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## **“BE ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE”: SURMOUNTING CULTURAL BARRIERS IN PRESENTING THE GOSPEL TO MUSLIMS**

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My university friends were generally atheist or agnostic. They asked me why I trusted the Bible when it was obviously manmade, how there could be a Creator when evolution was proved by science, why sex should be kept within marriage when we should do what we feel, and so on. Their questions were sometimes asked to annoy me, but they were often genuine and so pushed me back to the Bible for answers. In so doing, my faith was built as God showed me answers in His Word. It helped to root my convictions in the Bible.

Muslim friends also ask questions, but they are usually a little different. My Muslim friends still want to know about the Bible’s trustworthiness, but they agree with me about there being a Creator and that sex should be within marriage. As Ida Glaser points out, if Muslim people read the Bible, they are likely to approach it “with interests that are not on the agenda of most [Western] Christians.” Glaser then gives examples, such as from Acts, where Muslim people might be more interested in the development of the food laws than the preaching of the gospel. She also notes how an Islamic emphasis on social justice “may lead to Muslims being much more interested in how Christians put Jesus’ teaching on wealth and poverty into practice than in how they understand justification by faith.”<sup>1</sup>

Such perspectives and concerns can drive us back to our Book to check whether we have understood it properly. Muslim people’s questions, just like atheists’, can build our faith as we search the Scriptures for answers. Personally, I have seen that the Bible does equip us for life, godliness, and even the good work of talking to Muslim people about the gospel (see 2 Tim. 3:16 and 2 Pet. 1:3–8).

### **MUSLIM PEOPLE’S QUESTIONS**

Generally, our Muslim friends’ questions can be divided into two broad groups: theological and cultural.<sup>2</sup> In terms of theology, most Muslim people have these big four theological objections concerning the Christian message:

1. God is one, not three (against the Trinity).
2. God is too great to become a human (against the Incarnation).
3. God is eternal, so cannot die (against the atonement).
4. The Bible cannot be trusted (against our foundations).

These clearly go to the heart of our faith and so we should have biblical answers to them if we are to carry on being Christians, let alone sharing our faith with Muslim people.

While cultural questions tend not to seem as central to our faith, they need to be answered just as much. These questions often arise from misunderstandings about our behavior—behavior that can be a barrier to Muslim people hearing the gospel.

Also, our Muslim friends need to see how our faith works in practice. However, because these things are often “just what we do,” it can be hard to give distinctively Christian answers. Consequently, our Muslim friends can think that we are not wholehearted in our faith and will not want to hear us talk about Jesus the Messiah.<sup>3</sup>

What kind of questions am I thinking of? Here are some I have been asked in London:

- “Where do Easter bunnies come from? Are they in the Bible?”
- “Why do you have decorated trees in your house at Christmas? Aren’t they pagan?”
- “Why, when we have so much in common, do you eat pork?”
- “Why, when your wife is respectable and modest, doesn’t she cover her head?”

Currently, we are in South Asia. We are trying to learn one of the languages spoken by many Muslim people in London. As we aim to put 1 Corinthians 8–10 into practice here, my wife is wearing culturally appropriate clothing, which now includes covering her head. Now, we are asked, “Are you Muslim?”

### **A FEW WORDS ON THE BIBLE AND CULTURE**

This is not the place to give even a summarized overview of Christians’ relationship with culture. However, it is probably helpful to outline where I am coming from.<sup>4</sup>

I think that the Bible affirms the idea of “doing” culture (Gen. 1:26–30; 4:20–22; and 9:1–7), yet also warns us of following ungodly culture (Eph. 4:17–5:20; James 1:27; and 4:4–10). Therefore, like the exiles in Jeremiah 29 and 1 Peter, we are to get busy living in our cities, towns, and villages, seeking to serve our Lord in our work and to bring His good news to people around us, while not worshipping the idols of Babylon. We should neither entirely withdraw from our cultures, as some people seemed to be doing in 1 Timothy, nor should we completely embrace our cultures, as some seemed to be doing in 1 Corinthians. Within these parameters, I am free.

