Conflict, Co-existence and Conversion
Thinking Biblically about Muslims
Lessons for Beginners

Introduction

"Sarah saw (Ishmael) mocking." Gen. 21:9

"God heard the boy crying." Gen. 21:17

The one saw Ishmael as a rival, a competitor and an enemy. The other saw a boy in need, crying for water, alone in the desert. Sadly today it is the first of these two ways of looking at Ishmael that epitomises the attitude of the churches to the sons of Ishmael – the Arabs and, by extension, all the spiritual followers of Arabia's most famous son – Muhammad.

Muslims are not slow to sense the way we regard them. There is clearly as wide a communication gap today between Muslims and Christians as there has ever been. Our human tendency is to blame the Muslims for this wall of misunderstanding and to dismiss them all as being an ignorant and a fanatical lot!

We need to ask the question, **"Why are Muslims so resistant to the Gospel?"** We assume that all Muslims have seen such a wonderful display of God's grace and love in the Christians they have met – if not in person then in films, satellite TV and the media – that all the blame for the Muslims' failure to come to faith in the Lord Jesus is their own fault.

Is this a true or logical assumption? Are we being fair to Muslims? I have not found Muslims particularly resistant to talking about eternal, spiritual things – about God, worship or living a pure life etc. In fact Muslim evangelism is much easier in many ways than evangelism among post-modern secular humanists.

Three Basic Convictions

- We must get beyond slogans and we must try to think **Biblically** about Muslims.
- We need to understand the mind of Muslims – What does it mean to a Muslim to be a Muslim?
- We need to reflect on the process of communication

What we say ⇄ a grid ⇄ heard by a Muslim

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Language difficulties
Non-verbal behaviour

The Result: false attributions
miscommunication
stereotypes
ethno-centrism

Some of the historical problems underlying Muslim difficulties with Christians

1. Muhammad and Christians in Arabia
2. The Crusades
3. The Colonial Period
4. Polemic attacks on the Qur'an and Muhammad

"Proofs of the existence of God have made many sceptics.
The declaration of the love of God has made many saints."

5. Degraded western culture low in principles, filled with immorality and greed
6. Christian Zionism
7. Neglected Muslim countries – great poverty in many of them
8. Extracting Muslims out of their culture
9. Rationalising our failure – 'In the grip of Islam' – 'The bondage of Islam'

"Let the song go round the earth!
Lands where Islam's sway
Darkly broods o'er home and hearth
Cast their bonds away."

Biblically they are no more in Satan's grip than any other!

A Biblical Approach to Muslims

How do we use our understanding of Scripture in a Semitic context and relate this to Muslims who, through Islam, have been 'semiticized' to some extent? They are usually deeply religious people and very different from the average westerner.

1. Finding a way to start

- ✓ Acts 17:16-21 – Paul **reasoned** with the Jews in the synagogue and with the Gentiles in the street. So the key is to talk to people where **they** are.
- ✓ Luke 2:46-47 – Jesus sat where the teachers were. Five significant things:
  - ✓ He went to where the religious teachers were.
  - ✓ He listened to them.
  - ✓ He asked questions because He wanted to know how their minds worked. This is vital.
  - ✓ They were amazed at His **understanding** – **not** His knowledge!
  - ✓ Answers come at the end.
- ✓ 2 Tim. 2:23-26 – Remember these verses. Don't lose your temper!

2. Dealing with our prejudices

- Psalm 106:6: ***"We have sinned with our fathers"***

  We need to speak with a spirit of humility. We have done much wrong. Huge walls of mistrust and misunderstanding have been built.
- Matt. 5:43-48: We need to avoid the 'them' and 'us' distinction. Assume that your Muslim friends are God-fearing. We both know idolatry is very wrong and that we **must** worship God in the way **God** desires and not as we please.
- Gen. 20:1-18: ***"I thought there would be no fear of God…."*** Abraham sinned because he was afraid. God is speaking to Muslims. Assume God has prepared your friend to listen. Don't be afraid!
- Note the Biblical progress of the story of the conversion of the Samaritans:
  - ✓ Luke 10:25-37: The story of the Good Samaritan is very shocking/insulting! The person you least expect to show kindness does so. There are parallel attitudes Jew/Samaritan – Christian/Muslim.
    Did the Samaritans hear this story?
  - ✓ John 4:9-42: Jesus loved Samaritans. He broke cultural taboos to let them know who He was. He put Himself in a position of need.
  - ✓ Acts 1:8: Remember the Samaritans!
  - ✓ Acts 8: 14-17: Samaritans were baptised and filled with the Holy Spirit.

