

Sharing Christ with Muslim Women

by Steven M. Eggers

1.0 Introduction

The Western image of the Muslim woman is unfortunate. We see her as a hidden figure moving in a black garment that looks like a tent. Covered head to toe, the Muslim woman is almost symbolic of oppression and discrimination against women. We may wonder why women in 1999 tolerate such treatment. We may wonder how different Islam is from Christianity. Are all Muslim women oppressed? Why would women voluntarily become Muslims? Yet, the picture inside Islam¹ is quite different.

The sacred book of Islam is known as the *Qur'an*. Muslims believe that this is a series of revelations given by God to the prophet Muhammad. The *Qur'an* has much to say about women and men. The *Qur'an* states that an outer covering is to protect women from harm (Surah 33:59) and gives very specific rules to women about modesty (Surah 24:31). Modesty of women is a central virtue in Islam. But the fundamental view is that, while women are also important in the eyes of Allah, men are to be their protectors and maintainers (Surah 4:34). What always needs to be remembered is that the focus in the *Qur'an* is on the responsibility one has to Allah. Moreover, because one has obligations to God, this means that one has obligations to others.

One Muslim pamphlet on the role of women explains the idea of the covering this way.

“Look around you, across the street, around the world: you will see Muslim women choosing the veil of their own free will. For they recognize it for what it was enjoined, an emancipation and liberation. The merchandising of the human

¹ “Islam” is the name of the faith whose prophet is Muhammad. An adherent of Islam is called a “Muslim.” Both Islam and Muslim are terms that refer to “submission to Allah [God]”. It is never appropriate to call a Muslim a “Mohammedan.”

being profits only that ever-voracious corporate bottom line. *Hijab* [the covering] is a woman's statement, of transcending the often-abused power of men over their lives" (Griffin 10).

This is a very different point of view from those usually heard in the West!

1.1 Islam as a Faith

Islam arose in the Arabian Peninsula around 620 A.D. It is a faith whose most precious goal in life is expressed in its name: submission to the will of Allah. Muslims believe that Allah ("God" in Arabic) revealed His will to humans through the prophet Muhammad in the revelations now contained in the *Qur'an*. Given over a period of years, Muslims believe that Allah gave revelations to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. Muhammad was to recite (the meaning of the word *Qur'an*) these revelations to the people around him. He was to warn them away from the worship of many gods and call them to the worship of Allah, the Only God.

Muslims say that they too believe in Jesus (whom they call *Isa'*) and a number of Old Testament prophets. They also honor Mary, the mother of Jesus and John the Baptizer. The *Qur'an* is quite clear in recognizing Jesus as a prophet to be held in great honor. Muslims believe that their faith is that of Abraham, from whom there stems a long line of prophets. Christianity and Islam have a number of similarities; but there are also great differences.

The faith of Islam is summarized in the Five Pillars:

Confession of Faith: "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the prophet of God."

Charity: Giving a percentage of ones income to the poor.

Prayer: The five canonical prayers every day.

Fasting: Dusk to dawn during a special month.

Pilgrimage: Every able Muslim should travel to Mecca in Saudi Arabia at least once.

It would be misleading to think that this exhausts the meaning of Islam for the average Muslim. There are Muslim ways to wash, ways to eat, forbidden foods, and regulations about prayer. More importantly, “Within its parameters is a code of behavior, a complete social pattern for man and for woman, that looks out to the whole of life through the harmony of balanced scale” (Griffin 3). Muslims believe that Islam -- submission to the will of Allah -- involves the entire human life. No area of life is kept apart from Allah’s will.

Someone has said that Islam has created lawyers and not theologians. There is a bit of truth to this statement. The concern of the Muslim is not to seek to know what is not knowable, for no one can truly understand God. What matters is our submission to Allah’s will. To know this will and to do it is the highest virtue of human life. There are large volumes that tell the Muslim how to be a Muslim in every aspect of daily life. One volume has chapters that explain the proper way of praying, where, how and when, and what to do if interrupted. While such concerns sound strange to most Americans, they show the depth of Muslims’ regard for what they understand to be Allah’s will for their life.

