Understanding and caring for new believers from a Muslim background

The first step is to tell them you love them and you want to understand them. It is important for them to know that you want to listen to them and share with them. You can say, "When I really understand your needs, I'll tell you the truth and I will help you in every way I can. I will suffer with you. I will pray constantly for you that you will come through to a place of joy and peace. When necessary I will weep with you."

This is the secret of sharing the Gospel with Muslims. They need to know that if they believe the Gospel and become followers of the Lord Jesus, you will care for them. Of course this isn't only true of Muslims but of everyone else who comes to faith in the Lord Jesus.

So don't only communicate the Gospel, but also communicate that as believers they become part of a new family and this family, the family of believers in the Lord Jesus, will love them, pray for them, counsel and help them and seek to support them in every way possible. This is the truth of what we must do in the best way we can – speaking the truth in love by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What we are doing is suffering the pangs spiritual childbirth, ***"Until new life is formed in you"***. (Gal. 4:19). This is the secret of reaching not only Muslims but everyone else too! So it is important to communicate the message with love. Always remember we are utterly dependent on the Holy Spirit to work both in our hearts and in the hearts of our new brother or sister in Christ. It is a great emotional experience for both of us! But we are both deeply grateful.

I long that each one who reads this article will take this on board and trust the Holy Spirit to make it a reality. It is vital to see many more of these believers from a Muslim background both in the Muslim heartlands and also in the increasingly widespread Muslim diaspora welcomed and loved and grafted into the Family of God. We need to learn how to put the truth over to Muslim friends so that the Holy Spirit will teach them as they pray and they will learn from Him.

In the language you are using, don't use a word for a BMB (believer from a Muslim background) that conveys any sense of apostasy. You could use "saved from death". ***"Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."*** (Jn. 3:20-21)

Can we find a suitable phrase in Arabic, Turkish, Farsi, Urdu, Malay etc. that means, 'I've come to live by truth – by what God has done for me.' That is a challenge!! Some have used the Arabic word for "escapee". Each language will have to be prayed through for the most appropriate word that doesn't have any connotations of apostasy.

James 1:5-7 says, ***"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind."***

So how do BMBs come to know the Lord Jesus as their Saviour? One becomes a Muslim by repeating the Shehada. This is a danger! Some Muslims have the idea that if they repeat the Apostle's Creed they have become Christians. So they listen to us and others – perhaps on the radio or via satellite TV – and they can repeat the Lord's Prayer and perhaps some of the Creed, but they have not yet been born again as believers. Sadly it is easy to be duped by such people when the Lord Jesus is not being formed in them.

We need the Holy Spirit to give us a gift of discernment to know if a man or a woman is truly ***"born again from above"*** or not. A Muslim is usually brought to conversion by reading the Word of God. Many have come through by studying a Bible correspondence course which culminates in a personal commitment to the Lord Jesus which they sign at the end of the course. But this can be misleading for the people who take the course.

One man listened to a radio programme for several months. He signed at the end of the course that he did believe in the Lord Jesus. Then he was introduced to a "worker" who met with him for Bible study over the course of the year. After this he went to a camp for new believers for about 10 days. But it was not until he was on his way home, travelling by bus right through the night that he saw a bright light and he met the Lord Jesus! He had been doing Bible correspondence courses for four years before this. He had had all the teaching possible in the country, but the culminating point was when he saw the Lord!

This is not an argument to stop correspondence courses or Christian satellite TV programmes, but it is often very hard for Muslims to understand what true faith is. We will need to explain over and over again that "coming to faith" is not just a mental exercise. It isn't just trusting the truth of Christian theology! It is rather committing oneself to the Lord Jesus the Messiah. This involves repentance which we usually say very little about. Yet we know that many Muslims are involved in Folk Islam and demonic powers need to be cast out before they can begin to grow as believers in the Lord Jesus.

Secondly, many Muslims come to faith through a dream – a revelation of the Lord Jesus. I don't know how unique this is to the Muslim World, but at least in much of the Arab World many new believers report having seen a very bright shining light and in the midst of the light a person dressed in shining clothes. The extraordinary thing is that people who have had this vision don't go back to Islam!

