

“I Am Not a Prophet”: Ecumenical Dialogue with Definition

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The Huffington Post is not typically where one finds greatly nuanced theological arguments, and a recent article by Craig Considine (“Why a Christian Can View Muhammad As A Prophet”¹) is no exception. Considine, with no formal theological training, lectures in the sociology department at Rice University with a special emphasis on the sociology of religion and Christian-Muslim relations. I have no quibble with his sociological methodology, but his theological arguments are suspect. Briefly, Considine urges Christians to recognize Muhammad as a prophet. He argues: “[Muhammad] was an exceptional person; he might even be the greatest and most influential human being ever to walk the face of the earth. Prophet Muhammad brought love, peace, and much more to a part of the world that had little of these things.” The desire to recognize Muhammad as a prophet springs from an ecumenical spirit seeking to encourage harmony among humanity. “To push that boundary of ‘Christian identity,’” he concludes, “is to pave the way for a future that makes more room for the ‘Other.’” The desire to embrace the “other” should be commended—especially in such a war-torn, hate-filled, and fearful world as our own—but perhaps the *boundary of Christian identity* need not be *pushed* in order to do so. Overall, the problem with Considine’s argument is methodological. He operates with different definitions of particular words—words that he notes need expansion in meaning. Ultimately, it comes down to what it means to be a “prophet.” He recognizes this:

Really, what is in question here is the definition of "prophet." "Prophet" can be defined as "a person regarded as an inspired teacher or proclaimer of the will of God." Outside of the dictionary, I've always understood "prophet" to mean a messenger of a Higher Power who works on earth to bring justice and peace to humanity.

Again,

As I mentioned earlier, I like to view the word "prophet" as having a very broad meaning. In fact, I don't even like to place it in the realm of "religion," especially not in the Abrahamic tradition. To me, a prophet is someone who has valuable insight and intuition, who is sensitive about the well-being of others regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds.

However, such an inclusive, expansive, ecumenical view of prophecy leads to unhappy results:

Basically, me admiring Prophet Muhammad isn't "enough" for Muslims; in their eyes, I must take a few concrete steps towards Islam to be fully recognized as a "true believer."

¹ Huffington Post, 1/26/2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/craig-considine/why-a-christian-can-view-muhammad-as-prophet_b_9042420.html.

Otherwise, I'm just a weirdo Christian who respects Muhammad, but doesn't recognize him as "the man." Christians, on the other hand, have called me "pseudo Catholic" and "infidel" for my positive writings about Muhammad. For these Islamophobes, I'm quite simply a heretic. There's no way around it. Perhaps my work is irritating to Muslims and Christians because I'm pushing a few traditional boundaries and making people question the very heart of their religious traditions and identities.

While the desired goal is commendable—to show respect and build peaceful relations in a religiously tumultuous time—the argument falsely presupposes that abstracting words will lead to greater unity.

Now, I mention this religious op-ed piece from the Huffington Post because he roughly makes the same argument popularly as Anna Moreland does so academically²—each with the same goal in mind. Furthermore, and more to the point for this journal article, both make the same methodological misstep in presenting the argument by abstracting what it means to be a *prophet*. Unlike Considine, however, Moreland is trained in Roman Catholic systematic theology. In her short article, Moreland raises a number of important questions ranging from history and philosophy to theology and ecumenism. She seeks to find a reasonable conversation of prophecy that includes both Christians and Muslims by employing the analogical reasoning of St. Thomas Aquinas. The question she raises at the beginning—quite like Considine’s—is this: “Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet. How far can Catholics return the favor?”³ She concludes with what she calls mere “prolegomena”:

When Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet, they are not revering him as Christians do, and they are not equating this prophetic role with Muhammad’s singular one. I suggest that Christians can revere Muhammad as a prophet in a *limited and relative sense*, not one that Muslims would embrace, but one that Christians nevertheless should consider.⁴

There is an ethical demand upon Christians here. The two questions at hand are, first, whether she has made a compelling case for a “limited” and “relative” reverence for Muhammad to be considered by Christians a “prophet”; secondly, why would this strategy be helpful?

