

LIVING IN A MUSLIM COMMUNITY: A METHOD FOR ADJUSTING TO NEW CULTURAL SITUATIONS

by Wayne McClintock

Introduction

People adjust to new cultural situations in various ways. Many individuals learn by a process of trial and error, while others adopt a more methodical approach to acquiring information about their host community. Missionaries engaged in cross-cultural ministry, however, are primarily interested in acquiring knowledge about their new cultural situation for the purpose of building meaningful relationships with local individuals and families. Yet they often overlook the complex differences that exist between various Muslim peoples.

As the Islamic faith spread outwards from Southern Arabia, towards Africa in the west and Indonesia in the east, it interacted with traditional world views and social institutions to produce a wide range of variation in the indigenous expressions of Islamic belief and practice. Social behaviour in Pakistan, for instance, is manifestly different from that practiced in Saudi Arabia, even though the Muslim peoples of both nations share allegiance to a basic core of Islamic doctrine and ritual. Moreover, within national boundaries there can also be significant variations in the way the basic teachings of Islam are reflected in the everyday lives of the people. Regional cultures as well as class, ethnic, urban/rural, and sectarian differences influence these variations. Within the smaller Muslim nations such variations may be minimal but in the larger Muslim nations of Pakistan, Bangla Desh and Indonesia, they present a picture of bewildering sociological complexity to the outsider.

Outsiders commonly view Islam as a vast monolithic entity, and missionaries are by no means exempt from this misconception, with the result that they are ill-equipped for adopting a life-style that takes account of the manifold variations in social behaviour amongst Muslim peoples. Confronted with a strange and threatening environment that induces strong feelings of psychological insecurity, people often retreat to the safety of a system of rules to guide their behaviour. This emphasis on rule-oriented behaviour hampers their adaptation to the new environment, however. No system of rules can possibly ever take account of all the varying events and situations an outsider encounters when he enters another culture.

What is required, then, is a method for adjusting to new cultural situations rather than a system of rules. A method which helps missionaries build meaningful and enduring relationships with local individuals and families by enabling them to develop their own guidelines for living in a Muslim community. It is my hope that the following ten-step method will help missionaries working in Muslim countries in North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, to develop a suitable life-style relevant to the Muslim community in which they reside and minister.

A Method for Adjusting to New Cultural Situations

The first four steps in this method relate to the cultural adjustment process in general, while the remaining six steps are specially designed to help individuals develop their own particular guidelines.

Step 1. Adopt the attitude of a learner. There is much we can learn from the people around us which will facilitate our ministries, if only we have enough humility to put ourselves in the position of a learner rather than that of a teacher. This principle applies as much to missionaries with twenty years experience or more as it does to comparative newcomers. Missionaries not only need to study their host culture, but also should be aware of the cultural assumptions underlying their own world view. These assumptions are often manifested in misunderstandings and ethnocentrism when they encounter another culture.

In a recent book, Hiebert (1985) provides North Americans with a basis for making an evaluation of their own perception of reality by examining important cultural themes in their world view. Although primarily written for North Americans, this chapter could also help missionaries from Western Europe, the United Kingdom, and Australasia, to understand some of the presuppositions they bring to the task of communicating the gospel across cultures (McClintock 1989).

Step 2. Observe, evaluate, and consciously reflect about the many social situations and events that occur in your everyday life with the local people. It is wise to avoid taking these situations and events for granted, or making the opposite error of dismissing 'strange' or 'exotic' occurrences as evidence of irrational behaviour. Underlying such situations and events is a complex system of beliefs and values which regulate the behaviour of the people belonging to your host community.

Step 3. Try to develop a network of at least three or four cultural informants who are members of the particular social group which is the focus of your ministry. Initially these people will be those who are bilingual and speak some English. As your language fluency increases, you should try to find people who are more typically representative of the group as a whole, and then your inquiries can be conducted in the local language.

Step 4. Read widely about all aspects of the local society and culture, and in particular seek out published information about the specific social group which is the focus of your ministry. Begin this task by seeking out books and periodicals in your local libraries which are published in English. Eventually, if your reading ability in the local language allows it, you should try to read books published in that language. God novels by local writers, whether in English or the local language, sometimes provide insights that more academic authors overlook.

Step 5. Identify the groups of 'significant others' you relate to. For example, missionary colleagues, work colleagues, other expatriates, neighbours, the focal group of your ministry, etc.

Step 6. Assess your 'status' in relation to each of these groups and the possible impact of that 'status' on the other groups to which you relate. At any one moment of their lives, individuals occupy a number of different statuses. Thus a person may concurrently be a father, missionary, Anglican, and a friend. Each of these statuses relates to a specific social context and is associated with its own patterns of behaviour.

From our behaviour patterns, local people will assign us a status within their particular social context; this may have little relation to our own perception of ourselves as 'missionaries' (Hiebert 1985: 257-8, 263-4). Moreover, in societies where a strong emphasis is placed on status hierarchies, such as those of South Asia, the status we occupy in regard to one group will inevitably affect our relationships with other social groups in the host community. For instance, a missionary living in a village, will need to consider how his status in regard to one social group affects his relationship to other groups living in the community. Being identified too closely with a particular group may have serious consequences for developing relationships with other groups in the village.

