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STRATEGY FOR REACHING MUSLIMS: *Foundational and Contentious Issues*

Anonymous Author

Muslims are among those who are unreached with the gospel, though they are not unreachable. The author, with a rich experience of reaching Muslims, lays down some foundational principles essential for Muslim evangelism, then proceeds to discuss some contentious issues. This is a thought provoking and insightful article on Muslim evangelism worthy of reflection.

Developing a strategy that enables Christians for Muslim evangelism in an area such as East Africa is an enormously complex undertaking. Cultural and sociological settings range from the sophisticated urbanite to the primitive nomad, the *buibui*-covered¹ Swahili woman with strong Arab connections to the teenage model competing in entertainment and show business, the highly intellectual academic or businessman to the humble slum dweller. There are no simple solutions, even less can we expect to find a standard strategy to reach all these peoples. Although specific details will vary greatly, there are however some foundational issues which we must consider first.²

Anonymous Author is a church planter among a Muslim unreached people group. He also trains church leaders in Muslim outreach. He holds a M.Th. from Dallas Theological Seminary.

¹ A black scarf covering the larger part of the face, generally worn by Arab women along the coast of Kenya.

² The importance of laying a solid foundation as a point of departure for strategic considerations cannot be stressed too much. Compare Nehls' heavy emphasis on strong foundations in *Premises and Principles of Muslim Evangelism*, where he devotes over 60 pages (10-79) to it.

SOME FOUNDATIONAL ISSUES

Research conducted recently has confirmed our concern for *the all-importance of right attitudes*. Muslim evangelism that is induced and nourished by fear of Islam or by a spirit of triumphalism is bound to produce negative results. Even an in-depth knowledge of Islamic teaching and practice may be (and too often is!) used in an aggressive and destructive way. Unless the Christian witness wholeheartedly seeks to understand a Muslim and to share 'the truth in love',³ this kind of Muslim evangelism will only produce 'bitter fruit'.

We recognise that the enormous diversity of Islamic settings will justify, yes, even demand, an equally *broad spectrum of ministry approaches*. In East Africa this is already being practised by many ministries working there. Mission to Muslims by individuals and local churches may provide yet a greater variety of approaches.⁴ I think this diversification is in principle a healthy cross-fertilising element as long as it does not infringe on work which is already being done.⁵

It is certainly crucial to develop *carefully tailored strategies to fit the African context*. Experimentation with new methods is a vital part of finding ones feet in a given situation. Yet I see the danger that lack of experience may mislead new workers to an uncritical copying of successful methods from other places and countries, or even from a different continent. This will unnecessarily limit or even damage the ministry. Gilchrist gives an example in regard to men witnessing to women. In contrast to

³ In reference to Ephesians 4:15 as quoted by Nehls, *A Practical and Tactical Approach*, 37.

⁴ Rev. Matheny from the Nairobi Lighthouse church gave a very inspiring report, using the cell group model in their congregation to reach out to Muslims (among others) in the 'most unthreatening environment', namely, the home.

⁵ Lamu island might serve as an example: An open air crusade conducted by some outside church may seriously hamper the long-term contacts built up by a residential Christian worker.

Parshall's experience in Bangladesh who never witnessed directly to a Muslim lady. Gilchrist clarifies that.

In South Africa, however,⁶ such restrictions hardly exist. Christian men may freely witness to Muslim women, whether single or married, and...most Muslim men have no objection to this once they realise the Christian has no other motive or objective than the propagation of his faith.⁷

Another decisive factor depends on *how effectively the evangelical congregations can be mobilised and equipped for the task*. Some ministries have duly acknowledged this and invest considerable resources into training while others are continuing to do their best, yet divorced from the church. I think this is very unfortunate. Even in work among rather hostile groups like the Somalis, missionaries should not underrate the enormous potential of lay people using their natural contacts at work in the neighbourhood. Some ministries such as 'People of God' and 'AIM-FARM' seem to have awakened to the crucial role of training believers within the churches, but how much more could be accomplished if this was pursued more vigorously and by a greater number of ministries to Muslims!⁸ Reasons for such reluctance to work closely with other Christians in a country like Kenya might lie in a strong denominational commitment that will not give the missionary the liberty to co-operate with Christians of another persuasion. It could also be rooted in a misguided ideal of the 'homogeneous unit approach'⁹ to church planting. It may encourage converts from minority ethnic groups to insist that they

⁶ From personal experience in Nairobi (and also my wife in regard to Muslim men) we can confirm this is quite accurate, at least in an urban setting.

⁷ John Gilchrist, *The Christian Witness to the Muslim* (Benoni: Jesus to the Muslims, 1988), 29.

⁸ I readily acknowledge that this is an uphill struggle and that at times workers may feel they are wasting their time on seeking to train the reluctant, or motivating a pastor. Even so, I believe there is no better way.

