

UNDERSTANDING THE MUSLIM WORLDVIEW - PART II
IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN WITNESS

by Sam Schlorff

[The focus of Part I, which appeared in the last issue, was understanding the Muslim worldview. We saw that it centers in the idea of "submission" (Arabic - "Islam") to God as being the ideal for the God-man relationship. We also saw that the Islamic understanding of submission is shaped by five important assumptions. These are: the absolute transcendence of God and the essential goodness of man, which imply that man needs "guidance" and not salvation, God's provision of guidance in the Qur'an and Muslim traditions which constitute the very Law of God, His creation of a new social order, based on that Law, and a Heavenly culture for that community of submission. Part II concludes with the implications for Christian witness.]

All of this has important implications for us as Christians, not the least of which concerns the way we go about presenting the Biblical message to Muslims and defending it against their attacks. However, as I reflect on the evangelistic messages or writings addressed to Muslims that I have heard or seen, and the polemical or apologetic books written for them that I have read, it seems to me that in general we have not satisfactorily responded to the issues raised by the Muslim worldview, especially the ideology of the Ummah, in our presentation of the case for Christian theism.

Much of the evangelistic material that is available is quite useful. And there are some excellent apologetic works that address typical Muslim objections, e.g. the authenticity of the Bible, the crucifixion, etc. But what we have failed to do in any systematic way is respond to the issues raised by the Muslim worldview. We have failed to call into question its basic assumptions that are antithetical to the Scriptures and expose its inherent rebellion against God.

Reasons for our Failure to Respond

No doubt one reason for this failure is that such an undertaking requires a fairly good grasp of Islam and of Islamic history, which many Christians simply do not have. More important, however, is the tendency on the part of many Christians to equate apologetics with polemics--polemics like Pfander's classic known as the Mizan Ul-Haqq [Balance of Truth]. The thrust of this polemic was essentially negative; it attacked Islam's claim to have the final prophet and final revelation. Today, most of us tend to steer clear of this kind of approach. We have come to realize that one doesn't get very far with confrontation and polemic; one doesn't "win friends and influence people" by attacking them. And yet, people still "make judicious use" of the polemic because there is no good contextualized apologetic to take its place.

A third factor behind our failure to speak to the Muslim worldview, probably the most important of all, is our tendency in the West to focus almost exclusively on the spiritual aspect of the message. This is due to the influence of the concept of the "two realms"--the realms of Christ and Caesar, church and state, the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the political. Although this distinction originated in Christian theology, it has become such a part of our Western cultural framework that it is now one of our unspoken, and often unrecognized, assumptions.

Notice the spiritual focus of the typical gospel presentation: the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, our need of redemption, the substitutionary death of Christ and His resurrection from the dead, the way of salvation, and the hope of heaven. These are the essentials, of course, but the gospel message has political and social implications that are important as well. In the West, however, we tend to ignore these implications in evangelism. This is possible because the two-realm distinction has become a part of our cultural framework. The advantage is that it helps us eliminate everything but the essentials.

There is a disadvantage, however. We have become so accustomed to ignoring the socio-political dimension of the gospel that we have become insensitive to its implications for our message. The problem is that in ideological societies, such as Islam, that do not distinguish the two realms, this opens the door to misunderstandings and to gross distortions of the Biblical message. In such circumstances, ignoring the socio-political implications of the gospel does a disservice to the cause of Christ.

A recent article in an Arabic Muslim magazine is a good illustration of what happens. The article attacks "Christianizing" broadcasts in Arabic beamed to the Middle East. In one place it complains that they "attempt to Christianize Muslims." This is of course true. But the article calls this "a totally immoral and despicable act no matter which standard we may use to appraise its nature." As if Muslims were not themselves trying to Islamize Christians and other peoples! Later the article does an about face and acknowledges that to "propagate one's own religion" is legitimate. Now, however, its argument is that "the Western missionary effort is part and parcel of an imperialistic invasion of our Eastern countries." His conclusion: "These efforts of the Christian missionaries are not really aimed at converting people to Christianity. Rather, their activities represent one aspect of a multi-faceted campaign launched by an aggressive Western imperialism to dominate our peoples and our countries."

Notice that what we consider to be a spiritual ministry has become a political activity. This is due to the fact that Islam does not recognize a separation between realms. The charge of imperialism is, of course, hypocritical; Islam is as imperialistic as they come. As we have already seen, the ultimate goal of Islamic Da'wa (missionary work) is to dominate the world by imposing an Islamic social order wherever possible. Certainly, the requirement that the Qur'an be read and recited, and liturgies performed, only in Arabic is a form of cultural imperialism.

