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REFLECTIONS ON MUSLIM EVANGELISM: *APPROACH TO THE RELIGIOUS PERSON*

Y. Sephiros

Islam represents 1.2 billion people throughout the world. They are engaged in aggressive missionary expansion, using many of the methods which have been successfully used by the Christian church to evangelise. These methods include education, medical, literature, videos and cassettes, street preachers and community development. At the same time there is a growing concern in Christian circles to provide a more comprehensive and effective witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ among the Muslims. AJET has provided several articles on Muslim evangelism found in issue 15.1 1996.

In this article Sephiros underlines an important aspect in Muslim evangelism. Instead of focusing on Islam as a religion, Christians should focus on the Muslim as a person who needs the gospel of Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION

Within the context of Muslim evangelism this paper is going to focus on a person called a *Muslim*, not on a religion called *Islam*. It is only when we view the Muslim as a person and understand him as a person that we can effectively present the gospel to him, rather than judging him by his religion. In this point of view Jesus is the best model in presenting the gospel to Muslims. For this reason Jesus' conversation with the scribe in Mark 12:28-34 will be our reference Scripture in understanding the Muslim and our attitude towards him.

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One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked Him "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

"The most important one", answered Jesus, "is this, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask Him any more questions (Mark 12:28-34 NIV).

THE PROBLEM

During Jesus' day Rabbis divided the precepts of the law into "weighty" commandments, such as the command, "Thou shalt not kill," and "light" commandments, such as the prohibition of taking a bird from the nest with her fledglings or with the egg. Judaism drew no distinction between the moral and ceremonial law, for both were inextricably connected with the life of the people as a whole. Therefore the problem for a godly Jew in Jesus' day was the multiplicity of laws. It is amid this baffling profusion that the scribe in the narrative asks for guidance. Two attitudes characterise this scribe.

He Was Perplexed

Comparing his weakness and what the law expects of him, he was totally confused what to do. Because he found himself helpless to do the whole law perfectly, he resorted to selecting the greatest "one". He was genuinely perplexed. He had a riddle in life which he wanted Jesus to solve.

Similarly since Islam is a religion of works one can imagine the stress this imposes in a Muslim's mind. The Qur'an teaches that,

The balance that day will be (to a nicety): Those whose scale (of good)

will be heavy, will prosper: Those whose scale will be light, will find their souls in perdition, for that they wrongfully treated our signs (Sura 7:8,9).

No matter what the word "prosper" might actually mean in this verse, it is clear that the Muslim will strive his best to attain that prosperity. Equally with this, since he does not know the exact standard, he will struggle to be as good as he can. When he feels he is not being as good as he should be, he gets confused. Law and justice being the basis for all thoughts and behaviour in Islam, there is no flexibility in deciding the right, and compromises are seldom possible. If some injustice is done by trying to compromise, then such sin results in reprisal and punishment. Soon the fear and confusion starts to manifest itself in many ways. Sometimes it appears in the form of political conflicts such as in Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Zanzibar, and Gambia. Even sometimes it is manifested as clashes between rival Islamic groups like in Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Tanzania and Sudan. Getting frustrated, such people start to view the world order as miserable. They become unhappy people, plunged in reckless dissatisfaction. That is why today such people are continuing to "generate havoc and violence in the form of fundamentalism, for Muslims and non-Muslims alike."¹

Mohammed Arkoun, professor of Islamic thought at the Sorbonne University in Paris, stated that "No state has met the ideal requirement of Islam- and that is assuming anyone could."² Hence, the confusion created in the mind of a Muslim who is programmed to reach an ideal. An unattainable goal is really devastating.

At this point we can define a Muslim as a spiritually dissatisfied person who struggles with ineffective means to find favour in the sight of his non-understanding god, who expects his worshippers to be what they can not actually be.

He Was Truth-Seeking

Unlike his fellow scribes, this scribe did not come to test Jesus. The Bible tells us that he came to Jesus "noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer." From his attitude we see that he was having a genuine question for which he wanted to know the true answer. In asking Jesus sincerely which commandment is the greatest, what he wanted to know practically was "which is that command which we ought to have in a special manner an eye to, and our

¹ Pipes, Daniel. *Newsweek*, March 12, 1984.

