

# ISLAM *in*CONTEXT



OPENING THE DOOR  
TO UNDERSTANDING

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## **The Nature of God: Foundational Differences in Christianity and Islam**

‘... *the whole faith of Islam is not another way to God,  
but the way to another God*’<sup>1</sup>

Despite the growing profile of Islam in the West and the increasing exposure of Western Christians to Muslims from around the world, I have been increasingly struck by the persistent belief of many Christians, that Muslims and Christians worship what is fundamentally the same God, although there may be superficial differences in character or nature. This, I think, is a belief that is very damaging to us. Not only is it false, in that it is built on a misunderstanding of the claims of Islam, but, more importantly, it can act as a buffer against us seeing the true uniqueness and brilliance of the God of the Bible, and keeps us from a compassionate zeal to reach our Muslim brothers and sisters.

Os Guinness once wrote: ‘Contrast is the mother of clarity. I always find that I understand and wonder at the Gospel when I see the contrast of the alternatives.’<sup>2</sup> In comparing and contrasting the nature of God in Christianity and Islam, my hope is that it will bring a greater clarity and focus as we look afresh at the person of God in the Bible and find ourselves refreshed, amazed, humbled and grateful at His awe-inspiring magnificence. He truly is without equal. A second hope is that in seeing more clearly the God that the Qur’an outlines and that Muslims worship, we might be deeply moved with compassion for this vast gathering of people in our generation who live beholden to such a God, and that it would compel us to reach out in whatever way we are able.

The following discussion is far from comprehensive and is in-

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<sup>1</sup>S.M. Zwemer, *The Moslem Doctrine of God*, (Wec Press: Bucks, 1981) 5.

<sup>2</sup>Os Guinness, *Relevance Or the Gospel*, [www.churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/outreach-missions-articles/139230-os-guinness-on-outreach.html](http://www.churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/outreach-missions-articles/139230-os-guinness-on-outreach.html)

tended only as a starting point, but I will begin to trace out some thoughts as I look at five characteristics of the God revealed to us in the Bible, compare those characteristics with that outlined in the Muslim faith, and unpack some of the implications of the very deep differences that exist.

## **The God Who Is Relational**

‘And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.”’ (Rev 21.3).

The focus of the Gospel is relationship with God. Our God is a relational God who created us out of the overflow of loving relationship within the Trinity, and who intended us for perfect relationship with Him throughout eternity. The culmination of the Christian narrative is a wedding feast, a marriage. Christ the bridegroom and us His bride, the Church. When we look to heaven, as John 14 makes so beautifully clear, we are not looking for a where – a place, somewhere far away where we will be well. We are looking to a who – the person of God, and the wonder and joy and fulfilment of relationship with Him.

The Bible is full of the expression of God’s relational heart towards us – as a Father, a husband, a friend – and it carries through from Genesis to Revelation. When in the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve turn their backs on God and rebel against Him, we see immediately the tone is set for the rest of the ages, as God’s response is not ‘What have you done?’ but ‘Where are you?’ (Genesis 3:9). And the whole of the rest of the story is God winning us back, paying the price Himself, making a way for us to be with Him. It is a great love story, an epic adventure of a lover pursuing His bride. God Himself wooing and pursuing mankind. It is a breath-taking reality that we are inundated, in the Word of God, by His call for us to live in relationship with Him.

For a Muslim, however, there is no relationship to be had. The God of the Qur'an is not a relational God either in himself (the concept of the Trinity is considered the utmost of blasphemies to the Muslim mind), or with his created beings. Intimacy with this God is not on the agenda, and would, in fact, in some circles be considered to be blasphemous in concept.<sup>3</sup>

One of the primary characteristics of the God of Islam is his transcendence, and neither on this side of eternity or on the other are Muslims called to enter into relationship. Instead the dominant view is that of a master with his servants—a striking contrast to the person of Christ who tells His disciples 'I no longer call you servants, but friends' (John 15:15). Shabbir Akhtar puts it like this: 'Muslims do not see God as their father or, equivalently, themselves as the children of God. Men are servants of a just master; they cannot, in orthodox Islam, typically attain any greater degree of intimacy with their creator.'<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, speaking of the true God, 1 John 3:1 rings out with joy: 'How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Some Muslims cite surah 50:16 which teaches that God created man and is 'closer to him than his jugular vein' (translation by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 2004, Oxford University Press), in order to argue that Islam too has an understanding of relationality. The proper understanding of this and similar verses however is found in the context – to alert us to the fact that God is everywhere and is watching everything we do, and to encourage a fear of rebellion and wrongdoing in view of judgment day. The verse is not referring to relational intimacy.

<sup>4</sup> Shabbir Akhtar, *A Faith For All Seasons* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1990) 180.

<sup>5</sup>There is, of course, a root to these very different understandings of the relationality of God, and it is to be found in the very nature of God. Perhaps the single most emphasized polemic of Muslims against Christians is with regards to the Christian belief in the Trinity.. My own experience is that many Christians are confused about the Trinity and attempt to avoid discussions on this front, whilst Muslims feel they are in a position of strength as they insist on the absolute 'oneness' of God (the doctrine of 'tawhid'). Nothing could be further from the truth. The apparent simplicity of a strict monotheism like Islam, with its insistence on an undifferentiated unity in God, rather leaves Muslims open to significant philosophical problems that are impossible to overcome. Meanwhile, the complexity of God in three persons proves true both in theology and philosophy. It is beyond the scope

## The God Who Has Made Himself Known

Knowing and being known are vital components of a real and meaningful relationship, one based not on fantasy or wishful thinking, but on a right and appropriate judgment of each other – in other words, in truth. Whilst we may love somebody we do not know simply as a matter of will or as a result of an overarching theology or philosophy, the greater the knowledge of the other, the more intimate and fulfilling the love, and the more grounded in the reality of the other’s unique personhood. The Biblical emphasis is on a God who has revealed Himself: through nature, through the Scriptures, and ultimately through the living Word—the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus looks to His disciples and says to them that in knowing Him, they know the Father (John 14:7), and that knowing Him is to have eternal life (John 17:3). The self-revelation of God is a foundation point for Christian theology and the basis on which our security lies. It is one of the most profound truths of the Christian message, that whilst we may at times be in the dark about what God is doing, we are (praise God!) not in the dark about God.<sup>6</sup>

What makes this even more wonderful, is that knowing Him is not simply a matter of abstract possibility, but of God’s own heart desire, as He speaks through Jeremiah: ‘I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart’ (Jeremiah 24:7).

