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## This Priest Faces Mecca? A Parable of Confusion

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Rev. Steve Lawler has attracted the attention of the national media because this Episcopal priest chose a very odd way to observe Lent. He decided to “adopt the rituals of Islam” for the forty day season observed by many liturgical denominations, including the Episcopal Church.

As reported in *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Lawler decided to practice as a Muslim for the forty days as a part of his “Giving Up Church for Lent” emphasis at St. Stephen’s Church. The closer you look at this story, the more it appears that Rev. Lawler “gave up church” some time ago.



According to the press reports, the priest began to perform Muslim prayer rituals, facing toward Mecca and praying five times a day. He prayed to Allah, read the Qur’an, and adopted Islamic dietary restrictions.

He also got in trouble with his bishop. “He can’t be both a Christian and a Muslim,” said Bishop George Wayne Smith of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri. The bishop continued: “If he chooses to practice as Muslim, then he would, by default, give up his Christian identity and priesthood in the church.” The bishop also told the public that his priest had a responsibility “to exercise Christianity and to do it with clarity and not with ways that are confusing.”

It is refreshing to see that kind of conviction from a mainline Protestant church leader. But, after all, he had a priest who was practicing a different religion. Sort of.

What Rev. Lawler really represents is the postmodern spirituality that masquerades as authentic belief. This becomes clear when the report reveals that the priest did not declare the oneness of Allah nor acknowledge Muhammad as God’s prophet. These just happen to be the first of Islam’s Five Pillars.

So Rev. Lawler decided to deny the core beliefs of Islam, while claiming to be practicing the faith in order to learn about it. In so doing, he transformed himself into the perfect parable of postmodern confusion, emptying conviction of all content, picking and choosing beliefs and practices along the way. As his bishop rightly asserted, Lawler was “playing” with Islam.

At a deeper level, this betrays the kind of theological suicide mission that many liberal churches have adopted in recent years. The Bible could not be more clear in commanding Christians to avoid any confusion with non-Christian systems of belief.

As Paul instructed the Christians in Corinth:

*Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? [2 Corinthians 6:14-16]*

That is very strong language. Indeed, Christian worship cannot be mixed with non-Christian elements, nor can a Christian play around with the beliefs and practices of non-Christian religions without compromising faithfulness to Christ. This is a much more prevalent temptation now with the spiritual practices of Eastern religions, which some Christians attempt to blend in with Christian beliefs.

The news article states that Rev. Lawler joined the Episcopal Church because he wanted a theologically liberal denomination. Evidently, he just found out that even liberalism has some limits. A Christian minister who prays facing Mecca is not merely praying in a new direction. He is, whether he admits it or not, departing the Christian faith.

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Cynthia Billhartz Gregorian, "[Episcopal Cleric Tries Islamic Rituals for Lent](#)," *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Saturday, March 12, 2011.

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