Step 7. Identify which of these groups are Muslim, and learn about their religious practices. Are they orthodox believers or followers of folk Islam? To which Muslim sects do they belong? Try to learn as much as possible about their religious beliefs and practices by reading relevant books and articles, talking with your key cultural informants, and, where possible, observing their religious festivals and daily ritual activities.

Step 8. Draw up your own life-style guidelines for working among each of these groups. Formulate these guidelines in the light of Biblical teaching regarding the Christian's relationship to culture and your sociological knowledge of the group which is the focus of your ministry. Because man is created in the image of God, there are elements in all cultures which are in accord with Biblical values. On the other hand, there are customs and structures in all cultures which are the result of human sinfulness. Like the sins of individuals, these customs and structures come under the judgment of the gospel.

When ministering to particular groups, we are often confronted with customs which conflict with basic biblical values. Thus our participation in these activities becomes problematic, and we have to choose whether we will maintain our distinctively Christian life-style or uncritically accept indigenous values. The teaching of scripture is unequivocal at this juncture: we are to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth [Matthew 5:13-14].

Step 9. Be prepared to be incorporated into the family structure of those to whom you most closely relate in this group, through 'fictive' kinship. In many societies, outsiders are adopted as 'fictive' relatives as a means of incorporating them within the social group. These 'fictive' relationships can facilitate a missionary's access to a wide kinship network and provide many opportunities for sharing the gospel. One needs to be aware, however, that these 'fictive' kinship

relationships involve obligations as well as privileges. At times these obligations may appear to be very onerous to the missionary, but if these relationships are to be maintained they must be met.

Step 10. Modify and adapt your guidelines as experience teaches you.

Try to keep detailed notes of your observations and reflections during this ten-step process, especially in regard to steps 2, 3, 4, and 7. Make the effort to write up your guidelines once you have formulated them. Then they will be much easier to evaluate and, if necessary, adapt or modify at a later date.

Conclusion

The ten-step method presented here has considerable potentials as a technique for helping us develop a culturally appropriate and effective witnessing life-style amongst our Muslim friends and neighbours. But let us not overlook the work of the Holy Spirit in this process. Without His power, invoked by our constant prayer and submission to the Father's will, any method of witnessing we choose will remain a barren and futile task.

References Cited

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1989 "Anthropology for Missionaries" (a review of P. Hiebert, Anthropological Insights for Missionaries, and P.G. & F.F. Hiebert [eds.], Case Studies in Mission), in International Review of Mission, Vol. LXXVII No. 310, pp. 232-234.

RELATING TO ARABS CROSS-CULTURALLY THROUGH NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

by S. M.

[The original 24 page manuscript has been edited and abridged for publication here. Although the article uses illustrations from North America to highlight the differences of Arab non-verbal patterns, there are enough shared cultural ties between the countries of the West to make the article helpful to missionaries from other Western countries as well.]

As Christians concerned with presenting the Gospel of Christ to all the peoples of the world, we are aware of the prime importance of intercultural communication. But we generally think of communication in terms of verbal messages. When we study communication, however, we discover that 65-80% of communication is non-verbal, and most of that is unconscious.

An illustration may help us grasp the importance of the non-verbal aspect. The following exchange takes place in a conference room in a Middle Eastern city during the weekly meeting of the unit heads of an American organization.

As the men took their seats around the long table, John Smith, the American supervisor, was already in the room, engaging those present in a premeeting friendly conversation. Almost the entire staff was there. Omar Mohamed who had just arrived sat in an empty chair not too far from the supervisor. John Smith then turned around to Omar Mohamed and asked, "How's the wife, Omar?" Omar flushed, blushed deep red, mumbled some incomprehensible sound, and John Smith, smiling, nodded contentedly. At the time, the staff knew that Omar Mohamed's wife had been hospitalized for the last six weeks. However, to Omar and the Middle Easterners present, the friendliness and concern implied in the remark of the supervisor were offensive and in poor taste (Yousef 1974:384).

Mr. Smith had violated the cultural code. The subject of women and their relation to men involves the Arab's concept of honor. It is a matter for private conversation, and should not be brought up in public in a loud voice in the presence of the other men. To do so makes it impersonal, unimportant and casual. If Mr. Smith had known about and paid attention to the rules governing non-verbal communication--if he had spoken in a low voice, within two feet of the employee, while patting his arm or shoulder and listening intently to his response--his concern and his sincerity would have been unmistakable. This is what is expected of supervisors in the traditional, authoritarian Middle Eastern setting. Unfortunately, the distance between them and the loud voice changed the meaning of his message (Yousef 1974).

Not only does non-verbal behavior comprise a large part of communication, it is also of extreme importance for ensuring that the meaning we intend to communicate is properly understood. Non-verbals convey our emotions, and our perceptions of ourselves and of others. They complement verbal messages, and help them to produce the effect that is desired. They are symbols, and convey specific meaning. Each culture has its own set of non-verbal symbols, which must be learned with their meanings.

Categories of Non-verbal Communication

The purpose of this article is to help missionaries become aware of the non-verbal aspect of communication in Arab society and motivate them to begin learning this silent language which may influence whether the Gospel will receive a hearing. We will focus on non-verbals specific to Arabs, but to make it as practical as possible, we will also look at how they differ from North Americans.

Carley Dodd divides non-verbals into several categories: kinesics (body language), proxemics (spatial language), haptics (touch language), chronemics (use of time), and paralinguistics (how we say things) (Dodd 1982). Body language is what one thinks of first when