

Christian conversations with Muslim women

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Christ's conversations with individual women showed that he respected and understood them as people and appreciated their different religious and social backgrounds. He was also deeply aware of their psychological needs. One could profitably study his conversations with the Samaritan woman in John 4 verses 1-12, with the woman taken in adultery in John 8 verses 1-11, with Mary and Martha in John 11, with his mother in John 19 verses 25-27, and with Mary Magdalene in the garden after his resurrection - John 20 verses 1-18. There are other examples in other gospels.

Christ's example and our own experiences should cause us to realize that there is no typical Muslim woman. For meaningful conversation we must have some understanding of the individual with whom we are talking. Let us assume that we are not referring to a once for all encounter but that on a basis of friendship two Christian and Muslim women are getting to know each other and to share at more and deeper levels. If we analyse these sorts of relationships we will come to see that somewhere along the line we must understand the religious, social and psychological situations of the person.

RELIGIOUS. Is the Muslim woman we know devoutly religious, practising her faith and its requirements? To which sect of Islam does she belong? Is she a Sunni, a Shia, an Ismaili, or a member of some other sub-sect? Is she a Sufi? If so, what group of Sufis is she associated with? What does she know about the Christian faith? Has she like some uneducated Saudi Arabian women only just discovered that all people are not Muslim? Has she had previous contact with Christians as a Pakistani living in a city like Lahore? Or although she has not yet met a Christian has she studied the Bible in connection with her studies, say, of English or German literature? this brings us on to the social question.

SOCIAL. Is she illiterate? Is she well-educated? If so, in what system? Is she an Algerian woman who has been exposed to French European culture or has she been taught in an Islamic school in her home town? Is she naturally intelligent? Has she learned to think for herself? Is she an Indian Muslim - or is she Turkish, Indonesian, Omani? What is her country and to what section of the community does she belong? What is the position of women in her country? Has she benefitted from the relative freedom for women in a country like Tunisia which was the earliest in its reforms or does she belong to a country like Saudi Arabia where the constitution is the Qur'an? Is she from rural areas or has she always lived in a city? What of her family set-up? Is she married? What is her age? All these are legitimate questions to be kept in the mind of the Christian communicator.

PSYCHOLOGICAL. Is our Muslim friend more concerned about her psychological fears than her intellectual questions, if any? Maybe she is worried whether or not her husband will divorce her or take a second wife, about the dangers of childbirth, about the evil-eye and the antagonistic forces of the spirit world. In Algeria marabomutism is forbidden by law but many women still go to religious leaders and seek help through ancient practices and superstitions. There is a considerable influence traceable to animism rather than Islam.

In a recent tour (spring 1977) of North Africa I talked with several Christian midwives about what they had learnt and seen about customs connect with childbirth, Encounter No. 32 gives a brief up to date account of "common practices observed by Muslims in different circumstances of their lives." This duplicated paper is one of a series of *Documents for Muslim-Christian Understanding* published monthly and obtainable from Piazza S. Apollinara, 49, 00186 -Roma 1. This particular number is entitled *Life Cycle of a Muslim*.

Briefly we have been able to see three of the complex factors which influence an individual. Even such a cursory study should make us aware that there are many kinds of Muslim women. Similarly there is not just one approach or method to be followed in conversation and discussion about the Christian gospel. There are many methods and approaches. Let us look at three - recitation and song, prayer and keywords.

RECITATION AND SONG. The word Qur'an means recitation. The Qur'an in Arabic is to be recited aloud or chanted or memorized. It is difficult for the Westerner with his emphasis on reading rather than listening to appreciate what the chanting of the Qur'an means to the devout Muslim. Words and sounds, classical Arabic recited by a gifted speaker may be more significant than an intellectual appreciation of the meaning. Let me give an example about the Central Asian nomads who had crossed into Pakistan at the end of last winter. Two of their women in need of medical treatment were admitted into a Christian hospital along with their families. One day the doctor heard them singing a song about the Gulf oil state of Qatar. The dialogue in the song went like this:

Husband: I am going to Qatar and I will bring you back lots of green, green notes.

