

Five Main Questions Muslims Ask Christians – Dick Brogden

You cannot live in Sudan without interacting with Muslims. You cannot speak with Muslims as friends, neighbours, employers, employees, or colleagues without issues of faith arising. Issues of faith cannot long be discussed before Muslims raise objections to basic Christian beliefs. Living among Muslims opens a tremendous opportunity for Christian witness. Muslims are by belief and practice very religious. This is to be welcomed not feared. It gives us repeated opportunities to witness. We will look at five main objections Muslims have to Christianity and suggest answers we can respectfully share with them.

“In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander”, 1 Peter 3:15-16.

Objection 1: The Christian Scripture (Bible) Has Been Corrupted

When you love Muslims you soon see how much we have in common with them. Christians and Muslims both believe in one God. We believe there are angels and demons. We believe that God has spoken through His prophets. We believe God has left us a reliable, written scripture. We believe in the Day of Judgement. We believe that there is an anti-Christ. We believe that there is a Christ and that He will come again. The list goes on.

After some initial agreement and mutual affirmation, we very quickly realise that there are also crucial differences. Christians believe that God is merciful, and that sin cannot be forgiven without shed blood (atonement being made). Muslims also believe that God is merciful *but He can forgive our sin without needing to shed anyone's blood*. When it comes to the respective Scripture texts we run into an impasse:

1. The Bible records Jesus as saying "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6.
2. Islam rejects the concept of God as Father. God is not allowed "His one and only Son", John 3:16; Sura 2:116, 10:68, 19:35, 23:91. The Qur'an further states; "If any one desires a religion other than Islam, never will it be accepted of him and he will be counted in the ranks of those who are lost." Sura 3:85.

For servants of the texts of either faith, pluralism is not a viable option. They cannot both be true. If one is right, the other is wrong. Christianity and Islam are mutually exclusive. I often quote the above verses in conversation with Muslim friends. Then, with a smile, I slap their knee and say, "My friend, one of us is in serious trouble!"

Most Muslims respond to the contradictory issues in Islam and Christianity by saying that the Bible is not trustworthy because it has been corrupted. When I am addressed by a Muslim who doubts the trustworthy nature of the Bible I respond by respectfully sharing one or more of the following thoughts:

1. Inspiration verses Dictation

I point out that Muslims and Christians have different understandings of how our respective scriptures were revealed. Muslims believe in dictation. God spoke. Gabriel listened and then spoke the exact same words to Mohammed. Mohammed listened and then spoke the exact same words to his followers. The followers listened and then recorded the exact same words on bones, skin, and parchment. These recitations were then later compiled into what became known as the Qur'an.

This means the exact words that God wanted known were passed from God to Gabriel to Mohammed to Muslims. It was an oral dictation that was eventually written and collected. Since the exact words themselves are God-sourced (in Muslim belief), if there is a factual error or

grammatical mistake, the backward-traced implication is that God is at fault. A God who makes mistakes? If you point out an error in the Qur'an, you have succeeded in pointing out an error in God. An errant Qur'an thus would show that God is not the author of Islam, because God cannot make mistakes.

It is this understanding of "dictation, not inspiration", that Muslims apply to our Christian Bible. They do not understand the Christian concept of revelation by inspiration. They view the Bible as if it had been dictated word by word. Scribal notes and errors of transcription in Bible translation over the centuries thus prove to Muslims that the Bible has been corrupted.

Take, for example, 1 John 5:7-8. It seems a great verse for defending the Trinity:

"For there are three that testify in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one. And there are three that testify on earth: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement".¹

The problem is that this verse is not found like this in the most reliable and earliest manuscripts. A scribal note made through time seems to have merged into the text around the sixteenth century. The earliest collection of Greek manuscripts (called the Majority Text) and the N.U. collection² both indicate that the original text was:

"For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and the three are in agreement."³

Muslims use additions such as these in our Bible to claim the Bible cannot be trusted.

They also stumble over parallel passages with apparent discrepancies. For example, who moved David to count the warriors of Israel? Was it God as 2 Samuel 24:1 says? Or was it Satan as 1

¹ See N.I.V. footnote by 1 John 5:7-8.

