

A PRACTICAL RESPONSE TO MUSLIMS IN OUR COMMUNITY

Reliable figures are not available as yet, prior to the next census, but there may be around two million Muslims who have UK citizenship, together with many permanent residents who are refugees/asylum seekers. There are few major population centres of the UK - especially on the mainland - which do not possess a burgeoning Muslim community. The growth of the Muslim community largely comes from a higher birth rate than other communities, through immigration, and finally - albeit to a much lesser degree - through conversion. The last feature is one that distinguishes Muslims from other faith groups, such as Jews, Hindus and Sikhs, since none of these are *missionary* religions, whereas Islam, like evangelical Christianity, most definitely proselytises. Indeed, it is usually held in Islamic jurisprudence that a Muslim may not permanently migrate to a non-Muslim country unless he engages in *daw'ah* - mission. This obviously influences our relationship with the Muslim community. So how do we respond?

1. Be informed about Islam and Muslims

Since Islam is a missionary religion, Muslims will try to convert the local population. They are usually well aware that most Britons are only *nominally* Christian, but they are also conscious of the Christian heritage of this country. They also know that evangelical Christians hold to and defend the veracity of Scripture. It is increasingly obvious that many younger Muslims are being trained (or training themselves) in anti-Christian theological polemics, and so they are often ready for evangelicals when they meet them. In contrast, evangelicals often possess only a thin knowledge of Islam, if any at all.

It really is a matter of urgency these days for local congregations to instruct their members about Islamic beliefs and practices. The Apostle Paul, whose main mission field was the Gentile population of the Roman Empire, evidently possessed knowledge of Hellenistic religion and philosophy, as his debates with Epicureans and Stoics on the Areopagus reveal (Acts 17). That being the case, he was able to present the gospel in terms that his hearers could understand. It follows that in order to adequately relate to local Muslim communities in the UK, we must know something about their religious beliefs and practices.

This is particularly important because Islam and Christianity have certain points in common. Both are monotheistic religions. Both claim to be Abrahamic. Both hold that Jesus is the virgin-born Messiah, who will return from Paradise one day. Both have moral codes where homosexuality is considered sinful. The Qur'an actually

contains references to the Torah and the gospel. Yet the problem is that for all their similarities, the differences between the two religions are severe. Islam denies the triune nature of God, the deity of Christ and Jesus' eternal sonship; and the Muslim idea of Paradise has little if anything in common with the Biblical picture of Heaven. Usually, Muslims deny that Jesus was crucified. They normally hold that the Christian Scriptures have been severely corrupted. Furthermore, the Islamic concept of 'sin' has important distinctions from the Biblical idea. In Christianity, the Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity; in Islam, the term describes the angel Gabriel. In Christianity, inspiration does not normally involve *dictation*, yet the latter is precisely how Islam views it.

It follows, therefore, that in order to communicate with Muslims, we must be aware that though we may often use the same terminology, the meaning we ascribe to such terms will be very different. A somewhat quaint analogy is the difference between the British and American dialects of English. In the UK, we call 'jam' what Americans call 'jelly'. A visiting US preacher in a British church once made this mistake in a sermon, referring to a 'peanut and jelly sandwich', causing his hearers to give bemused looks! It is no use Christians approaching Muslims with the message about the new birth being the answer to the dominance of original sin when Muslims do not even believe in the concept, since what characterises 'sin' to a Muslim is a concrete, forbidden act, not inward corruption; we must first clarify our terminology to ensure that we are actually communicating what we intend to proclaim. It is essential not to presume that Muslims will understand what we are saying unless we adequately define our terms.

Thus, our congregations need to be trained in an overview of Islamic beliefs in order to better communicate our message to our Muslim neighbours. Whilst there are various books available, there really is no substitute for inviting experts in Islam to come and perform this service to the church. In practice, congregations usually have little knowledge of how to reach out to the local Muslims, and there is no substitute for experience. A number of people across the UK are available to perform such training. It is really best to set aside a full Saturday for such training - it just will not do to ask someone to do a short address on a Tuesday evening. There is simply too much to learn about Islam, and about how to answer Islamic polemics.

