

Selective Appeal to the Negus Narratives: A Case Study in Interreligious Relations

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The Negus narratives recount the interactions between the nascent Muslim community and the Christian king (Negus) of Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia). As one scholar observes, “Far from being a historical figure, the Negus began as a semi-legendary king and gradually turned out to be employable for a variety of religious and political purposes.” This article uses the pliability of the Negus narratives as a case study of how historical and literary narratives have been and should be invoked in interreligious relations. Following a summary of key elements of the Negus narratives, the article offers examples of how Muslims and Christians selectively appeal to aspects of the narratives to suit their political and religious purposes. The article then advocates a balanced selectivity that includes serious consideration of narrative applications contrary to one’s purpose, an approach more conducive to fostering deep understanding between Muslims and Christians as well as between adherents of different religions generally.

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The first Muslim *hijra* (migration) occurred several years before the better known *hijra* to Yathrib/Medina that initiated the Muslim calendar in 1 A.H. (*Anno Hegirae*) or 622 C.E.¹ Facing persecution in Mecca in 615 C.E., Muhammad advised his supporters, “If you were to go to Abyssinia (it would be better for you), for the king will not tolerate injustice and it is a friendly country, until such time as Allah shall relieve you from your distress.”² Abyssinia, modern-day Ethiopia, was a Christian country. Its king is known in Arabic sources as al-Nadjāshī, al-Najāshī, or an-Najāshī, in western European languages as the Negus, which simply means “the king.”³ According to Islamic sources, the Negus at this time was al-Aṣḥam b. Abjar or Aṣḥama b. Abjar (d. 9/630).⁴

All historical Islamic sources agree that the Muslim refugees, sometimes referred to as *sahāba* (supporters, followers, companions of Muhammad), found protection under the Negus,⁵ who dismissed a Meccan delegation’s attempts, first to extradite the Muslims, then to discredit them. This portion of the larger Negus narratives has been invoked as a positive model of

¹ For Arabic transliterations and premodern dates (A.H./C.E.), I follow “Instructions for Authors: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*” (Brill), except when rendering direct quotes from sources.

² A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1967), 146. The Abyssinian *hijra* probably comprised more than one wave around 615; see Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1994), 6–7; Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 42; William Muir, *The Life of Mohammad from Original Sources*, rev. ed. by T. H. Weir (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1923), 69, 86.

³ See E. van Donzel, “al-Nadjāshī,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs (online version, 2012, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_5718).

⁴ See Haggai Erlich, *The Cross and the River: Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Nile* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 24; Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, 7; Stuart Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 220 (online version, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.livingston.org/cms/lib4/NJ01000562/Centricity/Domain/602/aksum.pdf>).

⁵ van Donzel, “al-Nadjāshī.”

Muslim-Christian relations on both sides of the relationship. For instance, Muslim author and filmmaker Kamran Parsha writes, “this story of how Christians and Muslims could get past theology and see the truth in each other’s hearts is one of the most beautiful tales to unite our communities as we struggle to define faith in the 21st century. . . . It is, I hope, a vision of a world still to come. A world that will be built by sincere people of faith, who care more about love for humanity than about the triumph of their own tribe or theology.”⁶ On the Christian side, ordained minister R. Marston Speight frames *God Is One: The Way of Islam* around the encounter between the Negus and the Muslim refugees, which he describes as a “simple, though incomplete, discovery of what Christians had in common with the followers of Muhammad.” Speight continues: “As spiritual descendants of the Najashi, we Christians are taking part today in an unprecedented encounter with spiritual descendants of that little band of Arabian refugees. In this study we will be examining some of the terms and conditions of this meeting.”⁷

But the Negus narratives have also been invoked in antagonistic and triumphalist ways on both sides of the Muslim-Christian relationship. For instance, Christian blogger Sam Shamoun characterizes the Muslim refugees as disingenuous and manipulative in seeking asylum in the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia: “By failing to tell the Negus and his bishops all of Muhammad’s teachings on Jesus such as the explicit denials of Christ’s deity and crucifixion exposes their deliberate use of deception to win over the Christians.”⁸ On the Muslim side, blogger Reem Shraiky claims that the Negus converted to Islam: “Did you know that Islam spread in Abyssinia (modern day Ethiopia) in Africa seven years before it spread in Medina? And did you know that the Christian King of Abyssinia, Negus, whose land the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, advised his companions to seek refuge in, embraced Islam and became a loyal follower of the Holy Prophet^{sa?}”⁹

As Arabic and Islamic literature scholar Wim Raven summarizes, “Far from being a historical figure, the Negus began as a semi-legendary king and gradually turned out to be employable for a variety of religious and political purposes.”¹⁰ Philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s notion of “narrative identity” helps us to understand the pliability of the Negus narratives for Muslims and Christians over the centuries: “Individual and community are constituted in their identity by taking up narratives that become for them their actual history. . . . [N]arrative identity is not a stable and seamless identity. Just as it is possible to compose several plots on the subject of the same incidents (which, thus, should not really be called the same events), so it is always possible to weave different, even opposed, plots about our lives.” Thus, narrative identity is constructed through “the interplay of history and narrative,” “the exchange of roles between history and fiction.”¹¹ Whatever the historicity of particular elements of the Negus narratives, Muslims and

⁶ Kamran Parsha, “How the Story of Christmas Saved Islam,” *HuffPost*, updated May 25, 2011, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-the-story-of-christmas_b_403664?view=print.

⁷ R. Marston Speight, *God Is One: The Way of Islam*, 2nd ed. (New York: Friendship Press, Inc., 2001), 1.

⁸ Sam Shamoun, “The Quranic View of Christians—Fellow Believers or Unbelieving Polytheists?” <https://answeringislam.org/Shamoun/christians.htm>, accessed December 6, 2020.

⁹ Reem Shraiky, “King Negus: The Holy Prophet’s Representative and True Follower,” *Al Hakam: The Weekly*, December 4, 2020, <https://www.alhakam.org/king-negus-the-holy-prophets-representative-and-true-follower/>. The honorific superscript here, “sa,” is used for prophets, short for the Arabic phrase, “Peace be upon him.”

¹⁰ Wim Raven, “Some Early Islamic Texts on the Negus of Abyssinia,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 33, no. 2 (Autumn 1988): 209.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 247, 248. Ricoeur reflects further on the notion of narrative identity in an essay published

Christians have found these narratives advantageous both in constructing their respective identities and in brokering their relations with each other, whether amicably or contentiously. As interreligious studies scholar Paul Hedges explains in a global study of antisemitism and Islamophobia, religious groups can employ narratives to foster prejudices and violence on the one hand, or “dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation” on the other.¹² Hindu nationalists, to cite an example, tell one narrative about Muslims, “but other stories can also be told.”¹³

The present article explores the pliability of the Negus narratives in Muslim-Christian relations. After summarizing key elements of the narratives, I will give further examples of how Muslims and Christians selectively appeal to aspects of these narratives to suit their purposes. I will conclude by advocating a balanced selectivity that can foster deep understanding between Muslims and Christians as well as between adherents of different religions generally.

