

Islam in Britain: Threat or Opportunity?

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In the early 1960's, in a rather remote city in Pakistan, I was involved with some local Christians in seeking to obtain a building for Christian meetings and for the preaching of the gospel. The town was overwhelmingly Muslim, unevangelized and had known almost no Christian influence. One day, as the case was being considered by some officials of the town committee, one elderly conservative Muslim argued thus against giving these few Christians any facilities: 'This is a new thing. We don't want any such innovations in our Muslim city.'

Surely the gentleman was wrong! Christianity is not a 'new thing'. It pre-dates Islam, and there is evidence that it reached the Indian sub-continent before the advent of Islam. Surely those Christians in that remote Pakistani town had a right to a place of worship.

On the other hand, are we in the West too quick to say, 'There is no place for Muslims in our society?' Islam is a world-wide phenomenon. Muslims first came to Britain in large numbers to supply labour-hungry industries following World War II. Most Muslims are here legally, and should not be denied their rights. Furthermore, can we who are Christians deny them our hospitality? Regard for, and hospitality to, the stranger is an established Biblical principle. Through Moses, the Lord commanded Israel of old, 'When an alien lives with you in the land, do not ill-treat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.' (Leviticus 19:33,34)

Thus far, we admit, we have taken a rather superficial approach to the problem. While the principle of hospitality is surely right according to the Biblical ethic, and it cannot be denied that Muslims have a right to live in this country, this does not deal with some serious problems which have arisen due to the presence of significant numbers of Muslims in this country.

How many Muslims are there in Britain? Different sources vary in their estimates and I have not found any source which claims 100% accuracy. Johnstone, in **Operation World** gives the reasonable figure of 2.7% of Britain's total population, which means the total number of Muslims in the UK is slightly more than 1½ million. The round figure of 2 million is often given.

Cultural, Social, Educational and Political Aspects

Does a small minority like this constitute any threat to the cultural and social values of British society? Undeniably, there are some problems inherent in the

following realities:

Often Muslims are concentrated in communities within larger cities with the result that whole sections of a city, such as Savile Town in Dewsbury, become Islamic enclaves. Since influential leaders and theologians (Ulema) in Islam generally look with disfavour upon the modern concept of artificial birth control, it is possible that such communities will grow much faster than other parts of the city and the percentage of Muslims in the country will increase dramatically in the next decade.

The hold of the Ulema upon such communities and their conservative interpretation of the Quran and the traditions seem to be increasing. Thus, values which modern Western civilization cherishes will increasingly be challenged. There are many aspects to this problem, but one of the most noteworthy is the traditional Muslim attitude to women. For many Muslim women, seclusion behind the four walls of home is a way of life. Many Muslim men could not conceive of allowing their women the freedom and the equality which Western women take for granted.

There is also the area of education. It comes as no surprise that Muslims want their own schools, where not only the Quran is taught, but all subjects are presented with an Islamic bias, and where Muslim cultural and religious values dominate. The right for Muslims to have their own schools is not disputed, but whether these should be aided by public funds is more controversial. Apparently, a precedent has already been established in London's Borough of Brent, where, according to reports, the school founded by Yusuf Islam (formerly pop-star Cat Stevens) has been given voluntary-aided status. This means that such a school receives 85% of its funds from the taxpayer.

We must also remember that inherent in Islam is the close identification of mosque and state. Historically, Islam began very much as a worldly power, and it has always found its truest expression in a situation where it has the power to make the law, and in which it has, politically, the upper hand. We Christians tend to forget that the opposite is true of Christianity (cf I Peter; John 18:36). In Britain, this means that Muslims will surely press demands that 'Muslim law' be introduced for Muslims, and that they will work for a separate 'legal code' allowing for Muslim laws in matters like marriage and divorce, banking, ritual slaughter of animals, prayer observance and the call to prayer, to name but a few.

