

Middle Eastern Evangelists Talk about Sharing the Gospel with Muslims

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In the autumn of 2012 Seedbed editor Don Little had the privilege of visiting with two brothers and a sister from a Middle Eastern country now ministering together in London. Two of them (the couple Henry and Nina*) are from a Christian background while John* is a believer from a Muslim background. In their wide-ranging conversation, which Don recorded on his iPod with their permission, they shared with Don their motivations, their challenges and their joys in sharing the gospel with Muslims. Listen in as they discuss some of what they have learned in their many years of talking with Muslim about the Gospel.

Don: What counsel would you give to someone just getting started talking to Muslims about Jesus—perhaps someone who has studied the Qur'an and learned something about Islam, but has not had many conversations. Are there one or two key things you want to tell them to start with?

John: I advise people to learn all sorts of methods. I think they should know about the Qur'an. That helps us to understand how Muslims think and it helps us communicate well. I have my preferred ways of sharing, but I'm also familiar with many other approaches. I know what my goals are. For example, I know the Camel method, but I don't use it fully. If I'm in a situation where something from it will be helpful, I'll use it. It will help me as a bridge. I'm not systematic in how I share.

Nina: Last week John taught us how to maintain control of the conversation when conversing with Muslims.

Henry: For example, if a Muslim asks you a question you need to ask him *what he thinks* the answer to that question might be...

Nina: ...and when he answers the question, you'll know his thinking behind the question or the subject. And I learned from John that I don't need to defend my faith. I need to explain it not defend it.

Don: Can you explain the difference between defending the faith and explaining the faith?

John: There is nothing in the Bible about defending the Bible. In 1 Peter 3:15 it says to 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.' It talks about good news, not about some-

thing that's wrong. Muslims often want to talk about the Bible being corrupted. We have nothing wrong in the Bible and gospel that we have to defend; there is only the hope that we have the chance to explain. Why do we have this hope? Why are we different? I can talk about this good news. If someone comes along and says there's something wrong with the Bible, he needs to prove it first. And to prove it, he needs to show me that he's qualified to do this.

Don: So when he says negative things about the Bible, do you stop him?

John: In my culture, we like to laugh and tease and have fun, so I try to get them laughing and get them to lose their point in a nice way! I say to them, 'This is my faith, this is my Bible, this is my book, this is the most important thing in my life.

When you say my book is not correct, it's like saying to me my father is not my father.'

I tell them if they come to me with any verse in Qur'an that says clearly that the Torah or Injil has been changed or corrupted, I will become a Muslim. Then I tell them no one has been able to convince me yet! I just want them to think about it. Sometimes I say, 'You

know, the other day I was reading in your corrupted Qur'an something about...' and they get angry with me right away! So I say to them, 'You've said the same thing about my book for the last fourteen centuries and I haven't gotten angry!'

I hit back in a way—you know we come from a shame/honour culture and I embrace that. I do it like this, gently, to stop it. We have to establish respect; it's easy to tell them everything, but I want to be friends. I don't start weak, I start strong and then I go gentle. I never give them any reason to think that I'm afraid or worried about faith conversations.

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Don: Any other suggestions for a beginner?

Henry: I tell people you can't learn how to swim unless you get in the water! You need to just get out there and talk to people. For me when I started to speak with people I had no help; there was no one to give me any advice. I was from the country and when I went to the capital, no one could even understand my accent. However, God gave me ways to speak to people and gave me special words of knowledge and unique insights into individuals' lives.

Nina: I use any and all methods to share with Muslims. I studied very well to be ready for the questions they ask. Some Australian Christians once came to our capital city and they met an American woman who converted to Islam after marrying a Muslim. They talked for ten minutes and when I asked them what they talked about, they said the woman told them why she converted to Islam, why she

didn't believe in the Trinity, etc. I asked them 'What did you say to her?' They said, 'Nothing; we just listened because we didn't want to disturb her.' I said that in this culture you have to be on the offensive—to talk about Jesus, not just listen to them talk about Muhammad.

Don: In your culture you can challenge people?

Nina: Don't be afraid to be bold; it may feel rude, but in our country, they don't understand otherwise. You need to be strong. At a place like Speakers' Corner, we need to be bold and 'fight' and explain our faith. In other places in London, we have to be gentler, of course.

Don: Is there a helpful insight that God has given you to enable you to speak with Muslims more boldly or more effectively?

Henry: I think it's very important to LOVE Muslims when you're sharing with them. They can feel it. I don't share with Muslims because I want to be a hero or want to earn points to get to heaven, but because I love them. I don't need anything from them. I just go to the people in love.

