

MUSLIM WOMEN AND HOW TO REACH THEM

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I WOMEN IN CHURCH AND MISSION

In this point in history it is especially important that the Christian Church should see the theological and practical bases for its attitude to the ministries of both men and women. In the Islamic world there is a rising tide of Muslim fundamentalism which bodes ill for the position of Muslim women in Islamic societies. Although some Muslim women actively support this movement and join in campaigning for the repeal of reform laws relating to the position and rights of women and children and to family life (eg the Family Laws Ordinance passed in Pakistan in 1961) they do not represent the majority of women at least as far as one can ascertain. The attraction of the Christian way of life to many Muslim women will depend in the next decades on:

1. Christian life-style and patterns of family life as lived out in Islamic communities.
2. The way in which churches in Muslim lands grapple with Christian theology in its application to the position and role of women in society, the church and home.
3. Whether evangelicals with their emphasis on Scripture are able to distinguish between the authority of Scripture and the supposed authority of their own evangelical faith built up over the last one hundred and fifty years. Can evangelicals bring their traditions to the bar of Scripture? Their failure to do this will not only mean that the church will fail to rectify its attitude to the role and ministry of women, thus setting evangelical tradition above Scripture, but it will detract from the attractiveness of the Christian faith to those born into Islamic communities.

Perhaps a few examples will help to clarify the issues.

Example 1 The Theological Seminary in Gujranwala, Pakistan, while it recognised the importance of some training for the wives of its students, never came to grips with the role and ministry of women in the whole church. In Pakistan there has never been a concern to look at the Christian family in the context of the nation, society and the church. The possibility of the Christian family being the most attractive challenge to Muslims to find greater freedom, fulfilment and renewal has not occurred to most western and national theological educators in Pakistan if one is to judge by their lack of initiative in this area.

Example 2 In one North African country the discipling of converts from Islam was done on a man-to-man and woman-to-woman basis, and one-sex cell groups were formed by Western missionaries. When the groups developed and came together as local churches, mainly through Western influence the men took over the leadership, and the active role and participation of women declined. The strongest influence seemed to be Western evangelical fundamentalism. There was little recognition that even within the North African Muslim society women were finding a more active role. The evangelical traditions of North American Christian culture were so strongly taught and practised that they inhibited both national and expatriate women believers. Scripture does teach that the husband is the head of the Christian family, but the exercise of authority in the church is based on spiritual gifts and calling, and not on sex.

Example 3 Phil Parshall in his book **New Paths to Muslim Evangelism: Evangelical Approaches to Contextualisation** (page 117) writes: “The family is a great asset to an evangelistic ministry among Muslims. It is the norm of Muslim society. All Muslim girls are married, most of them by age 16. The male is usually married no later than 30 years of age. Muslims really cannot understand the single lady missionary. They have no category or role for her in society. This makes life, in a practical sense, very difficult for single ladies in the Muslim land. It is my opinion that they can best find fulfilment in institutional outreaches rather than seeking to engage in traditional evangelistic roles. I have never witnessed directly to a Muslim lady. My wife has never shared Christ with a Muslim man. Our honouring the dictates of Muslim culture - that one must communicate only with members of the same sex - has been much appreciated.

Phill Parshall is naturally extremely influenced by his experience in Bangladesh, which he appears to have absolutised. In Pakistan the single Muslim woman is rare, but she does exist. Miss Jinnah, the sister of Muhammed Ali Jinnah the founder of Pakistan, was one of the two candidates nominated for the presidency in 1962. Miss Benazir Bhutto, daughter of the executed former prime minister of Pakistan, leads the political party started by her father, and attracts the support of millions in Pakistan if one is to judge from the size of her political rallies as she toured the country in 1987. There are also women religious leaders today, as well as in the past. A woman – Rabia – was one of the most famous early leading Sufi saints. The role of the single woman missionary with a gift for evangelism is very difficult, but to exclude her on the basis of cultural unsuitability is to make Muslim culture absolute and not to allow the newness of the Gospel to be seen creating a new society. As for a man never to share the Gospel with a woman, and vice versa, one wonders what to make of Christ speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well, and whether she should only have spoken to the women of her city concerning the Saviour of the world.

