

CMEP Panel Presentation
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My Name is Mimi Haddad, and I work with CBE International an organization that promotes women’s leadership in every corner of the world as a Christian ideal. My family comes from the Christian Maronite tradition, in Lebanon. I grew up an American Christian Arab with all the confusion and anxiety that it inspired not only in my Jewish neighbor but also in evangelical church. To play with my neighbors on Saturday, I chose to join them in Hebrew-Saturday school, where I learned the Hebrew Alphabet and prayers like *Shamai Yisrael Adonai...* While some wondered out-loud why our Hebrew teacher would welcome an Arab Christian in her class, I was grateful for her kindness and inclusion as a daughter of Abraham.

My father insisted that if I spent Saturday learning the Old Testament, I had to invest in equal time on Sundays learning the New Testament scriptures which I was so glad for because I fell in love with Jesus who welcomed me and has guided my life and calling. I only wished, however, that evangelical pastors were as welcoming of my theological curiosity as my Jewish Saturday school teacher was years back.

From early on, I paid close attention to exclusion or embrace of religious teachers, leaders and institutions for “other.” In my case, the varied reactions I received as an Arab woman with a keen interest in theology, was one reason I decided to attend seminary and graduate school where I explored “how do we know what we claim to know.” Theologians call the “knowing of what we know” epistemology—which for many was the clearest lens, the surest and most trusted path to our living out our faith, in word and deed. For Christians, knowing what we know comes through the teachings of Scripture, and also through a careful reading of church history and doctrine. These are the tools that the church has used to guide our faith and moral life through history. So that when we come up against something that seems wrong, unfair or unjust, we explore that tension using the tools of epistemology—how we know what we know—to find a wise path forward. This often takes us into a deep reading of Scripture, history and doctrine. And, as each generation encounters the great moral issues of the day, the church turns to these tools of knowing to expose and resolve injustices as the body of Christ—the church.

The problem with injustice, is that it seeks to speak invincibly for God. It uses harnesses the tools of epistemology to confuse us, and to distort our moral life and happiness. Just as a virus, harnesses the body's DNA to perpetuate itself, so too many injustices fuel their legitimacy and leverage their destructive force by hiding or cloaking itself in something the church believes to be good and true—like the teachings of the Bible, or biblical prophesy or a view of eschatology—the end times.

The Bible has often been used to defend and promote slavery, apartheid, racial prejudice, the demeaning of Arabs, Jews, people of color and women. Through flawed bible translations and a selective reading of its contents, coupled with a distorted reading of history, philosophy and doctrine, human beings, created in God's image, have been subjected to enormous and unimaginable forms of cruelty. As Blaise Pascal once said, “people never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious convictions.” Our organization has devoted itself to exposing flawed readings of the bible and history when it comes to women's agency and dignity.

Tragically, the church is slow to *first* notice the suffering and also the injustices caused by failed sources of knowing, and *second* to identify and correct these. What we tend to notice—all too slowly is not distorted readings of Scripture but the cries of its victims. Perpetrators are then, eventually identified, but it takes time and courage to admit failed epistemology. Think about the Southern Baptist Convention.

For decades, women have writhed in pain in SBC communities, in academic societies in their schools, seminaries and churches. While the #MeToo, #Church Too movements have emboldened survivors to speak out about their abuse and demand a hearing, and as perpetrators are removed from leadership, yet flawed and even misogynistic interpretations of Scripture have not yet undergone a deep and necessary critique. Last week, we watched as the SBC held their annual meeting, filled with sincere sorrow, and very real impassioned prayers and pleas for forgiveness because so many abused women had at last been heard and their stories believed. But, the real work of examining their patriarchal epistemology is left undone. Because ideas have consequences, women and girls will continue to suffer until the Southern Baptists take their housecleaning to the level of epistemology and biblical interpretation. It will take more than getting rid of a few bad apples. To give justice real teeth, inconsistent interpretations of Scripture

must be addressed, or women and girls will continue to be devalued, marginalized and made easy prey to men with unilateral authority over them.

