Critical Contextualization and Muslim Conversion

The author advocates a "new Christian apologetic" in Muslim evangelism that makes much of the nature of God and his relationship to creation. Christian witness in dialogue must "gently unmask" Muslim rebellion against God and focus on the centrality of the cross.

by Warren F. Larson

For those who minister the gospel to Muslims certain questions keep reoccurring: How much does one have to understand and believe to be a Christian? What must a convert conclude about Muhammad, and, at what stage of the process? Can the Qur'an have a place in the life of a convert? Can a convert retain some forms of Islamic worship? When should a convert be baptized?[1]

As the Christian worker soon learns, there are also many practical problems to be considered: Who will befriend the convert? Where can the convert find work? And, perhaps more importantly, who will marry–and bury–the convert?[2]

These are painful realities, for on account of the Islamic tightly knit social fabric, converts are often doomed to a life of loneliness and isolation. This brief article suggests that in answer to these questions, the goal is to be culturally sensitive, yet remain faithful to the truth. Contextualization must strive to accommodate without compromise.

Basis for Contextualization

J. Dudley Woodberry suggests that most Muslim converts and inquirers find Christian forms of worship strange and offensive: Men and women are in close proximity in church; people sit on chairs or benches; they beat drums; and, worst of all they do not even remove their shoes! Then converts find out that the foreign terms used in Bible translations and liturgies are more Hindu than Muslim.[3] For this reason, most missiologists and expatriate missionaries are ready to abandon forms of worship that are strange and offensive to converts and inquirers; and, to retain Islamic religious forms and vocabulary.

However, would-be contextualizers usually face stiff resistance from both the Muslim and the local Christian community. Muslims tend to own their Islamic forms and words as the personal property of Islam, and therefore consider expressions like "followers of Isa," and "Masjid Isa" as deceitful.[4] Malaysia goes even further and forbids non-Muslim use of Islamic terms like Allah, *rasul, ratwas, wayhu, nabi, dakway* and *hadith*, failing to realize their distinct Syriac derivation predates Muhammad.[5] For their part, Christians take exception to the use of most Islamic terms in their worship, because they believe such Islamic "forms" are Satanic in origin.

Yet what Muslims and Christians fail to recognize is that Islam itself has contextualized the monotheism it inherited from Jews and Christians (Surah 34:28; 46:12). Even the five Islamic pillars are rooted in Judaism and Christianity. *Shahada* (confession) is similar to the Jewish *shema* in both function and form (Deuteronomy 6:4). *Salat* "to bow" (ritual prayer) was used in synagogues and churches long before Muhammad. It was borrowed from the Syrian church while the Prophet was in Mecca. Judaism had three prayers a day (Psalm 55:7; Daniel 6:10). The removal of sandals and other rituals for impurities were Jewish preparations for prayer (Exodus 3:5). *Zakat* (almsgiving to the poor) has scriptural roots (Deuteronomy 15:11; Proverbs 19:17; Matthew 6:1-4; 25:35). *Sawm* (fast) describes those who submit to God (Surah 33:35) and is often practiced in the Bible (Matthew 6:16-18; Luke 18:10). The *hajj* was adopted and reinterpreted into Muslim practice from pagan rituals, Jewish males went up to Jerusalem three times a year. Muslims perform their pilgrimage once in a lifetime.[6]

Fundamental Issues

Despite commonalties, fundamental differences do exist between Islam and Christianity. Islam considers defilement more important than depravity. So, adjudging ritual impurity and failure to bathe ceremonially after sexual intercourse a serious offense, most Muslims do not seem to be desperate for a Savior to deliver them from the "little sins" of lying, stealing and cheating.[7]

It is this deep concern over defilement that places folk Muslims in a state of insecurity and fear. They point their feet in a certain direction when they sleep, go to the bathroom and say their prayers. They utter the word *bismillah* (in the name of God) whenever they begin a task, embark on a journey, blow their nose and go to the bathroom.[8] It is therefore imperative that Christian workers understand the defilement issue and have a firm grasp of Scripture on this issue. The Bible clearly addresses the issue of shame (Genesis 2:25; 3:21; Exodus 30:17-21), but it also brings the good news that Christ's redemptive work clears up both shame and defilement (Mark 7:20-23).[9] This combination opens up new avenues of ministry, enabling Christians to present the gospel at the point of need, where shame is more important than guilt.[10]

Thus, in dialogue with Muslims, Christian witness will emphasize that

God is concerned with the sin of impurity on the "inside" (Psalm 51), and that the blood of Jesus Christ "purifies us from every sin" (Heb.9:13-14; I Jn. 1:7). And, that we forgive our enemies and do not seek revenge on those who harm, insult and disgrace us (Rom. 12:19).

