approach to pastoring Christ-followers from Muslim backgrounds also might seem polemical to some. Disagreeing with a range of contextual approaches including (but not limited to) Insider Movements (cf. Travis 2015), Durie advocates explicitly renouncing Islam, not because "proclaiming Muslims will go to hell if they do not reject Islam" (Accad 2012, 34), but because that is the only path to spiritual freedom (Durie 2022, 3–6, 9).

Yet Durie also exemplifies a biblically-informed, apologetic attitude. He does his best to present his answers (*apologia*) "with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15 [NIV]). He tries to avoid the "relentless repetition" of "sterile arguments" which Accad names as the main problem with apologetic approaches through the centuries (2012, 36). Whether analyzing the Qur'an (Durie 2018), dialoguing with a Muslim apologist (MuslimByChoice 2012), or pastoring refugees from Muslim backgrounds (Durie 2021c), he demonstrates careful listening. By this, I refer to both his demeanor in speaking engagements and his accurate summarizing of his opponents' views. He is humble and considerate in his responses while being clear about how he disagrees, backing up his arguments with evidence from "listening to" Muslim texts. This profound willingness to listen is the main reason I am reluctant to designate Durie as a polemicist (cf. Accad 2012, 29).



Durie's Response to the SEKAP Scale

During my research for this paper, I met Dr. Durie in person and showed him the SEKAP scale for the first time. Dr. Durie immediately recognized and was attracted to *kerygmatic* as meaning "proclamation," but its central position caused him to pause. He wants to counterbalance syncretism, yet he is reluctant to identify with the seemingly pejorative polemic label. Neither does apologetic fit him, because his main aim is not to persuade Muslims, nor defend himself in the sense of *apologia* in Luke 12:11 and 21:14. This rejection of an apologist role is a clue to why Durie's Christian-Muslim interactions are so hard to place on the scale. In Durie's words, "I'm not doing this. I'm talking to Christians" (Durie, personal communication, April 2023).

It does not fit neatly, because Durie is not doing or teaching Christian-Muslim dialogue. While Durie believes access to Muslim texts persuades some Muslims to leave Islam (Durie 2019) and he once participated in a public dialogue with a Muslim apologist (MuslimByChoice 2012), this is not his focus. His intended audience is Christians and Westerners, and his purpose is to equip, support, and defend Christians, their human rights, and especially their freedom of religion (Durie 2021a).

Durie is not an apologist per Accad's definition (2012, 36–37), in that he does not "engage with Muslims solely for the purpose of evangelism" but rather to "refute the validity of Islam" for his Christian audience.

The Problem of Audience

Durie feels a "weight of responsibility" to his two-part intended audience: the Christian West. The church, his Christian audience, includes church and parachurch leaders, laity, and believers from Muslim backgrounds. Where national values are based on Christian values, the church overlaps with the second part of Durie's audience, Western policymakers, or the state.



Factual statements based on rigorous scholarship like Durie's play a vital role in government policymaking, especially in such subjects as Islamist violence where controversy and misinformation abound. Likewise, Christian leaders should base decisions on truth.

Accad, in his kerygmatic approach, prefers existential dialogue in public, apologetically addressing controversy sensitively in private (2012, 43). Yet Durie says relegating apologetics to private spaces means the public never hear the hard truths about abuses of women under sharia, for example, and are denied opportunities to act (Durie, personal communication, April 2023).

It seems impossible to arbitrate between Accad's and Durie's approaches without limiting the audience. Durie is well aware of detractors who suppose his rhetoric stokes anti-Muslim sentiment but places them outside his target audience. The problem is that globalization and the internet make limiting one's audience impossible.