1.2 Living as a Muslim

The life of the Muslim centers on one goal: obeying Allah’s will. From fasting dawn to dusk or getting up before the sun for prayers, the Muslim’s life is a rhythm of prayer, worship and obedience.

The Muslim life of obedience starts with the example of Muhammad and his companions. To know how Allah wants people to live is to examine the life of the prophet Muhammad. His life is the prime example of how to live a life of submission to Allah. So, in addition to the *Qur'an*, the Muslim gets direction about life from the traditions of the life of Muhammad and his closest companions. These traditions answer questions that are not given in the *Qur'an*. These include the various rites of the pilgrimage, questions about divorce, inheritance and so on.

There are about 1 billion Muslims in the world today. The largest Muslim nation is Indonesia. Other Muslim nations include Iran, Iraq and Pakistan. There are also many Muslims in Africa, Asia and even the United States. In the United States, they are concentrated in such areas as New York and Detroit.

Their style of life is more easily carried out in the traditional Muslim lands than it is in the United States. One does not hear the call to prayer in a typical city in the United States, nor does the government collect the "poor tax" for Muslims. Muslims in the United States have to adapt to new ways of being a Muslim. In the malls and cities of the United States one now sees Muslim families and sees Mosques arise in unexpected places. Muslim families are no longer exotic; they are now neighbors. What is unfortunate is that some people have a poor view of Islam because of Muslim neighbors.

One has to be fair and admit that some Muslims are not good Muslims. These people neither represent Islam well nor follow it properly. It is unfortunate that so often we make our decisions about a faith or a people by looking at poor examples. So, as we seek to understand

Islam and Muslims, we will remind ourselves that every human -- Muslim or Christian -- is troubled by the same problems in daily life. Every human has the same desires and hopes.

2.0 Sharing Jesus with Muslim Women

Ideas Christians have in common with Muslims

Telling others about Jesus is the most precious thing a Christian can do. Christians love others because Jesus loves them. They want to share with their neighbors His greatest gift of all, forgiveness and hope. Certainly, telling others about God's love in Jesus can cause disagreement and bewilderment.

It all begins with respect, and respect begins with knowledge and understanding. There are numerous books and agencies one can consult to find out more about sharing Christ.

Sharing the Christian faith with a Muslim woman has one great challenge. It is probably better that a Christian woman shares her faith with a Muslim woman because a Muslim woman would be more at ease working with a Christian woman than with a Christian man. The average Christian in North America may find this separation between men and women strange, but it rests on a belief deeply-held among many Muslims.

Muslims worship one God and honor the prophets of the Old Testament. They abhor the worship of idols and false gods. The *Qur'an* is right when it says

And your God Is One God: There is no god
But He, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.
(Surah 2:163)

Muslims and Christians both place great importance on listening to God's Word. Muslims hold that God spoke through Jesus. They also honor the Old Testament prophets as men who spoke God's Word to their people. God used these same men in the past to tell His message to the people of their day, and to point them to God and His will for their lives.

All people need to be called to admit the times that they have failed God, that they have failed to do what God has commanded. Christians have to admit that there are times when they have not listened to the Word of God and done as God wanted them to do. Muslims too are willing to admit that there are times when they have failed to do all that Allah wants them to do. Sometimes these small sins were unexpected accidents. But often these sins cannot be passed over as mere "accidents." Christians have to go to God to receive His forgiveness. The believer prays for God's mercy and compassion. Even in Islam, there is recognition that forgiveness is a gift of God.

Christians also know there are angels, and a final day of judgment. Judgment Day is an unavoidable fact for all people. The New Testament says: "People die once, and after that they are judged." (Hebrews 9:27 GOD'S WORD)

On Judgment Day all people of every place will receive the just reward for their evil deeds. This is a day of terror. It will come. "Sin" is more than not doing what God wants; it is being willful rebels. Here the difference between Muslims and Christians start. Muslims believe that God (Allah) has given people rules that can be kept. Muslims believe that Allah has laid out in the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* (the way the Prophet lived) all the rules one needs to know.

Ideas that Muslims have trouble Understanding

Christians have a different point of view. Knowing the power of sin, Christians point out that we can't keep God's law in all its depth. In addition, Christians acknowledge that we as sinners really don't want to keep God's law. Christians sometimes call this type of sin "rebellion against God." We don't want to have Him as our Lord, and we object to His laws. Admitting this kind of sin is difficult, but necessary. Therefore all people need to come to God, admit their sin, and ask for help.