² Two translators use the Alexandrian/Egyptian manuscripts in their critical publishing: Nestle-Aland in the 26th edition of the Greek New Testament, and United Bible Society 3rd edition. These sources were consulted by the translators of the New King James Version (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson) 1982.

³ See N.I.V. text for 1 John 5:7-8.

Chronicles 21:1 says? Their usual thinking about a God-dictated text sees a contradiction. Christian belief in a God-breathed inspired text⁴ is able to recognise the awesome greatness of God. God chooses to weave Satan's work into His own, much greater, purpose. It is as if God says, "You have the freedom to do it, Satan, but I always keep the right to determine the results".

Our Bible was revealed to us through inspiration. God had a certain message that He wanted us to understand, so He whispered it into the souls of prophets and apostles. They in their own hand, their own dialect, and with their own grammar, wrote out what God wanted us to know. The result is that forty different contributors were breathed on by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Paul the scholar wrote in Greek language that was quite classical. Peter the fisherman wrote in a more colloquial Greek. Both Paul and Peter tell us something of what God wanted to say. Both communiqués are trustworthy. We hold both together, letting one interpret the other and vice versa. God has clearly revealed to us what He intends us to understand. Whether one writer said "Thou shalt not steal" and another one wrote "Do not steal", is of no consequence. We perfectly understand that God does not want us to steal. Matthew records Jesus as saying, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged".⁵ John records Jesus as saying, "Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgement".⁶ We understand we are to be discerning on spiritual matters but not condemnatory towards anyone. Only God is the Judge.⁷

The Qur'an never accuses the Bible of being corrupt. Numerous Muslim theologians of the 7th through 10th centuries accepted the truthfulness of Christian Scripture. The word "corrupted" only appears four times in the Qur'an⁸ and it never applies to the Bible itself. It always refers to meaning. Three times it is directed at the Jews and accuses them of changing the meaning of the text. Once it is aimed at Christians, likewise accusing them of changing the meaning of the text to suit their understanding and belief.

⁴ 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

⁵ Matthew 7:1.

⁶ John 7:24.

⁷ Romans 2:16.

⁸ Qur'an 2:75-79; 3:71; 4:46; 5:13-14.

The context of these accusations is found in the city of Medina. When Mohammed was originally expelled from Mecca, he travelled to Medina and tried to reach out to the Jewish tribes who lived there. They mocked him (Mohammed was allegedly illiterate) by telling him twisted Bible stories. He subsequently presented a “revelation from God” that was different from the Bible. Names would be wrong, facts would be out of order and the Jews would laugh at Mohammed behind his back. It was this deceit, together with the practice of hypocritically twisting the scriptures to allow their own sinful living, that opened Jews and Christians to Mohammed’s “corruption” charge. The meaning of the text had been corrupted. The text itself never was.

2. God’s Sovereignty

The second response to the Muslim who accuses the Bible of being corrupted is an appeal to the sovereignty of God. When my friend – I’ll call him Joseph – meets a Muslim who accuses the Bible of being corrupted, he lifts his voice so all can hear and says; “God forgive you for your blasphemy! Is God all powerful yet not able to defend His word?” This answer of course demands of the Muslim the justification for his indirect attack on God’s ability to defend His revelation. If the Bible was at one time the recorded truth of omnipotent God, how could it be possibly altered by weak and limited man?

Enlarging on this theme, another friend I’ll call Maajid uses the following analogy:

I love my son very much. Because Sudan is so hot, whenever my son returns from school I prepare a cup of cold water for him. I set it on the table and when he walks in, he immediately refreshes himself and quenches his thirst.

Let us imagine that my enemy sneaks into my house and replaces that cool water with a cool, colourless poison. Under what conditions would I as a father allow my son to drink that poison?

It would have to be one of these three: (1) I did not know my enemy had switched the poison. (2) I was afraid or overpowered by my enemy. (3) I did not love my son enough to warn him.

Now God is omniscient, omnipotent, and all loving. None of the three above explanations can apply to God. Therefore, if the Bible was poisoned God would have warned us.⁹

If the Bible was poisoned and the Qur'an was the trustworthy word of God, surely every page of the Qur'an would shout out a warning? Rather, the Qur'an says:

"If you are in doubt about what we have revealed to you, then ask those who have been reading the Book (the Bible) from before you." Sura 10:94.

