

Profiteering Off of the Prophet: The Unfortunate Case of Ergun Caner

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“Many Americans have suggested that more moderate Muslims should stand up to extremists, speak out for tolerance, and apologize for sins committed by their brethren.

*That’s reasonable advice, and as a moderate myself, I’m going to take it. I hereby apologize to Muslims for the wave of bigotry and simple nuttiness that has lately been directed at you. The venom on the airwaves, equating Muslims with terrorists, should embarrass us more than you. Muslims are one of the last minorities in the United States that it is still possible to demean openly, and I apologize for the slurs.”*²

Franklin Graham, John Hagee, Rod Parsley, Terry Jones are conservative Christians who since 9/11 have become infamous amongst Muslims for their outlandish statements, perverted depiction of Islam, and unfortunate following amongst conservative Christians in America. However, despite their media attention, speaking engagements, and numerous publications, perhaps no outspoken critic of Islam has been as influential in the “education” of conservative Christians post-9/11 coupled with the claims of being a former Muslim terrorist, as Ergun Caner. I first encountered Ergun Michael “Mehmet” Caner as an undergraduate at Liberty University, where at the time he was a professor of church history and apologetics. Caner, who previously taught at Criswell College, was hired at Liberty University shortly after 9/11 in the midst of mass Islamic ignorance and hysteria. In 2002 Caner published *Unveiling Islam: an insider’s look at Muslim life and beliefs* with his brother Emir Caner. The irony of *Unveiling Islam* is first seen in the badge found on the front cover, claiming that this is “the book that tells the truth.” Caner’s book alleges to provide a glimpse of how supposed former Muslims are able to offer an “insider’s view” into the “real” Islam.

Unveiling Islam became the sounding board and voice for a multitude of conservative and fundamentalist Christians. This was the book that sparked the infamous

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion conference at Gardner-Webb University (May 25, 2011).

² Nicholas Kristoff, “Message to Muslims: I’m sorry,” *The New York Times* (September 18, 2010).

controversy of Pastor Jerry Vines who, while addressing the annual Southern Baptist Convention called Muḥammad a “demon possessed pedophile.”³ Furthermore, what distinguishes Ergun Caner from the other fundamentalists mentioned above and others who wrote on Islam, or to put in a different way, what makes Caner someone who needs to be taken seriously, stems from his mass appeal and large audience amongst conservative Christians. For many, Caner genuinely was an insider’s voice concerning a religion many knew nothing about before that paradigmatic event on 9/11. Additionally, *Unveiling Islam* has since sold more than 150,000 copies to date. Caner was, for most of the last decade following 9/11, the spokesperson on Islam for conservative Christians and especially the Southern Baptist Convention, by far the largest Protestant denomination in America.

In this article I will offer a narration on the accelerated rise of Ergun Caner from his supposed terrorist youth, his later conversion to Christianity, then his stint as popular President of Liberty Baptist Seminary, and now perceived fraud. I will highlight aspects of the controversy surrounding many of his outlandish claims, writings, sermons, and videos. I am not suggesting Caner was not Muslim; however I along with many others question his “terrorist” upbringing and expertise of Islam as a former “insider”. My narration is not for the sake of controversy or belittlement, but for the sake of generating reconciliation and proper understanding by eliminating misguided ignorance and accosting those who tarnish the reputation of many Christians engaging in constructive dialogue.

Caner’s testimony of being a “former Muslim terrorist” begins with his early childhood. Caner had claimed on multiple occasions to be raised a Muslim extremist; in some statements while living in Europe and others while living in Turkey. His story then places him in Ohio as a teenager in 1978 where he converted to Christianity. Caner, recalling his youth, preached in a November 2001 sermon at the First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida⁴, “May I submit to you, until I was 15 years old I was in the Islamic youth jihad. And so until I came to America, until I found Jesus Christ as Lord, I was trained to do that which was done on 11 September. As were thousands of youth.” In the same sermon at First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida, Caner went on to say “I was raised as a Sunni Muslim . . . I was the son of the muezzin, the one who does the call to prayer at the top of the minaret,” Caner continued by describing himself as being comparable to a “preacher’s kid.”⁵ During that same month, at Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas⁶, Caner provided this depiction of his Islamic upbringing, “And coming to America I had lived under the misconception that you hated me, as a Muslim. That really affected a lot of what I did in my younger years. I’m not really proud of the

³ Susan Sachs, “Baptist Pastor Attacks Islam, Inciting Violence,” *The New York Times* (September 18, 2010).