The Negus Narratives

Narratives about the Abyssinian Negus appear in several early Islamic sources.¹⁴ The following summary draws primarily upon Guillaume’s translation of Ibn Ishāq’s biography of Muhammad, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, which today survives in the recensions of Ibn Hishām and al-Tabarī.¹⁵ Other Islamic sources are cited as needed.

One of the Muslim refugees reported, “When we reached Abyssinia the Negus gave us a kind reception. We safely practised our religion, and we worshipped God, and suffered no wrong in word or deed.”¹⁶ Becoming aware of this, Muhammad’s enemies in Mecca sent two representatives seeking extradition of the Muslim refugees. The two approached the king’s generals with the following accusation: “Some foolish fellows from our people have taken refuge in the king’s country. They have forsaken our religion and not accepted yours, but have brought in an invented religion which neither we nor you know anything about.”¹⁷ When the generals recommended to the Negus that he turn the refugees over to the Meccans, he became “enraged,” saying, “No, by God, I will not surrender them. No people who have sought my protection, settled in my country, and chosen me rather than others shall be betrayed, until I summon them and ask them about what these two men allege. If they are as they say, I will give them up to them and send them back to their own people; but if what they say is false, I will protect them and see that they receive proper hospitality while under my protection.”¹⁸

Summoning two representatives of the Muslim refugees, the Negus asked them to describe “the religion for which they had forsaken their people, without entering into his religion

after *Time and Narrative*; see “Narrative Identity,” translated by David Wood, in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, edited by David Wood, 188–99 (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1992).

¹² Paul Hedges, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 204.

¹³ Ibid., 184.

¹⁴ See Raven, “Some Early Islamic Texts”; Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, 6.

¹⁵ Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, provides page references to the Arabic text in Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, *Das Leben Muhammed’s nach Muhammed Ibn Ishāk* (Göttingen: Dieterichsche Universitäts-Buchhandlung, 1859), noting where al-Tabarī’s recension differs.

¹⁶ Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 150.

¹⁷ Ibid., 151.

¹⁸ Ibid.

or any other.” One of the Muslims, Ja’far b. Abu Talib, explained how God had sent them an “apostle” (Muhammad) to change their “uncivilized” ways and bring them the true religion, which included worshiping the one God and associating nothing else with God. “The Negus asked if they had with them anything which had come from God,” and Ja’far read a passage from Sura (chapter) 19 of the Qur’ān.¹⁹ Upon hearing the passage, the Negus declared, “Of a truth, this and what Jesus brought have come from the same niche. You two may go, for by God, I will never give them up to them and they shall not be betrayed.”²⁰ The Arabic term translated as “niche” by Guillaume, *mishkāt*, is often translated as “source.” The word suggests a source of light, perhaps a window or a lamp; thus, the Negus is saying that the messages of both Muhammad and Jesus come from the same source of light.²¹

The next day, one of the Meccans sought to turn the Negus against the Muslim refugees by charging them with a blasphemous belief about Jesus, namely, that he was merely “a creature” and thus not the Son of God. When asked to respond to this charge, Ja’far alluded to language from Qur’ān 4:171: “We say about him [Jesus] that which our prophet [Muhammad] brought, saying, he [Jesus] is the slave of God, and his apostle, and his spirit, and his word, which he cast into Mary the blessed virgin.” In response, the Negus “took a stick from the ground and said, ‘By God, Jesus, son of Mary, does not exceed what you [Muslims] have said by the length of this stick. . . . Go, for you are safe in my country.’”²² The English word “length” is not specified in the text but is elliptically implied as something like “extent of” or “amount of.” The Arabic word translated as “stick” by Guillaume, *ūd*, is meant to convey a short piece and can be translated as “twig.”²³

As intimated earlier, the Negus narratives include references to the Christian king’s alleged conversion to Islam. One thread revolves around Muhammad’s marriage to a widow among the Muslim refugees. Ibn Ishāq reports that when her husband “got to Abyssinia he turned Christian and died there as such having abandoned Islām. The apostle afterwards married his wife.”²⁴ Other sources elaborate the circumstances, including the role played by the Negus in arranging the marriage. In one version of the story found in several sources, the Negus makes a declaration that echoes the *shahāda* or profession of faith, the first pillar of Islam: “I testify that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His servant and His apostle, and that he is the one announced by Jesus, son of Mary.”²⁵ A similar profession of faith appears in an episode when some Abyssinians revolted against the Negus, accusing him, “You have left our religion [Christianity].” Ibn Ishāq’s report suggests that Muhammad approved of how the Negus handled this situation: “News of this reached the prophet, and when the Negus died he prayed

¹⁹ Ibn Ishāq does not specify the passage. J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 45 specifies 19:16–34; Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (New York: Inner Traditions International, Ltd., 1983), 83 specifies 19:16–21.

²⁰ Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 151–52.

²¹ Atef Said, University of Illinois at Chicago, email to author, September 9, 2015.

²² Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 152.

²³ Marcia Hermansen, Loyola University Chicago, email to author, September 9, 2015. Atef Said also helped to explain the meaning of the Arabic here (email to author, September 9, 2015). Jane Dammen McAuliffe uses the word “twig” in citing al-Tabārī’s reference to this episode in a *tafsīr* (exegesis) on the Qur’ān; see “Christians in the Qur’ān and Tafsīr,” in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, edited by Jacques Waardenburg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 119.

²⁴ Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 527.

²⁵ Raven, “Some Early Islamic Texts,” 206.

over him and begged that his sins might be forgiven.”²⁶ Several *hadīth* mention Muhammad’s in-absentia funeral prayer for the Negus,²⁷ though the texts are ambiguous about whether or not the ritual was intended to indicate that the Negus was a Muslim.²⁸

Al-Ṭabarī reports that Muhammad “sent out some of his companions in different directions to the kings of the Arabs and the non-Arabs inviting them to [convert to] Islam in the period between [the treaty of] al-Ḥudaybiya [6/628] and his death [11/632].”²⁹ According to al-Ṭabarī, the Negus replied, “I testify that you are God’s apostle, true and confirming (those before you). I have given my fealty to you and to your nephew and I have surrendered myself through him to the Lord of the worlds.”³⁰ However, another tradition reports that the Negus tore up the invitation, about which Muhammad says, “May God tear his kingdom as he tore this letter!”³¹

This striking discrepancy in the early Islamic sources points up ambiguity within the Negus narratives. (There are no contemporary Christian Ethiopian sources on the Negus narratives.)³² Raven cites contradictory sources within a single Islamic tradition (Basran) regarding whether it was the same Negus to whom Muhammad sent the letter and for whom Muhammad performed the funeral prayer. Raven explains the reasoning behind one of these sources: “The idea is that the Negus for whom the Prophet had performed the *salāt* [funeral prayer], i.e. the Negus who had granted asylum to the Muslim emigrants, did not need a summons [to convert to Islam], since he had already become a Muslim.”³³ Sheikh Ahmad Mahmoud draws upon multiple early Islamic sources to argue that the Negus who converted was neither the Negus who sheltered the Muslim refugees nor the Negus to whom Muhammad sent the letter. Rather, it was a later Negus who ruled only briefly and had secretly converted, about which Muhammad learned only via divine revelation after the king’s death. Mahmoud’s intention is to discredit those Muslims who justify living under non-Islamic rule today by arguing that the earlier Negus/es did not institute Islamic rule after converting.³⁴

Here we see the pliability of the Negus narratives in high relief. Regarding the question of whether any Negus converted to Islam, one can appeal to the narratives either way depending on one’s purpose. Whitney Bodman notes how unusual this is in the Islamic tradition: “The divergence of opinion on the matter is significant. In most of the Qur’ānic encounters with unbelievers, those who hear the testimony of Islam either convert or resist in indignant ways and thus are condemned. The Negus account falls into a different category. It is to be expected that some renderings of the story would present him as converting. This is the narrative norm. It is altogether surprising that others would tell the story of a warm and lasting relationship between a Christian ruler and Muhammad and his community that does not involve conversion.”³⁵

²⁶ Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 154–55.

