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meeting face to face



Hello! How are you?” This was a speaker’s short answer to a student who asked: “How should I approach a Muslim?” No doubt the questioner had a particular idea in mind of what Muslims are like, and felt some need to learn special techniques for communicating with them.

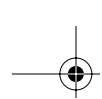
The short answer sums up the basic point: we approach Muslims as human beings. We meet them as people before we meet them as Muslims. We greet them as individuals with a name before we think of them as representatives of a great world religion. We extend the hand of friendship as neighbors before we self-consciously announce that we are Christians.

Perhaps it is a sad reflection on the state of the Western Christian world that something as obvious as this needs to be said! But unless it is understood and put to practice, all our study of Islam and all the talk about sharing our faith with Muslims is worthless.

STARTING WHERE WE ARE

Where we are presently in contact with Muslims, we may need to take stock of our situation and think how we can build on the relationships that we already have. Whom do we know? What is the context in which we meet? How well do we know each other? What kind of relationships do we have—do we know each other as neighbors, colleagues at work, teachers, students or casual acquaintances?





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If we do not already have any natural contact with Muslims in our own situation, we may need to ask ourselves some questions. Are there any situations where we could get to know any Muslims in a natural way—talking with other parents at school events, or chatting with colleagues at work, or being involved in some kind of social work in the community, for example? The great advantage of relationships of this kind is that they can be utterly natural; there need not be anything forced or artificial about them. If we have no such contacts in our different situations, are there ways in which we can take the initiative and go out to meet Muslims—for instance, by visiting a mosque or a Muslim bookshop, by talking to a Muslim shopkeeper or by inviting a Muslim student to our home? If we do decide to take initiatives like these, we need to be aware of our motives. Is it pure curiosity? Are we wanting to be good neighbors? Are we wanting to “share the gospel” with them? All of these motives can be good and appropriate in their own way. But it can be valuable for us to put our motives to words and discuss them with others.



THE SECRET OF REAL DIALOGUE

Assuming, then, that we have some kind of intersection with Muslims, where we can get to know them as people, are we aiming at anything more?

A description of Jesus in the temple at the age of twelve gives us a picture of what is involved in any genuine dialogue that gets beneath the surface. Jesus’ parents find him “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers” (Luke 2:46-47 RSV). It is obvious that Jesus’ relating in this way to the religious leaders of Judaism is not exactly comparable to Christians’ relating to their Muslim neighbors. But Luke’s brief picture shows us what is involved in any meeting of minds when people are exploring each other’s faith.

Jesus would have learned his faith in the home and the synagogue. But now he is in the capital city, talking to some of the religious leaders of Judaism. He is sitting among them and listening to what they are teaching. He





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genuinely wants to know what they think and how they teach the faith of their fathers. When he asks questions, it is not to trip them up and embarrass them but to draw them out to real dialogue. What impresses the observers about Jesus is that he seems to have understanding (as distinct from intelligence or knowledge) and is able to grasp the important issues. When he offers answers, therefore, it is in response to actual questions which people are asking.

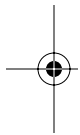
What would it mean to see this as a model for dialogue between Christians and Muslims? "Sitting among them" might mean visiting Muslims in their homes, or spending time with them socially. For a student in a university or college it might mean gathering courage to attend meetings of the Islamic Society and getting to know Muslim students. For Christians who have grown up as members of a minority community in a Muslim country overseas, it might mean working through their fears and trying to relax a little more in the company of Muslims.

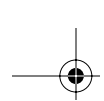
"Listening" could mean not just finding out about the faith of Muslim friends and neighbors but getting to know and understand them as people. In some cases it could mean reading a magazine, tract or book offered by a Muslim friend, going to a Muslim bookshop or watching a video about Islam in a Muslim home. Asking questions may at first produce very basic and elementary answers. But as we continue to probe gently, it should become obvious that we are not trying to score points but doing all we can to see the world as Muslims see it.

If this kind of deeper exchange is going to be fruitful, we will need that understanding which enables us to discern the most important issues. And if we reach the stage of being able to offer any answers, they will then be answering genuine questions in the minds of Muslims and not simply the questions that we think they ought to be asking.

GREETINGS

The problem for most of us is that we find it hard to break the ice, and for reasons that are perfectly understandable, we are reluctant to cross barriers of language, culture and religion.





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Muslims all over the world, whatever their mother tongue, are taught the following Arabic greeting: one person says *assalamu 'alaikum* ("Peace be on you"), and the other replies *wa'alaikum assalam* ("And on you be peace"). Why not learn the greeting, whatever country we are living in, and use it to greet any Muslims we meet? Some may not be pleased to hear Christians using a greeting generally thought to be a greeting for fellow Muslims. But others will be pleasantly surprised to be greeted in this way by non-Muslims, and delighted to feel that we have taken the trouble to learn something that is part of their religion and their culture. And it could be even more significant for ourselves if we discover that greetings are more than a mere formality; they convey something about our whole attitude toward another person.

