

LESSON 7

FACING ISLAM

Animism and Islam

The central teaching of Islam is the belief in one God and obedience to Him. However, the Koran and Muslim faith recognize the importance of evil spirits. In the Koran they are called Jinn. Because of this idea, the teaching of Islam provides a strange combination. Primary attention is given to Allah the one God, but there is still reverence for and fear of spirits. This part of Islam is not recognized in many articles and books. As we see this element in the religion, we discover that it is a mistake to describe Islam as a religion of "absolute monotheism."

Each day the Muslim will repeat "there is no God but Allah." But it must be remembered that there is also the belief in countless spirits and superstitions. Samuel Zwemer served as a missionary for many years among the Muslim people. He has written the following:

But in my daily observations —and I have lived among them for more than twenty-five years—I find they have many fetishes and superstitious customs which amount to as many gods as the heathen who bows down to wood and stone.¹

Many of these superstitious beliefs and practices have continued from pre-Islamic days. Some of these practices are supported in passages from the Koran. Certain beliefs about evil spirits and the "evil eye" have remained because Islam could not completely conquer the power of animism. This is particularly true in Africa, Malaysia and also parts of the Caribbean. Some writers suggest that these practices which involve spirit worship in different forms may have a more important place in the life of some Muslims than do the formal teachings and rituals of Islam.

Superstition is defined as "any belief or attitude that is inconsistent with the known laws of science or with what is generally considered in the particular society as true and rational; especially such a belief in charms, omens, the supernatural, etc."² We will now look at a few of these superstitious ideas and practices which reveal the strong animistic influence to be found in Islam.

Muslims give considerable attention and power to the belief in omens. They feel that certain words or actions may be foreboding and must be voided. For example, it is believed that illness can be provoked on someone simply by saying the name of the illness or

Evil spirits are called _____ in the _____.

(Jinn, Koran)

Is the following statement true or false?

In Africa, the Caribbean and other places, Islam completely destroyed the belief in the power of animism.

(false)

Muslims give considerable attention and power to the belief in _____.

(omens)

¹ Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Influence of Animism on Islam* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), p. 2.

² *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1968).

malady. Therefore, a person should not utter the names or diseases unless it is absolutely necessary. When the name of an illness is spoken, a Muslim will add the praise "ba'id 'annak" (let it be far from you.) The intent of the recitation of this phrase is to keep the disease away from the listeners. Concerning the power of spoken words, Muslims believe that they are often spoken in order to put a curse or to cause someone else harm. These curses, or evil wishes may be accomplished directly as a result of the spoken curse. This is what is believed. A person who seeks to curse another person often appeals to the aid of a local saint, a "jinn" (spirit), or demons. In addition to the fear of omens, Muslims are sometimes fearful of compliments. It is believed that the opposite of what is intended by the compliment may result unless the evil effect of praise is counteracted. Hence, the words "Allah yihfazu" (God protect him) or "ism Allah 'aleyh" (God's name on him) are uttered with the compliment to counteract the possible bad effect of the praise. It is also believed that a local saint has more power to bring about a curse when this is desired.

Many other examples of animism within Islam could be mentioned. One more such belief should be noted. Among Arabs the belief in the "evil eye" is strong and wide spread. Contributed to the effect of the "evil eye" are various misfortunes, sickness, death, and bad luck. Rarely can anyone escape the effect of the "evil eye." Many Muslim proverbs reveal the power of the "evil eye." "It empties the house, fills the tombs"; "half of humanity dies from the evil eye"; and "it is to the evil eye that belong two thirds of the grave yard." So the power of the evil eye is strongly associated with death. The Muslim may fear that a jealous neighbour with the "evil eye" may look at a child and cause the child to die. In a society where male children are highly praised, measures must be taken to prevent harm caused by the power of the "evil eye." A common practice is to dress the male child like a girl. Other methods used as protection against the "evil eye" include the placing of amulets or charms around a child's neck and keeping the child unwashed, or by placing a knife under the baby's pillow.³

