

The Real Christians, That's Us!

By Marten de Vries

Editor's Note

The following article is the personal account of a meeting for dialogue between Christians and Muslims that the author attended in the Netherlands.

It is Friday night. An Islamic organisation in Rotterdam has arranged a lecture and they have invited a minister. He is a real PhD, one of those theologians who know all about the Christian faith and one you can quote. The title of his talk is: 'How do Christians handle social developments?'

And I'm late again. I was too busy making my garden ready for the spring. When I enter, I get the impression that I've come to the wrong place. There are only two Dutch men in the auditorium. As it turns out, they are the speaker and a long-time Christian attendee of such dialogues. But after a while, some twenty Muslims turn up. They include an old friend (a Moroccan religious teacher with whom I once had a public debate about a book that he had written on the Bible), a few academics and some students of Islamic theology.

The lecture starts well and I am impressed by the flow of beautiful words. The doctor of theology begins with a Scripture reading. This seems very good; any imam worth his salt would also start with a recitation from the Qur'an. Everyone present can read along in Mark 7 where Jesus declares all foods clean. Jesus does this in response to the reproach of the Jewish *ulamaa* (scholars) that his dis-

ciples didn't wash their hands before eating. The essence of His message is the importance of the inside of the person, not the outside.

The speaker who was invited to introduce the subject argues that some Christians become nervous when changes happen. They need structure in their life. But it was exactly in this matter that early Christians differed from their environment. They didn't need structure. Their faith wasn't based on rules. They broke away from a religious system and lived according to the gospel of deliverance. Jesus can be regarded as the leader of the Jewish liberation movement called Christianity. The instructions of Paul do not clash with it. They are meant to help shape a free and sincere life for God. These regulations are never absolute. It is clear from the Bible itself that rules exist to be changed: the Old Testament demands things that the New Testament does not.

I really enjoy what follows. The speaker continues to describe how things went wrong. The church became powerful, Christians dominated Europe and people were forcibly baptized. In the long run, one was expected to behave like a Christian, i.e. 'act nicely'. You were supposed to go to church twice on Sunday or you were regarded as a sinner. Christianity was corrupted and became a system. But thank God, today true Christians are seen to be a minority in the Netherlands, just like the Muslims. And that is

not all bad. Faith has become once again a matter of the heart. Now that no one is forced to go to church, Christian communities have become smaller but of greater value because their members consciously choose for the church in answer to God's love. I recognize the truth of his statements from what has happened in our congregation in Delfshaven. Every Sunday our church is full of young people who usually attend both services of their own free will. Even after a long service, they are in no hurry to go home.

So far I am able to say 'Amen!' He is giving the Muslims a chance to understand why Christians have a hard time seeing Islam with its rules and system of good works as an improvement. For 'The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17). We would hate to abandon that truth. In the integration process, it is not only useful for Dutch people to learn more about Islam, but also for Muslims to hear about Christian beliefs directly from true followers of Christ and not just from other Muslims.

But now there follows a curious shift. Okay, so the Christian theologian doesn't like rules. But for him, it is also wrong to say 'Salvation is found in no one else but Jesus Christ'.¹ He thinks that this means again imposing rules on others. 'For me, Jesus is the way, the truth and the life,'² he states. 'But if for you as Muslims something else is the "only way", well, who am I to tell you otherwise?'

What a shame!

'Where in the Holy Scriptures does it appear that you can handle the words of Jesus and His apostles like this?' I ask. The speaker admits that he can't readily answer my question. What happens when a Christian leader tells Muslims about his faith in this post-modern jargon: 'For me, it is like this'? Such a statement has no relation to what Islam really is or how Muslims think. It may even be fair to say that he forces a typical western philosophical concept of truth upon them. It certainly isn't the 'aroma of Christ' that is being spread.³ Following Christ becomes optional.

The response in the audience is predictable.

- A heavily veiled girl, who has already interrupted the speaker several times, says that in Islam there is no compulsion. No one is compelled to go to the mosque. According to Sura *Al-Baqara* ('The cow'): 'in religion there is no compulsion'.⁴ Personally I wonder if going to a mosque in Morocco can be compared to attending an old-fashioned Orthodox Reformed church in Holland. Or if someone who was born a Muslim is really free to dissociate himself publicly from all Islamic rules.
- The next reaction was: 'It's clear that there are contradictions in the Bible. Well, we already knew that. And you just confirmed it again. Well, there are no contradictions in the Qur'an.'
- The third person is the Muslim religious teacher. He says that he is pleased to hear this respectful speech

and the moderating explanation of John 14:6. He adds, 'It is indeed a very difficult statement by Jesus'. Then he notes that not only the disciples didn't understand it but also Christians today don't find it to be altogether clear. He goes on to say that as a Muslim, he understands what Jesus means. He means the same as Mohammed did when he proclaimed that there is but one God! At this point, I interrupt to say that I don't think it is very respectful when a Muslim claims to understand the Bible better than a Christian. Just imagine the reverse if I explain the meaning of a Qur'anic text to a Muslim! But my comment doesn't strike home. Instead they say, 'The real Christians, that's us, Muslims!'

What did he accomplish, this Christian compatriot of mine? Not what he meant to, I hope.

- He certainly didn't make it plausible that a crucified Jesus Christ offers rest of the soul to all people.⁵
- He never even questioned the absolute claims to the truth by Islam (which are presented without any

moderation whatsoever). Instead, he kindly requested permission to stick to his faith. And the Muslims don't have a problem with that. After all, in the Sura *Al-Kaafirun* ('The unbelievers') it says: 'You have your religion and I have mine'.⁶

- He has strengthened his Islamic audience in the conviction that it is only a matter of time until 'the people of the book' (i.e. Christians) 'will agree that only the Muslims serve God', in accordance with Sura *Al-Imraan* ('The people of Imraan').⁷

'In religion there is no compulsion'. What a statement! There is reason to fear that history may repeat itself. That the Netherlands, too, like Mecca long ago, will be Islamized without much coercion!

Footnotes

1 Acts 4:12; 1 Timothy 2:5.6

2 John 14:6

3 2 Corinthians 2:15

4 Qur'an 2:256

5 Matthew 11:28-30

6 Qur'an 109:6

7 Qur'an 3:64