Nina: I think that it's important to establish openness and trust. When people are open and trusting, they can accept what we have to say. Then we can have a fruitful conversation.

Henry: Sometimes if I have a good friend I tell him, 'I will listen to you about your beliefs and after that I will tell you about mine.' We do that and I learn important things about him. Also, I pray with him before we depart, even if he's not willing to accept Christ just I tell him I want to pray for him.

Nina: Sometimes I explain my faith to people with whom I have long-term relationships. Last year a co-worker had a problem with his back and was going to have a risky surgery. I didn't know him very well, but I said to him that I know he's in pain and that I believe in Jesus. He said 'I believe in Jesus as a prophet' and I said, 'He is more than a prophet! He can heal you.' He said, 'Yes, all the prophets can heal.' I told him that Jesus is a special doctor; no one can heal like him. I told him I'd pray for his healing and he said thank you. A week later I found out he never had the operation because had been healed! I said to him, 'Muhammad I'm so happy! I know Jesus healed you because I prayed for you!' Since then we are very good friends. He is a fanatical Muslim and usually doesn't speak with women, but he speaks with me!

Don: How do you begin conversations with people?

Nina: I always pray before I speak. Then God gives me the strategy on the spot. Then I just greet them. Here in London I say I've just come from (her country) and ask them if they know Arabic. And so they get interested. When I feel in

my heart that she's a 'sheep' not a 'wolf,' I try everything to keep her in the conversation.

In an outreach in Greece during the Olympics (in 2004), I met a woman on the bus. She was sitting behind me and I could tell by her outfit that she was from my country. I didn't know how to start a conversation with her directly, so I called out to my co-worker, in Arabic, 'No one told us where the good shopping is around here!' The woman recognized my Arabic and asked me if we were from the same country. I said 'Yes! Can you tell us where the best shopping is?' Not only did she tell us—she took us there herself. So, every encounter is different. Sometimes there is no strategy!

Henry: One day on the bus someone called out to me-- I did not remember him at all but he told me that the previous year I'd given him a JESUS film and that after watching it he received Christ. Another time I was on a crowded bus and God told me that if the man on the seat got up and the woman next to me sat in it I was to give her a Bible. He got up, she sat down and I gave her the Bible. She started reading it right away and said to me, "Thank you! I wanted this Bible a long time ago but could never find it!"

Sometimes when I'm on a bus, I speak into my phone, as if I'm having a conversation with someone, and tell the whole gospel message. Then when I close the phone, someone near me will ask about it. Sometimes I'll just talk to the Christian friend I'm with about the gospel when we are together in public and many people come up to ask us questions.

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At times people initiate with us. There have been times when I've been afraid to speak to people so I ask God that they would start speaking with me. And they do.

One day I was sitting at home... God said to me, 'Go to church now.' I said to God, 'It's closed now!' He said, 'GO NOW!' So I went and it was closed. God said, 'Go walk along the river.' I went and saw a woman there. God said to me 'I brought you from home to speak with this woman.' I went over to her and asked if she was a Christian. She got angry and started shouting at me. However, the Holy Spirit said to me to stay near her and pray.

Eventually she called me back over. God gave me a specific word for her. I told her 'You came from your home to destroy your life, didn't you?' and she started to cry. She said she was a Christian but that she had just decided that day that either she would convert to Islam or she would commit suicide. After speaking

with her, she accepted Christ. I took her home and met her family—her mother and her husband and her son all accepted Christ that day. They were traditional Christians, but not believers. The whole family came to Christ.

Later on, I asked God why he told me to go to the church. Why didn't he tell me to go to the river directly? God told me 'If I'd told you to go to the river first you wouldn't have gone. Because you love the church I knew you'd obey me, and from there I could direct you to the river!'

We need to listen to the Spirit and speak into people's lives. We need to listen.

One day in my country, I was praying with our team and God told us to go to the train station; that we would meet someone called Ahmed. So we went and I was led to a man sitting on a bench. I went up to him and asked, 'Is your name Ahmed?' He said no, but the Holy Spirit said to me that his name IS Ahmed, so I said to him, 'Your name is Ahmed' and I began to speak to him prophetic words about his past and his future. I said everything God wanted me to say to him and then I walked away. Soon after he came running after me and asked, 'How do you know all this about me?' and I shared the gospel with him.

Don: How do you respond to the typical Muslim objections/misunderstandings? Do you have a certain way you respond, or does it depend on the individual?

John: Of course there are standard answers—but sometimes God gives us a unique answer for a particular person.

