

Christian-Muslim Engagement:

Obstacles and Opportunities

by

Anna-Marie Lockard¹

Abstract

Issues of religious diversity and interfaith understanding take centre stage in today's post-modern global society. Since September 11 (911), the church's mission to engage the Muslim community has been met with both obstacles and opportunities. The quintessential of global Christian witness is to have a pellucid grasp of the dangers and opportunities for Christian-Muslim witness. Basic principles of encounter must be relational rather than confrontative. Contextualisation must be viewed as both an opportunity and a challenge. Seeking a common witness can pose theological concerns for those who seek interfaith understanding among Muslims.

¹ Dr Anna-Marie Lockard holds an MA in Guidance and Counseling from Lael College and Graduate School, an MTh in Missiology from the South African Theological Seminary and a PhD in Biblical Counseling from Trinity Theological Seminary. She has lectured at Trinity Seminary and Africa Nazarene Theological College. Currently she serves as Vice Principal for Academic Affairs at Nazarene Theological College in South Africa and as a postgraduate supervisor for the South African Theological Seminary.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to integrate three missiological topics that hold high interest for me, namely, current opportunities for Christian-Muslim encounters, the challenges of Christian witness in contextualising the gospel among Islamic groups, and the caveats in examining a common witness to Muslims.

According to Stan Guthrie (2002), September 11 (911) has only intensified the dangers and rewards of Muslim evangelism. Guthrie graphically illustrates his assertion by citing the following example of a recent Muslim convert to Christianity:

Samuel (not his real name) watched the Jesus film and listened to Christian radio on July 15, 2001. For an Afghan Muslim, Samuel took a very dangerous but courageous step when he accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior. Soon the Taliban came for him and he was thrown into jail for being guilty of working for foreigners. For the next fourteen days, they beat him at least once a day with a five-foot steel cable. After the last of these brutal sessions, he fell unconscious in his prison cell.

That night Samuel had a dream in which a man wearing bright white clothes appeared and spoke to him in a kind voice: “Get up.” When Samuel awoke he found his prison cell door open and unguarded. He walked out the front gate of the prison and into the night to safety.

Clearly, the risks of Muslim-Christian encounters are high for both the Muslim convert and the ministry worker. Yet, the leading of the Holy Spirit has opened doors of opportunity on a global scale and the time is now for the church to respond.

2. Opportunities

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the USA, the church found itself with fresh momentum in engaging the world’s 1.2 billion Muslims in

Christian witness. However, due to the harassment and persecution of Muslims in the West, particularly, many Muslims are fearful and suspicious of Christians. This rift provides the church the wonderful opportunity to seek to build loving relationships by modelling Jesus as the Christ of God. When the church seeks to meet human needs and foster loving relationships, it will espouse what Muslims already believe.²

When Christians show holistic concern, verbal witness about Jesus will be credible and will create a reconciling atmosphere for witness (Gilliland 1997:11).

Gilliland (1997:12) cites long deceased Bishop Gairdner of Cairo, who posits that “the church has the responsibility to be a body of patient and loving people among Muslims.” Gairdner viewed the church as God’s people who act on behalf of Jesus.

Additionally, according to Dudley Woodberry, professor of Islamic studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, the church has entered a new era of opportunity with an increased level of responsiveness among the Muslim global communities.

For example, countries that face political instability and natural disasters appear to be particularly ripe for Christian witness, especially when Christians combine practical relief and development ministries with their witness. For example, over the last forty years, Christian growth rates have been double the population growth rate in Bangladesh. In 2000, the rate of increase for Christians was 3.2 percent per annum, versus 1.8 percent for Muslims (see Guthrie 2002). Similarly, in Indonesia, the Christian minority has reached 34 million since the mid 1960s, when government reprisals left one-half million communists and sympathisers dead. Churches on the heavily Muslim island of Java have grown by five percent annually since 1982—despite persecution, political upheaval and economic decline.

² For more insights on the Western-Christian/Muslim relations and tensions since September 11, see: Al-Massiah, Ubaid (2004).

According to the Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity, September 11 appears to have had two effects on Muslims worldwide: some have become more radical while others are seeing their religion in a new light and are seeking alternatives. Most Christian workers among Muslims attest that the opportunities for Christian-Muslim engagement has reached the apex of opportunity. For example, in all of North Africa (except Libya) there has been a significant increase in receptivity to the gospel. Guthrie (2002) posits that in the past it took nearly five years of Christian witness to a North African to produce one solid conversion. Today, however, following exposure to Christian media and the Jesus film, often we see Muslim converts within weeks.

Opportunities have risen for Christian-Muslim engagement in Algeria, where forty years ago there were only about 1,200 believers. Today it is estimated that there are more than 12,000 believers. Growth continues and the opportunities are reaching unprecedented levels (see Guthrie 2002).

3. Challenges: Progress and Problems

Reaching Muslims has always been a challenging mission task. In 1900, there were fewer than 200 million Muslims among the world's 1.6 billion people (12%). Today, there are 1.2 billion Muslims (19%) among a global population of 6.2 billion (Guthrie 2002).

Guthrie (2002) contends that Islam is the most studied and least evangelised religion. Reportedly, only six percent of Christian workers are focused on Muslims. Although signs of a breakthrough are clearly visible, the risks are real: mentioning specifics of how evangelism works can be risky because it inevitably gets back to the Arabic newspapers. The Islamic penalty for "apostasy" is death.

3.1 The Challenge of Contextualisation

The greatest success in engaging Muslims for Christian witness comes through contextualisation. Western ideas of what it means to follow Christ have been ineffective. Translation of Scripture into local languages, worshipping Christ

using their own forms of music, presenting the Bible chronologically and orally as a story, the use of acceptable religious language (Allah for God or other Islamic terms) and keeping cultural forms (e.g., the Muslim fast) have all been proven to draw many Muslims to Christ (see Guthrie 2002).