- Acts 9:10-19: Was Saul really converted or was it a trick? This is the attitude of the church in many lands. Ananias had doubts. Note also v.26, ***"He*** (Saul) ***was trying to associate with the disciples and they were afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple."***
- Acts 10:28, 34: Peter said, ***"God has shown me…."*** Peter needed a profound spiritual experience to shake him out of his prejudices!
  Like Peter, we are all racists and ethnocentric.

Exploring Biblical models to understand Muhammad

- Matt. 24:11: ***"And many false prophets will arise and mislead many."***
  But was it altogether Muhammad's fault?
- 1 Jn. 2:18-23; 4:1-3: This speaks of the 'anti-Christ'. But anti – not in the Latin sense of **'against'**. But in the Greek sense of **'a substitute'**. So Muhammad as a substitute for Jesus – technically the Qur'an is the substitute.
- Judges 6-8: The story of Gideon. There are similarities with Muhammad:
  - ✓ Both led a campaign against idolatry.
  - ✓ Both rallied the tribes against their enemies and led armies into battle.
  - ✓ In later life both deteriorated morally.

So Muhammad was 'chronologically' AD but 'informationally' BC – about 1200 BC!

3. Praying for Muslims

- Gen. 16:7: The angel of the Lord (a theophany) appeared to Hagar and made a promise to this Egyptian woman – Ishmael = **God will hear**. Clearly there was an inward participation in the faith of Abraham.
- Gen. 17:18: ***"O that Ishmael might live under your (covenant) blessing."***
  God's answer: ***"Yes, but…"***. Muslims are faithful to the covenant sign.
- 1 Tim. 2:1-5: The context is praying for those in authority. ***"There is one God and one mediator".***
- Acts 4:29-30: The context is one of responding to threats (prayer is the most appropriate response) and deciding what to pray for (not for protection but to speak the word without fear). This prayer is very relevant to us:
  - ✓ ***"Enable your servants to speak Your Word with boldness and confidence"***
  - ✓ ***"While You stretch out Your hands to heal and signs and wonders are performed through Your name…"***
  - ✓ God will do His part – Eph. 6:19. Paul prays for boldness ***"That words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the Gospel."***
  - ✓ Therefore a prayer for us:
    - * for effective communication – building bridges not walls
    - * for confidence and boldness
  - ✓ God will authenticate His message through us with signs and wonders.

4. What is Islam?

The Islamic worldview is like a popcorn ball – the toffee that keeps it together is Islam (i.e. religion). Attack Islam and the whole worldview (that gives them their identity) falls apart. Many Muslims are very conscious of this.

Islam is:

- Contextualised Arab monotheism
- A focus of unity
- An all-embracing way of life
- A civilisation – art, culture etc.
- A legal system
- A personal belief system often incorporating folk religion
- A political dimension
- A missionary driving force – it sees itself as the original 'mission of God'

Three Burning Questions!

4:1 Is the God of Islam the same as the God of the Bible?

4:2 Is there any genuine revelation in Islam?

4:3 Are there demonic forces in and behind Islam?

4:1 Is the God of Islam the same as the God of the Bible?

- ✓ This is a trick question like, 'Have you stopped beating your wife?' You are in trouble whether you say, 'Yes' or 'No'!
- ✓ An illustration: A coin is at the bottom of a glass of water. Looking down, do you see the coin? Yes. Do you see where it is? No. Why? Refraction is taking place – real and apparent depth.
- ✓ The experience of MBBs – both 'yes' and 'no'.

So what are the similarities? What are the differences? Is there enough in common so that we can use the same word?

- **The Qur'an affirms the God of the Bible**

  Surah 29:46 *"Dispute not with the People of the Book …and say, 'We believe in what has been sent down to us and what has been sent down to you; our God and your God are one…' "*

  So Muslims believe we worship the same God!

  It is probably best not to deny this the first time you meet!

