

How to Relate to a Muslim Friend

Borge Schantz

For centuries, it was a matter of geographical separation: for many Christians, Muslims were simply "over there"—isolated by oceans, seas, continents, and countries. Today we find quite a different picture. The past four decades have made many of us neighbors. Muslims have come to the "Christian West" as students, immigrants, refugees, and guest workers, and suddenly what was mostly foreign mission work, involving much sacrifice and expense, has also become neighborhood evangelism. Likewise, increased travel and international commerce have brought Christians into close contact with Muslims in their home countries. Who are the followers of Islam and what do they believe? How can we share the good news of Jesus Christ with them?

A Worldwide Religion

To make a quick comparison, we find that out of a world population of 5,480 million, 988 million (18 percent) are Muslims and 1,833 million (33 percent) are Christians.¹ The majority of adherents to Islam live in 31 nations. Among them are populous countries such as Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In fact, only 16 percent of all Muslims speak Arabic as their first language.

Muslims are also found among both the poorest and richest nations in the world. Among those praying toward Mecca five times a day are poor peasants in Bangladesh who do not know if or when they will get their next meal, and oil-sheiks so rich that they can afford to have private airplanes with built-in hospital beds and personal physicians.

Origins. Islam emerged in the seventh century A.D. The years 800-

1200 marked the Golden Age of Islam when the Arabs kept the torch of knowledge burning throughout their domains, which stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indus River. In this era, Islamic scholars excelled in mathematics, physics, chemistry, astronomy, geography, and medicine. Later, political disintegration of Islamic societies led to stagnation and decay in cultural and scientific disciplines. On the military front, the Muslims also lost their earlier vigor. No doubt these are some of the reasons why by 1920 all Muslims were under Western rule or influence. However, by 1990 all Islamic countries had received their independence.

The Founder. Muhammed (570-632 A.D.) was the founder of Islam. Orphaned at the age of six, he constantly traveled on his own, becoming a trader for a wealthy widow 15 years his senior. He subsequently married the widow and entered business in Mecca. Here the temple (Kaaba) had 365 idols that were worshiped by the different Bedouin tribes. The main business in Mecca was done with pilgrims to this ancient shrine.

Muhammed spent much time in seclusion and meditation, revolting against the rampant polytheism around him. Then, according to Muslim belief, the archangel Gabriel appeared to him in 610 and over the next 22 years revealed to him the word of God later collected in the Koran.

Muhammed's ideas were rejected by the leaders of Mecca, and after severe persecution he fled to the city of Medina in 622 A.D. This flight is called the Hijra and is the starting point for Islamic history. In Medina Muhammed was well received and soon had a large group of followers. These Muslims later returned trium-

phantly to Mecca, which was made the center for Islamic worship. The black stone in the Kaaba, or temple, probably a meteor, was proclaimed a gift from heaven.

The religion Muhammed founded is called Islam (submission to God). It forged the divided Arab tribes into a socially, culturally, linguistically, and religiously united people.

God. Islam is based on belief in a single all-powerful God, Allah, to whom people must submit. Allah is so different from humankind that it is impossible to postulate anything about Him. Even characteristics attributed to Him are not the same as when applied to humans. Allah is self-sufficient. He cannot be affected by the actions of His creatures. He is the source of both good and evil. His will is supreme, not limited by laws or principles. As a result of this belief, fatalism is a way of life for Muslims.

Although there are striking similarities between the Christian's belief in the biblical God revealed in Jesus Christ and the Muslim's belief in Allah, there are also crucial differences. In Muslim understanding, Allah's power is revealed in exaltation, and in political and military supremacy. After all, Muhammed the prophet was also a military leader and statesman. In Christianity, God, who is Almighty, sometimes reveals His power in weakness, humility, and suffering. The cross is the pinnacle of the revelation of God's love, shown in the humanity of Jesus Christ.

Allah has also had a number of prophets, perhaps up to 124,000 through the ages, who have revealed His will and warnings to humanity. The most outstanding of these are also biblical and include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Muhammed, however, is the greatest and

last of them all. His revelations sum up and supersede all given before.