So then the real reason Muslims see secret imperialistic designs behind Christian missionary work is that they themselves have imperialistic designs, and cannot conceive of mission without them. It is clear that such attacks are not concerned with truth; they are really disinformation campaigns aimed at confusing and distracting people from hearing the Christian message. In a way, the article is a tribute to the effectiveness of Christian broadcasting. The point that needs to be underlined, however, is that our habit of focussing on the spiritual aspects of the message, and ignoring its socio-political implications, puts Christian mission at a disadvantage in the Muslim context.

The Need for a Culture-specific Apologetic to Islam

This brings me to a major concern of this article: how does one correct the problem? What is needed is a contextualized apologetic that presents the case for the Christian worldview in relation to that of Islam. I am not talking about another general theoretical apologetic, but rather a culture-specific apologetic that responds specifically to the Muslim worldview. We need apologetic material that sensitively and tactfully calls into question and refutes those assumptions in Islam that are antithetical to the Scripture. And we need something that sensitively but firmly exposes the ideology of the Umma for the blasphemy that it is.

At the risk of being repetitive, it needs to be said that I am not calling for more polemic. The main problem with the polemic of the past is that it attacks Islam on the basis of debatable cultural questions (e.g. the marriages of the Prophet, various practices, etc.) but fails to challenge the basic assumptions that are at the heart of our disagreement with Islam. We already have more than enough of that kind of material.

The focus of this apologetic should be on clarifying the Christian worldview, not on the claims of Islam. It would nevertheless refer to the Islamic worldview because "what is new must be portrayed in such a way that it is possible to compare it at every point with the old" (J.H. Bavinck). It would include, for example, a defense of the Christian view of the two realms as it relates to Islam. It is necessary to make clear what the Christian vision is and is not with respect to the socio-political realm. It would thus not only provide a basis for disabusing Muslims of the notion that Christians have secret imperialistic designs on the Muslim world, but more importantly provide a springboard for the proclamation of the gospel itself.

To clarify what I mean by a culture-specific apologetic to Islam, I shall conclude by outlining one form such an apologetic might take, based on those aspects of the Muslim worldview already mentioned. Some key elements to be included in such an apologetic are mentioned, but the sky is the limit as to the ways in which a skillful writer could develop the argument.

Elements of a Culture-specific Apologetic to Islam

The Biblical doctrine of the Kingdom of God offers an excellent starting point for a Christian apologetic to Islam. Not only does it establish a kind of common ground with Muslims [e.g. the importance of submission to God], but it also helps us focus the discussion on basic assumptions, and it provides a framework for refuting those assumptions of Islam that are antithetical to the Scriptures. In the remainder of this article I shall outline some of the necessary elements of such an apologetic. I begin with a summary of the Biblical doctrine of the Kingdom, then draw out some implications with respect to the Muslim worldview in particular. I have omitted most Bible references to make this less cumbersome and lengthy, but a number of passages will readily suggest themselves.

A. The Biblical Doctrine of the Kingdom: it may be summarized in terms of two distinct phases as follows [See e.g. the classic Biblical-theological study of Riderbos, The Coming of the Kingdom].

1. The Kingdom of God in mystery (or provisional) form was introduced through the life, death, resurrection from the dead, and ascension into heaven of Jesus of Nazareth, "Son of Mary." These events show that He is the promised Messiah--the divine King anointed and appointed by God to rule the earth. The Kingdom is found only in mystery form in the present age; that is, it is spiritual in character and hidden in the hearts of those who are committed to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and who look forward to His return to inaugurate the Kingdom in its fullness.

2. The Kingdom of God will come in its fullness only at the second coming of Jesus Christ at the end of the age. When He comes back He will raise from the dead those who have been redeemed by His blood--who have committed their lives to Him. It is important to note that they are raised with incorruptible bodies--a new quality of life that is free from sin. At that time, he will set up His universal reign of justice and peace in a new heaven and new earth.

B. Implications for Witness to Muslims: following is a summary of points which I suggest should be included in a contextualized apologetic for Muslims. They will of course need to be developed and added to. But this nevertheless gives an idea of what is needed.

1. The main premise of the Biblical view is that to qualify as a "divine" social order (i.e. the Kingdom of God) a society must be ruled by God through Messiah, the divine King mentioned above. The Kingdom of God is a society in which the executive, legislative and judicial functions of government are thus in the control of God. It is clear that anything less than this, e.g. a society where any of these functions are in human hands, is ipso facto not a divine order.