Such a talk would examine the nature of revelation according to Islam, how Muslims see the Qur'an, the importance of the Hadith - the narrations of Muhammad and his immediate successors, since most of what a Muslim does is based on these - the character of Islamic law, Muslim doctrines of God, Christ, the angels and eschatology. Some people might have blinked when they saw the reference to 'angels' in the last sentence - after all, whilst Christians affirm their existence, evangelical statements of faith rarely if ever refer to them. In contrast, in Islam, angels play a crucial role that in many ways is analogous to that of the Holy Spirit in Christianity. Indeed, one must be careful when using terms such as 'the Holy Spirit' or 'the Spirit of God' to Muslims. In Christianity, the two terms are synonymous, but in Islam, *Ruh al-Quddus* - the Holy Spirit - is a title of the angel Gabriel, whereas *Ruh'Allah* - the Spirit of God - is a title of Jesus. Obviously, in Islam, neither refers to the Third Person of the Trinity.

Similarly, when Muslims affirm their belief in the virgin birth of Christ, we must beware of attributing Christian meanings to this term as they use it. There is no particular reason for the virgin birth in Islam, other than a sovereign miracle by Allah. It is true that Muslims believe that Jesus was sinless, but only in the sense that *all* prophets are viewed as such. Obviously, none of the other prophets was virgin-born, so clearly the Islamic doctrine has nothing to do with the impeccable nature of Jesus. Muslims will often assert that Adam's existence was a greater miracle, since he had no parents whatsoever!

As for the Second Coming, whilst evangelicals have differing opinions on the subject, none believes that Christ will descend on the wings of angels to the Jesus mosque in Damascus, and from there proceed to Palestine to slay the Antichrist with a lance, and then execute all Jews who reject Him as Messiah and all Christians who affirm that He is the Son of God; as well as marrying, have children, ruling for forty years, thereafter to die and be buried in Medina next to Muhammad and the first caliph Abu Bakr! It can be seen that precisely because Muslims have some beliefs in common with Christians, but invest wholly different meanings thereto, it is vital to have a proper knowledge of basic Islamic doctrines.

Furthermore, the Islamic doctrine of Paradise is very different to the Biblical view. A man who gets there is arrayed in green silk, living in a pearl palace, married to several beautiful virgins, and enjoying rivers of pure water, milk and wine. The Biblical emphasis on fellowship with God and the eternal adoration of Him is not to the fore in the Islamic descriptions of the Hereafter. Obviously, the means of getting there are different - in Christianity, it is by saving faith in Christ; in Islam, by belief in Islam and good works, with martyrdom being the surest way of entry into Paradise. Naturally, this means that evangelicals, when proclaiming the saving consequences of Christ's death, must spell out what we mean by 'Heaven', otherwise Muslims will continue to think of their own views of the Afterlife and assume that Christians also share this understanding.

2. Be acquainted with Islamic polemics

As previously stated, Islam is a missionary religion: Muslims in the UK are well aware of Britain's Christian heritage, and that most people are at least nominally Christian. They are also conscious of the missionary challenge of evangelical Christianity. Hence, they are increasingly producing tracts, booklets, books and DVDs aimed at undermining belief in historic Christianity. Such polemical works often utilise liberal Biblical criticism and often extreme, *The Da Vinci Code*-type ideas. A favourite author utilised by Islamic polemics/mission is the US scholar Bart Ehrman, an agnostic who started his career as an evangelical, but whose academic position is now extremely liberal.

One new approach that is making the rounds among Muslims is that the earliest Christians were the Ebionites, who were actually a second-century Jewish-Christian sect who produced their own pen-knifed 'Gospel' largely based on Matthew, but omitting the earlier parts, as they rejected the virgin birth, and who were also hostile to the Apostle Paul. Although Muslims uphold the virgin birth of Jesus, they are usually antagonistic to Paul, since, following discredited pre-war liberal theology, they blame him for the 'corruption' of Christianity, accusing him

of being the one to introduce ideas such as the Trinity, the eternal Sonship of Jesus, and salvation by faith apart from works. Often 1 Corinthians 9:22 ('I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some') is misquoted to prove that Paul advocated a syncretistic blend of traditional Judaism with Hellenistic polytheism - as opposed to the supposed unitarian theology of Jesus.