3. Chronological Logic

The third response to the Muslim who doubts the trustworthiness of Scripture is to point out the impossibility of his accusation. The Bible could not have been corrupted *before* the Qur'an was allegedly revealed and collected because the Qur'an affirms the Bible. If the Bible was corrupted, the Qur'an is flawed! Yet we have copies of early Bible manuscripts dating to the third and fourth centuries, 100 – 200 years before the Qur'an. The scriptures we have today are the very same scriptures available in Mohammed's day.

Once again the onus of proof is on the disbelieving Muslim. The Bible is innocent until proven guilty. If our Bible is forged, where is the original? If our scripture was corrupted *after* the endorsement given by the Qur'an, who changed thousands of copies? How is it possible that the translations we use today match those available in 600 AD?

4. Scripture Content

For the sincere Muslim inquirer, for the Muslim who is willing to read the Bible for himself or herself rather than depending on the already biased and twisted thinking of some Islamic

⁹ Galatians 1:6-9.

apologists, the best appeal we can make is to the Bible itself. If a Muslim can be encouraged to read the Bible with an open heart, over time the word of God changes him or her. Not only will the Bible speak to the heart, it will also speak to the mind. He or she will begin to notice that the God of the Bible is very different from the God of the Qur'an:

- The Bible will tell the seeker how much God loves him, while the Qur'an will state five different times that God does not love sinners, Sura 2:190, 2:195, 2:276, 3:31-32, 3:57.
- The Bible will tell the believer to "love your enemies", Matthew 5:43-48, while the Qur'an will tell him to "kill the unbeliever wherever he finds him", Sura 9:5.

The text of the Bible accompanied by the wooing of the Holy Spirit is the best answer to any charge of corruption.

Objection 2: The Trinity is Nonsensical

The central doctrine in Islam is called 'tawhiid' in Arabic. The word 'tawhiid' is linked to the noun 'waahid' - meaning one. In effect it refers to the indivisible oneness of God. God exists in absolute oneness. He will not, He cannot partner with anyone. He is transcendent. No one can partake in God's nature. (Contrast 2 Peter 1:4 which tells us we are partakers of the divine nature). According to the Muslim, not only is it impossible for God to be a plurality of oneness, it is abhorrent. The Muslim mind's objection to the Trinity is both empirical and emotional. Christians are accused of making up the doctrine of the Trinity since the word itself is not found in the Bible.

Before I mention some of the more common analogies (all of which break down at some point) let me set the philosophical base for our answer. It is important that we agree with Muslims on a few key points. Our agreement on these does no harm to the truth of the Trinity.

- First, we agree the Trinity does *not* make sense. If God is transcendent, we as finite humans cannot understand everything He does or He is. If we could completely understand God we would be equal to Him. There is an element of trust to all Faiths (otherwise they would be called "Knows" or "Facts", not "Faiths"). Muslims and Christians

choose at different points to believe what we cannot understand. The word “mu’min” (believer) is applied to both Muslims and Christians in the Qur’an and in the history of Muslim/Christian dialogue.

- Second, we agree to underline the omnipotence of God. He is able to do whatever He wills.
- Third, we agree that the term ‘Trinity’ does not appear in the Bible. But this is not an issue of concern because the term ‘tawhiid’ does not exist in the Qur’an either! Yet ‘tawhiid’ has become Islam’s cardinal doctrine.

In this discussion with Muslims it is always helpful to point out that there are transferable concepts. This equalising of the playing field usually does not convince anyone, but it lowers the barrier erected by categorical rejection of the other’s view. If the Muslim can admit to the necessity of trust in his or her own faith, he cannot deny it to another.

Let me illustrate how this can be done when talking to Muslims about the Trinity.

In the Qur’an there is the famous verse that refers to Jesus as “The Word of God and a Spirit from Him.” Sura 4:171. I find it interesting to ask Muslims if Islam teaches a duality in the Godhead. Is God separate from His Word? Which came first? Was His Word created? There has to be simultaneity of existence. If God existed from eternity past without His Word, was He mute? What about the Spirit of God? Did God exist without His Spirit? How could that be? When did God’s Spirit start? To the Muslim it is obvious that from eternity past God had a voice (His Word) and God was alive (His Spirit). In a way, the Trinity of ‘God – Word – Spirit’ is already at hand for the Muslim.