Perhaps this is comparable to the vision Saul of Tarsus had on the road to Damascus. To what extent this is unique to Muslims or whether it is also true for Hindus, Buddhists etc. I don't know. But to Muslims it seems that visions are a supernatural way of confirming and strengthening their faith. As a typical westerner, I don't think I would base my whole Christian experience (about 60 years) on a vision! But the Lord Jesus delights to reveal Himself to Muslims in this way and it really works.

So two of the major ways Muslims become followers of the Lord Jesus are through reading the Bible and through the revelation of the Lord Jesus in dreams and visions.

Thirdly, many Muslims are also coming to faith as a reaction to positive Christian love demonstrated to them. A Muslim man was given a Gospel by a lady Christian worker and he publicly tore it up in front of her. She smiled at him and quietly picked up the pieces of the Gospel and said she would pray for him. Later he became a believer and now he is the leader of a BMB fellowship.

Very often we see that Muslims wonderingly observe Christianity in action – the compassion, loving one another and helping one another. This should be evident in every fellowship and on every team.

There are three things that are very important for us to remember:

- The culture that formed him/her
- The cost he/she faces – strong persecution
- The comfort and counsel he/she needs as well as the encouragement and exhortations that are so much appreciated.

- **The culture that formed him/her**

A Muslim background believer's culture is totally different from the current culture of western countries (Europe, the Americas, Australia, New Zealand etc.). Conversion doesn't mean that he must totally reject his culture. He will always be a Berber, an Arab, an Iranian, a Turk, an Afghan etc. We need to be very careful we don't channel BMBs into western cultures. They are not changing their race or their culture. Usually (and sadly) in the Arab World they equate Christianity with Europeans and North Americans. But in many Muslim countries there is a small Christian indigenous population of 'almasihiiyn' [المسيحيين] who are quite distinctive in their ways. Many of them are from a Christian background such as Coptic, Greek Orthodox etc. and some are real believers and disciples of the Lord Jesus.

But it may be necessary for a BMB to go against his/her culture. There are many things in Muslim culture that must be abandoned. I am told that some people from a Muslim background, on the birth of twin baby girls, plunge them immediately into boiling water. This is an extreme case, but there are other customs that need to be examined and then abandoned. Together with your BMB brothers and sisters, you need to work carefully through aspects of their culture that are to be happily retained and identify those that must be abandoned or modified in some way.

One interesting study is to see how the Lord Jesus went against the legalistic Jewish culture of His day in Palestine that was largely made up of traditions. For example in Mt. 12:1-13 the Lord Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees as to why He allowed His disciples to eat pieces of corn on the Sabbath as they walked through a cornfield.

There are perhaps several principles here that will help.

1. Will this help me or harm me in my relationship with the Lord Jesus?

David, when he was a fugitive, went into the Tabernacle and ate the consecrated bread. (1 Sam. 21:6) This bread was only to be eaten by priests. (Lev. 24:9) But David and his men were not priests and still they ate the bread. The Lord Jesus used this incident to illustrate that principles of ceremonial law were not to be used in a legalistic manner. [See Mt. 12:3-4.] The Lord Jesus taught that it is always lawful to do good and to save life. (Lk. 6:9)

2. The Lord Jesus is concerned with people.

Look at the Lord Jesus in His conversation with the woman at the well. (Jn. 4:4-26) She was an immoral woman yet after her conversation with Jesus, she began to think that He might be the Messiah! She became a believer – a disciple. In this story the Lord Jesus definitely went against the cultural norms of the time!

The Lord Jesus went against the culture of the people in the interests of an individual. What was the effect of the culture on His thinking? As you know, in Islam religion and politics are one. Religion covers the whole way of life. This is something that westerners find very hard to understand. So if a BMB doesn't say an Islamic phrase at a particular moment, it will be noticed. If this happens often, family and friends will deduce that he/she is no longer a Muslim. Such a perception will be followed by a great deal of trouble! So the decision to be a follower of the Lord Jesus will affect every part of his/her life – personal life, family life, employment, relationship to the government etc. He will be seen as a traitor to his family, his friends and his people.

In becoming a Christian in the West this is not so! In Christianity, the believer is fundamentally responsible to the Lord Jesus and each individual is independently responsible to Him for his actions. This is in complete contrast to Islam.