²⁷ For example, Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 63, Hadīth 102–106, accessible at <https://sunnah.com/bukhari>.

²⁸ See Raven, “Some Early Islamic Texts,” 209–14.

²⁹ Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 652–53.

³⁰ Ibid., 657–58.

³¹ Raven, “Some Early Islamic Texts,” 207.

³² Hussein Ahmed, “The Historiography of Islam in Ethiopia,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 1 (January 1992): 22.

³³ Raven, “Some Early Islamic Texts,” 206n24.

³⁴ Ahmad Mahmoud, *The Da’wah to Islam* (www.khilafah.com, 1995), chap. 17.

³⁵ Whitney Bodman, “Reading the Qur’ān as a Resident Alien, *The Muslim World* 99, no. 4 (October 2009): 694–95.

One can also appeal to scholarly opinion either way, with Muslim scholars tending to accept the conversion, non-Muslim scholars not.³⁶ For instance, the British scholar J. Spencer Trimingham called the conversion a Muslim “fiction.”³⁷ Muslims who hold to the historicity of the conversion would likely dismiss Trimingham out-of-hand, noting his missionary connections.³⁸

Finally, two *hadīth* in the Sunan Abu-Dawud collection have Muhammad saying, “Leave [or let] the Abyssinians alone as long as they leave [or let] you alone.”³⁹ These *hadīth* are generally understood as reflecting Muhammad’s lasting appreciation for the protection afforded the Muslim refugees by the Negus.⁴⁰ Again, some non-Muslim scholars question the authenticity of these and other *hadīth* about the Abyssinians. Erlich, for instance, wonders whether the “leave the Abyssinians alone” tradition was fabricated to justify Islam’s later inability to control Abyssinia or simple disinterest in that country.⁴¹ In Trimingham’s judgment, “The accounts which give the Prophet’s references to the Abyssinians are not very trustworthy, but they do show that he held them in considerable affection.”⁴² Of course, for Muslims, more weight would be given the authenticity of the *hadīth*⁴³ and their own purposes in appealing to them.

Selective Appeal to the Negus Narratives in Muslim-Christian Relations

The Negus narratives are invoked in Muslim-Christian relations in two key contexts, political and religious, to use Wim Raven’s terminology noted earlier. In both contexts, selective appeal to elements of the narratives serves the purposes of the respective parties. The following discussion is illustrative rather than comprehensive given space limitations. I draw from scholars, theologians, interfaith participants, and bloggers without privileging any of them. Selective appeal to the Negus narratives can be found anywhere, both historically and in today’s information age.

³⁶ See Ahmed, “The Historiography of Islam in Ethiopia,” 22. Erlich claims that virtually all Western and Ethiopian historians reject the notion (*Ethiopia and the Middle East*, 9, 193n25).

³⁷ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 46n4.

³⁸ For instance, Trimingham headed the Church Missionary Society’s efforts in Sudan in the 1940s (see Janice Boddy, “Veiled Missionaries and Embattled Christians in Colonial Sudan,” in *Transnational Transcendence: Essays on Religion and Globalization*, edited by Thomas J. Csordas [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009], 97. Trimingham also filed reports on Islam in Africa at the request of missionary organizations; see *Islam in West Africa* (London: Wyman & Sons, Ltd., 1953) and *Islam in East Africa* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1962).

³⁹ Book 39, Hadīth 12 and 19, accessible at <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/39>.

⁴⁰ For example, Mustafa Kabha and Haggai Erlich, “Al-Ahbash and Wahhabiyya: Interpretations of Islam,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 4 (November 2006): 520; Erlich, *The Cross and the River*, 24–25. Hadīth 19 includes the enigmatic addition, “for it is only the Abyssinian with short legs who will seek to take out the treasure of the Ka’bah,” which has not deterred these and other interpreters from connecting this *hadīth* to the Negus narratives.

⁴¹ *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, 11.

⁴² Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 46.

⁴³ Both versions of the “leave the Abyssinians alone” *hadīth* are rated “good,” the middle category between “sound” and “weak”; see the rating at <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/39>.

Political Applications of the Negus Narratives

Haggai Erlich has extensively examined the pliability of the Negus narratives in Ethiopian history.⁴⁴ Erlich explains that the episode of the Negus protecting the Muslim refugees during the first *hijra* “left a legacy of two contradictory messages for future generations of Muslims.” On one side (the more dominant application according to Erlich), “it guided Muslims to be tolerant of the existence of [Christian] Ethiopia”; on the other side, some Muslims have interpreted the episode “to mean that [Christian] Ethiopia was illegitimate in the eyes of Islam.”⁴⁵

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for instance, the Ottomans established a presence in Ethiopia but never controlled the entire country, remaining largely content to “leave the Abyssinians alone” for strategic reasons.⁴⁶ The Yemenis adopted a different attitude. When the Ethiopian Emperor Fasiladas (r. 1632–1667) sought an alliance with the Yemenis after the latter had ousted the Ottomans, the Yemeni Imams expected the Ethiopians to convert to Islam. Imam al-Mutawwakil ‘Ala-Allah invoked the Negus narratives in his letter to Fasiladas by reminding the emperor that since Muhammad had called the Abyssinian king to accept Islam, “it is our duty to call you to that which called our forefather, and it is your duty to agree to that which [was] agreed [to by] your forefather, if God permits.”⁴⁷

More than two centuries later, the conflict between the Islamic Mahdists of the Sudan and Ethiopia under Emperor Yohannes IV (r. 1872–1889) included an appeal to the Negus narratives. In his 1885 letter to Yohannes, the Mahdi noted the Abyssinian king’s example of both befriending the Muslim refugees and heeding Muhammad’s call to Islam. “And I pray to the Lord,” wrote the Mahdi, “. . . that He will make you a successor to your predecessor by following me, and that He will lead you out of the darkness of the infidels to the light of the true belief.”⁴⁸ Whereas the Mahdi’s letter was “far from overtly hostile,” to cite Erlich’s assessment, Yohannes’s reply was “highly provocative” and included his own call for the Mahdi to convert to Christianity. Only after the conflict dragged on for three more years did Yohannes become more conciliatory toward the Mahdists.⁴⁹

During the Italian-Ethiopian conflict in the mid-1930s, four books published in Cairo employed the Negus narratives in drawing opposite portraits of Ethiopia for their Egyptian and larger audiences. One of the two “pro-Ethiopians” books,⁵⁰ by the Egyptian “Easternist” Muhammad Lutfi Jum’ā, devotes its opening chapter to positive interaction between Christian Abyssinia and the early Muslim community, emphasizing the king’s protection of the Muslim refugees and his “beautiful special relations” with Muhammad. Jum’ā makes no mention of the

⁴⁴ Haggai Erlich, *The Cross and the River; Ethiopia and the Middle East; Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa: Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2010). Also see David Chrisna, “*Kebra Nagast* and *Al-Najāshī*: The Meaning and Use of Collective Memory in Christian-Muslim Political Discourse in Ethiopia,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 33 (August 2021): 5–23, which builds on Erlich’s work.

