

Preparing to Evangelize in the Islamic World

Introduction

According to *Time Magazine* over 1.6 billion people follow the Islamic faith, making it one of the globe's largest, unreached, resistant people groups (2011, 30). Islam is a mega-culture with scores of sub-cultures. They are sheep outside of the Christian sheepfold. Some count it the greatest omission to the great commission. Many assume that most Muslims come from the Middle East. However, the largest concentration is found in Southern Asia and is spread throughout Africa. They have a presence in nearly every nation. Predominantly, their homelands exist in what is commonly called the "10/40 Window" ranging from the eastern side of North Africa to the western side of Asia. Due to mass migration Muslims may not be "over there" anymore but could be "next door."

History and Culture in the Islamic World

It is essential to understand the history and culture of any receptor society in order to embark on effective cross-cultural communication and carry out realistic missionary ministry. Muslims ("one who submits") are the spiritual sons of Ishmael (Genesis 17:20-21). Muslims trace their roots to the Bible, their selected portions, but discount God's Word, thinking it has been corrupted or changed. At the birth of Ishmael ("God hears"), God promised Hagar that her descendants would be too numerous to count (Genesis 16:9-11). Today, one in every five people identify with her.

Muhammad ibn Abdallah, the founder of Islam ("submission"), was born in 570 AD, in Mecca, Arabia (Saudi Arabia). Around 610 AD, at forty years of age, he claimed he started seeing visions; from an angel. His alleged revelations—received over a period of twenty-two years—are known as the *Qur'an* ("the reciting"). His disciples wrote down what he recited to them since he could not read or write. They have been described as the "People of the Point" because they go back in history to a particular point where Muhammad received his revelations.

Muhammad lived in the center of a polytheistic society and rejected such pagan idolatry, believing there was only one god. The people of Mecca opposed his teachings and he was forced to flee, with a small following, to Medina in the summer of 622 AD. It is from here that Muslims date their history. Later, he returned to conquer Mecca, destroying all idols in the temple except for the Black Stone (*Kabah*). According to tradition, the shrine was originally

constructed by Adam, damaged by the flood in the days of Noah, and repaired by Abraham and Ishmael. It was sacred because they believed this was where Abraham was tempted to sacrifice Ishmael. Throughout history, Muslims continue to direct their prayers pointing toward Mecca and the *mehrab* on every mosque is positioned in the same direction. A dying Muslim is turned toward Mecca. Once deceased, the body is placed on its right side toward that location (Bickel, 2002, 105-106). Muhammad died in 632 AD but his disciples aggressively spread his teachings.

Islam spread like wildfire in the seventh century prompting the crusades from 1095-1291. This historical fact gives a glimpse into one of the reasons witnessing to Muslims is tedious. The Crusades remain a festering, open sore. It worsened relationships between Christians and Muslims which lingers through seven centuries. Hatred and hostility continue—ashamedly—from both sides. Although times of dialogue and debate eventually came, the rapport has always remained confrontational.

Unfortunately, the Christians were the earlier ones that resorted to militant aggression as illustrated in the quote that follows:

The crusades arose because Christians adopted the Islamic doctrine of jihad, that is, holy war, and moved it to the center of their universe....For many Muslims, the Crusades have never ended. For many Christians, they became the past that would haunt the future (73, 75).

John Azumah (2002) said:

The first key to an effective Christian witness in a Muslim context is for Christians to deal with our own unbelief and lack of conviction in the saving power of God and His word, as well as what I call the 'Jonah Mindset' in many Christians....What I call the 'Jonah Mindset' has to do with Jonah's confession in 4:1-3 that the real reason he was reluctant to go to Nineveh was because he suspected God would relent from sending calamity to the Assyrians. (13-14)

For Christians, loving those that hate them should be applied to those that follow Islam and deny Christianity (Luke 6:32-36).