This is of course the best analogy to use. The Biblical view of Jesus as the Word of God, the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of God, and the Fatherhood of God is not so far a leap from the Islamic understanding of God, God’s Word, and God’s Spirit. The obvious gap is the Fatherhood of God, which Islam rejects categorically. It is wise to begin any explanation by making sure that Muslims know we do *not* believe the old Marianite heresy of a ‘God – Mary – Jesus’ Trinity. It was this

false teaching that fostered a misunderstanding in fifth century Arabia and prompted some of the Qur'an's verses against supposedly-Christian teaching.

Fallible Analogies

Let me repeat the disclaimer that while analogies can help, they all break down at some point. Here are some of the common ones that can be used. I will list them in order of my personal preference.

1) **God – Word – Spirit** (detailed above)

2) **One Human as Father, Brother, Son**

In conversation with Muslims I will often use the people themselves as examples:

“Is your father living?” “I am sure you are a faithful son to your father”.

“Have you any brothers?” “How many?” “I am sure you are a good brother to your brothers. “How many children do you have?” “I can see that you are a loving father to your children”.

My friend, do you see the point I am making? You are a father, a brother, and a son – but you are one person. You respond in different ways to these varied groups of people, but you remain absolutely one individual.

The main short coming of this analogy is that unlike any human being God is eternally all that He is. There never was a time when He was not all that He is.

3) **Mind – Thought – Analysis**

My mind (not my brain) is an abstract. With my faculty of thinking I can dwell on one thought. As I dwell on that thought I can analyse whether that thought is noble, selfish, or trivial. Thus I have a plurality in thought of thinking ability, thought, and analysis of thought.

The main short coming of this analogy is that God is not influenced or controlled by

anything outside of Himself. He is always God in and of Himself.

4) **Fire – Light – Heat**

One fire gives off light and heat as it burns. The Bible says, “God is a consuming fire”, Hebrews 12:29.

The main short coming of this analogy is that God needs nothing outside of Himself in order to exist. A fire needs wood or charcoal and must be lit by someone or something. God is fully self-existent.

5) **Body – Soul – Personality**

One person is made up of a physical body plus their psyche (mind and spirit).

Every one of us behaves individually and uniquely in a way others recognise as being “us”.

Again the main short coming of this analogy is that God has no beginning and no end, unlike every human being. Nor are there three parts adding up to one God as a mathematical sum: $1+1+1=3$. God forever has been and will be Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Holy Trinity may be “nonsensical” but it is not foolish nonsense. Inspired thinking of God in this way enlarges our wonder and admiration for His greatness, His “otherness”. Our human minds and our hearts bow in worship before Him.

Objection 3: The Atonement is not Necessary

Muslims do not believe in original sin. While they believe that every person (with the exception of Jesus, Mary, and John the Baptist according to tradition) was touched with sin at birth, they do not believe that sin is inherent to the Human race – carried in our spiritual DNA. Further, they believe that God is merciful and if God wants to forgive sin, He certainly can. He does not need to vengefully kill someone else in order for His mercy to be shown. If God wants to forgive, He will forgive. We can sway His opinion of course by a life of good works and veneration of the prophet Mohammed (who can put in a good word for you on judgement day if you have honoured

him well). The result is a works oriented religion with a lack of eternal assurance. At the end of the day if you have more merit than sin you will end up in heaven. Even this balance is tempered by the fact that God alone decides. No one can know personal salvation for sure.

In dialogue with Muslims, I have found two hypothetical situations of great help in explaining the Christian view. The first deals with the faulty logic behind *any* works oriented tradition, and the second with the need for atonement, not just forgiveness.

1. **Practising Muslims do not eat pork.** I will ask them this series of questions:

Question: "If you went to the butcher, would you buy minced meat from him if you knew that meat was 90% pork and only 10% beef?"

Answer: "Of course not!"

Question: "What about if you knew the minced meat was 90% beef and only 10 % pork?"

Answer: "Of course not!"

Question: "What about if the minced meat was 99 % beef and only 1% pork?"

Answer: "I will never touch anything that has been defiled by pork – not even if it is one tiny drop."

Question: Then how can you hold Holy God to a higher standard than your own? How could a Holy God possibly allow a person with even 1% of sin into His presence?"

