

# Our Muslim Neighbors

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## An Introduction

### Encounters in Morocco

As a Christian pastor, I have been blessed to study Islam and to learn something of the variety of its vast world while, at the same time, sharpening the depth of my commitment to Jesus Christ. As a citizen of the United States, I believe in the Constitutional freedoms that are reflected in our history, and I seek ways in which we can communicate across the current religious and cultural divisions in our nation. I hope that you will join me in learning about our Muslim neighbors and how we develop meaningful dialogue and friendship with these neighbors.

I have traveled extensively in the Muslim world, and I thought it might be interesting to start by sharing some of my experiences in Morocco. Having been a member of the Rotary Club for a number of years, I enjoy the fraternal customs. One special ritual is that we make up weekly attendance and get to know fellow Rotarians when we travel. It is with great pride that we bring back a small 6” x 8” banner from the club visited to adorn the display table of our home club.

I was in search of such a banner when I met the President of Rotary in Morocco. She was a most impressive woman, a physician, whose opinions helped shape national policy, known to fellow Rotarians. She was, by the way, an unapologetic but adamantly unfanatical Muslim.

Morocco seems a good place to start a discussion about meeting Muslims. I saw a paradox I will never forget: Two sights that I have never seen in the United States. On one side of the wall surrounding the hotel, I saw a number of Muslim women, probably from more rural areas, each wearing a black burqa, or veil, with a narrow screen that prevents even their eyes from being seen. On

the other side of the wall were other women, who considered themselves as much French as Moroccan, sunbathing topless around the hotel pool.

To me, the contrast of cultures across the high wall of the hotel said something about the stark contrast that lies within the continuum of the Islamic world and also in the Christian world. I confess that, as a traditional Christian, I was scandalized by the topless sunbathing, and I would have sympathized with Muslim clerics who sponsored regulations against it. On the other hand, as a citizen of a land obsessed with personal freedom, my heart was broken to see a young woman walking through the world with only a tiny, obstructed peephole from which to see the world.

Many Muslims would share my reactions to these sights, but there would be a variety of opinions. Muslims who are sensitive to the business world might say that Morocco needs tourists, particularly French tourists, in a land where French is widely spoken as the second language. Everything possible must be done to make tourists feel at home. Others would say that the burqa is simply the way that very traditional women dress. It is a tradition that should be respected for the women who practice it. Ironically, and this challenges what my American mind can grasp, many Moroccan Muslims would accept both of these positions with a shrug at most.

A great, wide continuum of views exists in the Islamic world. But there is also a wall, a cultural wall as palpable as the high barrier which separates the hotel from the street. This wall that separates East from West, ancient from modern, secular from religious. And Muslims around the world are trying to figure out where they stand and how they pass with respect to this wall.

It would be difficult to find an American woman wearing a full burqa, but I have noticed that each of us has things that limit our ability to see the world. Perhaps we are limited by ignorance or lack of experience. I believe that God teaches us many valuable

things through our relationships with others, including our neighbors who are Muslims.

## Chapter 2

### An Overview of Islam

More and more of our neighbors are Muslims. Have you noticed that? Perhaps it is the doctor you go to, or the owner of the convenience store, or a professor, or an African American woman with a veil, or a man wearing an embroidered stocking hat. Also, our world is becoming smaller. In a “globalized” society, we are affected instantly by news that happens on the other side of the world. We hear Muslims mentioned in the news everyday. And yet, we really know very little about Muslims and about Islam. Because we fear what we do not know, the media is able to exploit our fears with stories about extremists and terrorists. The events of 9-11 cause us to project the attitudes of a handful of people on to millions of others.

Jesus tells us to “love our neighbors.” How can we love our neighbors if we don’t even know them? If we want to have a witness to Muslims, we need to know them better and practice our faith more successfully. I am hoping that this study will teach us a little bit about Islam . And let me say this. The way to teach about a religion is, generally, to talk about what is best in it, not what is worst in it. That’s how we want people to know our Christian faith, by the best of what it can be, not by the worst things that Christians have ever done. So, if we practice the Golden Rule, we will present Islam the same way.. In that spirit we Christians acknowledge that Islam is one of the great religions of the world.

We must also say that, historically, Western Civilization owes a great debt to Islam. At a time when the writings and learning of the ancient Greeks were being lost in the Dark Ages of Europe, these valuable

documents were being preserved by Muslim scholars. That is why, prior to the Crusades, the Islamic world was way ahead of Europe in mathematics and science. (Thank goodness we now use Arabic and not Roman Numerals. We can still see the Arabic roots in words such as al-cohol, al-gebra and cotton (al-kotton).)

Contrary to what you may hear, most Muslims are against violence. The very word iSLaM comes from the root word SaLaaM, which means “peace.” Muslims greet each other by saying “Salaam aleikum,” which means “Peace be with you.” By the way, the Arabic word SaLaaM is related to the Hebrew word ShaLoM, which also means peace. In the Semitic languages, the meaning of the word comes from its consonants. Notice that the words Islam, salaam, shalom, and muslim all come from the root SLM, which means “peace.” The word Islam itself means “to submit.” The idea is that, if you submit to the Law of God, you will have peace. People who submit to God are called Muslims.

It all began when an Arab caravan leader, Muhammad, reported that he was hearing revelations from God. The words were spoken to him by the angel Gabriel, and then he would go and recite them to other people. As a prophet, he soon attracted a group of followers, and they wrote down what he recited. The Arabic word for “recited” is *qur’an*, and that became the name of the Muslim holy book. Let me say this as a historian. I certainly do not agree with all the things that Muhammad taught, but, I acknowledge that he was a great political leader and I think that he had sincere religious feelings.

Muhammad was clearly influenced by the Jews and Christians he knew. He used the same word for God that they did. *Allah* is simply the Arabic word for God, and it is found in every Christian Bible written in Arabic. Like Christians and Jews, Muslims are monotheists: They believe in one God. Where we talk about the Judeo-Christian tradition, Muslims would like to talk about the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. In recent years, scholars also call these the “Abrahamic” religions, because all three religions honor Abraham.

Most traditional Christians are not comfortable with these labels. The reason is that, whereas Christians accept the previous scripture of Judaism word-for-word, Islam seeks to change the record, both of the Old Testament and the New Testament. For instance, the Qur'an repeats the story of Abraham, but it switches Ishmael, Hagar's son, to the legitimate heir and makes Isaac and Sarah the outcasts. Muhammad claims that God told him to correct and improve on the Bible. This is a claim that both Christians and Jews reject.

Also, Christians question the authority of Muhammad. On the one hand, the Bible is based on the testimony of dozens of witnesses, over the course of a thousand years, who have a remarkably similar perspective in reporting what God has said and done. On the other hand, Islam is based on the authority of only one witness, whose testimony only lasted a couple of decades. Any time one single person steps up and says, "I am right and the Bible is wrong!" we reject the testimony of that one witness. For instance, we appreciate the Christian emphasis of Mormons, but we reject the Book of Mormon and its extravagant claims, largely because it is based on just one uncorroborated witness: Joseph Smith.

Muslims honor Jesus as a very great prophet. Did you know that? They ask us, "Since we honor Jesus so much, why don't you appreciate that fact?" The problem is that we acknowledge Jesus as the Savior of the World. We worship Jesus Christ as God. This is a scandal to Muslims: They do not believe that God could have a son. And they do not worship prophets. That's right, they don't even worship Muhammad. Here's one way to look at it: Muslims look at the Qur'an the way we look at Jesus, and they look at Muhammad the way we look at the Bible. For them, the Qur'an, not Jesus, is the eternal Word of God which has come into the world. Muhammad was simply the way the eternal Word comes to us.

Have you ever noticed that \_\_\_\_\_ people of every religion expect other faiths to be just like theirs. Because we worship our founder, Jesus Christ, we would expect that another religion, such as Islam, would also worship their founder. On the other hand, because Muslims only have one book, the Qur'an, they expect Christians to have just one book, the Gospel. They find it hard to accept the fact that the New Testament actually contains 27 books.

Islam, like Judaism, is a religion based on the Law. The Qur'an takes the place of the Torah. But there is also an elaborate system of rabbi-like commentaries, based on the example of Muhammad, which provides minute laws for living. Islam is very legalistic. Muslims believe that there is no action which a human being can take which is not covered by Islamic law. This includes nations and politics. Whereas, we Americans hold other nations accountable for what their religious extremists do, Muslims hold our religion, Christianity, accountable for what our nation does.