The Religious and Spiritual Aspect

We come now more specifically to the religious or the spiritual issue. As Christians, we are most likely to see the challenge of Islam in this, that a dynamic religious force has now effectively infiltrated Western 'Christendom'. As evangelical Christians, we cannot accept the 'multi-faith' approach, so strong in the West today, which sees all faiths as so many valid expressions of man's religious nature, all equally acceptable. Nor can we accept Islam as a faith very near and very similar to Christianity, differing only in one or two aspects. Rather we see Islam as a religion which at the very heart has missed the fundamental and the eternal reality. This is not to say, and it is not my

belief, that Islam is totally evil or demonic. God has not left the Islamic world without a witness, and by his goodness, there are those 'pointers' even within Islam which, if they are followed, will lead Muslims towards the truth. God's grace continues to reach men and women even within Islam. However, it is my strong conviction that the central and foundational realities concerning eternal salvation and godliness have been effectively obscured, and thus millions of Muslims are blinded. It is exactly as the apostle Paul stated, 'If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: in whom the god of this world has blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God should shine unto them' (2 Cor 4:3,4).

How is the gospel of Christ obscured in Islam?

As I see it, there are at least four crucial points which tell the story.

An inadequate view of God. The greatest possible stress is laid upon the unity (tawhid) of God. God is 'singular, without anything like him, separate, having no equal.' This formula is endlessly reiterated throughout the Quran. Such a God is therefore hidden to man, and in Islamic theology there is great argument about the exact nature of His attributes and the extent of the knowledge of them to which men can obtain. The ultra-orthodox strictly prohibit too close an enquiry. It is said to be impiety to enquire into the nature of God.

A Prophet instead of a Saviour. The creed (Kalima) of Islam is indeed the source of Muslim theology: 'There is no god but Allah, and Muhammed is his prophet.' Note that the first clause is stated negatively and the second positively. The second, then, assumes more and more importance and Muhammed, not Allah, is the Centre of devotion and he approaches divine status for millions of Muslims, if not for Quranic expositors. The Quran offers no support for the popular exaltation of Muhammed. But as a prophet, he warns, exhorts, and directs men to the right path.

A key and extremely sensitive doctrine of orthodox Islam is that although many prophets have been sent for the guidance of mankind (including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus), the Holy Prophet of Islam is the last in this series. Prophethood (nabuwat) ceased with the death of Muhammed, and no new prophet (nabi) shall appear after him. This doctrine is deduced from several Quranic verses, especially Sura 33, verse 40, 'Muhammed is not the father of any man among you but he is the messenger of Allah and the Seal¹ of the Prophets.'

It is the Prophet, then, who is all-important in Islam. There is no provision of a Saviour. In fact, as we shall see later, there is no need of a Saviour for men do not need to be redeemed from sin. They only need to be exhorted and directed in the right way.

Scriptures replaced by the Quran. Certain verses in the Quran seem to testify to the previous Scriptures and to accept them as genuine revelation from God. It appears that early in his preaching, Muhammed did not intend to establish a new religion. His dependence on the existing holy books is seen in Sura 10:94: 'And if thou (Muhammed) art in doubt concerning that which we reveal unto thee, then question those who read the Scripture that

was before thee' (i.e. Jews and Christians).

Is not the Christian, therefore, in a very strong position in inviting Muslims to read the Bible? But it is not that simple! The Muslim who does read the Bible finds inevitably obvious contradictions to the teaching of the Quran. If, as he has been taught, the Quran is the final revelation and contains all he needs to know about God and religion, then he must find a solution to the dilemma posed by the two Books. Sadly, the way out of this dilemma urged by misguided leaders and followed by millions of Muslims is to claim that the existing copies of the Scriptures of the Jews and Christians have been corrupted and are not the Books which were 'sent down' originally. So the Bible is rejected in favour of the Quran, and the message of a Saviour promised through the prophets, crucified, risen from the dead, reigning, and able to save, is unheard and unheeded.

Defective view of sin and salvation. In spite of frequent mention of sins in the Quran, Muslim theologians and philosophers view man as essentially good, free of original sin. The tradition which states, 'Every child is born a Muslim; it is his parents who misguide him,' is often heard among Muslims, and quoted by Muslim writers. A modern and influential philosopher, Iqbal, has written, 'The Quran...while it looks upon Jesus Christ as the Spirit of God, strongly protests against the doctrine of redemption, a doctrine which proceeds upon the assumption of the insufficiency of human personality, and tends to create in man the sense of dependence which is regarded by Islam as a force obstructing the ethical progress of man.'²

It is indeed difficult to frame any doctrine of salvation from the Quran or the traditions of Islam. There is only one occurrence of the word 'salvation' (Arabic: najat) in the Quran (40:41), and in that case it is contrasted with hell fire. Salvation seems to be primarily the escape from hell. But there is a great deal of confusion in the thinking of Muslims about this: on the one hand everything depends on the will of Allah, while at the same time a Muslim is urged to keep the obligations of Islam towards storing up merit for the Day of Judgement. A Muslim is never able to say whether he will be saved, and the Christian idea of a present salvation is unknown in Islam.

