

Kenneth Cragg's Critique of Muhammad as Statesman

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For non-Muslim historians, Muhammad was an Arab king, a ruler, and a 'prophet'. Muslims would not of course put cautionary quotation marks around 'prophet'. Both would agree that his faith, a twin birth of faith and empire, matured into a compulsively political and politically successful religion. But was the empowered portion of his prophetic career morally legitimate? This issue involves a strategic theological concern central to Islam. Muhammad ibn 'Abdullah, a religious reformer and founder of a faith, dirtied his hands with the political muck. To assess his moral character and the achievements of his political militancy, we must command intellectual patience, inter-faith courtesy, and skills of conceptual analysis.

These virtues are found in the work of the late Anglican missionary scholar and Arabist Kenneth Cragg, whose critique of Islam's involvement with power relies on a multi-lingual scholarship buttressed by some 70 years of experience of the politically volatile Middle East.¹ In my opinion, Muslims wrongly dismiss or despise his intriguing mixture of insight and oversight. Many Muslims and some non-Muslims saw Cragg, quite rightly, as a missionary to Islam itself rather than only to its adherents. Some scholars, both Muslim and Christian, have accused him of trying to Christianize and hence subvert Islam rather than merely convert its adherents!

In my judgment, the late bishop's articulate criticisms of Islam's political dimension deserve a reply at their own level of theological depth if not their stylized literary intelligence. His provocative but courteous criticisms enable us to sketch the contours of Islam as a politically aware religion. His agonized and searching thoughts force intelligent Muslims and non-Muslims alike to discern the ways in which, and the motives for which, Islam was from the beginning a political faith.

Despite its avowed Christian axioms, Cragg's critique is largely didactic and objective, not polemical or propagandist. Yet I wish to argue that Cragg occasionally lapses from his own demanding standards of sincerity and objectivity. I have, mainly in my book² taken him to task at length by identifying what I see as his *real* (as opposed to *professed*) motives for his reservations about Muhammad's political

career. While I dispute Cragg's scholarly but combative characterization of the origins of political Islam, I accept some of his policy recommendations for today, especially as these relate to Muslims' urgent need for a theology of the minority position. I also acknowledge that his writings deepen our theological understanding of normative Islam's political facet. Bishop Cragg has uniquely combined an intelligent sympathy for Islam with a critique of Muhammad's politics—and all for the sake of the things of God.

In the very title of the first of his two treatises cited in footnote 1, Cragg admits that Christians will have to take a stance on Muhammad, not only on Islam or the Qur'an. This is rare in Christian-Muslim relations. Cragg resembles earlier Christian thinkers in criticising Muhammad for his decision to leave Mecca. He too alleges that this move politicised and therefore compromised and corrupted the Prophet's pristine Meccan Islam. At the watershed of his prophetic calling, Muhammad betrayed his vocation. Unlike true servants of the word, he opted for force—a change of policy reflected in the Qur'an's partial alteration of style from moral preaching and private persuasion to political and legal injunction and coercion. This Christian reservation, historically inspired by the competing colonial histories of the two rivals, is in Cragg's work married to a thoughtful indictment of the Muhammadan involvement with power, an involvement which persists in our world where zealous Muslims' use of force creates serious problems for western policy-makers.

Cragg questions the rightness of Islam's merging of religious faith with temporal power. His accusations and reservations are theologically and politically consequential; he offers intelligent but partisan (Christian) grounds for accusing Muhammad of using political means to achieve religious ends. For Cragg, no religious goal can ever justify, let alone sanctify, the use or even threat of force. A secondary aim of Cragg is to question the Muslim claim that the Shariah-based state delivers righteousness and justice in social policy.

I believe that Cragg's critique misidentifies the political dimension of Muhammad's Medinan militancy. Cragg tends to overstate the centrality of Muhammad's political as opposed to his religious (or spiritual)

ministry. Muslims would agree that Muhammad was a statesman. However, they would insist that he remained, from first to last, a formidable prophet who never compromised his professed religious principles. Cragg also misunderstands the Qur'an's perspective on tragedy and, more narrowly, on failure in the political lives of believers.



For all his professed Christian caution against judging others, Cragg judges Islam and Muhammad. He mitigates this indictment by conceding that Islam was a religious achievement which helped Muhammad realise his destiny as a reformer and offered spiritual pabulum to his followers then and since. Cragg cautions, however, that the Islamic story, given its spectacular temporal success, makes Christians question whether or not it is religiously authentic. Can religious truth, perennially short of sponsors in our evil world, ever star as the hero of a success story? Given that human beings reject God's laws—a claim that both Christians and Muslims accept—the rapid and enduring success of Islam in this vile world needs explanation. Did Islam triumph by compromising Muhammad's prophetic credentials?

Cragg concedes that Islam has an authentic religious dimension, indeed a spiritual kinship with Christianity. This makes him suspect the political means used, especially when these betray loftier spiritual ideals painfully realised by Jesus in Gethsemane. If Islam were a false religion, no moral problem would arise about its political involvement or its secular success. If the message of a faith is genuine, however, we have a right to question the dubious political means used to convey it. Cragg insists that a prophet must repudiate worldly power, since faith has no fellowship with force. These are fair reservations; Christians and Muslims alike have the right to their consciences.

References

1. See Kenneth Cragg, *Muhammad and the Christian* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984) and its sequel, *Jesus and the Muslim* (Allen and Unwin, 1985).
2. Shabbir Akhtar, *Islam as Political Religion: The Future of an Imperial Faith* (Routledge, 2010).