⁴ A church with 28,000 registered members averaging nearly 8,000 in an attendance every Sunday.

⁵ Ray Reed “Dispute over theology, background led to Caner probe,” *News and Advanced* (May 17, 2010).

⁶ This church averages 2,000 in attendance each week.

fact that I am part of, was part of, Islamic Jihad. I'm not proud of the fact that it actually was my people who were involved in what took place, the horror," referring to the 9/11 attacks.⁷ This message was rebroadcast by the Christian television Network Focus on the Family in April of 2002. And so began the public attention to this "former terrorist", now turned Christian minister.

Caner's supposed "insider testimony" helped him to profit off of numerous books and videos. In another 2001 sermon titled "From Jihad to Jesus," Caner described his earlier ignorance of Christianity and Christians because "there's not that many of them in Turkey." A DVD containing a collection of sermons Caner released was marketed by asking, "Do you believe God can change the heart of a hardened terrorist? Former Muslim Ergun Caner, who came to America to be a terrorist, shares his testimony of how he came to know Jesus Christ."⁸ This DVD and marketing effort has since been removed. Caner, appearing on the television network Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), said, "The only thing I ever learned about Christianity I learned from my imam and the scholars in the mosque. Then when I began to be trained in Madras we heard even more about Christians, that they are our enemies." As the Associated Press, echoing others, pointed out, "It's not clear if the transcript should read 'madrasas,' a type of religious school for Muslims, or 'Madras,' a city in India. (Regardless) Neither makes sense in the context of a 1970s boyhood in central Ohio."⁹ However, no one questioned the authenticity of Caner's remarkable story from youth terrorist to Baptist minister.

The charm, charisma, and personal testimony that enabled Caner to triple the enrollment in Liberty's seminary¹⁰ are easily seen in Peter Montgomery's rendering of Caner:

Ergun Caner is unquestionably a polished and entertaining performer. He stands out among conservative evangelicals with defiant rhetoric designed to elicit "did he really say that?" titters and a frisson of naughtiness from his audience. Part of Caner's performing persona is his own brand of shock humor, which often relies on racial, ethnic and sexist humor. Speaking to one largely white audience, Caner joked about worship in black churches, where he said they pass the plate 12 times, women wear hats the size of satellite dishes and men wear blue suits that match their shoes and a handkerchief that matches their car. One black Baptist preacher asked for an apology.

At a conference in Seattle a few years ago, Caner joked about the Mexican students at Liberty this way: "The Mexican students and I get along real well. They're my boys. I always joke with 'em, I say 'Man, if I ever adopt, I want to adopt a Mexican because I need work done on my roof. [laughter], and, and uh, I got a big lawn. . . .

⁷ "Dispute over theology, background led to Caner probe".

⁸ Peter Montgomery, "Christian Right's Favorite Muslim Convert Exposed as Jihadi Fraud". http://www.alternet.org/story/146797/christian_right%27s_favorite_muslim_convert_exposed_as_jihad_fraud/

⁹ "Bearing true witness: why we are tempted to embellish conversion stories," *Christianity Today* Vol. 54, Issue 7 (July 1, 2010).

¹⁰ William Wan and Michelle Bortsein, "Liberty U. removing Ergun Caner as seminary dean over contradictory statements," *Washington Post* (June 30, 2010).

At an Ohio men's conference in 2007, he got the audience whooping and shouting with this gem: "Dr. Caner, do you believe in women behind the pulpit? My answer is well, yeah, of course, how are they going to vacuum back there unless they get behind it. . . . [laughter] . . . and that's going to be in half of your pulpits next Sunday. Feel free! I love that line! But you know one line like that shuts it all up, 'cause they're not going to talk about it, and they're not going to talk to you for a while, which is good, which is good."¹¹

