

Who is a Muslim and

Why Communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to him?

That's an easy one: a Muslim is "one who submits to the will of Allah" and he needs the Gospel because he can only come to the living God through Jesus Christ. Probably we all got it right, scored our points and can move on to the next question. Not so quick, please! There is far more to it than giving a textbook definition. How about this definition from one of our friends:

A Muslim is a spiritually dissatisfied person who struggles with ineffective means to find favour in the eyes of his non-understanding god to attain to something that he is unable to be.¹

I think that this is an exceptionally perceptive definition, obviously taken from a Christ- and Bible-centred viewpoint. You may reflect on this in your discussions later.

But we also need to ask: How do most Christians around us feel about Muslims? How do we relate to the Muslims we come across? And what do Muslims say about themselves? Furthermore what influences, beliefs and practices mould the life of a Muslim and how does his religion "Islam" affect him?

First, I would like to speak for my Muslim friends. As a follower of Jesus Christ you might assume that "a Muslim is a follower of Muhammad". Why not call him a Mohammedan then? Please don't hurt his feelings. These days Muslims don't like to be called "**Mohammadans**". Listen:

Muslims have often been called Mohammadans, a term which is abhorred by intelligent Muslims... It is wrong and misleading to give such a meaning to the followers of Islam. The Religion Prophet Muhammad preached was from Allah, referred to in the Holy Qur'an as Al-Islam, meaning The Submission. Chapter 5, verse 4 of the Holy Qur'an declares: ' This day have I perfected your Religion for you, completed my favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.'²

Of course, the fact remains that any true Muslim also needs to observe the example set by Muhammad to every minute detail. The Muslim creed testifies to the amazing union between "Allah and his messenger."³ But I trust none of us wants to hurt the feelings of any Muslim by calling him wrong names.

Secondly it is only fair to take note of **their own description of their faith**, before we judge from our perspective. The challenge of Islam is that "*Whoever desires a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him, and in the hereafter he shall be one of the losers.*" (Qur'an 3:85)

Furthermore Muslims claim that Islam is

- The last and final religion
- The natural religion of mankind
- More than a religion – a way of life, a complete code for human behaviour
- The shortest and broadest road that leads to God.

Another Islamic leader from Egypt, Hassan al-Banna, founder of the influential Muslim Brotherhood movement, drew the lines for a true Muslim considerably narrower. He claimed: "The only true Muslim is one who denies himself, overcomes his inner hesitation and is willing to kill the enemies of Islam."

¹ Yohannes Tesfamichael, LCA Partners Consultation, 1995.

² Editorial, reproduced from "Muslim News".

³ "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah."

From the Indian sub-continent comes another, much more gentle voice in the renowned Pakistani idealist Abu A'la Mawdudi. In his collections of 29 Friday sermons published under the revivalist title *Let us be Muslims* he differentiates “two kinds of Muslims”, namely the “partial” and the “true” Muslims:

Some Muslims profess faith in God and the Messenger and declare Islam as their religion; but then they confine this Islam to only a part of their lives. They are very particular in conforming to outward piety in matters of food, dress and other external social and cultural customs. Thus they are fully religious.

The second kind of Muslims are those who completely merge their personalities and existence into Islam... Their feelings, their desires, their ideologies, their thoughts and opinions, their likes and dislikes, all are shaped by Islam. Allah's guidance holds complete sway over their hearts and minds, their eyes and ears, their bellies, their sexual desires, their hands and feet, their bodies and souls... Neither their loves nor their hatreds are formed independently of Islamic criteria... Their collectivity exists for Islam alone; their collective behaviour is governed by the precepts of Islam alone.⁴

Of course, ideals in “Pakistan” (literally “the land of the pure”) have always been very high since the creation of this Islamic model country – or that's at least what its designers had hoped it to be. Unfortunately people are not being changed by noble intentions. Most would confess that there still remains so much that desperately needs change.