⁹ This refers to the 'homogeneous unit approach' widely promoted by Dr. Donald McGavran from Fuller Theological Seminary during the 70's.

are so different from other Christians of the country that planting ethnically separate Muslim convert churches seems to be the only way.¹⁰

It will also help us to *know which factors play a major role for conversions among Muslims to Christ*. John Miller, formerly based in Mombasa, observed in a survey among Muslim converts in five African countries in 1987.

- (1) We must be aware of the importance of our personal influence and maximise the exposure of our lives. Personal influence of foreign missionaries played a major part in the decision making of the converts.
- (2) Major emphasis in all our witness and preaching ought to be given to the fact that forgiveness of sins is available in Christ. The desire for forgiveness of sins was a moving factor in a majority of converts' lives.
- (3) Christian literature must be utilised to the full. This applies particularly to copies of the Gospels, but reading of other Christian literature, reading of the Old Testament, were all-important factors.
- (4) Preaching also has a place, in spite of our current emphasis on personal evangelism to the neglect of public preaching. Although Muslims are reluctant to respond publicly to mass evangelism, it is evident that many have listened to it and been affected by it, and eventually responded to it.
- (5) Muslims who are in the process of being educated and Muslims under age of thirty seem to be more open to consider the truth of the gospel than others.¹¹

I am also convinced¹² that the *methods employed must be contemporary and appropriate*. Too many Christians assume that

¹⁰ In order to avoid misunderstanding, let me clarify that I do not question the validity of outreach to specific groups or special fellowship meetings for Muslim converts. But I do not think we do them any service in encouraging separation from the Body of Christ in a place like Kenya which is offering such a wide choice of different churches.

¹¹ John Miller, 'Survey of converts from Islam through SIM-related ministry regarding factors that they consider influential in moving them towards response to the gospel'. Unpublished term paper. An Internship for Dr. John Gration, 1987.

the same old service style, the most ancient translation of the Bible or the same traditional methods will be the most attractive, effective and divinely authenticated ones. We may certainly learn from St. Paul's mission principles, his gospel presentation and spiritual commitment, but times have changed. Our fast-paced, ever changing world demands methods that are fresh and relevant.¹³

After having stated these convictions, let us reflect on some more contentious issues also.

SOME CONTENTIOUS ISSUES

It is not always easy to decide which methods and approaches will work well. Much of it depends on the timing, the setting and the right "dose" we are giving out to others. The prayerful, wise and watchful witness will find the right way. Some potential roadblocks should be considered:

Aggressive methods will invariably cause more harm than good. This seems to be an obvious statement, yet in practice many Christians defy its truth. The crusade mentality marks so much of the typical Christian approach either in public rallies or in the 'anti-*halaal* campaigns' where Christians have been known to collect signatures against the almost exclusive sale of '*halaal* meat'¹⁴ in shops and supermarkets. 'Dumping literature' in large quantities in predominantly Muslim areas has also shown counter-

¹² Along with the late Prof. George W. Peters, who beseeched his students during class lectures in Korntal in 1985: 'Whose missionary methods are we to use, St. Paul's or ours? -- Of course, ours!'

¹³ The International Bible Society of East Africa set an innovative example by publishing a bilingual New Testament in modern Swahili and Arabic language which is being well received especially among the younger generation.

¹⁴ Muslims are only permitted to enjoy meat that has been slaughtered in the typical Islamic way of draining all the blood through cutting the jugular vein. During the process they pronounce the '*bismillah*'. Many Christians feel they need to object to this as 'food sacrificed to an idol' (1 Cor 8).

productive results.¹⁵ The argument that “one soul saved is worth more than any other loss” fails to take into account the damage done to many unknown Muslims who were turned off from considering a gospel message through what they must perceive as an ‘act of indecency’.

Christ’s servants to Muslims need to gain clarity whether their task should also include to *stem the tide* of Islam. Are we to openly attack the Islamic system or take sides against an Islamic leader like Saddam Hussein, Khomeini or Yasser Arafat? From our historical reflections, both during the colonial era as well as recent events, it is quite clear that this would neither be wise nor necessary.¹⁶ We recognise, however, that we have an urgent responsibility to shield the members in our churches and congregations from Islamic deception by warning them with clarity and urgency what they forfeit by turning their back to Christ and embracing Islam.

Another issue for contention deserves consideration here: Why not *put all our resources into Muslim background believers* and enable them to reach their previous co-religionists? On the first sight a lot seems to speak for this: they know the culture, speak the language, and are acquainted with the religious content of their people, much better than any of us ever will.

