

PSST! WANNA BUY A CONTEXTUALIZED HORSE

by Warren Chastain

"A what?"

"Look! its a beautiful Arabian steed."

"But its got a hump."

"No problem, in this country your horse needs to look like a camel."

"But the front looks like a horse and the rear like a camel."

"Yeah, ain't it beautiful!--but, for you, a special price."

"But what is it?"

"Ummm--call it a camorse."

"That's odd--it looks more like a hormel."

John Mansour never defines what he wants to sell, so we may be excused if we feel like Daniel who struggled to describe the fourth nondescript beast. We will deal with Mansour's paper by sections. The title suggests that his theme is Unity; but this is supplemental to his real thrust which is to argue for what others call a "*Jesus Mosque*," a term he avoids. His ideal is a "movement of Muslims for Jesus that remains within Islam." Like motherhood, Christian unity is much more salable than the genetic experiment he promotes.

But why does Mansour address his appeal to Christians for acceptance? If his group is truly a "Muslim Fellowship" and remains in the Islamic community, then he should be addressing his appeal to Muslims. It is a problem of *Muslim* unity, not that of the church. Let him sell his horse to the community of which he claims "Muslim believers" are members. But aberrant Muslim sects are usually treated more harshly by Islam than are forthright Christians. If the *Jesus Mosque* people openly told of their beliefs and intentions, is there a Muslim in the world who would accept their claim to still be part of the *Umma*? "You say you are Muslim but you don't accept Muhammad as the Final Prophet; you reject the Qur'an as the perfect revelation; you deny the validity of the Shari'ah; you deny that Islam is the perfect religion, and nevertheless claim to be Muslims!" Yes, this is a horse of a different color--what about "truth in advertising"?

To lay Muslim forms over Christian meanings would probably remind the Muslim of the "hypocrites" condemned in the Qur'an. This *Umma* strategy has no validity in Islam, and no right to claim the Name of Christ. If it produces some kind of "success" in converts, would you place this offering at the feet of Christ? Or at the feet of Muhammad? What good is "success" if it turns out to be "wood, hay, and stubble"? But the "success" sales pitch is grossly exaggerated: the mission magazines and prayer letters don't report the long line of failures in the past decade. So we do a disservice to new workers if we encourage them to accept the *Jesus Mosque* as a key to success.

Mansour's solution really doesn't take Islam seriously enough. The anti-Christian and demonic elements of Islam are lightly regarded, and to mention them is dismissed as Islam bashing or a hangover of the Crusader mentality. Tactical adaptations of communication theory are seriously offered as a solution to the problem of Islam. Coach Mansour's strategy for the Christian team facing the great Super Bowl clash with Islam is to wear the

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same jerseys as the opponent--no one in the stadium will notice! Is this taking Islam seriously? And even if the Muslim leaders were that dumb, is this cleverness worthy of the Truth?

"Becoming Christian"

Jesus said he would build his "church," and the apostolic churches were not **ashamed to be** called "Christian": There is no evidence they ever tried to pose as members of a **false** religion to gain acceptance, to avoid persecution, or to witness. They retained their ethnicity and their culture but, like the Ephesian Christians, they cast out Diana and false books. This pattern is still valid today in the Muslim world. An Egyptian Muslim who receives Christ does **not** have to give up his Egyptian citizenship or his way of life, but only those things in the culture which are based on erroneous religion or promote sinful practices. He need only repent of sin, not of his culture or nationality. The *Jesus Mosque* idea confuses clear thinking by insisting that religion and culture cannot be separated, that to be an Egyptian is by definition to be a Muslim. Muslim Fundamentalists around the world are making this claim in every culture where they can pull the wool over the eyes of a gullible public. "Islam is the natural religion of the African," Muslim activists tell African-Americans with a straight face.

Modern anthropological theory is used to smuggle this Trojan Horse into the camp of the Christians. All kinds of exquisite distinctions are made between *form* and *meaning* in the name of contextualization. But don't dare distinguish religion from culture: this impiety could endanger the whole structure. Paul, however, made this distinction fundamental to his own proper contextualization. To win Greeks, Paul would freely use all aspects of Greek culture except those that compromised the Gospel. Christianity has no holy language, so Paul could use Greek. Any truth may be used if done properly (not like Satan quoting Scripture), so history and philosophy may be used as tools; but in no usage will Paul validate false religion. In Mansour's leaps of logic, Paul's citing of Greek literary figures, indeed, even the use of Greek language, somehow supports his case for bringing Islamic ideas into his "Muslim Fellowship." Granted, since it is a Muslim group, he does not need the Bible to prove anything. Indeed, a real Muslim group would not use a corrupt Bible to prove a practice, but only the *Usul al-Fiqh*.