Wife: Don't go there. You will have many troubles in Qatar. If God can provide daily bread for you there, why can't he continue to provide it here for us? Don't go to Qatar.

Apparently this Muslim family make up songs like this around their camp fire in the evenings. One woman asked the doctor to sing one of her songs. So she made up one in Pushtu about the parable of the wedding feast based on Luke 14. The excuses for not coming to the feast are ones her patients often use when they do not want to be admitted as in-patients. (The song was composed and sung originally by the Medical Mission Sisters in Pakistan).

This is an adapted version by the doctor mentioned above:

Chorus: I cannot come

to your feast to which I have been invited.

My buffaloes will not yield their milk to anyone else.

I have lots of little children at home and my house is isolated.

Therefore I beg to be excused - I cannot come.

1. There was a man who held a feast in his house.
He invited many people and sent a servant
To say to the people - the food is ready.
But at once they all began to make excuses.

I cannot come, etc.

2. When the master heard these things he became angry
And said to the servant - "Go to the Bazaar
And bring here the poor, lame, paralysed and blind,
My house must be absolutely full."

I cannot come, etc.

3. In this parable the Lord Jesus gives us a lesson
That when God calls, we should listen
And obey and accept whatever he says
So that we may obtain eternal life and salvation.

I cannot come, etc.

The women listened attentively and questioned and asked to have it written down so that they could sing it at home around the camp fire. So the doctor wrote it down and gave the booklet in which the episode is recorded - the Gospel of Luke. The second family asked for a song also. So the doctor wrote another song based on Matthew and gave the gospel and the written song. Both families used the songs and a literate member reads the gospels aloud. So through indigenous methods of communication the good news is spread.

PRAYER Prayer is a fairly natural human expression. Muslims are deliberate in their emphasis on regular prayers (salat) as well as on more impromptu or personal prayer (dua). In crisis or at special occasions a Muslim may request her Christian friend to pray for her. Several of the Christian midwives I know who find their Muslim patients nervous of the dangers of childbirth and fearful because of the superstitions and practices which are part of their culture request their nurses to pray. Sometimes the Christian midwife can talk along the following lines: "You are now the mother of a new baby. God has brought him (or her) safely into this world and has kept you safe too. Let us thank God for His love and goodness to you and for bringing this new life into your family. Jesus Christ the eternal Lord and Saviour of the world was born as a baby just like yours. His mother Mary experienced the pain of labour as you have, and rejoiced in the birth of her new baby as you have. Jesus Christ came into the world to save us from sin and to make us righteous before God. God has given physical life to you and your baby by the process of natural birth. He also wants to give you spiritual life by the process of spiritual birth which comes through faith in Jesus Christ." One suggested prayer for use at the birth of a child is: "O Creator God, we thank you that through your goodness this child has been safely born and that the mother has been freed from suffering. Now we beseech you that those to whom you have given physical life may also obtain eternal life through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

KEY WORDS. Christ used this method as we see in the story of his conversation with the Samaritan woman where the key word was water. Once I had a conversation in a

Punjabi village with a woman who enquired how many houses I owned. At first I said none but then she claimed that her extended family of clan owned two hundred houses. Then I told her my extended family owned more than that. She became really interested when I explained that houses were so secure that there was no danger of robbery and no need of repair. "In my father's house are many mansions." I offered to read about these houses and she listened carefully to John 14 verses 1-6. Other key words from daily life that I have used are amulets, burqa or the veil, and rain. There are many religious terms which can be used as points of contact, e.g., pilgrimage, fasting, creed. Such terms may lead to a more intellectual and theological discussion. Some Muslim women would benefit from such discussion. on the whole, women can talk with women and men with men in many Muslim society but sometimes couples can discuss with other couples.

In briefly touching on types of Muslim women and on just three methods of approaches I hope I have conveyed the idea that there is no standard woman and no one appointed method. All encounters between vital human beings are frontier situations in which we need to draw on all the Spiritual, educational, cultural and other experiences with which God has prepared us. Supremely after we have done our diligent preparation we rely on the Holy Spirit who alone leads us and any other into truth and into the truth who is Jesus the Lord.