It was mentioned earlier that some of these superstitions existed among the Arab people before Mohammed began the Muslim religion. Mohammed did not attempt to deny the existence of "jinn," but incorporated this belief into Islam. "Jinn" were recognized as super human beings, but were regarded as being below angels. It is believed that some "jinn" are good while others are wicked or evil. Speaking of "jinn," the Koran records:

And there are among us (jinn) some who have surrendered to Allah and there are among us some who are unjust. And who so hath surrendered to

³ C.R. Marsh, *Share Your Faith With A Muslim* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), p. 39.

Muslims are sometimes fearful of _____

(compliments)

Arabs have a strong belief in the " _____ "

(evil, eye)

Allah, such have taken the right path purposefully. And so for those who are unjust, they are firewood for hell. (Surah LXXII: 14-15)

These pagan fears give further indication of the spiritual condition of a Muslim. In spite of his devotion and diligent obedience to ritual and various requirements, the "believer" still continues to be fearful of many spirits and powers.

The Appeal of Islam

In our study we have noted that the Muslim faith has spread widely across the face of the earth. Frequently this spread has been very rapid. We noted that Islam was combined with military and political power and this explains some of the rapid growth in the early years of the Muslim religion. However, it should be noted that the founder, Mohammed, sought to make this new religion appealing. What are some of the teachings and some of the claims of the Muslim faith which do have a strong appeal?

To many peoples of the world Islam is attractive and appealing because it does not require an inward transformation of a life. It presents a doctrine of God which is understandable to the human mind and a code of conduct which is determined by simple and clear rules. When it comes to personal religious faith there is a "comfortable" feeling if you are taught that being religious is predictable and very simple. Any religious system which magnifies a few clear rules provides this appeal. The individual is not required to answer difficult moral questions. If the Muslim obeys these stated laws and follows the established ritual then he is taught that he is one of God's chosen people.

Because there is no basis for a personal morality or personal discipline, Islam can often be joined to other religious systems. This is particularly true in the African setting. The African can continue to respect and fear and seek to please his local spirits although he may call himself a Muslim. We noted that the Koran has much to say about the presence and power of "jinn" (spirits). Thus we see that the Muslim religion carries the appeal of simplicity and also the appeal of flexibility. When a person is simply required to repeat verbally the creed in order to become a Muslim we realize that there is no need for an inward or a personal change. Another appeal is the claim that the prophet, Mohammed, has absorbed and retained all that was best in other religions and in other religious revelations. More will be said about this in our next section when we discuss the relationship between Islam and Christianity. But we should note that the Koran teaches respect for the Old Testament and the Old Testament prophets and also respect for Jesus as a very important prophet. Islam claims that it is a later revelation than the Jewish or the Christian faith. Because of this claim, Islam makes the appeal of being superior to all other religions. A devout Muslim sincerely believes this.

Many Muslims fear many _____ and _____

(spirits, powers)

Is the following statement true or false?

Islam has a strong appeal to people because of its strong demand for the inward transformation of one's life.

(false)

Islam carries the appeal of _____ and the appeal of _____.

(simplicity, flexibility)

Islam makes the claim of being _____ to other religions.

(superior)

For some, the strong concept of predestination is appealing. It is easier to accept a barren and difficult life if one is confident that "Allah has willed it." The Koran presents man as weak and passive, especially in his relationship to God. This fatalism may provide a simple, universal answer to man's problems, but it also removes freedom, initiative and hope. Thus, the appeal of a strong predestination is a limited or mixed appeal.

Another important appeal is that Islam promises a pleasurable afterlife. This is simply guaranteed as a reward for piety and devotion within the teachings of Islam. This is the appeal of a simple formula which tells one how to enter into Paradise and its eternal pleasures.