For the Muslim, the situation is very different. Isma’il Al Furuqi is representative of orthodox Islamic thinking when he writes the following:

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of this discussion to consider the issues, but see as a starting point Geisler and Abdul Saleeb ‘Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross’ 2nd Edition, 2002, Baker Books: Michigan.

<sup>6</sup>Os Guinness, *Unspeakable* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005) 150.

‘He [God] does not reveal Himself to anyone in any way. God reveals only His will. Remember one of the prophets asked God to reveal Himself and God told him, “No, it is not possible for Me to reveal Myself to anyone.” ...This is God’s will and that is all we have, and we have it in perfection in the Qur’an. But Islam does not equate the Qur’an with the nature or essence of God. It is the Word of God, the Commandment of God, the Will of God. But God does not reveal Himself to anyone. Christians talk about the revelation of God Himself-by God of God-but that is the great difference between Christianity and Islam.’<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, Shabbir Akhtar adds further insight:

‘The Koran, unlike the Gospel, never comments on the essence of Allah. ‘Allah is wise’ or ‘Allah is loving’ may be pieces of revealed information but, in contrast to Christianity, Muslims are not enticed to claim that ‘Allah is Love’ or ‘Allah is Wisdom’. Only adjectival descriptions are attributed to the divine being and these merely as they bear on the revelation of God’s will for man. The rest remains mysterious.’<sup>8</sup>

It is both a challenge to us, and a heartbreaking reality, that millions of Muslims around the world stake their entire lives in absolute submission to a God they do not know. The challenge is on two fronts. Firstly that we should be compelled to share the Good News that God has made Himself known! We need not worship unknown gods! It is a truth that should fill us with wonder and with evangelistic zeal. The second challenge is more devotional. He has revealed Himself to us, and longs for us to be in relationship with Him. Thus the pertinent question becomes ‘Are we taking time to get to know Him?’ Are we availing ourselves of this incredible gift that God has given us: that we have been given the right, as children of God, to draw near, and to really get to know our Saviour. I wonder if we have grown complacent with

<sup>7</sup>Al-Furuqi, *Christian Mission and Islamic Da’wah: Proceedings of the Chambesy Dialogue Consultation* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1982), p47-48

<sup>8</sup>Shabbir Akhtar, *A Faith for All Seasons* (Chicago: Ian R. Dee Publisher, 1990) 180-181.



this magnificent truth—that we can know God—and find that days can pass without us drawing close. Let us remind ourselves that it is the unique, and staggering, privilege of those who worship the God of the Bible, that they worship a God whom they can know.

### **The God Who Is Love**

Three separate aspects of the love of God concern us here, and they are brought into sharp relief by their comparison. Firstly, the Bible tells us that God is love (1 John 4:16), thus making clear that we are not to conceive of love as something God does, a particular way in which He behaves, but rather as relating to His very essence, His being. He is love, and all love flows from Him.

Secondly, we read time and again that God loves everybody. Everybody! John 3:16 gives us the wonderful declaration: ‘For God so loved the world...’ Not just the righteous, not just the gifted, the holy, the clean—He loves the sinner, the broken, the bruised, the lost, those who are far away. He loves the prodigal. He is the initiator of love to the unlovely, the ungodly. 1 John 4:19 tells us that ‘we love because he first loved us’ whilst Romans 5:8 gives us insight into the overwhelming breadth and depth of this amazing love: ‘God demonstrates his love for us in this—whilst we were still sinners, Christ died for us.’ What a wonderful truth!

Finally, our God is a God who can be loved in return. I wonder if you have ever stopped to think for a moment, how great a gift it is that we get to love God—that we are invited to experience this love and to express our love for Him in worship. It is an expression of love that in its form and content is unique to the Christian faith. The nature of love is such that it is only genuine when it is freely given, and only true to the extent that it is knowing. We have already noted that the God of the Bible, in His love and grace and sovereign will, has made Himself known. But if we were beholden to God in any way, if we were unsure of our standing before Him, holding our breath for judgment day to see if we had been

good enough, there would be too great a hold on us from Him, too great a self-interest involved, too large a ‘fear factor’, to make it possible for us to truly love Him. It is only in the Christian Gospel that we are really free to love, because we are fully free of the fear of the future, as God has placed ‘his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come’ (1 Corinthians 1:22). We do not live in fear of judgment day. Those of us who have bowed the knee at the cross, find that a most awesome exchange is ours—we share in the resurrection! Our ragged dirty lives, exchanged for His righteousness! So we find ourselves bursting out with worship:

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!  
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!  
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,  
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.<sup>9</sup>

The God who is love, the God who loves everybody, and the God who can be loved in return.

Again, Islam’s message is very different. The Qur’an does not equate love with the essence or being of God, but at best as an adjectival description of his behaviour.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, the God of the Qur’an does not love everybody. In fact the Qur’an includes numerous verses that spell out the limits of the love of God, and the characteristics of those who fall outside of his love. So surah 2:190 tells us that ‘God does not love those who over step the limits’ whilst surah 2:276 tells us he ‘does not love the ungrateful sinner.’ Surah 3:32 tells us that God ‘does not love those who ignore His commands’, whilst 3:57 notes ‘God does not love evil-doers’ and surah 4:36 tells us that ‘God does not like arrogant, boastful people’, leaving one commentator to conclude: ‘The Quran is lit-

<sup>9</sup>Frances J. Crosby ‘Blessed Assurance’ 1873

<sup>10</sup>See Shabbir Akhtar quote above, see also Kenneth Cragg: *The Call of the Minaret* (2nd ed., New York: Orbis Books) 1992, 35.

tered with dozens of verses like this. It is a fact, nowhere in the Quran is God ever reported to love someone who does not love Him first, nor is God's love ever used as the central motivating factor to draw someone close to Him.<sup>11</sup> So the love of God in Islam is a conditional love, not inherent in his being, and given only in response to righteousness and merit in a deserving party.

Finally, it is not possible, nor required, for a Muslim to love God. Not only is it 'absolutely impossible for [human beings] to know God'<sup>12</sup> (making a reasoned love difficult), but the salvation narrative of the Muslim faith makes impossible a relationship not based on fear of judgment. The Qur'an repeatedly tells Muslims that 'none may feel wholly secure' from God's judgment (surah 70:28), even when they have been righteous. Whilst Muslims believe that on judgment day their good deeds will be weighed against their bad deeds, deciding their fate (see surah 101), they also stress the sovereignty of God to do whatever he pleases. Thus he is not bound by the outcome of the scales, and should there be even a huge weighting to the good, God may choose to send an individual to hell. Just as in his sovereignty he may choose to allow one whose works are weighted towards evil to enter paradise. Right at the heart of the Muslim faith then, is a fear of the future in the hands of a God whose version of sovereignty means that he can not be held to any promises, and the beholdness involved in such a fearful connection makes loving such a God impossible.