Christ in Islam

What about Christ? Has not Islam retained him, and given him a place of respect? So, Muslims often urge us to believe. But Christ in Islam is a 'Bound Christ'; Islam wishes to retain him and yet denies his Person and his work. It is as if Jesus Christ has always been an insoluble enigma to Islam, and the preaching of him as Son of God and Saviour, crucified and risen presents a barrier which must be removed at all costs.

So Muslims continue to hang on to a few texts in the Quran, some of which are obscure and others based upon misunderstandings. Because of such texts, and the interpretation of them accepted by many Muslims, **Islam denies:**

The Deity of Christ and his unique Sonship. The stress on God's absolute unity hides from Muslims the nature of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Often Muslims have understood that the 'Father-Son' relationship as held by Christians is somehow a physical one. Muhammed apparently even

thought that Mary was part of the Trinity (Sura 5:116). Muslims therefore are warned: ‘Say not “Three”: cease!...Allah is only One God. Far is it removed from His transcendent majesty that He should have a son’ (Sura 4:171; see also 6:101, 102, etc.).

The crucifixion of Christ. For this, Sura 4:157,158 is usually quoted: ‘And because of their saying, “We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah’s messenger” — They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain: But Allah took him up unto Himself...’ Other passages in the Quran do however speak about the day of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The evidence here is certainly anything but clear and straightforward. Compared to this, how overwhelming is the testimony of the Gospel, of those who were eye-witnesses, indeed the combined testimony of all Holy Scripture, which Muslims claim to revere. We can with complete confidence stand with Paul in his declaration of I Cor 15:1-4.

The Holy Spirit. A denial of Christ ultimately involves a denial of the Holy Spirit. While Jesus himself is referred to in the Quran as the Word (Kalimat) of Allah and a spirit from Him, the unique personality of the Holy Spirit, and His work in the world of glorifying Christ, and convicting men of sin, of righteousness and of judgement (John 16:7,14) is completely unknown in the Quran and by Muslim theologians. Instead, Muslims believe that Jesus’ prophecies about the coming of the Comforter (*parakletos*) were actually predictions of the coming of Muhammed.³ In one Quranic passage, Muhammed represents Jesus as bringing good tidings of a messenger who is to come, whose name is ‘Ahmad’ (the praised one). He was obviously referring to himself (see Sura 61:6).

Here then is the religious and spiritual challenge of Islam to the Christian church. A challenge which I perceive as not insignificant or unimportant, but which actually is more serious and more deeply-rooted than the cultural or the political challenge. It is a challenge which cannot be met by word or reason of man, but only by the spiritual weapons provided in the gospel (Eph 6:11-17).

That Muslims are serious about **pressing their claims** against what they perceive as a fading and crumbling Christian world can be clearly seen in these hard facts:

The **building of mosques** and other Islamic institutions goes on apace. In many cases, old buildings are used for Muslim prayers which are not purpose-built mosques, but adapted for this use. According to the Leicester-based Islamic foundation, there are at least 1500 Muslim praying-places in Britain. Larger ones, such as the central mosques in London, Dewsbury and Birmingham, are used also for propagating the faith, library and literature facilities, ‘teach-ins’ etc.

Many attractive English-language **Muslim publications** are now on the market. The Muslim Educational Trust in London and the Islamic Foundation in Leicester are sources for some of these. Misleading statements about the Bible and Christian teaching are found in many of

these.⁴

Some Muslims are also using the **polemical approach**. The Ahmadiya sect, which originated in the Indian sub-continent, but now has its world headquarters in Putney, London, has thrived on its polemic concerning Jesus. Ahmad Deedat, a South African Muslim, is well known for his debates which centre around either the Person of Christ or the Crucifixion of Christ, two points which Mr Deedat is particularly anxious to attack. Mr Deedat, as most Muslims are, is obviously averse to debating the Quran or the life of Muhammed.

While Muslims expect **full freedom** in Western countries to propagate their faith and win converts, and we believe they should enjoy such freedom, yet it is anomalous that Christians are denied the same freedoms in the heartland of Islam, Saudi Arabia, and other Muslim countries are more and more inclined to restrict the preaching of the gospel of Christ among both nominal and committed Muslims.

