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OBSERVATIONS ALONG THE ROAD OF MUSLIM EVANGELISM

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Textbook learning of evangelism is inadequate. There is nothing like experience to teach one how to witness effectively. This is especially true of Muslim evangelism. The anonymous author of this article has spent nine years in East Africa, much of that time devoted to personal evangelism of Muslims. He has engaged in "friendship evangelism," making friends of Muslims and through that friendship seeking opportunities to evangelize. Out of this intensive and personal experience this anonymous author offers practical suggestions for sharing one's faith with Muslims and leading them to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

A group of eighteen people sat around our living room, participating in a Christian worship service for Muslims. About half were Christian workers and converted Muslims, the rest were interested in how Christians worship. Our Muslim friends enjoyed sharing prayer requests, singing Christian songs, and reading the Bible together. The opportunity to have this service comes after several years of trial and error as my wife and I work to reach an unreached Muslim people group.

The strategies we use are specifically aimed at reaching the people group we work with. But the principles have a wide application to those who are evangelizing Muslims in Africa. We are still on the road in our church planting journey but we have learned some valuable lessons along the way. This article seeks to share some of these lessons and comment on the previous articles.

THE NEED TO FOCUS OUR EFFORTS ON ONE GROUP

One of the first things my wife and I learned about reaching Muslims was the need to focus on a specific group. When we first started our goal was to reach the "Muslims of East Africa". But we soon discovered that was impossible.

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Muslims are a greatly diverse group. There are Muslims living in Africa from different tribes, languages, countries, theological beliefs, and cultures. In fact, in each one of these groups there are many divisions and sub-groups. For example, the *Muslim* Indians living in East Africa have at least 60 separate religious and cultural groups.¹

Because we didn't have a focus at the beginning of our ministry we had Muslim contacts that were Somali, Indian, Arab, and from several local tribes. Although this was exciting it was also frustrating since we could not communicate in their languages or become deeply involved in each of their communities. Once we narrowed our focus to a single group we became accepted in their community and established deep relationships, resulting in many opportunities to share the gospel.

This does not mean we should not witness to whoever God brings across our path. But for the person who works with Muslims full time it is vital to narrow his or her aim in order to be effective.

It is important not to assume all Muslims are alike. Takona is right when she says we need to understand the beliefs, needs and culture of a target people. The characteristics of a people group dictates the strategies used to reach them. Are they literate or illiterate? Do they understand Arabic? Are they committed Muslims by choice or simply Muslims by birth? Answering questions such as these have helped us know what will be effective in evangelism.

There are also differences in the way Muslims practice their religion inside each people group. Only one of our Muslim friends faithfully goes to prayers five times a day, the rest don't. Some are studying to learn more about Islam, others couldn't care less about it. We need to get to know the needs of each individual Muslim in order to evangelize them effectively.

MISSTEPS ALONG THE ROAD

Takona brings up an important point when she talks about meeting felt needs. We tried several strategies that were not effective before we found some key heart needs.

Comparing the Teachings of Islam with Christianity

Strategies such as using the Quran as a bridge to the gospel is not effective with the people we work with since they cannot understand Arabic and

¹ Cynthia Salvadori, *Through Open Doors* (Nairobi: Kenway Pub., 1989).

many can not read at all. Comparing Christianity and Islam also has not worked, as they do not know much about the official teachings of their own religion. We tried to compare Jesus and Mohammed, the Bible and the Quran, God and Allah. But it went nowhere. They could not explain why they believed what they did. We knew more about the official teachings of Islam than they did. If we pressed them on a point they said, "Go ask the Imam, he will explain it to you".

We saw another danger in trying to compare Islam and Christianity. In order to show them the superiority of Christianity, we found ourselves teaching them about Islam. Instead of our friends turning to Christ it made some of them go deeper into Islam. If someone wants to discuss the Quran and the Bible we are all for it. But we do not want to teach them Islam. We want to tell them about Jesus.

Again, every group is different. Some groups, such as Arabs, will know more about Islam and want to debate religious ideas. We were involved in a weekly debate with leaders of a mosque for six months. The debates started between some Christians and Muslims on the street outside the mosque and became very popular. Large crowds gathered every week to hear the discussion. The leaders of the mosque were unhappy with their followers being exposed to this "false teaching" and moved the discussions into the mosque. After six months the debates ended with the feeling nothing was being accomplished. A few months later we discovered one of the leaders of the mosque had become a Christian and two others were in secret Bible study. God uses many ways to draw people to Him. We need to pray for wisdom in our use of strategies.

