

“Reaching our Muslim Neighbours”

Minehead Baptist Church

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1. Introduction

Islam is growing rapidly here in the UK, with the British Muslim community, according to current figures, thought to have grown by half a million, to 2.4 million, in just five years.¹ This raises all kinds of issues: from integration and community cohesion to politics and religion. And for us, as Christians, it means there will be an increasing need to understand Islam, the challenges that it raises to the Gospel, and to begin thinking about how best to share the Gospel with Muslims we will increasingly encounter — at work, in our neighbourhoods, schools and colleges. To communicate with somebody of a different faith — and sometimes a different culture — can sometimes be a tough challenge.

Deep in the English countryside, two farmers were sitting on a gate, watching the world go by, when a large, hideously expensive Mercedes, with a French license plate, pulled up. The window rolled down and the driver who, judging by the pile of maps, was extremely lost, called out: “Vous parlez Français?” The two farmers looked blank and shrugged. The driver paused before trying a second time: “Sprechen Sie Deutsch?” Again, the farmers looked blank. The driver made one final attempt: “Parli Italiano?” Once again, nothing. Furious, the driver floored the throttle and roared off, Gallic curses drifting through the window. One farmer turned to another: “Here, Bob, now we’re part of Europe and there’s all this multiculturalism, do you think we should learn a foreign language?” His friend chewed a blade of grass thoughtfully. “Nah. That chap knew three. Didn’t do him any good.”

Too often when Christians speak to those of another faith — or indeed, those who are simply unchurched — we can come across as if we’re speaking another language. The aim of this afternoon’s session is to help avoid this. To give a whistle-stop tour of Islam and its origins, of what Muslims believe and why, of some of the issues facing Muslims today. So that when you encounter a Muslim you may be better prepared to listen, to understand, to pray and to share your faith with them.

2. Christian / Muslim Mutual Misconceptions and the Importance of Understanding

¹ Source: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/article5621482.ece

Interactions between Christians and Muslims are often marked by some common misconceptions. For many of you here tonight, this may be the first time you'll have thought theologically, evangelistically and practically about Islam. Thus highlighting some common Christian misconceptions about Islam — and, conversely, some common Muslim misconceptions about Christianity — is a helpful place to begin.

- For Christians who know little about Islam, it is common to approach Muslims with the fear that all Muslims are extremists and that all Muslims are potential terrorists. However, we need to remember that there not only is often a media bias in the way Islamic fundamentalism is reported but, furthermore, that Muslims often manifest a degree of confidence in their faith that makes even the most ardent evangelical look limp by comparison. The majority of Muslims are indeed wonderful, friendly people — who are very, very convinced that they need to persuade of the truth of Islam and the falsity of Christianity. Like us, Islam is a missionary faith.
- Second, many Christians misunderstand the way that in Islam, politics and religion are intertwined. Because these categories have long been separated in Western culture, we find it hard to realise that for Muslims, the two belong together. The Qur'an and Islamic law embrace personal piety, family law, civil law, criminal law, politics and international relations.

Christians don't have a monopoly on misconceptions. There are some common misunderstandings that our Muslim friends often have about Christianity. For example ...

- A common Muslim misconception is that the Bible has been corrupted, changed at some point in its history, and cannot be trusted. This belief evolved in Islamic theology largely due to the differences between the Qur'an and the Bible — since the Qur'an was perceived as Allah's final revelation so, traditional Muslim scholars argued, it is the Bible that must be wrong. This misconception can lie behind many Muslim objections to Christian claims and teachings.
- Arguably the biggest Muslim misconception about Christians is that we have made Jesus, a man, into God — elevated a man to deity and committed for Islam what is the worst sin — *shirk*, associating something with God. Muslims have little idea about what the Bible teaches on this matter, for example, that Christian understanding is based upon what Jesus did and taught and what

the New Testament bears witness to. It is safe to say that the issue of Jesus' identity and role is by far the biggest dividing topic in Christian-Muslim discussions

These, then, are just a few of the areas that can cause confusion on both sides. Since the best way to avoid misunderstanding is through understanding, we turn now to a lightning, whistle-stop tour of the history and origins of Islam and its belief and practices. If we understand where Muslims are coming from and the distinctiveness of what they believe and do, then it makes communicating clearly with them all the easier.

