

Outreach to Muslims in North America

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Introduction:

Why reach Muslims? This is a question which has surfaced time and again in the minds of western countries. The apathy of western countries was rudely shaken after the events of 9/11. There was a sudden desire to know about Islam, Muslims, Jihad, and the beliefs of the Islamic people. The ignorance about the religion and belief, of those seven million people who live in the North American culture and a society, lead to fear, which coupled with the horrific events has resulted in paranoia.

So, why reach out to Muslims? There are many reasons – the main being the Great Commission, exhorting us to reach out to All Nations of the world. In North America and especially in the United States, there is a reticence in reaching out to anyone, let alone Muslims! We must understand that Islam is one of the fastest growing religions. In the United States, many would be surprised to know that the mother mosque in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, was established in 1923! Nearly all major cities have sizeable populations of Islamic people from many different cultures and countries. Highly skilled professionals work in many offices and jobs that were once the domain of Anglos. The Muslim population permeates every aspect of society and though they are from different cultures and creeds, once they think that their religion is under attack, they will show solidarity under the umbrella of the Muslim Ummah.

Important Facts about Islam

Before attempting to reach out to Muslims, there are some important facts which must be known to those who want to evangelize the Muslims:

1. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. This is due to very aggressive and extremely well financed evangelism, coupled with a very high birth rate. The Muslims believe that a highly influential minority comes to North America for the sole purpose of evangelizing the 'decadent west.' They believe that *spreading Islam validates a Muslim's departure from his own country to a western country with the intent of reviving and reforming the present Muslim community, as well as spreading Islam amongst the morally bankrupt western society.*
2. Islam has more common ground with Christianity than any other religion although they do not want to admit it. Jesus is mentioned as the Word, the spirit, sinless, having the power to give life, and many other attributes. There is also mention of Bible characters, like Adam, Noah, Joseph, Mary, and Jonah, as well as of angels, the flood, and many other events from the Bible. This gives a common ground for evangelists to reach out to them.
3. Islam is the only world religion that challenges the authenticity of the Bible, claiming that it was corrupted and altered in such a way as to not show that Muhammad would be the final prophet. This is not found in the Koran, but Muslims are taught this and often use it as a first response in any debate or dialogue.

4. Islam uses all possible means to make converts around the world and the missionaries have highly developed skills. It would not be wrong to say that every mosque is a training center to some degree. Their missionary efforts are concentrated not only on the spiritual aspect but also politically and materially. The other method is to challenge the claims of Christianity by bringing attention to decadence in the North American society and comparing it to what is taught as Christian beliefs.
5. Islam also has a radical side, which is influenced by the Koran and the Hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad). It is verses from these that incite Muslims to Jihad, as is evidenced by this quote: "If you choose to live here, you have a responsibility to deliver the message of Islam ---- Islam is not in America to be equal to any other faith, but to become dominant. The Koran should be the highest authority in America and Islam is the only accepted religion on earth --- everything we need to know is in the Koran" ("San Ramon Valley Herald," July 4, 1998. Omar M. Ahmed, Chairman Council on American-Islamic Relation [CAIR]).

Witnessing to Muslims:

Witnessing to Muslims requires time, temperament, an in-depth study of your own religion, and sensitivity to the cultures and traditions of Islamic countries as well as of the religion itself.

DO:

1. Be respectful and sensitive to the convictions of Muslims without compromising your own beliefs. Remember that what the person has learned throughout his life is more close to him than what you are trying to tell him now.
2. Learn the customs and traditions of the person you are reaching out to. The individual will be delighted to show you how they live, what they eat, how they dress.
3. Be interested in their festivals. Join them for special meals and bring presents with you. The Islamic cultures are very proud of being hosts and give and receive presents and gifts.
4. Be a true friend. This is the most important part of outreach to a Muslim. Your devoted friendship will win you the privilege of telling the person about Jesus Christ. You will have to give of your time and hospitality. You will be tested many times to prove your friendship. Friendship in the Arabic and many other Islamic cultures emphasizes that your needs are secondary to your friend's. However, be warned that your aim is to save souls for Jesus Christ. There are many instances where the missionary has been a wonderful friend without teaching and preaching the Gospel message and the message of salvation. Friendship will also give you leeway to invite your friend for church functions like Advent programs and other festivals. Here they must see a caring, Christ-centered congregation willing to make the guest comfortable and including him in their programs. Many chances have been lost by the stand-off attitude of congregations.
5. How do you go about saving souls? The best way is to first establish a strong friendship, and then give your personal testimony. This is a most powerful tool and will excite the mind of the person to ask questions about your faith in Jesus Christ. Be clear and concise as to how your faith in Jesus Christ has led you to salvation, and how you have been saved by grace through faith. This is very powerful stuff to a Muslim who relies on good works. Even Muhammad was not assured of his salvation.