In addition to the re-told Bible stories, the Qur'an contains some beautiful passages of praise and worship, and also a good deal of hell-fire preaching. Muslims believe that you are judged by your works. On judgment day, all your good deeds will be put on one side of the scale, and all your sinful deeds will be put on the other side of the scale. And, whichever way the scale tips, will determine whether you go to heaven or hell. True, I know a lot of so-called Christians who also believe this, but this is not what the Bible teaches. We believe that you can only be saved by the grace of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. It is not your good works, but only Christ, who can save you.

Muslims also believe in a strong theology of fate. God determines everything that happens to you by fate. If you tell a Muslim, "I'll see you tomorrow," he will reply, "Insha-Allah." – "If God wills it."

Among the many laws there are five cardinal obligations for Muslims. These are called the "Five Pillars of Islam."

No. 1: **Shahada**, the Creed: “There is no god, but God” If you are in an Islamic country, this is what you hear from the loudspeakers in the minarets as the call to prayer. First, the muezzin cries, “*Allahu akbaru! Allahu akbar!*” This means that God is greater than anything else in the universe. It is the phrase written in Arabic on the Iraqi flag. And, even though it is this phrase that suicide bombers scream as their last words, the statement is nevertheless true. God is greater than anything else. And no deranged terrorist can change that fact. After “Allahu akbar,” the loudspeaker from the mosque proclaims: “*Ashhadu: La illaha, ila` Allah.*” – “There is no god (small g) but God (capital G).” Muhammad said that anyone who could utter these words was technically a Muslim (and therefore saved). True, we Christians can agree with this much: “There is no god, but God.” But then, Muhammad’s followers have added: “Muhammad is the Messenger (or Prophet) of God.” *Wa Muhammad Rasul-Allah.* Muslims believe that Muhammad is unique as the foremost Prophet and spokesman for God. Christians cannot accept this.

Duty No. 2. Prayer. **Salat**. A good Muslim prays at five appointed times daily: dawn, midday, mid-afternoon, sunset, and bedtime. (By the way, Muhammad probably got this idea from observing Christian monks.) Some Muslims keep a special prayer rug with them, because the ritual includes standing, bending, and then touching the head to the ground in the direction of Mecca. Many Muslims are so devout that, in an Islamic country, it is not unheard of to stop in the middle of a sports event, in a large stadium, to give everyone time to bow down and pray. It is an impressive sight to see hundreds of Muslims, every nation, race and rank, prostrate together in prayer. If we are not reaching Muslims, it is because they are putting us to shame when it comes to prayer. The main gathering of the Muslim community for prayers is in the mosque at noon on Friday, which is the sabbath of Islam.

Pillar No. 3 is **Zakat**. Almsgiving. Giving money for the aid of the poor and the building of the community is a sacred duty in

Islam. Muslims are required to give 2.5% of their gross income. The community keeps close tabs on it. And let me say that most mosques receive much more per capita on the mandatory 2.5% than churches do by relying on a voluntary 10%. One reason why Muslim communities in the United States are strong is that they really help one another through their giving.

Pillar No. 4 is *Ramadan*, the month of fasting. Each year, during this sacred month, Muslims are expected to go without food, drink, tobacco etc. during daylight hours. (Muhammad was probably influenced by the Christian fast at Lent.) Because the Muslim calendar is lunar, the date of this month changes each year. Islamic dates start from the date of the Hijrah, when Muhammad fled from Mecca and went on to become the leader of the rival city of Medina.

Pillar No. 5. The *Hajj*. The pilgrimage to Mecca. Once in a lifetime, every Muslim man and woman is expected, if they are able, to make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. This involves an elaborate celebration, including the rite of marching around the Ka'aba stone. (The veneration of the Ka'aba dates back to an ancient pagan practice.) Every year, millions of Muslims go to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj pilgrimage. Because it is a sacred land, non-Muslims are not allowed in the holy cities of Saudi Arabia.

Why did Islam spread so quickly after Muhammad? Contrary to the traditional myth, it was not so much because of the sword. In actual fact, the Christians of the Middle East, at that time, were divided quarrelling over religious differences. Those Christians who were being persecuted by the Roman Emperor of the Byzantine Empire actually welcomed the Muslims who allowed them to practice their brand of Christianity without persecution. This is one of the ironies of history: that Christians fighting each other opened the door to Islam.

Through the years, however, discrimination against Christians has grown in the Muslim world. Relations took a real turn for the worst

after the Crusades. Today, with the passing of colonialism, and the upsurge of fundamentalist Islam, the life of Christians in Muslim lands is becoming more and more difficult. When I am on a program in a dialogue with Muslim leaders, here is my caveat: “All we ask is that Christians in Muslim lands be treated as well as Muslims are treated in Christian countries.” If that happens, the truth of Christ’s message can certainly hold its own.

Relations of Muslims with each other have also gotten more difficult in recent years. Muslims will tell you that they all are one, that there are no sects or denominations such as we have in Christianity. This is not exactly accurate. Not only have the mystics, called *Sufis*, always had a separate community, but now, the differences between Sunni and Shi`a Muslims are becoming more apparent. Sunnis are those who accept just the basic law based on the *Sunna*, or example of Muhammad. Shiites believe that Muslims should be led by a blood relative of Muhammad, someone descended from the Prophet’s nephew Ali, who was one of the earliest successors to Muhammad.

So, in the face of all this, what is the Christian approach? What response can we followers of Jesus Christ have to Muslims? Summed up in a word it is love. Love! The Muslim world is a world that is starved to know the love of Jesus Christ. That is the real difference that Christianity makes. In Islam, there is too much legalism, too much fatalism, too much fundamentalism, too much negativism. Too much putting down of women. Too much discrimination toward other faiths. What Muslims are yearning for is the type of love that can only be found in Christ. You and I can share that with them. Let me close this section by repeating the Bible’s commandment in **1 Peter 2:12** *“Live such good lives among the people of other religions that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God”* As the song says, “They’ll know we are Christians by out love.”

## Chapter 3

### The Life of Muhammad

After the quick overview, let's now look at Islam in a little more detail. One of the great barriers to Christians having relationships with Muslims is the fact that Christians know so embarrassingly little about Islam. Of course, we cannot do justice to this topic in the short space that is available, but it seems worthwhile to review some of the basic facts. The more familiar we are with the basic history of Islam, the better equipped we will be to understand the worldview of our Muslim neighbors and to discuss our two religions. Let's begin with Muhammad.

#### Who was Muhammad?

It is impossible to understand Islam without some appreciation of its founder, the prophet Muhammad. Muslims see him as the person whom God chose to be the vehicle of His final Word. In addition to the Qur'an, which he proclaimed, the life of Muhammad is the defining paradigm for all of Islamic law.

I want to be clear: Muslims do not worship Muhammad. Too many Christians jump to this mistaken assumption. Because we worship Christ and other religions worship their founder, we assume that Muhammad is also worshipped, but this assumption is wrong.

Muslims are very strict monotheists. Only God may be worshipped. Muslims believe that God is simply God, not the "Three Persons" (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) of the Christian Trinity. Muslims are particularly offended by the suggestion that God could have a son. From their point of view, this is a throwback to the pantheon of the pagans. We Christians know that we are monotheists. We can see that there is just one God. But we

have a hard time explaining the Trinity to Muslims. (If indeed we understand it ourselves!)

### Muhammad as a Prophet

On the one hand, Muhammad is considered to be equal with all the other prophets of the Qur'an, including Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and others. On the other hand, Muhammad is the "Seal of the Prophets." He is *the* Prophet with a capital P because he was the vessel entrusted with the Qur'an which Muslims believe to be the final and ultimate Word of God.

One way to understand the difference between the Christian and Muslim perspectives is this. To Christians, Christ is the ultimate eternal Word of God. The New Testament is revered as the vehicle by which God reveals Christ, the Word. To Muslims, the Qur'an is the Eternal Word. Muhammad is revered as the means by which God delivered the Word. Muslims generally consider Muhammad to be infallible.

### Early Life

We do not know much about Muhammad's early life. He was born 570 A.D. in Mecca, the center of the thriving spice trade of Arabia. His father died just before he was born, and his mother died just a couple of years later, leaving him an orphan. Abu Talib, his wealthy uncle, cared for him.

Muhammad worked his way up in the business of leading caravans. He began to work for a wealthy widow named Khadijah. When he was twenty five, the forty year old Khadijah proposed marriage, and Muhammad accepted. As it turns out, she was the love of his life and his first convert. For as long as she lived, Muhammad never married another woman.

### Receiving Revelations

Muhammad was an earnest seeker of religious truth. He was inspired by the prayerful solitude of Christian monks, and he often went into the hills to meditate. On one of these occasions, he heard a voice speak to him. Worried and fearful, he discussed this experience with his wife, and she encouraged him to be receptive to the voice. Muhammad's experience has invoked parallels in Christian history, such as Paul's experience on the road to Damascus or Augustine hearing a voice to take the Bible and read it.

