

Bridging the Gap by Georges Houssney

[The following article is reprinted from *Reach Out to the Muslim World*, a publication of Horizons International, Vol. 8, Nos. 2&3, 1996. It challenges us concentrate on a simple presentation on Jesus, the only true bridge to God, depending on the convicting power of the Bible as applied by the Holy Spirit, rather than dependence on use of supposed theological or cultural bridges between Islam and Christianity. Editor's note]

Bridging Concept

A bridge is a link that connects two opposite sides of a gap. In applying it figuratively to Muslim evangelization the word **bridge** refers to an approach or method by which a person communicates his faith. Common beliefs are considered bridges which can be used to span the gap between Christians and Muslims. An often used phrase is "building bridges through friendship." Behind this concept is a presupposition that a Christian worker must begin with the familiar before introducing the unfamiliar. This is interpreted to mean we must begin with a Muslim's beliefs and culture because that is "where he is." Therefore, the Quran is used extensively in this bridging process.

This article is an invitation to rethink our concept of building bridges in Muslim evangelization. The concept of **bridge** must be redefined, for it must not be thought of as a link between two different religions. Rather, it should be viewed as the **right path** to safety. The Muslim who is living in darkness can cross it to find the great light of God. There is only one bridge, Jesus, who

reconciles man with God and brings the prodigal home.

False Bridges

It is an indisputable fact that Muslims, unlike atheists and people of other world religions, do believe in God as creator. They acknowledge many facts about Christ, revelation, Jewish prophets, heaven, hell and much more. Hypothetically, these are bridges we can and should build on. Yet, in reality I find that lingering in these "gray area" has serious dangers. We run the risk of a mental syncretism between the two belief systems. It has been my experience and practice that changing a deeply-rooted belief is best done not by directly confronting it but by presenting a completely new and fresh alternative, because the goal is transformation rather than modification. For example, rather than beginning with the Islamic concept of Jesus as only a prophet and building on that to bring them to an understanding that he is God, I would simply share from scripture the supremacy of Jesus and let them come face to face with his glory. As they find themselves attracted to his divine character, the need to debate with them disappears.

If Islamic beliefs were legitimate **bridges**, why is it that Muslims remain the most difficult to reach? Although the bridge building approach has been used for decades, relatively few Muslims have responded by coming to Christ through this method. Could it be that the very bridges that seemingly span the gap actually widen it? Or perhaps these are no more than false bridges which deceive the traveler by distracting him

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from the only bridge that leads the lost to safety!

No matter how similar to Christianity Islamic teaching may appear to be on the surface, the discrepancies are great. It is a temptation to remain in the comfort zone, acknowledging the positive aspects of Islamic teachings. But our ultimate purpose must be to go beyond that "gray area" to communicate the gospel of love, hope and salvation. We must call Muslims to come to Jesus, the only bridge between God and man. The gap is only bridgeable as Muslims understand that they are sinners and need the Savior. Before a Muslim can grasp the implications of the death of Jesus and his victory over darkness and sin, he must realize his lostness and catch a glimpse of the hope of eternal life.

How will Muslims be convinced that Jesus is the only bridge? They need a road map and signposts along the way. At every junction, Muslims have to make the choice whether they want to linger in the familiar, their own religious beliefs and practices, or whether they will take the "narrow" way that leads to life.

The Road Map

The Word of God is the most powerful tool for leading people to God. It is the road map to knowing God and understanding his plan for our lives. No ministry is ever fruitful without a strong emphasis on scripture. I have seen and heard more stories of people coming to the Lord through the Bible than through any other means. When people see the light through God's Word, they are more likely to value the Bible for

the rest of their lives. I am surprised at the many "tools" of evangelism that exist. On principle some people do not give a Bible or a portion of it because they are convinced it is not "the right approach." However, the Bible is all that God gave us, and although other tools are helpful, it is the most effective and the only book that carries with it "deep conviction." God's Word, which to some extent has lost its value in the "Christian culture," has incredible impact on the first time reader. You know what I mean if you have not been brought up with the Bible read to you in church, in Sunday School and at home.

Muslims are already disposed towards revering God's Word. It is immaterial what Muslims think about the authenticity of the Bible. Arguments about how it was collected and the evidence of the authentic manuscripts can never ever match the power of the Word when a Muslim begins to read it. I will never forget the Saudi passenger who sat beside me on a flight from New York to Jordan. For a couple of hours he argued with me as to why the Bible could not be trusted. I ignored his arguments completely and began to read passages from the gospels. His eyes literally bulged when I put the Arabic New Testament in his hands. He began to read the passage I pointed to and went on to the ensuing chapters. Since my debater had forgotten me, I took advantage of his new distraction and enjoyed a long nap. When I woke up he was still reading and was ready to discuss.