3. Islam is something that is learned and repeated.

One example is prayer. You must know when to pray and how to pray – both actions and words.

When a BMB becomes a believer, he must learn to think for himself! Much of Islam is mechanical and repetitive so it is noticeable that a BMB often finds it easier to worship in highly structured Christian services – what we sometimes call High Church services that are nearly identical in every way, having a liturgy that is repeated. Brothers and sisters from a Muslim background find a "Free Church" service in a "Low Evangelical Church" quite difficult to adapt to, since it is so very different to their culture.

Islam is very legalistic. Either a thing is forbidden or it is permitted. It would be so easy to tell BMBs that you must not do this and you must do that – you must not go to the cafe and drink coffee with your old friends. You must break away from the world. You could then give him/her a long list of don'ts! This is the easy way out. The problem is that our list usually conforms to the patterns we have in our own culture. Our Christian culture is largely based on traditions and taboos rather than on the Word of God. If something is traditionally "not done" then it continues to be "not done"! As believers, we often don't even pray about it! We just accept what we are told. So it is in Islam, but to

a far greater extent. So beware of unconsciously passing on a series of taboos instead of training brothers and sisters from a Muslim background to read the Word of God.

Where to start? Galatians is a very helpful book. It will probably take three or four months to work your way through it with them and as you pray for them through this process, you will probably find that they have a totally different conception of what it means to be a believer.

In Islam, the Quran is the supreme revelation of God. What corresponds to the Quran in our Christian faith? Not the Bible! It is the Lord Jesus the Messiah. He is the one who corresponds to the Quran. He is the Word of God. So it is a matter of switching from the Quran to the Lord Jesus the Living Word of God – the supreme revelation of God. The Bible is written primarily so that we may know Him. It is so important to emphasise this with your BMB brothers and sisters.

Sometimes we are asked why we don't recite the Bible in our worship services. It is because we are linked by the Holy Spirit to our living Lord Jesus. Christianity is not a remembrance of something that happened in the past. It is current, living fellowship and communion with our living Lord Jesus.

So it is good and helpful to learn Bible verses and whole passages. It is good to repeat them and talk about them, but we have to be very careful that our BMB brother/sister doesn't switch into a Muslim mind-set in this negative way.

We must emphasise that it is the Holy Spirit who inspired the writers of the Bible and so He will teach us. We don't need to depend only on formal teaching. We can read the Bible prayerfully and ask the Holy Spirit to teach us, rebuke us, encourage us as we meditatively study it and through this we have sweet fellowship with the Lord Jesus.

This is a totally different concept of a relationship with God to anything your BMB friend had before he met the Lord Jesus.

4. A Muslim has an innate fear of the supernatural and the unseen.

It is hard to exaggerate the power of this fear of evil spirits in the lives of our Muslim friends and how much their culture relates to this. You know the normal greeting, *"As salem wa alekum"*. But when a man goes into an empty house and knows that there is no person there, why does he say, *"As salem wa alekum"*? Who is he greeting? The answer is the evil spirits or possibly an angel could be there.

When a man finishes his normal prayer *(salat)*, before he gets up from his knees, he will salute the two angels on either side of him. The greeting is never in the singular. It is always in the plural. All this is part of their culture. We need to know and understand these things. Be observant, ask questions and keep on learning.

This also involves the fear of the "evil eye". Often, especially when children get sick, the explanation isn't seen as anything to do with germs or modern medicine! Their gut reaction is that someone has looked at him/her with an "evil eye". We might dismiss this as just superstition, but to Muslims it is the power of the unseen. This is what we are up against and we must try and understand it in a deeper and deeper way. But we can always meet these events in the power of the Holy Spirit. He is the only answer. But first we must understand these things.

5. What can a believer from a Muslim background retain from his/her culture?

Can a woman retain her headscarf and veil? In many parts of the Muslim World a Muslim woman is normally veiled – sometimes with only her eyes seen. So should our women colleagues and wives wear headscarves? The real question is, 'In the culture where we are living, is wearing a headscarf just part of the culture or does it symbolise that you are Muslim?'

