

PART 3

A SUNNI WOMAN'S HEART – PART 6

ISLAM MUST BE RIGHT!

by Tahira

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For the devout, religion is the glue that holds life together in a system of meaning. Without that glue, life falls apart, and the world dissolves into chaos and confusion. To present the Gospel to a Muslim woman is to threaten the foundations of her existence. This article explores why this is so, and what can be done to help her consider rebuilding her life on Jesus, the Rock.

Barriers

Pride in the rightness of Islam prevents Muslim women from considering objections to Islam honestly. Among my Muslim friends, intrinsic to the definition of truth is the strongly felt notion that truth will always bring honour to God, which for them is the same as bringing honour to Islam. Furthermore, there is social and religious pressure to accept Islam as an indivisible package, where the questioning or rejection of one part is a failure to submit, that is, a failure to be a good Muslim. The women so want to believe in the rightness of this system, which gives their lives meaning and structure, that they readily accept 'scientific proofs' of Islam, which are highly dubious or of which they are incapable of judging the validity.¹ They dismiss, with equal ignorance, any empirical evidence that raises questions about the truth of Islam.

In addition to their own need to believe Islam is true, logical, and superior, Muslim women are pressured by their communities to maintain an unquestioning attitude when it comes to Islam. They are aware that any questioning could result in their being called *kafir* (infidel), making them vulnerable to the punishment of the community. Other belief systems are caricatured and summarily dismissed by the Muslim community. I heard one Muslim woman telling others, 'If you ask anyone (*non-Muslim*) for evidence of their religion, for scientific (or *scholarly*) evidence برهان علمی no one can give any evidence.' Very few Muslim women have heard a Christian apologetic given by a Christian, but only by Muslims with a vested interest in presenting Christianity as illogical and inferior to Islam.

The women of this religious community have deeply embedded prejudices against Christian beliefs, practices and people, and these prejudices hinder the formation of relationships with Christians. The same prejudices diminish the plausibility of anything or anybody related to Christianity. Foundational to these prejudices is the notion that Christians exist to show the superiority of Islam in one of two ways: either they applaud it and thereby confirms its truth or rebel against it and thereby show themselves inferior to Muslims, who have submitted to the truth. These are the two models of Christians Muslims know from Muhammad's interactions with Christians. The relative complexity of Christian doctrine presents a very great barrier, and Christians have failed to offer comprehensible theological explanations to Muslims of such basic Christian teachings, as the deity of Jesus, the Trinity and justification by faith.

Bridges

Christians and Muslims share many beliefs about the normative nature of revelation and about the nature of truth (especially that contradictory 'revelations' cannot both be right). Islam's roots in Judaism and Christianity provide a great deal of overlap in specific beliefs. We also share many concerns about the effect of modern science on faith, and particularly faith in the reliability of revelation. Both are open, in theory at least, to consider scientific evidences, but both are rightly reluctant to give science the final word in the light of God's sovereignty. Both communities rely overtly upon reason and wish to appear reasonable and tolerant to the other.

Fault lines

There are a plethora of contradictions between Islam and science, Islam and reason and Islam and itself. Someone from this subculture who discovers one or more of these contradictions and is honest enough with herself to admit the discrepancy will be highly disconcerted and looking for resolution.

Some aspects of Islam sit uneasily with other cherished values. Among these values, the affirmation of women is probably the one about which women from this population feel most strongly and which they are most willing to discuss with outsiders. The sense of superiority and rightness that characterizes these women is at odds with their self-professed commitment to humility and tolerance, qualities that they know to be essential to the survival of humanity. In particular, there is an unacknowledged tension between the claim that Islam does not deny the Gospel and the vigorous denial of many of the foundational teachings of the Gospel.