Two groups for which Durie's approach has potential negative effects are Arab Christians and moderate Muslims. Some Arab Christians, of which Martin Accad is one, take offense at Durie's negative characterization of them as *dhimmi*. Accad views *dhimmi* as a "mixed blessing," a historically valid and reasonable system of giving social status to non-Muslims in the past (personal communication, February 2023). Durie (2022, 25, 93–106) sees the *dhimma* pact as oppressive, dehumanizing, and a current threat to Western civilization (2021b; 2022, 101–102). When Durie labels a conversation partner as a *dhimmi* Christian, he alienates them, even though his intentions are to lovingly guide them to freedom in Christ.

Moderate Muslims are another group alienated and threatened by Durie's rhetoric. For example, Susanna Latham (2011), an Anglo Australian married to a Muslim man, thinks Durie has "a lack of close personal relationships with Australian Muslims and no understanding that Islam in the way [he uses] it is essentially a meaningless term." Durie's truth-ori-



ented approach resembles thought patterns of Salafis and is at odds with liberal interpretations of Islam. Durie gives only brief and dismissive mentions to the fact they interpret their scriptures differently (2021a). For example, *jihad* can be interpreted as holy war or "to strive to improve oneself" (Dib 2015). He says, "theological pronouncement about Islam's peacefulness" by Westerners like Latham "invites mockery" (Durie 2015). Additionally, he devalues liberal interpretations because they are recent and do not appear in the approximately 80 classic Muslim texts he studied in depth (Durie 2019).

Moving Forward: Reducing Threats and Building Bridges

As a Christian evangelist, I desire a presence and witness among both Muslims and non-Muslims, which necessitates building bridges of acceptance. The most basic way to build bridges is our mode of communication. Careful listening, humility, gentleness, and the heart of a pastor are unmistakable in Durie's speech, whether recorded or in person, and provide a model for honest conversation. Unfortunately, however, these Christlike qualities are masked in much of Durie's writing.

We must also consider our various audiences. Durie excels at educating Christians about Islam in its most historical, textually-based, fundamental sense, and exemplifies connecting the gospel to a select subtype of Muslims. The bridges he builds seem effective for those who are already disillusioned with Islam and seeking an alternative. With other groups, however, Durie seems to be building walls, not bridges. He talks past moderate Muslims, undervalues the contributions of Arab Christians, and aggravates non-Muslims who are trying to suppress their sneaking suspicion that Islam is not really a religion of peace. Yet his commitment to truth is admirable, despite his neglect of the "truth" of moderate Islam. Such evidence-based reporting of facts is essential in state-level policymaking, and Durie's emphasis on Islamist violence counterbalances the emphases of moderates.



Engaging with voices like Durie's has become even more relevant since the Israel-Hamas war broke out. Worldwide, onlookers are faced with the dilemma of whom to support and whom to condemn. Durie is firmly in the pro-Israel camp but urges "compassion for all sides" (Durie 2023a, pt. 8). He is doing his best to answer our hard questions about this messy situation and help us stop hating the Palestinians who live among us, whether in Australia or anywhere else.

Readers who have a bad taste in their mouths about Durie's writings might find a tiny hint of sweetness emerging in his October 2023 blog series "A Q&A Primer on Hamas" (Durie 2023a) and the radio interview he did to promote the series (Durie 2023b). Even though his clear aim is to mobilize support for Israel's campaign against Hamas, he also calls repeatedly for compassion and help for Palestinian civilians, many of whom identify as Muslims. He expresses deep sympathy and makes statements such as: "The Palestinians' situation is appalling. As human beings they deserve much, much better than being used as human shields for the Muslim Umma's proxies in a long fight to the death with Israel" (Durie 2023a, pt. 8).

Throughout the blog series, and especially in his radio interview (Durie 2023b), he delineates sharply between "Palestinian civilians" and their "leadership" past and present, of which Hamas is a present iteration. Hamas, he says, is a "genocidal" radical Islamist movement with "the destruction of Israel" as "a core goal" (Durie 2023a, pt. 1). Hamas is "deliberately sacrificing its own people" calculating that civilian casualties on the Palestinian side will boost support for Hamas and hatred for Israel (Durie 2023a, pt. 3). Palestinian civilians, on the other hand, are not the enemy. They are victims of the terrorists ruling over them who need liberation and love.

