

CHURCH PLANTING FORUM FEEDBACK

[Since the last issue discussing the *Jesus Mosque* idea came out, I have received the response of John Mansour to the article by Warren Chastain, along with two brief replies from readers who responded to the invitation to send us their comments and critiques. I would like to extend to them my sincerest thanks for taking the time to write, and to remind other readers that the invitation to send in comments and critiques is still valid. The Editor.]

A HORSE OF A DIFFERENT COLOR? A RESPONSE TO CHASTAIN

by John Mansour

I appreciate Warren Chastain's comments on my article in the last issue because they indicate that I wasn't clear enough in presenting certain understandings and assumptions that underlie what I have written about. When we discuss or debate with someone who agrees with us, it is easy to use intellectual shorthand, but often a critic can help us to see points we take for granted that others do not share. In this response I will begin by discussing semantic problems, then go on to cover a few other important issues.

First, I understood from Warren's response that often we were using the same term to discuss very different concepts or levels of meaning. I found an article in *Seedbed* by Kurt Wood, "Semantic Confusion and the 'Three Islams'" (IV/2 ['89]:24-27), to be helpful. However, I feel that we run into this semantic confusion not just when we talk about Islam, but also when we talk about Christianity.

Semantic Confusion with "Islam"

Wood maintains that it is possible to look at "Islam" on several levels of meaning. He sees that there are three ways we can refer to Islam. There is "Lived Islam", which would be saying that "Islam is what Muslims do." Another is "Document Islam" which defines Islam by the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Finally, there is what he calls "Value Islam" which defines a certain set of ideals and values as Islam, even though many of these values did not originate in traditional Islamic sources. Confusion arises when those in discourse do not realize that they are using the same term to refer to different concepts.

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It is possible to give these semantic categories different labels. "Lived Islam" I would term "Islamdom", "Document Islam" we could call "Classical Islam" or "Muhammadan Islam" while the last category could be labeled "Modernist Islam". Whatever the labels, we need to recognize the potential for confusion in our discussions of Islam. It is possible to think that because "Document Islam" teaches a certain doctrine or practice, that all Muslims must therefore believe it. However, "Islamdom" (how Muslims live) is no more monolithic than "Christendom."

So, to respond to Warren's question, yes, I have met Muslims who do not believe in Muhammad as a prophet. Yes, there are Muslims who do not uphold the Shariah, as we can see by perusing writings of thinkers from the Muslim world. There exist in Islamdom non-orthodox Muslims (Ahmadiyya, Druze, etc.) who somehow deny or qualify his prophethood, Sunnis who are modernists, secularized, etc., as well as Sunnis who are truly "Muhammadan" and uphold "Document Islam." Those who are "non-Muhammadan" would define themselves as Muslims under another category than the "Document Islam" category, and most of them are not challenged as to their identity.

Semantic Confusion With "Christianity"

The term "Christianity" can likewise be confusing. There seems to me to be at least three levels of meaning indicated when this word is used. As an aside, keep in mind that these categories do not parallel the semantic categories used to describe Islam. First, the term "Christianity" can be used to refer to an abstract body of doctrines. The difficulty is that because this is an abstraction, it is hard to find people who perfectly believe in and apply the classical teachings of their religion. Another problem is that faith in Christ is not strictly definable by assent to a list of propositions. Second, I see the word used to refer to all those who use the name "Christian" to refer to themselves. I feel that we would be better describing this level of meaning as "Christendom." This is often what non-believers think of when we refer to "Christianity." At a third level of meaning a living faith in the person of Jesus Christ would be called "Christianity."

There is a danger that as we communicate with non-believers, we may use the term "Christianity" to indicate faith in Jesus Christ as experienced and taught by the apostles, while our hearers understand us to refer to Christendom. Again, it is possible to refer to a set of abstract doctrines, which may be largely irrelevant to our listeners if they cannot see a visible embodiment of these doctrines in their vicinity (an *ekklesia*), or which may create dissonance when compared with the behavior of "Christians" that they know of.

