

Gospel Communication from Within

If we are to successfully open windows and doors in Muslim walls, we have to begin from within the Muslim mind and heart, from what they accept and value, not what they reject and despise. Here is an article pointing the way.

by Patrick O. Cate

Historic walls separate one billion Muslims from a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. This article deals with some of the historical theological walls, besides the cultural, social, familial, political and linguistic barriers that are present. We need to continually keep in mind that there is no substitute for prayer, love and a personal relationship for bringing Muslims into the light of our Savior. These require time, energy and a high value in our priorities.

To begin outside of the Muslim mind, driving points which Muslims categorically and antagonistically reject is similar to banging our heads against a wall. If we are to specialize in opening windows and doors in Muslim walls we have to begin where the Muslim mind is, with what he accepts and not what he rejects. We don't begin where we want him to arrive.

Throughout the fourteen centuries in which Muslims and Christians have been dealing with each other the same arguments have continued to emerge: the deity of Christ, the triune God, the sonship of Christ, and the trustworthiness of the Bible. We could profit by reading John of Damascus (date 749 AD) and many others who debated with Muslims in the first centuries.

In dealing with Muslims, it can frequently become a logical debate building on premises which Muslims already reject, resulting in a seeming attack on Islam. Sometimes Muslims are permitted to state the nature of the trial, the accusations, and be both the judge and the jury, leaving Christians on the defensive. In communicating the

love of Jesus Christ to Muslims, we need to try to prayerfully understand the Muslim mind and to share God's sincere love for Muslims beginning from within their mind and heart and frame of thinking. It is crucial to begin "where they are," with what Muslims accept and value rather than to start with presuppositions they reject. Beginning with what they accept, we need to gradually help them overcome their preconceived notions for rejecting the Gospel so that they can come to know God in a personal way through faith in Jesus Christ. This article offers a practical step by step approach to Gospel witness to Muslims, disarming them in key areas, and lowering barriers to the Gospel.

The Deity of Christ

Muslims have been taught to reject the idea of the deity of Christ. However, it is possible to lead some Muslims to become open to this concept, and to even accept it, without quoting the Qur'an or the Bible and without using the precise words "deity of Christ."

After establishing rapport with Muslims, I turn the conversation to spiritual things, especially towards Christ. I like to ask my Muslim friends if they believe that Christ had a virgin birth. They respond in the affirmative. Then I say, "So He had no father and therefore His birth was unique and supernatural, wasn't it?" Sometimes Muslims will point out that Adam did not have a human father or a mother, to which I also agree. But I come back to Christ and point out, "But He did not have a father like the rest of us, did he? So his birth was unique and it was supernat-

ural, wasn't it?" Although this is clearly mentioned in the Bible (Matt. 1:23) as well as in the Qur'an (3:45-47), I usually don't quote either of them at this stage.

I then point out that, Christ performed many, miracles of love, kindness and compassion. He healed people who were blind from birth and they could see; that He healed people who were lame from birth who were able to jump with joy; that He healed those with leprosy and even raised the dead (Surah 3:49; 5:110). Therefore, Christ's life was unique and supernatural. Sometimes, Muslims will say, "Other people have performed miracles, and that the Qur'an is a miracle of Mohammed." I respond, "The Bible does say that there were others who performed miracles. However the miracles of Jesus Christ were supernatural and unique acts, weren't they?"

Even though what I have shared up to this point is already believed by Muslims, and although I usually do not quote the Bible nor the Qur'an, nevertheless they generally accept what I share with them concerning Christ. This now sets the stage and I introduce something briefly that they usually do not accept, and say, "And the prophet Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, and also arose from the grave and conquered death." Sometimes, a Muslim at that point will reject what I said but I try not to answer his contradiction. Muslims need to hear the Gospel, and often I do not know how many times a particular Muslim will need to hear it before he/she believes. But I want it to be one less Gospel witness. It also is possible that I will never see

them again, which is another reason for sharing the Gospel with them.