Another tactic is the increasing use of Gnostic material, such as that in the Nag Hammadi library, to bolster Islamic doctrines. For example, many young British Muslims are aware that some Gnostics, notably the second century leader called Basilides, held that Jesus swapped facial features with Simon of Cyrene, leading to the latter being crucified in Jesus' place, whilst Jesus stood by laughing, before ascending from the earth. The story is found in the third century document found at Nag Hammadi known as the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, which is presently being quoted by some Muslim polemicists. A popular belief among Muslims is that God rapt Jesus up to Paradise, whilst the features of Judas were transmogrified to resemble those of Christ, causing him to be executed in Jesus' place. We can see how the contemporary discovery of this Gnostic belief is grist to the Islamic polemical mill. The situation is complicated by the absurd claim in the best-selling book, *The Da Vinci Code* (pp. 317, 331), that the Nag Hammadi documents represent 'The earliest Christian records'. Given the widespread readership of this book, many people are indeed convinced of a 'conspiracy' on this issue, and this aids Islamic polemics.

This brings us to one of the central points of dispute between Christians and Muslims - the identity of revelation. Muslims are always keen for debates on this issue. Again, they have utilised liberal Biblical criticism to attack belief in the reliability of Scripture. They point out that the longer ending of 1 John 5:7 affirming the Trinity is an interpolation, and they often imply that the Bible is full of such glosses, making it untrustworthy. Similar points are often made about the longer ending of Mark 16, and John 7:53-8:11. So often, ordinary members of our congregations are simply insufficiently knowledgeable to answer such points.

Related to textual issues is the question of canonicity. Again, *The Da Vinci Code* has caused much mischief in this area with its claims that Constantine 'commissioned... a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's *human* traits... The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned.' Exactly the same view has been a feature of modern Islamic polemics - that the Canon of the New Testament was the principal issue at the Council of Nicæa. Such ideas can be found in the Islamic polemical book *Jesus, Prophet of Islam*. The essential claim is that the present canon is the product of late and arbitrary choice. Modern polemicists also look at some regional variations on the canon, as in Ethiopia or among the so-called Nestorian Assyrian church. With respect to the Old Testament, a favourite charge against Protestants is that we have arbitrarily deleted some books from its canon - namely, the 'Deutero-canonical' books such as 1 Maccabees upheld by the Roman Catholic Church. Muslims often ask why Protestants and Catholics have a different Old Testament canon. How many ordinary Christians are able to answer them?

A final point in relation to this is the so-called *Gospel of Barnabas*. This must not be confused with either the second century apocryphal work called *The Epistle of Barnabas*, or the fifth century *Acts of Barnabas* - neither, of which, of course, were written by Barnabas. It should be noted that the book *Jesus, Prophet of Islam*, frequently confuses the *Epistle* and the pseudo-gospel. The pseudo-*Gospel of Barnabas*, since it presents Jesus and predicting Muhammad, and condemning the Apostle Paul, is often a favourite tool for Islamic polemicists, especially in conjunction with attacks on the canon of the New Testament. Few ordinary church members - even pastors - are aware of the history and nature of this pseudo-gospel, which in fact probably dates from the seventeenth century. Again, when untrained Christians are faced with this false text, they are usually unable to address it. Once more, it is essential for congregations to be trained in the history of this hoax.