⁴⁵ Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 14–16, 37–38.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 39; brackets in the original.

⁴⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁰ Erlich’s designation; *ibid.*, 101.

king converting to Islam.⁵¹ The author of the other “pro-Ethiopians” book, the “liberal Egyptian nationalist” ‘Abdallah al-Husayn, cites the *hadīth* about leaving the Abyssinians alone, commenting, “And because of this order none of the rulers of Islam ever even contemplated occupying Ethiopia or exerting his influence over it.”⁵² The other two books adopt a generally negative view of Ethiopia. Lebanese Christian author Bulus Mas’ad criticizes the treatment of Muslims by later Ethiopian Christian kings, though Mas’ad looks favorably on the Negus in this regard, ignoring the purported conversion to Islam.⁵³ Yusuf Ahmad, an “Islamicist militant” whose book “would later be transmitted to the radical Muslims of today,”⁵⁴ focuses on Christian Ethiopia’s maltreatment of Muslims throughout history. Erlich summarizes the book’s single theme as “Ethiopia’s savage ingratitude to its Muslims.”⁵⁵ Even during the reign of the Negus who protected the Muslim refugees, Ahmad contends, the Ethiopian Christians persecuted the Muslims. “If it had not been for the *najashi*,” who had converted to Islam, “they all would have to become Christians, die, or be returned to Mecca so that Quraysh [the Meccan enemies] could do with them as they pleased.”⁵⁶

The first *hijra* is variously invoked regarding the legitimacy of Muslim settlement in non-Islamic countries. Analogies have “served both jurists and theologians who offered broad legitimizations and those who introduced narrower legitimizations or even banned migration altogether, demonstrating that it is the interpreter, rather than the interpreted, that determines the topical implications of canonical myths contextualized.”⁵⁷ Sheikh Ahmad Mahmoud’s argument about the illegitimacy of such Muslim settlement was noted earlier. ISIS and other Islamist groups have cited both the first *hijra* and the later Medinan *hijra* “to justify their calls for Muslims all over the world to emigrate to their controlled territories to join ranks and fight alongside them or to become a member of their community.”⁵⁸ Erlich notes recent “radical Islamic” applications in which the import of the Negus narratives “lies not in Ethiopia saving the *sahāba* but in the conversion of the *najashi* to Islam.” Thus, “the very existence of a Christian Ethiopia is an offense against the legacy of the Prophet.”⁵⁹

The Negus narratives continue to inform contemporary Muslim-Christian relations within Ethiopia and in the Ethiopian diaspora. As anthropologist John Christopher Dulin observes, the two groups “live in different historical imaginaries. In other words, Muslims and Christians often have different understandings of key events in Ethiopian history, and/or they

⁵¹ Ibid., 103. On 102, Erlich implies that Jum'a was a secularist, which appears to be what Erlich means when he calls Jum'a an “Easternist” in “Identity and Church: Ethiopian-Egyptian Dialogue, 1924–59,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 1 (February 2000), 32.

⁵² Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, 102. Erlich calls al-Husayn a “liberal Egyptian nationalist” on 101.

⁵³ Ibid., 107.

⁵⁴ Erlich uses the phrase “Islamicist militant” in “Identity and Church,” 29. The other quote here is from Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, 109.

⁵⁵ *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, 106.

⁵⁶ Quoted in ibid., 105.

⁵⁷ Uriya Shavit, “Europe, the New Abyssinia: On the Role of the First *Hijra* in the *Fiqh al-Aqalliyāt al-Muslimā* Discourse,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 29, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 374.

⁵⁸ Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah Bin Sudiman, “Countering ISIS Call for *Hijra* (Emigration): A Review through the Lens of *Maqāsid Ash-Shari‘ah*,” *Journal for Deradicalization* 12 (Fall 2017): 61.

⁵⁹ Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, 17, 18.

imbue the same events with different values.”⁶⁰ Dulin reports that Muslims in one part of Ethiopia “often use the narrative of al-Najashi’s conversion to legitimate their claim that Ethiopia belongs to Muslims just as much as it belongs to Christians,” whereas “Christians do not accept that al-Najashi converted to Islam. Instead they claim the king had simply showed the Muslim refugees hospitality.”⁶¹ In the Ethiopian Muslim diaspora, a “discursive practice—deconstructing the official Ethiopian history in order to make national reconstruction on an inclusive basis attainable—is focused on the Najashi narrative,”⁶² including the Najashi’s conversion to Islam, as part of an effort to ensure Muslims’ political rights in Ethiopia.⁶³ For its part, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church “fiercely contests the Muslims’ claim” about the Najashi’s conversion and asserts Ethiopia’s Christian identity as “chosen nation.”⁶⁴

Beyond the Ethiopian context, some Muslims see in the Negus narratives a way forward for peaceful coexistence with other religious groups. For instance, South African Muslim scholar Farid Esack writes of the “Abyssinian paradigm,” namely, “coexistence and cultural tolerance,” which he claims has been gaining increasing acceptance in mainstream Islam since 9/11. The Muslim refugees lived in Abyssinia “peacefully for many years,” says Esack, “and some of them did not return, even after Muslims were in power in Mecca. They did not make any attempts to turn Abyssinia into an Islamic state.”⁶⁵ A similar perspective comes from Shaikh Nimir al-Darwish of the Islamic Movement, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood located in the State of Israel. Al-Darwish is willing to live peaceably as a minority group, “If the Israeli government would render justice to Muslims the way the *najashi* and Christian Ethiopia did with the *sahāba*.”⁶⁶

Religious Applications of the Negus Narratives

Once again, this discussion is necessarily illustrative rather than comprehensive, offering examples of selective appeal to elements of the Negus narratives to serve the religious purposes of the respective parties.

Muslims and Christians alike have lauded the Negus narratives for providing a constructive model of interfaith engagement. In an article that appeared under the category “Dialogue” in *The Fountain Magazine* and in an online collection of *khutbas* (sermons), Ismail Acar includes the first *hijra* in a list of interactions between Muhammad and Christians, from which Acar draws this conclusion: “Understanding each other well, respecting others, and accepting others as they are would be a great step toward solving the global problems of the different religious communities.” Acar describes the Abyssinian king’s response to Ja’far b. Abu Talib’s explanation of Islamic beliefs about Jesus as follows: “When the King Negus heard this testimony, he picked up a twig from the ground and said, ‘I swear, the difference between what

⁶⁰ John Christopher Dulin, “Intelligible Tolerance, Ambiguous Tensions, Antagonistic Revelations: Patterns of Muslim-Christian Coexistence in Orthodox Christian Majority Ethiopia” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2016), 47.

