

Meet the Muslim actor playing Jesus in Bill O'Reilly's 'Killing Jesus'

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(RNS) "Bless you for playing Jesus, peace be upon him."

This was the reaction of Lebanese-born actor Haaz Sleiman's mother after she learned that her son had been cast as Jesus in National Geographic Channel's *Killing Jesus*. The three Abrahamic religions will collide on Palm Sunday this year when the television special premieres, with a 24-year-old Muslim actor playing Jesus.

The television movie is adapted from the *New York Times* best-selling book by Fox News host Bill O'Reilly and co-author Martin Dugard. Sleiman digested the book, among others, in preparation for the role. He says he was excited to portray Jesus, a person he described as "the ultimate teacher," who has "heavily influenced" his life.

Both the book and film retell Jesus' crucifixion and accounts of his resurrection— two events that are central to Christianity but not embraced by Islam. Sleiman said he wasn't aware of the difference before he accepted the role, and it wasn't a concern for him.

"As an actor, my no. 1 focus was to be on the same page with the writer, director and producers," he said.

In contrast to Christian doctrine, Muslims accept only Jesus' humanity. The script's focus on this aspect of Jesus is something that Sleiman said was important to him.

"The idea that we got to focus on the humanity of Jesus was very inspiring and empowering to me," Sleiman said. "It is what Jesus came to show us, the beauty of humanity and the love we are capable of having towards one another; even to love your own enemy."

Asked about any disapproval from conservative Christians to the idea of a Muslim playing Jesus, the actor replied: "I cannot speak for Jesus, but I can quote his teachings, and he said, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' . . . How would he react to me playing Jesus? He wouldn't judge it. He wouldn't judge his own enemy. . . . Playing this part highlights his teaching in a very nice way."

Either way, Sleiman is a rare choice in Hollywood—a person of Middle Eastern descent playing the lead role in a biblical epic. The film's executive producer, Ridley Scott, was widely criticized for casting white actors to play Egyptians and Hebrews in *Exodus: Gods and Kings* and for saying it would have been impossible to finance a film filled with actors named "Mohammad so-and-so from such-and-such."

Sleiman said he hopes people of all faiths, including Muslims, will watch *Killing Jesus* (8 p.m. EDT on the National Geographic Channel) and be transformed by Jesus, just like he has been.

"Today more than ever," he said, "we need to apply his teachings in our lives."