Moreland constructs her argument to fit her presuppositions, which are based upon the assertions from Vatican II of *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium*. As she puts it:

If, as Nostra Aetate explicitly affirms, Muslims honor the same God Christians do, and if, as the document readily acknowledges, Muslims and Christians share an overlapping web of beliefs, then we should not be surprised to find the Qur’an to be a vehicle of God’s grace in Muslim communities. More importantly, however, if Muslims are being

² “An Analogical Reading of Christian Prophecy: The Case of Muhammad,” in *Interreligious Reading After Vatican II: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology and Receptive Ecumenism*, ed. David Ford and Frances Clemson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

³ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 73; emphasis mine.

sanctified through an encounter with the Qur’an, Christians should consider the possibility that acknowledging this encounter could bring Christians to a deeper consideration of their own faith...*If* we argue that God chose Muhammad to be the vehicle to communicate a divine message, Christians should find language that properly acknowledges this claim.⁵

Those *ifs* carry a heavy load. One wonders whether they are as sure and certain as the resulting ethical demand requires. What *if* Vatican II got it wrong? What *if* Muslims do not honor the same God Christians do? What *if* Muslims are not being sanctified through an encounter with the Qur’an? And what *if* God did *not* choose Muhammad? Though consistent with Vatican II—which recognizes Muslims within the worship of the one, true God—the difficulty still remains in what it means to be a *prophet*. This difficulty is apparent in her discussion of an analogical means by which to find common language with expansive definitions.

As Moreland outlines her use of *analogia*, she addresses how Christians are to speak of God: “Christians must be cautious in their language about God, but they can speak about God from observing God’s pulse in the world.”⁶ While *analogia* offers a means of speaking about God truly, albeit imperfectly, she misses the cause or the reason why we are given to speak truly of God. It is not merely because what we call “good” must have some participation in the much greater good that is God; rather, it is because God has given his word to us. He has given us the words to say about him that are true because they come from him. While our grasp of how those words reveal God will always be imperfect on account of our sinful deficiencies, they are nevertheless the words that God has given us to use. By these words, he has given us to believe who he is as God. And all these words—from God to us—are given by the mouth of a *prophet*.

In any case, this is not the sense of *analogia* that Moreland takes up. She seeks a “secondary sense of analogy,” one that “recognizes resemblances among religious traditions amidst the backdrop of radical difference.”⁷ Her pursuit is to take the words of man about God from one religion (Christianity) and compare them to the words of man about God from another religion (Islam), find their commonalities, and engage one another with expansive definitions. She invites us to see a fluidity between “perfect prophecy” and “prophetic instinct.” Towards this latter option she has Christians recognize Muhammad as one who “is moved [by the Holy Spirit to think, say, or do something] without...knowing it.”⁸ Her conclusion, cited above, argues that because Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet (though not in the same way as Muhammad), Christians also should revere Muhammad as a prophet (though not in the same way as Jesus).⁹

Beside the fact that Christians do not merely refer to Jesus as a prophet, but as “lord and savior,” one ought to wonder why, or in what sense, Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet. Far from an ecumenical olive-branch, they do so because that is how they are given (prophetically) to speak of Jesus from their Qur’an: “He [I’esa (Jesus)] said: Verily! I am a slave of Allah, He has

⁵ Ibid., 64-65, emphasis mine.

⁶ Ibid., 70.

⁷ Ibid., 70.

⁸ Ibid., 68.

⁹ Ibid., 73.

given me the Scripture and made me a Prophet” (19:30).¹⁰ The Qur’an does not require Muslims to revere Jesus as Christians do; the “Curse of Allah” is invoked upon those who say that Jesus is, as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed confesses, *very God of very God*.¹¹ If Christians speak of Jesus as a prophet, they do so in such a way that he is the true prophet to whom all other prophets relate *analogically* (according to the primary sense of that word). Lastly, Moreland invites Christians to consider Muhammad a prophet in a *limited and relative sense*. Does this *limited and relative sense* include that of *false prophet*?