Islam and Christianity

In one sense, it is difficult to try to make a careful comparison between religions. However, in order to better understand Islam it might be helpful to be aware of certain similarities which do exist. It will also be noted that there are a number of very important differences. The Christian cannot make an effective presentation of the gospel to a Muslim without some insight into these similarities and differences.

Similarities

The following is a brief list of some similarities which are to be found in Islam and Christianity:

1. God is sovereign Lord: He compels and challenges men; He is wise, merciful and compassionate.
2. God, according to Islam, is seeking to be known through teachers and prophets. Here is a similarity and a difference. The Bible teaches that God has revealed Himself through teachers and prophets also, but God's supreme self-revelation is in Jesus Christ.
3. God is omnipresent. The Koran tells us that God is everywhere and is closer to us than our neck vein. Christianity teaches us the same about the presence of God but goes further with this truth. The Bible teaches that through Christ God actually lives within the believer.
4. Prayer is important. Daily prayer is stressed both in the Koran and in the Bible.
5. Men stand before God at all times, and are accountable to God.
6. Men should practise no racial discrimination in prayer and in worship.

A careful comparison of the Koran and the Bible would make it possible to suggest other similarities in addition to these which are listed. However, these interesting similarities must be considered in the light of some very strong differences which exist between Islam and Christianity.

Differences

What does constitute the basic theological differ-

Is the following statement true or false?

It is easier to accept a barren and difficult life if one is confident that "Allah has willed it." _____

(true)

Islam promises a _____ afterlife.

(pleasurable)

List six similarities between Islam and Christianity.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

ence between Islam and Christianity? This basic difference is not found in the fundamental teaching of Islam—that is, that God is one. Christians are also monotheists; they are convinced that there is no God but God. Nor does this difference reside in the Muslim's conviction that Allah is to be obeyed. God's will is the Christian's ultimate concern. Above all else, Christians want the Kingdom of God to come. The presence of God's Kingdom on earth requires God's authority and control in the lives of men.

The essential and most vital difference concerns the person of Jesus Christ. It is true that Muslims take Jesus seriously and show admiration and respect for Jesus. However, to the Muslim, Jesus is merely another great prophet. This important difference concerning Jesus Christ leads to other important differences concerning the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Atonement.

Several years ago Dr. D.T. Niles wrote a letter to a friend who was a Muslim. He asked this Muslim why the servants of Allah found the Christian faith unacceptable. His friend replied:

Your question is "why I as a Muslim, find it impossible to accept the Christian faith?" My main answer must be that I find it impossible to accept that Jesus Christ is God . . . This is a false and unnecessary claim . . . To speak of Jesus as an incarnation of God is to sin against God's majesty as well as His unity. It is unnecessary because God deals with man's condition by revealing His will to him through prophets, and God's final will has been revealed through Mohammed, the last and the greatest prophet. An incarnation is a completely unnecessary idea.⁴

The above statement identifies the basic theological difference between Christianity and Islam. Muslims respect Jesus as a messenger from God and as a good man who did many mighty works. They do not believe, however, that He is the Messiah who has atoned for the sins of mankind. They do not believe that He was crucified and raised from the dead.

Because Muslims deny the Incarnation and the Deity of Jesus, they are unable to accept the teachings of the Trinity. Muslims accuse Christians of worshipping three Gods. The Koran says, "they do blaspheme who say: God is one of three in the trinity; for there is no God but God." (Sura. Roman V - 76)⁵

Another major difference concerns the doctrine of the Atonement. For the Muslim the idea of one person atoning for the sin of others is inconceivable and impossible. Islam declares that the forgiveness of sin cannot be obtained by the suffering and sacrifice of any other person, human or divine. They believe that this forgiveness is granted by the grace of God and our

What is the most vital difference between Islam and Christianity?

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Muslims accuse Christians of worshipping

(three, gods)

To the Muslim, the idea of one person atoning for the sins of others is _____ and _____.

(inconceivable, impossible)

⁴ D.T. Niles, *The Preacher's Task and the Stone of Stumbling* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), pp. 41,42.