More serious than the fact that cultural patterns have encrusted our evangelization is the fact that evangelical tradition has become in some instances more authoritative than Scripture itself. Dr Kenneth Bailey, formerly of the Near East School of Theology, in a lecture in Beirut in 1981 delivered to a small group which met from time to time to discuss issues relating to the Church and Islam gave his distilled wisdom on this subject, and I am indebted to him for stimulating my thinking on this matter. He pleaded that the subject of the role of women in the New Testament is a very critical topic as the wave of fundamentalism in today’s Islam is bad news for Muslim women. He raised the question as to what will be the Christian stance in the light of this Muslim fundamentalism. The position of women is being discussed all over the world in Muslim and Christian circles.

Dr Bailey calls Christians to return to a study of the Bible on this subject. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches are looking again at their church traditions to see if they are in line with the Bible. Evangelical Protestants who have developed an evangelical tradition over the last one hundred and fifty years may need to face the issue of tradition versus the Bible also.

II MUSLIM WOMEN

So often a Muslim woman is not regarded as a **person**. She is the wife of Abdullah and the mother of Habib. Perhaps no-one ever calls her by her own name. Her standing in the extended family set-up is never secure. Her husband may divorce her and she may become someone of very little importance. Her only son Habib may die and her husband may take a second wife in the hopes of securing a male heir. Insecurity, fear of illness, death and rejection are her main concerns. For solace she may turn to the local shrine, to a so-called holy man or holy women for help in combating or preventing the ills of this life and the dread of the next. Her questions are probably not theological, but relate to her psychological needs. We need to try to put ourselves in her shoes in order to understand and reach her.

III HOW TO REACH MUSLIM WOMEN

In addition to speaking their language and understanding their customs we will reach Muslim women more effectively if we learn to think their way. Thinking their way generally means thinking in an Eastern way. We can continue thinking in our logical, Western way but we may not then be properly understood. We may fail to communicate the message we love best. One of my Pakistani friends, formerly principal of a university college, said “You Westerners, you leave nothing to the imagination!”. We naturally think and discuss in logical terms. We think it steps and straight lines, not in circles. Truth, however, can be communicated and apprehended not only by logic and concept, but by imagery, poetically and by suggestion. It may be important to leave logical argument and to present truth through parables, plays, proverbs, stories, poems and illustrations in the way that Christ often did.

a) **Parables**

It is not difficult to re-tell the Biblical parables in modern and Islamic dress. We need to prepare beforehand and to relate them for a Muslim rather than for a Jewish audience.

Martin Goldsmith has dealt in detail with the parable approach, so I will not illustrate it further except in making an overall syllabus for teaching. An Asian acquaintance of mine who works among Muslims in a predominately Muslim country drew up this series of parables that could be used with a Muslim enquirer up to his conversion – and beyond.

On sin

- i) The Pharisee and the Publican: Luke 18: 9-14
- ii) The rich fool (covetousness): Luke 12: 16-21
- iii) Ceremonial and real defilement: Matthew 15: 1-20

On God's love and our need to repent

- i) The lost sheep: Luke 15: 3-7
- ii) The lost coin: Luke 15: 8-110
- iii) The lost son: Luke 15: 11-32

On the judgement of God

- i) The draw-net: Matthew 13:47-50

- ii) The wheat and the tares: Matthew 13:24-30

On God's way for man's salvation

- i) The great supper – the garment of righteousness: Luke 14:16-24
- ii) The wicked tenants – God's provision of His Son: Luke 20: 9-18

On counting the cost of following Christ

- i) The hidden treasure: Matthew 13:44
- ii) The precious pearl: Matthew 13:45,46
- iii) The houses built on rock and on sand: Luke 6:48,49