The Christian acknowledges that our life is to be one of obedience to God, but it is obedience that flows out of the knowledge of His forgiveness. While there are many traditions in the Christian church, such as ways to pray and worship, Christians believe that God commands none of these. Christians may differ with each other on how to pray, but they see in these differences expressions that show their love for God. Good Christians and good Muslims have many things in common, but Christians acknowledge that their faith is not one focused upon human obedience, but upon what God's Son Jesus Christ has done for them.

While Muslims honor Jesus, the Christian must clearly understand that Muslims only honor Jesus as a prophet. A Muslim finds it difficult to understand that Jesus is more than a prophet. Certainly the *Qur'an* describes Jesus in glowing terms:

Christ, the son of Mary, Was no more than A Messenger; many were
The Messengers that passed away Before him. His mother was a woman of
truth. They had both to eat their (daily) food. See how Allah doth make His
signs clear to them; Yet see in what ways They are deluded Away from the
truth! (Surah 5:75)

He said: "I am indeed A servant of Allah: He hath given me a revelation and
made me A prophet. (Surah 19: 31)

And We made The son of Mary and His mother As a sign. We gave them both Shelter on high ground, affording rest and security And furnished with springs. (Surah 23:50)

But this is still not the full picture of Jesus revealed in the Bible. Jesus is a teacher, of course, but so much more.

Christian Ideas Difficult For Muslims To Accept

It is difficult for Muslims to understand the Christians' deep faith in Jesus as Savior. But that God became man to save sinners (the Incarnation) is the most difficult tenet for Muslims to accept.² Christians speak of Jesus, who is the only One who both knows our life and our true needs. Because Christians recognize their own failures to do God's will – sin – Christians confess that only God Himself can help them.

We have a chief priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. He was tempted in every way that we are, but he didn't sin. So we can go confidently to the throne of God's kindness to receive mercy and find kindness, which will help us at the right time (Hebrews 4:15- 16, GOD'S WORD).

Coming in our helplessness to God in prayer, we seek God's mercy and kindness. At His throne of grace there is forgiveness. Forgiveness is His gift to us. God gives it because Jesus, humanity's representative and savior, is the one mediator between people and God. The Christian knows that while people can pray for us, only God can do the redeeming.

There is one God. There is also one mediator between God and humans. He sacrificed himself for all people to free them from their sins. This message is valid for every era. (1 Timothy 2:5-6, GOD'S WORD)

The hardest idea for Muslims to understand is the idea that Jesus is God in the flesh. As mentioned above, Christians believe that Jesus "was conceived by the Holy Spirit." Moreover,

Jesus' prefers life and obedient death on a cross as a substitute for all humanity, and His sacrifice is beneficial for all people.

By trusting Jesus as Savior, Christians believe that sinners receive the gift of a blessed life eternal. Such eternal blessing is not the result of their own deeds, no matter how good these deeds are. Paradise is a gift of God given to all who turn in trust to Jesus Christ to save them. This gift of faith and salvation from God is undeserved.

3.0 Additional Resources

More Information

POBLO is a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod ministry that shares the Gospel with Muslims. They can put you in touch with various resources. Contact:

Rev. Randy Duncan
People of the Book Lutheran Outreach
35001 Michigan Ave.
Westland, MI 48184
(734) 467-6256

Books

There are numerous good books written about the relationships between Christians and Muslims and how to share your faith with Muslims. The following are just two. You may not agree with everything they say, but they are very good starting points:

Cragg, Kenneth. Call of the Minaret. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1992.
Dretke, James. A Christian Approach to Muslims. Pasadena, Calif.:
Wm. Carey Library, 1979.

² The incarnation is the Christian doctrine that Jesus "who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary" (Apostles' Creed).

Both of these books are available at the Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne bookstore. Telephone (219) 452-2160.

4.0 References Cited

Ali, Yusuf. The Meaning of the Holy *Qu'ran*. Brentwood, Maryland: Amana Corporation, 1992.

Griffin, Tasleem K. "Within the Sheltering Peace." Islamic Circle of North America.

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