⁶¹ Ibid., 48.

⁶² Dereje Feyissa, “The Transnational Politics of the Ethiopian Muslim Diaspora,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 11 (November 2012): 1904.

⁶³ Ibid., 1905.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Quoted in “Is the Face of Islam Changing? An Interview with Farid Esack,” *U.S. Catholic*, September 7, 2011, <https://uscatholic.org/articles/201109/is-the-face-of-islam-changing-an-interview-with-farid-esack/>.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, 16.

we believe about Jesus, the Son of Mary, and what you have said is not greater than the width of this twig.”⁶⁷ Acar purports to be quoting R. Marston Speight, the Christian author cited at the beginning of this article, though Acar uses the word “twig” whereas Speight uses “stick.”⁶⁸ As we have seen, the Arabic supports either translation with the clear intention that it was short. However, both Acar and Speight measure the difference between Islamic and Christian beliefs about Jesus by the width but rather the length of the stick/twig, obviously employing the metaphor to minimize the religious differences as much as possible.

A similar religious minimization is offered by Robert Todd Wise, an ordained Christian minister who teaches at the University of Balamand, Lebanon. Wise, who calls the encounter between the Negus and the Muslim refugees “the first interfaith dialogue between Christianity and Islam,” relates the king’s use of the stick in this way: “After drawing a simple line in the sand with a stick, Najashi proclaimed the ‘difference between the message of Mohammed and Christianity is the difference between this thin line.’” Wise elaborates: “Fearing God, Najashi drew a slight boundary, a line in the sand, to mark the differences between his Christian faith and Islam. No one can really say how Najashi would explain his line in the sand, but we can be sure it was not meant to be much. Such a line can be blurred or easily stepped over—or its trace deepened when needed.” Wise also claims that the Negus “felt no compulsion to leave his Christian faith. It seems that Najashi and his theologians believed both faith expressions stemmed from the same God.”⁶⁹

Daaiyah M. Taha, an ex-Catholic now a Muslim, also says that the Negus “took his staff, drew a line in the sand, and said, ‘The difference between us and you is this’—this thin line in the sand.” This leads Taha to “appeal to the Christian community to take the same posture as that negus . . . we have so much more in common than we have differences. If we could take the time with each other to dialog, I think we’d see that....”⁷⁰

Scott C. Alexander, Professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago (and a Catholic), recognizes that “the history of Christian-Muslim relations, from its very beginnings until today, has simultaneously unfolded and continues to unfold along both of these major story lines—confrontation and conflict as well as dialogue and cooperation—sometimes running parallel and often intersecting.” For Alexander, the Negus narratives exemplify only the positive story line. He prefaces his discussion of the Negus by saying, “From the Muslim perspective, the story of Christian-Muslim dialogue and cooperation stretches all the way back to the life of the Prophet Muhammad himself,” then describes the response of the Negus to Ja’far b. Abu Talib’s recitation from the Qur’ān in this

⁶⁷ Acar’s article appears under the title “Interactions between Prophet Muhammad and Christians” in *The Fountain* 50 (April-June 2005), listed at <https://fountainmagazine.com/dialogue>. It is titled “Prophet Muhammad (sws) and the Christians of His Time” at <https://khutbahbank.org.uk/v2/2011/06/30/prophet-muhammad-sws-and-christians-of-his-time/>, posted June 30, 2011.

⁶⁸ Speight, *God Is One*, 1.

⁶⁹ Robert Todd Wise, “Merely a Line in the Sand: A Model for Christian-Muslim Dialogue,” *Reformed Journal*, March 1, 2014, <https://reformedjournal.com/merely-a-line-in-the-sand-a-model-for-christian-muslim-dialogue/>.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Margaret O. Thomas, “No More than a Line in the Sand: An Interview with Daaiyah M. Taha,” *Church & Society Magazine* (January/February 1994): 39.

way: “Upon hearing this, al-Najashi became convinced of a sublime spiritual kinship between Muslims and Christians and refused to hand the Muslims over to their would-be persecutors.”⁷¹

Contrast these religious applications of the Negus narratives to that of a Muslim blogger named Haji Zainol Abideen (the title “Haji” indicates that a person has taken the Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the Five Pillars of Islam). Abideen opens a post on the Negus in celebratory fashion, calling him “the Good Christian King of Ethiopia . . . [who] helped the early Muslims, refugees who fled from Makkah [Mecca] to escape the persecution of the Qureishi [Meccan] Arabs!” Abideen mentions the exchange between the Negus and Ja’far, reporting the king’s response to Ja’far’s recitation from the Qur’ān simply as, “an-Najashi wept and exclaimed: ‘By Allah this is the truth!’” Abideen says nothing about the Negus using a stick to indicate the difference between Christian and Islamic beliefs about Jesus. Instead, Abideen focuses on the king’s acceptance of Muhammad’s call to convert to Islam, leading to this call that ends the blog post: “To Good Christians of the world, take the example of the Negus of Ethiopia and return to the fold of Allah, God Almighty and be as Jesus Christ @ Eesa Al Masih Alaihi Salam, a mighty and noble Messenger of Allah, nothing more, nothing less. May Almighty Allah open up your hearts to Al-Islam, your birthright to Allah’s Peace and Salvation, Ameen.”⁷²

On the Christian side, some see Ja’far’s response to the religious inquiries of the Negus as disingenuous and manipulative, echoing Christian blogger Sam Shamoun cited earlier.⁷³ “Islamic scholars identify a multitude of forms that Jihad can take,” claims the Jesus-is-Lord.com Website, one of which is the “Jihad of Deception.” Referencing the discussion with the Negus, “The Muslims selectively recited those passages of the Quran that agree with the Bible such as the virgin birth and miracles of Jesus and His ascension to Heaven and ultimate return. They remained silent on the unbridgeable differences (such as the denial of the Trinity and the atonement) between the Quran and the Bible. As a result the Christian Abyssinians protected the Muslims from the Meccans.”⁷⁴

Nada Unus sees the selectivity of the Muslims, not as deliberate deception, but rather as an attempt “to highlight their commonalities with the Christians when appealing to the Negus,”⁷⁵ an example of “intercivilizational dialogue [which] calls on participants to highlight their common goals and interests.”⁷⁶ Alluding to the stick metaphor, Unus says the Negus “realized that the Muslims and his people differed in only minute ways and became convinced that they worshipped the same God that the Christians did.”⁷⁷

⁷¹ Scott C. Alexander, “We Go Way Back,” *U.S. Catholic*, June 24, 2008, <https://uscatholic.org/articles/200806/we-go-way-back/>.

⁷² “The Story of An Najashi, the Good Christian King of Ethiopia,” Mahaguru58 blog, December 24, 2006, <https://www.mahaguru58.com/2006/12/24/story-of-najashi-good-christian-king-of/>.

⁷³ Shamoun pursues this line of argument also in “Is Muhammad a Prophet?” <https://www.answers-islam.org/authors/shamoun/rebuttals/abualrub/jafar1.html>, accessed April 7, 2022.