It seems that Moreland’s quest for interreligious dialogue—one that “transcends the bounds of one particular tradition”—is rooted in an anthropocentric view of religious boundaries.¹² However, what separates Christianity and Islam is not merely the limited capacity of humans towards the fullness of revelation (which seems to be Moreland’s view); what separates them is the confession that Jesus is God. This confession is unacceptable to Islam and definitive for Christianity. Where particular Christians or particular Muslims depart their larger tradition on this issue, and yet desire to remain adherents to their tradition, one wonders what such a person means by Christianity or Islam in the first place. What words mean, therefore, is precisely at the center of the argument.

Moreland admits this, notably in regard to what it means to be a prophet: “The current proposal argues that prophecy is the fitting term for such acknowledgement. But to make this novel argument, we must first *widen the term* “prophet” by way of analogy.”¹³ Before one *widens* the term, it might be beneficial to consider the narrow meaning of “prophet.” As is the case with most theological vocabulary, this tends to be problematic. One possible definition identifies prophets as “spokespersons for God who announced God’s will or intentions for people, or predicted the future, or did both.”¹⁴ John Barton classifies three interpretive groups, each understanding the work of prophecy slightly differently from particular theological traditions: 1) the historical-critical view of prophets as moral exhorters over and against the law and society;¹⁵ 2) the Fundamentalist/Christian propensity towards apocalypticism and prediction; and 3) the Jewish understanding of the prophets as tradents and commentators of Torah.¹⁶ Certainly, there is

¹⁰ Noble Qur’an.

¹¹ “Then whoever disputes with you concerning him [‘Iesa (Jesus)] after (all this) knowledge that has come to you, [i.e. ‘Iesa (Jesus)] being a slave of Allah, and having no share in Divinity) say: (O Muhammad SAW) “Come, let us call our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves - then we pray and invoke (sincerely) the Curse of Allah upon those who lie” (3:61).

¹² The irony here is palpable. The religious boundaries that she seeks to expand with a greater and more inclusive sense of prophecy are precisely the boundaries given by the word of the prophets.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 65; emphasis mine.

¹⁴ Paul L. Redditt, “Prophecy, History of,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, eds. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012): 587-601, 587.

¹⁵ This view was popularized already by Bernhard Duhm, *Die Theologie der Propheten* (1875) and Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*.

¹⁶ John Barton, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile – New Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13-15.

more to what it means to be a prophet¹⁷—and even among these three categories there is a good deal of overlap—but nevertheless, these descriptions capture the main lines of argumentation.

On the other hand, there is the common notion that prophecy is a phenomenon that variously occurs in other ancient near-eastern cultures, as well as today. For instance, there seems to be some support for ecstatic “prophecy” at Mari already in the eighteenth century B.C.¹⁸ Extending the historical-critical view of prophecy in the scriptures, Walter Brueggemann takes up the example of Jeremiah and applies it to today: “Every Christian preacher, *mutatis mutandis*, is regularly engaged in the same imaginative rereading of reality through the crisis of Jesus.”¹⁹ The underlying question—again, still considering the narrow definition of the term—is whether prophecy is a sociological category that exists in general, or whether prophecy, as it is found in the scriptures (Old and New Testaments) has a particular sense unique to the God of Israel.

The question of what it means to be a prophet in the narrow sense must be answered before a Christian should consider attributing that title *broadly* to Muhammad. Admittedly, beyond the general description noted above, the field is a bit messy, and the scriptures do not always clear it up. Amos offers an insightful example in his brief exchange with Amaziah:

And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, “I *was* no prophet, nor a prophet's son [לֹא-נָבִיא אָנֹכִי וְלֹא-בֶן-נָבִיא אָנֹכִי], but I *was* a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs.