2. **A family and a judge.** I ask the Muslim how he would feel about a judge who pardoned a thief, murderer, and rapist. "Let us pretend", I say, "that a thief enters your house and steals all your

money. The thief is caught and brought before the judge. The judge tells the thief; “What you have done is sinful, but because I am merciful I forgive and release you”. The thief thanks the judge, and that night returns to your house and kills all your children. Again the thief is caught and brought before the judge. “What you have done is very sinful, but I am very merciful, so I forgive you and free you again”. The thief thanks the judge and returns to your house that night and rapes your wife. Again he is caught and again the merciful judge forgives and frees him. What would you think of that judge? Would you respect him? He is merciful, but he is not just. Atonement brings together both the justice and the mercy of God.

A further objection that Muslims have regarding the atoning death of Christ is **the element of suffering**. Muslims cannot believe that God would allow one of His Prophets to experience a shameful defeat or death. Muslims deny that Jesus was literally crucified and claim that either Judas was put up on the cross by mistake, or Jesus ‘swooned’ on the cross, He did not actually die.

These denials of Jesus’ death seem to run counter to the Qur’an itself. In Qur’an 3:55 God is speaking and says “I will cause (Jesus) to die...” In 5:117 Jesus refers to “...when you caused me to die...” In 19:33 Jesus again says “Peace upon me the day that I was born and the day that I die.” All three references use the Arabic verb “itwaffa” – the same verb that is used today for death. Qur’an 4:157 does say, “You did not kill him, you did not crucify him”, but the text shows that this comment was directed at the Jews and is in line with the claim of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel, “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord”, John 10:17-18.

When presenting the Biblical view of atonement the logical starting place is the absolute holiness of God. We humans are in an impossible situation. God is so holy that He only allows 100% perfect people into His presence, and yet no one is nor can be 100% holy. No one can attain the level of holiness that God demands. With this as a foundation, we need to show that God, from the very first sin, shed blood to cover the sin. Adam and Eve tried to clothe themselves with

leaves, Genesis 3:7, but God killed an animal and covered their sin with skin from the lamb whose blood He shed, Genesis 3:21. The Old Testament story reveals progressively how every sin had to be covered by blood. Abraham on Mt. Moriah tells his son that “God will provide a lamb”, Genesis 22:8. In the New Testament John the Baptist points to Jesus and says, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” In the whole Bible context, we see God has always insisted: “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”, Hebrews 9:22.

Most Muslims are from cultures that appreciate indirection and stories. I have found the best way to illustrate vicarious atonement is by using the following story:

In San Francisco at the turn of the 20th century, there lived two immigrant Chinese brothers. The elder brother was industrious and moral. He feared God and lived in right relationship with his community. The younger brother was mischievous, rebellious, and violent. He loved to frequent the bars and brothels. The older brother repeatedly warned and pleaded with his younger brother (whom he loved) to turn from his sinful ways and live a godly life. The younger man happily ignored all his brothers pleas.

One fateful night, the younger brother got into a brawl at the local bar. Smashing a beer bottle on a nearby table, he used the sharp end as a club with which to kill a man. Blood from his victim's clothes splattered all over his shirt. The police were called and the younger brother ran home in abject fear. His older brother welcomed him in and on hearing his frantic confession calmly told him to take off his shirt. The innocent brother exchanged the guilty brother's shirt for his own. The police arrived, and not able to distinguish one immigrant Chinese from another, hustled the innocent elder brother – in a bloodstained shirt – to prison. In the course of time, this righteous brother was tried, sentenced and executed.

Five years passed, and as time went by the guilt feelings of the younger brother increased. He came to a point where he could bear no more. He sought out the judge

who had sentenced his older brother to death. He confessed through his tears. "I am the guilty one. My precious brother was innocent of any wrong. He died in my place. What can be done?" The judge was quiet for a moment. Then he gently said, "Blood has been shed. The debt has been paid. You are free to go."

Objection 4: Jesus is not God

Every Muslim is quick to affirm that Muslims believe in Jesus. Most will admit Him into the top three Prophets of importance along with Moses and Mohammed. They will agree that Jesus was a prophet, a teacher, and a miracle worker – but the concept of Jesus as God is blasphemous to a Muslim.