Ideally, I would like to see Dr. Durie further develop his conception of "truth and love" beyond a tagline. I would also appreciate greater interaction with modern Islamic texts in his study of Islamic doctrine. Perhaps these are unreasonable expectations since Dr. Durie is only



one man with limited capacity. So a more realistic request I would like to make is that he partners together with younger scholars to engage with and balance out his work, in a spirit of charitable, curious expectation of what new insights might emerge. As we do so, I suggest three helpful attitudes for younger scholars engaging with and building on Durie's work: taking moderate Islam seriously; respecting, rather than hating Islam; and aiming for a kerygmatic approach.

Meanwhile, I hope to encourage younger scholars to engage with Durie and balance out his work. As we do so, I suggest three helpful attitudes: taking moderate Islam seriously; respecting, rather than hating Islam; and aiming for a kerygmatic approach.

Taking Moderate Islam Seriously

While technically true, Durie's assessment of Islam as causing violence might fit into what Accad calls "brash generalizations about Islam" (Accad 2017). Violent Islamist ideology may be "mainstream" and "not aberrant" in certain Islamic nation states (Durie 2021a), but not necessarily in all of them, as Durie's generalizations imply. Moreover, it is the moderate, secular, and liberal Muslims, not the violent ideologues, who are given voice in Australia. These moderate voices exist alongside increasingly outspoken radical voices in the pro-Palestinian movements happening in late 2023, when Durie published his responses to the Israel-Hamas war.

For Palestinians to be liberated, he says, not only must Hamas be defeated but also Islamist ideology itself. Otherwise, another terrorist group will rise to replace Hamas (Durie 2023a, pt. 8). When moderate Muslims and non-Muslim supporters of the Palestinian cause learn the truth about Islam as he sees it, Durie hopes they will not only extend more care to the Palestinian people but also abandon any affiliation they have with the religion of Islam. Caring for Palestinian people, as Durie sees it, means taking the same action necessary to defend Israel-that is to wrest them from the grip of not only Hamas but Islamism as well. He does not see moderate or secular Islam as a solution to anything.



Perhaps Durie's background in linguistic scholarship precludes him from taking Islamic secularism seriously. The Arabic term 'almi is widely used in the Middle East to refer to a government that separates religion from state affairs, that is, a secular government. Yet Brown (2017, 297) insists that the "most natural" Arabic for "secular" is *Ia-dini*, devoid of faith. Perhaps, just as Durie cannot accept linguistic links between Islam and peace (Durie 2015), an Islamic faith that is "devoid of faith" sounds like nonsense to him.

Then again, Durie's attitude toward moderate Islam may have less to do with linguistics and more to do with the evangelical lens through which he views the world. Evangelicals reject liberal Christian beliefs on the grounds that they differ from the Bible. Similarly, Durie appears to reject liberal Muslim beliefs on the grounds that they differ from the Qur'an.

Nevertheless, moderate and secular Muslims exist, and we should not expect them to behave like Islamists; neither can we expect distressing information about Islam to motivate all of them to abandon their faith community. By taking seriously the variety of textual interpretations within Islam, Christian scholars of Islam could help people tell the difference. We have words for Christian liberals that help evangelicals adjust the expectations we place on their beliefs and behavior. Could we, or a gifted linguist like Durie, find ways to describe moderate Muslims that would help us all to stop fearing them?

Respecting, Not Demonizing Islam

Accad and Durie agree on the need for respectful discussion of difficult topics. In Accad's kerygmatic approach, "No topic is taboo, since a respectful exchange is prepared and assumed" (Accad 2012, 43). Likewise, Durie believes "Tolerance is strengthened when people are able to debate ideological issues freely" (Durie 2011).