Presenting the Gospel Without Building a Foundation for Understanding

One of our early mistakes was to assume Muslims knew who Jesus was. We have found most Muslims have never heard the real story of Jesus. One day we were visiting at the home of Muslim friends. They presented us with a gift of a beautiful cross. We were shocked and asked them why they wanted to give us this gift. We had always heard that Muslims hated the cross. They thought we were offended by the gift. We assured them it was lovely but we wondered what made them want to give a cross to us. "Well, it's part of your religion isn't it?", they asked. We said it was and asked them if they knew what it meant to Christians. They had no idea. This led to a long discussion on the meaning of the cross.

We have also discovered that a traditional five minute presentation of the gospel only brings confusion and hardens them to the truth. This is because

words such as "sin", "saved", and "savior" all have different meanings in Islam. Takona has pointed out some of the main differences in her article on the Muslim faith and Christian contrast. For example, Muslims have heard that Christians believe God had physical relations with Mary and she gave birth to Jesus. When we say Jesus is God's Son, they think we mean he is God's physical son and not eternal. We must clearly define what we mean when we talk to Muslims about God.

The first time we ate in a Muslim home one of the young women there asked my wife, "Are you saved?" We were surprised that they would be openly interested in what Christians believe but we have since learned that this is a common question Muslims have. Instead of answering directly, my wife ask the woman, "What do you mean by 'saved'?" She told us it meant going to church, reading the Bible, not drinking alcohol, and not going to discos. In other words doing good deeds like the Muslims. My wife surprised her by saying that she was not saved like that. My wife was then able to clearly share what she believed about Jesus in simple terms. When she was done the woman said, "That sounds very good, but I'm a Muslim. Why don't Christians share this with us?" Experiences like these have taught us to take time to build a foundation of understanding before sharing the gospel.

STEPPING INTO THE SPIRIT WORLD OF FOLK ISLAM

A major turning point in our ministry came when we understood the role animism and the spirit world played in the lives of most ordinary Muslims. We had been frustrated by the seeming indifference our Muslim friends had to the orthodox teachings of Islam. Not only did they not know much about Islam, but it didn't seem to make much difference in their lives. We wondered: Where do these people find meaning in their religion? What are their heart needs? Slowly we began to see they lived in fear of the spirit world. Islam is meaningful to them as a way to deal with these spiritual forces.

Opened Eyes

Unusual experiences first opened our eyes to this world. For example, a teenage Muslim boy who was involved in Bible study with us, became sick. We took him to the hospital but he just got worse. Finally his mother took him out of the hospital late at night and insisted on going to see the "holy woman". We left them at their house about 1 a.m. with the young man seriously ill. That morning at 7 a.m. the young man showed up at our door perfectly well. We asked him what happened and he explained the "holy woman" had done some rituals to cast out an evil spirit that was affecting him. He asked us if we believed in evil

spirits and we said we did. We then were able to share the power of Jesus over spirits and Satan with him.

About the same time we read Bill Musk's book, *The Unseen Face of Islam*, which gives an excellent overview of the lives of ordinary Muslims.² It was like he was describing our people group.

Suddenly we began to understand the meaning of many of the things we had observed. The incense burning in the house was not just to make the house smell nice but to chase away the Jinn. The verses from the Quran over the windows and doors were not just decoration but to prevent Jinn from entering the house. The necklaces and bracelets they wore contained charms from the Quran.

We also began to understand the reaction of our Muslim friends towards us. When we first began visiting their homes, we complimented them on their clothes or decorations. We were surprised to have them instantly offer these items to us as gifts. This response was a mystery to us until we realized they were afraid we might have the "evil eye" which is the power of jealousy to cause destruction and even death. It would be better to give us what we wanted than to risk a curse we might put on them because we were jealous.

This is not a side of Islam that is apparent at first. Phil Parshall in his book, *Bridges to Islam*, writes:

Perhaps this revelation about animism within Islam will come as a shock to the reader. We have been taught to think of Muslims as homogeneous and Islam as monolithic. The image of Muslims lined up in the mosque for prayer five times a day has been etched deeply into our minds by the media. There has been little understanding of what occurs in the privacy of a Muslim home or within the confines of a *pir's* [a Muslim spiritual guide] annual meeting.³

It takes time for Muslims to trust you enough to explain what is really going on in their lives. We had noticed that our Muslim friends put black smudge marks on a newborn babies head. At first they wouldn't tell us why and said it was just a tradition. But as we developed a deeper relationship they told us it was to keep the Jinn away. If a Jinn would see the baby it would notice the mark and leave the baby alone thinking it was too dirty to touch.