⁵ Kate Ellen Gruver, "Muslims on the American Scene", article in *Home Missions* magazine, Vol. 24, No. 3, March 1975, p. 38-40.

sincere and persistent efforts to fight against evil and to do good. Whether or not a person has adequately atoned for his sin will be known only at the last judgement when his soul is weighed in order to determine whether or not his good works outweigh his bad.⁶

The crucial difference between Islam and Christianity is clear. Despite numerous and significant similarities, Muslims and Christians fundamentally disagree over their ideas and beliefs concerning Jesus of Nazareth. To the Muslim, Jesus was a great prophet, sent to the Jews by Allah, second only to Mohammed. To the Christian, Jesus is the Messiah sent to mankind by God, and He is second to none. The Christian faith is grounded in the truth that God has acted in Jesus Christ in a complete and divine manner. The biblical message is simply "that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself".⁷

A Christian Approach to the Muslim

In the light of our study we must consider this question: "what is an appropriate and effective Christian approach to persons of the Muslim faith?" The Christian witness must be shared with the Muslim in the same way it is shared with all people. It is supremely important that this witness must be based upon *faith and love*. The attitude and motive of the witness is grounded in these fundamental truths.

If one is to witness with confidence and effectiveness to the Muslim, he must exercise faith in what God can accomplish. The Christian must dismiss the idea that God can save and change anyone except a Muslim. It is true that Muslims are devout, but many are not as devout or committed as we have imagined. They need the good news and they are open to the good news. Islam has appeared to be very strong because it is supported by society and by the state. Arab culture is seen as being Muslim. This makes it appear to be stronger than it actually is as a religion. It is surprising to stand in a number of Arab cities during the call to prayer and to observe how few people stop their activities and actually pray. Nevertheless, the social influence is strong. There are heavy penalties for the one who leaves the Muslim faith. It is God's love and God's power which draws men and which convinces and transforms. This is the basis for the faith and confidence of a Christian witness.

It is also essential to approach the Muslim with true love. If this is the spirit and the motive, the Christian will be able to demonstrate this love through patience and especially through a deep concern for the individual. We love individuals and we bear witness to individuals. Love will remind us that we are not "fighting against Islam." Love declares that we are not "debating with Islam to

To witness to a Muslim, one must have _____
in what _____ can do.

(faith, God)

Is the following statement true or false?
All Muslims are absolutely loyal to Islam. At the call to prayer, everyone stops what he is doing, bows towards Mecca, and prays. _____

(false)

The Muslim also must be approached with true _____

(love)

⁶ Mohammed Al-Nowaiki, "The Religion of Islam," *International Review of Missions*, (April 1976), p. 65.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:19.

prove that our views are correct and theirs are incorrect." In the same way we are not primarily interested in changing one's religion. The goal and purpose of a Christian witness is to introduce people to Jesus Christ. The following practical suggestions are important in our witness to the Muslim.

1. Be familiar with Islamic faith and practices. This knowledge and understanding will reflect something of your interest and your love. Do not condemn or ridicule Muslim teachings. Do not point out weaknesses in their doctrines or practices.

2. Reveal your respect and your love by *listening*. Only as you listen to an individual can you really know what he believes. This will allow you to know his personal beliefs and commitments. By listening you will also learn what the individual understands and does not understand about the Christian message. People often receive incorrect ideas about Christianity. These misconceptions can come from books or from weak and inconsistent Christians. As you listen you may discover that the Muslim has never really met Jesus and has not therefore rejected Jesus. Rather he has rejected certain ideas about Jesus. As the Christian witness becomes a listener he will also encourage the Muslim to listen.

3. *Give your own testimony*. Know how to share it in a clear and simple manner.