2. Unless Divine Law is interpreted and administered by God, it is no better a basis for society than other legal systems. Law is "weakened by the sinful nature"; it cannot of itself bring about the perfect obedience required by God. When interpreted and applied by human judges, God's Law is no better than any other legal system; human beings are never perfectly righteous, equitable or just. More-

over, states based on religious law tend to be oppressive because they put human judges in the place of God. According to the Bible, the Mosaic Law was not given to justify mankind before God, but rather to expose the sinfulness of sin and the hopeless condition of mankind, and to point people to Christ who alone can atone for sin.

3. A social order based on Religious Law (Shariah) is intrinsically no better (or worse) than any other. Every attempt to establish such a system has fallen short of the ideal of a society living in total submission to God. It can be helpful to point out: 1) That the Hebrew nation had the Law of Moses, but this did not keep it from falling into such widespread idolatry and oppression that God had severely to punish it through exile. 2) That Christians at various times have also tried to set up a religious state, but this effort likewise came to nought. 3) That the early Muslim Community was a religious state based on Islamic Law, but it too failed as is evidenced by the fact that the Community went into decline.

It is appropriate at some point to raise the question: on what basis do you suppose that a return to Islamic law will solve the problems of the Muslim world today, when earlier that law could not keep the Muslim community from going into decline. One can affirm, on the basis of the principles given here, that the Ummah has never been and never will be a community of submission any more than any other social order. Such a utopic view of the Muslim community is only a formula for frustration, and more oppression and violence.

4. The basic problem with Islam is its reliance on religious law to transform society and make it submissive to God. It assumes that man has in himself the moral power he needs to live in submission to God, and that all he needs is a knowledge of God's law, i.e. "guidance"; it goes so far as to construe this to mean that the Muslim community, based on this "guidance," is superior to other communities. These assumptions are contradicted by the above-mentioned facts which give powerful support to the Christian view that man is sinful by nature. The doctrine of sin implies that all peoples and cultures are guilty before God and unable to do what pleases Him. Indeed, the very idea of a superior community and a heavenly culture is blasphemous from the Christian perspective; it debases and dishonors God by attributing to Him the actions of men, and it exalts man by making his judgments out to be the "Law of God."

5. As we communicate the gospel to Muslims, it is important to acknowledge that Christians, like all mankind, are by nature sinful and unable in themselves to live as God requires. Neither the church nor any other religious community can claim to be the Kingdom of God. In our zeal to help people experience liberation from sin we must be careful not to give the impression that Christians think they have arrived! That has sometimes been done. Unfortunately, it does not help the Muslim give up the myth of superiority and admit the truth--that Islam is not the superior social order it claims to be, nor will there ever be one until Christ returns. The eschatological dimension of the Biblical message is all-important here; the Kingdom of God has indeed come in mystery form in the person and work of Christ. God's promise of the Kingdom will not however be realized in a new social order until Christ returns and the redeemed are resurrected with an

uncorrupted body--free from sin. As "children of the Kingdom," they are nevertheless called upon to combat evil and injustice wherever they find it, and to try to make society more just and equitable. They are not, however, under any illusion that by their own efforts they will be able to usher in a new social order.

6. It may accordingly be affirmed that a separation between realms as concerns the exercise of political power is justified in the present age. The world we live in is a fallen world; mankind is NOT naturally "Muslim" (i.e. submissive to God), contrary to what Muslims would have us believe. No human being has the knowledge or moral perfection needed to legislate, interpret and apply the law with complete equity and justice. A "separation of powers" is therefore justified in the sense that it helps to protect society from the abuse of power that inevitably occurs when religion and state are one. I say "justified" advisedly. I am not aware of any passage in Scripture that teaches a separation of powers explicitly. It is not even indispensable to the church's existence in a society, as we tend to think. I would suggest, however, that Christians should be able to agree with Muslims in their conviction that every aspect of our life is sacred and to be lived before God in subjection to Him.

Let me conclude: it seems to me that an apologetic of this nature is needed for at least two reasons: it is needed on the one hand to refute the falsehoods that Muslims are propagating at the expense of the gospel, and also, perhaps more importantly, because the young churches being planted desperately need a Biblical perspective on these issues to help them survive. For this, we would probably do well to acknowledge the validity of many of the criticisms Muslims level against the West--its decadence, its abandonment of moral values, its greed and its ungodliness, etc. It is not our task to defend Western civilization, but it is our task to defend the Faith. Acknowledging the validity of such criticisms serves to underline the truth of the Biblical view of man. It also reinforces the truth that Islamic civilization is really no better than the West; it is just different. I recognize that a lot of weighty theological issues have been treated rather summarily in this brief essay, and that probably not all evangelical Christians will be completely comfortable with some of the views expressed. I nevertheless hope that it will be sufficiently suggestive of the riches of the Biblical materials on the subject that you will be challenged to become an apologist for the gospel in all its dimensions.