The same is true for evangelicals and the Arab world. Evangelical denominations and churches, when guided by a “dispensationalist” view of history, are having a difficult time hearing the cries of Palestinians. Believing that the return of Christ is dependent on their uncritical support of dispensationalism, they are misguided by a thin understanding of history and culture coupled with a deeply flawed reading of the Bible’s teachings concerning events preceding the return of Christ. Of course, the dispensationalist view is taught and received uncritically as biblical and historic fact, without an alternative narrative in prominent evangelical institutions. I discovered this while preparing to defend my PhD many years back. Given my doctoral these concerned the period of history that encompassed the advent of the Scofield Study bible—a tool of dispensationalism. As I analyzed the Scofield bible, its notes and translation, to my horror, I realized not only it was completely fallacious and worse, there were no books exposing these academically. *Tragically*, some of the most conservative and prominent evangelical seminaries and colleges in the US are built on these views and have for decades incorporated these teachings into the evangelical-consciousness as biblical and historically fact and therefore as a just approach to Middle Eastern politics.

I took aside friends who were tenured faculty members at these school asked if they were aware of the depth of the problem. They were! Yet a comprehensive factual challenge to evangelical dispensationalism has yet to published despite its humanitarian consequences. I even approached a friend at a prominent evangelical publishing house, laying out these concerns and impact, and was told rather calmly, well, “you know Mimi I’m a dispensationalist myself though you would not recognize my articulation of dispensationalism when compared to their commonly held views.” The individual has yet to publish an alternative view, to my knowledge, again, despite the impact of dispensationalism on the Gospel and social justice. Even so, the problem with flawed epistemology intrinsic to dispensationalism with its moral failures and human suffering that results and not been addressed.

We can think of Isis, and their abuse of girls and women justified through a distorted reading of the *Qu’ran*. The women living in Northern Iraq saw the early iterations of Isis forming and tried to warn government leaders. Had we listened, we may have avoided the genocide of the Yesidi

people, and the rape and sexual enslavement of thousands of Yesidi women. Thankfully, three years ago, The *Shaq'eq* Network held a panel in Egypt to explore “Research Directions for Faith Based Feminism.” I was the only Christian on a panel, beside leading Islamic feminists like, Dr. Omaima Abou Bakr professor at Cairo University. I explored the ways Christian patriarchy has demeaned and marginalized women and how a deep dive into Scripture, as an epistemological challenge to viewing women as “other,” as enabled Christians to bring more women to the tables of decision making to a trajectory of abuse.

As I read my paper, I noticed Dr. Omaima Abu Bakr, seated next to me, smiled, nodded her head and chuckling. What was this about I wondered? And, as she read her paper, I realized her observations *paralleled* my own. The work of Islamic feminists challenged a distorted reading of the Qu’ran and women’s history as it created a gender divide or a gender essentialism that rendered men as essentially different and superior to women at birth, making them the logical leaders of the home and world. The power imbalance and placed communities and families at risk for abuse. It was then I realized, patriarchy is not that clever. One important and essential place for women as peace makers is at the forefront of challenging flawed epistemology, given our shared experiences of patriarchy and its consequences.

Well, Charles Habib Malik (1906-1987)—a Lebanese theologian, philosopher and diplomat made these observations decades ago. The Lebanese Representative to the UN and president of its commission on Humans Rights, Malik—a devout Christian who would weep when the name of Christ was mentioned—was the keynote speaker at the launch of the Billy Graham Center in 1998. In his lecture, Malik challenged the anti-intellectualism of evangelicals that had distanced them as thought-leaders in the humanities, sciences, philosophy, and theology. Malik argued, correctly it would appear, that will take more than 100 years to regain our moral and intellectual credibility because of our failures in epistemology. His comments inspired the young historian seated in the audience, Mark Noll to publish his book, the scandal of *The Evangelical Mind* (Erdmans: 1995 and *Christianity Today’s* 1995 book of the year), followed by Ron Sider’s *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Baker Books: 2005), yet, other publications are also needed to expose root causes of oppression in our world today—injustices furthered by zealous, well-meaning but beguiled Christian epistemology. May we turn our collective will and energies toward this addressing task for the glory of Christ.