In our **modern world Muslims** are influenced and attracted by numerous forces that will affect them to a greater or lesser degree. There is what we might term Original Islam based on the teaching of their holy book, the *Qur'an* along with the elaborate model description of Muhammad's life as collected in the six most trustworthy *Hadith*, collections which mark the narrow path about “Do's and Don'ts” for a Muslim. This is refined and complemented through the *Shariah*. On the other side of the spectrum is Popular Islam, or better known as folk Islam, with its many variations of black and white magic, taboos and cultural norms which keep individuals, clans and countries under a spell. Some even speak about a “collective bondage”⁵ enslaving Muslim lands and nations. To counteract the ignorance and superficiality of the folk Islam adherents there have always been reformers, both from a mystic sphere (the Sufis) or from a radical side who attempt to realize an Ideal Islam. They would often claim that today's Islam has been corrupted by the gangrene of capitalism and the devils of modernism and needs to be totally cleansed from all such *kafiri* (= unbelievers) practices and innovations. Others, however, feel totally at ease in the world of Modern Islam and would not dream to dismiss videos, Mercedes limousines, the internet and even more controversial matters for the “pure, original form of Islam”, whatever that might have been. To illustrate the point, let me show you what Muslim children here in Kenya are being taught how to use the bathroom or toilet: (picture).

So how can we know **who is a Muslim**? Does he wear a hat like this? – Nonsense! This is a common Nigerian hat. Or one of these ‘*topis*’, as they are popular among the Cape Malays? – You can't be sure, for many Christians even wear it. Does every Muslim grow a beard? – Well, it is an Islamic ideal, but not everyone with a beard is a Muslim; I am not one! Is a Muslim a very clean person? – So we are told, but you better see the evidence for yourself first!

What about the prayer times? The rosary (*tasbeeh*)? The rigorous fasting which is being observed? The prayer carpet (*masallah*) you might find in a house? Or at least a wall hanging prominently featuring the *Kaaba*?

All these are externals and might be indicators to help you smell Islam as you enter a home or speak to people. But in order to know who is a Muslim you need to touch the soul of Islam,

⁴ *Let us be Muslims* by Abul A'la Mawdudi, page 115-116.

⁵ Abd Al-Masih in *Who is Allah in Islam*. Also from some champions of “Territorial Warfare” theology.

you need to walk in a Muslim's shoes, you need to understand what his religion means to him.

Let us therefore take a brief look at **the system of Islam**, its teachings and practices, its "do's and don'ts", its ideals and realities. We need to keep in mind:

(1) Islam is a post-Christian religious system

Muhammad formulated his beliefs and practices in interaction with Jews and Christians of his time, comparing and contrasting them. This can be shown from many examples in the Qur'an. Like no other foundational book of the great religions does the Qur'an make reference to biblical events and personalities, and in some lesser way, allusions to the message of the Bible.⁶

(2) Islam is not a Christian heresy

In my opinion it would be quite deceptive and misleading to place Islam on the same level as Mormonism or Maria Legio. Although Muhammad tried to win the approval of Jews and Christians as a prophet in line with judeo-christian prophethood, he explicitly changed his attitude in later life. The radical shift of the *qibla* (prayer direction) from Jerusalem to Mecca was an early indication of what later resulted in the beheading of hundreds of Jews in the market square of Medina or an open challenge for a *muballah* (curse duel) to the Christian party from Nasran, Yemen.

(3) Islam is an anti-Christian system

The denials of fundamental doctrines of the Bible such as the Trinity, Crucifixion, Atonement or the Divinity and Sonship of Jesus Christ mark Islam as a system that is strongly opposed to the heart of the gospel message. Some Christians fear that just mentioning the name of Jesus to a Muslim will earn them a blue eye or a knife between their ribs which is completely unfounded. Muslims will insist that they give Jesus a much higher place of honour than Christians do, but vehemently refuse to accept the Crucified. Ali Muhsin from Zanzibar in his popular booklet *Let the Bible Speak* shows his disgust to the biblical account of the crucifixion and Christ's "pathetic lamentations" in no uncertain terms. I quote:

For an ordinary man to behave in such a way is excusable. But for the man of God to declare at the time of trial, or even for a leader of a people with guts in him, to cry out aloud in front of a crowd: "My God, my God why has thou forsaken me?" is, to say the least, below the dignity of a leader.⁷

We have already learned about bitterness, fear and even hatred among many Christians who perceive Muslims as their enemies, see them as potential bomb throwers, liars, deceivers, thieves or simply a demon-possessed monster that either needs to be avoided or delivered. For others they are sinners just like anyone else and they need to be preached to just like any other sinner. For those who have tried, however, the Muslim quickly becomes a very hard nut to crack as they find him programmed against the gospel message, ready not only to defend his own religion but also aggressively attacking ours or at best very suspicious of all Christian efforts of winning them over. Many a Christian feels insecure and unprepared for such an encounter.