### **The God Who Experiences Suffering**

The Word of God presents to us a God who suffers, who grieves for His people, who is grieved by their sin and their rebellion, by their unfaithfulness, and who feels their grief, bearing their pain and sorrow. Isaiah tells us that He not only 'took up our infir-

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<sup>11</sup>The Character of God in Bible and Qur'an: A study in contrasts, [www.answering-islam.org/God/character.html](http://www.answering-islam.org/God/character.html) (the framing of this anonymous article inspired the current piece).

<sup>12</sup>Fadlou Shehadi, *Ghazali's Unique Unknowable God* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1964) 37.

mities' on the cross, as though that was not enough, but 'carried our sorrows' (Isaiah 53:4), and we find on the cross a suffering saviour. In short we are introduced to the incredible reality of an all-powerful God who suffers. Our actions, we are told, have a heart impact on Him. He is not indifferent to our sin, He is not indifferent to our suffering. Both cause Him pain, and it was for the eternal resolution of both that He endured the suffering of the cross for our sakes.

The narrative of the Qur'an is in sharp contrast to the suffering of God in the Bible. The God of the Qur'an experiences no suffering, whether as a result of our sin, or as a result of our sorrows. Orthodox Islamic theology looks on suffering as weakness, and thus points to a God whose power entails that he be detached. Where the Biblical narratives, even in the context of the wrath of God and the judgment of God, point to a God who is grieved by sin, the Qur'anic narratives talk of the anger and the wrath of God, his judgment against evildoers, but make no mention of a heart response on his part.<sup>13</sup> Muhammed-al-Burkawi puts it like this: 'Allah can annihilate the universe if it seems good to Him and recreate it in an instant. He receives neither profit nor loss from whatever happens. If all infidels became believers and all the wicked pious He would gain nothing. And if all believers became infidels it would not case Him loss.'<sup>14</sup> How starkly different to the God who cries out and pleads with love to unfaithful Israel: 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?' (Ezekiel 33:11) He longs for the wicked to live, and it grieves Him when they refuse to turn and accept His saving love. The love of God and the suffering of God

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<sup>13</sup>It is interesting to consider the Noah narratives in the Bible and the Qur'an by way of comparison on this front. Genesis 6:6 tells us that 'The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain' and that this was intrinsic to the wrath that followed, whilst the Qur'anic accounts (found primarily in surah 7 and 11) refer only to the wrath of God.

<sup>14</sup>See Zwemer, *The Moslem Doctrine of God*, 56.

are thus inextricably linked. It is not possible to fully love, if the actions of the other have no impact on you. The God of the Bible is moved by us, not by any need in Him, but by His overwhelming love for us even whilst we are lost. He suffers, because He loves.

### **The God Who Is Holy**

The God of the Bible is holy, and the pages of scripture, Genesis to Revelation continually resound with the cry of worship: ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come’ (Revelation 4:8). The Bible reveals to us the God who ‘is light’ and in whom ‘there is not darkness at all’ (1 John 1:5), and speaks to us of the devastating consequences of sin which violently rip us away from God, and would leave us forever banished from His presence were it not for the cross. God’s holiness means that He cannot tolerate sin, He cannot leave it unpunished, He cannot sweep it under some cosmic eternal carpet. And it is a grave command to us: ‘consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy’ (Leviticus 11:44). The Bible is clear: God does not tempt anyone with evil (James 1:13), and never allows us to be tempted beyond what we can endure (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The God of the Qur’an is an entirely different being. The word ‘Kuddus’ (holy) is used only once in reference to God in the Qur’an (in surah 59:23)<sup>15</sup> and is used in relation to him being set apart, as opposed to morally perfect. The God of the Qur’an is not bound by any moral consistency. He is not holy. Zwemer puts it like this: ‘Allah’s moral law changes, like His ceremonial law, according to times and circumstances... Moslem teachers have in my presence utterly denied that Allah is subject to an absolute standard of moral rectitude. He can do what He pleases. The Koran often asserts this. Not only physically, but morally, He is almighty, in the Moslem sense of the word.’<sup>16</sup> The Qur’an tells us that Allah is the ‘Best of Schemers’ (surah 3:54), and a deceiver

<sup>15</sup>See Zwemer, *The Moslem Doctrine of God*, 36.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

of men (surah 4:142). Moreover, even a basic understanding of the salvation narrative in the Qur'an reaffirms that whatever the Muslim understanding of the holiness of God, the God of the Qur'an clearly has no difficulty being around sin. 51% good deeds weighed against 49% bad deeds would be good enough for him, and in fact, as I have mentioned, his sovereignty means that even a person full of evil might be permitted into paradise if God simply willed it. There would be no problem such as would be found with the fierce burning purity of the God of the Bible.<sup>17</sup>

As a result, and as might be expected as a logical outworking of his own character, there is no parallel command in the Qur'an telling Muslims to 'be holy because I am holy'. Rather, unbelievably to the Christian mind, the Hadiths tell us that the God of Islam in fact apportions sins for human beings to commit, from which there would be no escape.<sup>18</sup>

### **Concluding Thoughts**

There are many other differences between the God revealed in the Bible, and the God of the Qur'an, but I have chosen here to focus on five. Their culimative impact is profound:

In the Christian message, we have a relational God who longs for us to come into an intimate, knowledgeable relationship with Him. A God who reveals His very nature to us so that we are not in the dark about Him, and we know in whom we've place our trust. A God who is completely holy, but who loves the sinner,

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<sup>17</sup>See Mark Durie, *Revelation? Do We Worship the Same God?* (Australia: City Harvest Publications, 2006) 105-109 for a further discussion of this theme.

<sup>18</sup>Sahih Muslim, book 33, no. 6422 records: 'Abu Huraira reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying, Allah fixed the very portion of adultery which a man will indulge in. There would be no escape from it. The adultery of the eye is the lustful look and the adultery of the ears is listening to voluptuous (song or talk) and the adultery of the tongue is licentious speech and the adultery of the hand is the lustful grip (embrace) and the adultery of the feet is to walk (to the place) where he intends to commit adultery and the heart yearns and desires which he may or may not put into effect.'

the broken, the ungodly, the unlovely. A God whose justice demands that sin be dealt with, and whose love means that He deals with it Himself. A God who, because of His amazing love for us, sacrifices Himself and takes on our sin and our suffering in order to reconcile us to Himself. The Christian God takes sin seriously, takes justice seriously, takes love seriously—and we see the culmination of it on the cross.