⁷⁴ “What Is Islam? What Do Muslims Believe?” <http://www.jesus-is-lord.com/islam.htm>, accessed December 6, 2020. It should be noted that Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, 8 seems to imply that Ja’far tried to deceive the king “[b]y making Islam appear to be a form of Christianity.”

⁷⁵ Nada Unus, “Intercivilizational Dialogue in the Qur’ān and Sunnah: Examining the Potential for Muslim Participation,” *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 13.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 13. An Internet search leads me to believe that Unus is a Muslim.

Evangelical Christian scholar Timothy C. Tennent places the degree of difference between the Islamic and Christian views of Jesus on a continuum between the Negus and Catholic theologian Hans Küng.⁷⁸ Tennent cites a Muslim translation of the stick metaphor that has the Negus saying, “As God is my witness, the difference between your position and ours is not as wide as this line.” At the other end of the continuum, Tennent cites Küng’s view that the differences are so great as to constitute a “dead end” on the road of dialogue.⁷⁹ Tennent thinks both extremes “need considerable qualification.” His own assessment: “although the number of differences between Christianity and Islam may not seem *wider* than the line drawn by King Negus, the theological significance stemming from those few issues is *deeper* than the Red Sea that separated Arabia from Abyssinia.”⁸⁰

Balanced Selectivity in Interreligious Relations

The foregoing survey illustrates a common approach in Muslim-Christian relations as well as interreligious relations generally, namely, selective appeal to aspects of historical and literary narratives to suit one’s purpose. Of course, any appeal to a large body of narratives must necessarily be selective. What I advocate is a balanced selectivity that includes serious consideration of narrative applications contrary to one’s purpose, an approach more conducive to fostering deep understanding between adherents of different religions.

The examples of political applications of the Negus narratives are sobering and raise doubts as to whether certain protagonists can ever reach a resolution of their differences. The insights of mediation expert Lawrence Susskind offer some hope here. Susskind distinguishes values- and identity-based disputes from interest-based disputes in which compromises can be reached. Resolving conflicts over deeply held values and identities is unlikely, but the disputing parties can gain a measure of mutual understanding and perhaps even reconciliation by squarely facing their differences.⁸¹

Religious organizations on the international level have been involved in such efforts.⁸² One of these, the Quaker United Nations Office, has a relatively good track record, especially through its “long tradition of facilitating face-to-face exchanges, in particular by organizing informal, off-the-record meetings . . . [designed] to enable exploration of difficult, controversial, or sensitive issues; to challenge assumptions; to develop a better understanding of areas of agreement and disagreement; or simply to learn more about issues.”⁸³ In contemporary Ethiopia, the common portrayal of a history of peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims going back

⁷⁸ Timothy C. Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 151–67.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 152.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 166; emphasis in the original.

⁸¹ Lawrence Susskind, “Reconciliation vs. Resolution: The Logic of Mediating Values- and Identity-Based Disputes,” *Dispute Resolution* 17, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 24ff; also, presentation at the Pluralism Project Conference: A Convening on the Case Method, Harvard University, January 13, 2019.

⁸² See, for instance, “Building Peace from the Ground Up: A Call to the UN for Stronger Collaboration with Civil Society,” Conflict Transformation Working Group, August 2002, available at <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/124859/buildingup.pdf>.

⁸³ “Quaker United Nations Office,” *Encyclopedia of Human Rights*, edited by David P. Forsythe (Oxford University Press, online version, 2009); also see “Religion and Public Policy at the UN” (Washington, DC: Religion Counts, 2002), 30.

to the Negus will not enhance relations between the two groups. What is needed is the balanced selectivity I am advocating. “Only from such a perspective can a truly complete and clear picture, and an objective analysis of inter-faith relations, emerge,” writes Hussein Ahmed of Addis Ababa University. “Covering up or ignoring facts, issues and processes, either intentionally (for fear of antagonizing some and provoking others), or out of ignorance about the importance of those issues, will further widen the rift between the two religious communities.”⁸⁴ Ahmed gives examples of collaboration between Ethiopian Muslims and Christians despite their differences in deeply held values and identities.⁸⁵

As to religious applications of the Negus narratives, recognizing the multivalence of religions is a first step toward fostering deep understanding between adherents of different religions. “It is never Islam and Christianity, or Muslim and Christian communities as such which develop relationships,” observes scholar of Islam Jacques Waardenburg. “It is always particular interpretations and forms of Islam and of Christianity, found in specific Muslim and Christian groups, which in particular situations condition certain types of relationship.”⁸⁶ Religious studies scholar Aaron W. Hughes criticizes the kind of shoddy academic analysis that reduces the “wide-ranging diversity” within and across the so-called Abrahamic religions to “caricatures and clichés based on vague and indefinable traits.”⁸⁷ Though Hughes explicitly declines to do so,⁸⁸ I would extend his critique to interfaith circles: “There is the omnipresent danger, in other words, that the caricatures that we use in our own work might well become fixed as clichés that inhibit understanding.”⁸⁹

It is imperative that Muslims and Christians alike plumb the depths of the stick metaphor. Jumping off from this metaphor, Muslim scholar of Islam Vincent J. Cornell writes about what he calls “the Ethiopian’s Dilemma.” “Despite the many similarities between Christianity and Islam,” Cornell observes, “these similarities have not been sufficient to create a lasting sense of concord between the two religions. From a distance the differences between Christianity and Islam seem as small as the length of a stick or the width of a line in the sand. However, on closer observation these differences can become deal breakers.”⁹⁰ We have seen selective appeals to the stick metaphor on both ends of the similarities/differences continuum. Cornell advocates a contrapuntal approach to Muslim-Christian dialogue in which adherents of both religions take seriously their religious differences while maintaining the integrity of their respective traditions. Referencing the Negus, Cornell writes, “His concern was not to determine whether Islam was the same as Christianity, but to discern whether its differences from Christianity stayed within an acceptable range of dialogue according to his creed. . . . [The Negus] seems to have understood

⁸⁴ Hussein Ahmed, “Coexistence and/or Confrontation?: Towards a Reappraisal of Christian-Muslim Encounter in Contemporary Ethiopia,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36, no. 1 (January 2006): 19.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 13–14.

⁸⁶ Jacques Waardenburg, “Critical Issues in Muslim-Christian Relations: Theoretical, Practical, Dialogical, Scholarly,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8, no. 1 (March 1, 1997): 15.

