

**EVANGELISM AMONGST MUSLIMS:
A SPECTRUM OF APPROACHES
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I. INTRODUCTION

Within the contemporary Christian church there are a wide spectrum of beliefs and attitudes towards non-Christian religions in general and Islam in particular. One could plot a number of points along such a spectrum but the two polar opposites on it could be described like this:

- **Pluralist:** other religions are seen as alternative manifestations of God's truth, thus Jesus and the gospel are just one path to salvation among any. This view is not just common in the secular West but even among certain groups in the Christian Church. Here is the Anglican Priest, Clinton Bennett:

Is there any possibility that we are faced not with a choice between rivals [Muhammad or Jesus] but with complementary exemplars, both rooted in divine self-disclosure? ... I do not know how the Qur'an was communicated by God through Muhammad, but I can accept that it was.¹

- **Exclusivist:** the belief that the gospel message of Jesus alone possesses divinely revealed truth and a path to salvation. Here, for example, is Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali

As Christians, we long for the day when all men will repent of their evil and come to a knowledge of God as revealed in the 'open secret' of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that only Christ can assuage the spiritual hunger which is so often seen in the Muslim world today.²

As evangelicals, we would of course want to affirm the latter position and reject the former; not only because it is blatantly non-biblical and stands outside of historical mainstream Christianity, but also because of many logical and philosophical problems with pluralism, including:

- i. Claiming that all religions have equal truth-value is to effectively admit that all of them are false and/or meaningless.
- ii. Pluralism is deeply bigoted, it says "we can be friends if you think like me".
- iii. It is philosophical contradictory, claiming that all religious claims to exclusive truth are false except its own. Thus it is inherently contradictory.

However, once one accepts the need to present the Gospel to Muslims — which, of course, we all do here today, there are important missiological discussions to be had concerning the *best* way to do that — and that is the purpose of this workshop/section of the seminar.

¹ Clinton Bennett cited in Peter G. Riddell, *Christians and Muslims: Pressures and Potential in a Post-9/11 World* (Leicester: IVP, 2004) p. 116

² Michael Nazir-Ali, *Islam: A Christian Perspective* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1983) p. 166.

2. THE DIALOGUE-DEBATE AXIS

DIALOGUE

In recent decades, there has been an increasing move in missiological circles that sees the best approach to mission to other religions — especially to Islam — as being one of **dialogue**. There have been a number of key names behind this but perhaps the scholar most associated with the dialogue model is **Colin Chapman**. Chapman and others argue that there are four key principles that lie behind a dialogue approach to other religions. These were first laid out at the interfaith section of the Anglican Conference at Lambeth in 1988.

- **Dialogue begins when people meet people.**

Central to a dialogue approach to Islam is the importance of getting Muslims and Christians to sit down with one another, to listen to each other's point of view and beliefs — generally each side is not encouraged to make criticisms of the other.

- **Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding, mutual respect and mutual trust.**

Muslims often have deep suspicions of Christians, not least because they tend to equate “Christian” with “Western” and therefore equate Christianity with e.g. American foreign policies, the excesses of Western culture and so forth. Dialogue requires time to be taken to build up trust on both sides so that proper listening can take place.

- **Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community.**

Christians and Muslims often share many similar concerns with relation to community and society and proponents of the dialogue model have often sought to find ways in which both faiths can stand together on issues. For example, after the war in Afghanistan, a group of churches and mosques in Leicester worked together to raise funds for Save the Children working in Afghanistan.

- **Dialogue becomes a medium of authentic witness**

Dialogue proponents are not automatically pluralists: this needs to be stressed extremely firmly. There are many evangelicals who would advocate this approach to Islam, arguing that it builds bridges of friendship and trust across which the gospel can be presented. Kenneth Cragg, an early advocate of dialogue who has written many books building theological connectors between Christianity and Islam was clear in his desire for Muslims to find Jesus, yet believed bridges needed to be built first.