- **The source and meaning of the word Allah**

  - ✓ It is a pre-Islamic word in Arabic. It is a contraction of the words Al (the definite article) and Illah (God) i.e. **the God**. Arabic and Hebrew are both Semitic languages with a common root. In the pantheistic cultures of around 2000 BC in the Middle East, 'El' was considered **the Supreme Being**. The writers of the Bible, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, were willing to use this pagan word and redefine it as **the only true God**.
  - ✓ Allah was widely used in pre-Islamic Arabia and Arab Christians before Muhammad used it.
  - ✓ Muhammad also used the word in the context of a polytheistic culture. [In Mecca, in the Ka'aba, a pantheon of deities were worshipped – about 360 of them. Three of the most popular were 'the daughters of Allah'.]
  - ✓ Look up another Qur'anic verse – Surah 22:40. God is worshipped in, *"Cloisters, churches, oratories and mosques."*

- **What do we say as Biblically-oriented Christians?**

  Some say a qualified. 'Yes'! Others say, 'No'! The Qur'an is referring to the God of the Bible, yet it does not affirm everything in the Bible about God. It even denies things clearly taught in the Bible. Christians believe the fullest extent of God's revelation to be in Jesus Christ. Christians consider the fullest and most complete expression of the love of God is in Jesus self-giving love as He gave Himself on the Cross. Muslims deny this!

- **Some Biblical references**

  ✓ El – the high God of the Fertile Crescent

  Ex. 6:3 – El-Shaddai – God Almighty

  Gen 14:18-24 – El-Elyon – God Most High

  ✓ The condemnation of 'other gods'

  Deut. 6:13-15 – A healthy corrective – **some** understanding is not enough

  ✓ God and the Gentiles – a universal God for all people – not a tribal God

Pharoah	Gen. 12:10-20
Jethro	Ex. 3:1
Rahab	Josh. 2:8-11
Ruth	Ruth 1:16-18
Jonah	Jonah 3:5-10
Job	Job 1:9; 2:3, 9, 10; 38:1; 40:1, 6; 42:1, 9
Malachi	Mal. 1:18-21

  ✓ The uniqueness of Jesus

  Jn. 14:6

  1 Jn. 2:22-23; 4:1-3; 5:11-12

4:2 Is there any genuine revelation in Islam?

- How does Islam compare with pre-Islamic religion in Arabia?
  - ✓ Much better – female infanticide outlawed
  - ✓ **But** it incorporated as great deal of folk religion
- How are we to understand the development in the experience of Muhammad?
- How are we to understand the psychological process of receiving 'revelations'?
- Was Muhammad sincere?
  - ✓ Certainly yes in the Meccan period – a tale of two cities
- How are we to think of Muhammad's rejection of Christianity?
  - ✓ It was based on a heretical form of Christianity.
- How are we to understand general revelation in the experience of Muhammad?
  - ✓ Only in **this sense** – is there any genuine revelation except that which is borrowed from the Bible?
- Is there any special revelation in the teaching of the Qur'an?
  - ✓ Only that which is borrowed no unique revelation

4.3 Are there demonic forces in and behind Islam?

- Why single out Islam?
- Does this mean every Muslim is demonised?

- How much is the church responsible for all that has happened?
- Beware of stereotypes.
- Beware of over-simplification of complex issues. Look up:
  Jn. 8:44 and Eph. 6:10-20

5. Rethinking the Gospel for Muslims

As we listen to Muslims and seek to understand them, as we share the Gospel with them, we begin to understand how difficult it is to express ourselves in ways they understand.

- **Discover what sort of a Muslim he/she is**
  - ✓ Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi, Ahmedi etc.
  - ✓ Does he/she go to a person for protection from evil spirits?
  - ✓ Has he/she ever put a curse on anyone or been cursed?
  - ✓ What does he/she believe about life after death?
    What happens at death?
  - ✓ According to his/her beliefs, how does a person go to heaven?
  - ✓ How are sins dealt with?
  - ✓ What does he/she think about God?

On visiting workers in Cairo, a great missionary said, *"I was profoundly conscious that they* (the workers) *did not understand Muslims and were horribly ignorant…."*

The best way to learn about Muslims is to talk to Muslims.

- **Review how your Christian sub-culture preaches the Gospel**

  Mine: typical of western evangelicals – first law – then grace. Preach law and bring people to admit their guilt. Then show that Jesus is the Son of God who died on the Cross. Therefore you should accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour.

  This doesn't work with Muslims! Theirs is an honour-shame culture. They don't feel guilty!