Commitment to Truth

A discussion of contextualization must also emphasize the need to approach Islam as committed Christians. That is, dialogue with Muslims will ultimately result in a full disclosure of the person and work of Christ. Christians must willingly discuss the distinctives of their faith, and, at the appropriate time, help Muslims evaluate their own Prophet. Ultimately, Christians must unashamedly invite Muslims to conversion and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This must never be taken to mean that Christians have nothing to learn from Muslims. Through dialogue, Christians can better understand and express their own beliefs, especially in regards to doctrines like the Trinitarian concept of God and the essence of salvation.[11]

The danger is that in dialogue with Muslims Christians may be tempted to avoid controversial matters. For instance, though the qur'anic Allah and Old Testament names for God have etymological connections, Christians must be careful to emphasize conceptual and qualitative differences. Christian workers should make much of the character of God and Jesus Christ as God Incarnate—not just "Isa the Prophet." They must emphasize that there is no salvation outside of Christ and that the cross is central to the gospel (I Cor. 1:17, 18; 2:2).

As to Muhammad, Kenneth Cragg explains how desperately Muslims want Christians to recognize him as a true prophet:

> Muslims are disturbed about the silence and reserve of Christians regarding Muhammad. He is for Muslims the last and greatest of the prophets. Christian reticence on this subject surprises and scandalizes

them. They do not understand why we refuse to grant Muhammad the respect they themselves grant to the person of Jesus.[12]

This is indeed a touchy issue, and with a new emphasis on Blasphemy Laws in some Muslim countries, it is increasingly important for Christians to use caution and respect whenever they refer to the Prophet. However, Temple Gairdner, the eminent missionary from Glasgow, spoke to this issue nearly eight decades ago. He called for honesty and a commitment to truth:

> if admirers of Mohammad are content to regard him historically as a great Arabian, who had a real and strange sense of prophetical call, and through this and his immense natural genius, singular gifts, and many virtues, accomplished a stupendous life-work, then we join with the admirers...The worst enemies of Mohammad are not his opponents, but his friends, who will have it that the character of this Arabian giant is the very type of perfected humanity;....that no great wrong can be attributed to him; that his moral splendor throws that of Jesus completely in the shade; and that his example and precept make the best foundation not only for codes of conduct but for national and international law!...All we know is that these men one and all, are doing a disservice both to truth and to their idol.[13]

The Goal of Dialogue: Conversion

Thus, true dialogue suggests that Christians invite their Muslim friends to faith. Such intent does not imply a "hidden agenda" whereby the Christian secretly plans for a Muslim to "convert." Rather, it is an open and forthright goal of dialogue. Christians must understandably approach Muslims in a spirit of friendship and goodwill. They must demonstrate sympathy toward Islamic beliefs but stay committed to evangelism. They must not regard evangelism as secondary to good relations or conversion as peripheral to dialogue. They must see themselves in partnership with the Holy Spirit and invite Muslims to conversion (II Cor. 5:20; (Acts 18: 5, 9; 23:11; 24:24, 25; 26:28, 29; 28:23, 24, 30; II Cor. 5:20).

In the spirit of the Apostle Paul who boldly called others to faith, Dean Gilliland writes of individuals in the

past who combined sensitivity to Muslims with a sincere desire for their conversion. St. Francis of Assisi beautifully exemplified this love and commitment for the truth in attempting to convert the Sultan of Egypt during the Crusades. He, the most powerful Muslim leader of his time, was renowned for his ruthless hatred of Christians. Yet Francis walked directly through the battlefield to him and boldly "proclaimed the Triune God and Jesus Christ the Savior of all." Though not converted, the Sultan offered him hospitality, requested prayer and even permitted the friar to preach the gospel in his house.[14]

Gilliland goes on to list two other historical figures who witnessed lovingly, albeit purposefully. From the time of the Crusades Fra Ricaldo de Monte Croce tried to win Muslims to Christ. He set out for Baghdad in AD 1288 determined to live with Muslims so they might be converted. He criticized the Islamic faith but advocated a warm relationship with Muslims.[15]

Raymon Lull is another example of one who loved Muslims and grieved over the Crusades. He tried to convince Christians that conversion of the Saracens could not come through war. With an "unquenchable and all-consuming zeal" Lull used every possible means at his disposal to win Muslims. He wrote profusely, pled with popes, and started missionary preparation schools. Lull was stoned to death by an angry Algerian mob in AD 1315, but he managed to turn the eyes of the world toward Muslims.[16]

Similarly, Cragg describes Gairdner's total commitment to act as "an apologist for God in Christ via the cross." Gairdner emphasized holiness through the channel of grace in the lives of his hearers and personal conversion. He was leery of anything that compromised Christianity in respect to other religions. His concept of salvation through faith dealt radically with sin and redemption through the finished work of Christ. For Gairdner, the purpose

of dialogue was not only to discuss, but to save.[17]

But Samuel Marinus Zwemer (1867-1952) probably did more to help Christians understand the spiritual needs of Muslims than anyone in this century. He never articulated this goal more clearly than when he hung a large map on the wall at a Student Volunteer Movement conference. As he swept his hand across the vast areas of Islam he declared, "Thou O Christ art all I want and Thou O Christ art all they want. What Christ can do for any man, He can do for every man."[18]

Care of Converts

Finally, it must be underscored that because of the special circumstances, Muslim converts need particular love and nurture. Since conversion is often a long journey that takes several years it is necessary they receive this care throughout the entire process.