2. Muhammad and the Beginning of Islam

2.1 Pre-Islamic Arabia

Islam emerged into a world of empires, the Arabian peninsula of the seventh century lying sandwiched between the giant Byzantine and Persian empires, who had been at war for years. The Arabian peninsula lay outside of the action, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious backwater. Religiously very diverse, pre-Islamic Arabia was also largely an oral culture: storytelling and poetry were the main ways that religious and cultural material was circulated.

2.2 Muhammad's Birth and Childhood

Into this world Muhammad was born, sometime around AD570. He was born in Mecca, a minor trading centre and pilgrimage site, with the Ka'ba, the cube-shaped building that is now the focal point of Muslim worship, used to host idols for a wide range of pagan deities.

As he grew up, Muhammad worked first as a shepherd and then in the caravan trading business. At 25, he married his wealthy caravan-owning boss, Khadija, who bore him two sons and four daughters. Only the daughters survived, a pattern that would be repeated with his later wives: Muhammad's failure to provide a male heir arguably led to a number of succession problems after his death.

2.3 Calling to Prophethood

Muhammad had ascetic tendencies and as a young man would regularly retire to the desert for protracted periods of meditation. It was in AD610, on just such a retreat that, according to Muslim tradition, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and revealed what is now chapter 96 of the Qur'an. Muhammad continued to receive revelations over the next twenty-three years and these were, in Muslim belief, collected together as the Qur'an.

2.4 Meccan Ministry

During his twenty-three year prophetic career, Muhammad had two distinct phases to his career. The first was in Mecca where, from 610-622, he began his ministry, claiming to be like the biblical prophets, only sent to the Arabs. His message was threefold: monotheism, social justice and warning of the punishments in hell for those who refused to listen. Although he gained a few converts, opposition quickly grew, soon leading to outright persecution. This eventually became so bad that Muhammad and his followers had to flee for their lives; so it was that in AD622 the early Muslims migrated north to the city of Medina; a date that marks the start of the Muslim calendar.

2.5 Medina

The second phase to Muhammad's career, the years 622-632 he spent at Medina, are extremely important if we are to understand why Islam today looks the way it does. For it was at Medina that Muhammad made the transition from prophet to statesman, his gaining control of the city being accompanied by a shift in the character of his revelations. Now Muhammad claimed that God was revealing to him laws for a new nation with him at its head. This had a number of implications: for example, it is at Medina that we see the beginnings of *jihad* or holy war — with a number of verses of the Qur'an allowing for, at first defensive and then, later, offensive use of battle to further the Muslim cause. Following a number of military interactions with the Meccans, Muhammad finally conquered his home city in 630AD. He spent the last two years bringing the remaining Arab clans in the region under his control before he died in AD632.

2.6 Lessons from History

This background is vitally important for several reasons. First, for Muslims, the Qur'an is deeply bound up with Muhammad's life. For Sunnis in particular, the Qur'an is to be read through the filter of Muhammad's life: it is by knowing when a verse was revealed and what Muhammad was doing at that time that we can interpret it today. Second, for Muslims of all varieties, although Muhammad was only a man — a Prophet, a Warner — he is still the supreme example of humankind, whose example is to be studied and emulated. Furthermore, the origins of Islam set up a number of themes that resonate down the centuries to the Islam we see today.

- Although Muhammad claimed to be a prophet in the same line as those of the Jews and Christians, he the end he preached a supersessionism. Islam had not merely come to complement these former faiths, it had come to replace them.
- Muhammad demonstrably moved from a model of non-confrontation in his Meccan ministry to a willingness to use force to impose his ideas in the later part of his ministry. For example, in chapter 9 of the Qur'an, both pagan Arabs and Jews and Christians are explicitly mentioned as being objects of the sword if they do not accept the rule of Islam over them.

These are live issues today. The question of how Islam relates to other faiths, the question of Islam and violence ... the seeds for all these and other contemporary issues were sown in the Islam's very origins.

