

*A Deadly Misunderstanding:
A Congressman's Quest to Bridge the Muslim-Christian Divide
by Mark Siljander*

***A Book Review
by
Dr. Rick Love***

A Deadly Misunderstanding chronicles a dramatic account of Mark Siljander's journey into bridge-building between Christians and Muslims. If you are interested in peacemaking in general or Christian-Muslim relations in particular, this is a book worth reading. It will deepen your hope for meaningful encounters with Muslims. But beware: this book will stir up your theological categories!

A Deadly Misunderstanding highlights the dynamic process God used to shape this narrow-minded conservative evangelical politician into a creative-thinking, big-hearted agent of peace. Siljander's encounter with Muslims and participation in the National Prayer Breakfast lead him to a deeper study of Scripture and a rigorous study of the Quran. The result: Siljander experienced what he described as a paradigm crash!

The same could happen to you. In fact I am writing this review because I believe that followers of Christ need this same kind of mind-expanding, heart revolution in their attitudes and relationships with Muslims.

This book describes numerous poignant spiritual encounters that Siljander has with heads of state and high level political and spiritual leaders around the world. Siljander talks freely about Jesus and prays with people like Omar Hassan Al-Bashir, President of Sudan, Pervez Musharraf, former President of Pakistan, Abdurrahman Wahid former President of Indonesia, Hosni Mubarak, President of Egypt, and the late Yasser Arafat, former Chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization -- to name a few.

Siljander describes his approach as "the path of Ananias," based on the vision God gave Ananias about what Paul's ministry: "But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel (Acts 9:15 NIV). Thus, Siljander concludes: "Saul wasn't commissioned to *convert* the kings or to bring any sort of religious system or specific set of policies. He was told simply to 'carry his name.' In other words, just go in peace and friendship, in the name of Jesus, to be representatives of his teachings. To offer goodwill and unconditional love, and even bless and pray for our enemies" (pg. 73).

Siljander acknowledges that there are often many other important issues to be addressed, but his priority is to build personal relationships centered around Jesus and prayer. I love this Jesus-centered, prayer-oriented approach. A Jesus-

centered approach to Muslims highlights the treasure of the gospel. It does not confuse Christendom, patriotism or our civilization with the good news. His emphasis on prayer helps connect people with God rather than engaging in debate about God.

Having said that, I must admit: this book is provocative. It won't sit well with many Evangelicals. But it is a book that they need to read. You don't have to agree with every point of Siljander's theological argument to be profoundly impacted by his life and journey. My mind was stretched and my faith strengthened by his story (and I've been active in Christian-Muslim relations for over 30 years). He powerfully illustrates a Jesus-centered approach to bridge-building with Muslims that is worth emulating. His passion to find common ground and to step out by faith into unchartered territory is admirable.

In the preface of the book Siljander describes his purpose: "What follows in these pages is not some new form of ecumenism or syncretism where Christians, Muslims, or anyone else is expected to give up cherished and long-held beliefs or creeds. It is rather a chronicle of one person's search for a rich common ground that exists between these faiths and cultures" (pg. xii). He then highlights this pilgrimage for "common ground" with fascinating and inspiring stories that demonstrate the lessons he has learned.

However, contrary to his stated purpose not to espouse some "new form of ecumenism or syncretism" I find he comes close to doing just that. Two quotes will illustrate my concerns.

"As I sorted through explanations of the Five Pillars of Islam, it struck me that at their core, none of these practices seemed really incompatible with being a good Christian or a good Jew (pg 114) ... "If we then set aside for a moment the provision about Muhammad being God's messenger and focus on the message embodied in the five pillars themselves, here's what we have:

'I believe in one God.'

'I will pray every day.'

'I will give to the poor and needy, according to my ability.'

'I will fast and do my best to purify my body and soul.'

'I will travel, in body if possible and in mind and spirit otherwise, to holy sites to celebrate my God (pg. 116)'

It is true that if we set aside the affirmation about Muhammad being God's messenger, the five pillars are clearly congruent with the Christian faith. He rightly highlights this huge amount of common ground. Dudley Woodberry's excellent article on "Reusing Common Pillars" affirms as much (See *Contextualization Among Muslims: Reusing Common Pillars* International Journal of Frontier Missions, Vol 13:4 Oct-Dec. 1996). However, you can't set aside

Muhammad as if he were merely a footnote in Islamic thought! He is the final prophet and authoritative model for Muslims.

In another place Siljander actually does seem to affirm a “new ecumenism and syncretism.” According to Siljander, “Islam and Christianity were not simply *overlapping* ideas. They were not merely *compatible*. In the most central sense, *they were one continuum*” (pg 122).

I find this quote theologically confusing. Yes, there is an overlapping of ideas and there is compatibility in many areas. But a continuum? In what way is there a continuum? Muslims would affirm a continuum. They would argue that Islam builds upon Christianity and thus is the final and authoritative revelation to humankind. I can’t imagine that Siljander believes that.

So what does he mean? I am not sure. But it seems to be an unfortunate overstatement, undermining the supremacy of Christ and the distinctiveness of the Gospel. I hope some of these statements will be deleted from the next edition of this book.

The reader of this review may be asking: “Ok, Rick, is this a good book or a bad book? Do you like it or not?”

When it comes to reading books (listening to sermons or enjoying a conversation with my friends for that matter), I apply what Paul said to the Thessalonians: “Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thess 5:21 NASB). Please note: there is a lot of good in this book! We need to read books like this that “push the envelope” and think “outside the boundaries,” especially in the area of Christian-Muslim relations.

So read this book with an open heart and discerning mind ... and let God change your attitude and refine your approach to blessing Muslims!