Keith Swartley (2005) indicates that we all come equipped with a set of lenses through which we see the world. This is commonly referred to as "worldview." He writes:

We use these lenses to edit, interpret, and evaluate what we experience. Usually, we are unaware of our own cultural lenses, unless we encounter someone with a different set. To understand Islam, we need to look at the world through a different lens. (5)

June Hunt (2003) additionally posits:

If we want to share Christ with Muslims, we must learn more about the Muslim mind-set. The majority of us do not feel equipped to witness to followers of Islam because we have little knowledge of what they believe and why. And without this vital understanding, we will not be able to speak to their minds, much less their hearts. (11)

Successful ministry among Muslims is closely related to evading barriers and identifying bridges.

Islam is a works-related religion. To Muslims it is not merely a matter of what you believe that counts. It is more in what you do. They emphasize doing rather than believing. Good deeds in life should outweigh bad ones. Much emphasis is placed on right conduct, and Muslims have inflexible ideas of what is right and wrong.

The table that follows depicts the deep commitment, conviction, and consecration of those that sincerely follow Islam.

Pillars or Foundations of Islamic Faith

Pillar	Arabic Word	Explanation	In Christianity
Confession/Faith	<i>Shahada</i>	Confess publicly, "There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is the prophet of God." Making this declaration is the first step to becoming a Muslim. It is the first thing whispered into a baby's ears.	Deuteronomy 6:4
Prayer	<i>Salat</i>	Pray five times a day: shortly before sunrise, mid-morning, noon, mid-afternoon, and after sunset. The head is covered and the body pointed to Mecca. Recite prescribed prayers. On	Matthew 6:5-6

		Friday, it is routine for every Muslim to go to the mosque, usually at noon. Supposedly, Mohammad's first sermon was preached on Friday so it became the day of gathering and worship.	
Almsgiving	<i>Zakat</i>	Give 2.5 percent of one's wealth.	2 Corinthians 8:7; Matthew 6:-34
Fast	<i>Ramadan</i>	Fast one month from sunrise to sunset. From sunset to sunrise eat as one desires.	Matthew 6:16-18
Pilgrimage	<i>Hajj</i>	Expected from every Muslim, once in a lifetime, unless prevented by war, poverty, or other conditions. The <i>hajj</i> is a symbol of equality among all Muslims before Allah and of global unity. Once a year they forget their fragmented faith and "During the hajj, an astonishing diversity of Muslims join together in singular devotion—a breathtaking display of oneness that no other faith can match" (77).	Hebrews 12:1; 13-16

Garlow (2002) cites that there is an "unofficial" sixth pillar of Islam called *Jihad* ("struggle"). There is (a) *jihad* of the tongue (talking about Islam), (b) *jihad* of the hand (good works), (c) *jihad* of the heart (living the Islamic faith), and (d) *jihad* of the sword (defending Islam including violence) (44).

Evangelism Strategies in the Islamic World

Ashamedly, instead of Muslims being significantly evangelized, they are evangelizing. This is accomplished through political, social, educational, military, cultural, and theological endeavors. To them, Islam is more than merely a religion. It cannot be forced into a small

compartment. In fact, they assert Islam is not a religion, but a way of life. It permeates every facet of their lives. They use a corresponding holistic, mission's strategy pursuing any means possible to make converts and amplify influence.

Relational Evangelism. Muslims are likely most receptive to Christianity during the first few years in a new country. Many come as students and will return to their nations as leaders. Friendship evangelism is pivotal. Muslims tend to be very hospitable so hospitality counts a lot. It expresses true love and concern. As one opens his home and heart it pulls down barriers. Muslims are community-oriented and respect elders. The model of the family is important to them and speaks volumes. Conversion to Christianity usually comes with colossal consequences. It may cause a life-threatening circumstance and certainly means a break from the community and family. So, being adopted into a replacement community is paramount.

Muslims need to feel the love of Christ. This starts through friendship by showing kindness and compassion. Involve Muslim friends in the daily things one does and places one goes. Look for ways to incorporate them into one's shared life. Encourage them to teach you their culture. We can reach out through listening, loving, longsuffering and learning. Evangelism is not merely a one-time event. It is a process. Relationship-building takes times.

Dialogue. Discuss what Muslims and Christians have in common, or look for common grounds. Begin where they are. Know what a Muslim accepts and what he rejects. Avoid statements that divide. Progress is not achieved by openly condemning Islam, Muhammad, or the Qur'an. "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (2 Peter 3:15).