On Christian living and stewardship

- i) The two debtors: Luke 7:41-43 (forgiving others)
- ii) The unmerciful servant: Matthew 18:23-25 (forgiveness)
- iii) The wise steward: Luke 12:42-48 (serving God)
- iv) The talents: Luke 19:11-27 (serving God)
- v) The good Samaritan: Luke 10:30-37 (love)
- vi) The new cloth and the old wine: Luke 5:36-39 (new perspectives in life)

b) Plays

Dr Kenneth Bailey in his book *The Cross and the Prodigal* includes a play on the parable of the prodigal son. A Christian youth group in Karachi, Pakistan, produced this play. During the practices several Muslim friends asked if they might join the cast. The discussion about acting and presentation and the very experience of taking on a part proved to be a very convincing way for these Muslims to understand and enter into the truths of this parable. Early in this century William Gairdner used plays in this way in Cairo. Maybe his casts were Christian, but his audience was mostly Muslim. *Joseph and his Brothers* was particularly convincing in presenting the Christian message. Unfortunately some other Christians in England queried his use of drama in evangelism and his presentations were limited and restricted.

c) Proverbs

So often, quoting an apt proverb makes a spiritual truth come alive. It illustrates in a minute way what may not be clear after ten minutes of logical presentation. The Urdu and Punjabi proverb that I most use is: "One fish makes the whole pond dirty". Such a proverb is helpful in explaining some of the effects of sin. Most Eastern languages are rich in proverbs. We can learn some of them from the people themselves by asking about them and listening for them. The Bible's book of Proverbs merits more study also. Let me give you a few more Punjabi examples. There are many proverbs about hypocrisy, for example: "The Qur'an under his arm and his eye on the bullock" (that is, to steal it). Another suggestive proverb is "Having seven hundred mice, the cat goes to Mecca". Another is "No theft, friendship or service takes place without a go-between."

d) Stories

It is wise to make a collection of stories to use in evangelism.

e) Poems

The Urdu radio programmes on Radio Seychelles (FEBA) based on the life of Jesus the Messiah include many Urdu poems as well as songs. We could make use of poetry much more than we do.

f) Songs

It is often possible to communicate in song what would be unacceptable in conversation. Some friends of mine were camping in a remote valley in the north of Pakistan, and had hired horses. The owner, who was a local leader, invited them to his home for a meal. My friends learned that the leader's father-in-law had recently been murdered. The wife tried to talk to the women about Christ's victory over death, but they were not keen to hear this message. Then God guided her to sing. She has a lovely voice, and gave the same message in song. They asked her to sing again. Then she asked if she might pray for them. They asked her questions about the song. Two days later, two men came to ask the husband to sing for them. The words were very important to them. Because of this singing, the couple were invited to another meeting in the leader's house at which about thirty people had collected. Later, the leader and his son sought out my friend for a chat, and he told his city brother to get in touch with them in the city. Sometimes the chanting of the Qur'an is rather like a type of singing.

g) Illustrations

We must use illustrations which come out of the culture of our Muslim friends and out of their everyday life. One personal example may help here. Some Pakistani village friends with whom I had been spending Christmas Day once put me on a local minibus. We were about eight miles from the city. The Volkswagen held about thirteen people but three seats were empty. Soon a farmer carrying a small bag got into the vehicle. The other passengers, who were also farmers, said "What have you got in your bag?". He said "Carrots." I said "I don't have carrots in my bag." Of course everyone wanted to know what was in my bag. After a suitable period of suspense I said I had booklets in my bag and then I passed them around. Several farmers read the tracts about the Lord Jesus Christ and one said "This is foreign seed. I said "Oh no, it is not foreign seed. It was first sown in Asia." Then I was asked how long I had lived in Pakistan and whether I preferred living in Pakistan or England. I said "When it is God's will for me to live in Pakistan, I like that best. When it is His will for me to live in England I like that, but neither Pakistan nor England is really my country. I am just a traveller, as we all are, and I am travelling towards another country." As Abraham demonstrated, we are "strangers and pilgrims on earth" (Hebrews 11: 13-16). From this illustration I could go on to explain more about the heavenly city and how one can get there safely. This way of thinking is not Western but it is meaningful to Easterners.

h) Points of contact

1. Amulets

Amulets or charms generally contain a paper on which is written a verse from the Qur'an. Christians sometimes declare that the wearing of an amulet is wrong and urge the person to take it off. Surely it would be better to enquire if the person thinks God prefers His word to be around our necks or in our hearts. We can then

share words of God which we have memorised and hidden in our hearts. Psalm 119:11

2. The wearing of the veil (burqa)

Women often ask why we do not wear the veil. One answer is to spiritualise the matter and to say “Yes, I wear a spiritual veil all the time.” Of course we have to give a full explanation. Isaiah 61:10 and Romans 13:14.