A lot has to do with sheer ignorance about the basic tenets of Islam and how to evaluate them in the light of the Bible. I just want to list them here and refer to a more comprehensive treatment of the teaching of Islam as can be found in our Trainers Textbook *ISLAM* by Gerhard Nehls and Walter Eric in chapter 6.

⁶ For your own interest turn to the index in a Qur'an and check the references given Bible characters such as Abraham, Yussuf (Josef), Yahya (John the Baptist), or Heaven and Hell, Creation, Fear of God, and many other topics of commonality between Bible and Qur'an.

⁷ *Let the Bible Speak* by Ali Muhsin, page 56.

The Pillars of Islam - Deen	The Articles of Faith – Iman
Confession – <i>shahada</i>	God – <i>Allah</i>
Prayer – <i>salat</i>	Angels – <i>malaikat, jinni</i>
Fasting – <i>saum</i>	Books – <i>kutubu</i>
Almsgiving – <i>zakat</i>	Messengers – <i>nabi</i>
Pilgrimage – <i>hajj</i>	Life after Death – <i>akhira</i>

The Christian witness does well to obtain a true understanding of the significance of these pillars and articles for any dedicated Muslim, and to compare and contrast these with the Biblical theology and practice.

Now let us turn to the second part of our topic:

Why should we communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ to Muslims?

The reason why should be so clear to any disciple of Jesus Christ:

- He commanded us to go to ALL THE WORLD, including the Muslims
- Muslims are in need of salvation whether they believe it or not. Christ died for the Muslims too!
- Jesus made a special point to reach the despised and rejected (John 4:4 and 9:4)
- We are responsible to warn Muslims of the serious consequences of rejecting Christ as the only way to God (Ez. 3:18-20)

But I would like to emphasize here the importance of “communicating” the Gospel to them. Communication means “that an idea which I have in my mind passes through my lips and reaches the other person’s mind.” But it does not stop here. Good communication seeks to achieve that my words are understood so that “in the recipient’s mind, it is substantially the same as when it left mine.”⁸ This has special relevance to the use of phrases and terms which may be so clear to us, but perfectly meaningless or misunderstanding to my Muslim vis-à-vis. For example you may urge Yasin to accept Jesus as Saviour from all his sins. To Yasin as a typical Muslim this may sound as futile a message as trying to sell a wheel barrow to an Indian elephant for transporting wood. You will probably only succeed in having that wheel barrow damaged with Jumbo grinning from ear to ear: “What do you think God has given me a strong back for!”

That’s how a prominent Muslim scholar, professor Ismai’il al-Faruqi has put it:

*In the Islamic view, human beings are no more ‘fallen’ than they are ‘saved’. Because they are not ‘fallen’, they have no need of a saviour. But because they are not ‘saved’ either, they need to do good works – and do them ethically – which alone will earn them the desired ‘salvation’. Indeed, salvation is an improper term, since to need ‘salvation’, one must be in a predicament beyond the hope of ever escaping from it. But men and women are not in that predicament. Humans are not ethically powerless. They are not helpless puppets capable of neither good nor evil. They are capable of both. To ‘save’ themselves by deeds and works is their pride and glory. To miss the chance and pass all the opportunities by is pitiable neglect; to miss the calling deliberately and to do evil is to earn punishment, to deserve damnation.*⁹

There is so much insider jargon among Christians such as “saved by grace”, “bowing down at the foot of the cross” or “receiving Jesus into your life” which will either fail to communicate or even misfire into the face of the well-meaning Christian witness.