Worthy of Observation

Although it is far from the norm, some will quietly question what they have been taught. It is worth looking for people who show signs of inner struggle between

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maintaining reverence for God and determination to know the truth. Vehemence in defending Islam may mask doubts. One should be especially alert for questions that suggest the person is genuinely seeking to grasp truth. Prejudices have to be challenged on the basis of truth, of course, but it might help the challenge if it were supported by some other cherished value, such as the honour of Islam, 'tolerance,' submission, God's honour, or the affirmation of women.²

Islam is meant to provide a system of meaning, which guides the life of Muslims. It makes sense to be sensitive to women who fail to find the meaning they seek in Islam, especially when emotional needs go unmet along with the intellectual. Examples might include, the Hajji who comes back dissatisfied from what should have been the highlight of her spiritual life, or a bereaved woman who cannot find the profound comfort she needs simply in accepting the will of a distant Judge. Expressions of dissatisfaction will almost always be subtle.

Missional Strategies

The ideal would be for Muslims to recognize for themselves the inconsistencies of Islam. Muslim women are unlikely to do so because they do not want to lose the intellectual, social and moral structure of Islam, which provides a sense of security and meaning for their lives. Their deeply engrained prejudices against any alternative system of meaning compounds their unwillingness to allow themselves to ask foundational questions. Nevertheless, a worker may be able to foster honest doubts by humbly asking sincere questions and explaining why he or she is not convinced of Islam. The claims of Islam's reasonableness could be used as an opportunity for queries. What is good need not be defended by lies or faulty reasoning.

A woman from this subculture who has the courage to doubt is likely to be highly conflicted and in emotional pain. This situation calls for persistent, confidential, sensitive and supportive ministry to help this person seek the truth with courage. Triumphalism should be avoided. Muslims should be challenged to pray for light and to seek truth fearlessly, because God is sovereign and true.

Muslims who raise questions about Christian beliefs should receive concise and respectful answers, which explain clearly, raise a more foundational question or keep the conversation open. The use of proverbs and metaphors may be helpful, but only if understood by the hearer. Answers given should have the backing of biblical authority not just one's own opinion. An opportunity of long-term witness might be gained by providing a Bible and offering to study it together. There is a need for attractive pamphlets or DVDs, which give short answers to common questions.³

Muslims will find answers more plausible when they seem in keeping with sources of authority they trust. It is therefore appropriate to use the Qur'an, the Hadith, science, simple philosophy and the best of popular culture to reinforce, but not supersede, the authority of Scripture. However, such appeals need to be done with integrity, not manipulating isolated facts or verses. Believers in Jesus who answer questions put to them should be aware that intellectual questions often cloak emotional, social and spiritual agendas.

Although personal testimony might easily be dismissed on intellectual grounds, most Muslim women are empathetic and find it hard to deny the personal experience of another woman, especially when that woman is clearly devout and seeking to honour God. It may be effective to explain why faith in Jesus has given one's own life meaning, or the joy of serving God from a motive of gratitude (as against earning), or to speak of one's intimacy with a knowable God.

Conclusion

Jesus said of himself, 'I am the Truth.' This is an audacious claim, one which challenges everyone who finds ultimate meaning in any system, including Islam and Christianity, rather than in the Person of Jesus. While Muslim women have a right to hear from us clear, concise and well-supported reasons for the hope that is in us, few of them are really interested in our apologetics. More than anything else it is the experience of encountering Jesus himself which will give some Muslim women the power to stop clinging to their tightly woven belief structure that cannot save.

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- 1 Consider, for example, the following quotations. 'Every prophet must show a miracle to prove his divine authority. Our Master Muhammad split the moon in two. This was witnessed by people in other countries, not just in Arabia. You can still see the crack if you look carefully. Scientists are amazed that our Master Muhammad could do this as such a feat requires great heat and power.' 'The change of the qibla was from God, not people. One proof of this is that scientists have recently discovered that the Ka'aba is located over the exact centre of the earth.'
 - 2 For example, in addition to providing evidence for the basic textual integrity of the New Testament, one might appeal to God's honour in preserving his word.
 - 3 Many pithy answers are available on the Internet or from agencies (like Christian broadcasting networks), which answer thousands of questions annually. However, it cannot be assumed that an answer designed for another person or context is appropriate to the immediate need.