There are many strengths with a dialogue approach to Islam that we would want to affirm. The centrality of relationship and trust building are very important — especially since so many Muslims distrust Christians for a wide range of reasons. But we also need to critique a dialogue approach: if one never asks the difficult questions, are we being authentic? Are we prepared to challenge as well as listen? And with a dialogue approach there is a danger that the desire to build friendship can eclipse the goal of introducing people to Jesus.

DEBATE

At the other end of the spectrum of approaches lies the debate approach. This is one that Jay will shortly give you a lot more information on, especially its historical uses — arguably it has only been neglected in recent times. It is now increasing being revived, through the likes of Jay and others, who argue that boldness, challenge and debate are the approach needed to reach Islam, especially the more radical Muslims who one would probably never find in a dialogue setting. There are a number of key principles to a dialogue approach:

- It recognises that the differences between Islam and Christianity need to be highlighted, or one runs the risk of collapsing into a warm, fuzzy “people of faith” morass.
- It advocates the importance of asking difficult and challenging questions of Muslims — challenging them on the Qur’an, the prophethood of Muhammad, and a range of other issues. This is not all one way — debate proponents likewise welcome Muslim challenges to Christianity because, by means of good apologetics, these challenges can be defended. In short, a debate approach can be pictured as a clash not of civilisations, *ala* Samuel Huntington, but of worldviews.
- A debate approach recognises that we need to go where the Muslims *are*, not wait for them to come to our dialogue sessions. One of the perceived weaknesses of dialogue-based approaches is that often only the more moderate, sometimes even nominal, Muslims will come to interfaith meetings or events, whilst the radicals, the traditionalists stay away. But debate advocates are willing to go to Speakers’ Corner, the mosques, the Muslim meetings on campus.
- The debate model is also built upon the observation that to the Muslim mindset, the *manner* in which a conversation is carried out can be as important as the *content*. Many Muslims think Christianity old and irrelevant not least because they believe Christians don’t believe their own faith. With the media full of stories of homosexual ordinations, polite dialogue sessions with firm presentations or rebuttals simply reinforce the idea that Christians are weak. Whereas debate shows that we are passionate for what we believe, prepared to stand up and defend it.

The debate model also has a number of important strengths, especially in its recognition of the way that Muslims judge truth by the way it is presented. It also avoids the risk of pluralism that dialogue runs, since it is built upon a proper appreciation of the respective truth claims of Islam and Christianity and, most importantly, *their differences*. But there are weaknesses too. There is a danger that the central thing in the debate can become *winning*, not presenting the gospel. Moderate Muslims can be put off, as can some Christians. It also requires a greater knowledge-base in its practitioners than a dialogue model.

3. CONCLUSIONS

There has been a lot of recent debate in missiological circles about the relative value of dialogue or debate and at times it has been quite heated. Colin Chapman, for example, will hear nothing of debate — for him it is disrespectful to Muslims and dialogue is the only approach. Yet if tough questions are not asked at any level, are we not doing our Muslim friends a deep disservice?

It will come as no surprise that I advocate a spectrum of approaches to Muslim evangelism — in short, any missiological strategy that seeks to build on purely debate or dialogue will be a poor one. Context is all important; if you live next door to a Muslim, then dialogue is the way to go, building a lasting friendship and trust first. If you’re a Christian CU on a campus with a large ISOC, then

debate is going to be an important tool. The two strategies are also complementary: debate approaches can raise difficult questions for the Muslims who encounter them, questions that ideally trusted Christian friends can then work through more gently with them. Jesus comfortably worked with both approaches — an interesting observation here is Nicodemus the Pharisee; if not he himself, certainly his peers must have been on the receiving end of Jesus' polemic. Yet this leads to Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night and here Jesus adopts more of a dialogue approach, engaging Nicodemus in a discussion that, nevertheless, does not duck the difficult issues.

Christian engagement with Muslims is still very much in its infancy, especially among Muslims here in the west. Churches need to develop a well-stocked tool kit to meet the challenges and opportunities ahead.