Unless we have come to understand a Muslim by gaining a good grasp of the system of Islam and its impact in programming the perception of its adherents we will fail to communicate the life-saving message of Christ, our Lord.

⁸ Francis Schaeffer, quoted in *A Practical and Tactical Approach to Muslim Evangelism* by Gerhard Nehls and Walter Eric, page 12.

⁹ *Islam* by Isma’il R. Faruqi, page 9. At another place Faruqi adds: “Salvation is hence not in the vocabulary of Islam.” *International Review of Mission*, No. 260, October 1976, p. 399).

Why should we communicate the Gospel with Muslims? Because we dare not confess we have received Christ's love, if we are not **willing to share it**. Mission to Muslims is saying "Thank you, Jesus, for calvary". I was deeply touched by a brief encounter published by Arab World Ministries under the heading *They Never Loved Us*.¹⁰

Why should we communicate the Gospel with Muslims? Because **God is already busy in the lives of many Muslims**, but He wants to involve you and me in leading them to a true decision for Christ. Recently we received this fascinating account how two Muslim couples in Malawi were led to Christ.¹¹

Why should we communicate the Gospel to Muslims? Because, as all of us who minister among Muslims will readily admit, **Christ wants to teach us some lessons** from this work which we might never have learned otherwise. I freely confess that my understanding of the unique revelation of God as a triune God who relates to his creatures so lovingly, my grasp of the Fatherhood of God or the profound unveiling of the doctrine of the Lamb of God from Genesis to Revelations would never have struck me the way it did were it not for my intense involvement in Muslim Evangelism over the past 20 years. It is worth it and I am happy to continue until Christ returns and the great struggle is over.

John Gilchrist in his new book "Facing the Islamic Challenge" reflects on the Christian-Muslim cutting edge in his usual brilliant style:

*Great conflicts come and go but one, which has endured for nearly fourteen centuries, appears destined to remain until the end. It is the classic battle - a universal one which outlives every generation. It is the struggle between Islam and Christianity for the souls of all who live on earth. Although mostly unrecognised, it is probably the supreme contest - one which tackles the greatest of issues, namely the very purpose of human existence and its ultimate destiny. Each has its own figurehead who is claimed to be God's final messenger to all mankind - Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world or Muhammad the universal Prophet to the nations. Each has its own mission - the spread of the Gospel to the ends of the earth or the establishment of an ummah (community) which covers the globe. Each, likewise, has its own conviction of its ultimate triumph over all the philosophies, religions and powers that have challenged human allegiance. It is only natural that they should come into conflict.*¹²

As you face the challenge in your Nineveh remember that God's last response to the reluctant, sulky prophet was a heart-searching question:

<p><i>"You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"</i></p>	<p>→ your personal comfort → all of it is God's grace → this comfort is for a fleeting moment → ~120 Mill. Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa → no spiritual understanding (Rom 10: 2-3) → Islam affects all of society → God cares about Muslim people</p>
--	---

And what about You?

©Walter Eric, *Life Challenge Africa*, November 1999

¹⁰ *Frontline*, by Arab World Ministries, November 1998.

¹¹ *How two Muslim families became Christians*, letter to the author.

¹² *Facing the Islamic Challenge* by John Gilchrist, page 6.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How would you describe a “typical Muslims”? – Collect some ideas from Christians around you. –

Now check carefully which characteristics are truly typical for a vast majority of Muslims. Did you consider only Muslim men, or were you also conscious of doing justice to women, children, old people or teenagers?

2. From this talk summarize briefly under the headings “The misconceived/abused Muslim”, “The True Muslim”, “The Modern World Muslim”. – Discuss reasons for the great differences among Muslims.

3. How do names and expressions used by Christians about Muslims reflect and affect our attitude towards them? Collect some examples and consider their impact.

4. Do you agree with the author that “Islam is not a Christian heresy”? Give reasons for your conviction.

5. Discuss the definition “A Muslim is a spiritually dissatisfied person...” Reflect on each part measuring the system of Islam along the standard of Scripture.

(6. Develop some comparisons and contrasts between “The Pillars of Islam” and the Biblical practices.)