The Ecclesia

Notably missing is a theological basis for his missiological engineering. Mansour sprinkles his text with excellent quotes and Bible verses but, guided by an imbalanced contextualization, he almost invariably draws wrong conclusions. His section on "*The Ecclesia*" illustrates the pattern of argument. He charges the Church universal with ignorance of what the Church really is. He is severe on "traditions" and suspiciously includes only those that interfere with his Islamisation of the church. He charges that these traditions (even "sermons") "nullify the gospel"! But Mansour won't list the Muslim traditions he wants to incorporate into the *Jesus Mosque* fellowships, or discuss how these might "nullify the Gospel." He tells us what true fellowship is **not**, but avoids unveiling what his "church" **is**. This omission is useful for debate but hardly responsible. Mansour warns us against the "leaven" of our traditions, but sees no dangers in the leaven of Islam. The whole point of leaven is that it influences every part of the whole, how much more if

the culture is "Islamic." Mansour would have us believe that culture is neutral, and that even the part that is specifically Islamic is unleavened.

Perhaps this bad leaven may be seen in Mansour's focus on organization, structures, and names, and in his reference to "allegiance" to Christ without defining what this is. To become a Muslim it is enough to have an "allegiance" to Muhammad, but such allegiance is far from the radical change of nature that is required for entry into the Body of Christ. If Muslims swap one "allegiance" for another, they are still in Adam, not "in Christ." No doubt Mansour believes in a New Birth, but his discussion deals with externals and keeps the discussion in an Islamic framework.

Islam as an Evil Empire.

Mansour says it is "too simplistic" to say that "people need to be liberated" from demonic Islam. Really! Is "the whole world under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19 NIV), except for Islam? Christian reluctance to adopt Muslim "identity" (read: "practices") is twisted to mean we are attacking their "ethnic identity," and is unfairly compared to calling down fire from heaven. Mansour makes missions overly complex by continually mixing ethnicity, Christendom, culture, Christianity, religion, etc., whereas our goal is less grandiose: to establish small groups of believers who remain within their culture while avoiding the Islamic elements (whether "good" or bad) that suggest they can serve two masters at once. We should contextualize in the direction of their *culture* in harmless areas, rather than toward their *religion*--which is inherently harmful. Satan comes as an angel of light, quoting true Scripture to promote error. Islam tells us to do "good" things too. But there are occasions when it is naive to change stones to bread. You may be tempted to throw yourself off the pinnacle of the Temple (or mosque) to win over the crowds. Some acts may be wrong merely because of the source or context. If we borrow from Islam we are confirming the Muslim belief that what Christ taught is incomplete. Does Jesus need Muhammad to *perfect* the religion of God?

At the risk of being labeled "obscurantist," I thank God for Paul's "simplification": "We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to (Muslim) Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23). Paul knew the communication theory and religions of his day, but he considers it all foolishness as a means of propagating the Gospel. As a "Hebrew of Hebrews," Paul should not only have been eager, but able to bring into struggling Christianity all the glories of his former religion (with all its good and truth). But what does he say? "Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more ... I consider them rubbish" (Gal 3:7f). Given Paul's obvious readiness to dispense with the best of Greek and Jewish culture as worldly wisdom, can we see him buying into the modern reverence for culture now ballyhooed as *the key* to missions?

I would agree that any group may call itself "Muslim" or "Christian," or any name it pleases. But are Christians or Muslims narrow-minded if they question the peddler's sales pitch? Mansour uses the image of religions as "big umbrellas" which enclose a multitude of contradictory movements, slipping in the idea that his Muslim fellowships have already been accepted by Christian workers in Bangladesh and Indonesia, and then makes the marvelous leap of logic: "Why then is the idea of an Islamic Jesus movement so resisted by expatriate workers elsewhere"?

The claims made about Bangladesh are prodigious, but workers there, both ex-pat and national, raise questions that restrain the Christian community from leaping on the latest bandwagon. Confirming what I have heard from national leaders, one experienced ex-pat team leader, sympathetic to contextualization, said to me, "If this new movement claims to have 25,000 Muslim believers, ask them: What happened to the first 25,000"? But since we cannot establish truth by counting noses, no statistics from Bangladesh can answer the theological question as to whether this effort is valid, or merely misguided Christians sacrificing everything to establish a new sect *within* Islam. If you take them at their word, these believers see themselves as "Muslims" who give a greater role to Jesus than the other Muslims around them, and are still within the *Umma* of Muhammad. Is it possible that Jesus is Head over *two* bodies

It is misleading to use Indonesia as a proof text for the *Jesus Mosque*. The millions there who have left Islam--the largest such group in church history--were not won by witnesses trying to minimize the differences between Islam and Christianity. The National Christians tolerate those few missionaries who push the newest Western ideology--contextualization--on them, but inside they agree with the Christians of the Middle East who reject the idea of a "Muslim Fellowship." The National wonders why the foreigner wants to sell him an *Arab* horse, especially the Western image of an Arab horse. Why join a pseudo-mosque, when they have already left the real thing? Arabs are an admirable people, but why must a Javanese face Mecca to get to God?