The Muslim God, however, is not relational. He does not want or require our love and does not, cannot reveal himself. A God whom we are entirely in the dark about, and yet he demands unquestioning submission. A God who is unable to share our suffering, and unwilling to suffer on our behalf. A God who does not take sin seriously—he himself is not holy and he can happily tolerate sin—yet he does not love the sinner, and makes no effort to bring man to salvation. A God who does not take justice seriously, as it is ultimately sacrificed to his capricious will. And a God whose love is completely conditional and open to change.

My hope is that the contrast of this alternative would fuel a fire of worship in our lives as we see afresh how magnificent is our God, and how worthy of worship. There is no one like Him. Let it also move us with compassion for our Muslim friends. If they are willing to worship such a God as that portrayed in the Qur'an, how much more could they love the true God if we were only able to communicate His grace to them, and how different the impact on their lives. Let us not hold back from sharing what we have freely received!

## **Understanding and Reaching Muslims**

*by Andy Bannister*





## Understanding and Reaching Muslims

I have Muslims to thank for my being an apologist! In the late 1990s, I was a youth worker working with young people in London, England. I'd never thought much about apologetics. I'd certainly never thought about Islam or Muslims. Then in 1997 I stumbled into a seminar on apologetics to Muslims at an event I was attending. The speaker led a ministry at a place called "Speakers' Corner" in Hyde Park in London, where every Sunday he and several others stood on stepladders or boxes and preached to the hundreds of Muslims that were there. Fascinated, I tagged along a few weeks later to witness this ministry firsthand and was quickly drawn into conversations with Muslims. They asked questions—*dozens of questions* about my faith—for which I lacked answers. I went home that day with my head spinning and I began reading to find some answers. As I did so, I discovered some great writers: Josh McDowell, C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer and Norman Geisler. And *I discovered apologetics*. I went back to Speakers' Corner the next week with answers. But the Muslims had new questions! This pattern repeated itself and so, over the next three months, I learned apologetics and I learned about Islam.

What I discovered fascinated me so much that I eventually went to seminary and did a degree in theology and then a PhD in Islamic Studies, doing some detailed critical study of the Arabic text of the Qur'an. Eventually that then led, in 2010, to me being hired by an evangelistic ministry based in Canada and we moved to Toronto. God used very surprising ways—Muslims and their questions—to lead me into full-time evangelism and apologetics ministry!

Looking back on the last 15 years or so that I've been studying Islam and sharing my faith with Muslims, one thing that strikes me is how attitudes in the church have changed. Back in the late 1990s, when people discovered that Islam was an interest of mine and that I spent a lot of time talking with Muslims, the common reaction was apathy. The conversation quickly moved on to other  
 20 topics. People were not especially interested. Then something

happened. 9/11 happened. And almost overnight, interest in Islam exploded, both in the church and in the wider culture. Since that fateful September morning, I have found that now when people discover I have a specialism in Islamic studies, the questions flow and fast and furious: “Is Islam a religion of peace or violence?” “Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?” “How did Islam begin?” “What do Muslims actually believe?”

Answering those questions takes time and patience. But it’s worth investing that time if we are going to effectively share Christ with our Muslim friends. You see, whatever we may think of *Islam*, one thing is clear: *Muslims*, as do all people, need Jesus. The more I have studied Islam the more my response to Islam has moved from fear, which to be honest was my initial reaction, to compassion. I began to understand how Islam, as a system, trapped people. Fear is the reaction of many Christians to Islam, and that’s understandable. But the problem is this: fear should not be the basis for evangelism. The basis for evangelism should be *compassion*. And the best way to generate compassion is to understand Islam itself—to understand the lostness of Muslims and the power of Christ and the gospel to reach, rescue and restore them. God loves Muslims and our task is to share and communicate that love effectively. I hope this short introduction to Islam will help you in that wonderful and great commission.

## **Islam and Communicating Cross-Culturally**

One reason that people are nervous, or even afraid of Islam, is that the religion is growing rapidly here in Canada. According to the Pew Survey, in 2010 the Canadian Muslim community numbered 940,000—about 2.8% of the population. This is forecast to more than double, to over 2.5 million (or 6.6% of the population) by 2031.<sup>1</sup>This raises all kinds of issues: from integration and com-

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<sup>1</sup>Source: “The Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010-2030”, Pew Forum, 27 January 2011. Available online at [www.pewforum.org/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-regional-americas.aspx](http://www.pewforum.org/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-regional-americas.aspx) (accessed 18 July 2012).

munity cohesion to politics and religion. For Christians, it means there will be an increasing need to understand Islam, the challenges that it raises to the Gospel, and to begin thinking about how best to share the Gospel with Muslims we will increasingly encounter at work, in our neighbourhoods, schools and colleges.

Communicating with someone of a different faith and/or from a different culture can sometimes be a challenge. There's an old story that illustrates this nicely. Deep in the Prairies, two farmers were sitting on a gate, watching the world go by, when a large, hideously expensive Mercedes, clearly a rental car, pulled up. The window rolled down and the driver who, judging by the pile of maps, was extremely lost, called out: "Vous parlez Français?" The two farmers looked blank and shrugged. The driver paused before trying a second time: "Sprechen Sie Deutsch?" Again, the farmers looked blank. The driver made one final attempt: "Parli Italiano?" Once again, nothing. Furious, the driver floored the throttle and roared off, Gallic curses drifting through the window. One farmer turned to another: "Here, Bob, now there's all this globalization and multiculturalism, don't you think we should learn a foreign language, to help the tourists, eh?" His friend chewed a blade of grass thoughtfully. "Nah. That chap knew three foreign languages. Didn't do him any good."

Too often when Christians speak to those of another faith (or indeed, those who are simply unchurched) we can come across as if we're speaking another language. The aim of this short introduction to Islam is to help avoid this. My goal is to briefly survey Islam and its origins, what Muslims believe and why and to touch on some of the issues facing Muslims today. My hope is that when you encounter a Muslim you may be better prepared to understand, to listen, to pray and to find ways to share Jesus in a way that engages them.

## **Mutual Misconceptions: The Importance of Understanding**

As we begin our brief look at Islam, it's worth observing that interactions between Christians and Muslims are often marked by some common misconceptions. For some readers, this booklet may be the first time you have thought theologically, evangelistically and apologetically about Islam. Thus a great place to begin is by highlighting some common Christian misconceptions about Islam and conversely, some common Muslim misconceptions about Christianity.

The first misconception that many Christians have is the fear that all Muslims are extremists, or even potential terrorists. At worst, this fear can lead to hatred, but the more common response is that we simply ignore and try to avoid Muslims. As one lady just said to me: "I recently got onto a bus and found myself the only Christian—the other six passengers were Muslim women, wearing hijabs. I confess my initial reaction was to want to get off at the very next stop."