I then introduce another point about Jesus which they already believe. I say, "Then the prophet Jesus ascended to heaven." But I add, "And there is *not a grave where you can go to worship at his dead bones*. The end of his life was unique and supernatural wasn't it?" (See Surah 3:55 which deals with Jesus' ascension.) I use the phrase, "so there is no grave where you can worship at his dead bones" to alert Muslims of their roots and tendencies toward animism. Not only in Medina, where they go to pray at the bones of Mohammed, but throughout the Muslim world, Muslims hold to animism or to a supernatural power, in this case in the dead bones of their dead saints, through which they believe their prayers can be answered. This is attributing a partnership to God. Although I do not go into a detailed explanation regarding this point, it nevertheless serves as a gentle reminder. Avoiding at this point the fact of the death and resurrection of Christ, I say, "So the end of Christ's life was unique and supernatural. The end of his life is not like the rest of our lives where there is a grave and a dead body." I do not use the phrase "death of Christ." At each of the three points in the discussion on the life of Christ, I ask the question, "Wouldn't that make His birth, His life and the end of His life unique and supernatural?" I keep asking this question until I get an affirmative answer from my Muslim friends.

To introduce the crucial part in the development of thought, I review and say, "So that would make Christ's birth, His life, and the end of His life to be unique and supernatural," which leads up the fact that "The prophet Jesus would be the only person who ever lived, who had all three: a unique and supernatural birth, a unique and supernatural life, and a unique and supernatural end to his life, wouldn't He?" Sometimes Muslims will point out exceptions of individual cases, and, of course, I point

out, "yes, there are other people who had a supernatural birth or performed miracles." Therefore it is important to emphasize Jesus' singularity by using the words "only" and "all." Christ was the only one who was singular and unique in all three.

I keep asking these questions until I get an affirmative answer. I ask, "Since the prophet Jesus is the only one to have a unique and supernatural birth and life and end to His life, that would make Him the most unique and supernatural person who ever lived, wouldn't it?" Recently, when I came to that point with a Muslim, he answered, "Yes," he dropped his objections and immediately asked, "Could you get me a copy of the New Testament so I can read it?" So without using the words, "God," "deity," or "Son of God," through this discussion and progression of thought it truly is possible in a first conversation to get a Muslim to agree that Christ is the most supernatural and unique person who ever lived, which comes very close to acknowledging the deity of Jesus Christ.

Sometime ago I was dialoguing with a number of Muslim friends on the floor of one of the major mosques in America discussing these questions. There were some ten of us from a local seminary and about ten Muslims and the conversation got rather heated. However, I kept asking my same question, "Wouldn't that make Him the only person who ever lived who had a supernatural and unique birth, life and end to His life?" I kept asking it until the resident scholar, a sheikh, answered, "Yes." This then changed the conversation radically from attacking Christianity to praising Jesus. Obviously that doesn't mean that they believed and were saved. But it helped to stop their attack and opened their minds to possibilities they had never thought of before.

One advantage of this type of approach and train of thought is that it follows from within the Muslim mind, moving from the known to the

unknown. The fact that they are ready in their mind to accept the virgin birth, the miracles, and the ascension of Christ can help them see that Christ is the most unique and supernatural person who ever lived, since He is the only one to have all three attributes. Muslims have never quite put it all together before nor realized the significance of such a life. I suggest that "other lovers" of Muslims try this approach also.

The Son of God

In most conversations with Muslims, it is not the Christians who bring up the concept and discussion of "Son of God," but Muslims begin to address it with their absolute rejection of it. However, I have found that this is one of the easiest objections to answer. For starters, we need to ask, "What do you mean by Son of God?" Usually they do not come up with an answer, so I try to probe, and I say, "Do you mean that God in a sense got married to Mary, or had sexual relations?" When they affirm or acknowledge this, then I say with much more emotion than they, "*haram, fosh* —blasphemy," expressing a much stronger denial of this concept than they felt or expressed. It is important for them to hear and realize that what they reject, namely that God had sexual relations with Mary, is more blasphemous to us than it is to them.

But then what does "Son of God" mean? I think it is important to again begin within the Muslim mind and proceed step by step. A little research can be of much help at this point. I would encourage every Muslim evangelist to make a study of the Muslim language that he uses, to find as many metaphorical and kinship terms and illustrations as he can within that language for son, father, mother, daughter and sister. I have a list of sixty kinship analogies in Arabic and five in Persian.

Possibly, the most common figure of speech in Muslim languages, using "son of" is "*Ibn is sabil*," which literally

means, “son of the road.” The meaning from Arabic would be “wayfarer, wanderer, passerby, or traveler.” The reason that it could be the most universal concept is because it is found in the Qur’an five times (See Surah 8:41; 9:60; 17:26; 30:38; 59:7). In the Qur’an “son of God” is rejected as a title for Christ and “son of Mary” is accepted.