One of the earliest messages Muhammad related as follows:

Proclaim: In the Name of thy Lord, the one who created,  
created man from a single cell.

Proclaim: And thy Lord is the Most Generous...

...who taught man what he did not know. (Qur'an  
96:2-5)

Muhammad recited what he heard. His followers memorized it and eventually wrote it down. The word *qur'an* is Arabic for that which is proclaimed or recited. Many of the early messages sounded like religious oracles. Increasingly there came calls for social justice. The messages contained vivid warnings of the Day of Judgment and hell's fire. But above all, the revelations of the Qur'an were a call for absolute monotheism, the worship of the one true God (Allah in Arabic), who had been known to Jews, Christians and other faithful believers down through the ages.

Those who submitted to this message of God were called Muslims. Khadijah was the first. Soon afterward came Abu Bakr, as well as Muhammad's nephew Ali and a few others. Some, like Abu Bakr, were citizens of means, but most were poor, even some slaves.

### Trouble at Mecca

The economic vehicle that enriched Mecca was the pilgrimage to a shrine called the ka'ba, home to three pagan goddesses. As more

people embraced Muhammad's monotheism, the local economy, which was focused on the pagan goddesses, became threatened. Muhammad and his followers faced ridicule, ostracism, and physical threats. After the deaths of Khadijah and Abu Talib, his two most important protectors, Muhammad's position became untenable.

He had begun to move his followers to a base of operations outside of Mecca when the leaders of Yathrib, a city torn by the bloody revenge of tribal feuds, came to Muhammad and asked him to come and be their arbiter and leader. Evidently Muhammad's reputation for integrity had preceded him.

Muhammad's enemies did not want to see him leave, and they plotted to kill him. He and Abu Bakr escaped from the city, and they managed to elude their pursuers. This flight, or Hijrah, would be the turning point in Muhammad's life. His followers later selected the date of the escape, September 22, 622 as the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

### A New Beginning in Medina

The key proviso in Muhammad's agreeing to accept the call to his new position was that the people of the city would adopt Islam as the official religion. Yathrib came to be called Medina, "the City (of the Prophet)," his residence for the rest of his life. The revelations of the Qur'an continued during Muhammad's stay there.

One of the dynamics of life in Medina was the fact that a number of Jews lived in and around the city. On the one hand, Muhammad began to distinguish Islam as a religion separate from Jews and Christians, "the people of the book." On the other hand, Muhammad and his followers were deeply influenced by Judaism (as they had been by Christianity). Like Judaism, Islam developed an intricate system of laws, including dietary laws forbidding pork.

Jerusalem was originally the direction towards which Muslims prayed. During one unforgettable night Muhammad had a vision, the *mir`aj*, in which he felt that he was transported on a magical steed to Jerusalem, and from there into the heavens, where he met the messengers of God who had gone before him. The vision formalized Muhammad's understanding of his relationship to previous prophets, and it enshrined Jerusalem as the third holiest city of Islam.

### Muhammad's Leadership

Muhammad was already a gifted organizer and administrator; he turned out to be a capable political and military leader as well. First, he organized his followers, providing rules for worship and behavior, and then he organized the city with new laws and a highly motivated militia. After overcoming local opposition, he initiated military campaigns against Mecca. Despite a couple of reversals, he was finally able to bring his native city under his control, and the Ka'ba became a Muslim pilgrimage shrine. This move had been anticipated by the fact that Muslims had changed the direction of their prayers towards Mecca.

When Muhammad died in , he had united the tribes of Arabia under his control, and he was preparing a military campaign against the Christian Byzantine Roman Empire that would meet with astounding posthumous success.

### A Christian Assessment of Muhammad

How would a traditional Christian assess the life of Muhammad? Muhammad was clearly one of the important figures of history, and the founder of a great religion. We could go so far to say that he was a genius in a number of areas. We have mentioned his gifts for organization, administration, politics and military strategy. Leadership was his strong suit. He was also a gifted speaker. The Qur'an is a collection of powerful sermons that he felt God spoke through him. There are a number of speeches outside the Qur'an

which also had a powerful impact. People were drawn to him; they were often willing to follow him to the death.

After the death of Khadijah, Muhammad married Aisha, the daughter of his dear friend Abu Bakr. Eventually he would marry three additional women. Following his example, that number of wives is still permitted to men under Islamic law. To the modern reader, this fact undermines the truth that, in the very primitive Arabian society where he lived, Muhammad actually did a great deal to improve the rights of women. While the role of Muslim is being debated both inside and outside the Islamic world, we are reminded that several Muslim countries have had women leaders.

Muhammad was a very spiritual person; he had the courage to lift up the one true God in the midst of a polytheistic pagan world. He stated clearly that God had spoken through Jesus, Christians and the Gospel. He acknowledged Jesus as a great prophet, a teacher, and the promised Messiah. We might also say that the Qur'an is a powerful book. It contains many good points and a number of true statements. The Qur'an even defends the Virgin Birth of Jesus. If Muhammad had not varied from the teachings of Christ and the Bible, we Christians might have been willing to say that he was *a* (but not *the*) prophet or messenger of God.

Friends can agree to disagree. There are a number of points where Christians have a different perspective from Muhammad and the Qur'an. In the first place, we acknowledge Jesus as much more than just a prophet. We look to Christ as the Savior of the World, and we trust him as our Savior. We worship Jesus as Lord. We believe that he was somehow fully divine as well as fully human. We believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Although Muslims sometimes mistake us for polytheists, we believe that there is only one God. We can agree with the Muslim shibboleth: There is no god but God. Arabic Bibles referred to God as Allah long before Muhammad was born.

Another major difference has to do with the source of authority. We believe that the Bible is the complete and final Word of God as the written statement of God's message to us. We accept those things which are in accordance with the Bible, but we cannot accept those things which disagree with the Bible. Therefore we cannot accept the things in the Qur'an or in Islamic law that contradict our scriptures.

We differ with the Muslim claim that "Islam supplements Christianity in the same way that Christianity supplements Judaism." Christianity accepts every word of the canonical Jewish scriptures as true, and we receive these scriptures as part of our own canon. If Islam likewise accepted every word of the Old and New Testaments as a literally true part of the Qur'an, there would be much less ground for disagreement.

It is difficult for Christians when the Qur'an, Muhammad and Muslims claim to correct the Bible and tell us what really happened in our own history. We feel that the correction is problematic. In the first place, it comes some 600-2600 years after the events and their documentation. Secondly, this re-writing of history and of God's Word is based on the revelation experience of a single individual, rather than through reliable contemporary reporters. The great strength of the Bible is that it comes from dozens of people who were usually eye-witnesses of the events they reported. In other cases, they were recipients of the community's unbroken oral tradition.

Hopefully, this chapter has left us better acquainted with Muhammad and the Qur'an. On the one hand, we have been impressed by the leadership qualities of the Prophet and by the impact of the Book which he proclaimed. From this perspective, we have been well informed to set out some of the differences and commonalities between the Muslim and the Christian point of view. In the next chapter, we will turn our attention to history after Muhammad, the Golden Age of the Islamic world.

## Chapter 4

## Islam after Muhammad

Every religion, movement, or organization goes through a critical phase after the loss of its founder. Either the movement falls apart, or able leaders step up to take the founder's place. We see this in Christianity. After Jesus' death and resurrection, the Twelve Apostles and then Paul provided critical leadership for the fledgling church. Likewise, in Islam, Muhammad was followed by capable leaders who continued to develop the laws and worship of the community while at the same time supporting Islamic armies that were bringing Arab control to most of the civilized world.

## The Rightly-Guided Caliphs

When Muhammad died in 632, his devoted friend Abu Bakr was elected as the "Caliph" or successor to the Prophet. Abu Bakr began collecting written records of Muhammad's Qur'an proclamations. The first Caliph died in 634, and he was succeeded by the devout Muslim `Umar. `Umar collected the Suras or chapters of the Qur'an into the form that we know today.

Before he died, Muhammad had been preparing to extend Islamic conquest beyond Arabia by doing battle with the struggling Christian Byzantine Empire that controlled Egypt and Syria. During `Umar's reign, Muslim armies experienced phenomenal success. Damascus fell in 635, Jerusalem in 638, Egypt in 641. Christians were allowed to keep their religion in tact, so long as they did not resist and paid a special tax. Ironically, the tax was often less than the burden which had been imposed by the Byzantine (or Eastern Roman) Empire. In fact, many of the Christians had been persecuted because they held beliefs which the Byzantine authorities considered heretical.