Such reactions, unhelpful as they may be, are to some extent understandable, given the way that Islam is often reported in the media. There is a media bias in the way Islamic fundamentalism is reported. After all, when Islam makes the news, it is often because of some random act of Islamic terrorism or extremism, either here in Canada or elsewhere in the world. Rarely are the moderate voices in Islam reported. As Christians, we should at least recognise the issue of media bias. We know how frustrating it is that, so often, when Christianity is reported in the news, the story has a negative spin—a pastor who has fallen from grace, a televangelist embezzling funds, somebody whose views don't reflect our own. It is equally frustrating for many ordinary Muslims. This is not to say there is not a serious problem with Islamic extremism — there is, and honesty is required. (More on this later) But we must also remember that most Muslims you will meet are likely to be warm, friendly people. They admittedly often manifest a degree of confidence in their faith that makes even the most ardent evangelical

look limp by comparison. This can also make Christians nervous at first. However, over the years I have had hundreds of wonderful conversations with Muslims about Jesus and the gospel. We need to push through the barrier of fear.

A second misunderstanding that Christians sometimes have about Islam is misunderstanding how in Islam, politics and religion are intertwined. Because these categories have long been separated in Western culture, we find it hard to realize that for Muslims, the two belong together. The Qur'an and Islamic law embrace personal piety, family law, civil law, criminal law, politics and international relations. This can cause no end of confusion. For example, I've found myself beginning a conversation about prayer and five minutes in the conversation has shifted to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A category mistake? Not for my Muslim friend: for him, politics and religion are *all one category*.

This issue can cause confusion for the Muslim as well. I have lost count of how many Muslims have said to me something like: "Christianity is a failed religion because of the corruption of the west." "What do you mean?" I reply. My Muslim friend then points to violence, sexual immorality, drugs, teenage pregnancy—you name it. Why does he think those elements in *western society* are an argument *against Christianity*? Because, again, for a Muslim, religion, politics and culture are one category. Western society is "Christian". These things occur. Therefore, Christianity must condone them. So goes the argument. The response is to gently help the Muslim raising this issue to see that countries cannot be Christian. Only people can be Christian and that Christians have as much concern with these things in our culture as Muslims do.

Hence, Christians do not have a monopoly on misconceptions. There are also some common misunderstandings that our Muslim friends have about Christianity. The two I encounter most are *theological*. Talk to Muslims frequently and it won't be long before you come across one of these misconceptions. The first is the

common Muslim belief that the Bible has been corrupted, changed at some point in its history, and thus cannot be trusted. This polemic is not found in the Qur'an but evolved in Islamic theology as Muslim theologians in the centuries after Muhammad began to discover the profound differences between the Qur'an and the Bible. They concluded that since the Qur'an was believed to be God's final revelation, where the Bible contradicted the Qur'an it must be the Bible that is in error. This misconception lies behind many Muslim objections to Christian claims and teachings. There are numerous ways to respond, but it is essential as you talk with Muslims that you are ready for the objection and are able to explain why the Bible can and should be trusted.<sup>2</sup>

But there is a second misconception that many Muslims have concerning Christianity that looms larger and that's the question of *who Jesus is*: Merely a man, a prophet, or the Son of God? Muslims would answer, "a prophet, a forerunner to Muhammad." The most common Muslim objection to Christianity is that they believe Christians have made Jesus—a man—into God. The worst sin in Islam is shirk—associating something with God. That is what Muslims believe Christians have done. Yet most Muslims have little idea about what the Bible teaches on this matter and do not realize that the Christian understanding is based upon what Jesus did and taught and what the New Testament bears witness to. It is safe to say that the issue of Jesus' identity and role is by far the biggest dividing topic in Christian-Muslim discussions. Jesus' provocative question, "Who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8:29) remains as potent today as it did in the first century.

These, then, are just a few of the areas that can cause confusion and misunderstanding when Christians and Muslims talk with one another. What is the best way to overcome such barriers? The best way to overcome *misinformation* is with true *information*, with understanding. For Muslims, I believe, that can only come

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<sup>2</sup>A good introductory book on the reliability of the Bible is Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP Academic, 2007).

through helping them see the importance of reading the gospels and wrestling with the Jesus they meet there, not the Jesus of Islamic theology. For Christians, the best way to overcome misunderstandings is to dig a bit deeper into Islam. If we know a little about how Islam began, about Muhammad's career, about Muslim belief and practice, it will make communicating with them somewhat easier.

## **The Beginnings of Islam: Muhammad and Pre-Islamic Arabia**

Islam emerged into a world of empires with the Arabian Peninsula of the seventh century lying sandwiched between the giant Byzantine and Persian empires, that had been at war for years. The Arabian Peninsula lay outside of the action—a multi-ethnic and multi-religious backwater. Religiously very diverse, pre-Islamic Arabia was also largely an oral culture: storytelling and poetry were the primary ways that religious and cultural material was circulated.

Into this world Muhammad was born, sometime around AD 570.<sup>3</sup> He was born in Mecca, a minor trading centre and pilgrimage site, centred around the Kaa'ba, the cube-shaped building that is now the focal point of Muslim worship (which was then used to host idols for a wide range of pagan deities.)

Growing up, Muhammad worked first as a shepherd and then in the caravan trading business. At 25, he married his wealthy caravan-owning boss, Khadija, who bore him two sons and four daughters. Only the daughters survived, a pattern that would be repeated with his later wives: Muhammad's failure to provide a

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<sup>3</sup>Here we are largely following the narrative set out in the classical account of Muhammad's life, of which a good translation can be found in A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001). There are critical scholarly questions about how reliable all of this material is; for an up to date summary of the issues, see Tom Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword: The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Global Arab Empire* (New York: Doubleday, 2012) esp. chapters 1, 6 and 7.

male heir arguably led to a number of succession problems after his death.

## **Muhammad's Prophetic Career**

Muhammad had ascetic tendencies and as a young man would regularly retire to the desert for protracted periods of meditation. It was in AD 610, on one such retreat that, according to Muslim tradition, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and revealed what is now chapter 96 of the Qur'an. Muhammad continued to receive revelations over the next twenty-three years and these were, according to Muslim belief, collected together as the Qur'an.

There were two distinct phases to Muhammad's twenty-three year prophetic career. The first was in Mecca where, from 610-622, he began his ministry, claiming to be like the biblical prophets, sent only to the Arabs. His message was threefold: monotheism, social justice and warning of the punishments in hell for those who refused to listen. Although he gained a few converts, opposition quickly grew and outright persecution ensued. It became so bad that Muhammad and his followers had to flee for their lives. So, in AD622 those early Muslims migrated north to the city of Medina; a date that marks the start of the Muslim calendar.