However, Accad says, "The message that the media and leadership—political and religious—set forth is one that either demonizes or idealizes



Islam" neither of which respects Muslims, nor the truth of what Islam is (2012, 2). Durie is accused of "demonization" (Latham 2011), but he asserts that "criticism-or even hatred-of a religion should not be conflated with the hatred of people who hold those beliefs" (Durie 2011). Although this parallels the Christian notion of loving sinners but hating sin, Accad is right to call it "disturbing, for it is a very short step from the demonization of Islam and Muslims altogether" (2012, 2).

A more helpful approach may be to shape our view of Islam with the desired outcome of our presence among Muslims in mind (cf. Accad 2012, 2). This must by no means lead us to deny the existence of Islamist violence, but rather to broaden our knowledge base, seek to understand what attracts people to the faith, and treat the whole person, including their beliefs which we do not share, with respect.

Using a Communal Kerygmatic Approach

As mentioned, expecting any one person to employ every approach on the SEKAP scale is unrealistic. As a group, however, Christians can and do cover the range of approaches. The key is for Christians to see each other as a diverse community with complementary gifts, not as adversaries (1 Cor. 12:4–30) and to let Muslims glimpse our love for one another despite our differences (John 13:34–35). As an evangelist, I can focus on showing love and speaking of Jesus without feeling pressure to answer every question myself. Durie, on the other hand, while perhaps not loved by Muslims, may be one of the "religious and scholarly leaders ... willing to share uncompromisingly" which Accad (2012, 43) deems so essential to Christian–Muslim interactions.

I cannot censor the voices of Christians who make people uncomfortable, nor do I wish to. What I can do is invite people to engage with the diverse views they encounter and humbly walk with people as they wrestle to discern truth. On occasions when Durie's views enter the conversation, I can take on the metaphorical role of "good cop" while Durie's straight talk on Islam, whether intentionally or not, may



position him similar to a "bad cop." This analogy is not intended to communicate that Durie's posture is abusive or aggressively negative toward Muslims. Rather, what might be considered as two contrasting approaches—"straight talk" on Islamic violence vs. an irenic "kerygmatic" approach—can both contribute constructively in helping Muslims come to understand truth and freedom. There can occasionally be friction and even visible conflict, but both the good and bad "cops" are members of the same metaphorical police force working in different ways for the same ultimate goal.

Conclusion

Mark Durie's discourse on Islamist violence has an important, if unpleasant, role as part of a wider community in Christian-Muslim interaction. Durie has intentionally presented himself as a truth-telling counterbalance against the misinformation he sees as contributing to naïve syncretism and existential dialogue.

He makes frequent yet brief calls for "truth and love" but is limited in his application of both. The truth he proclaims applies only to the classical forms of Islam he has studied and experienced, disregarding many facts about moderate Muslims. He tangibly loves Christians yet does little to expound in his public writing how he envisions demonstrating that love to people outside the family of Christ. He seems to prefer to leave the task of actively loving Muslims to evangelists like me.

These qualities make him an excellent source of information about Islamist violence and a handy foil for those who advocate for more irenic approaches to engaging Muslims. However, Durie's discourse on Islam can still contribute toward the ultimate goal of "kergymatic" proclamation. Whether or not he intends it, the role of "bad cop" in Christian-Muslim dialogue is an constructive function of his discourse for which he is particularly suited.



Editorial Note: This is an updated (June 8, 2024) version of the article which contains corrections and clarifications from the author to better reflect her intention and Mark Durie's views.

Questions for Conversation

- Do you agree with Julie's conclusion that Mark Durie's discourse "has an important, if unpleasant, role" in Christian-Muslim interaction? Why or why not?
- 2. In what ways does your context affect your approach to Muslim-Christian interaction and dialogue?
- 3. How would you describe your own approach to Muslim-Christian interaction? How does it compare to Durie's? Where would you place your approach on Accad's SEKAP scale?

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