It is interesting to note that Christ and the apostles chose to refer to faith in Him and their community in terms that did not indicate that he was bringing a new religion. Jesus preached the Kingdom of God rather than a new sect or doctrine. The apostles spoke of repentance and faith in a person rather than of changing one's religion. As an aside, it is worthwhile to do a study of the terms used for faith and belief in the NT. The term "a convert" (*proselutos*) is only used to refer to pagans who formally converted to Judaism, while the terms used for belief in Christ are, "believe," "repent," "turn," and so on.

Divisibility of Culture and Religion

Warren maintains "we should contextualize in the direction of their [Muslims'] *culture* in harmless areas, rather than toward their *religion*--which is inherently harmful." How do we understand this statement? If we define Islam as "Lived Islam," or what Muslims do, then it seems that there are many areas that are clearly harmless or beneficial, and we can contextualize towards them. If we define their religion as "Document Islam", it still seems that there are many areas when the Qur'an and Sunnah teach ideas compatible with the Bible, and we would not be wrong to affirm those things. However, I think that Warren's objection may be in the area of *authority* - in other words, to be within the religion of Islam (however defined) or to use a practice also found in the religion of Islam is *ipso facto* to give supreme authority to someone or something other than Christ. We will examine this objection in more detail below.

Is it being unnecessarily complex to "mix religion, culture, Christianity, etc." as Warren says? Is it fogging the issue? Can we make a clear-cut distinction between religion and culture? Well, it seems to me that it is not possible to say "this is a good thing, but since it carries a religious label ("Islamic") rather than a cultural label, it is wrong or inherently dangerous to use it." It is also not a Scriptural dichotomy. The Scripture rather emphasizes the need in such circumstances to test things on a case-by-case basis (1 Thess. 5:21, 1 Cor. 8, Rom. 14). There are Islamic practices that are detrimental to believers (such as chanting the Qur'an, polygamy, and so on) but there are others that when tested against the Bible will be seen to be acceptable (bowing to pray, using Islamic proper names for prophets, etc.).

It seems that a rejection of practices or ideas simply because they carry the label "Islamic" or "Muslim" is no more justifiable than accepting a practice because it is understood to have the label "Christian." For example, veiling, praying in a certain direction, praying five times a day, etc. were all originally "Christian" practices (see Tertullian, *On Prayer* and *On the Veiling of Virgins*). The Christians who practiced these customs did not feel that they directly contravened the Scriptures. That they now carry the label "Muslim" does that mean they should be rejected?

Let us look at some practices labeled as "Christian." The Easter egg tradition was taken from paganism. Eventually, however, the practice was filled with meaning more amenable to Biblical teaching and no longer questioned. The use of a Christmas tree was taken from Druid practices, but Christians eventually filled the practice with a more acceptable meaning and interpretation. Many of the practices of traditional Christian denominations date from the time of Constantine, and yet they are unquestioned.

Our attitude toward cultural and linguistic forms is often motivated by a desire to retain the purity of the truth, or to keep the truth gloriously unsullied by "primitive", "inferior" practices. The ultimate model and example for our presentation of the gospel cross-culturally, however, is the Incarnation of the Lord Christ. He did not hesitate to give up his glory and to identify with sinful and unclean man – an inherently dangerous step. He was willing to take the chance of being misunderstood. He knew full well that some people would take him to be simply a rabbi, a freedom fighter, etc. Yet he fully glorified God within the confines of a human body, a fallen human culture, and a corrupt religion.

Lordship and Authority

Warren is absolutely right when he says that a believer cannot have two lords; one cannot serve Christ and Muhammad. Jesus must command his full allegiance, and any practices or beliefs from his past life that are contrary to Christ's teachings or Scriptural principles need to go. There are nevertheless many things from his background that are not contrary to following Jesus. They are either good or neutral. Therefore, why should a believer from a Muslim background who wants to serve Christ also serve Western or Arab Christian tradition, if the particular practice from his own culture is acceptable and good.

What does it mean that I cannot have two lords? It means that there is only one person with supreme authority in my life. It does not mean that there is no other authority in my life. Thus, if my parents tell me to do something that Christ forbids, I must obey Christ and disobey my parents. But if my parents tell me to do something that is not contrary to following Christ and I disobey, both God and my parents rightly hold me guilty. In the same way, I should reject certain things that my community teaches that are contrary to following Christ. However, that does not mean that I reject everything from my community and all authority of tradition. If my community says that wearing shorts is immoral, I should respect the authority, even if the teaching is labeled "Islamic".