3. Beliefs

From this brief survey of Islam's origins and some of the ways that history impacts on Islam today, we turn to explore and comment on Islam's core beliefs and the differences between them and Christianity. According to the traditional understanding, Muslims must belief in five (or possibly six) things ...

For most Muslims, belief comes second (albeit a close second) to practice. You may have heard of the well known “five pillars” of Islam — the creed, prayer, fasting, charitable giving and pilgrimage to Mecca. These define Islam and shape the lives of religiously active Muslims. Indeed, one can perhaps sum up the differences between Islam and Christianity by noting that Christianity consists of complex beliefs with simple practices, Islam reverses this: simple beliefs and complex practices. However, beliefs are still important — and it is particularly through its beliefs that we can explore Islam's relationship to Christianity. What we'll find as we progress is a pattern: common terminology but different content. Islam uses the same *words* as Christians but means very different things by them.

3.1 Belief in God (Allah)

Muslims believe that Allah is utterly one (hence they consider Christians are basically polytheists, due to the Trinity), transcendent, all powerful, all knowing. The emphasis is on Allah's power and arguably that Allah's key attribute is his Will.

One of the common mistakes Christians can make in approaching Islam is to assume that because the same terminology is used — “god”, “scripture”, “prophet”, “revelation” — that Muslims mean the

same thing by each term that we do. This is not the case. For example, “faith” itself functions quite differently in Islam: Faith in God is more like mental acceptance of the fact of His existence and lordship, and especially of a particular concept of His oneness. Allah is transcendent and non-personal, revealing only His will, so the emphasis of a Muslim’s relationship with God is one of obedience of a slave to a master rather than a personal, close relationship.

3.2 Belief in Angels

Angels form a core part of the Islamic belief system — far more so than in Christianity. It is angels who brought revelation (e.g. the Qur’an) down from heaven to the prophets, angels who watch over our every deed (two recording angels are perched, one on each shoulder, documenting everything you do) — thus angels and the angelic realm are an important, everyday reality for the faithful Muslim. In one sense, this stress on the role of angels in Islam flows from beliefs about Allah: because Allah is so high, so transcendent, so remote, it is angels who interact with the earthly realm and, for the lowly Muslim believer, form his or her point of contact with the spiritual realm.

3.3 Scripture

Muslims believe that Allah has revealed his will to human beings by sending books with his prophets and, indeed, that every prophet brought a book or written revelation. Not all have survived, however the Qur’an does speak of the *Taurat* (of Moses), the *Zabur* (Psalms, of David), the *Injil* (Gospel, with Jesus) and, of course, the Qur’an, Allah’s final revelation that was sent to Muhammad. Although the Qur’an mentions and speaks positively of the former scriptures, most Muslims believe that they have been corrupted and that only the Qur’an has been perfectly preserved.

There are further difference in the way that belief in Scripture operates for Islam than it does for us as Christians. First, Christians would affirm that the Bible contains multiple-genres: history, poetry, parable, song, psalm and prophecy. Muslims, on the other hand, believe that Scripture only consists of the first-person speech of Allah himself — hence they often exhibit great confusion when faced with the way the Bible looks. Second, Muslims understand that Scripture consists of Allah revealing his Will and his commands to his people whereas Christians would recognise this as just one function: the Bible is also about God revealing something of himself and his character. Third, Muslims consider Scripture to be, quite literally, the very Word of Allah (at least the Qur’an in its Arabic form). Hence why they treat the physical book with such reverence. One Muslim author has helpfully pointed out that the equivalent of the Qur’an in Christianity is not the Bible, but is actually *Jesus* ...

The Word of God in Islam is the Qur'an; in Christianity it is Christ ... The form of the Qur'an is the Arabic language which religiously speaking is as inseparable from the Qur'an as the body of Christ is from Christ Himself.²

In Christianity, the Word of God became a man. In Islam, the Word of God became a book.³

3.4 Prophets

Like Christians, Muslims believe that God has sent messengers — prophets — to mankind. But there the similarity ends, for Muslims believe some quite different things about prophets. For example, traditional Islamic belief is that prophets are sinless, protected by Allah from any wrongdoing. Hence Muslims have a very difficult time with the stories in the Bible such as David's sin with Bathsheba. Furthermore, most Muslims believe that every *people* have been sent a prophet: one commonly accepted number for the total number of prophets sent is 124,000. There is a line of prophethood, beginning with Adam, the first prophet, and ending with Muhammad, the last — and seal of the line of prophets. Among these — and mentioned in the Qur'an — are many biblical prophets, although often with Arabized names: eg. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David and Jesus.