Sin. The different concepts of sin in Islam and Christianity are perhaps the greatest obstacle in Muslim evangelism. On it rests the acceptance or rejection of Jesus Christ as prophet or Saviour. Islam recognizes three categories of sin. Some sins are just shortcomings, human limitations or negligence. The consequence is sanction rather than punishment. Other sins are more serious and will incur punishment. Among these are disobedience to parents, murder of a Muslim, adultery, and slandering a virtuous Muslim. The unpardonable sin is "shirk," the crime of setting other gods alongside Allah.²

Beliefs. The Islamic faith is based on Five Pillars, the main points of the creed. The first is the testimony of faith (Shahada): "I bear witness there is no god but Allah, I bear witness Muhammed is the Apostle of Allah." The second is prayer five times a day at specific hours (noon prayers on Fridays being the most important). Then comes fasting during Ramadan (the ninth month of the Islamic calendar); alms giving, varying according to income and kind of property; and finally a pilgrimage to Mecca.

It is expected that a Muslim will adhere strictly to the Five Pillars. However, for persons and situations where strict observance is hindered there are reasonable exceptions.

In addition to the Five Pillars, Islam has five (some say six) Articles of Faith. They include the Doctrines of Allah, Angels, Revealed Book, Prophets, and the Last Things. To this, some add the Jihad (holy war), the defense of Islam and the attack on other beliefs. More moderate Muslims interpret the concept of Jihad to mean any struggle against underdevelopment and injustice.³

Other significant traits of Islam are that polygamy (up to four wives) is allowed, and the consumption of alcohol and pork is forbidden. In Islam there is no priesthood, no sacrifice, and generally no saints or relics for protection or for helping infertility, etc. However, on a popular level, the majority of Muslims, influenced

by surrounding religions (Hinduism, traditional religions, etc.), practice a kind of Folk Islam, involving magic, witchcraft, and veneration of saints.⁴

The Book. Like Christianity, Islam also has a holy book. The Koran is considered the perfect revelation from God. It is a reproduction of the original engraved tablets in heaven in the Arabic language, regarded by some as the language of God. The text of the Koran is seen as holy and perfect, due to the miraculous way Allah's will was communicated and externalized to Muhammed. Although the Koran has been translated into 124 languages, only the Arabic Koran has authority. All translations, even the most correct, are classified only as explanations of the Koran. It is maintained that neither Muhammed nor any other human has had any part in the authorship of the Koran. It is seen as the true source of all guidance, truth and science. For these reasons a Muslim cannot apply any criticism to the Koran.

Here lies a trap Christians sometimes easily fall into, namely, the "Battle of the Books." It is very easy to get into a conversation with a Muslim in which the Koran and the Bible are compared. However, this is not a valid comparison. For the Christian, the Bible, although venerated as a divine guide to God, is not perfect. The Holy Spirit used human beings as spokespersons. They, however, kept their own writing styles and personalities. The supreme revelation of God is not in a book, but in the person of Jesus Christ. The difference may be summarized like this: in Islam the Word of God became book; in Christianity the Word of God became flesh.

The Koran, being only a short book, could not cover all aspects of life. It was therefore augmented by the Sunna, the spoken and acted example of Muhammed, who lived a faultless life and was therefore a perfect example to be followed. The written record of Muhammed's extra-Koranic sayings and acts were collected 250 years after his death in the Hadith. Together with the Koran, the Hadith is the basis for Shariah Law, which deals with all aspects of Is-

lamic life (religious, social, political and economic). There are, however, only a few countries that have been able to apply the Shariah law with its rigorous punishment of transgressors.⁵

Resistance to Christianity

Islamic resistance to Christianity, which includes mutual suspicion and animosity between the followers of the two world religions, has at least four causes. First, there are powerful creedal differences. The most outstanding are the person of Jesus Christ, the authenticity of the scriptures of each faith, the prophethood of Muhammed, and the doctrines of salvation. Second, there are also political and historical confrontations where both have struggled for supremacy among the countries around the Mediterranean Sea. Third, we must add the fact that as missionary religions, both have ambitions to expand and often focus their proselytism on the same people.

The fourth reason for lack of success in Muslim evangelism is probably that Christians have generally dealt with Islamic theology and doctrinal points of disagreements. We have not really addressed the Folk Islamic beliefs and the needs of the common Muslim, in spite of the fact that 80-90 percent of all Muslims have somewhat syncretistic concepts where non-Islamic beliefs and practices are mixed with Muslim doctrines and customs.