Equally unforgettable is a recent incident with Shiite Muslims in south Lebanon who wanted me to debate their imam. As I entered the home of

the organizer of the debate to agree on the terms of the debate, I began to read selections from the Bible, including the Psalms. He and the dozen others in his living room were so awed that they "shut up" and listened. We need to believe in the Word of God as the greatest and most effective tool for evangelism and beyond. Otherwise we will be looking for all kinds of other tools which are inferior no matter how well they are written or how beautifully illustrated. No human being has ever been able to match the power of God's Word, which speaks for itself:

For the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

After the sinner comes to Christ, the Word of God becomes the most useful tool for:

...teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (1 Timothy 3:16,17)

If we do not express the value of God's Word to our listeners, we cannot expect them to value the Bible. And without the Bible they cannot find the bridge from death to life.

The Signpost

Without the evangelist, no evangelism takes place. The road map in itself is often not enough to lead the lost to where they need to be. The evangelist opens the road map, explains it and points the way to the bridge. The evangelist is therefore a signpost to guide the traveler. This is clearly stated in Romans 10:13-15:

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'

This passage clearly puts the responsibility on the Christian worker who is sent to preach the good news of the gospel. Jesus gave us the marching order to go to the world, to preach, teach, and make disciples. There is no substitute on the earth for the evangelist. The role of the evangelist has been overlooked in favor of more impressive means of communication: literature, radio, TV, videos, and mass campaigns. I cannot emphasize this point enough. We are God's ambassadors:

We are Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God. (11 Corinthians 5:20)

God often uses a number of people in the life of a lost person to bring him to a saving knowledge of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 3:5,6, Paul explains:

What is Apollos, and what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe - as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow ... For we are God's fellow workers, you are God's field, God's building.

As Christian workers, we are signposts who lead people to the only bridge, Jesus. Someone appropriately said that "we are the only gospel that some people may ever read." God has chosen us to be his spokespeople. We bear the

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major responsibility to spread the Word and to point people to Jesus, who is the only true bridge between God and man.

The Bridge

The Bible tells us that there is *one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. (I Timothy 2:5)*

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is not other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. (Acts 3:12)

If we use all kinds of methods, theories and approaches as bridges, we undermine the fact that Jesus is the only true bridge. If we present Jesus as the only bridge, our message will be simply announcing the good news that God loves Muslims, that they can have a personal relationship with him, that their sins can be forgiven, that they can have eternal life through Jesus, and that they can become children of God and join his international family of believers. As new believers, they need to know that the truth will set them free from their insecurities and fears and that Jesus will give them all he promised, including joy, peace and eternal life.

Conclusion

The great gap is not between Islam and Christianity but rather between God and man. Islamic ideas which seem similar to Christian beliefs are far from being reliable bridges in communicating the gospel to Muslims. Embedded in these beliefs are deceptions which hinder Muslims from seeing the truth.

Bridging advocates are motivated by a desire not to offend their Muslim friends. They are convinced that a Christian should have a generous attitude towards Muslims, acknowledging

the truths they stand for. If we remove the offensive aspects of the gospel, such as the cross and the deity of Christ, we have not helped our Muslim friends to hear the truth. And it is truth about Jesus which leads them to their Savior.

It is possible to use common beliefs as starting points. We cannot and **should** not ignore the Muslim's recognition of God's existence, his acknowledgment of Jesus and many other biblical facts. If the two sides of the bridge are made to look like nothing more than a choice between two religious systems, the Muslim has no real motivation to cross to the other side. To cross the bridge the Muslim needs to be convinced that he will find what he has always been looking for. On the other side he will find refuge and salvation. We must attract Muslims to the truth in Christ rather than modify their belief systems by making them understand our own.

As messengers of the Good News our approach should be to share it simply as news of God's love and his plan for the salvation of the world. Our message needs to be fresh and attractive.

We must call Muslims to come to Jesus, the only bridge between God and man. Before a Muslim can grasp the implications of the death of Jesus and his victory over darkness and sin, he must realize his own lostness and catch a glimpse of the hope of eternal life. The great gap is only bridgeable by the work of the Holy Spirit who convicts of sin. It is *not by might nor by power by but my Spirit*, says the Lord. (Zechariah 4:6)

We are Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God. (II Corinthians 5:20)