The Qur'an gives us a great starting point on this question. In numerous places the Qur'an affirms the uniqueness of Jesus (19:18-19, 3:45, 4:171). He is called the Messiah, the Word of God, Virgin Born, and recognised as coming again to judge the living and the dead. The Hadiith even affirms that Jesus is sinless.¹⁰ I love to start any discussion on the nature of Jesus by summarising what Islam admits about Him: Messiah, Sinless, the Word of God, Born of a Virgin, and Returning Judge. I then bridge to the story of Jesus healing the paralytic man and forgiving his sins, Mark 2:1-12. I mention all the things that Jesus has done for me (loved, forgiven, healed, blessed, comforted, forgiven sin, granted heaven) and I ask what anyone else can possibly do. Jesus is very special!

Proving the deity of Jesus outside of the authority of scripture is another matter. We sometimes demand belief prematurely. We need to allow Muslims time to come and trust the Scripture, listening to the advice of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' first disciples journeyed progressively into their understanding of the nature of Christ. Several centuries and Councils of our church fathers were needed to clarify our own understandings. We must introduce Muslims to Jesus. When they fall

¹⁰ Bukhari Volume 4, Book 54, Number 506.

in love with Him (and most of them do before they understand that He is God) there starts a relational base of trust on which the Holy Spirit can secure the heavy truth of Jesus' divinity.

We should never refer to the Qur'an in any way that gives it authority. All of our references should be in question form; "Why does the Qur'an say this or that?" When we ask Muslims questions about the Qur'an we do not affirm it as authoritative. We invite them to begin to question it. We should never use the Qur'an to try and prove the Bible, or any Christian doctrine, true. Why? If you do so the progression is simple and dangerous:

- 1) You use the Qur'an to prove the Bible is true.
- 2) The Bible reveals that the Qur'an is false.
- 3) If the Qur'an is false, how can you use it to verify the Bible?
- 4) What it says about the Bible must also be false.

It is neither advisable nor fair to compare Jesus to Mohammed. Jesus never sinned. Mohammed had to repent numerous times, Qur'an 4:96-97; 40:54-55; 47:19. Comparison is not advisable because we anger Muslims and the red fog of anger then removes any possibility of amicable discussion. Comparison is not fair, because Orthodox Islam never claims Mohammed to be perfect nor the incarnation of God. The Qur'an is claimed as absolutely perfect. It is not too much to say that Islam and Christianity are delineated thus:

- In Islam, the Word of God became a book (Qur'an).
- In Christianity, the Word of God became a person (Jesus).

Any fair comparisons should compare Jesus to the Qur'an – the Christian Word of God compared with the Muslim word of God. If you can point to an error in Jesus, Christianity crumbles. If you can point to an error in the Qur'an, Islam fails. Fallibility in the life of Mohammed is not central to this argument.

The fact that Mohammed gave fallible advice (see the Hadith of Sahiih Muslim 'Ridaat al Kabiir' # 1453) sanctioned assassinations, led 29 different violent attacks, and took 12 different wives plus

numerous concubines (including one who was six years old, and another he asked his adopted son to divorce so he could marry), is not the point. If a Muslim wants to compare and contrast Mohammed to Jesus we will be delighted to do so. No right thinking Muslim will dare - as it is not a favourable comparison for their prophet.

If a Muslim knows the biographical history of Mohammed and presses the point I usually find it enough to ask this rhetorical question: "If Jesus was at one well and Mohammed was at another, to which well would you send your wife to draw water?"

Objection 5: God cannot have a Son

Muslims will tell you repeatedly that "God does not beget, nor was He begotten" and "God cannot take the form of His creation". The unpardonable sin in Islam is "shirk" which comes from the verb "sharaka", to associate or partner. To ascribe an equal to God is the most offensive thing one could do, because it violates God's "tawhiid", His incomparable oneness.

The term "Son of God" therefore makes Muslims recoil. It is incomprehensible and reprehensible to Muslims to even suggest that God would have physical relations with Mary in order to produce Jesus. Again, the original confusion is linked to the Marianite heresy which taught of a Mary included Trinity. Modern Roman Catholicism has not helped by its over exaltation of Mary.