3. The creed

The Muslim who says so often “There is no God but God, and Mohammed is his apostle” will sometimes ask us about his creed and ours. John 17:3 is a useful summary of the Christian creed as it speaks of the One God, of Jesus His apostle or sent-one, and of knowing God.

4. Prayer

A discussion on prayer can lead us into an explanation of the Lord’s Prayer which so many Christians pray every day. Luke 11:2-4

5. Fasting

Especially during the fast of Ramadan, Muslims enquire from Christians about their beliefs and practices in regard to fasting. Isaiah 58 is a helpful passage to study and explain.

6. Almsgiving

The basis for Christian almsgiving and good works can be discussed. 2 Corinthians 9:15.

7. Pilgrimage

John 14:1-6 describe the pilgrim, the pilgrim city and the pilgrim way. Jesus is the way (practice), the truth (belief) and the life (experience).

8. Other words

It is not always religious words which are points of contact. During the summer of 1978 a Pakistani fellow-traveller on the back of a Landrover spoke of what Mr Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the former prime minister of Pakistan then in prison, had done to help the remote Northern regions of Pakistan in which we were travelling. He said that several people had volunteered to die in Bhutto’s place. I asked him if he had ever heard of a completely innocent man who long ago was allowed to die in the place of others. This led on to some account of the death of Christ for us.

i) Prayer with and for Muslims

Prayer is in no way a tool of evangelism. However, often in a crisis our Muslim friend will welcome our prayers and ask us or give permission for us to pray for her in the name of Jesus, in her presence. I have Muslim friends in Bahrain who call the whole extended family together for me to lead in prayer for them all each time I visit them. It is their request. The way we pray naturally in private or in church may not be very appropriate in such a setting. I suggest we should give more thought to what we actually pray for and the terminology we use. If our preparation is thorough the

praying will be natural. Once I asked each of my Indian Christian students to prepare a prayer for use in the home of a Muslim sick friend. The best prayer was as follows:

“O God, creator of the universe – You who created and now sustain all your creation with the word of Your power; we worship you. We remember how great you are and yet how loving You are. There is no-one like you. We remember too that you are closer to us than our jugular vein. You know all things, so we are assured that You know each of us – our sin and our sicknesses. We thank You that You are able to deal with our sinfulness and to heal our diseases. We remember the words that you spoke through Your Prophet Isaiah, that all we like sheep have gone astray but You have laid our sins upon Him, even Jesus; and by His being punished we are healed. Look with mercy on this my friend Fazal who is ill, and according to Your will and for Your glory heal him of his sickness and cleanse him from his sinful ways. We pray this in the name of Jesus the Messiah. Amen”

We need also to consider the postures we will adopt when we pray with Muslims. Will we use the standing position like Solomon when he dedicated the Temple (1 Kings 8:22), or we will bow our heads before the Lord like Abraham’s servant (Genesis 24:26)? Or will we follow the psalmist who calls us to kneel before the Lord, as well as to bow down (Psalm 95:6)? Ezra fell on his knees and spread out his hands to the Lord (Ezra 9:5). In the Garden of Gethsemane our Lord knelt in prayer (Luke 22:41). The Muslim, who pays so much attention to the positions of prayer, will watch us carefully, and we should not put him off by our casual attitudes, and our lack of reverence expressed through bodily movements or lack of them.

In conclusion, let it be said that to be effective communicators we have to understand our Muslim friends’ way of thinking. We have to enter into mind, heart, emotions, shoes. *“To the Jew I became as a Jew, in order to win the Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law – though not being myself under the law – that I might win those under the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.”* (1 Corinthians 9:20-22)

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