We would not ask a Saudi man in Saudi Arabia, who would normally wear a long white thobe with a red-and-white chequered headdress, to take them off and wear a suit and tie as a typical westerner. He would probably do this anyway if he was visiting London! But should it be mandatory or even advisable when he becomes a disciple of the Lord Jesus?

What about the way BMBs should pray? You know well how they prayed before they believed in Jesus. They have a prayer mat and during their prayer time there are periods of standing and bowing down and touching the prayer mat with their foreheads. Is this wrong? If so, we should tell them so or is it actually perfectly acceptable?

I was once in a group of BMBs who found this practice perfectly acceptable although the words of their prayers were quite different from before. I think keeping to this pattern of praying is becoming rarer. Christian satellite TV broadcasts BMB worship services including much singing, people standing to give their testimonies or pray – all very different from a typical mosque!

We need to ask ourselves, as we disciple brothers and sisters from a Muslim background, is this part of their culture or is this part of Islam? Each one of us needs to decide these things before the Lord in prayer. In a village or in a city it is best for the workers together with mature BMBs to outline some guiding principles.

Then there is the issue of which musical instrument should a BMB worshipping group use in their times together. In broad terms, stringed instruments are used in worship, wind instruments are not used. Pianos and organs are not generally known and are expensive!

What about times? A Friday morning is the usual time of worship in the Muslim World. It is a public holiday in most places. It is best to ask BMBs when the most suitable time is. As westerners, initially we may find it hard to appreciate Arabic music, but learn as fast as you can and learn to sing in Arabic or whatever language you are working in. Learn to sing wholeheartedly to the Lord.

Some practical issues

- What about relationships between young, single men and women BMBs? This is a vital issue in many parts of the Muslim World today. There are many issues that we perhaps wouldn't think of discussing in public. But BMBs want to know the answers to many questions and they can't easily ask anyone else. We must think through the issues and pray that God would give us discernment. It is helpful to consult with other workers in other worker groups so that BMBs are not given conflicting advice. Many of the most difficult issues are related to marriage and family. Pray and ask God to give you wisdom and understanding.

- The cost faced by a BMB is often great. We are aware of the Islamic laws concerning apostasy. The traditions, the hadith and all the schools of Islamic law say that a male apostate should be killed, a female apostate should be confined to a separate apartment and beaten every day and starved until she comes back to the true faith of Islam. *"When the sacred months are passed, slay the idolaters wherever you find them."* (Sura 9:5) So anyone who abandons Islam is regarded as a traitor and the law of apostasy has never been abrogated in any Muslim land even though it says in Sura 2:258, *"There is no compulsion in religion"*.

The UN Bill of Rights grants religious freedom to every country and most Muslim countries subscribe to this, but sadly this is largely only in theory. So the cost faced by a BMB is often very high. He or she may say to you on the quiet, "It is really hard for me to be a follower of the Lord Jesus." Please don't say, "No, it is easy, just trust the Lord Jesus!" It might be easy for us, although in reality we sometimes struggle, but for our brothers and sisters from a Muslim background it can be very hard. Some of them have been killed by their families.

- BMBs often suffer in their work. They may lose their employment.

No Muslim would ever employ them. If he did, no other Muslim would patronise his business. So BMBs are ostracised by everyone and often turned out of their homes. Every Ramadan (the month of fasting) all the opposition is stirred up again.

So problems come from three quarters – from the family, from the religious authorities and then from the civil authorities because he/she is considered a traitor or worse – a paid spy of a foreign power. So every department of their lives, wherever they go they are faced with opposition from the evil one – Satan.

For women BMBs things can be even worse! A woman is threatened that unless she recants and returns to Islam she will be divorced, she will lose her children and she won't be accepted back into her own family for she has brought shame on everyone. Usually she is turned out on the street and her only hope is that some of the other believers will take her in for a while. Initially this is often expatriates. In the long-term she will probably have to move far away, learn to do a job and find employment and live as a single "widow". We need to think as a team of workers how best we can help these people.

Finally and very importantly learn from mature BMBs. What was helpful to them as they were being discipled? What made it harder to live in their culture as a believer from a Muslim background? With hindsight, what do they wish they had been told and how would they like to have been encouraged and helped?

May God help us all to think through these issues and learn from Him the very best way to love, understand and care for our brothers and sisters from a Muslim background.