

PART 4: BOOK REVIEWS

THE MESSENGER, THE MESSAGE AND THE COMMUNITY: Three Critical Issues for the Cross-cultural Church-planter

Roland Muller (pseudonym). Published by CanBooks, 2006. 394 pages.

Available from Fellowship of Faith for Muslims [www.ffmpegna.org]. The book is currently out of print but available on a CD from <http://rmuller.com>.

‘This is the best book I’ve read on evangelism among Muslims. Roland understands us!’ exclaimed a believer from a Muslim background (BMB) from Washington State who intentionally went to Vancouver Missionfest to meet the author of *Tools for Muslim Evangelism*. Most of its contents are now included in this new book. Roland echoes how some of us felt when we first started in cross-cultural ministries. He writes, ‘When I first arrived in the Middle East in the late 1970s, I started asking, “How do I do it?” No one seemed to have any concrete answers. There was no one to point to and say, “They know how to do it!” Consequently, each new missionary developed his own approach by trial and error, often with more error than success.’ Not only in this section but throughout the whole book, Roland shares useful insights he has gained and observed in pursuing his research and ministry.

In this review, I will focus on four helpful themes that particularly apply to my ministry to Muslims and believers from Muslim backgrounds.

I. Teacher-based evangelism

The chapter on ‘Teacher-Based Evangelism’ is my favourite. Roland addresses the difference between friendship evangelism and teacher-based evangelism. In the East, friendships are lifelong commitments. What few of us understood at the beginning of our cross-cultural experience was that authentic and mutual friendships like these are not easy to develop and the expectations from a friend are much greater than in typical western friendships. Roland discusses some of the pitfalls in making ‘friendship evangelism’ our primary strategy. For example, we may delay sharing the gospel or initiating a spiritual discussion lest it terminates the relationship. Many find that friendship evangelism fits hand in hand with the modern concept of tentmaking. Tentmakers may be cautious about projecting themselves as trained religious workers/teachers and adopt a secular identity in the community.

On the other hand, Roland states that ‘in every case the successful evangelists had the reputation in their own communities of being

spiritual people, men and women of God.’ He observes that even non-Christian neighbours knew where to go, or direct others, to address questions about spiritual matters. I was challenged with the idea that in teacher-based evangelism, evangelists have an agenda when dealing with Muslims; otherwise Muslims will try to impose their agenda on us.

2. Dealing with the two faces of a believer

Eastern cultures and Islam allow and sometimes encourage duplicity. So a very relevant topic in discipleship of a BMB is the matter of the two worlds that a new convert lives in or, as stated in the book, he develops two faces. On the one hand, the new believer welcomes Christianity, fellowship, Bible teaching, etc. but on the other hand, he lives in his community with parents, relatives, spouse and children and may even pretend to be a good Muslim. As he continues living in two worlds, he is left with great tension. This may even lead to mental instability. With the work of the Holy Spirit and help from a wise discipler, the new believer learns how to integrate the two worlds and finds freedom in Christ.

3. Going beyond a guilt/innocent paradigm

Roland points out that between the first two and the last two chapters of the Bible all of humanity lives under the influence of and is tainted by sin. ‘The only reason that the Christian missionary enterprise exists today is

because sin exists.’ Roland comments that missionaries, who know that the cure for sin is ultimately found in Jesus Christ, have neglected to spend much time unwrapping sin’s effects.

In short, during Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, they experienced guilt or conscience for the first time. They never felt shame and fear before. Being evicted from the Garden added to their shame. Muller assists us in understanding how to share the gospel message with people living under world views that have a strong focus on *shame*, *fear* as well as *guilt*. Roland points out that no one world view is better than another because all are trying to negate sin’s effects. He insists that the Bible speaks to all cultures and world views. If we dig deep enough, humanity is affected in all three areas: shame, fear and guilt. Writers of the New Testament were influenced by the Roman culture and law. Early church fathers like Tertullian and Augustine developed theologies based on guilt and righteousness. Roland says that, ‘The danger comes when we Westerners take our Roman understanding of the Gospel and apply it to those who do not have a Roman-based culture.’