After the Fall of Rome in 476 A.D., the Western Roman Empire had been ruled by Gothic leaders who were Arian Christians. Muslim armies swept across Gothic kingdoms in North Africa and Spain. They were finally stopped by the Franks in 732 A.D., 100 years after the death of Muhammad. In the East, Muslims quickly overran the ailing Sassanian Persian Empire, pouring through Mesopotamia into Central Asia, Iran and Afghanistan.

When `Umar was murdered in 644, `Uthman, a son-in-law of the Prophet, ruled for about ten years. `Uthman was succeeded by Ali, Muhammad's nephew, son-in-law, and early covert. By this time, a number of Muslims believed that the Islamic world should be led by a blood relative of Muhammad. They had resented `Uthman because he was from the rival tribe of Mecca which had originally opposed Muhammad.

### The Umayyad Dynasty 661-750

The Muslim governor of Syria, also from the rival tribe of Mecca, never accepted the leadership of Ali and sent an army against him. Before they could engage in battle, Ali was assassinated. The governor, Mu`awiyya, became the founder of the Umayyad Dynasty. The Umayyads generally kept the existing institutions of the people they ruled, living somewhat separately on the profits of their newly-acquired kingdoms.

Meanwhile, Husayn, Muhammad's grandson and Ali's son, rebelled against the Umayyads and tried to reestablish a Caliphate of the Prophet's family. He was slaughtered in a bloody battle in Karbala, Iraq (680 A.D.), and his severed head sent to Damascus.

To this day, a branch of Muslims believes that Islam should be ruled by the family of Muhammad through Ali and Husayn. They are called the Shi'a or "Party" of Ali, better known as Shiites. The spiritual leader of the community should be an Imam, or successor to Ali. Shiites have an intense sense of persecution which

influences their memorials, such as the annual gathering at Karbala in Iraq. Iran is a Shiite country. On the other hand, the majority of Muslims believe that they are guided not so much by the family as by the authoritative example, or *sunnah*, of Muhammad. These are called Sunni Muslims.

### The Abbasid Dynasty 750-1500

The Abbasid Caliphs, who took over in 750, marked the Golden Age of Islam. They built a new capital at Baghdad. These Rulers were strong despots. Islam had become the dominant religion, and under Abbasid rule, Islamic culture flourished. Greek literature was translated into Arabic. Science and medicine increased among the Abbasids while such learning suffered in Europe. Persian literature experienced a Renaissance. Great movements of Islamic law and mysticism were born. Baghdad became the unsurpassed center of learning and culture. This is the world of the Arabian Nights; it is a culture which dazzled the Crusaders.

Located at the geographic as well as the cultural crossroads of the world, the Abbasid Empire would be challenged by invaders. First, Turkic tribes from Central Asia, and eventually the Mongols. But, more significant to our study, Crusaders came from Europe. In 1095, Pope Urban II called for a Crusade to take back the shrines of the Holy Land from its Muslim rulers. Crusaders reestablished Christian rule over Jerusalem in 1099, but during the twelfth century, the Christian armies were steadily defeated, and they were completely driven out by 1244.

From an Islamic point of view, the Crusades are a dark point in Christian-Muslim relations. The Muslim world had not expected such an invasion. And it was the first time that Christians had reconquered land lost to Muslims centuries before. It also brought a sense of a continuing threat from the Christian West that has continued down through Colonialism and into modern times. The Christian atrocities of the Crusades are still remembered among Muslims. And there were atrocities on both sides. At first,

European knights could not tell the local populace apart, and they killed Eastern Christians together with Muslims. Although the original rationale for the Crusades was to come to the aid of the Byzantine Empire, the Crusaders ended up sacking Byzantium itself in their greed for loot. This Christian Eastern Roman Empire was so weakened by the Crusades that it gradually succumbed to Muslim conquest. For the millions of Christians living under Muslim rule, life became more difficult, and it would never be the same.

Another sad comparison may be drawn between the Muslim conquest of Byzantium and the Christian reconquest of Spain in 1492. When the Ottoman Turks overran Constantinople in 1453, allowed most of the Greek Orthodox Church to continue. On the other hand, the Spanish employed the Inquisition. In Spain, Muslims, Jews and Heretical Christians were forced to convert to the Catholic faith, or they were faced with torture and death.

### The Sultanates

After 1500, great changes were occurring in the Muslim world. As Colonial nations were making their first voyages into Asia, the Abbasid Caliphate was succeeded by several empires ruled by Sultans. The three most prominent of these Sultanates were the Ottomans in a region running from Turkey to Egypt, the Safavids in Iraq and Iran, and the Moguls in India. Islam had not only spread into India, but into Indonesia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world today. If India and Pakistan were still one nation, as they were under the British until 1947, that country would have the largest Muslim population.

This chapter has presented a brief survey of Islam during its Golden Age. In the next chapter, we will look at the changes which have taken place in the Muslim world during more recent times.

## Chapter 5

## Variety and Change in the Modern Muslim World

We have seen that the Muslim world is a world of variety. Let's take a moment to look at some of the issues that are interwoven with this variety. At the heart of many of the issues is the role of the *Shariah* or Islamic law.

When we think about law, our first thought would be the laws of the land which are enacted by Congress, state legislatures, and local governments. When we think about religious laws, we might think of the rules which govern our denomination or the by-laws for our local congregation. On the other hand, if we were to think about Orthodox Judaism, we might see in it a vast code of religious laws which include many minutiae of diet and personal behavior.

The *Shariah* of Islam is much more like the law of Orthodox Judaism. In fact, we might say that the *Shariah* goes even further because it also provides laws to govern society and even the national government. The guiding principle of Islamic law is that every conceivable action which a human being could take has been evaluated to be either permitted or forbidden.

At its core, Islam is a very legalistic religion. In fact, salvation is determined on the Day of Judgment. Every person's good deeds will be put on one side of the scales, and their wrong deeds will be put on the other. Whichever way the scales tip determines whether they go to heaven or hell.

I know a vast number of ill-informed nominal Christians who have this same perception of Judgment Day, but it is an understanding which directly contradicts scripture. The Bible tells us that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, through his grace, and not by any good deeds on our part. We speak of salvation as God's gift, given through Christ.

Muslims are comforted by the legalistic approach to faith. They believe that God is merciful because not leave us without guidance. Through the law, God shows us what is right and wrong in all things. They believe that a person can have confidence in their status before God according to whether they are following the rules as set out by the Lord in the Qur'an and clarified in the Shariah.

So, every action which a citizen could take, in fact every action which a nation could undertake, should be covered by the Shariah. Therefore many devout Muslims believe that a country really needs no law beyond the Shariah. After all, this is the not only the ultimate law; but, from their point of view, it is the ultimate Word of God to govern human beings.

We remember that Muhammad's first successors, like the prophet himself, were the spiritual as well as the political and military leaders of the community. With the coming of the Umayyad caliphs, these two roles began to split. Throughout most of history, Islamic countries have been ruled by monarchs. The ruler's decisions set the final parameters for day to day life. But there was the assumption that Islamic law was also at work regulating the life of the people.

### Western Influence on Law and Government

With the coming of Western influence, there has been an increase in constitutional government, which was usually a secular form of government. When the colonial powers of Europe took control of a country, they required a constitutional type of government. Countries that were not under colonial control sometimes followed the constitutional system on their own.

Now the colonial era has ended, but we have seen some interesting combinations in its wake. In one country, it might be possible to see a combination of monarchical law, constitutional law, Islamic

law and even military law, all at once. The constitution itself might be passed by a democratic parliament or prescribed by a dictator.

Other factors have accompanied the changing dynamics of law during modern times. One has been the coming of secular principles of government. A second has been an emphasis on human rights. A resulting third factor has been the relaxing of some moral values. And finally, there is the dominating influence of Western business, and the increasing presence of Western culture and dress.

From colonial times and beyond, the dominating countries of Europe and the United States have introduced the concept that egalitarian secular values, not religious mores, should define society and the law of the land. Individual freedom is one of the highest values in Western law and life.

Traditional Muslims, particularly in developing countries, would give a mixed review to these values. As a rule, the people of every culture value their own individual rights and freedoms. This is particularly true where economic opportunities and benefits are concerned. On the other hand, deeply religious people tend to resent laws that permit immoral behavior. In the Islamic world, there is a reaction to the loss of circumspect traditional Islamic conduct.

### Women and Culture

The role of women varies greatly between communities and from one country to the next. Traditionally, the Shariah calls for women to be covered, except perhaps for their faces and hands. In very traditional communities, even the face and hands would be seen only by the husband. In traditional communities it was normal for marriages to be arranged. Men, rather than women, had the prerogative to make the decisions. The Shariah permits one man to have up to four wives, based on the example of Muhammad.