The second phase to Muhammad's career, the years 622-632 he spent at Medina, are extremely important if we are to understand why Islam today looks the way it does. It was at Medina that Muhammad made the transition from prophet to statesman. There, he gained control of the city and a shift in the character of his revelations occurred. Muhammad now claimed that God was revealing to him laws for a new nation with him at its head. This had a number of implications: For example, it is at Medina that we see the beginnings of *jihad* or holy war, as a number of verses in the Qur'an allowed for, at first the defensive and then later, the offensive use of battle to further the Muslim cause. Following a number of military interactions with the Meccans, Muhammad finally conquered his home city in 630 AD. He spent the last two



years bringing the remaining Arab clans in the region under his control before he died in AD 632.

## Lessons From History

This background is vitally important for several reasons. First, for Muslims, the Qur'an is deeply bound up with Muhammad's life. For Sunni Muslims in particular,<sup>4</sup> the Qur'an is to be read through the filter of Muhammad's life. It is by knowing when a verse was revealed and what Muhammad was doing at that time that we can interpret it today. Second, for Muslims of all varieties, although Muhammad was only a man—a prophet—a “warner”—he is still the supreme example of humankind, whose example is to be studied and emulated. Furthermore, the origins of Islam set up a number of themes that resonate down the centuries to the Islam we see today, for example:

- Although Muhammad claimed to be a prophet in the same line as those of the Jews and Christians, in the end he preached a supersessionism. Islam had not merely come to *complement* these former faiths, it had come to *replace* them.
- Muhammad demonstrably moved from a model of non-confrontation in his Meccan ministry to a willingness to use force to impose his ideas in the later part of his ministry. For example, in chapter 9 of the Qur'an, both pagan Arabs and Jews and Christians are explicitly mentioned as being objects of the sword if they do not accept the rule of Islam over them.

These are both live issues today: The question of how Islam relates to other faiths and the question of Islam and violence. The seeds for all these and other contemporary issues were sown in the Islam's very origins.

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<sup>4</sup>There are three main sects of Islam: Sunnis, Shia and Sufis. For a survey of their origins and differences, see Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2005) 77-78, 88, 121-148.

## Muslim Belief and Practice

From this brief survey of Islam's origins and some of the ways that history has impacted Islam today, we turn now to explore and comment on Islam's core beliefs and the differences between them and those of Christianity. According to the traditional understanding, Muslims must believe in five (or possibly six) things.

However, before we examine these, it is worth noting that for most Muslims, belief comes second (albeit a close second) to practice. You may have heard of the well-known “five pillars” of Islam: the creed, prayer, fasting, charitable giving and pilgrimage to Mecca. These define Islam and shape the lives of religiously active Muslims. Indeed, one can perhaps sum up the differences between Islam and Christianity by noting that Christianity consists of complex beliefs with simple practices while Islam reverses this—simple beliefs and complex practices. However, beliefs are still important. It is particularly through its beliefs that we can explore Islam's relationship to Christianity. What we'll find as we progress is a pattern: common terminology but different *content*. Islam uses the same *words* as Christians but means very different things by them.

### Belief in God (Allah)

Like Christians, Muslims believe in one God. The best way to understand the Muslim concept of God is simply by turning to the Qur'ān. Sura (chapter) 112 of the Qur'ān reads as follows:

*Say: He is Allah, the One and Only;  
Allah, the Eternal, Absolute;  
He begetteth not, nor is He begotten;  
And there is none like unto Him.*

You can immediately see the key idea repeated multiple times: Allah (the name the Qur'an uses for God) is absolutely, indivisibly one. Early Muslim theologians developed the term *tawḥīd*

for this doctrine—Allah’s absolute oneness. This emphasis on the absolute *oneness* of Allah leads Muslims to fundamentally misunderstand the Christian concept of the Trinity, leading Muslims to simply consider Christians as being polytheists.

Along with being absolutely, indivisibly one, Muslims also believe that Allah is transcendent, all-powerful and all knowing. The Qur’an repeatedly emphasizes Allah’s power and that arguably Allah’s key attribute is his Will.

As we have seen, one of the common mistakes Christians can make in approaching Islam is to assume that because the same terminology is used—“god”, “scripture”, “prophet”, “revelation”—that Muslims mean the same thing by each term that we do. This is not the case. For example, “faith” itself functions quite differently in Islam. Faith in God for many Muslims is more like mental acceptance of the fact of His existence and lordship, and especially of a particular concept of His oneness. Allah is transcendent and non-personal, revealing only His will. Consequently, the emphasis of a Muslim’s relationship with God is one of obedience like that of a slave to a master rather than a personal, close relationship.

### **Belief in Angels**

Angels form a core part of the Islamic belief system—far more so than in Christianity. It is angels who brought revelation (e.g. the Qur’an) down from heaven to the prophets—angels who, according to Islamic tradition, watch over our every deed, with two “recording angels” perched, one on each shoulder, documenting everything you do. Thus, angels and the angelic realm are an important, everyday reality for the faithful Muslim. In one sense, this stress on the role of angels in Islam flows from beliefs about Allah: because Allah is so high, so transcendent, so remote, it is angels who interact with the earthly realm and, for the lowly Mus-

lim believer, from his or her point of contact with the spiritual realm.<sup>5</sup>

## **Belief in Scripture**

Muslims believe that Allah has revealed his will to human beings by sending books with his prophets and, indeed, that every prophet brought a book or written revelation. Not all have survived, however the Qur'an does speak of the *Taurat* (of Moses), the *Zabur* (Psalms, of David), the *Injil* (Gospel, with Jesus) and, of course, the Qur'an, Allah's final revelation that was sent to Muhammad. Although the Qur'an mentions and speaks positively of the former scriptures, most Muslims believe that they have been corrupted and that only the Qur'an has been perfectly preserved.

There are further differences in the way that belief in Scripture operates for Islam than it does for us as Christians. First, Christians would affirm that the Bible contains multiple-genres: history, poetry, parable, song, psalm and prophecy. Muslims, on the other hand, believe that Scripture only consists of the first-person speech of Allah himself and exhibit great confusion when faced with the way the Bible looks. Second, Muslims understand that Scripture consists of Allah revealing his Will and his commands to his people whereas Christians would recognise this as just one function: the Bible is also about God revealing something of himself and his character. Third, Muslims consider Scripture to be, quite literally, the very Word of Allah (at least the Qur'an in its Arabic form), thereby treating the physical book with such reverence. One Muslim author has helpfully pointed out that the equivalent of the Qur'an in Christianity is not the Bible, but is actually Jesus ...