² Bill Musk, *The Unseen Face of Islam* (Evangelical Missionary Alliance, MARC, 1992).

³ Phil Parshall, *Bridges to Islam* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985) 16.

Folk Islam

The mixing of the orthodox beliefs and practices of Islam with traditional belief and practices of the local people is called Folk Islam or popular Islam. The need for Folk Islam results from the fact that Allah is not a personal God. He is Master not Father and ultimately unknowable. But ordinary Muslims want to experience God. Phil Parshall puts it this way:

Islam, as a theological system, is rigid and unyielding.... However, as millions of Muslims move beyond cold, dead orthodoxy, we see them desiring that felt needs be met. Their hearts cry out for fulfillment in a love relationship to a more personal God.⁴

The problems Muslims have with orthodox Islam are increased when they can not understand Arabic. Our Muslim friends can not read the Quran, do not understand what they say in prayer, and can not understand the official Islamic pronouncements blessing their marriage. Once we were watching a video of a marriage ceremony and the Islamic blessing was being given. We asked if anyone in the room could understand one word of what was being said. No one could. One young man told us, "They could be calling us dogs and we wouldn't know". Therefore, many practices in Islam hold little meaning for them.

Folk Islam also fills the need of a way to deal with the spirit world. Our Muslim friends live in a world controlled by spirits. They live in fear of these forces, but orthodox Islam does not help them. So they change the meaning of beliefs and practices in orthodox Islam and give them different meanings. The creed, "There is no God but Allah, Muhammad is his messenger", becomes a protection against evil spirits instead of a statement of faith. The Quran becomes a book of blessings and cursing instead of a guide to life.

The great majority of Muslims are involved with Folk Islam.⁵ This would be especially true of Africa so far away from the centre of Islam.

The Reality in Islam

The first reaction of our people group to almost any situation is to find the answer in Folk Islam. If woman gets a boil on her finger, she immediately assumes it is the result of the evil eye. One of our Muslim friends has said of the spiritual power in popular Islam, "This is the only part of Islam that is real. I don't believe any of the rest."

⁴ *Ibid.* 17-18.

⁵ *Ibid.* 16.

The spirit world is the one thing that unites the otherwise divisive groups of Islam. *Dhikr* is a ceremony of emotional frenzy that leaves the participants in a trance like state. Many *dhikr* ceremonies focus on the occult. We became aware of *dhikr* when one was held by our neighbors in the apartment below us. The chanting and dancing shook the building. The amazing thing to us was the variety of Muslims that came to this ceremony. Muslims from different religious sects, races, tribes, and social standings that would normally have nothing to do with each other came together for this event.

In order to reach our Muslims friends, we have to understand the spirit world that lies behind the veneer of orthodox Islam. Only then will we address their felt needs. As Bill Musk observes; "With which 'Islam' is Christian witness familiar? Which 'Islam' is known, or maybe even knowable, by most contemporary missionaries to Muslims? Is it Quranic, institutionalised, orthodox and official Islam? Or is it everyday, everyman, non-publicised, local, and popular Islam?" He goes on to say that knowing and understanding official, orthodox Islam is important and needed to witness to Muslims practicing that kind of Islam. But it is equally important to get to know the world of popular Islam.⁶

The Search for Power

A major issue in the lives of our Muslim friends is who has spiritual power. This is illustrated by the experience of a couple we know. A divorced man about to marry for the second time was cursed by his first wife. The groom became sick and was taken by his family to a person with more spiritual power than the one who cursed him. A blessing was pronounced and the man was healed. If the man had not become well, the next step would have been to go to an even stronger spiritual power.

It is in the area of Folk Islam that we have the best and most numerous opportunities to share the gospel. We have the power of Jesus to set these people free from their fear of the spirits. "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8b). This is what we are telling our Muslim friends.

FINDING THE STRAIGHT PATH

After several years of ministry we have found some key principles that are proving very effective.

⁶ Musk, *op cit.*, 203-204.

1. Develop Relationships

Our highest priority is developing personal relationships. Muslims rarely come to Christ through street preaching or crusades. They come to Christ like most of us did - through the personal witness of people that lived and explained the life of Jesus. Nothing can substitute for spending time with Muslims and letting them see your godly lifestyle. Many Muslims associate Christianity with the godless lifestyle they see in TV and movies. This perception can only be changed by Muslims getting to know us and seeing we are different.