Highly contextual approaches, however, can raise theological concerns. For example, some Christian workers have permitted Muslim converts to Christianity to worship in the mosque and call themselves Muslims. A research study led by Dr. Gilliland (1997) of Fuller Theological Seminary confirmed these caveats when he evaluated a contextualised group in a Creative Access Area of the world.³ Two-thirds of the leaders said the Quran was the greatest holy book. Forty-five percent of “converts” to Christianity did not affirm the Triune Godhead. Thirty-three percent went to the mosque more than once a day.⁴

Therefore, the theological challenge of contextualisation still remains: how do we carry out the mission of the church (*missio Dei*) and live out the great commandment in a world of cultural diversity? In what ways do we implement a gospel that is truly Christian in content and culturally significant in form? Missiologists (e.g., Woodberry 2002; Bevans and Schroeder 2004) posit that missiological cues must be taken from the incarnation; just as Jesus emptied Himself and lived among us, we too must be ready to do the same as we enter another culture. Additionally, cross-cultural workers must recognise that the Holy Spirit has been at work long before they arrive.

3.2 *Insurmountable Obstacles and Common Ground*

The one seemingly insurmountable obstacle in Christian-Muslim engagement is that both faiths posit the claim to be God’s final message of salvation and eternal bliss for the world. Although the Quran calls for tolerance and respect for Christians, Muslims generally condemn Christians as polytheists.

³ The term “Creative Access Area” is a missiological term used to protect the identity of cross-cultural Christian workers in areas of the world that oppose proselytising.

⁴ For additional insights on contextualisation, see Racey (1996), Parshall (1998 and 2005), Johnson and Scoggins (2005).

Ayoub (2004) posits that of all the dialogues between Christians and Muslims, there appears to be only one common ground: that of the Abrahamic roots of both faiths. Others have argued that while Christians have come to accept Muslims as people of faith, but do not accept Islam as an authentic post-Christian religious tradition, Muslims have accepted Christianity as a revealed faith, yet have not accepted the Christian's faith in the triune God or the church as a source of guidance or the books of the New Testament as authentic Scriptures. According to Ayoub (2004), the main obstacle to true Christian-Muslim dialogue is their unwillingness to truly admit that God's love and providence extend equally to all human beings. What is needed is a dialogue of faith.

A dialogue of faith, according to Ayoub, espouses the ideas and methods on a deeper more personal level—its aim is to deepen the faith of both Muslim and Christian by sharing the personal faith of the other.

The ultimate purpose of this dialogue is to create a fellowship of faith among followers of Islam and Christianity. This goal may be achieved by sharing one's faith with the other through worship, spiritual exercises and the existential struggle in God (Ayoub 2006:7).⁵

4. Conclusion

This paper sought to discuss three integrated topics for missiological reflection: basic principles of Muslim-Christian encounter with regards to the challenges of contextualisation in seeking a common witness among Islamic groups. As cross-cultural workers, our tendency to engage in superficial contextualisation can cause us to overlook critical Biblical and foundational issues such as: *Who is Jesus?* More than forty years ago, missiologist Kramer (1960) wisely affirmed the primacy of offering Christ to Muslims: "It is not Christianity that Muslims need to see. It is Jesus."

⁵ For additional readings on Muslim-Christian dialogues, see Chandler 2003) and Wakely (2004).

In order to present and model Christ effectively, our perspective and focus must first be to remember that it is the Holy Spirit who witnesses to all the truth claims of Jesus as the one holy Son of God. Scripture attests to this truth:

But, when the counselor comes who I shall send to you from the Father, even the spirit of truth.... He will bear witness to me (John 15:26, RSV).

This is He who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ.... And the Spirit is the witness because the Spirit is the Truth (1 John 5:6-7, RSV).

As issues of religious diversity and interfaith dialogue take centre stage in today's postmodern world, let us neither forget nor minimize the quintessential elements of the true gospel of Jesus Christ when engaging our Muslim brothers in Christian witness.

Works Cited

- Al-Massiah U 2003. Pulling back the brink. *Africa speaks: an anthology of the Africa Nazarene Theological Conference 2003*. Johannesburg: Africa Nazarene Publications.
- Ayoub M 2004. Christian-Muslim dialogue: goals and obstacles. *Muslim World* 94:313-319.
- Bevans SB. and Schroeder RP 2004. *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
- Chandler PG 2003. Mazhar Mallouhi: Ghandi's living legacy in the Muslim world. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 27.2.
- Rabey S 1996 (March). Mission-minded design strategy for the Muslim world. *Christianity Today* 40.
- Gilliland DS 1997. Principles of the Christian approach to an African based Islamic society. *Missiology: an international review* 25:4-13.
- Guthrie S 2002 (Sept). Doors into Islam. *Christianity Today* 46:34.
- Guthrie S 2006 (Feb). Islam's uncertain future. *Christianity Today* 50:62-66.
- Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity, 2004 (16 Aug). <http://www.isic-centre.org>, accessed 2006-07-14.
- Johnson TM and Scoggins DR 2005. Christian mission and Islamic da'wah: preliminary quantitative assessment. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29:8-11.
- Kramer H 1960. Islamic culture and missionary strategy. *Muslim World* 50:244-251.
- Parshall P 1998. Danger! New directions in contextualisation. *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* 34:404-417.
- Parshall P 2005. Lifting the Fatwa. *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* 41:288-293.
- Racey D 1996. Contextualisation: how far is too far? *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* 32:304-319.
- Wakely M 2004. The search for the golden key. *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* 40:12-21.
- Woodberry J 2002. Terrorism, Islam, and mission: reflections of a guest in Muslim lands. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26:2-7.