

Muslim polemical articles about Christian missionary activities

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Preface by Cornelis Hulsman: In 1997 I started making press overviews on issues related to Muslim-Christian relations and founded the Religious News Service from the Arab World which later was renamed Arab-West Report. Between June 13, 1997 and July 11, 1998 I collected articles from al-Muslimoon of which we bought paper copies in the newsstands in Maadi, Cairo. With the transition of Arab-West Report from a practically free electronic publication to a subscriber based publication it is no longer possible to make these al-Muslimoon articles accessible through our subscription system since we hold no copyright to them. Yet, the arguments made are fascinating. It shows very well what believing Muslims dislike about a particular Islamophobic type of Christianity. The topics mentioned in 1997-1998 are not so different from the topics of today. These are concerns about Christian missionary activities, conversions or issues related to culture and tradition. I am very pleased that Melina Aboulfalah has made an overview of the major themes and arguments in these articles for Arab-West Report since in particular Christians are not always fully aware of these sentiments among believing Muslims.

In the beginning of this summary analysis it is important to say that I only read the approximately 70 articles available in the database of the *Arab-West-Report*. It was hard finding secondary information about the newspaper *al-Muslimoon* itself. What I found interesting after all is that it appears that Jamal Khashoggi [Jamāl Khāshqjī], the Saudi Arabian Journalist, who was murdered inside the Saudi Arabian embassy in Turkey, used to write for this newspaper.¹ *Al-Muslimoon* was a weekly newspaper on Muslim affairs that apparently operated in the late 1980s and 90s and it does not seem to be active anymore today.² Rubin describes the newspaper as a “weekly about Muslim political, social, and cultural issues.”³ Based in Saudi Arabia as part of Saudi Research and Publishing Co,⁴ the overall tone is rather conservative and stresses Islamic principles and supremacy in terms of morals or standards and generally speaking, Saudi Arabia’s vital status in that context.

I will hereby try to give an overview about the recurring subjects and what I think was *al-Muslimoon*’s intention, impact or consequence for the reader, based on the articles I read. As Cornelis Hulsman mentioned before, some of the issues raised in these articles will sound familiar to us reading them around 30 years later. Some ideas, demands or resentments have not perceivably changed or reoccur in another context.

¹ World Economic Forum: “Jamal Khashoggi,” 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/people/jamal-khashoggi>.

² Rasheed Abou-Alsamh: “‘He was a devoted father’,” October 20, 2018, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1391221/saudi-arabia>.

³ Barry Rubin: “The Middle East: A Guide to Politics, Economics, Society and Culture,” 2015 (2nd edition), Routledge, London and New York, p. 311.

⁴ Lucy Dean (ed.): “The Middle East and North Africa 2004,” 2004 (50th edition), Europa Publications, London, p. 994.

In terms of education for example, the selected articles offer perspectives we can also perceive “upside-down” in Europe, for instance, when it comes to confession-based teaching of religion in public schools. In Germany, the discussion about offering classes in Islamic Religious Education has been re-activated last year, even though the state of Hessen for instance already offered these classes for primary schools starting 2013/14.⁵

Let us approach the same subject, but reversed, in the Arabic and Muslim country Jordan. Even though the country is by far smaller than Germany, geographically and in terms of population, the relative share of Christians in Jordan is comparable to the Muslims in Germany.⁶ Of course, it makes a difference that in Jordan, the state religion is Islam, whereas Germany is a secularized country (the church as a public corporation however plays a certain role in German society and politics).

It appears to me that the selected articles evolving around the topic of education stress the decline of Islamic values or representation. Trends of secularization are negatively portrayed, whether it is in the form of discrimination of veiled Muslim women in Turkish Universities⁷ or changes in the Lebanese syllabus at the expense of Religious studies.⁸ The same applies to demands of teaching Christianity in Jordan public schools, a demand that is represented as not being worth the discussion, as most of the Christian children are in private schools where the subject Christianity has been taught for a long time.⁹

When it comes to tradition, customs or elements of culture, it seemed like some articles seek to weaken the position of Western societies as superior “First world countries” by questioning their supremacy especially when it comes to morals. Regarding polygamy for example, this is legal in most of the Arab countries. Exceptions are Tunisia and Oman. One article stressed the fact that polygamy, a subject that for a lot of Westerners serves as key aspect to stress alleged Arab backwardness, is also happening in the USA for instance in Mormon communities.¹⁰

Other than that, it does not come as a surprise that the newspaper reveals some kind of moral decay by pointing out that apparently nothing is sacred to Westerners, not even Christianity. One article dealt with an exhibition by Swedish artist Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin, who is known for portraying sexual

⁵ Hessisches Kultusministerium: “Neues Unterrichtsangebot: Bekenntnisorientierter islamischer Religionsunterricht,” last retrieved March 13, 2019, <https://kultusministerium.hessen.de/schulsystem/religionsunterricht/bekenntnisorientierter-islamischer-religionsunterricht>.