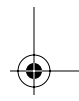
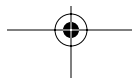
VISITING

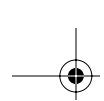
Most Westerners think of their homes as a place of retreat for privacy, and they feel they are intruding if they call on someone without an invitation. This is not, however, the mentality of the East and most of the Muslim world. An Egyptian sums up the way most Easterners think about the custom of visiting in this way: "You honor people more by visiting them in their homes than by inviting them to yours."

In this respect it is probably true to say that it is we in the West who are out of step with the rest of the world. Throughout the East, in Africa and in Latin America, hospitality is regarded almost as a sacred duty. If someone visits me in my home, I must drop whatever I am doing, however urgent I think it is, because welcoming and entertaining my guests has priority over every other obligation. I will offer them something to drink and perhaps even something to eat, and they will have to think twice before refusing what I offer.

What might this mean in practice in relating to Muslims? It may mean that I need to put aside Western ideas of etiquette. So if I meet a Muslim and want to get to know him or her better, it might be natural to say, "Can I visit you in your home?" rather than "Would you like to come over?"

Once we begin to feel relaxed and comfortable in the homes of our Muslim friends, it will be natural to think of other occasions when visits would





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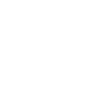
be appropriate. What about visiting, for example, during a Muslim feast? And why not visit after the birth of a child, when someone has returned from a journey, or during a time of celebration or bereavement?

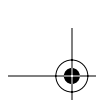
Another way to meet Muslims is to visit a mosque (see chapter four). With some mosques it is wise to make an appointment before you go, but in most mosques in the West this is not necessary. Visitors are welcome at almost any time.

If we want to work out in advance where all our visiting is going to lead, the chances are that there is still something wrong in our own attitudes. In the teaching of Jesus, the command to love our neighbors is prior to the command to go out and make disciples of all the nations. It makes little sense to calculate how we are going to share the gospel with our Muslim neighbors if we have not begun to know them, love them and care for them as our neighbors. There needs to be genuine meeting between people.

But how does this emphasis on relationships work out in practice? The following three quotations come from entirely different situations and illustrate different kinds of response to initiatives in friendship. In the first, Roger Hooker describes an important breakthrough in his attempts to get to know his Muslim neighbors while he was working in India:

When we came to live in Bareilly in October 1968 I determined to make contact with the Muslim community, which was obviously a large one. But how to set about it? In Agra I had once paid a visit to the Jama Masjid, but had been asked to leave after about 10 minutes. In Allahabad I had asked a durzi if I could visit his mosque to watch the worship, but this was not allowed. Soon after we got to Bareilly I wrote to the principal of the local Muslim college to ask if I could see round his institution, but I got no reply. One afternoon in February 1969, in sheer desperation, I went for a walk in the old city and climbed the steps of the first mosque I came to. I asked if I could see the maulana. After some time he appeared and asked me what I wanted. I said that I wanted to see round his mosque. He showed me round but of course there was not very much to see, so he invited me to sit down and have a cup of tea. We chatted for about half an hour.





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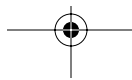
He asked me who I was and what I was doing in India. I told him I was a missionary. He said that he, too, had wanted to be a missionary in Africa but his parents wouldn't let him go. We also discovered that we each had a son of the same age and that our respective wives were expecting a second child. As I went down the mosque steps he asked me to come again. For me this was one of the most thrilling moments I had known since arriving in India four years before. At last I had managed to penetrate to the house of Islam, and had met a Muslim as a fellow human being.¹

The second quotation comes from a Muslim who had been welcoming groups of Christian students to his mosque in a British city over a period of years. At the end of a helpful time of questions and discussion, someone said to him: "Would you and any of your community be interested in visiting a church or coming to our college to hear how we understand our faith?" The answer was polite but clear:

There are too few of us looking after our own community, and we don't really have the time to meet with people of other faiths. What's more, it might be confusing for any Muslims who are not sure of their faith. But for those of us who are sure about our faith, there's nothing we can learn from Christians, because it's all there in the Qur'an. We've got it all in Islam.

The third quotation is from an Arabic-speaking Christian from the Middle East living and working in another country in the region, who describes his experience of mixing with his friends and colleagues during the month of Ramadan:

The month of Ramadan has just finished. Particularly on this occasion I am having first-class contact with Islam and its practices. The legalism, the Judaism, salvation by works and hypocrisy is *[sic]* just killing. Being invited to so many dinners, I eat so much during this month, but also suffer so much spiritually. I find myself completely helpless being evangelized rather than evangelizing. It is a faith so much rooted





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in the hearts of people. Anything else contradicting their Book is “false” because God has actually and verbally spoken.

This person had moved beyond superficial contacts to begin to get beneath the surface. He had also discovered that there is nothing romantic in dialogue at this deeper level; he had begun to experience some of the pain involved in relating face to face.