As a follower of Jesus the Messiah, I am free to eat all kinds of food or just locusts and honey. I am free to give Christmas presents or to treat Christmas Day the same as any other day. My wife is free to wear a veil or to have uncovered hair. She is free to

serve a meal to friends without eating it herself or to sit down and join in the meal and its conversation.<sup>5</sup> For my Muslim friends, this seems rather odd, if not contrary. “How could this be following God? You Christians just do what you like” is often in their minds.

The principles behind such differences can be seen very clearly in 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1. Just as God the Son became a human to reach humans, so the apostle Paul becomes a Jew to reach Jews and a Gentile to reach Gentiles. We are to do likewise. We aim to flee from our cultures’ various idols while embracing what is good in a culture (or, at least, not against God’s Word) so that there are fewer barriers to other people hearing the gospel. We do this so that God might be glorified and some might be saved. Yet, Muslim people often cannot understand this and may view our behavior as God-denying. To see this more clearly, let’s take the example of democracy.<sup>6</sup>

### **DEMOCRACY: A MISUNDERSTOOD FREEDOM?**

For people brought up in the West, including Christians, democracy is an important ideal. It is the development of hundreds of years of political thought and practice. It aims to recognize individuals’ right to choose who governs them. It is linked to an individual person’s freedom and a desire not to be coerced by others. While some of these principles can be gained from the Bible, it is difficult to say, in all honesty, that democracy is mandated or explicitly taught in Scripture.

A few years ago, the night before voting in UK local government elections, numerous stickers and posters appeared in my area. These had slogans such as “Vote today, hellfire tomorrow.” They were put up by a Muslim group attempting to dissuade Muslim people from voting (even as the local mosque was promoting good citizenship through voting). While this particular group is seen as marginal, I have talked about these kinds of slogans with Muslim friends and many would agree with them, even if they would not agree with the rest of that particular group’s methods.

Basing their thinking on people such as Sayyid Qutb,<sup>7</sup> they argue that voting and democracy is wrong because it is humanity deciding who should rule them. Instead, we should sit under the authority of the Qur’an and the Hadith as the sources that tell us how humanity should be ruled. Their version of government would be something like the Islamic caliphate, which ended when the Ottoman Empire crumbled after World War I. My Muslim friends who think this way are children of first-generation immigrants to London. Their parents probably chose the UK because of its freedoms, but these children now see such freedoms as immoral because it is humanity trying to be free from God. It is also not what Muhammad taught in seventh-century Arabia.

For most Muslim people, Muhammad is the example they are to follow:

*Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the Praise of Allah. (Qur’an, Surah 33:21).*

*Say: "If ye do love Allah, Follow me: Allah will love you and forgive you your sins: For Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." Say: "Obey Allah and His Messenger. But if they turn back, Allah loveth not those who reject Faith." (Qur'an, Surah 3:31–32).<sup>8</sup>*

Taking Islam as a system of thought, it is understandable that Muhammad should be viewed like this. He was thought to have brought a message from Allah their creator and so it makes sense to them for this messenger to be revered. It makes sense for him to be seen as some kind of authority in how to live out that message.<sup>9</sup> However, it is not just how Muhammad acted or thought in regard to God and theology, but it is his whole life (including his appearance, family relations, means of organizing society, and so on) that is to be a Muslim's pattern.

As a result of this, many of my Muslim friends, for example, wear the same Arab-style clothes that they think Muhammad wore and have the same beard he had.<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that all Muslim people do this, but that some of those who are seeking to be more sincere in their religion do appear to reject other culturally based appearances. I have been to a number of Islamic talks where the speaker has challenged the male Muslims there to follow in Muhammad's footsteps by dressing like him and having a beard like him.<sup>11</sup> While Christians are urged to be like Christ, we are to have His internal attitude toward others in loving them and outwardly serving them, rather than being concerned with being like the Messiah in outward physical appearance (Mark 10:35–45; John 13:34; 1 Cor. 10:31–11:1; and Phil. 2:5–11).