I was recently on a trip with two Muslim men. Tasneem I had known for several years but found him very resistant to Christianity. Salim was his friend whom I had never met before. Salim turned to me and said, "Tasneem tells me you are a holy man". It was startling because Tasneem had never been receptive to our witness but he saw something in our lifestyle that was different. God is working in his heart.

Time is a key element. We had a co-worker who had a passion to see our Muslim friends believe in Jesus. She started telling them Bible stories and sharing about Jesus the first week she was with them. But she became frustrated by their lack of response. We encouraged her to continue to spend time just getting to know them. She immersed herself in their culture and after a few months began to have amazing opportunities to witness. It was the Muslims who often asked her to tell them about Jesus. It took time for them to come to trust her and establish a relationship where they wanted to know about her faith.

Islam controls a person's whole life, so deciding to become a Christian is a frightening decision. They need to trust the messenger before they trust the message. When I teach on Islam at the Bible School I give my students the assignment of talking to Muslims. I ask them to go slowly at first and get to know the person before presenting the gospel. Those that spend the time developing a relationship first have excellent witnessing opportunities. Those that begin with the gospel usually come back and tell me that Muslims are impossible to evangelize.

We have used a variety of ways to develop friendships with our people group including: eating meals together, watching videos together, picnics, cooking classes, fishing, outings, special meals, birthday parties, Christmas and Easter parties, and much more. We have made it a point to be with our Muslim friends during major events in their lives. We participate in weddings, help take care of them when they are sick, and go to some of their religious ceremonies. At the same time we do not compromise our testimony for Jesus. The results of

this effort is we are well accepted in the community even though we are known as Christian teachers.

A final thought on developing relationships is that it costs us some of our freedom. Takona says the Christian trying to reach the Muslim must "have the courage to cast off the 'idols' of his tribe and identify himself with the Muslim culture." This is the price we pay to reach the Muslim. We have had to dress differently, give up eating pork, change our sleep patterns, and live in a difficult place in order to be effective in our witness. Is it too high a price to pay to save the lives of people God loves?

2. Remember the Goal

There is a saying: "Keep the main thing the main thing." In this case the main thing is Muslims trusting Jesus as savior. Our ultimate goal is to see groups of Muslims from our people worshipping Jesus together. Everything we do must be focused on that goal. It is not enough to make good friends and enjoy spending time together. We must share the truth about Jesus. Whether we are having a party or studying the Bible with our Muslim friends, the goal is to share Christ. That does not mean you have to force the gospel into every conversation but it does mean you intentionally seek opportunities to witness in every situation.

3. Work in Family Groups

Our ministry revolves around several key families. God has given us the vision of seeing whole families trust in Jesus at the same time. With this in mind we look for opportunities to share the gospel with families as a whole and not just one on one. As much as possible, we do not work with individuals. If a young person comes to our house, we ask to meet his or her parents before we continue to work with that person.

In our community there were several teenage children that desperately wanted to come to our house to read our Christian books and watch our Christian videos but their father forbade it. Sometimes they would sneak over to our place without telling their parents. We told them they had to get permission from their parents and did not begin to work with them. For two years we prayed God would open up this family as a whole to our witness. God answered our prayers in an amazing way.

One day the parents were forced to come to our house in order to contact an important visitor we had with us. The next week the father invited me on an overnight trip with him and we had a great time. A few weeks later they came back to our house for a party where we shared the gospel - the first time

they had willingly visited our house. At that time I asked him for permission to have his children come to our house for an all night party the next week. He was impressed by our willingness to respect his role as leader of his family. He said, "My children can come to your house any time they want. They don't need to ask my permission. I now see that you are good people." His children have been some of our most frequent visitors.

Takona has an excellent section on working with community leaders in her article on Muslim evangelism. In our people group the husbands and fathers are the leaders and the family is the main unit that will be influenced by an individual's decision to trust Christ. We believe that if a whole family would turn to Christ they would be able to stay in their community and be a witness to their own people.

4. Understand Folk Islam

I have already explained the importance of this area in our ministry. Dealing with the world of spirits and the occult has led us to two important conclusions.

First is the need for an accurate understanding of what the Bible teaches about angels, evil spirits, and Satan. Our Muslim friends have all kinds of superstitions and fears about the Jinn that are lies from Satan. They are right to fear the real power of Satan in their lives apart from Christ, but they are further bound by fear based on Satanic lies and deception. Their belief that the Jinn control the ocean and not God is just one example of a deception (Psalm 24:1-2; 95:5). We must have a biblical understanding of the spirit world or we will be caught up in the same fears our Muslim friends have and lose our witness to them of God's power.