The Word of God in Islam is the Qur'an; in Christianity it is

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<sup>5</sup>For more on angels, see Andrew G. Bannister, *Angels in Islamic Oral Tradition from the Qur'an to Tha'labi* in Peter G. Riddell & Beverly Smith Riddell, ed., *Demons and Angels* (Leicester: Apollos, 2007) 170-189.

Christ ... The form of the Qur'an is the Arabic language which religiously speaking is as inseparable from the Qur'an as the body of Christ is from Christ Himself.<sup>6</sup>

In Christianity, the Word of God became a man. In Islam, the Word of God became a book.

### **Belief In Prophets**

Like Christians, Muslims also believe that God has sent messengers—prophets—to mankind. But there the similarity ends. For example, traditional Islamic belief is that prophets are sinless, protected by Allah from any wrongdoing. This is why Muslims have a very difficult time with the stories in the Bible such as David's sin with Bathsheba. Furthermore, most Muslims believe that every *people* have been sent a prophet: one commonly accepted number for the total number of prophets sent is 124,000. There is a line of prophet-hood beginning with Adam, the first prophet, and ending with Muhammad, the last—and seal of the line of prophets. Among these—and mentioned in the Qur'an—are many biblical prophets, although often with Arabized names: e.g. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David and Jesus.

### **Belief In The Day Of Judgement**

Again, like Christians, Muslims believe that at the end of time, God will wrap up history, those who have died will be raised, and all will face judgement. It is important to understand the major

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<sup>6</sup>Cited in Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993) 8; cf. Seyyid Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 2002) 22-23 where Nasr also describes the Qur'an as "the central theophany of Islam."; cf. William Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (London: SCM, 1993) 47: '[The] Qur'an is to Muslims what Christ is to Christians ... [Muslims] relationship to [God] is (iman) is mediated through the Qur'an. For them, this scripture is stands uncreated, eternal. The Word of God is eternal, is an attribute of God himself ...' See also Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, Rev. Ed. (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997) 53

role that the Day of Judgement plays in the Islamic worldview. For many Muslims, judgement is an ever looming reality and most are terrified about the prospect of being found wanting on that day.

All Muslims would hold to these five beliefs. Some other Muslims add further beliefs as being central to Muslim identity: the most common additional belief is an extreme view of predestination—the belief that Allah has ordained and determined everything and that everything that happens does so by the will of God—inshallah. Muslims have traditionally had a very difficult time reconciling human freedom and God’s sovereignty because whereas the Bible tends to hold the two in tension the Qur’an tends to emphasize Allah’s will at the expense of human freedom — and many Muslim cultures are shot-through with fatalism.

### **Issues Facing Islam Today**

We have looked at the origins of Islam and the career of Muhammad. We’ve also briefly dipped into Muslim theology and seen how the core beliefs of Islam differ in significant ways from those of Christianity. Let’s bring our brief survey of Islam right up to date by highlighting some contemporary issues and challenges facing Islam today—especially Islam in the West and the Muslims that you will likely meet here in Canada.

The first is the issue of “*moderation*” versus “*radicalism*”. You can hardly open a newspaper or turn on a news bulletin today without seeing the words “Islam” and “terrorism” conjoined. This resurgent Islamic radicalism that is currently rearing its head challenges Muslim and non-Muslim alike with the question: Will the Islam of the twenty-first century be dominated by the voices of radicalism or the moderation? To discuss the roots and ideology of Islamic radicalism in detail would require a whole other book. Suffice to say that here in the West, if one was going to paint with broad brush strokes it would probably be fair to say that 15% of Muslims would be at the more radical end of the scale, 15% very

moderate and, crucially, 70% *in the middle* who are swayed by whichever voices are the loudest and the issues that are currently effecting the broader Muslim community. Whilst the Qur'an contains verses that can be appealed to by both moderate and radical, the problem for the moderates is that more of the text (and the history of Islam) supports the radical position—meaning that moderate Islam still has much work to do.

Related to the issue of radicalism vs. moderation is a second question: the question of authority. Who speaks for Muslims and to whom should Muslims turn for advice and guidance? This question unpacks itself on a number of levels. On a national level, western governments have long struggled with the question of who to speak to in order to hear *the* voice of the Muslim community. At a local-community level, many mosques in Canada are traditionally run by the older generation, with elders—often first or second-generation immigrants—holding the reigns of power and resisting change and modernisation. However, an increasing number of young Muslims—and to an extent, women—are protesting that these mosque committees don't represent them and their concerns nor are they helping Muslims with the challenge of living in the modern world.<sup>7</sup>

Which leads to our third issue facing Islam today: the challenge for Muslims reconciling their faith with the pressures of living in the modern world. Across Western Europe and North America, Muslims find themselves living as minority communities in pluralistic, usually largely secular societies. Yet the traditional sources of authority—the Qur'an, the Hadith, Islamic law (*Shariah*)—all assume that Muslims will be living in states that are run along Muslim lines. As Zaki Badawi puts it, classical Muslim theology is:

... a theology of the majority. Being a minority was not seri-

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<sup>7</sup>A helpful book on the perspectives of young Muslims living in the west is Philip Lewis, *Young, British and Muslim* (London: Continuum, 2007).

ously considered or even contemplated...Muslim theology offers, up to the present, no systematic formulation of the status of being in a minority.<sup>8</sup>

Thus Muslims have a problem: where do you go as a Muslim for theological, legal and practical resources to help you decide how to live out your faith? For Muslims, however, aside from Muhammad's beginnings in Mecca, Islam has always traditionally been in power. Look at the rapid spread of the Muslim Empire in its first 300 years. It's hard to be a Muslim in contemporary secular Canada, with temptations and challenges around every corner. This is an area that opens up some very fruitful areas for conversation, because, of course, Christians also feel the challenges of the modern world, especially as it pertains to living as a minority. Christians, however, can simply turn to the pages of the New Testament to find good resources and rich theological thinking on how to live as a minority. The early church began as a minority religious group and the first Christians had to think through what that meant for how they responded to culture. Perhaps we can reflect on their example and use it as a starting point for conversations with Muslims we may meet.

### **Engaging in Evangelism and Dialogue**

All of which brings me to one final subject. Equipped with a basic understanding of Islam, with compassion for our Muslim friends, with a desire to reach Muslims for Christ, how do we do this? How do we engage the Muslim in evangelism and dialogue, in conversation and witness? There are seven principles that I have found to be very helpful over the years as I've tried to interact with Muslims, to answer their questions, and to demonstrate and proclaim Christ's love to them.