This would seem to have gotten off the topic of democracy, but the same thinking is at work. Muhammad did not espouse democracy. The book that he claimed to have brought from Allah did not espouse democracy. Therefore, Muslim people should not be involved in democracy. Instead, Muslim people should be involved in promoting the same kind of seventh-century Islamic state that Muhammad led.

### **DEMOCRACY: LESS IMPORTANT THAN THE GOSPEL?**

It is fair to say that many Muslim people are not against democracy. However, my impression in London is that the view outlined above is pretty strong. More importantly, how, as Western Christians who probably enjoy our democratic rights, should we respond to this critique as we head off to the voting booth? What should we say when we are asked by Muslim friends about democracy? This might seem an odd question to think about, but my experience from London has been that such conversations can both hinder and open up conversations about the gospel.

In an attempt to put 1 Corinthians 8–10 into practice, I might try to do the following:

1. Find out why a Muslim friend is asking the question. If we do not understand the reason he is asking the question, we can talk past him and not address his issue properly.
2. Affirm that God is sovereign over all of our lives and that we should humbly live before Him.

3. Talk about how the Bible teaches Christians to behave regarding governments (in Romans 13) and that God has instituted authorities in the family, church, workplace, and wider society to which we should submit.
4. Explain how the Bible does not mandate a particular form of government but that God is over all authorities. Therefore, it is permissible for Christians to vote, just as it was permissible for Daniel to serve King Nebuchadnezzar. Neither serving in a democracy nor serving a dictator is necessarily God-denying.
5. Explain, too, that all governors and their subjects will be accountable to Jesus the Messiah when He returns. Governors will have to answer for their rule and we will have to answer for our submission.
6. . Go to Genesis 3 to show how all people want to be independent of God and to decide how they run their lives without listening to their loving Creator—in effect, to be like God, as the serpent says. Therefore, democracy or any other system of government is not the issue—our hearts are.
7. This kind of conversation will probably lead to various questions about how one relates to unjust governments and whether the Bible is a practical guide for life. Therefore I would conclude by going to 1 Peter 2:9–25: the Bible does want us to live good lives among ungodly cultures and to live like Jesus the Messiah, who gave us an example to follow in relating to unjust governments and died so that our sin of wanting to be independent from God might be forgiven.

You will probably notice what I haven't done. I have neither defended democracy nor attacked certain Islamic states. This is not because I think that the Bible has no principles that might lead to democracy or that Islamic states are beyond reproach. Rather, the point here is how I can help my Muslim friend to understand something about Jesus the Messiah, instead of discussing (or usually arguing about) different political systems.

If justifying democracy puts up another cultural barrier to a Muslim friend hearing the gospel, then I should become “like one not having democracy so as to win those not having democracy...not causing anyone to stumble by promoting democracy, whether Jews, Muslims, or the church of God” (1 Cor. 9:21 and 10:32, slightly reworded!). For Western Christians, this can be hard to swallow. We do, after all, value our freedoms, but there may be times when we hold to such rights more tightly than we should. In so doing, we can put off some Muslim people from hearing about Jesus.

### **WHAT ELSE MIGHT WESTERN CHRISTIANS DO DIFFERENTLY?**

While much of Western culture does spring from Christian roots, these roots are often hidden or long dug up, and so we cannot hold too tightly to the “way we do things here” if they are not specifically mandated by Scripture. We must help our Muslim friends see the distinction between Western culture and Christianity so that they can begin to hear that the gospel is for people like them. If Muslim people see drunkenness or sexual immorality in the West (it happens in the East, too, but it is generally more hidden), and they see Christians drinking alcohol or wearing beach clothing, it is not so

surprising that they assume that Christians are drunken and immoral, too. We do need to show how Christianity ≠ Western and our behavior may need to change.

