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## WITNESSING TO MUSLIMS PART THREE

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In previous installments of this series, we noted that Islam is divided into many sects, the two major ones being the Sunnis and the Shias. The original split between the latter two was over the question of who should succeed Muhammad as leader of the community. The Shias felt the leader should come from Muhammad's family; the Sunnis thought he should be someone of noted piety elected by and from Muhammad's closest companions. The Sunnis won with the first three successors; then the Shias, or party of Ali, assumed the leadership. But Ali was martyred, as were his only two sons (more on this shortly).

Down through the centuries, the Shias usually lost out in these power struggles. This led to their taking on the nature of a protest movement against the corrupt Sunni leaders. Inevitably, to justify their separate minority identity, they developed theological doctrines that radically differed from those of the Sunnis on at least two major points: the idea of martyrdom and the idea of divine light indwelling their leaders. Both these beliefs open up Shias to Christian witness in a way not possible among the Sunnis.

Martyrdom for the cause of the people is memorialized in the Shia calendar year during their lunar month of Muharram. Of the three martyrs mentioned above — Ali (Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law) and Ali's two sons, Hasan and Husayn (Muhammad's grandsons) — that of Husayn is celebrated annually. The first ten days of the month of Muharram are dedicated to "passion plays" that retell the story of Husayn's betrayal and courageous stand, facing overwhelming odds, against the ruling house of Mecca (the Umayyids). On the tenth day, it is common for parades of self-flagellating men to beat themselves until the blood flows, lamenting the failure of the people to come to the defense of their beloved leader.

This brings us to the key point: Shias believe that the shed blood of their slain leader atones for their sins. They accept the concept of atonement — an idea totally unacceptable to the Sunnis. Of all the approaches I've seen Christians use in witnessing to the Shias, the most effective is through films depicting the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. (By the way, unlike Sunnis, Shias accept art forms depicting human beings, and practice drama.) I have seen them weep profusely while viewing such films. Afterwards, it is easy to speak to them of the deep spiritual meaning of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

Anyway, with or without the use of a film, asking a Shia to talk to you about the martyrdom of Husayn naturally opens the door for the Christian to then bring into the conversation the atoning death of Jesus on the cross. The points to emphasize are the overwhelming odds against Jesus during His arrest and trial, the significance of the shed blood of Christ in atoning for the sins of the people, Christ's victory over death, and His promise of eternal life to those who believe in Him.

The second major point of contact has to do with the idea of "divine light" indwelling Muhammad, Ali, Husayn, the early "Imams," and currently, the present leading Ayatullah, whoever that may be. Before proceeding, let me explain the two technical words above. In Sunni Islam, an Imam is a leader of the prayers at the mosque. It could be anyone. In Shia Islam, the Imam is a big word. It refers to the succession of the spiritual leaders of the community. Depending on which branch of Shia Islam one is talking about, that line of succession terminated with the disappearance of either the fifth, the seventh, or the twelfth Imam. These lines came to an end centuries ago. Each was supposedly indwelt by divine light.

This light was then passed on to a lesser order of clerics called "Ayatullahs." This word means "Sign or Miracle of God." The late Ayatullah Khomeini was the most famous such Ayatullah of our day. His successor at the moment is named Khomeini.

For the Christian witness, this idea of divine light is the bridging point with Shias. It was Jesus who first said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). Behind this is the idea of pure light coming through a sinless servant of God. The problem for Shias is that they are forced by their own set of assumptions to attribute sinlessness to their present-day Ayatullahs. But not even Muhammad claimed this attribute for himself.

The Qur'an exhorts Muhammad (and others, too) to seek forgiveness of his sins (Q. 40:55; 42:5; 47:19). The universality of sin is mentioned in Qur'an 16:61. The Qur'an also says that whatever misfortune happens to a Muslim happens because of his sin (Q. 42:30). It further says that even when victory comes it occurs so that God may forgive one's sins (Q. 48:1, 2). From these verses, one can demonstrate that no one is sinless or capable of being the "Light of the World." The big exception, of course, is Jesus. Even in the Qur'an, we read that he is "among the righteous ones," that is, sinless (Q. 3:46).

Moving from these Qur'anic passages, the Christian witness should then be able to show to the Muslim that Jesus is "the holy Son of God" (Matt. 1:20, 21; Luke 1:32); that He was indeed sinless (2 Cor. 5:21); that in Jesus is true spiritual life and this life is the true light of men (John 1:4); and, finally, that Jesus Himself claimed to be the Light of the world (John 8:12) and it is in His light that we see light (John 1:9).

— *Don McCurry*