

PART 2: BOOK REVIEWS

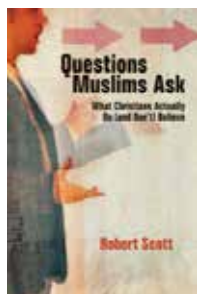
Questions Muslims Ask: What Christians Actually Do (and Don't) Believe

By Robert Scott

Published in the UK by IVP, 2011 as

Dear Abdullah – Eight questions Muslim people ask about Christianity

This book has a distinct flavour that sets it apart from the flood of Christian books on Islam that has almost inundated the market in recent years. It begins with the author's intention that this book be read by both interested Christians and curious Muslims. What an enquiring, open-minded Muslim would make of the book I am not sure. To explain one of the consequences of this objective let me digress.



A year ago, Interserve (UK) released an equipping DVD based upon Steve Bell's book, 'Friendship First', which bears the same title. (An excellent tool!) Its subtitle is, 'Ordinary Christians discussing **good news** with ordinary Muslims'. One of the course's six sessions has an assignment in which participants are invited to write a 1,000 word outline explaining the gospel to a Muslim. The purpose of the homework is to encourage people to use words, phrases and ideas that would be readily comprehensible, theologically and culturally, to the Muslim hearer. In many places, Robert's book reads like a polished and much more erudite version of several assignments lovingly proffered by course students.

His use of the phrase Jesus the Messiah to describe Christ, Rescuer as a synonym for Saviour, and eternal rest for eternal life are examples. The limited feedback from the local 'Friendship First' alumni is that they have found such language accessible to their Muslim friends.

The second distinctive would be that Robert draws extensively not only on his personal interactions with Muslims and believers from Muslim backgrounds (BMBs) but from the 'approach' called, 'Meetings for Better Understanding'.⁸ These non-polemical, non-confrontational meetings provide the opportunity for Christians to learn more about Islam and how ordinary Muslims practice their religion but they also challenge Christians to explain Christian essentials in user-friendly language.

The third distinctive is that there are some new insightful nuggets in communicating the gospel to Muslims, which come through seeing the Scriptures through Muslim objections. For example, I have never come across the proposed parallel

8. *Meetings for Better Understanding*, a book explaining this approach, is available at www.cepbookstore.com.[†]

between the ‘unlettered’ Muhammad and the carpenter from Nazareth when dealing with the Muslim-claimed ‘miracle’ of the Qur’an (144-145).

The fourth distinctive is that some of the chapter titles are arresting. What do I mean? Rather than using traditional Christian phrasing for the predictable Muslim objections to Christian truths Robert uses unexpected expressions, e.g., ‘What sort of God can be born as a baby?’ It is illustrative of the author’s desire to attract the attention of a potential Muslim reader while retaining his focus on the person and character of God. The seasoned reader is very aware that Muslims have very little to say or write about God (look around a Muslim bookshop). This book reminds us that in our ‘good news’ sharing we need to keep returning to the God who has made himself known throughout Biblical history and is active today. Robert is strong on Covenant and the God who makes himself known personally. (Chapter 1)

So what are you getting?

Eight, 20-page chapters keep the reader thirsty for more. At the end of each chapter Robert summarizes the chapter in three bulleted ‘Key Points’ and offers six bulleted questions, three ‘For followers of Jesus the Messiah’ and three ‘For Muslim friends’. The questions would be particularly good to use in a mixed Christian-Muslim study group.

Robert is unequivocal about his Christian faith and the authority of Scripture (17-18). In a section on methodology he writes, ‘I also shied away from using the Qur’an too much because it isn’t “my” book’ (18). Where he quotes Qur’anic verses and associated Muslim commentary his inferences remind us of interpretive chinks in the Qur’anic text but break no new ground, e.g., Surah 5:43-46 on the authority of the Old and New Testaments (136).

Robert looks at some other areas that are sometimes omitted in our exchanges with Muslims. Chapter 2 is entitled, ‘Don’t Christians Only Do Sundays?’ and looks at 24/7 Christianity. Chapter 6 is entitled, ‘Where Does Christianity End and Western Culture Begin?’ and considers how knowing Jesus the Messiah transforms attitudes to food, clothes etc. He writes in a later chapter, ‘that Islam seems often tied to one culture and one time’ (145).

In addition to addressing ‘The Big Four’ (p. 13) – Jesus did not die on a cross; Jesus is neither the Son of God nor divine; the Trinity is wrong; the Bible is corrupt – Robert looks at some other areas that are sometimes omitted in our exchanges with Muslims. Chapter 2 is entitled, ‘Don’t Christians Only Do Sundays?’ and looks at 24/7 Christianity. Chapter 6 is entitled, ‘Where Does Christianity End and Western Culture Begin?’ and considers how knowing Jesus the Messiah transforms attitudes to food, clothes etc. He writes in a later chapter, ‘that Islam seems often tied to one culture and one time’ (145).

Chapter 4 on the divinity of Jesus and the crucifixion is particularly help-

ful, for example, quoting Mark Beaumont's quote of the ninth century Christian theologian, Abu Ra'ita, 'It wasn't a case of God taking a son to himself, but rather that the eternal Word or Son took "flesh" to himself' (83).

In unpacking and explaining the Trinity in Chapter 5, Robert has some lovely turns of phrase like, 'Biblical monotheism is not about mathematics but uniqueness, incomparability and depth' (92). His discussion on the implications for the individual and community of Islamic 'Tawhid' (radical 'oneness') over and against the rich relational nature of a Triune God is perceptive and refreshing.

Chapter 8 (the final chapter) affirms the necessity of the Holy Spirit to open eyes, underlines the certain assurance that faith in Jesus the Messiah confers, and gives some signs of hope where new communities of BMBs are flourishing, e.g. the growing number of Iranian believers.

Any reservations? There is some repetition of themes and cross-referencing, which can be a little frustrating, but otherwise the writing is lucid and uplifting.

I recommend this book because it glorifies our Triune God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It reminded me of the Trinity's 'deep unity' that surpasses anything that sterile radical monotheism can offer the human condition – body and soul. We are reminded that 'truth' and not methodology is what presents Christ authentically to Muslims and that the message of Scripture fits with the world we experience (132).

Read this book for your soul alone and you will be blessed.

Reviewed by Keith Fraser-Smith

Muslims of the Arab world have been Keith's focus for more than 40 years. He has served in a variety of leadership roles with AWM in Media, the Middle East, Arabian Peninsula, Globalization and UK ministry and is now leading a local CPM team in the UK. Among his many interests is his pleasure in writing book reviews.

Christ Above All: Conversational Evangelism with People of Other Faiths

by Daniel Shayesteh

Sydney, Australia: Talesh Books, 2003 & 2010, 239 pages

Dr. Daniel Shayesteh (PhD in Philosophy) has written a refreshing and encouraging book that does a *great job* of explaining how to have effective conversations about truth, God and the Gospel, with men and women of all of the major faiths and ideologies