On the other hand, we will probably need gently to help our Muslim friends see why we do not follow many of the outward practices of Islam. Some of these practices have the appearance of wisdom, yet are not wise or godly (see Col. 2:20–23). But, as Richard Shumack asks, how can we be holy in front of Muslim people when their understanding of holiness is so different? The answer is by being like Jesus the Messiah (which is how the apostle Paul ends his culture and freedom section in 1 Corinthians 11:1).

Shumack goes on: “I want to be seen as someone who values love and service over rules, but I also want to be seen as someone who sets profoundly high moral standards...be holy by Jesus’ grace standards, not Islam’s sharia standards.”<sup>12</sup> That is no easy task, but neither is it easy for a Muslim to turn to Christ. Both of us need the Holy Spirit to be at work. Wonderfully, we have a loving Father who delights to answer His people’s prayers for us to be godly and for our Muslim friends to be saved; not least because His Son died for all kinds of people—even believers who get too wrapped up in their Western culture and Muslim people who previously thought that Jesus was a mere prophet.

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## NOTES

- 1 Ida Glaser, “Qur’anic Challenges for the Bible Reader,” in “But My Words Will Never Pass Away”: *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, 2 vols., ed. D. A. Carson et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).
- 2 While all of life (including culture) can be subsumed under theology because everything should be understood in relation to our knowledge of God, this distinction can still be helpful. “Culture” is a very slippery word, but I am defining it as “things that we do or value that make a community work, but that vary between different communities (and that may or may not have a foundation in a Christian worldview).”
- 3 When talking with Muslim people, it is good to give Jesus His full title. This helps our Muslim friends to see that we honor him. I usually say “Messiah” rather than “Christ” as this is what the Qur’an calls Him. It also means that I can then ask my friends whether they know what “Messiah” means. This, in turn, gives me the opportunity to explain something of His identity and mission.
- 4 I have found D. A. Carson’s *Christ and Culture Revisited* (IVP, 2008) and Tim Keller’s sermon, “The Meaning of the City,” <http://sermons2.redeemer.com/sermons/meaning-city>, most helpful recently.
- 5 Among the South Asian people we are trying to reach, the standard way of showing hospitality is for the wife to wait on guests, serving food, and making sure everyone is well-fed, rather than actually joining in the meal.
- 6 I am defining democracy very loosely as “citizens of a country choosing their government by means of a vote between different options.”
- 7 To find out more about Sayyid Qutb see Charles Strohmmer, “Submit or Die: The Geostrategic Jihad of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda” (two parts), *Christian Research Journal* 29, 4 (2006) and 29, 5 (2006), accessible at <http://www.equip.org/articles/submit-or-die-the-geostrategic-jihad-of-osama-bin-laden-and-al-qaeda-part-one/> and <http://www.equip.org/articles/submit-or-die-the-geostrategic-jihad-of-osama-bin-laden-and-al-qaeda-part->

two/.

- 8 Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation of the Qur'an. There is no standardized verse numbering, so a different translation may have slightly different numbers for these verses, although they can usually be found close by.
- 9 Whether or not they should revere Muhammad in this way is an interesting conversation to have with a Muslim friend. A very short but extremely helpful article on this can be found at <http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/2012/01/a-common-word/>.
- 10 See for example <http://www.islam.tc/beard/beard.html> for a northodox website on beards.
- 11 One of those speakers was a U.S. convert to Islam, Yusuf Estes. Find out more about him at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yusuf\\_Estes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yusuf_Estes).
- 12 Richard Shumack, *Latimer Briefing 9: Witnessing to Western Muslims: A Worldview Approach to Sharing Faith* (London: The Latimer Trust, 2011), 39-40.