There are parts of the world where women still live under these very burdensome circumstances. We modern Christians are outraged by some of these practices, and we see them as the oppression of the women affected. In truth, many Muslims, in the West especially but also around the world, would agree with our outrage. On the other hand, many Muslims would be more inclined to patience, saying that traditional cultures are slow to evolve. They would suggest that, as people grow in understanding, changes are inevitable. Finally, there will be a few Muslims who say that each culture should be free to choose its own way and not have values forced on it by the West or by modernizers.

The attempts to harmonize Shariah and modern principles have led to some interesting combinations. In Iran, for instance, the freely elected government is run by religious parties and every effort is made to make Islam the law of the land. So we see thoroughly modern women required to wear at least a scarf. Many of these women might leave it off if they had a choice, but now they take it in stride, and it generally ceases to be an issue. Women function at every level of Iranian society, and there is one interesting quirk which has come from the Islamic approach. Iran continues to emphasize universal education, but Islam prefers that women teach women. Therefore, there is a push to have half of all teachers be women, from preschool to graduate school. In Iran today, a man should have only one wife.

We would like to embrace a world view where women are continually becoming more enlightened and leaving the veil behind. And yet, there is also a contrary trend. A growing number of women in the United States, and around the world, are freely choosing to wear the veil, at least as a headscarf, to show their loyalty to Islam and to identify themselves as Muslims. What a contrast this is to places such as Turkey where, in 1925, the wearing of the veil was outlawed as a sign that the nation had become part of the modern world.

In recent years, there has been a growing reaction to Western values and an increasing revival of traditional Islam. Through the years, Muslims have resented the dominance of Europe and the United States. First, there were the Crusades. But then, in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century, the colonial powers, which were Western, Christian, secular nations simply took over nearly every part of the Islamic world and divided it to suit their whims. True, many of these regions were ruled by oppressive foreign regimes, albeit fellow Muslims. True, many advances were made, freedoms were established, and modern conveniences began to be enjoyed. But we Christians of the West, buoyed by a sense of missionary triumphalism, have failed to understand the deep abiding resentment which comes from having one's homeland captured and dominated by a foreign power.

Even after the Islamic world was liberated from colonialism, it continued to be dominated by the influence of multinational businesses from the West. Whereas we might see Coca-Cola signs on every corner as a sign of prosperity and happiness, traditional Muslims might see it as a symbol of economic domination.

We see evidence of reaction in a number of places. For instance, it was no accident that the World Trade Center Towers were the target for repeated attacks. The towers were one of the greatest symbols of economic domination. This does not excuse the horror of the attack, but it points to why this particular site was chosen.

As a second example of reaction to the West, we see that the revival of Islam around the world has been funded by nations which have achieved economic independence and world influence through oil wealth. Saudi Arabia and Iran are examples. An increasing number of oil rich Islamic countries are feeling the heady confidence of not only standing on their own economically, but also having an impact on the rest of the world. In Dubai, we

see an isolated desert coast suddenly transformed into one of the world's financial centers.

## Jihad

In the midst of the revival of Islam, we come to the controversial topic of jihad. Originally, the Arabic word *jihad* meant “struggle”. This could be an individual's struggle to remain faithful and obedient. It could be the community's struggle to stand up for the faith. According to the Qur'an, Muslims are not to be the aggressors, but they may fight to defend their faith. In fact, martyrs for Islam are promised a special place in paradise.

Societies with military resources tend to stretch the meaning of “defense,” and the Islamic world is no exception. For instance, al-Qaida has interpreted all Western troops in the Middle East as an attack on Islam. These forces are sometimes called “Crusaders.” Osama bin Laden referred to American bases in Saudi Arabia territory near Iraq as a desecration of the holy soil of Islam, because Saudi Arabia is where the holy cities of Mecca and Medina are located. No non-Muslim is permitted to visit these cities. Another problem which upsets Arabs and Muslims around the world is the taking of Arab land by Israel.

The great majority of Muslims around the world reject the call for militant jihad. They would see al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden as dangerous and harmful influences. Still, they wish that there were no U.S. or European troops in the Middle East. They do not trust Israel, and they are critical of its abuses. They wonder if Middle East policy is sometimes misguided. They believe that the U.S. news media is biased against Muslims.

Although some Muslims remain skeptical, al-Jazira Network has been welcomed in the Islamic world as an attempt to present the other point of view.

## Struggle in America

Muslims living in the U.S. have experienced prejudice because of their faith and their ethnic heritage. It is particularly challenging for those who wear traditional clothing, follow Islamic dietary laws, take time for weekly worship at midday on Friday or faithfully observe religious holidays. The days following September 11 marked a high point of abuse and misunderstanding.

These are sobering observations for us Christians to read, but I write as a brother in Christ. We cannot be friends with Muslims, if we do not understand their point of view. As a rule, American Muslims will be looking to fit in, and they want to be free to enjoy the opportunities and benefits of life in our land. Unfortunately, they will find few Christians who are familiar with the issues that are set out in this chapter.

As Christ's followers, we are called to agape love. We are guided by the Golden Rule, to treat others as we would like to be treated. What a difference it makes when we can begin to understand what the world might look like from a Muslim point of view. It is part of being a good neighbor. In the next chapter, we will talk about our Muslim neighbors and what it means to be a friend.

Don't hesitate to ask Muslims questions. What role does the Shariah have in your life and your family? How does the Qur'an guide you? How do you and your family worship? Do you abstain from alcohol, pork and other foods? What holidays do you enjoy? What happens during these times? Do you ever experience difficult moments because of your faith?

## Chapter 6

## If Only They Understood

As a way of promoting dialogue between Christians and Muslims, I am offering these two sections: “What Christians wish Muslims knew” and “What Muslims wish Christians knew.”

## Part 1

What Christians wish Muslims knew about Christians:

1. Christians are monotheists. They worship only one God. Though they believe that Christ shared the nature of God, and that the Holy Spirit is the form of God known in our hearts, there is still just one God, who in Arabic is called Allah.
2. Christianity, like Islam, stands against immorality, atheism and godlessness.
3. Christians can accept the heart of the *Shahada*, or basic creed of Islam, which declares: There is not god but God (Allah), and Muhammad is the Prophet (Messenger) of God.” Every Christian can affirm: “There is no god but God.” Many Christians could affirm Muhammad as a prophet. Yet they would not accept him as *the* last, final and authoritative Messenger of God. Christians certainly agree with the statement *Allahu akbar*, “God is greater (than anything else in the universe).” It offends Christians, however, when these words are uttered during acts of violence.
4. Christians strongly believe in submission to God. They submit to God as He has revealed Himself in the Old and New Testaments. In fact, it is the goal of a Christian to

deny himself completely and to allow God's Holy Spirit to live through him.

5. Christians are people of peace. Jesus is called the "Prince of Peace." In the New Testament, Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God."
6. Western concepts of political freedom have evolved from Christians following the "Golden Rule" of Jesus: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." In just about all of the countries of the West where Christians form a majority, Muslims enjoy equality as citizens, the freedom to practice their religion, and the right to receive converts. Christians ask that these rights be granted to the Christians who are living in Muslim countries.

Here are some passages from the New Testament that I believe speak to relations between Christians and Muslims:

Have good and honorable behavior among the people of other religions, so that, although they speak against you as if you were evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. 1 Peter 2:12

Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. Matthew 7:12

But I [Jesus] say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask them back. And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise. Luke 6:27-31, Matthew 5:44

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. John 14:27

Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Matthew 11:28-30

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

And though I give away all my possessions to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude.

Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in the wrong, but rejoices in the right.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

But where there are prophecies, they will be lost; where there are tongues, they will cease; where there is knowledge, it will vanish away.

For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall understand fully just as I have been fully understood.

So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

## 1 Corinthians 13

Jesus taught his followers, saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew 5:2-12

## Part 2

What Muslims wish Christians knew about Muslims:

1. We worship the same God. The word *Allah* simply means “God”. This word was used in the Arabic translations of the Old and New Testaments for hundreds of years before Muhammad was born, and it is still used in Arabic Christian Bibles today. Muhammad said that he was calling for a revival of faith in the God that Christians were already worshipping.
2. Islam is a religion of peace. In fact, the very words *Islam* and *Muslim* mean “peace.” In Arabic, just as in Hebrew, the three basic consonants in the root of a word determine its meaning. The root SLM means “peace,” as in the specific word for peace, *SaLaam*. This is the same as the Hebrew word *ShaLoM*. *'iSLaM* means the submission to God which brings peace, and a *muSLiM* is someone who has found peace by submitting to God.