⁶ The Embassy of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Washington, D.C.: “Culture and Religion,” last retrieved March 13, 2019, <http://www.jordanembassyus.org/page/culture-and-religion>.

⁷ Jihād Abāza: “A Turkish university expels 86 women students for wearing the Moslem veil,” *al-Muslimoon in Arab-West-Report*, August 29, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-35/3-turkish-university-expels-86-women-students-wearing-moslem-veil>.

⁸ Tha’ir Abbas: “Dropping Religious Studies in schools in Lebanon,” *al-Muslimoon in Arab-West-Report*, August 29, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-35/4-dropping-religious-studies-schools-lebanon>.

⁹ No author mentioned: “Teaching Christianity in Government Schools in Jordan,” *al-Muslimoon in Arab-West-Report*, November 7, 1997, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1997/week-45/1-teaching-christianity-governmental-schools-jordan>.

¹⁰ ‘Ammar Bakr: “Polygamy is a widespread Christian belief in America,” *al-Muslimoon in Arab-West-Report*, June 27, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-26/7-polygamy-widespread-christian-belief-america>.

minorities in her works, and her exhibition *Ecce Homo*, in which she pictured Jesus among homosexuals, transvestites and dying from AIDS.¹¹ The exhibition was highly controversial - some understood Ohlson's works as representative of Jesus' spirit in modern times, for he stood with those at the edge of society and as sign of the all-embracing love of God, since in a lot of churches, homosexuality is still considered a taboo. Others, obviously, considered the exhibition as blasphemous and disrespectful.¹² Also, members of the LGBT-community criticized the exhibition for perpetuating clichés and stereotypes associated with them.¹³ In my opinion, the article at hand failed to adequately illustrate this controversy and kept on stressing the exhibition's inappropriateness.¹⁴

The same idea of Christianity being perverted or corrupted by Western ideals and used for capitalistic purposes shows in the article reflecting how, thanks to Muslim activism, the use of religious symbolism in advertisement was prohibited by British authorities.¹⁵ However, the article also mentions that the British Authority of Advertising Standards received complaints against images of nuns wearing Jeans and even an image of Pope John Paul II promoting various products, which most likely did not come from Muslims. So after all, it is important to mention that the article does not proclaim Muslims as the only defenders of all morals.

There are several articles examining how Islam or Muslims are victims of discrimination in the West. For example, the newspaper mentions the former and then banned website *suralikeit*, which made sarcastically fun of Islam and used the style of a Sunnah to express the criticism.¹⁶ The discrimination can for sure affect individual and personal fates, as for a Muslim couple that got its children taken away from them in the US because of accusations of abusing their children.¹⁷ In one article the newspaper compares the current image of Islam in the West with that at the time of the Crusades. Therefore the newspaper compares the current situation in terms of discrimination based on religion to an actual war.¹⁸ An example for discrimination exercised by authorities is stated in an article that explains that a

¹¹ Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin: "Ecce Homo," last retrieved March 13, 2019, <http://ohlson.se/index.php/utstallningar/ecce-homo/>.

¹² Mimi Fronczak Rogers: "Region: Photo show sparks religious uproar in Serbian capital. Biblical scenes with gay protagonists exhibited during Belgrade Pride Week," *The Prague Post*, October 17, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121025101252/http://www.praguepost.com/news/14559-region-photo-show-sparks-religious-uproar-in-serbian-capital.html>.

¹³ Revolv: "Ecce Homo (exhibition)," Wikipedia content in *Revolv*, last retrieved March 13, 2019, <https://www.revolv.com/page/Ecce-Homo-%28exhibition%29>.

¹⁴ No author mentioned: "A church organizes a photo exhibition misrepresenting Christ," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, October 10, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-41/17-church-organizes-photo-exhibition-misrepresenting-christ>.

¹⁵ No author mentioned: "A warning against using religious symbols in advertising," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, August 29, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-35/2-warning-against-using-religious-symbols-advertising>.