6. Once you have gained the trust and respect of your Muslim friend, invite him to church. Remember that this may be the first time your friend is going to a Christian house of worship, unencumbered from religious fanatics, family, and others. Be aware that some of the things he sees will lead to discussion and questions.
7. Enhance your knowledge of the Koran, especially the attributes of Jesus Christ. This will be very helpful once you are in the stage of discussing serious issues with your friend. The Koran speaks of Jesus as the Messiah, the word of God, ascended into heaven, worker of miracles, and giver of life who died and rose up the third day.
8. Use the Bible and quote it wisely. The use of biblical quotes often piques the interest of the Muslim. This is an ideal time to offer the Bible for his self-study, along with other Christian literature. If you do not have a Koran, it would be a good idea to obtain a copy and go through the passages that talk about Jesus Christ.
9. Do practice what you preach. Muslims are very skeptical of the society and the American culture as it is portrayed through the media and also in the streets. A majority of Muslims live in the lower- to middle-class neighborhoods and equate street culture as a universal problem of the church in North America.

During your interaction with Muslim friends, there are some things that could potentially antagonize an Islamic person.

DON'T:

1. When discussing, do not talk negatively of the Koran or the religion. Do not start off with phrases or points that antagonize the mind of a Muslim. Son of God, Trinity, atonement, redemption may be clear for you, but not for him. Use everyday expressions to bring home a point.
2. Treat the Bible and the Koran equally, with respect. Muslims place a lot of emphasis on giving respect to the Koran and are appalled at the way Christians treat their Holy Book. Putting the Bible on the ground or under your chair is highly disrespectful to the Muslim. In a Muslim house, the Koran is always kept covered and is never held below the waist. It is kept in a special place, preferably on a mantel on the wall, above head level. Disrespect of your own book can be an immediate turn-off.
3. For an Islamic person, functions that mix genders are frowned upon. In some more conservative countries, men have a separate enclosure (Hujrah) from the women. In some countries, women are not allowed into the mosque. In western society, men and women worship together in churches – sometimes showing undue affection during the course of the worship service. This is frowned upon by the Islamic society.
4. Do not get involved in political discussions. Of the seven million Muslims in North America, many may have come to escape persecution from their own people. They still, however, see the United States as a reason for many of the problems in the Islamic world! They are highly nationalistic and very volatile in reaction to a perceived or an actual slight.
5. Many westerners forget that the Middle East is the cradle of the major religions of the world. One major mistake of evangelists is to try to put a western face on Christianity. One Palestinian Christian, when asked how long had he been a Christian, replied, “Since the last

400 years!” In addition, keep in mind that the culture of such countries is much richer and older than North America. Therefore, do not compare their culture with your own. It would be of value to learn some of the history and the culture of the people to whom you are reaching out.

6. The Islamic culture and society do not allow women to speak intimately with men. Therefore, it would be better for people within the same gender to interact. Even in the North American environment, do not try it.
7. Outreach to Muslims is an intense one-on-one effort. Do not try to evangelize an entire group. You will be defeated from the very start. Also do not try and talk to a husband and wife at the same time – they will be wary of each other’s reactions and will shy away from asking questions or getting further involved.
8. Many missionaries are intimidated by Muslims – especially in the prevailing environment of fear and mistrust during these times. The mental picture one draws is of a fundamentalist Muslim, out to create as much mayhem and terrorism as he can. That is not the universal case. Though many Muslims are sympathetic to the Islamic causes around the world, not all of them align themselves with the fundamentalists. Be ready to talk openly about the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ and the greatest of all commandments – Love your neighbor as yourself.

How Do You Start?

You might ask, “How do I start reaching out to my Muslim neighbor?” I suggest:

1. Get to know your Muslim neighbor. It could be the worker at the Seven Eleven store you frequent, it could be your co-worker, and it could be your doctor. Start by showing interest in them rather than projecting a stand-off attitude.
2. Teach and encourage your children. In schools and even colleges, many Muslim students study with your children. This could be a wonderful way to get to know the parents of your children’s Muslim friends.
3. Once you have established a friendly foundation, invite these friends and neighbors into your house for Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving (not for Halloween). This is a good “religious ice breaker” when you might be asked questions pertaining to these church and Christian festivals. Be very hospitable.
4. If any one of your Muslim friends is sick, visit and do say a prayer for the ailing person and the family. In case of someone’s demise, go to the house and say a prayer. It will be appreciated.
5. Once you have gained friendship and trust—and only then—start to tell your friends about Jesus Christ and His message of salvation. Most often your friend will be the one to take the initiative and start asking you questions.
6. Take your friends to your church and introduce them to the congregation. Consider telling your pastor so he can also extend the arm of friendship, perhaps even making special mention of the person without mentioning the religious affiliation or belief.