My method of using this with a Muslim is very simple. I simply ask, “What does this mean? Does it mean that the road got married and had a baby road, who was a traveler? Does it mean, that the road got married and had sexual relations that produced a son of the road?” The usual response is, “No, no, no!” So I say, “What do you mean?” The response usually is something like, “A wayfarer, a wanderer, a passerby or a traveler.” Then I respond, “So you do not mean it literally or physically, or biologically, but you mean it in a spiritual way, or a metaphorical way. In the same way, when the Bible says that Christ is the Son of God, we do not mean that God got married to Mary and had sexual relations and produced a baby Jesus. We do not believe in a ‘papa God’ and a ‘mama God’ producing a ‘baby God.’ That is blasphemy. I usually say, “We don’t mean it literally, biologically or physically, but we mean it spiritually and metaphorically.” I repeat this series of questions and responses concerning “Son of God” with each of the analogies I use in this approach.

In Egypt, a very famous idiom is that an Egyptian is an “*Ibn in nil*,” or a son of the Nile. So I ask, “What does this mean? Does it mean the Nile got married and had sexual relations and produced baby people who are Egyptians or baby Nile rivers?” They, of course, reject that. Then I ask, “Well, what does it mean?” Usually I need to continue, “You don’t mean that an Egyptian is physically a son of the Nile! You don’t mean it literally, physically, biologi-

cally, but you mean it in a spiritual, or metaphorical sense.”

Egyptians also say that Egypt is the “mother of the world” or, “*Masr um il dunyah*.” So I ask, “what does this mean? Does this mean that Egypt got married, had sexual relations and produced all of the other nations of the world?” Again this is rejected. I usually respond, “Then of course, you don’t mean it literally, physically, biologically.”

Another common Egyptian idiom

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is that the Sphinx is the “*Abul houl*” which translates, “the father of terror.” Regarding this I ask the question as to what this means. Does this mean that the Sphinx got married and had baby Sphinxes who were terrors?” They would respond, “No, the Sphinx guards the desert and the pyramids.” So I respond, “So you don’t mean it literally, physically or biologically, but mean it in a spiritual and a metaphorical way. It’s the same when we say, ‘Christ is the Son of God.’ The Bible doesn’t mean it literally, physically, or biologically, that a ‘papa God’ got married to a ‘mama God’ and had a ‘baby God.’ We mean it spiritually and metaphorically.”

In the Persian language, Shiites often revere Ali more than Mohammed. I go through the same analogies, as they speak of Ali as the husband of widows, the father of orphans, the sword of God and the hand of God. I would ask questions like, “Did Ali, father all the orphans of the world? That would not be right! Did Ali marry all of the widows of the world? That would not be right! Are not four marriages enough? Isn’t it immoral to marry them all? So what does it mean? Do you mean it liter-

ally, physically or biologically? In the same way that you do not mean it literally, physically, or biologically, we do not mean God got married and had sexual relations with Mary and produced a baby God when we say Christ is the Son of God.”

These are just a few analogies from Persian and Arabic. Much of this is very cultural and different idioms would be used in each of the various Muslim languages.

It is important, not merely to help them to realize that their definition of Son of God is incorrect, but also provide a positive definition and ask ourselves the question, what does it mean? We must not only ask what it does not mean, but what the concept is and tries to communi-

cate. Theologically the phrase, “Son of God” communicates several important concepts. One of those is that the Son *reveals* the Father. Hebrews 1:1-4, indicates this when it says, “God has spoken to us through the Son and the Son is the exact representation of His nature and the radiance of His glory.” We need to deal with the concept of *revelation*. What does it mean to reveal? Sometimes, I’ll use a visual aid and touch the curtains in a nearby window and say, “If I had not been in this country before, and had arrived at night when it was dark and these curtains would be closed, and in the morning they would be opened, and the veil would be removed—revelation would occur—and I could look out and see how beautiful the country is. We cannot see God face to face, but He has chosen to remove the veil to let us get to know Him better through getting to know the Prophet Jesus. In this world, a physical son reveals his father to us. When we see a son, we know something of his father even if we have never met the father before.

Muslims frequently think we are taking a good man, a prophet, and mak-

ing Him into God. By beginning from within the Muslim mind, where he is and what he values, we can gradually lead him to the truth.

In Islamic history and theology there were two leading groups, the Asharites and Mutazilites. The Mutazilites, who held to man's free will and human responsibility, lost out to the Asharites, who held to the sovereign free will of God. This concept is made famous in the cry, "*Allahu akbar*," God is the greatest! "*Allahu akbar*" is shouted from every minaret five times a day and mentioned during each time of prayer. Mobs shout it against their governments, dramatically trying to say we are on God's side and you are not, and with His help we will overthrow you. It clarifies that God is completely sovereign and we are to submit to Him. He can do whatever He wants to do. We, as puny beings, here today and gone tomorrow, cannot tell God what He can or cannot do. We cannot tell God that He cannot reveal Himself in the form of the prophet Jesus for our salvation. It is not a case of man becoming God, but God choosing to remove the veil and to reveal Himself in the form of the prophet Jesus for our salvation.

The Trinity

In addition to dealing with the deity of Christ and the Son of God concepts, there are a variety of approaches which can help in communicating the idea of the Trinity. One which comes from within Islamic thinking would need to come back to Asharite theology, embraced by all Muslims. Asharites hold to two basic points of theology. One is the sovereign free will of God and the other is that the Qur'an is the un-created speech of God existing in the mind of God from eternity past.

Normally I don't broach this subject. However, when Muslims accuse Christians of having three Gods, I ask them, "Do you believe the Qur'an is

created or un-created?" I keep asking them until they answer the question. When they answer that the Qur'an is un-created, I say, "So the Qur'an is eternal and un-created, and God is eternal and un-created. You have two eternal and un-created beings or things, you have two Gods, right?" Of course, they strongly refute that. I go back and ask the same question again and maybe even a third time. Finally I say, "You are telling me that you have two eternal and un-created things, but one God. You know, that we also have two or three eternal and un-created beings or things but one God." (John 1:1)

Fuoad Accad shows that Muslims are the ones who worship three gods: Allah, the Word and the Spirit. If they deny the eternity of the Word and the Spirit, he then points out that there was a time when Allah was both dead (no Spirit) and dumb (no Word).

The Problem of Sin

It may seem easy to think that if we can prove the deity of Christ and the sonship of God and the trinity, etc., that Muslims would take the next step and become Christians. But this too often is not the case. Believing Christ is God and the Son of God, and believing in the trinity, does not make a person a Christian. A person has to believe that he is a sinner, confess his sin, repent and believe that Christ died on the cross for his sin. The root problem is not the smoke screens that Muslims raise, but the biblical definition and existence of sin that they want to deny. For most Muslims, sin is like a child cheating on a quiz in first or second grade. It's not a big issue. It's not a moral affront to a holy God. One of our main tasks as Muslim evangelists is to help them realize that they are sinners, and because God is holy, sin is no small matter.

In my case, if I have a thirty-minute conversation with a Muslim, I might spend ten minutes establishing rapport; spend another ten minutes on the

problem of sin; and then use another ten minutes on the person and work of Jesus Christ, who He is and the answer to the real problem of sin. I would then conclude by asking them to read the Gospel of Luke. But how can we get the problem of sin communicated? We deeply need to know the issues involved. Muslims don't seriously consider themselves sinners and God holy. Therefore, they could care less about a Savior who delivers them from their sin.

One way to communicate the concept of sin is by a visual aid. I usually say something like the following, especially if it is a cold day. I might ask my Muslim friends, "Wouldn't it be great to have a cup of hot tea right now, or a coke?" He might say, "Yes, that would be great!" Just before I would give it, I would say, "Wait, a minute!" At this point I would add a bit of poison or bug spray or I might add Drano. A clear glass of Coke with a bit of liquid Drano added changes the Coke's color and makes the visual aid even more effective. Then I would offer it to him to drink and say, "Don't you want it?" As he refuses it, I point out, "I only put a little bit of poison in it, most of it is very good tea or coke, why don't you want to drink it?" I point out that it is just a little bit of poison, 99% of it is very good tea or Coke. I ask the question, "How many sins did Adam have to sin in order to get out of fellowship with God? God told Adam to till the ground. He tilled the ground. God told Adam to name the animals. He named the animals. He just sinned once. He took fruit from one tree and he was out of fellowship with God." At this step, I point out that I have sinned far more than one sin, and so has he, and so has everyone else.