And, in the strong likelihood that converts will be alienated from family and friends–and may even fear for their lives, it is suggested they be "taken in" by a Christian family to help provide the needed nurture. In practical terms, this means that with the help of other believers, the family would be responsible for the convert's education, employment, and need for a spouse.

Conclusion

Contextualization of the gospel among Muslims is a critical issue and easy answers are not forthcoming. On the one hand, there is the danger of monoculturalism that sees only the evil and demonic in Islam. However, there also is the danger of compromise and a tendency to steer around key issues.

This suggests that though Christians have much to learn from Muslims, certain distinctives, such as the nature of God, must come to the fore. The author advocates a "new Christian apologetic" in Muslim evangelism that makes mush of the nature of God and his

relationship to creation. Christian witness in dialogue must "gently unmask" Muslim rebellion against God and focus on the centrality of the cross. It must be clear that Jesus Christ alone can purify and make us acceptable to God!

But respect for the truth must be held in tension with sensitivity and deep love for Muslims. Conversion must always be the ultimate aim of dialogue—never an end in itself. Christians do not primarily enter dialogue with Muslims to enrich each other's faith—they want Muslims to be converted!

It is clear that Muslims must overcome numerous obstacles when considering conversion. Such hurdles lengthen the entire process as Muslims contemplate the high cost of commitment. The paper stressed that the need for friendship, employment, marriage, and a place of burial must not be overlooked. It is the duty of the "new brotherhood" to take full responsibility for care and growth of the new disciples of Christ.

End Notes

1. I personally feel we should not forego baptism for converts, but this does not mean that it should not be delayed under certain circumstances. See Cragg, *Call of the Minaret*, 349-350. Also, two publications by the same author: Phil Parshall, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 195 and "Lessons Learned in Contextualization," ed. Woodberry, 253. A comparison reveals a switch on this issue. In the first book he recommends a functional substitute, but nine years later recanted.

2. Martin Goldsmith, "Community and Controversy: Key Causes of Muslim Resistance," *Missiology* 4 (July 1976): 318.

3. J. Dudley Woodberry, "Contextualization Among Muslims: Reusing Common Pillars," in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology For Mission Today*, ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1989), 283. The author says that the traditional Arabic Bible adopted Syriac names for Bible characters that are different than those used in the Qur'an. For example, *Yuhanna* rather

than *Yahya* for John and *Yisu* rather than *Isa* for Jesus. The same thing was done in the Urdu Bible in Pakistan.

4. In 1988 the Malaysian Government ruled that non-Muslims not read the Bible as one reads the Qur'an, that is, they were not to sit on the floor, use the rehal (wooden stand) to hold the Bible and wear clothing traditionally worn by Muslims. Moreover, it prohibited non-Islamic religions from using "Muslim words." Similarly, Sunnis in Pakistan resent it that Ahmadis use Muslim names and conduct worship, as if they are Muslim.

5. Woodberry, "Contextualization Among Muslims," 286-287.

6. Ibid., 287-303.

7. Bruce Thomas, "The Gospel for Shame Cultures: Have We Failed to Reach Muslims at Their Point of Deepest Insecurity?" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (July 1994): 284-285. Thomas has found the same thing true of Muslims in Southeast Asia.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 286-289.

10. Ibid.

11. Arne Rudvin, "The Gospel and Islam: What Sort of Dialogue is Possible?" *Al-Mushir* 21 (1979): 122-123.

12. Kenneth Cragg, *Muhammad and the Christian* (New York: Orbis, 1984), 1.

13. Vander Werff, *Christian Mission to Muslims*: *The Record*, citing Temple Gairdner, "Mohammed Without Camouflage. Ecce Homo Aribicus, *The Moslem World*, 9 no. 4:56f.

14. Dean S. Gilliland, "Encounters in History," T*heology, News and Notes* (December 1988): 10.

15. Ibid., 11.

16. Ibid.

17. Kenneth Cragg, "Temple Gairdnerís Legacy," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 5, no. 4 (October 1981): 164_167.

18. J. Christy Wilson, Jr. "The Legacy of Samuel M. Zwemer," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 10, no. 1 (July 1986): 119.

Dr. Warren Larson is the director of Muslim Studies at Columbia International University. He has served as a missionary in Pakistan for 23 years.