So then, how should we relate to a neighbor or fellow student who has a Muslim background? First of all we have to bear in mind that there are as many kinds of Muslims as there are Christians. The attitudes toward Islamic doctrine and practice range from the orthodox fundamentalists who take the Koran literally, follow traditions closely and believe that the solution for present-day evil is found in a return to conditions that mimic the pioneer days of the faith, to those who in their liberalism will symbolically hold to only a few Muslim ideas. Some students use opportunities away "in a distant country" where there is no family and mosque pres-

sure to live in disregard of Islamic traditions. Between these extreme attitudes you will find the mystic who seeks some kind of union with God, and the syncretist who is prepared to blend Islamic belief and practices with local religious customs.⁶

Diverse as they are in their theological positions, Muslim students have two things in common as they study abroad. They are away from direct pressure from the community, and they experience a state of transition that makes them open and sometimes even winnable.

Sharing Your Faith

Here are some general guidelines that can help you share your faith with a Muslim friend, classmate, or colleague:

1. Relate to your Muslim friend as a person, not just as a possible prospect for conversion. It is important that mutual trust and understanding be established as a solid foundation before witnessing takes place. A trusting relationship should be a goal in itself and not a means of evangelism.

2. Listen and learn. Unlike most Christians, many Muslims are not hesitant to talk about their religion. Do not discuss the major points of disagreements mentioned earlier until you have achieved a trust relationship.

3. Dialogue and personal testimony are often more important than public meetings or group discussions. In such encounters, it is good to share with joy and enthusiasm what Jesus Christ has meant to you. This can be much more powerful than well-founded arguments based on a sophisticated understanding of Muslim theology and practices. Share what prayer means to you; share your feelings about death and judgment. In this sharing experience it is also beneficial to let your Muslim friend talk about his or her faith. Such discussions will prove instructive and can even be avenues for witness.

4. Invitations to church or Christian activities are other ways of witnessing for your faith. However, be sure you know what is going on in

the church on that day. Sometimes offensive material given in a sermon will put Muslims off. An occasion where there is a potluck meal could be a grand opportunity. In many Islamic cultures sharing a meal is a seal of friendship.

5. The use of Christian publications is an excellent form of contact. The Bible will be the most powerful witness. The Bible is three times bigger than the Koran and different in style. A Muslim should not be encouraged to read it all at once. Certain books and chapters are more readily accepted in the initial stage than others. Begin with Genesis and Proverbs; they are well accepted and understood by Muslims. Luke will be a good beginning in the New Testament. Other Christian books can also be helpful. A significant fact we often neglect in Islamic evangelism is that we are prone to use all kinds of gimmicks in our approaches,⁷ when we should instead remember that the gospel by itself "is the power of God unto salvation."

Conclusion

Space does not allow me to outline more approaches. Then again, perhaps more details are not really needed. In encounters with Muslims—as with any other group of people—it is really love, concern, honesty, and spontaneity that are the best and most convincing approaches. God does work in mysterious ways.

Finally, a word of caution. Remember that to Muslims, Islam is not just a religion with creeds and rituals. It is a total way of life that encompasses not only religious practices but also business, politics, law, education, human relationships, and the family as a whole. The extreme individualism as we know it in the West is un-Islamic and not appreciated.

This should make us sensitive and patient in our witnessing and persuasive activities. Keep in mind that even when a young Muslim has been convinced of the Christian argument, it can be extremely difficult and sometimes dangerous to change religion outside and without the ap-

proval of the safe-family circle.

May God help us in this noble but delicate activity of sharing our Christian faith with our Muslim friends.

NOTES

1. David B. Barrett, "Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission 1992," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 16:1 (January 1992), p. 27.

2. Cyril Glasse, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), p. 32; James Jomier, *How to Understand Islam* (London: SCM Press, 1989), pp. 46, 47.

3. Jomier, p. 121.

4. Bill A. Musk, "Popular Islam: The Hunger of the Heart," in *The Gospel and Islam*, Don M. McCurry, ed. (Monrovia, Calif.: MARC, 1979), p. 208f.

5. Glasse, p. 362.

6. Don McCurry, *Muslim Awareness Seminar* (Pasadena, Calif.: Samuel Zwemer Institute, 1981), p. 63.

7. Martin Goldsmith, *Islam and Christian Witness* (MARC Europe, 1982), p. 109f.

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