The first principle is simply this: *go where Muslims are*. If you want to share Christ with Muslims, you need to talk to Muslims.

<sup>8</sup>Zaki Badawi, *Islam in Britain* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1981) 7.



Living and working as we do in a multi-cultural society like Canada, meeting Muslims is not difficult. So if you have Muslim neighbours, try to find an opportunity to introduce yourself. Make friends with Muslims at work. Take every opportunity you can.

Second, we must remember the importance of friendship. Evangelism works best while building authentic long-term relationships, not performing hit-and-run operations with the gospel. And this is especially important when it comes to Muslim colleagues or neighbours. For a whole range of reasons, Muslims can often be very suspicious of Christianity and long and ancient prejudices may need to be broken down. Hospitality is an important virtue in Muslim cultures and is a great way of building deep friendships. Try inviting a Muslim neighbour over for coffee, or offering to buy a Muslim colleague or classmate lunch. It is also in the context of longer-term friendships that Muslims can see the gospel lived out, seeing and hearing the difference that a relationship with Jesus makes.

Third, we must *break free of the fear factor*. Many Christians don't get involved in sharing their faith with Muslims quite simply because of fear. Either fear of Islam itself (perhaps because of all those terrible news reports about Islam being violent), or in countries like Canada, fear of causing offense—saying or doing the wrong thing. I have to say that this fear is often more in the mind of the Christian than of the Muslim. Whatever the cause, it is vital to overcome it. Fear is arguably the biggest obstacle holding Christians back from all evangelism!

Next, we must *be honest about the differences between Islam and Christianity*. Whilst friendship is important, it is also vital to stress that Christians should not play down the many and major differences between Islam and Christianity. It may be tempting to not speak of those things or areas that separate us, but avoiding or dismissing them is actually far more likely to cause damage. Instead, why not use them as a rich area of conversation? As you befriend Muslims, ask questions about what they believe and

don't be afraid to say something like: "That's really interesting. We believe something a little different as Christians." You can then use that difference to highlight an aspect of the gospel.

Fifth, as you learn more about Islam (which I hope this little book will inspire you to), you may read or discover things that raise profound questions for you. You may find that some of the violent passages in the Qur'an can be quite disturbing when you first encounter them. We should not be afraid of raising such issues with our Muslim friends, indeed avoiding them does our friend no favours. Such questions can be asked—indeed we have a duty to ask them, because many Muslims have never heard or faced tough questions about what they believe. This can be done without denigration. One does not need to deliberately insult Muhammad or the Qur'an in order to raise a question, especially if one asks in the context of a friendship and with an openness to also allowing our Muslim friends to ask the questions they may have about Jesus or the Bible. Learn to ask good questions; this was the heart of Jesus' own apologetic methods (just read the gospels and see how many times Jesus asks somebody a question).

I suspect that one of the reasons Christians are sometimes afraid to get to know Muslims or to ask difficult questions is that our culture tends to shy away from disagreement. So this leads to my sixth and penultimate point — *don't be afraid of disagreement*. Westerners tend to see debate or even argument as a bad thing, whereas for a Middle Easterner, debate is seen as a good, healthy thing. Indeed, shying away from confrontation is not a Christian virtue, but is more a Western cultural artefact, especially in Canada where the mantra is "tolerance, tolerance, tolerance". Ironically, of course, to *tolerate* something you first need to *understand* it. Pretending that all religions are the same and avoiding contentious points is not tolerance, but ignorance. If you read the New Testament carefully, especially the Gospels and Acts, you quickly discover that healthy debate and discussion was the way of the early church. For example, Jesus and Paul, to name but two, were not afraid of disagreements and even heated arguments. Perhaps

we need to learn from their example.

Finally, one last, and critically important principle. *Keep centred on Jesus*. At the end of day, sharing your faith with a Muslim friend, neighbor or work colleague is not ultimately about winning an argument but about introducing them to Jesus. It is when they encounter Jesus for the first time and grasp who he really is—not the distorted picture the Qur’an paints of him—that they will take spiritual steps forward. Therefore, I would recommend when talking with a Muslim that one always brings the conversation back to Jesus. Whether it is a comparison of him and Muhammad on different points, or talking about what he has done in your life, or what he was like, or what the Bible says about him—keep it Jesus focussed.

## **In Conclusion**

We have only been able to give the briefest of overviews of Islam. But nevertheless, I hope that it has opened your mind, given you food for thought, and just a glimpse into the huge edifice that is Islam. It is important to understand where Islam has come from and the historical events and forces that still shape it today. It is vital to recognise that all Muslims are not the same, that Islam is not a monolith. It’s also exceedingly helpful to grasp that whilst Muslims and Christians may use the same words at times, they do not necessarily mean the same thing. Let us not forget as we reflect that Islam, as well as Christianity for that matter, both face challenges and questions in the twenty-first century to which thoughtful Muslims seek to respond and find answers for. Recognising all of this helps overcoming misunderstanding and false assumptions and helps clear the ground for planting the seeds of the Gospel.

Muslims are growing in number here in Canada. Some Christians see that as something to be worried about and I certainly share some of that concern. But it also excites me, for two reasons. First, it’s an unprecedented opportunity to reach Muslims with the gospel. There was once a time when if you wanted to share

Christ with a Muslim you had to go to the Muslim world. Now the Muslim world has come to us. What a tremendous opportunity! And, second, I believe the number of Muslims here in the west is God's wake-up call to the church. Sometimes we have not been as diligent or as faithful in missions and evangelism as we might. Well, now we have one less excuse—Muslims are in our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our schools and universities. What more incentive do we need to reach them with the gospel? After all, the best response to radical Islam is radical Christianity.

I hope and pray that some of you reading this booklet will be inspired to get involved in reaching Muslims—that you will begin reading more deeply and that you will begin praying for God to give you opportunities to befriend, talk and discuss with Muslims.<sup>9</sup> Get involved in sharing the love of Christ with them.<sup>10</sup> God has a heart for the Muslim people. Jesus died for our Muslim friends. They need to hear that message, presented with credibility, clarity, conviction and passion. As Jesus said: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). In twenty-first century, multi-cultural Canada, the nations have come here. Let's ensure that as well as welcoming them to our land, we introduce them to our Lord.

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<sup>9</sup>Some introductory books include Peter G. Riddell and Peter Cotterell, *Islam in Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003); Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993); Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2001); and Nick Chatrath, *Reaching Muslims: A One-Stop Guide for Christians* (Oxford: Monarch, 2011).

<sup>10</sup>The Canadian Network of Ministry to Muslims ([www.cnmm.ca](http://www.cnmm.ca)) can help you find other people in your area interested in reaching Muslims for Christ.



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