¹⁶ 'Ammar Bakr: "The story of removing a site that challenges the Qur'an on the internet," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, July 11, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-28/5-story-removing-site-challenges-qur%E2%80%99-internet>.

¹⁷ 'Ammar Bakr: "The tragedy of a Muslim couple," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, April 4, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-14/2-tragedy-muslim-couple>.

¹⁸ Nasir Musá: "Different German attitudes towards Muslims," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, June 28, 1997, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1997/week-26/2-different-german-attitudes-towards-muslims>.

church was built on Muslim land in Bulgaria, because it is financed by the "Future of Bulgaria" organization, which was headed by the wife of the then Bulgarian president.¹⁹

The victimization also shows in the field of international politics when the newspaper refers to political discrimination against Muslims by the German CSU [political party, Christian Social Union in Bavaria]²⁰ or to a bill issued by the US Congress that imposes sanctions on countries that harass Christian minorities.²¹ The criticism in the formulations in *al-Muslimoon* relies on the perception that Muslims are treated as inferior to Christians and Jews by not applying the same standards to all religions. So this article criticizes for example that countries in which Muslims are harassed or persecuted, are not sanctioned. Another article blames media of alleging "that the persecution of Copts is the most important human rights issue" while "Christian organizations have continued their attacks against Muslims."²² *Al-Muslimoon* tries to undermine the idea that Christians in some Arab or Islamic influenced countries are victims of displacement or persecution and they even find their proofs by for instance citing Egyptian authorities such as Dr. Ahmed Shalaby [Aḥmad Shalabī], then Islamic history professor at the Dār al-'Ulūm:

"The relations between Copts and Muslims didn't witness any tension since Muslims headed by Amr Ibn al-Ās ['Amr Ibn al-'Āṣ] conquered Egypt."²³

Or Patriarch Alesadore Batikha:

"I worked in the Vatican for 25 years. I came to Syria as a Patriarch of the Greek Catholic Church, and I see how Christians are performing their ceremonies freely. I didn't believe that I am in a Muslim country. We are given freedom in saying our prayers and we have the same rights and duties as others."²⁴

In another article Nihad Mou'ad [Nihād Mu'awwad], the then acting president of the Council of Islamic American Relations (CAIR), was quoted to state that the Zionist movement is one of the major powers behind the before mentioned bill against the discrimination of Christians. By portraying the creation of

¹⁹ Muhammad Rabi' Salamah: "A Muslim endowment is transformed into a church," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, August 8, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-32/17-muslim-endowment-transformed-church>.

²⁰ Haytham 'Ayyash: "The German Christian Party asks for the deportation of Muslims," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, May 30, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-22/5-german-christian-party-asks-deportation-muslims>.

²¹ No author mentioned: "Fifty-five Christian organizations behind a dangerous project," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, September 19, 1997, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1997/week-38/1-fifty-five-christian-organizations-behind-dangerous-project>.

²² No author mentioned: "Christian organizations continue attacking Muslims," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, August 22, 1997, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1997/week-34/5-christian-organizations-continue-attacking-muslims>.

²³ Faraj Ismā'īl: "Egypt's Copt[s] refute the claim of persecution," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, August 29, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-35/15-egypt%E2%80%99s-copt-refute-claims-persecution>.

²⁴ Faraj Ismā'īl: "Palestine's Christians are emigrating," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, August 29, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-35/12-palestine%E2%80%99s-christians-are-emigrating>.

the bill as being subject to “hidden Jewish fingers”,²⁵ known anti-Semitic resentments clearly show. This is the idea of Jews, notably in the form of the state of Israel as controller of the world’s decision making due to their powerful allies, of course at the expense of Muslims. For example, in another article, it is said:

“We all know that, over the years, Zionist have been able to affect the world, including mass-media, economy, politics, arts and social science. But what is really new this time, is that they have been able to control dozens of Christians.”²⁶

The highly conspiratorial tone of the articles dealing with Israel or Jews, without pointing out reliable sources of information, reveals the newspaper’s bias at that end. It accumulates in the article that states that the International Jewish Council and the Zionist Federation in Australia are planning to create a Jewish independent state in the South of Australia. The only proof given by the authors of this article is that Australian media published campaigns stressing the “great role of the first Jews in building Australia” or a “campaign that clarifies the sufferings of the Jews in America and Latin America.”²⁷

But let’s not forget that, apart from the persevering Arab-Israeli-Conflict, these articles were published during the time of the Kosovo War, a war during which religious background was somehow equivalent with ethnic adhesion and therefore crucial in terms of membership to one of the war’s parties. Muslims were the group the most exposed to displacement or discrimination in general; they actually feared a process of eradication. So the overall idea of Muslim disadvantage proclaimed by *al-Muslimoon* does not come out of nowhere.