4. *Point the person to Jesus Christ*. Our main emphasis will be on Christ as a living person. Present Jesus as the Saviour. A Muslim has a certain sense of sin, but his religion gives no assurance of forgiveness for that sin. Only Christ can satisfy this need for forgiveness and for cleansing. Our witness should be like that of the early disciples who were content to say to other people "come and see." If we introduce them to a living person, He will draw them, reveal Himself to them, and teach them all necessary things.

5. *An effective witness should also practise what he preaches*. There should be a life which is consistent with Jesus and His message. We must remember that the message one brings is often judged by the character of the messenger. Think about this question. "What would be necessary to make *you* give serious consideration to another religion?" Perhaps you would want more than a simple statement of a belief and you would want to see a demonstration of the truth and power of the message. Concerning our life and our example there must be a true demonstration of the love of Christ. This does not mean that the Christian witness will be perfect. But his life as well as his words must point people to Jesus.

6. *Always remember and depend upon the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit*. It is the Holy Spirit who will guide and inspire your witness. It is

What is the goal of the Christian witness?

(Compare your answer with the text.)

The Christian who witnesses to Muslims needs knowledge and understanding of Islamic _____ and _____

(faith, practices)

A Christian witness can show his respect and love for the Muslim by _____ to him.

(listening)

Share your Christian _____ clearly and simply.

(testimony)

Point the person to _____

(Jesus, Christ)

Is the following statement true or false?

How one lives has no bearing on one's personal witness to others. _____

(false)

The Christian witness must depend on the _____

(Holy, Spirit)

the Holy Spirit who must bring conviction and faith in Jesus Christ. The Christian witness cannot decide the time for a decision nor can he control the time for a decision by another person. God through His Spirit will do this. This is a wonderful truth which gives confidence to the Christian witness.

The effectiveness of God's truth and the drawing power of Christ are sufficient to guarantee that some will be won in these ways. *We must be available as witnesses, and must extend our witness in faith and in love.*

Today Muslims are numbered in the hundreds of millions and they are growing in number. They represent a major force in our world today. This fact demands that we take serious notice of them. Each individual Muslim is a fellow person made in God's image. This makes that individual precious to God and a deserving object and recipient of our love—and of our faithful witness. As it was necessary for us to see God's love in Christ, it will be necessary for the Muslim to see Christ's love in us before he will look at Christ.

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). After reading the study guide, answer the following questions.

1. What is the Muslim belief in "Jinn"? Give three examples. _____

2. List four claims that help make Islam appealing.

3. Give five similarities between Islam and Christianity.

4. State the basic theological difference between Islam and Christianity.

5. Why do Muslims say Christians worship three Gods?

6. Show the difference between the Muslim and Christian concept of atonement.

7. Name two things necessary in making an effective witness to Muslims.

8. Why does a Christian witness to Muslims need to be familiar with Islamic faith and practices?

9. Why is *listening* important in witnessing to Muslims?

10. Give four other pointers in bearing a Christian witness to Muslims.

11. What gives the Christian confidence that Muslims can be won to faith in Christ?

Supplementary activity (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read pages 103-10; 198-201 in *Understanding World Religions* and do the following things.

1. Draw a line from top to bottom in the centre of a piece of paper. On one side write the word *similar* and on the other side write the word *different*. Under the column marked similar list the ways Christianity and Islam are similar. List ways they are different in the other column.
2. How can Christians answer the complaint made by Muslims concerning the Christian doctrine of the Trinity?

Advanced activity (*Level 3*). Do the following things.

1. After reviewing Lessons 6 and 7 in the study guide and the supplementary readings in *Understanding World Religions*, write an essay on how you would share your Christian faith with a Muslim. If you live in an area where you have Muslim friends or neighbours, use your plan to witness to a Muslim. Be ready to share your experience in the seminar.

2. What challenges does Islam face in today's world? What effect might this have on our Christian witness?

Seminar Discussion

1. Discuss the Muslim belief in "Jinn."
2. Discuss the similarities and the differences between Christianity and Islam.
3. Advance students can share their essays and witnessing experiences. Ask the other students for input in this discussion.