Caner's academic specialties, in light of the statement above, I hesitate to say expertise, include apologetics as well as Church History. This has led Caner to debate and argue with numerous Calvinists, whom he thinks are borderline heretical.¹² One debate participant, a Calvinist theologian named James White, disputed Caner's biography and helped to spearhead the inquiry into Caner's extraordinary biography.¹³ Until July 2009, the biography on Caner's website claimed he had debated "Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and other religious leaders in 13 countries and 35 states," statements that have since been removed from his official biography. In addition, in his February 2010 statement concerning mounting allegations, Caner admitted, after an accusation from White, that he had incorrectly named a Muslim scholar as someone he had debated. Stating White's indictment was "a legitimate complaint," Caner released an avowal, "Sin is sin, and if I am dumb enough to say something like that, I should be man enough to deal with it and never make such a grievous error again."¹⁴

Additionally, it was the unlikely collaboration between the Muslim blogger Mohammad Khan of *FakeExMuslims.com*, and evangelical Christian Debbie Kaufman of the *Ministry of Reconciliation blog* that catalyzed the media attention into the Caner controversy. Both began delving into statements and publications by Caner that contradicted his claims. The internet exchanges became more barbed when Jason Smathers, website designer and webmaster for *witnessesuntome.com*, posted copies of the 1978 divorce settlement between Acar Caner and Monica Caner, the parents of Ergun Caner. This document obtained from a Columbus Ohio courthouse showed that Caner was born in Sweden and moved to America at age three. The pieces of Caner's testimony that long seemed either too good to be true, inconsistent, or just plain outlandish, were coming to light. Furthermore, Caner's name became topic for dispute. Prior to the events of 9/11 Caner purportedly went by Ergun Michael Caner or E. Michael Caner — or "Butch" Caner, which is what he says his wife calls him. Ergun Michael Caner is the name on his concealed carry gun permit, issued in 2009 by the Commonwealth of Virginia. After the events of 9/11, Caner's middle name, Michael, was replaced with the

¹¹ Peter Montgomery, "Christian Right's Favorite Muslim Convert Exposed as Jihadi Fraud".

¹² Caner's contention with Calvinism lies in their belief of predestination and de-emphasis of free will.

¹³ James White, "A Response to Dr. Ergun Caner, President, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary," Alpha and Omega Ministries <http://www.aomin.org/aoblog/index.php?itemid=3781>

¹⁴ Ray Reed, "Dispute over theology, background led to Caner probe".

ominous-sounding “Mehmet” (the Turkish name for Muḥammad) on the covers of his books.¹⁵

Debates Caner claimed to have participated in also became a topic of contention. Caner led people to believe he debated Islamic scholar Shabir Ally; even going so far as to give a specific location for the debate, Nebraska. Caner twice gave specific arguments he claimed to be made by Shabir Ally. In a video, Caner gave two other names of scholars he supposedly debated. The first name was Nadir Ahmed, an Islamic apologist that in all actuality Caner had only email exchanges with on the topic of peace within Islam. No other topics were discussed as Caner claimed on his personal website. Even more disturbing was the occurrence of Abdul Saleeb’s name. Caner declared to have debated Abdul Saleeb. The question raised by James White was “who is Abdul Saleeb?” and “what does the name mean?” White, in partnership with Mohammad Khan of *FakeExMuslims.com*, continued the unveiling, “Abdul Saleeb means ‘servant of the cross’ or ‘servant of the crucified one.’” White concluded, “That’s not exactly a common Islamic name. It is a pseudonym, of course, adopted by the former Muslim co-author of a book with Norman Geisler (a conservative Christian apologist) on Islam. In other words, Abdul Saleeb is a Christian. Yet, Caner claimed not only to have debated him, but, at the ‘end’ of their debate, Abdul Saleeb, the servant of the cross, argued, ‘So what if Jesus died?’”¹⁶

Khan provided further scrutiny into Caner by examining many of his videos found on the internet. In numerous sermons, speeches, and interviews Caner attempts to speak what he claims is Arabic. However, what comes from his mouth is mere gibberish. Caner is heard in one video attempting to repeat the *shabāda*, yet what is heard being uttered is anything but. How would a former “insider” Muslim, trained as a terrorist youth not know the first pillar of Islam? Furthermore, Caner in another video discusses the night he told his father he converted. Caner claims to have told his Turkish father that he had now “come to believe in Jesus” by saying in Arabic, “*Īsā ibn Allāh*.” As Kahn rightly points out, how does “Jesus is the son of God” denote “I believe in Jesus?” Still, these examples from his videos are merely a few of a plethora in which Caner is heard mouthing off sounds, Arabicizing non Arabic words, and at times simply making up words as he goes along. At one point Caner turns the word Synagogue into an “Arabic” word by merely adding an “-ay” to the end, with “synagogay” as the end result.¹⁷ To a non-Arabic speaking Christian audience, the lines and rhetoric Caner articulated seemed authentic and convincing. To those familiar with Arabic, these lines Caner fed his eager audience were simply incorrect and at times humorously wrong.

