

## **Our Muslim Friends and Neighbours**

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Vivienne Stacey , August 1982

### Did you know that:

- every one person in six in the world is a Muslim, a follower of the religion of Islam?
- India has the largest minority of Muslims in any country? There are over 70 million Muslims in India.
- there are over 40 Muslim countries in the world - countries in which over half the population is Muslim?
- although there are 22 Arabic speaking Muslim countries, a large majority of Muslims are not Arabs but live in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia?
- Russia has an estimated Muslim population of about 45 million or about one fifth of its total population?
- Muslim nations possess over half of the oil reserves of the world?
- over 400,000 Arabs visit Bombay every year?
- despite the fact that over 1/6 of the world's population is Muslim, only 2% of Protestant missionaries work among Muslims?

### **Our attitudes to Muslims**

Most Christians have no Muslim friends and find it difficult to relate to their Muslim neighbours who often have different customs, values, habits, beliefs, and even a different language and culture. Christians often assume the Muslim to be resistant to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We find it hard to believe that a Muslim individual or family can come to know Christ. We should reflect not merely on our knowledge of facts as we have in the first paragraph but also on our attitudes.

In sharing the gospel with Muslims we may be like the little boy who was beating another little boy. When an adult intervened and inquired what the trouble was, the little boy explained: "I am beating him because he won't learn the verse 'God is love'." The little boy's theology was good but his method of communication and attitude was not the way to draw someone to know God and his love.

Our lack of Christian love for the Muslim is proved in India and in the rest of the world by the fact that the church has sent so few ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5 verse 20) to

Muslims. When a particular country does not consider another country very important it keeps a small embassy there. The Christian church has so often kept a small embassy in Muslim lands. Sometimes it has even broken off diplomatic relations by keeping no embassy or ambassador. For our lack of love and concern we have to repent.

### **Our lack of faith that God can change Muslims**

No one will deny that it is difficult for a Muslim to come to a personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Some Christians have so little faith in God that they do not think that He can convert Muslims today. Maybe we have to repent also of our lack of faith. The Muslim declares that God is great but the Christian too often doubts it. God forbid that we should doubt his power and ability to convert our Muslim friends and neighbours. Maybe there are more barriers created by us or to be overcome by us.

### **The barrier of vocabulary**

We assume that when we use the same words as the Muslim we both mean the same thing. This often is not so. Both Christians and Muslims use the word "salvation". It occurs in the glorious Qur'an in surah (chapter) 40 verse 44 as a noun. The verb "to save" comes many times. The Qur'anic meaning of both the noun and the verb is that the Muslim may be delivered from hell. "Salvation" has a meaning which relates only to the future and only to the negative, that is, to what one is saved from. The Biblical view of salvation includes the saving of the believer from hell but it also includes the positive blessing of everlasting fellowship with God in heaven. There is no doubt attached to his future because his salvation is based on Christ's redeeming sacrifice and his complete righteousness. The sins of the past are forgiven. The believer has entered into abundant life in Christ now. His future deliverance and blessing is also assured. The definition of salvation according to the Bible embraces the past and present as well as the future. The Qur'anic definition refers only to the future. Here is another example of the importance of understanding the definition of a word. The word "sin" in the Qur'an is a translation of three different Arabic words. One word occurs 5 times and has an ethical meaning. It indicates missing the mark or falling short of a standard. This word comes nearest to the Biblical idea of sin. The other two Arabic words for sin in the Qur'an occur 29 and 38

times respectively and refer to breaking of the ceremonial rules and failure to keep the legal requirements for almsgiving, prayer, fasting and pilgrimage. There is little idea in the Qur'an that man's sin is offensive to and grieves a holy God. Allah is not affected by man's sin.

### **Are we answering questions the Muslim is not asking?**

Another barrier that the Christian unknowingly may raise in his relationship with Muslims comes from assuming that the Muslim is asking the same question as the Christian. The Christian often assumes that the Muslim is asking how shall I be saved or find salvation. Then he proceeds to answer that question. In fact, Muslims believe that God has revealed his will in a book, the glorious Qur'an. Therefore the Muslim asks what are God's directions and rules so that I may follow them exactly and be accepted by him. The Christian believes that God has revealed himself in a person. Therefore he asks how can I be restored to fellowship with God through that person Jesus Christ. Both Muslims and Christians worship God. For the Muslim the Eternal Word of God the Qur'an is the key. For the Christian the Eternal Word of God, Jesus Christ, is the key. Somehow relying on the Holy Spirit and the convicting power of the written word, the holy Bible, the Christian has to pray about how to communicate with Muslims. Several conversations may be necessary starting not with the subjects of sin and salvation and the saviour but with the holiness of God, the purpose of man's creation, and how sin so seriously and terribly broke man's relationship with God so that it cannot be restored by knowing God's rules but only by knowing God's Saviour.

### **The intermingling of the gospel and culture**

Another barrier that Christians sometimes unknowingly erect and which makes it difficult for the Muslim to accept Christ is the confusion of gospel and culture. The gospel is sometimes overlaid by cultural ideas which the Christian preaches as part of the good news. The Christian may declare that a Muslim cannot come to true faith in Christ without declaring this in baptism. While the sacrament of baptism is an ideal to be aimed at it may not be the right time for the new believer to be baptized straightaway. Maybe he needs to live in his community confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and witnessing to him

before he takes the decisive step of baptism which might cut him off from his community and prevent his relatives and friends from seeing Christ living in him before their eyes. The great New Testament confession was "Jesus Christ is Lord." Baptism today is seen by many Muslim communities as the rejection of the Muslim community, culture as well as faith, and even as an unpatriotic act. While the Muslim who comes to know God through Christ will pray about baptism, God may guide him to delay it until his whole family comes to saving faith. Sometimes Christians are too rigid in what they demand from a new believer. One of my friends who left the Muslim faith said that in becoming a Christian he found that he had thrown off one yoke only to be saddled with another by Christians. We need great sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, to the salvation of new believers and to what new things God may be doing in our time.

### **Gospel breakthroughs among Muslims**

In several strongly Muslim countries I know groups of Muslims who have come to faith in Christ. Family units have been baptized and the church established. Dozens and in some cases hundreds have come into the kingdom of God. In one land during the ravages and danger of civil war the growth of the church increased a hundred fold. In another country in a part where there was no church over two hundred became believers and met for worship even though they were not baptized. As teenagers grew to adulthood Christian marriages were arranged and families baptized although for safety they had to move away. In yet another country a revived church was the springboard for evangelism which resulted in dozens of young Muslims coming to Christ.

### **Opportunities for Indian Christians**

It remains for me to ask my Indian brothers and sisters in Christ:

1. Are you praying for any Muslim by name? Are you praying for your Muslim neighbours? Are you praying for any Muslim country specifically? Are you praying for and encouraging the IEM in its work among Muslims?
2. Are you trying to get to know your Muslim neighbours in your city or town or village or college?

3. What are you doing and what is your church doing to increase the numbers of Christ's ambassadors to Muslims? Are you praying for relatives and friends working in the Gulf countries of Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia? God has given them a great opportunity to live, pray and worship among Muslims. There are more Christians in these areas today than at any other time in the whole history of the church. Encourage your friends and relatives to reach out in prayer and conversation. Maybe this is why God has dispersed so many Indian Christians in Muslim lands.

4. God is blessing Indian missions including IEM. Is He now asking us to pray to him for more labourers in the harvest field among Muslims in India and beyond?