The skepticism on global politics yet does not lead to its alienation. In the context of perceived overall discrimination, successes in the field of appreciation or increase in Muslim influence are valued. One article about the American Islamic Council in 1998 puts emphasis on the fact that the number of Muslims in the USA is increasing and that former Senator Joseph Lieberman, who, according to the article, “long boycotted the Muslim population”,²⁸ gave a speech at that occasion.

In that context, it does not come as a surprise that the newspaper gives portraits of some people who converted to Islam. The articles stress the nobility of these persons or their high rank in society or

²⁵ No author mentioned: “Fifty-five Christian organizations behind a dangerous project,” *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, September 19, 1997, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1997/week-38/1-fifty-five-christian-organizations-behind-dangerous-project>.

²⁶ ‘Ammar Bakr: “The Zionist octopus infiltrates Christian organizations,” *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, July 18, 1997, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1997/week-29/10-zionist-octopus-infiltrates-christian-organizations>.

²⁷ ‘Ammar Bakr: “With an agreement between the Jewish councils and the Zionist Federation, another Israel in Australia,” *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, August 22, 1997, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1997/week-34/6-agreement-between-jewish-councils-and-zionist-federation-another-israel>.

²⁸ ‘Ammar Bakr: “The American Islamic Conference is a large step in the heart of Congress,” *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, July 11, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-28/4-american-islamic-conference-large-step-heart-congress>.

education as for Yahya Birt, son of former Director-General of the BBC Jonathan Birt.²⁹ Another, rather surprising example of a conversion is the one of David Benjamin Keldani, a former Chaldean Catholic priest, who converted to Islam³⁰. Keldani was said to be convinced that many Biblical prophecies - understood by Christians to point to Jesus – actually refer to Muhammad [Muḥammad]. This and similar examples or observations of Christians converting to Islam indirectly serve as an argument that Islam is simply the stronger or more convincing religion, which will grow further as people recognize it.

The overall representation of Christianity in the articles at hand is rather negative and most of the time associated with intrusive missionary work. This clearly shows in articles related to humanitarian aid. It is an aspect that definitely requires further mentioning because it was dealt with in several articles. The newspaper is highly suspicious about Christian missionary work or Christian organizations' intentions in general. Some articles deal with the "Apologists"-group that traveled to several Middle Eastern regions, their trip coinciding with the 900th anniversary of the Crusades in 1998, when around 500 European and US-American Christians would go to these countries and apologize for what their ancestors did in the Crusades. The newspaper does not hide its suspicions about the movement:

"Not knowing who funds them, these visits, which will last for six months, have raised many questions [...]."³¹

As this article reveals, the newspaper was wary and spread uncertainty about the group's true motivations. The formulations come more extreme in another article, when it is said that: Lebanon is under the "attack of foreign religious delegates flocking into the country."³²

However, this passage of another article in my opinion shows the newspaper's overall rejection of Christian missionary work:

"The killing of three nuns in Yemen from the order established by Mother Teresa raised a lot of questions about the reason for the presence of nuns in [a] country that contains no Christians in the first place. The killer accused the nuns of practicing missionary work."³³

²⁹ No author mentioned: "BBC manager's son embraces Islam," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, September 12, 1997, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1997/week-37/2-bbc-manager%E2%80%99s-son-embraces-islam>.

³⁰ Aria Ibrahim: "'Muhammad in the Holy Book' – An ex-priest points out the mentioning of 'Muhammad' in the Bible and the Thora," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, October 10, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-41/5-%E2%80%99muhammad-holy-book%E2%80%99-ex-priest-points-out-mentioning-%E2%80%99muhammad%E2%80%99-bible-and-torah>.

³¹ Tha'ir Abbas: "The [descendants] of the Crusaders apologize," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, September 26, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-39/11-ancestors-crusaders-apologize>.

³² No author mentioned: "Lebanon's summer full of religious delegations and Christianizing groups," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, October 17, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-42/12-lebanon%E2%80%99s-summer-full-religious-delegations-and-christianizing-groups>.

³³ No author mentioned: "Are the nuns in Yemen part of a missionary work," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, August 8, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-32/16-are-nuns-yemen-part-missionary-work>.