² Arkoun Mohammed. *Time*, June 15, 1992.

obedience to which will lay a foundation for our obedience to all the rest?"³ He really wanted a safe exit from his confusion. He really trusted Jesus that he could give him a satisfying answer. Reverend Robert Jamieson comments that he "answered 'intelligently' or 'sensibly' not only in a good spirit, but with a promising measure of insight into spiritual things."⁴

As their first trial to find a way out of their frustration, many Muslims are observed trying to get a satisfying answer within the boundary of Islam by supporting different Islamic groups. The Sudanese example is one. Many initially welcomed the fundamentalist coup and its promises of organisation and order following the disarray of the last government. But today most Sudanese, however devout they may be, are "more fearful than fulfilled."⁵ Similarly, Len Bartlotti of the Centre for Ministry to Muslims (Assemblies of God) says that Muslims in West Germany are "reachable but neglected,"⁶ indicating that they would seek the *truth* if they could get it.

The reason that makes a Muslim seek the real Truth is to be found behind Allah, the object of worship in Islam. Though "The Merciful" is one of his beautiful names, he remains distant and impersonal. If the one who claims to be the merciful fails to show mercy, it is inevitable for the soul of a Muslim to look for a reliable Truth.

THE SOLUTION

Four attitudes characterise Jesus' approach in solving the scribe's problem.

Jesus Was Available

Because of his dealings with the first three scribes who came to test Him, Jesus could have reserved Himself from this last sincere scribe and ignored him. But Jesus did not do so. He made Himself available for this truth-seeking scribe. He didn't show any sign that might have made the scribe feel uninvited or unaccepted. He made him feel free to ask any question for which he wanted an answer.

³ Henry, Matthew. *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.

⁴ Jamieson, Robert. *Commentary on the Whole Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

⁵ *Time* magazine, June 15, 1992.

⁶ Bartlotti, Len, quoted by Kevin Piecuch, *Christianity Today*, March 5, 1990.

Jesus Was Understanding

Observing the genuineness of the scribe, Jesus showed compassion towards him. He discerned his real problem. Because he knew well the day-to-day life of the Jews under the law, Jesus tried to show in action that he, the scribe, is one of the subjects for whom he came to liberate from bondage. By trying to put Himself in the place of the scribe, Jesus understood his real situation.

Jesus Was Specific in His Message

Once He understood the objective situation of His subject, Jesus spoke to him with a specific message – the message of *love* without beating around the bush. Probably the scribe viewed God not as a loving father but as a fault finder who maliciously counts failures. Hence Jesus explained to him how love, both from God's and man's direction, solves everything.

Jesus Was Kingdom-Oriented

In helping the scribe, Jesus was not persuading him to leave Judaism but showing him the way to join God's Kingdom. He did not try to impose a new religion on him but simply tried to indicate the new path of love to approach God.

THE REFLECTION

"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters," said Jesus in Matthew 12:30. God knows no gray area. Everything is either black or white. That is to say, everyone in this world belongs either to God's Kingdom or outside of it. No one can be in between. And since Jesus is the only way to that Kingdom, anyone who does not accept the Jesus of the Bible is out of that Kingdom. Therefore, those who are already in the Kingdom, namely Christians, have a responsibility of bringing such people, like the Muslims, to the Kingdom. Our best example for such a mission is Jesus Christ Himself.

Phil Parshall in his book, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism*, says that "there is no ultimate methodology, only an ultimate message."⁷ Having this in mind, leaving aside talking about techniques, we can learn something from

⁷ Parshall, Phil. *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989.

Jesus' attitude towards people who need the ultimate message – in our case, the Muslims.

Availability

Tullio Vinay, founder of the *Agape* movement in the Waldensian Church, once said that,

The church's task is not to save itself – Christ has already done that. It is rather to give itself in love and service – in fact to die for the world.⁸

God did not design his church to struggle for survival within itself, but to be the "aroma of His Son Jesus Christ" in a dying world.⁹ Hence it would be shameful for the church to say that it is too busy with some thing else, while neglecting the needy ones. Speaking about the time of Christians, Kevin Howard says,

The one who always cries, Too Busy! but never manages his time is like the one who constantly bounces checks but refuses to look at his bank statement. It is suicidal, no matter how you look at it.¹⁰

Let's make ourselves available first for the needy Muslims before we condemn them because of their religion.

Understanding

The reason why Jesus showed compassion to the scribe was because He understood his problem. He felt the situation of the scribe which was sandwiched between the binding requirements of the law and his burning zeal for God. This feeling is what led Jesus to give him the appropriate message.