There is, however, another side to it. This approach conveniently ignores that the former Muslim will be received with far more opposition, contempt and outright hatred than any other witness. After conversion it will usually take a long time before he can freely mix with his family and friends, let alone share the gospel with them. My concern goes a step further. This approach can become a cheap excuse for many a Christian to discharge

¹⁵ Parshall recalls a direct mailing campaign of Urdu New Testaments to all telephone subscribers in an Islamic country in Asia. Hundreds of these were refused and returned to the post office eventually ending up as waste paper ‘The Muslim could only shake his head in disbelief that such a desecration of Scripture could take place’. *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁶ Neither is the Christian witness obliged to justify every action of the state of Israel towards the Palestinians on the grounds that ‘they are God’s chosen people’.

himself of his responsibility and put it all into the court of the brother from an Islamic background. On the positive side, expatriate missionaries will do well to closely listen to Christians from a Muslim background, especially in the area of assisting Muslim seekers or young believers in their quest for following Christ. In several ministries former Muslims actually play an important supportive role.¹⁷

Our openness for experimentation needs to be kept in balance. Most of us are inclined to stick to acquired habits and continue in our familiar tracks.¹⁸ Missionaries are not exempted here. It has been said and not without reason, that 'missionaries are people who are willing to sacrifice everything, even their lives, but not their (ingrained, and at times, wrong) convictions'.¹⁹ Parshall in his 'trail-blazer book', *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* underscores the importance of the missionaries' readiness for change.

My conviction is that we as missionaries must open ourselves to criticism, both from friend and foe. We must be willing to re-evaluate what has come to be regarded as sacrosanct methodology. 'Change' must not be a dreaded word. Can the missionary to Islam be more effective? What is the Muslim's perception of the missionary? How can it be changed for the better?²⁰

He strongly advocates for experimentation in methodology 'to move away from techniques that have proved barren',²¹ 'to narrow the distance between Islam and Christianity',²² and 'to avoid frustration among young missionaries'.²³ Indeed, it would be

¹⁷ Interestingly, in Kenya very few former Muslims are in direct leadership positions in ministries to Muslims. This is different in Ghana, Nigeria and various francophone countries.

¹⁸ A German idiom puts it neatly, '*Der Mensch ist ein Gewohnheitstier*'.

¹⁹ Lecture given by Fred Nel, an alumnus of 'Haggai Advanced Leadership Training Institute' in Singapore.

²⁰ Phil Parshall, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 3rd printing, 98.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²² *Ibid.*, 147.

²³ *Ibid.*, 119.

foolish not to heed such advice, for as much as God is in the business of changing his servants to conform closer to his image, so our methods and approaches should also reflect that inner change to a large extent.

But there are important limitations to balance one's zeal for experimentation with a respect for one's colleagues, especially when working in a closely knit team. There is need for a thorough, sober reflection considering the long-term implications of a new method and a theological integrity to the nature of the gospel, especially in the area of contextualization.²⁴

Cultural sensitivity and contextualization have become the missionary watchwords of our day. Whereas many missionary prayer letters during the colonial era may have promoted an air of paternalism and nationalistic superiority over the 'primitive pagan people', the pendulum has now swung far towards the other side. Georges Houssney believes that,

This fear of tampering with culture is one of the most inhibiting factors in reaching Muslims. In an extreme case, a veteran missionary to a Muslim country adamantly told me that she would not give a Bible to a Muslim because it would offend him.²⁵

Suggestions to 'try by every possible way to become like Muslims' in order to 'present the gospel in religious and cultural forms that Muslims can identify with'²⁶ carry the potential danger of denying the power of the gospel. I am afraid that general statements like, 'missionaries should use certain passages from the Quran as a springboard for explaining the gospel'²⁷ carry the danger of neglecting a sensitive probing and understanding where the Muslim inquirer stands.

²⁴ This is not to say that Parshall would disagree with any of these concerns.

²⁵ Georges Houssney, 'Methodological Roadblocks' in *Reach Out*, Vol. 8, No. 2 & 3, 1996, 12.

²⁶ John Mark Terry, 'Approaches to the Evangelisation of Muslims', *EMQ*, April 1996, 172.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

The question of *confrontation and dialogue* is the last one we will consider. My impression is that convictions in this matter are primarily affected by personality and personal experiences, rather than by doctrinal positions, probably more than some of us would like to admit. I would also hasten to add that interpretations of these terms differ widely, so it is always good to listen to the other's definition of terms before passing judgement. If dialogue means 'a sincere effort...to achieve mutual understanding...and to promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values',²⁸ hardly anyone would object. But where it is translated into public prayers jointly performed by the leading representatives of the respective religious community, it is bound to lead to much confusion or frustration among ordinary church members and will prove counterproductive to an effective evangelistic witness. Interestingly, even Muslims, like Dr. Kateregga feel that dialogue certainly works for the advantage of the Muslim side, since 'in most cases, Christians who participate in dialogue have, at best, only half-baked ideas about Islam, normally derived from the Orientalist sources'.²⁹ One wonders whether a straightforward grass-root level approach like a small mobile Christian book-shop used at a ferry, as done in Mombasa a few years ago, might not produce better results.³⁰

²⁸ Declaration *Nostra Aetate* on relations between the Church and non-Christian religions, chapter 3 from Jacques Jomier, *How to Understand Islam* (London: SCM Press, 1989), 132.

²⁹ Badru Kateregga, 'The Islamic Da'wah – How to carry it to Christians', *Al Islam*, June 1983, 20.

³⁰ For a practical example of this approach, see Gary Robert Morgan, *Unreached, but not Unreachable*, 45.