God is holy and man is sinful. God is in heaven and there is no room for sin in heaven. "Who wants to go to heaven if, like this world, it is going to be filled with people who are adulterers or think adulterous thoughts, who steal and cheat people, who speak and

think with profanity, who do not speak the truth? Heaven is filled with God. God is holy and pure. God is completely separated from sin so we cannot go to heaven and bring our sin with us. Our sin must be forgiven before we can go to heaven. Adding more tea (or Coke) will not get rid of the poison. Adding more good works will not get rid of our sin. That is the wonderful thing about the prophet Jesus. When He died, He died on the cross as the complete sacrifice for our sins so we can be completely forgiven so that we can go to heaven and not bring our sins with us.”

Muslims are attracted to animism because they believe it gives them power over weak areas of their life. But when they are honest, they readily acknowledge their lack of power over personal sin. More than anything else Muslims need to know Christ has the power to forgive sins and to give personal victory over sin’s power.

The Christ-Shaped Vacuums

There are four things which Jesus Christ offers that Islam does not have. Islam does not emphasize a loving God; a personal God; the assurance of forgiveness of sins; nor the assurance of eternal life. There are a variety of ways in which we can communicate that God is a loving personal God. We should remember that Love is one of the ninety-nine names of God. It’s the ninety-third name, *al-Wadud*. This is not a strong concept within Islam. Rather, the concepts of God’s justice, sovereignty, greatness, and unity are central to them. Muslims really do not have a concept of a loving God who cares for them, they certainly do not have a concept of a personal God. For them, God is transcendent, He created the world, but is removed from it and them. When a Muslim wants something personal, he frequently prays to a dead saint or uses a fortune teller or reverts to animistic rituals. When he prays to God, he uses memorized, recited prayers, but does not enjoy a per-

sonal relationship with a loving personal God.

A wonderful way that the Gospel can be communicated and corrected is by praying for them at the end of a conversation. In our conversations with them we should have discerned where they are hurting and what some of their problems are and then I frequently ask them, “May I pray for you? It’s my custom to close my eyes and bow my head when I pray.” I then pray to God, to our loving Father, concerning the particular problems they have. This demonstrates a loving personal God, who hears our prayers. About 50% of the time, when I lift up my head, I see tears in their eyes. Muslims, who have been converts much of their life, have said, “You are the first person who ever prayed for me.” Of course, Muslims do not have the assurance of the forgiveness of sins or of eternal life. Yet this is a wonderful gift that Christ promises and the Word of God teaches. We need to be very careful to point out lovingly these four areas because they are vacuums within the Muslim heart which they do not know how to fill.

One of our goals in a conversation with Muslims is to get them to read Scripture. It is obviously advantageous to have a copy of a Gospel (I prefer Luke) in their language to give to them and to ask them to read. Frequently, I will ask, “Don’t you think it’s wise if we read all of the books given by God?” Most Muslims will answer, “Yes.” The truth is, most Muslims have never really read the Gospels. I tell them, “This is a biography of the prophet Jesus,” When I give it to them, I ask that they promise to read it, saying, “This will not do you any good as a fetish to keep off the evil eye, (as many Muslims might think), but it can help you to come to know the Prophet Jesus Christ. He can answer your prayers and can give power over sin and evil in your life.”

This might be the time to suggest they watch the *Jesus* video in their lan-

guage. An additional goal for which we should prayerfully direct our efforts, is to find those who would like to get together to read and study the Bible.

In an ideal relationship we would have an in-depth study of the person of Christ, possibly through the Gospel of Luke; an in-depth study through the Old Testament prophets which a Muslim accepts; or an in-depth chronological study beginning in Genesis. These types of studies provide an excellent foundation for faith.

However, since Muslims normally reject the Bible as authority, it might be advantageous to begin from within their mind, from where they are, and from within mutually accepted theological concepts.

Conclusion

I encourage others to prayerfully test and adopt some of the ideas and practical steps suggested in this article. Perhaps God would bless this approach to open the minds and hearts of many Muslims to the wonderful news of the Savior of the World who loves them and died for them. However, no matter what we do or how we look at it, the *sine quo non* of introducing Muslims to our Savior and Lord is love and prayer—prayer that God would lead us to Muslims who are open to spiritual things. Indeed may it be that God would redeem from all Muslim nations, tribes, and tongues a people for Himself for His glory even by the year 2000!

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