Henry: It is important to study how to answer their common objections.

Don: Can you give us examples of answers that are convincing or helpful to people?

Nina: When we talk about the qualifications of a prophet, I ask my Muslim friends how they prove Muhammad came from God. I say that Jesus backed up his claims with his miracles, with his words. I ask them if Muhammad performed miracles or spoke words of wisdom and knowledge. Was his behaviour from God? I ask them to prove to me that Muhammad was the last prophet and that he came from God. Most times, they just say they believe it but can't prove it.

Don: You've been talking to Muslims about the gospel for many years now. Have you observed any changes in the way Muslims respond to you now, since the events of 9/11 and other world events involving Muslims?

Henry: Yes—before *we* were on the defensive as Christians. Now *Muslims* are defensive. They are embarrassed about much of what has happened in the world since then.

Nina: I think the proud spirit of Islam is broken. When we first came to the UK, I

met an Algerian man who wouldn't even have tea with us because it was *haram*. He swore he wouldn't even go back to Algeria before the Queen of England became a Muslim!

But now some Muslims are embarrassed by what their leaders say. There was a controversy over an Egyptian mufti who said in a fatwa that a Muslim woman should breastfeed a man to enable them to be in each other's company.

Don: What's the value of using the Qur'an when talking with Muslims?

Nina: When I use the Qur'an, I feel like I'm using a common language between us. I try to use what the Qur'an says about Jesus to steer the conversation to Him. That will lead me to talk about the foundation of the Christian message, about the Bible. It's a tool to build the first bridge.

John: I don't like to use any method that would compromise my faith. Using Islam or the Qur'an as a bridge is fine. But it is not my main focus. I focus on Jesus, not the Qur'an because for me it is not valid. I usually ask a Muslim, 'Do you know Jesus?' If they say yes, I ask more specifically, 'Do you know about him or know HIM?' They usually say they know him. So I say, 'OK, I'll give you ten minutes to tell me everything you know about Jesus and then I let them speak. This usually lasts for a minute or two because they don't really know Jesus!

So then I ask, 'Can I tell you what I know about him?' If they say yes, I share everything we agree about first. They usually love to disagree, so I start with things about which we agree.

Don: What are the things you agree on?

John: Everything but the crucifixion and resurrection. We agree on all his miracles and his powers and abilities; his teaching and his lifestyle and—I can even accept the Jesus spoke when he was in the cradle—he's God so he can do it! I don't talk about his nature or his divinity at first. A Muslim doesn't know these things so I don't start there. I can speak for two hours about Jesus Christ without disagreeing. Muslims love stories, so I connect everything to my life, his life, reality, and ultimately to God. During that time, I pray and ask God to open his mind and heart. I keep saying interesting stuff so he's intrigued. I allow God to work. I talk, but I let God work.

I know a strong Muslim at Speakers' Corner. One day he found me and called me over. He's well known, so lots of people gathered around. He said, 'You know brother, I have a problem with the book of Genesis.' I asked him what it was. He said, 'God told the serpent he would crawl on the ground and will eat from the sand. When I read this I was confused, so I started studying serpents but I found out that serpents don't eat sand.' Which is not true; serpents eat sand. So I said 'And?' He said, 'I came to the conclusion that this serpent must

be a Christian serpent.' Of course, he's making fun of me and everyone's laughing, so I laughed too and I played along. I told him that since this story made me doubt my faith I started studying other religions to find the real God. So when I studied about Islam, I found that his prophet travelled from Medina to Jerusalem on the back of a mule with two wings coming out of his hips and it took him there in less than one second. I told him this was confusing, so I decided to study mules. I found out that mules don't fly! So I concluded that this mule must be a Muslim mule. Then I said, 'So when you compare a serpent crawling on the sand with a prophet riding a flying mule with wings coming out of his hips—No, I think Christianity is true. I'll become a Christian.' And I walked away...

Henry: We have no problem using the Qur'an. For me, sometimes I use certain verses from it—for instance, the verse about Jesus being 'the word of God.' I ask my friend to imagine that I make a promise to meet them tomorrow at noon. They come to meet me but I'm not there. Then after a few days they see me and say, 'You said you'd meet me!'

I tell him, 'Me? I didn't tell you, it was just my word, not me.' They will say to me, 'You are crazy! You and your word are the same thing!' That's when I tell them that's what it means for Jesus to be the Word of God. God's Word and God are one in the same.

We use Qur'an first to establish the relationship and open the conversation with Muslims. In the end we have to use the Bible; it is the truth. You can't go halfway.