⁸⁷ Aaron W. Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁰ Vincent J. Cornell, “The Ethiopian’s Dilemma: Islam, Religious Boundaries, and the Identity of God,” in *Do Jews, Christians, and Muslims Worship the Same God?* edited by Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, Bruce D. Chilton, and Vincent J. Cornell (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 87.

that it is not in comparison but in counterpoint where the greatest benefits of interreligious dialogue dwell.”⁹¹

Christian theology professor Nellie Van Doorn-Harder writes that the Negus “took a stick and drew a line on the ground uttering the now famous phrase that I have heard quoted many times during Christian-Muslim dialogue events: ‘There is nothing more than this line between your faith and ours.’”⁹² Doorn-Harder is chagrined at the Christian king: “Ignoring his own sacred texts, the Negus produced an answer that supported the Qur’anic view of Jesus. For all we know, the reports of this meeting are historically incorrect, and the Negus gave a long speech on Christian dogma. We will never know the truth but can observe that the discussion, while promising, was reduced to one answer: a common denominator. A potential learning exercise collapsed into a single truth to be used for the ages to come. The dialogue was not real; it did not allow for deeper conversation or true attempts to understand the other.”⁹³

Doorn-Harder is even more chagrined by how Christians today short-circuit deep dialogue with Muslims by appealing to the stick metaphor in reductionist fashion, seeking a single common denominator of the two religions. Of course, Christians can make a different appeal to the metaphor, exploring the measuring stick of difference rather than commonality. As noted above, the Arabic word indicates a short distance, short enough to allow conversation between two parties but long enough to maintain a distance between them. Christians would do well to consider the fact that the Negus would have evaluated Islam from a Monophysite perspective rather than the Chalcedonian tradition that includes Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox churches, and thus the stick of religious difference might be longer for the latter tradition.⁹⁴

Qur’anic critiques of core Christian doctrines deserve scrutiny by both Muslims and Christians. Qur’ān 4:171, for instance, to which Ja’far only alluded and which prompted the Negus to invoke the stick metaphor, has typically been understood as containing explicit condemnation of core Christian doctrines:

O People of the Book!
 Commit no excesses
 in your religion: nor say
 of God aught but the truth. . . .
 Say not “Trinity”: desist:
 It will be better for you:
 For God is One God:
 Glory be to Him:
 (Far Exalted is He) above
 having a son. . . .

⁹¹ Ibid., 129.

⁹² Nellie Van Doorn-Harder, “Who is Muhammad to Christians? Revisiting the Question,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 26, no. 1 (2016): 61.

⁹³ Ibid., 62.

⁹⁴ On Monophysite Abyssinia, see Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 40; Erlich, *The Cross and the River*, 19. Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable*, 179–80 suggests that Sunni and Monophysite critiques of the doctrine of the Incarnation are similar in that both see it as compromising the immutability of the divine nature.

Commenting on this, Yusuf Ali writes, “The doctrines of Trinity, equality with God, and sonship, are repudiated as blasphemies. God is independent of all needs and has no need of a son to manage His affairs.”⁹⁵

Two trends in Qur’anic scholarship could shorten the measuring stick of theological difference in Muslim-Christian dialogue. With regard to the first, “Some scholars maintain that the Qur’ān does not deal with the biblical doctrine of the Trinity but with the Trinity of heretical sects. They therefore argue that the Qur’ān need not be thought hostile to orthodox Christianity per se but only to certain distortions of it.”⁹⁶ The second, more recent trend sees the Qur’anic critiques as “polemical statements” or “polemically inspired caricature,” and thus “we should look for the Qur’ān’s creative use of rhetoric, and not for the influence of Christian heretics.”⁹⁷ Both approaches nuance the Qur’ān’s critiques of core Christian doctrines, offering potentially fruitful avenues of dialogue on topics that some have written off as intractable. As the Anglican scholar Hugh Goddard writes regarding the Trinity, “further reflection both among Christians and between Christians and Muslims on this question would certainly be enlightening.”⁹⁸

Both Muslims and Christians would also do well to consider the question of whether the claim made in the Negus narratives is correct that the messages of both Muhammad and Jesus come from the same niche or source of light, that is, the same God. There is no lack of Christians who say that Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God.⁹⁹ Although Muslims would not say this, the Islamic rejection of core Christian doctrines concerning the divinity of Jesus cannot be minimized. It may be difficult for Christians to hear the blunt words of the influential Muslim thinker Ahmed Deedat in *The “God” That Never Was*, who cites biblical passages “to prove that Jesus neither SHARED THE NATURE OF GOD, nor is he IN EVERY WAY LIKE GOD. He can, therefore, NEVER be GOD.”¹⁰⁰ Referring to Jesus as God or Son of God, continues Deedat, constitutes “A MOCKERY OF GODHOOD” and “BLASPHEMY OF THE LOWEST ORDER,” and furthermore insults human intelligence.¹⁰¹

Muslim author Jamal A. Badawi suggests, “After all, promotion of serious mutual understanding requires, not only examination of the common potential uniting themes, but also understanding areas of differences and appreciation of where each community is coming from.

⁹⁵ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation & Commentary* (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, n.d.), 233–34; available at https://ia801603.us.archive.org/15/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.504946/2015.504946.holy-quran_text.pdf, accessed July 23, 2022.

⁹⁶ Mun'im Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur'an and Other Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 46–47.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 47, 48.

⁹⁸ Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 171.

⁹⁹ See, for example, R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?” <https://albertmohler.com/2015/12/18/do-christians-and-muslims-worship-the-same-god>, accessed April 28, 2022; Ruth Gledhill, “Franklin Graham on Wheaton Row: Muslims and Christians Do NOT Worship the Same God,” *Christian Today*, January 25, 2016, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/muslims.and.christians.do.not.worship.the.same.god.says.franklin.graham/77653.htm>.

¹⁰⁰ Text available at <https://archive.org/details/TheGodThatNeverWas.pdf>/mode/2up, accessed April 28, 2022; emphasis in the original.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.; emphasis in the original. For more on Deedat, see David Westerlund, “Ahmed Deedat’s Theology of Religion: Apologetics through Polemics,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33, no. 3 (August 2003): 263–78.

This candidness may help members of faith communities to avoid misrepresenting the faith or scriptures of other faith communities.”¹⁰² Roman Catholic sister and scholar Mary C. Boys refers to the “principle of homogeneity” in interreligious dialogue: “any given concept can only be properly understood and evaluated from within a total framework. Superficial parallelisms and shallow syntheses destroy dialogue.”¹⁰³ In a similar vein, political scientist Claus Leggewie contends that the function of interreligious dialogue is “the establishing of difference instead of locating the superficial similarities.”¹⁰⁴ Jewish scholar Paul R. Mendes-Flohr disparages the kind of interfaith dialogue that employs a “strategy of studious indifference” and a “tepid ethic of interfaith tolerance” that ignores or dismisses real differences.¹⁰⁵ “[T]he religious beliefs and theological commitments of the Other must be taken seriously, even should they clash with one’s own.”¹⁰⁶

I have participated in countless interreligious dialogues. I enter such situations hoping that speakers will bring a balanced selectivity that includes serious consideration of narrative applications contrary to their respective purposes. Unfortunately, I am usually disappointed, hearing instead a well-intentioned positivity that does not move the needle of mutual understanding very far. Christian theologian Harvey Cox bemoans the bifurcated state of interreligious relations which is divided between what he calls the universalist and the particularist perspectives: “Those who glimpse the universal dimension advocate dialogue and mutuality; they search out what is common and that which unites. Those who emphasize the particular often shun dialogue and excoriate their fellow believers who engage in it more fiercely than they condemn outsiders.” Cox describes his feelings at gatherings that include only universalists (like himself): “I have wondered at such moments whether the dialogue has not become a tedious exercise in preaching to the converted, and I have secretly wished to bring in some of those [particularist] enthusiasts. Deprived of the energy such particularists embody, a dialogue-among-the-urbane can, and sometimes does, deteriorate into a repetitious exchange of vacuities. It could end with a whimper.”¹⁰⁷

Without a balanced selectivity that includes serious consideration of narrative applications contrary to one’s purpose, the needle of mutual understanding can move in a negative direction. I have winced at one-sided presentations of the history of Muslim-Christian relations, waiting for someone in the room to supplement the speaker’s portrayal (whether positive or negative) with the other side of the history. A speaker’s credibility—and potentially the credibility of the religion they represent—is damaged by such one-sidedness. Those who know the other side will likely conclude that the speaker was either uninformed or disingenuous.