Conclusion:

Evangelizing Muslims is at the same time a difficult and an easy task. What makes it difficult is that Muslims are very aware of the upheavals and conflicts within the American culture and society. They see how the church makes a very limited impact on society and how many Christians only pay lip service to religion.

Consider these thoughts: In countries outside their own, the Muslims tend to stick together and congregate for a single purpose, which is in the name of religion. They may be from many different cultures and countries and languages, but their binding force is the call of Islam. How many Christians do this? What they see in the streets and in the media is equated with Christianity. They are also very aware of the way “freedoms” allow Christians to beat up on their own religion – removing the name of God from public buildings, taking umbrage to saying the Pledge of Allegiance where God is mentioned, and turning Christian holidays into secular holidays. One can find many examples where Americans have willingly surrendered their faith to portray themselves as accommodating and pliant.

That considered, why is evangelizing Muslims easy? One reason is that they already have an idea of Christian scriptures through their own Koran. For example, Jesus is mentioned in 93 verses in the Koran. If you have a working knowledge of the Koran, you will be able to sow a seed, which will help save a lost soul. Remember – it takes a long time to bring a Muslim person to Jesus Christ – NEVER LOOK FOR QUICK RESULTS. You have to remain committed.

Practice:

Scenario 1

Initiating prayer with your Muslim friend:

During any problem or catastrophe, all people, from any religion, invoke the mercies of a being higher than ordinary mortals. The Hindu would pray to one of their many gods or goddesses, the Sikh would invoke the mercies of the Gurus. Likewise, the Muslim calls upon Allah to bestow his mercies upon the afflicted one(s). More often than not, they would invoke Allah and not Muhammad. It is here that a Christian can initiate prayer. Let us take the example of sharing a meal with your Muslim friend in your own house.

At the Table ...

Mom: “I hope everyone has a good appetite. I’ve prepared all the special dishes for a Thanksgiving meal.”

Friend: “So, why do you spend so much time and energy getting the family together to spend this particular festival – don’t you think Christmas is a more important event?”

Mom: “Thanksgiving is a time for the complete family to be together and share the joys and the gifts our Lord has given us and to remember that His hand is always upon us. But you’re right, Christmas is also very important as we celebrate the birth of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Friend: “What’s the significance of having turkey?”

(Always try and guide the conversation to show how God has blessed you and the many blessings for which you are thankful. Brush up your knowledge of various traditions so that you are not caught short on any question.)

When the food has been brought in and all are seated ...

Mom: "As you know, Nadim, we always start our meals with a word of prayer to our Lord Jesus Christ, thanking Him for His gifts to enrich our souls and bodies. But with today being a special day, thanksgiving, and having a special guest, we also say a special prayer."

Friend: "Thank you for being such a gracious host."

Mom or Dad says the prayers, always certain to observe the following:

All present should close their eyes and fold their hands. The prayer needs to be said in a loud, confident voice and not in a small or apologetic voice. Thank the Lord who gives us salvation through His Son Jesus Christ. Thank the Lord for all who have traveled safely and, above all, thank the Lord for having a special friend in the house who is going to share bread and fellowship under your roof. Also pray for the family of your friend.

Once the prayer has been said and the food is being served, be sure to serve your friend first. If you have gone through this regularly with your friend, you will notice that when s/he calls you for a meal, you will be expected to say your prayer in their house also.

Scenario 2

Making friends initially, at the Seven Eleven ...

(This would be a place you frequent often. It could be a restaurant, grocery store, your corner store, or a gas station.)

You: "Hi, could I have some pop, please?"

Associate: "Sure. Coke or Pepsi?"

You: "Pepsi would do fine – diet please. Which country are you from?"

A: "I am from Jordan."

Y: "That's a country rich in culture and heritage."

A: "How do you know about Jordan?"

Y: "I read about it in the Bible and then I got interested. What little I know is through reading books – I sure would like to know more, especially from someone who comes from that country."

(At this stage, the person may show more interest, which could lead to an opportunity to invite him or her for coffee or even dinner. Remember to pay for your guest. This works well if you show interest as if you are researching a country. Ask about culture, traditions, life, family, what brought this person to the United States, how the United States compares with the old country, etc.)

Resources:

Web sites:

For more information go to <http://www.poblo.org/>

There are a number of Muslim websites that teach about the Koran and the Islamic religion:

<http://www.al-islam.org/>

<http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA>