

Witnessing to Muslims

Christian Research Institute

PART ONE

Because of the long history between Christians and Muslims, the Christian witness is viewed with great animosity by the Muslim. The roots of this tragedy go back to the Emperor Constantine, who after allegedly having had a dream of the cross (313), wed the sword to the cross. One of his successors, the Christian Emperor Heraclius (reigned 610-641) was a contemporary of Muhammad (reigned 622-632).

“Holy War” (*Jihad*). Following Muhammad’s death (632), Muslim armies swept the Christian Byzantines out of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt (636). Christians and Muslims have been at war with one another ever since.

Leaving aside the question of Muslim atrocities against Christians of both the East and the West, let me review the grievances of Muslims against the West, perceived as Christian. The Crusades (around 1050-1291) are painfully and permanently inscribed in Muslim memories. The Colonial Period (around 1450-1970), during which Western nations occupied about ninety percent of the Muslim world, has left the Muslim psyche with a deep sense of shame and humiliation that needs to be avenged. But above all else, the loss of Jerusalem to the Jews in 1967, after more than thirteen hundred years of possession, rankles daily in Muslim minds. This, of course, is blamed on the “Christian” West because of the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 — perceived as the greatest sin ever committed against humanity.

We need to remember, when seeking to witness to Muslims, that we are working in an atmosphere poisoned by the memories of these and more recent (e.g., the U.S.’s two invasions of Lebanon) Muslim casualties. It is only by the grace of God that we have as much opportunity as we do to work with Muslims. If we exhibit any form of cultural superiority, religious triumphalism, or selective amnesia concerning the sins of the West, perceived as Christian, we only make matters worse. More to the point, the denigration of Islam as a religion or slurs against its founder, Muhammad, will not be tolerated. Working with Muslims calls for an especially sensitive approach. Thus, although I will address apologetic issues later in this series, it is first of all important for Christians to know something about *how* to approach Muslims.

In orthodox Islam, God has supposedly not spoken to a single human being since the year Muhammad died (632). For this reason, giving your own testimony of how you became a Christian — of how God revealed Himself *to you* — takes Muslims by surprise. This is a thoroughly biblical approach (1 John 1:3). And there is no argument against a testimony.

Muslims are usually genuinely seeking to please God (as they understand him). They can be complimented, for example, on their practices of confessing God, praying five times daily, giving to the poor, keeping a month-long fast, perceiving themselves as pilgrims, and even striving (*jihada*)

on the “way of God.” Similar points of contact can be found in their belief system concerning God, prophets, holy books, angels and demons, the decree of God, and the day of judgment. Of course, on each subject there are points of variance between Islamic and Christian doctrine, but the point is to find a common starting place.

One will find that each subject can always be related to the teaching of the Lord Jesus and the apostles and other Scriptures. The Quran bears surprising witness to Jesus. It affirms His virgin birth, His ability to heal and raise the dead, that He is both a word from God and a spirit from God, that He is the Messiah, an all-righteous one (sinless), among those nearest to God, that He is alive in heaven now and will return to judge the earth (Quran 3:45, 49; 4:158; 82:22). Muslims often are convinced that Christ is greater than Muhammad from just reading the Quran. These above points are excellent starting places in leading Muslims to *biblical* truth about Jesus.

Indeed, in our effort to bring Muslims to study the Bible, we have an unexpected ally in Muhammad’s book, the Quran. In a careful reading of Quranic references (3:84; 5:51, 71; 6:34; 10:37, 64, 94; 46:12), we find that Muhammad affirmed his belief in what was revealed to Moses and Jesus. He taught that God confirms and guards all previous scripture, that Christians are to stand fast on their own books of the Law and the Gospel, and that none could change the Word of God. Finally, the Muslim is told that if he has doubts he should ask the Jews and Christians, who were reading the Holy Books before he was.

If and when a Muslim begins to study Scripture, he (or she) is going to be under suspicion by his family and friends. He will need strong support and encouragement from a Christian friend. This support is even more critical at the time of conversion, baptism, and post-baptismal trauma. One must be ready to die with his or her disciple (John 15:13).

Even before all of the above begins, the Christian worker would do well to find a way to minister to human need in the environment of the disciple. This could take the form of personal help, medical service, teaching, relief in times of disaster, and development programs of any kind to improve the quality of life (Matt. 25:31-46).

Finally, we must realize that this work is not simply an intellectual exercise; it involves the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. In utter dependence on Him, we receive the insights and ideas that grip the mind and heart of our Muslim friend. And similarly, the Holy Spirit works in our friend to give understanding, insight, and receptivity to the good news of Jesus Christ. This trust in the work of the Holy Spirit is something to be cultivated in prayer and faith by the Christian worker.

PART TWO

Islam has as many branches and sects as Christianity. The two major ones are the *Sunnis* and the *Shias*. They split over the issue of apostolic succession. When Islam's founder Muhammad died unexpectedly in A.D. 632, he had left no arrangement for a successor. His followers divided into two camps. The Sunnis were those who thought the leader should be elected democratically from among his closest followers, and the Shias were those who thought the leaders should be related to Muhammad. Perhaps 85 to 90 percent of all Muslims would call themselves Sunnis. We will consider witnessing to Sunnis in this installment, and in Part Three we will turn our attention to the Shias.

The word Sunni comes from the Arabic *Sunnah*, which simply means "the trodden path," or "tradition." In the Islamic context, it means someone who follows the exemplary pattern of conduct established by Muhammad, believed to be the model for all humankind.

Since Muhammad was just one solitary man, confined to a slice of time in seventh century Arabia, he could not foresee the problems Islam would face in its rapid expansion into other lands. His followers — who were imbued with Muhammad's obsession with law — had to devise new laws based on their understanding of what Muhammad would have done, if he had remained among them. This process took almost two hundred years and resulted in the formation of Islamic or *Shariah* Law.

A Sunni, then, is a person who believes that the true way of life is to attempt to keep the laws of Islam (*Shariah*) derived from the Quran and the other collected sayings of Muhammad. For this person, paradise is the reward of those whose good deeds outweigh their bad on the day of judgment. With such a Muslim believer, there are two evangelistic approaches that can be used: to show the futility of the idea of salvation by law, and to show the inadequacy of Muhammad's life as a model for all humankind. Both approaches ultimately lead to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Muhammad, in his obsession to discover and execute the will of God, set in motion a movement that resulted in a wild proliferation of laws attempting to cover every facet of life. By borrowing from the Egyptians the idea that God would weigh our good deeds against our bad deeds in a balance scale on the day of judgment, he betrayed a lack of understanding of the function of law. The law does not save; it condemns.

Christians can begin by complimenting the Muslim on his or her zeal to keep the law of God as he or she understands it, but then we must go on to show that the law has the ultimate function of showing us where we failed. As Paul wrote, "The letter [law] kills, but the Spirit gives life" (1 Cor. 3:6). Our Muslim friends also need to be disabused of the idea that 51 percent performance is good enough to obtain salvation. Show them what James wrote: "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10). To this could be added Paul's words in Romans 3:20, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin," and in Galatians 3:24, "The law

was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24). This then leads on to a discussion about Christ. And this discussion can be based on materials from both the Quran and the Scriptures.

In Quran 7:158, Muhammad asked people to follow him. Elsewhere in the Quran, Muhammad testified that Jesus was among those nearest to God, held in honor in this world and the hereafter (Quran 3:45). Muslims understand this to mean that Jesus was sinless and all-righteous, something that the early Muslims never claimed for Muhammad. In fact, in several Quranic passages (16:61; 40:55; 42:5, 30; 47:19; 48:1-2), we read that Muhammad was exhorted to seek forgiveness for his faults, that not a single living creature would be left on earth if God punished everyone for their wrongdoing, and that one of Muhammad's military victories served as an assurance of forgiveness of his sins, past and future. It is pointless for Muslims to argue for Muhammad's sinlessness or to compare him to Jesus, whom Muslims consider to be both sinless and alive in heaven, near to God right now. The contrast could be more sharply drawn by pointing out that Muhammad's grave is in Medina today, whereas Christ is alive in heaven with God.

In the Quran (2:253; 3:45-49; 4:158, 171; 5:49; 19:33; 89:22) it is noted that Jesus was called the Messiah; He was born of a virgin; He was among the righteous ones — those nearest to God; He received strength from the Holy Spirit; He could give sight to the blind, cure lepers, and raise the dead; He prophesied His own death and resurrection; He was called a Word from God and a Spirit from God; and finally, He is coming back with thousands of angels to judge the world. All these characterizations add up to a powerful picture of a Christ who was more than a prophet, and — on Quranic terms alone — superior to Muhammad.

From this point on, it is up to the Christian witness to lead the Muslim friend into a study of biblical material on the person and nature of Christ. One suggestion would be to start with John 1:1-14, where Jesus is set forth as the eternal Word of God, an idea Muslims implicitly accept. Then go on to show the purpose of God for Him in becoming a man: to carry out the will of God in accomplishing the salvation of lost humankind, who would not be saved by the law, either Islamic or Mosaic.

PART THREE

In previous installments of this series, we noted that Islam is divided into many sects, the two major ones being the Sunnis and the Shias. The original split between the latter two was over the question of who should succeed Muhammad as leader of the community. The Shias felt the leader should come from Muhammad's family; the Sunnis thought he should be someone of noted piety elected by and from Muhammad's closest companions. The Sunnis won with the first three successors; then the Shias, or party of Ali, assumed the leadership. But Ali was martyred, as were his only two sons (more on this shortly).

Down through the centuries, the Shias usually lost out in these power struggles. This led to their taking on the nature of

a protest movement against the corrupt Sunni leaders. Inevitably, to justify their separate minority identity, they developed theological doctrines that radically differed from those of the Sunnis on at least two major points: the idea of martyrdom and the idea of divine light indwelling their leaders. Both these beliefs open up Shias to Christian witness in a way not possible among the Sunnis.

Martyrdom for the cause of the people is memorialized in the Shia calendar year during their lunar month of Muharram. Of the three martyrs mentioned above — Ali (Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law) and Ali's two sons, Hasan and Husayn (Muhammad's grandsons) — that of Husayn is celebrated annually. The first ten days of the month of Muharram are dedicated to "passion plays" that retell the story of Husayn's betrayal and courageous stand, facing overwhelming odds, against the ruling house of Mecca (the Umayyids). On the tenth day, it is common for parades of self-flagellating men to beat themselves until the blood flows, lamenting the failure of the people to come to the defense of their beloved leader.

This brings us to the key point: Shias believe that the shed blood of their slain leader atones for their sins. They accept the concept of atonement — an idea totally unacceptable to the Sunnis. Of all the approaches I've seen Christians use in witnessing to the Shias, the most effective is through films depicting the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. (By the way, unlike Sunnis, Shias accept art forms depicting human beings, and practice drama.) I have seen them weep profusely while viewing such films. Afterwards, it is easy to speak to them of the deep spiritual meaning of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

Anyway, with or without the use of a film, asking a Shia to talk to you about the martyrdom of Husayn naturally opens the door for the Christian to then bring into the conversation the atoning death of Jesus on the cross. The points to emphasize are the overwhelming odds against Jesus during His arrest and trial, the significance of the shed blood of Christ in atoning for the sins of the people, Christ's victory over death, and His promise of eternal life to those who believe in Him.

The second major point of contact has to do with the idea of "divine light" indwelling Muhammad, Ali, Husayn, the early "Imams," and currently, the present leading Ayatullah,

whoever that may be. Before proceeding, let me explain the two technical words above. In Sunni Islam, an Imam is a leader of the prayers at the mosque. It could be anyone. In Shia Islam, the Imam is a big word. It refers to the succession of the spiritual leaders of the community. Depending on which branch of Shia Islam one is talking about, that line of succession terminated with the disappearance of either the fifth, the seventh, or the twelfth Imam. These lines came to an end centuries ago. Each was supposedly indwelt by divine light. This light was then passed on to a lesser order of clerics called "Ayatullahs." This word means "Sign or Miracle of God." The late Ayatullah Khomeini was the most famous such Ayatullah of our day. His successor at the moment is named Khomeini.

For the Christian witness, this idea of divine light is the bridging point with Shias. It was Jesus who first said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). Behind this is the idea of pure light coming through a sinless servant of God. The problem for Shias is that they are forced by their own set of assumptions to attribute sinlessness to their present-day Ayatullahs. But not even Muhammad claimed this attribute for himself.

The Quran exhorts Muhammad (and others, too) to seek forgiveness of his sins (Q. 40:55; 42:5; 47:19). The universality of sin is mentioned in Quran 16:61. The Quran also says that whatever misfortune happens to a Muslim happens because of his sin (Q. 42:30). It further says that even when victory comes it occurs so that God may forgive one's sins (Q. 48:1, 2). From these verses, one can demonstrate that no one is sinless or capable of being the "Light of the World." The big exception, of course, is Jesus. Even in the Quran, we read that he is "among the righteous ones," that is, sinless (Q. 3:46).

Moving from these Quranic passages, the Christian witness should then be able to show to the Muslim that Jesus is "the holy Son of God" (Matt. 1:20, 21; Luke 1:32); that He was indeed sinless (2 Cor. 5:21); that in Jesus is true spiritual life and this life is the true light of men (John 1:4); and, finally, that Jesus Himself claimed to be the Light of the world (John 8:12) and it is in His light that we see light (John 1:9).

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This first part of this article first appeared in the Spring 1993 issue of the Christian Research Journal. The second part first appeared in the Summer 1993 issue of the same journal. The third part first appeared in the journal's Fall 1993 issue.

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