We have been told that a spirit haunts our area. Some of our Muslim friends openly admit to being possessed by a spirit by their own choice. If we did not biblically understand our protection from demons and Satan and God's absolute control over them, we would never be in this ministry. Those who wish to set Muslims free must also be convinced of this.

Second is the need to emphasize the power of Christ over Satan in our witness to Muslims. We need to live a life that practically demonstrates Christ's defeat of Satanic power, "having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15). We must boldly take the gospel to those bound by Satan.

We can not fear the spiritual power that ordinary Muslims seek if we want to proclaim the superiority of Jesus. One Christian missionary told us she would never go to our area as she was afraid she would be harmed by the spirits there. Do we believe that "greater is the one who is in you than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4)? As Musk asks, "Does the missionary for Christ have any stronger antidote for evil spirits in the home than the local incense burner? What of exorcism and healing? Do Christ's ambassadors have any expertise, on behalf of their King, in these ministries?"⁷

When we were offered occultic cures to have children we told our Muslim friends we trusted God to do His will. It is a testimony to His power that we now have children. When our Muslim friends express concern that our children are not protected by charms from the evil eye and the Jinn, we tell them about the much greater power of Christ in our lives. When our Muslim friends are sick, we are ready to pray for healing. When they want freedom from the power of spirits, we offer them the power of Jesus.

5. Tell Stories

Storytelling is a powerful way to present the gospel. The story of Jesus and other Bible stories are completely unknown by many Muslims. One of the things our Muslim friends enjoy the most is watching the Jesus film even though they have seen it several times before. We have also found it effective to read and discuss a Bible story and then watch a video of that story if one is available.

When we begin to share with Muslims, it has been most effective when we start with subjects they know and then move into new areas. Instead of starting with the death of Jesus we might start with creation. This gives the Muslims an understanding of why it was necessary for Jesus to die. Their view is that sin is simply a mistake that must be corrected by good works. Therefore the death of Christ seems unnecessary to them. When we explain the seriousness of sin through the fall of man and God's severe punishments as a result of sin, it opens their eyes to how God really views their own sin. New Tribes Mission has put out a series of books that explains and guides Christian evangelists through the process of telling the gospel story in a chronological way.⁸

We have been sharing the gospel with Mr. Baraka for a long time. In the beginning we started with the story of Jesus' death and resurrection but it made little impression on him. For one thing, he could hardly understand the story

⁷ Musk, *op cit.*, 204.

⁸ Trevor McIlwain, *Building on Firm Foundations* (New Tribes Mission, 1987).

since he did not know all that led up to it. More recently we have gone back to the beginning and spent several months studying Genesis. After telling the story several times of Adam and Eve's sin and the consequences, he finally understood the seriousness of sin. "You mean God gave all those terrible punishments for just that little mistake of eating the fruit?", he said. Then we discussed the great number of times people have disobeyed God since then, including us today. Mr. Baraka was distressed. "What can we do?", he cried. He is now ready to receive Christ.

6. Pray

The power of prayer is very evident in our ministry. When we spend time in prayer before visiting with Muslims we almost always have a clear opportunity to share the gospel. If we do not pray before the visit, it usually turns out to be just another social occasion. Someone has said: "Prayer is not preparation for the battle, it is the battle."

One Muslim couple who were close friends of ours were preparing to go on *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). We have found that many times Muslims come back from *hajj* hardened to the gospel. We mobilized a large group of people to pray for them while they were in Mecca. We also fasted and prayed that God would keep them from Satanic deception and open their eyes to Himself even in Mecca. When they returned we asked them how it went. They said it was terrible. Nothing went right. Their prayers for healing were not answered, the Arabs they had admired were rude and abusive, and the whole journey was a disaster. They are disillusioned with Islam and want to continue to study the Bible with us. This is the power of prayer.

CONCLUDING STEPS

Recently a man from our people group was talking with a co-worker. The subject turned to religion and he brought out the *Jesus* video he had just bought from a local store. "Can our family watch it and you explain it to us?", he asked. God is at work among the Muslims. Opportunities like this abound for those who are willing to invest the time to develop the relationships that show a godly lifestyle. The question we were asked by the woman the first time we ate with a Muslim family still haunts us: "Why don't Christians share what they believe with us?" It is a challenge for all of us who say we are following the footsteps of Jesus.

[Note: Names and details of stories in this article have been changed in order to preserve anonymity.]