Articles about humanitarian aid practiced by Christian organizations are more or less accused of only trying to proselytize new Christians. This paragraph for instance makes it seem like any Christian inspired charity organization only cares about the recruiting of new Christians and not about actually improving their situation:

“Dr. El-Romeihy reveals that the tasks of Westerners were not necessary to serve humanity, but ‘they had other aims, such as converting Muslims to Christianity.’”³⁴

Compared to these accusations or suspicions, another article appeases similar accusations made to Muslim charity associations:

“A series of prepared accusations, enhanced by rumors and tainted media reports, are casting shadows over voluntary Muslim work in Muslim disaster areas and affecting Muslim minorities worldwide. These accusations have touched Muslim volunteers and workers in charity organizations who have been working in silence to lift the suffering of their brothers through religion and humanity.”³⁵

The idea of Muslims converting to Christianity seems so inconceivable to *al-Muslimoon* that it cannot happen just as a consequence of conviction, but mainly because of puppeteers operating in the background. This becomes evident, when they cite the General Mufti of Kazakhstan, who admits that there are “some” Muslims converting to Christianity, which is because of “financial temptations and Western aid funds, and not because converts really believe in Christianity.”³⁶

Al-Muslimoon illustrates a strong and independent Islam that does not surrender to any missionaries’ efforts and stresses the important role of Saudi-Arabia in Islam in that context:

“They wanted to do this, despite the seeming impossibility of such a task, given that Islam sprung from the mountains and valleys of Saudi Arabia, making the country as firm in its faith as a concrete building.”³⁷

The articles portraying the strength of Islam and its adherents is shown by the use of numbers, for example when in one article the author writes about the King Fahd Mosque in Los Angeles and how

³⁴ Ḥabashī al-Shamīrī: “Kuwait before Oil; the golf was an aim for Christianity,” *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, June 27, 1997, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1997/week-26/1-kuwait-oil-gulf-was-aim-christianity>.

³⁵ ‘Isam Ahmad Mudir: “A brochure urges Christians to convert Muslims,” *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, August 22, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-34/7-brochure-urges-christians-convert-muslims>.

³⁶ Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Salām: “In Kazakhstan the Mufti confesses ‘There are some Muslims who have converted’,” *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, September 12, 1997, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1997/week-37/1-kazakhstan-mufti-confesses-there-are-some-muslims-who-have-converted>.

³⁷ Ḥabashī al-Shamīrī: “Kuwait before Oil; the golf was an aim for Christianity,” *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, June 27, 1997, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1997/week-26/1-kuwait-oil-gulf-was-aim-christianity>.

huge and expensive it is and generally speaking, mentions the influence and spread of Saudi-Arabian institutions all over the world.³⁸

There are few articles reporting on interreligious dialogue and even less promoting it. Positive reporting is however detectable in the articles that stress Muslim influence in a Muslim-Christian or Western-Arab context, for instance when the US-Navy added the crescent in its logo.³⁹

Based on the collection of these articles, one can slightly assume that the newspaper's intention was to spread the message of Islam and to create a positive image of it, which is missionary practice. There are political consequences linked hereto, since the applied type of reporting on Saudi Arabia clearly sought to strengthen the country's role and status especially for Muslims, but also in general.

The fact that the newspaper was published in English (it is unclear whether or not there was also an Arabic version, but anything else would not make sense), leads to a worldwide and thus broader audience, which could more people think of or actually converting to Islam.

After all, media in any way, whether broadcasting or publishing, has always been used to not only inform, but to influence and to leave a certain mark or impression. It is about convincing, either in an obvious or subtle way. *Al-Muslimoon* states an example for the obvious, yet unnamed, path and did not aim to reporting in a neutral way or hide their intentions. In the end, it breaks down to the question what their aim is. Convincing people of a certain way of life entails emotion and belief, which, in my opinion, is clearly distinguishable in *al-Muslimoon*.

³⁸ 'Abd al-Wahhab Bashir: "On behalf of the custodian of the two Holy Mosques; Abdul Aziz to open King Fahd Mosque," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, July 18, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-29/1-behalf-custodian-two-holy-mosques-abdul-aziz-open-king-fahd-mosque>.

³⁹ 'Ammar Bakr: "The US Navy adds the crescent to its logo, taking into consideration its Muslim troops," *al-Muslimoon* in *Arab-West-Report*, October 10, 1998, <https://www.arabwestreport.info/en/year-1998/week-41/3-us-navy-adds-crescent-its-logo-taking-consideration-its-muslim-troops>.