Muslims are not terrorists. More than 99.9% of all Muslims deplore terrorism. When a Christian commits a bombing, such as that in Oklahoma, other Christians see this as a deviation from what a Christian is supposed to be. Likewise, when a Muslim commits a bombing, Muslims see this as a deviation. Within every religion, there are deviants who are crazy evil-filled people. All of us wish that the world did not have such people, and we would like to be safe from them. Over all, terrorists have killed many more Muslims than Christians.

3. Muslims can accept the two Great Commandments of Jesus without reservation: Jesus said: “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great

commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-40) Every word of these statements, faith in God and helping others, is consistent with the belief and practice of Islam. Muhammad and Muslims are sincerely trying to hear and follow God.

4. Both Christianity and Islam stand against immorality, atheism and godlessness.
5. The Qur’an, like the prophets of the Bible, speaks of God as a God of mercy as well as a God of judgment.
6. Muslims have great respect for Jesus. They honor him as a prophet. They believe in the virgin birth of Christ, as well as in his miracles and his ascension into heaven.
7. Muslims emphasize good works, especially helping those who are in need.
8. The Qur’an required Muhammad and his followers to honor and protect Christians and Jews as fellow “People of the Book.” The Qur’an mentions and accepts many of the people and events of the Old and New Testaments.
9. The word *jihad*, which really means “struggle,” is intended to mean the struggle to be faithful to God, not Holy War. The Qur’an teaches Muslims not to fight for their faith unless they are attacked.
10. Muslims have tended to treat Christians humanely down through the ages. An example would be the contrast between the Ottoman conquest of Byzantium in 1453 and the reconquest of Spain in 1492, two events which occurred at roughly the same time. The new rulers of Turkey preserved most of the churches and Christian communities.

In Spain, by contrast, the Inquisition forced Muslims to convert to Christianity under threat of death or exile. Muslims wish Christians would acknowledge the atrocities of the Crusades and the oppression of colonialism.

Here are some passages from the Qur'an that I think are relevant to relations between Muslims and Christians:

You shall find the nearest in amity to those who have faith to be those who say, 'We are Christians.' This is because there are among them learned men and monks, and they are not arrogant. When they listen to that which was sent down to the Messenger, you see their eyes well up with tears as they recognize the truth. Qur'an 5:82

Surely those who have faith, those who are Jews, and those who are Christians, and the Sabaeans, whoever has faith in God, and in the last day, and does good works, will have his reward with his Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor will they grieve. Qur'an 2:62.

True righteousness is this: to have faith in God and in the last day, the angels, the scriptures and the prophets; to give of one's wealth, though it may be cherished, to the next of kin and to the orphans, the destitute and the wayfarer, to the needy and for the redemption of slaves; to observe regular worship and to give the obligatory alms. Those who fulfill their covenant having bound themselves to it and those who are patient in misfortune and adversity and in times of strife: these are true in their faith; these are God fearing. Qur'an 2:177

Do not dispute with people of the book [i.e. Jews and Christians] except in the fairest manner, save with those of them who have committed wrong. Say, 'We have faith in that which was sent down to us and that which was sent down to you. Our God and

your God is one God; to Him we are submitters (Arabic *muslims*)'. Qur'an 29:46

Let there be no compulsion in religion. Qur'an 2:256

To every one of you, We have appointed a way and a course to follow, for had God so willed, He would have made you all one single community [i.e. religion]. Rather He would test you by means of that which He had bestowed upon you, who of you is of better deeds. Vie therefore with one another in works of righteousness. For, to God shall be your return and He will inform you of all that in which you had differed. Qur'an 5:48

Not through your desires, or the desires of the people of the Book... But whoever performs good deeds, be it male or female, and has faith: these shall enter paradise, nor will they be wronged in the least. Qur'an 4:122-123

## Chapter 7

## Friendship with Muslims

We all need friends. A good friend is one of the greatest blessings that God has provided us in this beautiful world. I find that my friends are a great source of strength in my life. I feel strong and happy because I know that they believe in me and affirm me. I know that I can turn to them when I face failure, discouragement and unhappiness. They take away the sting of loneliness which we human beings sometimes experience. And it is not just what I receive from friendship, it is also the joy I get from giving encouragement to a friend when they need it. There is the happiness of just being together with someone I care about.

In many ways, friendship with a Muslim person is just like friendship with anyone else. People are people all over the world. And every person enjoys having a good friend. On the other hand, some Muslims in the United States feel a sense of isolation. This feeling might be especially significant when they live in a community where there are not many other Muslims. They may even have experienced prejudice from being different. There are a lot of Muslims who would sincerely like to have more true friends among mainstream Americans. If you are a sincere Christian, they might very well respect you for your faith and religious values, rather than reject you.

Among Muslims, women tend to feel more isolation than men. It is relatively easy for the husband to make friends at work and the children to make friends at school, but in traditional Islamic families, women are sheltered and tend to spend more time at home. At the same time, these women see the community where they live, and often wish for a broader society of friends. They might prefer one or two close friends to the banter of a large, unfamiliar gathering of women.

## A Few Suggestions

Here are some of the recommendations that I would have for all true friends. They seem to fit very well for Christians who are friends with Muslims.

**Respect gender sensitivities.** As a rule, in a relationship with traditional Muslims, men should seek friendship with men, and women with women. The next step would be that one family might have a relationship with another. Unless they are children or single young adults, men should avoid relationships with Muslim women, and women should avoid relationships with Muslim men. Muslims appreciate friends who are sensitive to these issues. They also appreciate friends who are interested in and informed about Islam and its rules.

**Be inviting.** When you meet someone whom you might enjoy having as a friend, find the appropriate way to invite them to get together. If you work at the same place, you might spend a few moments at his desk, or beside him in the cafeteria, or invite him to lunch. If you are a mother of school children, you might chat with a fellow mom at the bus stop, or offer to car pool, or invite the children over to play.

**Spend time together.** Good friends simply enjoy time in one another's presence. Some friends chat every moment. Others enjoy long periods of silence. But all enjoy being together. When it is appropriate, share things about yourself. Where did you grow up? What was your family like? Where did you go to school? What is your spouse like? Where did you meet?

**Be a good listener.** We all love having someone to talk to. It helps to share your own experiences and feeling. If the other person is shy, you can share things with them where it is appropriate. But it also helps to listen. You cannot possibly listen, if you do all the talking. I have found that even the shyest person

eventually has something to say, if they know that you are really listening.

**Affirm your friend.** All of us need affirmation. Every person has self-doubts. We need reassurance. We need encouragement. When you offer this to a friend, you give a valuable gift indeed.

**Celebrate the things that you have in common.** Do you both work at the same place? Are you both mothers? Are your children in the same class? Were you born in the same month? Are you both active in your religious communities? Are your parents sickly? Are your real estate taxes going up? Do you attend soccer games after school? Do you like to cook? Do you like to try new foods? Are you secretly addicted to ice cream?

**Do things together.** Sign up for the same seminar at work. Host the class party together. Go grocery shopping on the same day. Attend the community picnic. Walk together. Take the kids to the park. If your friend was born in another country, would you be willing to start learning their native language?

**Affirm their family.** Family experiences and family values are very important to Muslims. Be a good listener and affirm your friend's feelings, but do not criticize their spouse. Do not suggest activities which pull their family apart. Do not get hung up on their traditionalism. Share your own family-centered priorities.

**Introduce them to others.** Depending on their personality, they may not enjoy being overwhelmed by new faces. Still, you might have another close friend who would also enjoy their company. If the two of you have become comfortable together, the three of you might hit it off. Be sure to make them feel included, and not outnumbered. If they invite you to meet a friend or family member, accept this cherished opportunity. Unless it is problematic, offer to have your spouses meet one another. When there are appropriate community activities, invite them and their families to participate.

**Stand by them during difficult times.** If they are having difficulties at work, you might offer sympathy and encouragement. Be understanding if their child or spouse is having problems. When they are downhearted or depressed, spend time with them and offer encouragement. If they need the help of a professional, offer it in a diplomatic way, but do not be interfering or offensive. When they are sick, be sure to visit. If they have a sick family member, you might send a card or offer to visit. (Be sensitive to the fact that a visit might not be appropriate.) If they have lost a loved one, share your sympathy and offer to be with them. Attend the funeral (where it is appropriate).

**Help them in time of need.** Offer a ride to work if his car is in the shop. Offer to watch her kids if she needs a hand. Help them to find community and government services. Lend them your tools. Offer to help paint the house or repairs things (if you are competent). You might have a good time together.

**Be patient with their faults.** Everyone has weaknesses as well as strengths. You have faults, why shouldn't they? If they do things that are illegal or harmful to others, you want to be careful about having a relationship with them. But if it is just a matter of accepting them "warts and all," show a little tolerance. Forgiveness is a cardinal Christian virtue.

