

A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO EVANGELIZING MUSLIMS

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of constant change filled with political unrest, socioeconomic rebellion, and religious zealotry seldom encountered in recorded history. Woven within this tapestry of change is the growing tide of the Islamic faith that is sweeping the globe with eschatological speed. According to a 2010 global population estimate, of the nearly seven billion people in the world,¹ over twenty-three percent of the global population claims adherence to the religion of Islam.² But this number is ever increasing. According to a recent study by the Pew Research Center,

Globally, the Muslim population is forecast to grow at about twice the rate of the non-Muslim population over the next two decades – an average annual growth rate of 1.5% for Muslims, compared with 0.7% for non-Muslims. If current trends continue, Muslims will make up 26.4% of the world's total projected population of 8.3 billion in 2030, up from 23.4% of the estimated 2010 world population of 6.9 billion.³

Given these sobering projections, it is more critical than ever before that Christians answer the call of our Lord Jesus Christ to, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19 ESV). This has and will ever be a difficult task as the fundamental doctrines of the Islamic faith often run counter to biblical truth. Nevertheless, there are practical similarities between the fundamental teachings of Islam and Christian Scriptures that can be utilized to evangelize those

¹ "The World Factbook", Central Intelligence Agency [US] <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/xx.html> (accessed 23 February 2011). As of July 2010, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency estimated the world population at 6,768,181,146.

² "The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010-2030", The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life <http://pewforum.org/The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx> (accessed 24 February 2011). The Pew Research Center estimates the 2010 global Islamic population at 1,619,314,000.

³ Ibid.

of the Muslim faith. This discussion will attempt to compare and contrast these similarities and provide a practical means of presenting the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to these lost souls.

ESSENTIAL ISLAMIC BELIEFS

The Islamic faith can be confined to four basic beliefs: one God; God's messengers or prophets; God's scriptures and revelations; and the Last Day Judgment. While these beliefs may appear similar in form to Christianity, they are quite different in nature.

Islam focuses on the oneness of God, or Allah.⁴ It rejects the concept of the tri-unity of God as heresy. In fact, Muslims stridently attack this doctrine, which they presume to be the weakest point of Christian belief. The Qur'an states, "They do blaspheme who say: God is one of three in a Trinity" (5:76). Islam denies the Fatherhood of God, the divinity of Jesus the Son, and the person of the Holy Spirit.

The Qur'an states that a messenger or prophet has been sent to every people (10:47). From various Qur'anic passages we find twenty-five named, most of which are Old Testament figures. Greenham writes, "all of these individuals (including Jesus but not Muhammad) were mortals, human beings, endowed with divine revelations and appointed by God to perform certain tasks."⁵ Jesus is reassigned by the Qur'an to a lower-level prophet. Muhammad, however, is described in the Qur'an as "the Seal of the Prophets" (33:40), which closes "the long

⁴ Imad N. Shehadeh, "Do Muslims and Christians Believe in the Same God?," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141, no. 641 (2004): 23. According to Shehadeh, the term Allah was imported into Islam at the time of Muhammad from the Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians living in the Arabian Peninsula as referring to the one and only true God. He further explains that while Islam today has much in common on the essential attributes of God, there is wide divergence on His moral and relational attributes. Muslims and Christian may speak of the same subject, the true God, but they have different concepts of Him.

⁵ Ant Greenham, "An Examination of the Role the Epistle of James Might Play in Introducing the New Testament to Muslims," *Faith and Mission* 19, no. 3 (2001): 7.

line of Messengers. Allah's teaching is and will always be continuous, but there has been and will be no Prophet after Muhammad."⁶

Muslims generally hold a high view of the Old Testament but view the Jews and Christians as having lost their covenant promises from God. They would exclaim that the rightful covenant was made with the descendants of Ishmael instead of Isaac. While revelation was given to Jesus (in addition to Moses and David), this revelation was later corrupted by Christians. As such, Muslims hold a very low view of the New Testament and especially Pauline writings.

Islam considers judgment and destiny to be very important subjects, and the Qur'an refers to the coming Day of Judgment more than any other subject except the oneness of God. The judgment addressed in the Qur'an is based on a weighing of good deeds versus bad deeds and is thus teaching a personal destiny based on works.

ISLAMIC BELIEFS CONTRASTED WITH CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

While Islamic teaching from the Qur'an may seem close to many truths of the Bible, as previously stated, they are in almost every way different. For example, God's Word clearly describes the actual persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Unlike Islam which misunderstands the meaning of the Trinity (they view this as a polytheistic doctrine), Scriptures tell us that there is only One God, who at the same time exists as three distinct persons (cf. Duet. 6:4; Matt. 6:9; Acts 5:3-4; John 10:30; Eph. 4:30). Though separate persons, each possesses the essential nature and attributes of God, thus experiencing and maintaining oneness and unity

⁶ *The Holy Qur'an: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary*, (Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarrah: Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, Call and Guidance, King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex, 1989, 1897), 1255-1256. quoted in Greenham: 7.

within the Godhead. Muslims reject calling God a Father, as God, they say, cannot procreate; he is One. As an extension, since God cannot procreate, then Jesus cannot be his Son – in fact, they would argue that Jesus never called himself God. They would further reject the concept of the Holy Spirit as merely a mystical force from God and deny his person. Though the mystery of the Trinity is even difficult for most, if not all, Christians to fully comprehend, the Three-in-One of God is demonstrated throughout Scripture. Is it the denial of the authority and inerrancy of all of Scripture that is the root of Islamic unbelief in this area, as in most areas?