3.5 The Day of Judgement

Again, like Christians, Muslims believe that at the end of time, God will wrap up history, those who have died will be raised, and all will face judgement. It is important to understand the major role that the Day of Judgement plays in the Islamic worldview. For many Muslims, judgement is an ever looming reality and most are terrified about the prospect of being found wanting on that day.

All Muslims would hold to these five beliefs. Some other Muslims add further beliefs as being central to Muslim identity: the most common additional belief is an extreme view of predestination — the belief that Allah has ordained and determined everything and that everything that happens does so by the will of God — *inshallah*. Muslims have traditionally had a very difficult time reconciling human freedom and God's sovereignty because whereas the Bible tends to hold the two in tension the Qur'an

² Cited in Norman L. Geisler and Norman Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993) 98

³ “[I]n Islam one cannot talk about the “incarnation” (that is, the “enfleshment”) of the word, but rather of the “inlibration” (that is, the “enbookment”) of the word. The word did not become flesh in Islam; it became book[.]” — Murata, Sachiko and Chittick, William C., *The Vision of Islam*. (London: I B Tauris, 1996) 177.

tends to emphasize Allah's will at the expense of human freedom —and many Muslim cultures are shot-through with fatalism.

4. Issues Facing Islam today

I want to end this evening by briefly flagging up three major issues facing Islam today — especially Islam in the West and the Muslims that you will meet and minister to.

4.1 Moderation vs Radicalism

You can hardly open a newspaper or turn on a news bulletin today without seeing the words “Islam” and “terrorism” conjoined. This resurgent Islamic radicalism that is currently rearing its head challenges Muslim and non-Muslim alike with the question — will the Islam of the 21st century be dominated by the voices of radicalism or the moderation? To discuss Islamic radicalism, its roots and its ideology, in detail would require a whole other evening — suffice to say that here in the West, if one was going to paint with broad brush strokes it would probably be fair to say that 15% of Muslims would be at the more radical end of the scale, 15% very moderate and, crucially, *70% in the middle*, swayed by whichever voices are the loudest and the issues that are currently effecting the broader Muslim community. Whilst the Qur'an contains verses that can be appealed to by both moderate and radical, the problem for the moderates is that more of the text (and the history of Islam) supports the radical position — meaning that moderate Islam still has much work to do.

4.2 The Question of Authority

Related to the issue of radicalism vs moderation is the question of authority. Who speaks for Muslims and to whom should Muslims turn for advice and guidance? This question unpacks itself on a number of levels. On a national level, the UK government has long struggled with the question of “who do we speak to in order to hear the voice of the Muslim community?” Whilst at a local-community level, many mosques in the UK are traditionally run by the older generation, with elders — often first or second generation immigrants — holding the reins of power and resisting change and modernisation. Increasingly many young Muslims — and to an extent, women — are protesting that these mosque committees don't represent them and their concerns, nor help Muslims with the challenge of living in modern Britain.

4.3 Living as a Minority

Across Western Europe and North America, Muslims find themselves living as minority communities in pluralistic, usually largely secular societies. Yet the traditional sources of authority — the Qur'an, the Hadith, Islamic law (*Shariah*) — all assume that Muslims will be living in states that are run along Muslim lines. As Zaki Badawi puts it, classical Muslim theology is:

... a theology of the majority. Being a minority was not seriously considered or even contemplated...Muslim theology offers, up to the present, no systematic formulation of the status of being in a minority.⁴

Thus Muslims have a problem: where do you go as a Muslim for theological, legal and practical resources to help you decide how to live out your faith? For Muslims, however, aside from Muhammad's beginnings in Mecca, Islam has always been in power — witness the rapid spread of the Muslim Empire in its first 300 years. It's hard to be a Muslim in contemporary secular Britain, with temptation and challenge around every corner.

