

That's a Good Answer: Danish Cartoons of Muhammad

By I.L.

Introduction

It is all too easy to be dismayed by world events such as the publication in Denmark of satirical cartoons about Muhammad. If it is not these cartoons, it is something else. Often Christians who are citizens of Europe or America get blamed for the problems. But these problems can be turned into opportunities. We know that most Muslims confuse nationality with religion and think that the West is *Christian* in the same way that North Africa and the Middle East are *Muslim*. No matter how much we explain and live pure lives, their first thought is that Christians are immoral. In fact, since the word *Christian* can become problematic, many people do not accept being called a Christian until the meaning of the word becomes clear.

Our starting point must be the sovereignty of God. He is in total control of the world events that we may dislike and find inconvenient as they bring suffering because of our links to offending countries. In times of political strife, we must grow strong by encouraging each other with the certainty of his sovereignty. We must learn to ask ourselves questions like: What does God expect of me today? How can I turn this event to good?

Those of us who have been in the Arab world for some time may find that questions leading to witnessing opportunities are few. Therefore I welcomed the Danish cartoons because a lot of people were talking about their publication. Some people accused me, but others who knew me better wanted to know what I thought. Several times potential discomfort turned into profitable conversation. There was nothing spectacularly new in what I did. This time I will present the material about a good answer as a case study, with a discussion of the choices made. In this way, I can consider not just the arguments, but also the attitudes and feelings.

Case Study

Some friends recently asked me the dreaded question, 'What do you think about Muhammad?' I prayed. Then, for the first time in my life, I said, 'I don't want to say, because I don't want to offend you!' That was a good answer. Why? I was expressing respect and I was building trust, love and relationships. When they pushed me for an answer, I admitted that he was not a prophet. They heard my statement and did not get upset! Then I also said, 'I admire Muhammad enormously.' Yes, I do genuinely admire Muhammad, having studied his life in detail. I added that I particularly liked the way he stood up against false religion. I really think it was a pity that Muhammad had never met true Christians – all those whom he had met were in sects. They had not had a true

Bible and they had changed a lot of the stories. Muhammad was right to call people back to the true God.

Our conversation moved on to the question of the Danish cartoons. I said that Jesus had also been attacked in a similar way. I mentioned the film, the *Life of Brian*, where Jesus is portrayed as a homosexual. They sympathised with me! I got the chance to insist that Europe was not Christian and that Europe was evil because it had departed from the laws of God. Many Muslims think that Europe is Christian and that the evils of Europe are a consequence of following the Christian religion! I got the chance to show that the very opposite is true. I explained that Europe needed to come back to the Bible.

They said they would like to talk to me another time to convince me of Islam and I could try to convince them of the Bible. After all, only one of us was right and to get it wrong was to go to hell. I refused their statement, but I suggested that we should talk again with both of us looking for the truth.

They liked my comments and said that I was softer than another Christian with whom they had previously talked. Apparently, the other Christian, using better language than I, seemed only to want to convince them of the Christian view. At the end, they said something very touching, which I found to be a confirmation that God was encouraging this line of approach. They said that they wanted to talk again because I listened to them.

The next week there was a different mixture of people, including someone new to me. Immediately the question was introduced: 'Aren't your scriptures corrupted?' Since there are many possible answers to this question, I wondered which one I should use. I prayed and said one word: 'Interpretations'. Immediately, someone picked up on my comment and agreed with me! He declared, 'The scriptures are not corrupted. It is just that there have been many wrong interpretations.' Then, to my amazement, he gave the Son of God as an example. He added, 'Muslims say that this phrase means God physically had a son, but the Bible does not say that. The Bible says it in a picture sense, just like Arabs say 'son of the country'. Did the country have a son?'

Then a young woman came along and the conversation started to become irreverent, so I decided this was the time to quit. I excused myself and I left with their invitation for 'next time' ringing in my ears.

Observations

I. There was a balance between being prepared to give answers and my helplessness and reliance on God for answers that were on target. I had prepared answers to the dreaded Muhammad question. The previous day I had been meditating on the need to be gracious and respectful in my relationships even when I disagree with people. As I prayed, I experienced the right answer – and a new one for me – to refuse to say what I

thought of Muhammad because I did not want to hurt them. Repeated affirmations of respect won me the chance to be bold and to be heard.

2. Notice how the delicate question of the Danish cartoons was turned into a golden opportunity:

- I presented several examples of blasphemy and shame against Jesus that were unknown to them. When they heard my examples, they shared my shame and sympathised with me.
- I aligned myself with them. As a Christian, I have more in common with Muslims than with atheists.
- I shifted the ground to deal with questions I wanted to answer and in the process, dealt with related questions that I knew they had, even if they were not expressed. In particular, I wanted to show that to be European was NOT synonymous with being Christian. I also wanted to deal with a more recent development in the argument: 'Europeans are Christians, Europe is immoral and therefore Christians are immoral'. I had recently read some local Islamic material (in French) that took this argument further to say that the immorality found in Europe must be due to following a corrupted Bible. Since they may well have heard this recent extension to the popular belief, I addressed it, turning the argument upside down and saying that what Europe needed was to return to the Bible. True followers of Jesus show love and respect for others. I could then have gone on to mention the Ten Commandments (which they were aware of) to stress that true Christians are supposed to follow moral laws. I might also have taken the chance to explain the difference between nominal Christians and true Christians by faith and the new birth.

3. I wanted to avoid the common reaction of a desire to compare religions. Comparing has its place, but more often than not, it is pointless; each side digs into its own corner. Also, I am only interested in talking if there is some give and take. Actually, this was their position too; they preferred to talk to someone who listened to them and empathised with them.

4. I find in my life in general, and in witnessing in particular, that it is difficult to avoid either compromise or being too hard. In the above example, I did not compromise one bit. In fact, I was very bold at one point and said that Muhammad was not a prophet. This usually signals either a sharpening of the discussion, or an abrupt end. In this case, it did not. I was also able to praise Muhammad for having spoken out against false religion. What struck me again was that when I approached them as human beings, expressed my respect for them, and sought the common ground of being a human being like them, then I was heard and did not have to hide what I really believed. And I heard them – not so much their arguments, but their hopes and fears. In fact, I felt compassion for them like I have not felt for a long time.

Much of what happened was along the lines of Francis Schaeffer's teaching on how to reach people. Everyone is made in the image of God, though it is a fallen one. Therefore, everyone can be respected, loved and listened to. Everyone knows there is a God and that one day, they will have to give account of their lives. They know this, though the thought is often denied and suppressed. We can begin with our common humanity and start to build bridges and share truth in love without compromising. We begin with what concerns them, what can be relatively easily accepted and then move on to other matters. Their needs are a springboard to the gospel they ought to hear. We should sometimes seek to answer the hidden question behind the spoken one. We can rely on the Spirit of God who knows the hearts of men. We should use both our heads and our feelings of love and respect in order to prepare the way for the gospel. Most people are not ready to hear immediately about the meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ for their sins. They must first be convinced that they are helpless sinners in need of God. And before that conviction comes, we often have to prepare the way by becoming people who gain a hearing because we listen.

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