¹⁵ Montgomery, “Christian Right’s Favorite Muslim Convert Exposed as Jihadi Fraud”.

¹⁶ White, “A Response to Dr. Ergun Caner, President, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary”.

¹⁷ There have been twenty-four videos made by Kahn. They can be found on *Youtube* beginning with: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?playnext=1&index=0&feature=Playlist&v=MRDyOaCJ3t0&list=PL872A1C75AA013516> These videos demonstrate the numerous errors and instances of “gibberish” along his ignorance concerning Islam.

Since the story broke and the controversy began many of the biographical facts pertaining to this “jihadist” upbringing have been proven false. According to several court documents, including his parent’s divorce agreement and his concealed weapon’s permit, Ergun Michael Caner was born in 1966 in Sweden with Michael as his middle. Caner was not born in Turkey nor is Mehmet any part of his legal name. Caner’s family moved to Ohio in 1970, not affording him the opportunity for the youth jihadist training in a Muslim country as he had claimed. Caner claimed to live in Muslim majority countries (Sweden and America?) and claimed to be a devote Muslim until he converted to Christianity; yet court documents show that by the age of eight Caner and his brother were living with their non-Muslim mother after her divorce.¹⁸ When did Caner have the time for terrorist training? When Caner claims “his people” attacked on 9/11, and that he was raised to “hate America”, how are these statements plausible in spite of the real biography of a boy born in Europe who grew up in America while living with a parent who was not Muslim? Implausible as these claims may have been, they surely did aid and abet in the popularity, book sales, and demand for this profiteerer.

In February 2010, responding to the mounting criticism, Caner issued a statement on his web site stating he “never intentionally misled anyone . . . For those times where I misspoke, said it wrong, scrambled words, or was just outright confusing, I apologize and will strive to do better.”¹⁹ Later in September 2010, while Caner was speaking at a prayer breakfast in Bristol, Virginia, he responded to the criticism and controversy by saying “We saw it (controversy) coming. My brothers and I have been dealing with it for years. This just happened to bounce big, and I paid no attention. News means little to me, and the Web is — well, bloggers for the most part — are just frustrated people in their basements,” he continued “Every pastor in America, ask them if you can go through 200-odd hours of your sermons. Would they find where you said your kids’ names wrong or dates wrong? Yeah, of course. You just smile and move on.”²⁰ Unapologetic and continuing to sell the story of being a former Muslim terrorist, Caner continues the crusade. His publisher Kreger still openly supports his claims and refuses to pull any of his books. However, after an investigation Liberty University removed Caner from his post and he is currently the provost and vice president of Arlington Baptist College in Arlington, Texas.

The events of 9/11 dramatically changed the nature of Christian — Muslim engagement, both positively and negatively. In a world where many are striving to prove Samuel Huntington wrong, we as Nicholas Kristoff so aptly put it, will “stand up to extremists, speak out for tolerance, and apologize for sins committed by . . . [our] brethren.” For that reason I narrate the unfortunate case of Ergun Caner, all the while seeking corporal forgiveness for the sins many of my Christian brothers and sisters have

¹⁸ Jason Smathers, “Ergun Caner’s Secret Biography,” Witness Unto Me <http://www.witnessesuntome.com/2010/03/ergun-caners-secret-biography/>

¹⁹ <http://www.erguncaner.com/>

²⁰ McGee, “Caner Defends background in Bristol Speech”.

committed since 9/11. Despite the fact that many, benighted in their false understanding of Islam, continue to spread their version of a faith that only exists in their schema, others are working to advance common ground, honest understanding, and peaceful cooperation. May actions and words of reconciliation, peace, and cooperation echo in places of worship, halls of the academy, and voiced in the media, as we move forward from and reflect upon the horrific events of 9/11.