Prayer Evangelism. Let one's Muslim friend know he or she is being prayed for. "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14). Perhaps, even joining them in their prayers is possible. Calling the church to prayer will be effective to leading a revival among Muslims. Pray God will give the church a heart for Muslims and He will open the Muslim world to the gospel.

Prayer is effective in bringing down strongholds that stand in the way of the gospel....Missionaries can be refused visas or arrested, imprisoned and deported from Muslim countries...but nothing and no one can intercept or stop the Spirit of God from blowing wherever He pleases. (Azumah, 28-29)

Share your testimony: Each of us has a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. It is often said, “The man with an experience is never at the mercy of the man with an argument.” Rarely do people ever change because of coherent arguments. Transforming hearts is a spiritual matter birthed by the Holy Spirit and watered through the process of faithful, consistent love and witnessing. “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow” (1 Corinthians 3:6). One can quickly see the power in a personal testimony through the story of the woman at the well: “Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39).

Power Encounter. A pivotal key in reaching Muslims is share the truth and watch God work with accompanying signs and wonders. Muslims believe in the supernatural. Many times winning souls for Christ among animistic or folk Muslims comes down to which God can do the most and is strongest. This is the traditional: “The god who answers by fire—he is God” (1 Kings 18:24). Proclaiming the testimony of God (truth encounter) and demonstrating the power of God (power encounter) strengthens the evangelism encounter. “Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it” (Mark 16:20). The Holy Spirit is a powerful evangelist. Paul testified:

“When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with demonstration of the Spirit’s power....” (1 Corinthians 2:1, 4)

In the Scriptural sense “signs” may be a power encounter that points people to the one true God. “God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (Hebrews 2:4). They confirm God’s Word and have a way of shouting, “Hey! God is at work here! This is truth being preached to you!” Signs point primarily to the powerful, saving activity of God. “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:29-30).

Love (2000) in his book. *Muslims, Magic, and the Kingdom of God* explains that “the manifestation of the kingdom pointed to and corroborated the message of the kingdom.” He also mentions “Witnessing in Acts...includes both bold proclamation and supernatural demonstration. The two go hand-in-hand (2:43; 4:30, 33; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6; 14:1-7; 15:12)” (145).

“Because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

Lifestyle Evangelism. One should live out his faith alongside Muslims. It is important to live a consistent Christian life and avoid hypocrisy. The journey from mistrust to trust takes time. Confrontational evangelism and heavy duty apologetics are not normally appropriate evangelistic methods in this context.

Prepare others to evangelize. Vision and burden are contagious. Evangelistic opportunities and the desire to reach the Muslim world may increase if Bible schools and training institutions begin to teach concerning Islam at all levels of instruction. This raises awareness of the possibilities of evangelism among this large unreached group.

Living and Communicating in the Islamic World

To effectively witness to Muslims, one must understand and adapt to acceptable social norms. Gender differences are strong. Muslims are dominated by male role models, and interaction with groups such as the extended family. Use wise discretion when having a discussion with a Muslim of the opposite sex. Physical contact with the opposite gender is usually forbidden outside of engagement or marriage. Care must be taken to adhere to Islamic interpersonal relationships. One must learn to interact only with those of the same sex. One perplexing thing is that cultures change. These changes impact gender relations.

Most Muslim women cover their heads. Most American women do not. Christian women in Muslim countries need to be careful to wear modest clothes. Many Muslims are disgusted at the way westerners dress, even if they have lived in the West. Appearance and image are important. “Veiling was instituted as the means for freeing a Muslim woman to take part in public life, while remaining modest” (56). Modesty is considered to be a matter of dress and also of proper behavior. Of course, with conservative Christian believers, modesty and holy living are the norm, enabling us to be more readily accepted.

The quote that follows gives a little idea of how “infidels” are viewed:

Immoral, insensitive, irrelevant, selfish and dirty—these are just some of the ways Christians have been perceived by Muslims....Much of the failure of Westerners to grasp the underlying premises of Muslim culture results from our failure to understand and appreciate Muslim self-perception. (21)

By studying Islamic cultural practices we can circumvent offences, pull down barriers, and build bridges. Many Muslim countries restrict Christians entering as missionaries but allow people to come to work in various professions. Working in a Muslim community creates a witnessing opportunity.