¹⁰² Jamal A. Badawi, “People of the Book: Potential Uniting Themes and Barriers to Unifying Dialogue,” in *The Abrahamic Encounter: Local Initiatives, Large Implications*, edited by Mazhar Jalil, Norman Hosansky, and Paul D. Numrich (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 100.

¹⁰³ Mary C. Boys, “The Salutary Experience of Pushing Religious Boundaries: Abraham Joshua Heschel in Conversation with Michael Barnes,” *Modern Judaism* 29, no. 1 (February 2009): 20.

¹⁰⁴ Claus Leggewie, “Dialogue? Thank You, No! Ten Commandments for Interfaith Dialogue,” *European Judaism* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 109.

¹⁰⁵ Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, “Reflections on the Promise and Limitations of Interfaith Dialogue,” *European Judaism* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 4, 5.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 8–9.

¹⁰⁷ Harvey Cox, “Many Mansions or One Way? The Crisis in Interfaith Dialogue,” <https://www.religion-online.org/article/many-mansions-or-one-way-the-crisis-in-interfaith-dialogue/>, accessed December 27, 2020.

The question of which Negus—or whether any Negus—converted to Christianity is a significant case in point. We saw how appealing to the Negus narratives or to scholars can go either direction in answering this question. That said, many if not most Muslims believe that a Negus converted to Islam, likely the same Negus who sheltered the Muslim refugees.¹⁰⁸ This is certainly the view of Reem Shraiky, the Muslim blogger cited at the beginning of this article, who bestows on the Negus the honorific reserved for followers of Muhammad, “ra” (short for the Arabic phrase, “May Allah be pleased with him”).¹⁰⁹ Both Christians and Muslims should ponder the question of why any Muslim would want the Negus to convert to Islam rather than be content to leave him as a benevolent Christian monarch who protected Muslims. Muslim scholar Vincent Cornell bluntly criticizes Muslims: “The attempt by Muslims to make the Negus of Abyssinia one of themselves is a tacit admission of the failure of Muslim-Christian relations.”¹¹⁰

I suspect that most Christians would find a converted Negus awkward at best, offensive at worst. In this regard, R. Marston Speight’s approach illustrates what can happen when one thread of the Negus narratives is invoked without at least a nod to contrary threads. As cited at the beginning of this article, Speight frames his book *God Is One* around the encounter between the Christian Negus and the Muslim refugees, but he says nothing about the Negus converting to Islam, not even to dismiss the idea or attribute it to a different Negus. Speight is unequivocal in answering the question, “Can Christians accept Muhammad as a prophet?”: Christians “can never accept Muhammad in the same way that Muslims do. If they did, then they would be Muslims, not Christians.”¹¹¹ How might Speight—or any Christian—respond to a Muslim who counters that the Negus who sheltered the Muslim refugees accepted Muhammad and thus became a Muslim? Certainly, this would dismantle Speight’s whole argument that Christians today are the “spiritual descendants” of the Negus.¹¹² So, then what? I would contend that until such an exchange takes place, the encounter between Christians and Muslims will remain superficial.

Conclusion

The present article has explored the pliability of the Negus narratives in Muslim-Christian relations as a case study in interreligious relations. I have advocated a balanced selectivity when appealing to historical and literary narratives that includes serious consideration of narrative applications contrary to one’s purpose in order to foster deep understanding between adherents of different religions. To cite one other example, the common portrayal of Buddhism’s historical pacifism¹¹³ must be tempered with consideration of Buddhist nationalism and religious justifications of violence and war.¹¹⁴ When Buddhists engage with religious others, the full story should be aired.

¹⁰⁸ See F. Peter Ford, Jr., “Christian-Muslim Relations in Ethiopia: A Checkered Past, a Challenging Future,” *Reformed Review* 61, no. 2 (2008): 55; Cornell, “The Ethiopian’s Dilemma,” 89.

¹⁰⁹ Shraiky, “King Negus.”

¹¹⁰ Cornell, “The Ethiopian’s Dilemma,” 89.

¹¹¹ Speight, *God Is One*, 108.

¹¹² Ibid., 1.

¹¹³ For example, see Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, rev. ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 84.

¹¹⁴ For example, Tessa Bartholomeusz, “In Defense of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 6 (1999): 1–16; Matthew Isaacs, “Why Are Buddhist Monks Promoting Violence in Sri Lanka?”

Political Violence at a Glance, July 1, 2014, <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2014/07/01/why-are-buddhist-monks-promoting-violence-in-sri-lanka/>.

I once asked a leader of an interfaith initiative of Christians, Jews, and Muslims to give advice to anyone wishing to begin such a relationship. Go beyond the superficial and “pathetic” topics of typical religious dialogues, I was told in no uncertain terms. The relationship cannot start and stop at the Golden Rule but must address “problematic and uncomfortable” topics and become “a lot deeper and a lot harder—and painful.”

Without such pain, how deep can interreligious understanding be? As Archbishop Demetrios of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America once said, “gaining knowledge in an interfaith dialogue might be painful.” Especially in historically contentious interreligious relationships, dialogue “involves the uncovering of many painful truths. It also requires that we engage in truly honest inquiry into painful historical circumstances that are understood differently by different people for different reasons. The results of such an honest examination can add significant knowledge, but we should be ready; indeed we must be ready, to accept that our growing in knowledge will entail experiencing levels of pain. But the pain will not be debilitating.”¹¹⁵

I must confess that I have been guilty of selectively appealing to the Negus narratives to suit my purposes in some public presentations. No one ever challenged me, probably because they had no knowledge of the Negus narratives. I wish someone had challenged me to provide the kind of balanced selectivity that can foster deep understanding between Muslims and Christians. I did so in a sermon titled “The Stick of Christian-Muslim Relations.”¹¹⁶ In it, I noted that the Negus narratives have “many wrinkles,” including the conversion question, and I laid out significant differences between Islamic and Christian beliefs that cannot be ignored. “To have a conversation,” I urged, “both parties across the measuring stick of difference must be informed and articulate about their own faiths. They must also be willing to learn about the other, including how they differ. It is just as important to know where we disagree as where we agree.”¹¹⁷



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¹¹⁵ “Greek Orthodox Primate Brings Message of Ecumenism to Fairfield University,” *Fairfield News* 40, no. 114 (November 16, 2007), <https://www.fairfield.edu/news/press-releases/2007/november/greek-orthodox-primate-brings-message-of-ecumenism-to-fairfield-university.html>.

¹¹⁶ “The Stick of Christian-Muslim Relations,” *Inclusive Pulpit Journal* (Summer 2016): 99–106.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.