5. Engaging in Evangelism and Dialogue

5.1 Go where Muslims are

Living and working as we do in a multi-cultural society, meeting Muslims is not difficult for us. Britain is very multi-cultural, even somewhere as rural as Minehead!. So if you have Muslim neighbours, try to find an opportunity to introduce yourself. Make friends with Muslims at work. Take every opportunity you can.

5.2 Friendship

Any evangelism we conduct should be seeking to build long term relationships, not perform hit-and-run operations with the gospel. And this is especially important I believe with Muslim colleagues or neighbours. For a whole range of reasons, Muslims can often be very suspicious of Christianity and long and ancient prejudices may need to be broken down. Hospitality is an important virtue in Muslim cultures and is a great way of building deep friendships. It is also in the context of longer term friendships that Muslims can see the gospel lived out, seeing and hearing the difference that a relationship with Jesus makes.

⁴ Zaki Badawi, *Islam in Britain* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1981) p27.

5.3 Break free of the “fear factor”

Many Christians don’t get involved in sharing their faith with Muslims quite simply because of fear. Either fear *of* Islam — perhaps we’ve seen all those terrible news reports about Islam being violent. Or fear of causing offense — yet this fear is often more in the mind of the Christian than of the Muslim. It is vital to overcome it. Indeed, fear, arguably, is the biggest thing holding back Christians from *all* evangelism!

5.4 Be honest about the differences between Islam and Christianity

Whilst friendship is important, it is also vital to stress that as Christians we need to be honest with the Muslims we are speaking with about the differences between Islam and Christianity. Whilst it may be tempting to downplay or not speak of those things or areas that separate us, not to speak of them is actually far more likely to cause damage.

5.5 Ask challenging questions

We also need to raise the tough questions: issues like, what do you do with the violent passages in the Qur’an? Avoiding this does our friends no favours. If you take the time to learn a little more about Islam, there are other questions that need to be asked about Muhammad and the Qur’an. These can be raised — indeed we have a duty to raise them, because many Muslims have never heard or faced tough questions about what they believe. This can be done without denigration — one does not need to deliberately insult Muhammad or the Qur’an, but one can still ask: what about the contradictions in the Qur’an? What about Muhammad’s many battles? ... etc ... without causing deliberate offence, if one asks them in the context of a friendship and is open to allowing tough questions to be asked back at us.

5.6 Don’t be afraid of disagreement

I suspect that one of the reasons that sometimes Christians are afraid to get to know Muslims or to ask difficult questions is that our culture tends to shy away from disagreement. We see debate or even argument as a bad thing, whereas in, say, an Arab context, it is seen as a good, healthy thing. Conversely, shying away from confrontation is not a Christian thing, it is a Western thing. Jesus and Paul, to name but two, were not afraid of disagreements and even heated arguments. Truth often needs to be hammered out on the anvil.

5.7 Keep centred on Jesus

At the end of day, sharing your faith with a Muslim friend, neighbour or work colleague is not about winning arguments so much as introducing them to Jesus. It is when they encounter Jesus for the first time, grasp who he really is — not the distorted picture the Qur'an paints of him — that they will take spiritual steps forward. Therefore I would recommend when talking with a Muslim that one always brings it back to Jesus. Whether it is a comparison of him and Muhammad on different points, or talking about what he has done in your life, or what he was like, what the Bible says about him etc. — keep it Jesus focussed.

6. Conclusion

I hope this rapid overview has opened your mind, given you food for thought, and a handle on this huge edifice that is Islam. It is important to understand where Islam has come from and the historical events and forces that still shape it today. Vital to recognise that all Muslims are not the same, that Islam is not a monolith. It's also exceedingly helpful to grasp that whilst Muslims and Christians may use the same words at times, they do not speak the same language. And important, too, to reflect that Islam, like Christianity, faces challenges and questions in the 21st century to which thoughtful Muslims seek to respond and find answers for. Recognising all of this helps overcoming misunderstanding and false assumptions — and helps clear the ground for planting the seeds of the Gospel.

7. Further Reading

Chapman, Colin, *The Cross and the Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam* (Leicester: IVP, 2003)

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