Similarly, it is only when we understand the real situation of Muslims that we can reach them with the gospel. Rather than judging them by how they behave, let's understand the problem that drives them to behave so. No one who has a biased view of Jesus has ever had any peace with himself. The reason is that such people do not understand that the real meaning of life lies in the single idea, "God so loved the world". Speaking about the Muslim view point, Juck Budd says the following, quoting al Gazali,

⁸ Vinay, Tullio, quoted by Howard Snyder, *Lion Hand Book of Christian Belief*. Herts, England: Lion Publishing, 1988.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 2:15.

¹⁰ Howard, Kevin. *Israel My Glory*, Vol. 45, No. 1, Feb/Mar 1987.

... it is inconceivable that Allah should love mankind because when there is love there must be in the lover a sense of incompleteness, a realisation that the beloved is needed for complete realisation of self. This is completely impossible with Allah, since Allah is perfectly complete... Thus any idea that God so loved the world that He gave His only son is completely foreign to the Muslim mind.¹¹

On top of this, owing to the fact that no Muslim can be certain about his destination, the Muslim spirit is a restless spirit. Even Mohammed himself is reported to have said,

Verily the Almighty and Glorious Allah took hold of one with his right hand and another with the other hand, and said: This is for this and this is for this, and I don't care. I don't know in which of the two (hands) I am.¹²

Can you imagine the pain you would have felt in your soul as a follower of Jesus, had Jesus said in His last hour on the cross "I am sorry men, I am not sure if I can finish what has to be done in your place"? That is why we have to understand the Muslim first in order to tell him that he can have an eternal lover who can give him a certain destination, unlike his prophet which was not sure even about himself.

Specificity

Christopher Lamb had this to say, to the effect that it is the quality of what we preach and not the quantity that matters.

So much preaching and writing is preaching and writing past people, meeting neither felt nor real need. We answer questions people are not asking, or have ceased to ask or have not yet thought of asking. We talk our own jargon in our own tongue and wonder why no one understands.¹³

In His conversation with the scribe, Jesus wonderfully knit together the whole law of God into a single idea – *love*. The Hebrew word for *love* in the Old Testament verses which Jesus quoted implies "an ardent and vehement

¹¹ Budd, Jack, *How to Witness to Muslims*, Red Sea Mission Team, 1983.

¹² Mishkat III, P. 118.

¹³ Lamb, Christopher, quoted by Anne Cooper, *Ishmael My Brother*. MARC STL Books, Evangelical Missionary Alliance, 1988.

inclination of the mind and a tenderness of affection at the same time... It denotes a strong emotional attachment for and a desire to possess or be in the presence of the object of love."¹⁴

The Greek counterpart of the word indicates,

a benevolent love, the benevolence of which is not shown by doing what the person loved desires but what the one who loves deems as needed by the one loved, for example as in John 3:16. God's love for man is God doing what He thinks best for man and not what he desires. It is God's wilful direction towards man. But for man to show love to God, he must first appropriate God's love, for only God has such an unselfish love.¹⁵

The reason why Jesus gave this message to the scribe was because He knew that the scribe did not understand love as God views it. If we were to analyse his attitude from today's ground, using New Testament terminology, we would say that he was trying to please and worship God before he appropriated God's love as expressed through Jesus Christ's finished work on the cross.

Do you think a Muslim needs any other message than the message of love? From whatever angle we examine it, this is the message of the gospel which is the "perfect law that gives freedom."¹⁶

Under the magnifying glass, the fundamentalist activity around the world today is a desperate move to liberate themselves from Islam and not to liberate others for Islam. Ten years back no one dreamed Afghanistan would be what it is today. All factions in the country were fighting for a unified Afghanistan covered by *Sharia* law under the Qur'an. But to the amazement of the world they continued fighting even after they drove out what they called their "oppressors". The simple reason is that the bondage is in the soul of each individual Muslim fighter, not a physical one on the country as a whole. Do you think a soul under such a situation needs a message other than the gospel of liberty proclaiming God's love as expressed through Jesus Christ? So being specific in our message, it is our responsibility first to bring the good news of God's love to the Muslims, this needy portion of the community of mankind.

¹⁴ Zodhiates, Spiros, *Hebrew Greek Key Study Bible*, AMG, 1986.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ James 1:25 NIV.

Orientation

There is a fictitious story about Peter the apostle, that one day he will stand at the gate of heaven and ask the people coming, "Are you Roman Catholic? Sometimes churches are side tracked by spreading their own religion and forgetting that they are here to propagate God's kingdom.

When Jesus saw that the scribe answered discretely and intelligently, He commended him with respect to God's Kingdom. Jesus, being Kingdom oriented, was not persuading him either to leave one religion or join another. In this world what mattered for Jesus was the propagation and expansion of God's Kingdom as he continued to do so through his Spirit as recorded in the Book of Acts.