It is very difficult to obtain figures which will indicate how successful Islam has been in attracting non-Muslims in Britain. Converts to Islam are highly publicized, and one tends to think there are thousands, while the true figure may be only in the hundreds. At any rate, there seems to be a small but steady stream of people in Britain converting to Islam.

The Opportunity

All that we have said about Islam, and particularly Islam in Britain, might be construed as posing a threat to our faith, our way of life, and our institutions. While we need to see the negative side, and be aware of the dangers of false teaching, I urge every Christian believer to accept the presence of two million Muslims in Britain as an unprecedented opportunity. The Almighty God has brought them here, and if Christians turn their faces away, neglect them, or show a resentful spirit towards them, we will lose the opportunity to commend true Christianity to them, and God's name will be dishonoured.

As regards this opportunity, I wish to comment on our **aim**, our **attitude**, and our **methods**.

Our Aim

Broadly stated, our aim is that Muslims should hear the word of the Gospel, believe, and be saved. In this aim, we are following in the footsteps of Peter, Paul, and many other faithful ministers of Christ (cf. Acts 15:7; 26:17-20; Rom 15:9-12, 18-20; I Cor 9:20-22).

To work towards this aim, I believe the following counsels are important:

We desire to see Muslims **converted to Christ**, not Western culture. It is important then, to seek to understand Muslims, their thinking, and their values. Is our message too much in Western, British, American dress? Do we expect converts to reject their own culture and become like us? This is an area that demands much prayer and consideration, especially by those called to Muslim work.

We **do not desire the dislocation** of the Muslim convert. It does often happen, of course, that following Christ means the rejection by family and

society. But families are very important and so necessary to people who come from a Muslim society. The ideal that should be followed is to see the Muslim inquirer remain as a witness within his family. When this is impossible, then there must be a caring, accepting fellowship of believers who can provide a spiritual home, a new family for the convert. Altogether too often we have seen that our churches are not prepared to provide such a spiritual home for the convert from Islam. Suspicion and rejection tend to drive him away.

Special care should be taken concerning work among **young people**. We recognize that young people who are uniquely placed between the old society of their family, and the new, interesting, and exciting society of their peers and schoolmates, may be very open to hearing the gospel. While recognizing this opportunity, we must also be aware of its pitfalls. Young people who are 'extracted' from family and culture before they are firmly rooted and grounded in the faith, may become misfits with great problems. It is therefore wise to work patiently and cautiously with Muslim young people and not to urge open commitment until they are of age.

Muslims who have come to faith in Jesus Christ have often done so after even years of inquiry, investigation and study. They may seek out the help and fellowship of numerous Christians. We must therefore be prepared to give time, prayer and effort to follow-up and discipling, to be merely a **link in the chain** which eventually leads them to Christ.

Our Attitude

In the prevailing political climate in the world, so many people in Britain and other Western countries have offered Muslims only suspicion, hostility, and even hate. Sadly, many Christians tend to turn away, and keep silent when they are among Muslims. I believe the attitude our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us includes:

Accept the presence of Muslims in Britain as God's time for them. Thank God that he has brought this about. Pray that this may become 'The day of salvation' for many Muslims. 2 Cor 6:2.

Be open towards them. Give time to learn more about them, make contacts, express Christian charity towards them. Let them know that you are not a free-thinker or materialist, but a believer in God and a follower of Jesus Christ.

Expect God to open their hearts. We can and must show Christian acceptance and charity towards them, but only God can open their hearts and reveal to them the truth concerning the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our Methods

The intellectual approach. Modern missionaries to Muslims have found this approach of little value. To argue the relative merits of Christianity and Islam too often leads to debate, with each protagonist more and more convinced of his position as the argument goes on. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the profitableness of this approach in years gone by used by such great men as C G Pfander, Henry Martyn and others. Because they argued the truth persuasively and powerfully, minds of some important Muslim leaders

were convinced and hearts yielded. Certainly this method is not absent in the New Testament. Paul used it (Acts 17:2-4), and Peter exhorts us to 'be ready always to give an answer of every man who asks you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear' (I Peter 3:15). But we must understand that this approach requires hard study, intellectual vigour, and perseverance, qualities which seem to be in short supply in the evangelical world in these days.