Most cults, and Islam is no exception, are so defined because they feel a need to improve upon what they feel has become corrupted. In this case, Islam views the Bible and the Christian faith to have been corrupted, and it is their charge to correct the errors they perceive have occurred.⁷ In the Qur'an, Muhammad is said to have spoken jointly to the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) to reveal what was concealed in their Scriptures and to guide them to the straight path (Surah 5:15-16). This corruption claim, however, is generally limited to the New Testament (with the exception of the first three Gospels)⁸ for they view with some sincerity the authority (though not the inerrancy) of the Old Testament. This corruption claim is, therefore, again rooted in the denial of the authority and inerrancy of all of Scripture. Since the New Testament reveals the Old Testament, one cannot be held on higher authority than the other.

On the concept of the Day of Judgment, Islam is very much in line with most, if not all, other pagan religions throughout the world. Salvation, where salvation is even a concept, is

⁷ Imad N. Shehadeh, "Reasons for Islam's Rejection of Biblical Christology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161, no. 643 (2004): 278.

⁸ Edward E. Hindson and Ergun Mehmet Caner, *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics* (Eugene, Or.: Harvest House Publishers, 2008), 281. According to Caner, Muslims believe the original teachings of Jesus have been corrupted by the subsequent teachings of the apostle Paul. Caner further states that Muslims believe the apostle John was infected with Greek philosophy and is therefore suspect.

rooted in human performance, or works. The concept of grace is alien to a Muslim and as Shehadeh writes,

The Qur'an makes no mention of the concept of unconditional blessing to the unworthy. The giving of divine gifts depends on human merit. These conditional blessings are said to include establishing Islam as a religion, revealing what is forbidden and what is permitted, giving instructions on ablutions, making a covenant with Muslims, and protecting them from their enemies. These favors (from God) are given on the condition that Muslims do His will. . . In God's relationship with humankind nothing depends on His grace and everything depends on human merit.⁹

To a Christian, the Qur'anic concept of salvation by works is, or should be, just as alien a concept as it is actual doctrine in Islam. God's Word is truth (John 17:17), and the biblical doctrine of *sola Fide* (faith alone in God's saving grace through Jesus Christ) is clearly revealed therein (Eph. 2:8-9).

PRACTICAL EVANGELISM TO A MUSLIM

Given the obvious disparities between Christianity and Islam, one might think the proposal of sharing the Gospel of Christ with a Muslim to be a futile adventure. Yet believers in Jesus Christ are merely vehicles for transmission of the Gospel; it is God that ultimately calls the lost to Himself (John 6:44). Toward that end, there is a practical approach to evangelizing Muslims that centers on the root of their faulty belief system, the Bible.

The use of the Bible as the primary evangelistic tool seems to be the common ground between the two faiths; that is, since Islam holds a high view of the Old Testament, and even the Synoptic Gospels are fair game, explaining the accuracy and authority of at least these portions of Scripture can move a Muslim closer to the truth. The challenge is where to begin?

⁹ Shehadeh, "Reasons for Islam's Rejection of Biblical Christology," 281-282.

It is my thesis that the starting point is the accuracy of Jewish history found in the Old Testament, over and against the claims of the Qur'an, and Old Testament prophetic fulfillment in the person and work of Christ. Small nuggets of truth can be derived merely by pointing to the accuracy of the Old Testament as it pertains to the Jews, in spite of their derision by the Qur'an. Walid Shoebat, a former Palestinian terrorist, was moved by this approach, writing, "For the first time, I studied *factual* history, the Christian bible, the Jewish Bible, Jewish history and Jewish songs and art, but I couldn't find anything about the murderous, terrible Jews that had been in my mind for so long"¹⁰ – a product of both the Qur'an and culture.

After this, and once the accuracies of the Old Testament have been presented, then the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy should not then be questioned. If so, then prophecies concerning the person and work of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, must also then be true. Thus we have established a foundation for evangelism that moves the Muslim to the truth of Christ. Through the Synoptic Gospels we can then explain the relationship of Christ to the Father, and the message of Christ regarding salvation and eternal security.

CONCLUSION

Though we have only been able to briefly describe the basis for, and fundamental differences between Islam and Christianity, it is the hope of this author that, at a minimum, the prospect of evangelizing a Muslim is not viewed to be futile. Rather, drawing upon distinct areas of agreement, namely the Old Testament and the Gospel of Christ, the prospect now becomes a process – a process that by God's grace will draw Muslims to Himself in the waning days of this

¹⁰ Walid Shoebat and June S. Neal, *Why I Left Jihad : The Root of Terrorism and the Rise of Islam* (United States: Top Executive Media, 2005), 19.

world and will stem the spreading tide of Islam, a primary affront to the Great Commission in our day.

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