This means that a growing dynamic church will *always* have two allegiances. The first and most important is allegiance to Christ. The second is allegiance to its own people and culture (see Mark 12:29). While the greatest commandment must always be in first place, it cannot stand apart from the second one. Obedience to Christ leads to loving those in the world. When one distances himself from those in the world (even out of so-called "obedience" to Christ) he is in fact denying Christ's full lordship. When one tries to "fit in" to his culture to the extent of ignoring the preeminence of the teachings of Jesus, again he denies the Lordship of Christ.

There are no holy cultures or holy traditions. Islamic understanding of Arabic practices as superior to those of other people groups is plainly wrong. Arabs who are "ethnically" Christian (i.e. born into a given Christian tradition) are not culturally inferior to Muslims. However, while one cannot say that Arab Muslim culture is superior to African or Korean culture, one *can* say it is best for an Arab Muslim. Those things that are not harmful and contrary to the Lordship of Christ should stay and be affirmed.

What about Arab Christians? There is no reason that Arab Christians need to become culturally Muslim, but I do believe that those who desire to faithfully and effectively witness should at the point of witness adapt to the religious forms of their listeners in order to fully incarnate faith in Jesus Christ.

The "Jesus Mosque"

One reason I avoided using the term "Jesus Mosque" in my article is that it leads to confusion. We are called to help people from all nations and people groups come to faith in Christ, gathering together in meetings that are called in the New Testament "*ekklesia*". It may be that believers choose to meet in a purpose-built building, but the building does

not define God's people--the first centuries of the faith saw believers meeting in homes and other locales adapted to their needs.

For the *ekklesia*, the *manner* and *locale* of meeting are secondary to following the authoritative teachings of the New Testament. It may be that a meeting that meets all New Testament norms *looks* very Islamic, just as in the first century the meetings of Jewish believers *looked* very Jewish. If there are cultural aspects that do not contradict the express commands of Scripture (sitting on the floor, praying by bowing, etc.) they should be utilized. A useful test for contextualizing specific practices is: Will this help me to obey Jesus, and make faith in him comprehensible, practicable and reproducible for others in my community?

It may be that an "*ekklesia*" (meeting) of believers from a Muslim background meets in a form that looks like a mosque meeting. It could also meet in a form that looks like a study group, social gathering, or so on. What is important is that it is faithful to Scripture and comfortable to people in the culture.

Centered versus Bounded

Unfortunately, both in the Muslim world and outside of it, faith in Christ is often defined by boundary markers, or "highly visible, relatively superficial practices that serve to distinguish people inside a group from those outside."¹

As John Ortberg points out in a penetrating article in *Christianity Today*, "While the religious experts focused on clarifying boundaries, Jesus focused on what lies at the center of faithful life. ...Consistently in the New Testament we see the spiritual life determined by what is at the center, not by the boundaries. It was a "centered approach" to Christian life. This explains why so many of the conflicts between the religious experts and Jesus and Paul revolved around the issues of Sabbath, eating, and circumcision. Jesus was not simply differing with them on applications of the law. He was threatening the foundation of their very understanding of themselves as the people of God."² The Pharisees and Judaizers had made their faith into a sort of exclusive preserve with shibboleths and trivial tests of belonging. Yet the Kingdom of God is designed to be "radically inclusive" (Rev. 5:9-10).

What is really central to following Jesus? What is the supreme qualification to enter the kingdom of Heaven? It is to believe in and participate in the sacrifice of Christ, which totally annulled the Law and the barrier between Jew and Greek (Col. 2:14, Eph. 2:12-16). Thus Paul instructs us, "in view of these tremendous facts, don't let anyone worry you by criticizing what you eat or drink, or what holy days you ought to observe, or bothering you over new moons and Sabbaths. All these things have at most only a symbolical value: the solid fact is Christ" (Col. 2:16-17 Phillips translation).

¹ "Why Jesus' Disciples Wouldn't Wash Their Hands", *Christianity Today Online*, August 15, 1994,

p.1

² *Ibid*, p. 1-2