Testimony. This is most effective when it takes place in an atmosphere of confidence and trust. When we meet Muslims in such an atmosphere, we can invite a Muslim to share a testimony of his faith for a specified amount of time. We may then expect an equal opportunity when, after committing ourselves to the Lord and trusting the Holy Spirit to empower us, we can share with them the length, breadth, height and depth of the love of Christ.

The Word of God. It is important that we introduce a Muslim inquirer to the Holy Scriptures. We need to guide him about what to read, and we can be selective and point out to him passages about prophets whose names are familiar to him: Abraham, Moses, David. We can then lead him to the promises and the fulfilment through our Lord Jesus. In the experience of most Muslims who have come to faith in Christ, the reading of the Scriptures has played a large part.

Friendship at Work. Lionel Fitzsimons has said, 'Friendship, often over long periods, is the main key to Muslim hearts.' This can be on at least three levels: personal, family, and church. On a personal level, it must be man to man, and woman to woman. A friendship with the opposite sex for the purpose of Christian witness would be totally misunderstood by Muslims. A relationship of trust and confidence takes time and patience to develop. It is only in that kind of a relationship that we can expect to sit down with a Muslim friend to study and discuss the Bible together.

In family contacts, if these occur in Muslim countries, Muslim women will often not be free to sit in the company of men. In such a situation, the Christian ladies will have to spend time in the ladies' part of the house, and men will have to sit with men. In Britain, however, many Muslim ladies feel more free, and will be able to sit together in mixed company. Mutual visits to each other's homes for food, explaining each other's customs, helping Asians to understand the ways of the West, will help to break down barriers.

Much can be done also by evangelical churches which are located in proximity to groups of Muslims. While contacts may be made by knocking on doors or passing out literature, we should not be content to leave it there. A method which has been used to some effect by certain evangelical churches is to arrange for a 'Friendship Evening', held preferably not in church premises but in a neutral place, such as a school hall. Backed by much prayer and preparation, Christians can thus show their love and concern to Muslims, make themselves available to those who need help, and thus build fruitful relationships. In some cases, we have seen a Bible study for Muslim women started, and even Muslim children attend Sunday School with the blessing of their parents.

These things cannot take place if Christian churches are lukewarm or unconcerned about winning Muslims to Christ. There must be commitment backed by prayer. There must be a willingness to 'give ourselves' in time spent, building friendships and offering help.

One fears that the great opportunity given by God to the Churches of Britain and the West to proclaim Christ to Muslims may be lost due to the low level of Christian life and spirituality today. There is much Christian activity and yet so much is ineffectual. Fruitful witness comes from churches full of the love of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. The most important thing in Christian witness to Muslims today is to have authentic Biblical Christianity in our homes and Churches once again. I believe that the challenge presented by Islam in Britain will be met when:

God visits his people with a refreshing breath from heaven. Acts 3:19.

God's people are obedient to the Great Commission, and are clothed with power from on high as they fulfil this. Acts 4:23-31.

God's people again put holiness first in their lives. Acts 2:42ff. This will not be a holiness or righteousness which is static, self-satisfied, with a 'holier-than-thou' attitude, but it will be patterned after God's righteousness which ever goes out, loves, seeks, and saves lost men and women.

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References

1. The Arabic word 'Khatm' can mean 'seal' or 'termination'.
2. 'Muhammed Iqbal', 'Ethical Nature of Man', in ISLAM AS AN ETHICAL AND POLITICAL IDEAL. Lahore: Oriental Publishers.
3. The Arabic meaning of Muhammed is 'the praised one', a meaning conveyed by the Greek word *Periclytos*, a word which Muhammed may have confused with *Parakletos*.
4. For example, see Ghulam Sarwar: ISLAM BELIEFS AND TEACHING, Muslim Ed Trust, London, p 30:148-158.

Muslim stories in the media included one which challenged Christian commitment to knowledge of the only Scriptures. In November 1986 the papers reported the phenomenal feat of an eight-year-old Glasgow boy who had become the youngest person in the Western world to memorise the Quran. Studying for up to five hours on week nights and longer at weekends, he memorised the 114 chapters and 77,934 words in two years. And he learned it in the original Arabic, his own languages being Urdu and English. He clearly has an exceptional gift, but he is only one of many who work hard to learn as much as possible of the Quran off by heart. How full and accurate is our knowledge of the true words of God?

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