Many of us, when first immersed in the shame-based world view of the Muslim world, learned very quickly how honour and shame permeate society. Honour is viewed as the biggest asset in the East and it is not easily restored once lost. In Christ, we have many illustrations of how

God ‘raises mankind from a position of shame to the ultimately honourable position of joint-heirs with Christ.’

Western evangelicals often struggle with the role of the supernatural. We may fail to understand or even question the validity of curses, power encounters, dreams and visions in the life of a Muslim seeker or BMB. Yet, this dimension of life is ‘real’ for many non-western seekers and believers. While these issues are not fully addressed in this book, principles are laid down for opening up ministry to satisfy these deep needs.

4. Developing wholesome communities where BMBs fit

In the last section of this book, Roland explores the subject of the importance of biblical community. He observes that sometimes new workers are more confident than the experienced workers about how to do church planting and form community. He rightfully observes that the new church-planter should be conscious of the community he envisions, even before evangelism is initiated.

Westerners may be strong in attempting to contextualize their message but they are often weak in creating an alternative community for new believers. A new brother or sister will struggle to leave a close-knit *Umma* and be afraid of feeling isolated in a new community. This affects how discipleship takes place – at times, the new believer may just want to hang out with his new friends or in a Christian home.

The whole matter of belonging is important to Eastern communities – much more so than in the West. In the East, bonding and closeness are very important.

‘The Bible encourages us to build communities of believers, where “nearness” is based on faith in Christ rather than blood relations’ (p. 273). Western Christians subconsciously accept that evangelism moves on a continuum to discipleship and finally to joining a Christian community. ‘In many cases, the non-Western seeker will want the question of community to be dealt with first, or at least alongside that of personal faith’ (p. 351). The process is sometimes reversed to Community (belonging), Discipleship (exploring) and then Evangelism (accepting). Here we have a case of pre-evangelism discipleship! We have to allow for the seeker sitting among us to ‘sniff’ out this new community before he moves on to a decision.

Concluding Comments

I highly recommend this book with its trilogy of significant topics (the messenger, the message and the community) for all who are beginning a cross-cultural ministry to Muslims and BMBs. Pertinent questions for reflection and discussion at the end of each chapter also help make this book a good refresher for experienced practitioners. Roland shares best practices in Muslim evangelism and discipleship gleaned from years of his own and others’

ministries. I believe the application of the principles highlighted in this book will accelerate a new worker's effectiveness.

I see a couple of slight weaknesses in this book. First, Roland Muller interjects thoughts for evangelists involved with people from other faiths and cultures besides Islam and the East. It would have been less disruptive to retain its original flavour or focus on reaching Muslims. Secondly, the section dealing with fear-power

paradigm is brief and incomplete in light of it being a dominant concern for many Muslims, especially women.

After reading Roland's book, we need to ask, 'How can I grow in these three critical issues in the ministry I am part of?' The western church knows how to nurture church planters for western society but is lacking in its ability to develop cross-cultural evangelists and church planters. This book is a valuable resource.

reviewed by Ed Loewen

Ed directs AWM Canada's outreach to Muslims, and, along with his wife, he has been involved in ministry to Muslims for his entire adult life – first in Pakistan and then in Canada.

GRACE FOR MUSLIMS? THE JOURNEY FROM FEAR TO FAITH

Steve Bell (Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2006).

While not offering any insights that are substantially new to the subject of how to reach Muslims in western societies, Steve Bell, the author of *Grace for Muslims*, needs to be listened to, nevertheless. He served in the Middle East for over a decade with the express purpose of sharing faith with Muslims, was the director of Action Partners Ministries (formerly Sudan United Mission) and is presently the UK Director of InterServe.

It is not his intention in this book to reveal the emotions and value struggles we often associate with reverse

culture shock, but it is evident that Steve has more affinity for Arab culture than for his own British culture, and that he experienced a clash of values that became most pronounced when he returned to the UK after many years of service in Egypt. Not surprisingly, his empathy towards Muslims shines through as he encourages Christians to extend grace to them by starting with building genuine friendships with those who misunderstand and are misunderstood in the Arab diaspora. I like the point he makes with regard to establishing friendships as a starting point in evangelism: 'What is