3. Know how to respond to Islamic polemics

Martyn Lloyd-Jones once commented that problems in church life often occur when the pew is allowed to dictate to the pulpit. In many ways, this has relevance to the local congregation responding to the challenge of an active Muslim community in their midst. Sunday preaching is necessarily 'devotional' in character - after all, what Christians want to know is how to advance in their relationship with the Lord, how to experience sanctification by the Spirit, how to interact with other Christians in spiritual unity and love, etc. Moreover, in many churches, as A. W. Pink long ago observed:

During the last two or three generations the pulpit has given less and less prominence to doctrinal preaching, until today, with very rare exceptions, it has no place at all. In some quarters the cry from the pew was, 'we want living experience and not dry doctrine'; in others, 'we need practical sermons and not metaphysical dogmas'; and yet others, Give us Christ and not theology. Sad to say, such senseless cries were generally heeded...

(Iain Murray, *The Life of Arthur W. Pink*)

Of course, the problem is, if congregations are not given adequate training in the foundations of the Faith, they become like the 'unoccupied' abode of Matthew 12:44 to which a demon may return - that is, people who are not prepared are open season. In many ways, this represents the situation for congregations across the British Isles at present. It was not always so. Generations of Scots, Welsh, Ulstermen, and English 'Dissenters' were raised on the Shorter Catechism (and their Baptist/Independent variants), and Richard Baxter was famous for catechising his parishioners. Instructed in the intellectual defence of the Gospel, many ordinary believers were very able defend the Faith to 'everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you' (1 Peter 3:15). Indeed, if we go back much further in church history, the second and third centuries saw the emergence of able Christian 'Apologists' such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian who defended the Faith against attacks by non-Christians.

This has to be emphasised because so often the reaction of many ordinary, untrained Christians when faced with Islamic polemicists and their arguments is to retreat behind the statement, 'I don't know the answer, but I know Him who has

the answer'. Pious this may sound, but it is also subjective and unconvincing to those Muslims who may be open to hearing the truth. Of course, our experience of the Holy Spirit is the decisive feature of our Christian life, but if we return to Paul on the Areopagus, the proclamation of our supernatural experiences was not the substance of his preaching and discussion.

Many church members, encountering Islamic polemics for the first time, may have their faith shaken (I have met at least three people who have moved from evangelical Christianity to Islam, and whilst we may question their standing in terms of spiritual regeneration, we need to think of those attendees and especially our young people who may be vulnerable). Moreover, we must remember that the Christian faith is based on historical reality - e.g. 'Christ died for our sins' involves a theological assertion ('for our sins') about an historical reality ('Christ died'). Furthermore, when church members are unable to answer Islamic polemics, ordinary Muslims - and possibly ordinary church members - naturally assume that the reason for their silence is that the claims of Islamic polemicists are true. It follows from this that the training of congregations in answering Islamic missionaries is no luxury.

What then can be done? In American churches, part of Sunday worship is often the *adult* Sunday school. Perhaps this can be adapted for the British context. It need not be regular, nor on Sunday. What is definitely required is that pastors set aside some Saturdays and weekday evenings part of the year to provide training in vital matters such as textual criticism, Biblical canonicity, explaining the Trinity, understanding the two natures of Christ in one Person, what actually happened at the Council of Nicæa, addressing 'problem texts' (i.e. which Muslims claim are self-contradictory), why Paul does not contradict Jesus, justification and salvation, the historical evidence for the crucifixion, the extermination of the Canaanites, and also issues such as whether Christianity 'borrowed' from pagan Mystery Cults - all issues raised by Muslims.

All of this may seem rather daunting, and many pastors might feel that they are not up to the task, but available resources exist for instructing church members in conservative scholarship on Biblical canonicity, text, elements of early church history, etc.

Experts in the distinctive fields can be invited to address the subjects. Those who have been regularly engaged in the defence of the Gospel against Islamic polemics will naturally be able to help by showing how the subjects can be practically addressed. Of course, the problem is not just that pastors are unwilling or unable to put such events in place, but also that attendance at such events are often limited.