Jews for Jesus: Muslims for the Messiah

Mansour suggests that "Jews for Jesus" reject the name "Christian." A phone call to the "Jews for Jesus" headquarters brought a denial that they refuse to use the name "Christian"; they did not know of any Jewish ministry that refused that name. Mansour's argument is as misleading as his premise. "Jews for Jesus" have not remained "within" either the Judaism of the 1st or 20th century. Jewish believers were kicked out of both the Temple and the synagogue in the 1st century, and have not been invited back since. Messianic Jews can still maintain practices given by true prophets that do not contradict New Testament truth, but they make no compromise with erroneous Jewish ideas, and, like Paul, rejoice that they are part of the Christian community. Paul can be our model: he loved Israel, but in Romans 11:28 he calls the Chosen People "enemies" of the Gospel. If Israel is an enemy of the Gospel, is Islam a "friend"? If Israel was "broken off," when was Muhammad's community grafted into the root?

Believers are not saved as part of a cultural community, whatever that community might be. Being a member of the Jewish community did not save Ahab, Nadab, Abihu, or Korah. So it is not false individualism to say that sinners get saved as distinct believers. Can a community believe apart from its members? With what does a culture believe? Culture has been so elevated in missionary circles since World War II as to become a cult. This is evident in Mansour's solution to the problem of Islam: "a movement of Muslims for Jesus that remains within Islam". This glittering mirage may promise water to the thirsty desert traveler, but it will only draw you further into unreality. Can you really cross Jesus with Muhammad? Try telling a Muslim that he can be "truly Muslim" without Muhammad.

When I was a small boy a teenager gave me a nickel and sent me to the candy store to buy "Round-Squares." The kindly Jewish shopkeeper smiled and asked me to "describe them." Mansour has a vision of a community that is "both truly Muslim and truly followers of Jesus." If you can explain how to be both a true follower of Muhammad and a true follower of Jesus, you will not only have solved the problem of how to serve two masters at the same time, but you will also have solved the riddle of Round-Squares!

The false parallel between "Jews for Jesus" and "Muslims for Messiah" ignores the Pauline pattern which proved he could retain his ethnic and cultural Jewishness even after he had been thrown out of the synagogue. It is hard to retain membership in a religion when they try to kill you every chance they get. Jewish believers in Jesus are the only "true Jews"; believers in Muhammad are the only "true Muslims". The term "Messiah" in the above name would be significant if it were used by a Jew, but it does not define a "Muslim." Muslims empty the term "Messiah" of its biblical significance, making Jesus an obsolete prophet who saves no one, denies the Church, and who will ultimately confess Muhammad as his superior. Why stress a term that conveys a minimum of accurate information, and that the group misunderstands?

Messianic Jews do not damage the unity of the Body of Christ because Christ is the fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures; these lead men to Christ and New Testament truth, not away from it like Islam. Jews have a special place in God's plan which Muslims do not have. Old Testament Judaism is true, even though incomplete; the same cannot be said of Islam. One cannot therefore justify the *Jesus Mosque* on the basis of a parallel between the mosque and the synagogue. Islam was not founded as a true saving system by a true prophet. The Jewish prophets were sent by God; we deny this to Muhammad.

On True Unity

This section adds nothing to the discussion since Mansour agrees with the decision of the early church that Gentiles could be saved as Gentiles. Muslims can be saved as Gentiles too, but Mansour would have us believe that they can be saved as Muslims and possess dual citizenship in both the community of Muhammad and that of Jesus. Such religious dualism contradicts the message of the Old Testament that Jews must keep themselves pure from the religions around them. It also contradicts the example of the Apostles who did not join the gospel to religious error. Mansour does not provide evidence from the New Testament that the early churches accepted converts as members of two religious communities at the same time. He is under the illusion that the problem of Jewish "ethnocentrism" that the Apostle Paul faced in his day is basically "the same issue we are facing in Muslim evangelism today." Surely this question was settled centuries ago, unless you believe that the Muslims constitute a separate category of people not included in the term "Gentiles." And if you are unclear on how one is saved, how can you offer a solution to the problem of *True Unity*.

Actions Speak Louder than Words

Here again Mansour manages to misunderstand "the real issue," twisting it so much that those who disagree with him are "nullifying the grace of God"--a serious charge indeed!