Gigantic worldview differences prevent spiritual discussion and channels of communication from taking place. There is a clash of cultures. One must understand culture in order to have a grip on communication patterns and ways of relating. The more you understand of the culture and its worldview, the more one will be able to find common ground from which one can actively, and wisely witness.

Naturally, Muslims, as well as all of us, interpret communication according to cultural codes. Miscommunication is easy to occur. Learning to communicate verbally and non-verbally within a given culture is difficult. Communication can be restrained, formal, distant, and impersonal. Many cultures utilize metaphors and proverbs complicated for an outsider to understand.

Just because a Muslim speaks your language (in this author's case that is English) does not mean the receiver understands the message from the sender's perspective. We should identify with their background and worldview. Genuine communication is difficult among Muslims because they look at Christians with suspicion. As we live among them credibility increases as they see Christian character. This fosters trust. It takes time. Becoming experts in understanding the new culture increases credibility as well.

Sharing contexts using contextualization allows one to see things as they do and builds bridges:

Effective cross-cultural communication of necessity takes place within a given context. The apostle Paul was a master cross-cultural communicator, varying his message depending on the background of his audience. The gospel did not change; the way he presented it differed significantly. (279)

William Wagner (2004) identifies three diverse forms of encounters between Christianity and Islam. These are: (a) encounters between religious structures, (b) encounters over theology, and (c) spiritual and conversion encounters. The first two are addressed through the communication methods of dialogue and debate. Neither appears to be overly successful in winning Muslims to Christianity. The third tends to affect the common person. Wagner was surprised to discover that in all, but a few cases he surveyed, those converted had either a (a) a

vision of Jesus Christ, (b) a dream where Jesus came to them, or (c) they heard a voice of God or an angel telling them what they should do (151).

Touching a child on the head represents a sign of love in one culture. In many parts of the Muslim world it may be viewed as an attempt to put a curse on the child.

Caner (2002) explains that in discussing Christianity with a Muslim care should be taken in calling him “my brother.”

Offense at the term ‘brother’ is more than just a cultural issue, it is a theological one, for brotherhood assumes theological agreement in Muslim (and in some extent Christian) circles. One may call a Muslim ‘my friend,’ which is a positive social statement that does not assume agreement of philosophy or belief. (224)

Entering Islamic society surely brings emotional turmoil. One quickly realizes he/she is an outsider, part of the minority, foreigner, and alien detached from the home culture and also from the host culture as well. Missionaries feel pulled between two worlds: home and host. One is no longer part of the home culture, and finds it complex to be part of the new. Loneliness easily prevails. Individuals are perceived according to the group they belong to. Western missionaries come from individualistic cultures while many cultures of the world, including most Muslim cultures, are collectivist.

Culture shock is inevitable in any cross-cultural missionary incident. Adjusting to any culture can be a roller coaster experience. The highs and lows of the journey are maximized when ministering in Muslim cultures because the differences are so pronounced. Feelings of ignorance and insecurity are intensified. It is easy to feel different, detached, discouraged, and disengaged. Being well informed concerning the culture, its history and its customs, help alleviate these depressing feelings, enabling one to overcome doubts and fears. Additionally, they are trying reach and rescue people who really do not want to be reached and do not recognize they are lost. Often, it is easier for missionary men to adjust rather than missionary women. This is due to the restrictions and expectations placed on women.

Conclusion

Perseverance is paramount in ministry to Muslims. At times, it is stressful, lonely, and a daunting task. One needs to be anchored to the call and assured by the Spirit. It is important to remember that Christians, through the ages, have identified with, “And they admitted that they

were aliens and strangers on earth” (Hebrews 11:13). “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9). In the end, all the listening, learning, long-suffering and leading others to Christ will be worth it all. In the innumerable throng, there will be Muslims; many Muslims. That is ample reason to effectively and strategically prepare to evangelize the Islamic world.

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