Again, it is the responsibility of pastors to imbue a sense of urgency and responsibility in the congregation as a whole to meet the challenge of Islamic missionaries in their midst. At the very least, they should point out to the parents in the congregation that their children will encounter the challenges of Islamic polemics at secondary school (if not earlier!) and most definitely at college and university level. Do they want to lose their children - if not outright to Islam, then to rank unbelief, as their offspring conclude that Christianity cannot be defended? If not, then they must

grasp the nettle of putting some effort into learning how to defend the faith from attacks.

4. Meeting Muslims at local level

There are often 'inter-faith' events happening in localities. Usually, these are quaint social 'get-togethers' between leading figures in the Muslim community (often local councillors, etc.) and liberal churchmen. It need hardly be said that such events are hardly conducive or attractive to conservative evangelicals. Little constructive gets accomplished from an evangelical perspective. They also tend to be quite elitist, with few opportunities for ordinary believers from either religion to meet. Obviously, this is precisely what we want to see.

Generally, younger Muslims are very keen on holding debates with Christians. Such Islamic youth tend to be very confident about their religion, and increasingly, they are trained in Islamic mission (*da'wah*) and more specifically in Islamic polemics against evangelical Christianity. It is almost their first reaction when encountering Christians, to switch to debate mode or challenge Christians to a debate. Such events are common in colleges these days. It is quite possible to hold debates in church buildings or mosques. One can be quite sure that a good number of Muslims will attend - which makes it essential that large numbers of Christians also attend. It is probably best that local evangelical churches collaborate in such events. However, it is essential that when these debates are planned, churches do not fall into trap of just asking a local pastor to speak on their behalf. Usually, Muslims will call on experienced debaters to take on Christians, and it is vital that Christians reciprocate by inviting experienced Christian debaters to take up the challenge; otherwise the Christians will lose by default. In practice, debates require a neutral moderator, good (and intensive) stewarding, a programme that allows for presentations (around 30-45 minutes) followed by rebuttals (around 15 minutes), and questions (again 30-45 minutes).

A midway course employed by some churches, sometimes alongside debates, is a practice known as 'Meetings for Better Understanding' (MBUs). These are neither debates nor 'inter-faith' ecumenical events, but rather meetings where each group presents what their faith community believes about a certain subject. For example, the subject could be 'The Second Coming of Christ', with either the Muslim or Christian speaker going first, presenting his beliefs on the subject (around 30-45 minutes), but without trying to disparage the other side, as inevitably happens in debates. There are no rebuttals, but questions are taken (again 30-45 minutes). Again, an objective moderator and good stewarding are necessary. It is good to have a social break between presentations and questions, with light refreshments served, and opportunities for one-to-one conversations. Both in debates and in MBUs, good Christian literature, especially if free, should be available (the Muslims will also insist that theirs is available, and Christians should equally insist on reciprocity when such events are held in mosques).

Conclusion

The growth of the Muslim community in Britain presents many challenges to evangelical Christians. We have always had to endure the occasional knocks on our

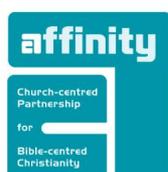
doors on Saturday mornings by Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons, but we have never had to face large *communities* who are our missionary rivals, and are as committed to proselytising one's neighbours as ourselves. One good effect of this is that it has required us to study our Faith more intensively - as one Christian often engaged in debates stated to his Muslim rivals, 'You've caused me to become a better Christian!' To meet the challenge of Islamic polemics, he had to become more knowledgeable about his own Faith. So it is with all of us. The challenge of Islam is no longer an issue for specialists, as with Mormonism or Hinduism, because Muslim communities are springing up all over the UK, with mosques spread from Belfast to Bradford, from Aberdeen to Cornwall, and from Cardiff to Canterbury. We need to pray to be specially endowed by the Spirit to meet that challenge, and to be prepared to make the effort to study to show ourselves approved by God.

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Table Talk is a series of occasional papers published on line by the Affinity Theological Team. Its purpose is to stimulate theological thinking on significant issues. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Theological Team.

Foundations is a journal published twice a year by the Affinity Theological team. Its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, including in exegesis, biblical theology, church history and apologetics and indicating their relevance to pastoral ministry.



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