**Friendship is a two-way street.** Make sure that you receive the blessings of friendship. It is not all about giving. Every person has some good thing that they can give you. Not to receive would be an insult. True friendship is where each person is a blessing to the other.

Finally, **make sure your motives are pure.** If you are befriending a person just to tell them about Christ and your Christian faith, your motives are not pure. Friendship with another person is meant to benefit both parties with the joys that God intended for us human beings in sharing life together. Every Christian whom I

know has at least a couple of non-Christian friends. If you are going to be friends with a Muslim person, do it for the joy of friendship itself and for the recognition of the value of who they really are, and not for any ulterior motive.

### The Golden Rule

What I have outlined here is not anything extraordinary. It is not some hidden secret. It is just a little common sense about being friends with another person. You could probably have written this chapter, from your own experience, as easy as I could.

The heart of our relationship with others is the love of God which is found in Jesus Christ. We share that special agape love in Christ's name. Jesus himself gave us the best possible principle for love when he gave us the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

What I like about this rule is that it is positive, rather than negative. Several other religions have given the negative version of the rule: Do *not* do to others what you do *not* want them to do to you. This is passive friendship at best. But Jesus says: Be positive. Take the initiative to do good things to others. And do it to such depth that it would be the kind of thing you would most appreciate having done for yourself.

Christianity is about love. Friendship is about love. If we are truly following Christ, and his love is found in us, friendship should be the most natural thing in the world.

## Chapter 8

## Sharing your Faith with a Muslim Friend

While I was working as a pastor in a university town, a student asked me a question similar to one I have heard on other occasions. He said, “I have a close friend in my dorm who is a Muslim. He and I have been hanging out together since freshman year. We talk about a lot of things. As a Christian my faith is really important to me, and I would like to tell him more about it? What do I say?”

How do you share your Christian faith with a Muslim friend?

There are some things to remember when you share your faith with others, particularly Muslims. Your Muslim friend may be very religious. He or she may live in a family setting where religion is a very sensitive issue, particularly in a land where Muslims are a religious and ethnic minority. Here are some suggestions about sharing your faith.

**Do not argue.** I have never known a single person to become a follower of Jesus Christ as a result of losing an argument about faith. And yet, I have seen so many Christians engaged in heated debate as if this were the case. We Protestants have made theological divisions an art form. That’s why there are so many different Protestant denominations.

Muslims are turned off by these schisms. They believe that God sent Muhammad to end the divisions and get people back to the true faith. Devout Muslims are clear about what they believe: There is one God (with no son), and good works are the pathway to heaven. Muhammad and the Qur’an are simply the way God has provided to establish these facts. A devout Muslim is not likely to be argued away from these simple principles.

If not through debate, then how do people become Christians? Through relationships. Every person I know who has come to know Jesus Christ has come because they have seen something special in another person or group of people. They realized that this special quality flowed from Christian faith, and they wanted to have that kind of faith. Typically, this relationship occurs with a parent or *family* member, with a friend, or with a pastor, a Sunday School teacher or other church leader.

**Actions speak louder than words.** Your life says more about your Christian faith than your words ever will. I am convinced that the reason the church loses so many youth in the next generation is because our children see that we are not really living the faith we claim to believe. “Your life may be the only Gospel that another person reads.”

The example of your life provides a powerful witness to your Muslim friends and neighbors. Can they see Christ in you? Is the love of Christ shining through in your relationship with them and your other friends? Is faith a strong, caring bond in your family? Is your relationship with God evident in your life at work and in the community? You can answer these questions so much better with quiet, caring actions than with religious clichés.

**Be respectful.** Be respectful of your Muslim friend’s beliefs. Be respectful of their customs and traditions. There are many beautiful cultural practices which make no difference to core beliefs. Take time to listen and learn. We Americans are notoriously ignorant about other cultures and faiths. As you learn, you can affirm the things that are worthwhile.

Christians are often unaware of the deep reverence that Muslims have for Jesus as a prophet. Very religious Muslims will sometimes say, “Peace be upon him!” every time they mention Jesus’ name, just as they do when they mention Muhammad’s name. (In the early years, Christians always revered Christ’s name with these words, but the Christian practice dropped off more than

a thousand years ago.) Muslims accept the virgin birth of Jesus *and* his ascension into heaven. As Christians, we can see that Muslims are missing some of the most essential facts about Christ and His salvation, but we can nonetheless affirm those things which they do accept.

We can also affirm the way so many Muslims are faithful in the practice of their religion. If all Christians set aside five times every day, devoted to serious prayer and intercession, the world would see a Revival like it has never known before.

**Pray regularly for your Muslim friend.** Prayer makes a difference. God is constantly at work in the world. The Lord can change even the most hard-hearted of people. Prayer is one of the great conduits for the power of God. I find that I have so little impact on other people. But I can almost always see that my prayers are making a difference. My prayer partner used to say, “They may spurn your words, and they may reject you personally, but they are helpless against your prayers.”

James 5:16 says, “The prayer of a godly person is very powerful and effective.” I do not claim to be the person James had in mind, but I can honestly say that most of the people I have prayed for consistently to know Christ have done so. Sometimes this has occurred after many years.

**Be inviting.** Invite your Muslim friend to activities with you and your family. Invite them to activities at church. Social activities might be more appropriate at first. Their children might enjoy a youth fellowship activity. Introduce them to your friends who are Christians, especially where they have things in common.

**Be prepared.** Be prepared to talk about Christ and Christian faith when you are asked a question. Make sure you know what you are talking about. If you do not know the answer, say, “I don’t know, but I will find out and get back to you.” (And get back.) Share information about your faith and testimonies from your life in a

loving, respectful way. Don't be pushy. Don't give them an avalanche of information if they are only looking for a little.

It is good to talk about the Grace of God. We cannot save ourselves, no matter how many good things we do. Only God, by His Grace, can save us. He has given us salvation through Jesus Christ. That's why Christ is so precious to us. Jesus Christ can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Also, we open up our hearts for God's Holy Spirit to be at work in us. But, ironically, we can only find the forgiveness, and strength, and the inner power of God through repentance and self denial. This fact is contrary to our sinful human nature, but in it, lies the truth of knowing the fullness of God. (A little book that I like is called *Would You Like to Know God Personally?*, but there are a number of short, clear summaries of the message of salvation through Christ.)

**Practice forgiveness.** Your Muslim friend may not always receive you well. She may misunderstand you. He may say or do things that hurt you. His friendship may run hot and cold. Her family and friends may misunderstand your friendship. Let him see in you the forgiveness and patience which is the mark of a true Christian. Not only to her, but also be forgiving to others.

**You can trust God** with these matters. Be very patient. Only God can turn a person's heart toward Christ. You cannot do this, no matter how hard you try. The Qur'an tells Muslims to be tolerant, because, if God had wanted to, He could have made everyone the same religion. We too should be respectful of this fact.

Nevertheless God is at work. As the Bible says, he is busy reconciling the world to himself. He invites us to be part of that ministry. We can enjoy being co-workers with Christ, sharing the Good News. But we can leave the results in the Lord's hands. We can trust God that He is at work, sometimes transforming people with dramatic, instantaneous miracles, but at other times gradually warming their hearts with soft rays of love.

True witnessing is not a confrontation or even a presentation, it is a dialogue. It is grounded in relationship. Words are used to explain the places where God's love and Holy Spirit are already at work. Wasn't it St. Francis who said: "Witness to the Good News of Christ at all times, and if necessary, use words."

## Appendix

## The Challenge of Being a Christian in a Post-Modern Multicultural World

The world has changed unbelievably during my lifetime. The church has also changed. When I entered the ministry in rural Virginia during the mid 1970's, I could say to a group of Christians, "Let's recite the 23rd Psalm together," and I could count on the fact that everyone knew it. Move forward twenty years to one of the great "Aha!" moments of my life. I was pastor of a rapidly growing church in Northern Virginia where many of the members were new Christians. My staff came to me and said that we needed to print the words for the Lord's Prayer in the bulletin, because not everyone knew it. The Lord's Prayer! My understanding of the world changed radically the day I realized that not all Christians knew the Lord's Prayer.

To show my age, I can tell you that when I started public school, we prayed the Lord's Prayer together every morning. We could count on the fact that every person in our community, churched or otherwise, knew it by heart. Now, as I write this book, I wonder what it was like to be the first Muslim who moved into my home town. I still love the Lord's Prayer, and I confess that I wish that everyone still knew it, but I realize that the world has really changed.