- **Go back to Scripture**

  Look to see **how** Scripture teaches the basics of the Gospel. It was largely written by and for Semitic peoples. Find from Scripture ways to correct their misunderstandings. Find new ways of re-stating the Gospel. Note: Scripture starts at the beginning – Genesis. Do this with Muslims – chronological story telling.

  In Scripture there is a great deal of presenting the Gospel to shame-based cultures. Examples include:

  - ✓ From being unclean to clean – stories like Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-19)
    The concept of defilement makes sense in shame-based cultures.
    The issue is, 'How do I become pure and clean?'
    See Malachi 3:1-3 and Psalm 51:2, 7, 10.
  - ✓ From being naked (very shameful) to being clothed with beautiful clothes
    See Matt. 22:2-14 – the Great Wedding Feast.
  - ✓ From being excluded/expelled to being visited by God. The stories of Abraham's visit by God, the tabernacle/temple (2 Chron. 6:13-42; 7:1-3)
    Emmanuel – The Holy Spirit
  - ✓ From weakness to strength
  - ✓ From sickness to health

6. Replying Biblically to our Muslim friends' objections to our faith.
Basically these are:

- The authenticity of the Scriptures
- The Trinity
- The historicity of the Crucifixion
- The deity of the Lord Jesus
- The necessity of the Atonement

Each of these needs a thorough look at **what** the Bible teaches and, just as importantly, **how** the Bible teaches it to Semitic people.

7. Finally – some hints!

- **Learn some of their language**
  - ✓ Learn greetings – phrases like 'inshah'allah' (if God wills)
  - ✓ Titles of respect: 'majid' (glorious) for the Qur'an or 'sharif' (noble) for Muhammad. Give some titles to the **Lord** Jesus and the **Holy** Bible.
  - ✓ Jesus is called Isa 25 times in the Qur'an and Al-Masih 8 times.
  - ✓ Various useful words: prayer, sin, repentance etc.
- **Understand their customs:** don't put your Bible on the floor. Treat it with respect.
- **Learn to think their way.**
  Truth is best understood by stories and by suggestion through parables, plays, proverbs, poems and illustrations. Copy the way that Jesus taught.

  Tell parables but in modern and Muslim dress

  Teach about sin
  - ✓ The Pharisee and the Sinner – Lk. 18:9-14
  - ✓ The Rich Fool – Lk. 12:16-21
  - ✓ Ceremonial and real defilement – Mt. 15:1-20

  Teach about God's love
  - ✓ The Lost Sheep – Lk. 15:3-7
  - ✓ The Lost Coin – Lk. 15: 8-10
  - ✓ The Lost Son – Lk. 15:11-32

  Teach about God's Judgement
  - ✓ The Net - Mt. 13:47-50
  - ✓ The Wheat and the Weeds – Mt. 13:24-30
- **Learn proverbs**: Pakistani proverb – 'One fish makes the whole pond dirty." Study the Book of Proverbs.
- **Collect stories to use in evangelism.**
- **Illustrations**
- **Use common things:**
  - ✓ Amulets
  - ✓ Wearing a veil – see Is. 61:10
  - ✓ Questions: Do you have a creed? Use Jn. 17:3
  - ✓ Prayer – see Lk. 11:2-4

- ✓ Fasting – see Is. 58
- ✓ Almsgiving 2 Cor. 9:15
- ✓ Pilgrimage

Effective communicators understand the way their Muslim friends **think**.
They have entered into their minds, their hearts, their emotions and their shoes.

Jesus is the model for our methods

He identified totally with us, yet without compromising His integrity and separateness. How would Jesus set about winning Muslims? I think He would dress like them. He would eat with them. He would sit where they sit. Would He pray with them when they prayed? Would He be all things to all Muslims?

Ask God to show you what you should do in various circumstances – i.e. should you remove your shoes when you pray? Moses did!

Jesus is the model for our message

We must teach what He taught (Mt. 28:19, 20). He **is** the Gospel! He appealed to people to accept Him, believe on Him, feed on Him, drink from Him. Jesus is central to our message.

Let us not make it difficult for Muslims who are turning to God – see Acts 15:19

Don't:

- Engage in futile arguments
- Denigrate Muslims, the Qur'an or Muhammad
- Proclaim the glories of western civilisation
- Attempt to change their culture

Do:

- Pray that God will save your friends
- Use the Bible
- Share what Jesus has done for you