At times in our effort to "work for God" we philosophise too much and end up making people mere church-goers. Nowadays many churches and organisations have adapted so many methodologies and techniques, including development work like education and agriculture, to reach the unreached Muslims. But it is sad to see such churches and organisations abandoning the very mission for which they were called. The only reason for this is because they are not being Kingdom oriented. The fame and praise which the hungry stomach is throwing at them blurs their vision. Speaking about the intended human transformation in development work Dr. Tokunboh Adeyemo once said,

Human transformation involves inward and outward environment. It is the bringing of inward and outward environment under the leadership of Christ.¹⁷

Though we may use many of our activities to show our Christian love to our Muslim neighbours, it ends up in vain unless our move is Kingdom oriented to make Christ reign in their hearts.

The gospel should be proclaimed both in word and in deed. We need both to identify with the non-Christians in their need and to tell them the Christian 'Good News.'¹⁸

¹⁷ Adeyemo, Tokunboh, *Second Consultation on the Role of Evangelical Fellowship and Organisations in Relief and Development in Africa.* January 1987.

¹⁸ Snyder, Howard, *Lion Hand Book of Christian Belief.* Herts, England: Lion Publishing, 1988.

CONCLUSION

Finally here are some questions which help us identify our problem areas so that we may be able to keep track of God's plan for the world of Islam.

1. Do we ourselves have the life of God about which we are preaching to others? "Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread," said D.T. Neils.¹⁹ You can't tell others where to find the bread of life unless you first have it for yourself. Howard Snyder said,

Witness springs from the church's worship and community life. A church weak in worship has little inclination to witness, nor does it have much to witness about... Evangelism and service may be thought of as representing the church's witness by word and by deed... not just by individual believers but by the Christian community functioning as a body, which gives the church's life in the world an authentic impact for the Kingdom of God.²⁰

You can radiate liberty to a Muslim if only you have already appropriated it for yourself through the redeeming power of the blood of Jesus Christ.

2. If we already have life in ourselves, as individuals, churches and organisations, are we pushing forward or stagnating in some comfortable corner? Someone has said "A ship in a harbour is safe, but that is not the purpose for which ships are built." Some got their ship of faith broken. Some have abandoned the stormy field of Muslim evangelism to search for "smooth" fields. But beyond this we mention with a sense of humiliation that some have left church buildings to be converted into Mosques,²¹ while Islam is continuing to programme its young adherents with bitterness and bondage. Half of all Muslims in the world today are under twenty years of age. For example, a 1977 manual for Jordanian first grade teachers states,

It is necessary to implant in the soul of the pupil the rule of Islam so that if the enemies occupy even one inch of the Islamic lands, *jihad* becomes imperative for every Muslim.²²

In spite of such a move on the side of Islam, in which direction are we

¹⁹ Neils, D.T, *Ibid*.

²⁰ Snyder, Howard. *The Lion Handbook of Christian Belief*. Herts, England: Lion Publishing, 1988.

²¹ Piecuch, Kevin, *Christianity Today*, March 5, 1990.

²² *Israel My Glory*, Vol. 51 No. 3, June/July 1993.

moving? Are we pushing forward effectively so that our next generation may appropriate the living faith? Do not lose your vision. "Where there is no vision the people perish."²³

3. Do we have a strong faith that "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world"?²⁴ Do you realise that God's arm is strong enough to destroy every stronghold, including Islamic arrogance? Mr. Ian M. Hay, the ex-General Director of SIM International, recently said in an interview,

If God, in such a brief period of time, can upset the whole communist world, what about Islam?... (Islam) is a cracked wall. And as strong as the fundamentalist Muslim seems to be at the moment, it is fragile. Even in those countries, most people will not tolerate that rigidity for long. It is going to change. And God has different ways of doing that.²⁵

Two decades back it was impossible to talk about the fall of communism. But God did hear the prayer of many faithful men and women who constantly prayed for this to happen. How about you? Do you trust the Lord that one day He will demolish the Islamic pride? In every step of your move in this ministry, your faith in the Lord will determine your fruit and victory.

After we are clear concerning our attitudes, then for God there is no question of possibility because everything is possible for Him. As to us there will be no problem because we have cleared every obstacle from our side. As to the devil he will continue to wage war against us. But praise God! Victory is finally ours, for "we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37).

²³ Proverbs 29:18 KJV.

²⁴ I John 4:4 NIV.

²⁵ Hay, Ian M, *SIMNOW*, Feb/Apr 1993.