Churches have changed. When I was a child, Christianity in America was dominated by mainline Protestant churches. We sang the same hymns that our parents and grandparents had loved. Now independent evangelical churches are having greater impact. More and more churches are turning to contemporary worship and music. There are more Catholics, particularly hispanic Catholics, where there were once only Protestant churches. And every community has residents, usually born in other countries, who follow non-Christian religions. It should also be said that every

community has citizens who are very much against religion altogether, and who stand ready to fight any sign of it in the schools, government or any other publicly controlled arena. The world certainly has changed!

I was raised on consumerism. I was taught that I need new toys, new cars, new appliances, a new house, and anything else that can be sold. I should be continually purchasing products which add to my convenience and leisure. I should never be satisfied with anything but the latest and best. And I should continually search for the best price. I am influenced most by the companies that have the most striking and entertaining advertisements.

Consumerism influences our choice of churches, and even of religions. Churches advertise. They compete to see who can offer the most inviting worship and fellowship environment, especially for young families. New religions boast that they offer the most fulfilling way of knowing God and achieving your full potential.

Multinational corporations have linked our economy to that of the rest of the world. We are rocked by foreign oil prices. The words "Made in Japan," which were once the butt of jokes, are now the mark of excellence. Today our cheap manufactured goods are produced in China, and our clothing is made in developing countries where wages are very low. Our customer service telephone calls are routed to India. Events on the other side of the world are quick to influence jobs and prices here at home.

During my lifetime, attitudes have changed. Philosophers and theologians now speak of an outlook called Postmodernism. The modern ideal was grounded in the belief that the world always continues to improve through the progress of science and technology. Human attitudes and social problems will inevitably improve at the same time. We can trust our leaders to guide us through this process. Our nation really came together in support of World War II. The years following that war marked the climax of

faith in the modern ideal. By no accident, it was also the zenith of mainline churches.

On the other hand, the Viet Nam war was a turning point in the backlash against modern ideals. We no longer regard our political leaders with unquestioning trust. Nor do they strive to set an example of trustworthiness. The anti-authority trend has carried over to the church, and we give less respect to our pastors and denominational leaders.

We no longer believe that science and technology will solve all our problems. Our idealism in the past was blind to huge problems, such as racial discrimination. The economic prosperity we enjoy causes enormous problems of exploitation around the world. Modernism was too often attached to colonialism, and the newly independent nations of the world have demanded a voice in running it. The priorities of developing nations are different from Western powers. There are new voices of power, including China and the oil rich Arab nations.

Immigration has resurfaced as an issue in American life. A hundred years ago, the new arrivals were conspicuous for being Roman Catholic and Eastern European. That generation seems remarkable homogeneous compared to the hispanic and Asian arrivals today. Latin Americans have flooded in, often illegally, in response to our demand for low-paid construction, agriculture and domestic workers. On the other hand, many Asian immigrants are doctors and engineers.

Latinos have changed the face of the Catholic Church in America, and Asians have exposed us to new religions, especially Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Of these three, Islam has the strongest missionary attitude. It has achieved remarkable success in the African American community, beginning with the Nation of Islam, a sect which has now largely assimilated into the mainstream of Muslims. Islam is in the U.S. to stay, and more Americans of all

racers are finding their way into its fold, some by marriage but others by conversion.

[First generation Americans are facing the same moral challenges which impact all of us.] Television has an influence on our society which is so large that it is difficult to measure. There is no doubt that television competes with parents, family and tradition in determining our values. We rightly cherish our constitutional emphasis on personal freedom and choice, but this emphasis makes us particularly vulnerable to being influenced by the media. Television is but one phase of the modern trend of invention. It was preceded by the influence of printing, transportation, telephone, radio and modern music. It is rapidly being supplemented by the internet and the cell phone.

The technology revolution may be having a more dramatic impact in developing countries than in the U.S. Communities that once waited years for telephone land lines and even longer for television service, now have instant access through cell phones and the internet. There are now hundreds of millions of people in the world who can afford a cell phone, but who cannot afford an automobile, or in some cases, even indoor plumbing.

With the television, cell phone and internet, there also come images of casual extra-marital sex, gangster rap music, and the gossip of celebrity life. Coca-cola, McDonalds, Pizza Hut and KFC become familiar signs. Divorce becomes more common, children become more disrespectful.

One thing that Muslims and Christians have in common is the challenge that contemporary values pose to traditional faith. One expert says that there are three approaches taken by leaders in the Islamic world. One is the secularist. These Muslims believe that the nation should be run by secular law. Life should be as close to secular Western values as possible. At the opposite end are the Islamicists. A few of these are radical and militant, but most are not. However, all Islamicists believe that their nation should be

governed by Islamic laws and that all of the people should follow traditional Islamic customs. A third group is sort of a compromise, advocating a society governed by both secular laws and Islamic values.

Similarly, I would say that are four basic approaches to the role of Christianity in America today. There are secularists who want as little to do with religion as possible. They may grant the believers' right to worship, but they want to be immune to any exposure for themselves. There should be no mention of anything remotely religious in school or government. There should be no sign of religion at work.

At the other end of the spectrum are evangelicals. They believe that America, originally founded on Christian principles, should maintain those principles. Whereas every citizen should be free to chose their own religion or lack of it, they cannot expect to be free from Biblical faith in a land where it has always been cherished. Evangelicals might see the encroachment of non-Christian religions into American life as a threat.

The meddling of Evangelicals is often resented by another group, the Theological Liberals. These Christians are often very strong in their private faith, but they are sincerely committed to the separation of church and state. They are very sensitive to the politically correct rights of other religions. Christianity should not offend non-believers.

Finally, I would say that most Americans are nominal Christians. They go to church once in a while. They hope their children will have some Christian values, but they hesitate to force the matter. They would not be offended by the Ten Commandments at the court house or a Christmas pageant at school, but they would not fight to preserve it. In fact, they are put off by loud campaigners on either side of the issue. They don't want their children to turn out like the risque programs on television, but they are too entertained to change the channel. Like all Americans, they want a

stronger marriage, but they are not willing to confront their own faults. They are consumers, significantly in debt, because they can't resist buying the things they want.

This is the ever changing world that we Christians live in. We discover more and more Muslims living in it with us. Who are they? How do we relate to them? Is it possible to be friends? Can we talk to them about religion? Do they have the same challenges that we do? All this relates to the study of our Muslim neighbors as we consider: What do they believe? And what is their life like?

## Appendix 2

## Abrahamic Religions

Some traditional Christians have expressed concerns regarding the term “Abrahamic Religions” used to describe a common tradition of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This term is a favorite among those scholars of religion who see Abraham as a central figure in all three faiths. It is an alternative to the Muslim claim that the title “Judeo-Christian Tradition” should be replaced by the moniker “Judeo-Christian-Islamic Tradition.”

Again, from the Christian perspective, Judeo-Christian is a good fit, because Christians have adopted the Hebrew Scriptures word for word. On the other hand, Islam seeks to rewrite both of the earlier traditions.

The term “Abrahamic Religion” really seems to adopt a Muslim perspective. Abraham is seen as a prophet, one of the early “Muslims” who anticipated Muhammad. The Ka’ba is venerated as the place where Abraham was called to sacrifice his son Isaac.

Of course, Jews have claimed their inheritance as biological descendants of Abraham, but their religion is much more a reflection of Moses and the giving of the law. Muslims refer to Jews and Christians as “People of the Book.” Just as Islam has one prophet and one book, so Jews have the prophet Moses and the book of the Torah, Christians have the prophet Jesus and the book of the Gospel.

Abraham is not necessarily a central figure in the Christian faith. He is important as a part of the Bible record where he is one of the leading patriarchs in the heritage of God’s people. In the New Testament, Paul reminds us that Abraham is a paradigm of those who had true faith in God, even before the coming of Christ. Abraham is evidence of the fact that the righteous people of God

are saved by faith alone, and not by works. In contrast, Muslims believe that people are very much saved by the fact that their good deeds outweigh their bad deeds on the Day of Judgment.

Instead of “Abrahamic Religion,” Christians might prefer “those who worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (known to us through the scriptures). Even without the parentheses, this title would be difficult for Muslims to accept, because the Qur’an changes the Biblical account, making Hagar’s son Ishmael the true heir and Sarah’s son Isaac the child of a slave.

As an alternative to “Abrahamic Religion,” Christians might also suggest “God fearers” or “those who worship the one, true God.” In Acts 13:6 and 10:2 we see this terminology in reference to those who are neither Christians or Jews, but who nevertheless “fear,” which in Biblical parlance means “worship” God. Christians have often acknowledged that Jews worship the same God, though they have not yet received Christ. Based on the citations in Acts, and other similar passages, we can say that Muslims also worship the same God.

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