But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ Now therefore hear the word of the Lord. (Amos 7:12-16, ESV)

What seems startling about this passage is not always perceptible at first sight. Most translations operate similarly to the ESV and highlight a contrast between what Amos *was* and what he *is now*. However, the problem with this translation is that the Hebrew is fairly clear grammatically; and the NRSV captures it well: “Then Amos answered Amaziah, ‘*I am* no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees.’” The reason that many translations prefer to place this statement in the past tense is because Amos most certainly *is* a prophet. Placing this autobiographical note in the past brings a sort of rugged authenticity, an interpretation that suggests Amos neither sought nor was trained for the office, but that the

¹⁷ Abraham Heschel notes, “The prophet is a person, not a microphone...The word of God reverberated in the voice of man...The prophet is not only a prophet. He is also poet, preacher, patriot, statesman, social critic, moralist. There has been a tendency to see the essence and chief significance of prophecy in the display of one or another of these aspects. Yet this is a misapprehension of the intrinsic nature of prophecy” (*The Prophets: Volume I—An Introduction* [New York: Harper & Row, 1962], x).

¹⁸ H.P. Muller, “Nabi,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Volume IX, ed. G Johannes Botterweck et. al., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 135.

¹⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 192. See especially his book *The Prophetic Imagination* (2nd ed., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) in which he states, “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us” (3).

Lord drew him into it (even unwillingly). If, however, as the Hebrew suggests, Amos claims *not to be* a prophet, what does this mean?

Amos’ denial of being a prophet counters Moreland’s argument for an expansive view of prophecy. We have a case of a true prophet denying the title of prophet because the one using it has a different definition. Briefly, Amaziah is the priest in Jeroboam’s temple. This northern temple is established apart from the prophetic word—that is, the Lord has not given his name to be called upon *there*. Rather, as Amos proclaims, “The Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem” (Amos 1:2). Amaziah, then, has a very different understanding of prophecy. One gets the sense that Jeroboam’s prophets were much like Ahab’s before him:

Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred men, and said to them, “Shall I go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I refrain?” And they said, “Go up, for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king.” But Jehoshaphat said, “Is there not here another prophet of the LORD of whom we may inquire?” And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the LORD, Micaiah the son of Imlah, but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil.” (1 Kings 22:6-8)

These northern prophets learned very quickly that Israel is *the king’s sanctuary* (Amos 7:13). He calls the shots. He gives them what they are to say. So it is no wonder that Amos gets reprimanded for prophesying the way he does.

His response, then—that he is *not a prophet*—is to say that he is not a prophet as Amaziah (and Jeroboam) understand a prophet to be. Like Micaiah before him, Amos understands his office such that “what the Lord says to me, that I will speak” (1 Kings 22:14). The prophet does not determine the words, neither does the king; but a prophet is only a prophet insofar as the Lord has given him the words to speak.

This view of prophecy, which is admittedly narrow, binds the definition of prophet to the true word of the true God—any other prophet or prophecy is deemed *false*. For a Christian to consider Muhammad a prophet would require that his words be the true words of the true God. “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man,” Peter writes, “but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). As the Holy Spirit always takes what belongs to Jesus and declares it to his people (John 16:15), it becomes evident that the prophets of old did not speak in distinction to or apart from what is spoken by Jesus but, rather, their words accorded with his (Hebrews 1:1-2). Thus, from the perspective of the Old and New Testaments, Muhammad may rightly be considered a prophet if what he says accords with the entire testimony of the scriptures (Old and New Testaments)—most notably that Jesus is the Christ who must suffer, die, and on the third day rise again:

And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

The reason neither Moreland nor Considine have found much support from either community of faith—even for such laudable and ecumenical intentions—seems to be that both Muslims and Christians recognize that they have fundamentally different words that they are given to believe and confess.

Finally, a brief word on ecumenical dialogue: if we seek to foster open and loving discourse between religious traditions, the way forward will not be found in abstractions but in truth. Unity cannot be achieved through expansive definitions; rather, unity arises when real differences come together in truth. When two people can discuss a real difference while recognizing the humanity of the other, then that can be judged as a successful ecumenical dialogue. Rather than broadening the prophetic terminology, Moreland’s goal might better be achieved by critically setting the two views of prophecy side-by-side. The pursuit of knowing the other is laudable and certainly falls within the boundaries of what it means to be Christian; I suspect the same goes for a Muslim identity as well.