Our response begins with the explanation of metaphor. Remember that Muslims acknowledge the virgin birth. We must simply affirm that Jesus was virgin born, and that "Son of..." is a metaphor for a unique relationship. In the Qur'an the expression "son of the road" is used to refer to a traveller.¹¹ Sudanese and Egyptians are often referred to today as "sons of the Nile". In discussion with Muslims I will often ask with a smile, "So tell me, who had sex with the road to produce travellers? And who had sex with the Nile in order to produce you wonderful Sudanese?" The response is always a playful chuckle and the metaphor point is acknowledged.

¹¹ Qur'an 2:177.

A second means of explanation is to ask, “Who was the father of Adam?” “If God is Adam’s father, then can we call Adam a son of God?”

“Imagine you were the recording official when Jesus was born. You were in charge of filling out Jesus’ birth certificate. Who would you write in the space marked “Father” _____?”

One Khartoum summer on a boat steaming up the Nile, I was sitting next to a dear friend who was a recent convert to Christ. He was asking this very question about the incarnation. I had a tea cup in my hand and with it I pointed to the Nile.

I asked him “What water is that?” “The Nile”, he said. I dipped the cup down into the water and lifted it out again. “And what water is this?” He smiled and said, “That too is the Nile.” “And what is the difference between this Nile and that Nile?” “None”, he said. I threw the water from the cup back into the Nile and said. “Jesus is the essence of God. He came to the earth in human form for 33 short years. Then He returned to heaven.”

This simple (and imperfect) illustration was enough for my friend. Since that day, the incarnation of Jesus has not been a problem for him. Let me be sure to say the illustration helped largely because my friend *wanted* to understand. God had made him ready. For others who seek to undermine and accentuate problematic issues, this analogy is limited. Again, let me repeat what I mentioned earlier. Cleverness and polemic argument wins very few Muslims to Jesus. There are thousands of Muslims much smarter and more articulate than you or I. Muslims have been deceived and blinded by the devil and unless the Lord intervenes, none of our illustrations or answers will be decisive in the battle for their souls, 2 Corinthians 4:4; Acts 16:14.

I used to think that if only I could learn Arabic, acculturate the message and live contextually, then Muslims would instantly embrace the Gospel. Unfortunately I found out this is not so. Almost every Muslim I know who now follows Jesus has journeyed through several years of searching and questioning.

There are usually three encounters that work together as Muslims come to know Jesus as Saviour and Lord:

- 1) **Love encounter** an ongoing relationship with a Christian
- 2) **Truth encounter** an ongoing study of the Bible
- 3) **Power encounter** a dream, a miracle, or a supernatural sign

In the end (and following Christians in all ages) we rely on prayer. Yes, we study hard. Yes, we learn how to gracefully “give an answer to everyone who asks us the reason for the hope that we have”, 1 Peter 3:15-16. Yes, we learn Arabic. Yes, we don the robe and drape the veil. Yes, we love and listen to Muslims year after year. We do all this gladly, but we know there is no “magic” formula. We have only the assurance that every person’s salvation is a miracle. We know that every person’s salvation is a very personal encounter between one soul and one Saviour. And we know the only Saviour is Jesus the Messiah, Acts 4:12.

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:

1. Why are “gentleness and respect” such important tools in sharing with others? 1 Peter 3:15-16.
2. Explain the differences between the Muslim view of “dictation” for the Qur’an and the Christian view of “inspiration” for the Bible.

Why must we keep this in mind when sharing with others?
3. Which do you think is the most useful argument for the truth of the Bible:

the Sovereignty of God? or the chronology of the Bible and the Qur’an?

Why?
4. Explain the Holy Trinity in a way that a Muslim may begin to understand, or may at least be encouraged to see the real difference between Islamic and Christian understanding.

Consider the “oneness” (tawhiid) of God.
5. Explain the Christian doctrine of atonement.

Give biblical examples of God shedding blood in order to forgive (to atone for, to cover) sin.

Why is God's mercy *not enough by itself* to offer forgiveness to humankind?

What other attributes of God must be held in a balancing tension with God's mercy?

Why?

6. Why is it "neither advisable nor fair to compare Jesus to Mohammed"?

Describe the key difference between the Word of God in Christianity and in Islam.

7. How can we help a Muslim who struggles over whether God can "have a Son"?

Consider the Christian and Muslim belief in Jesus' virgin birth.

8. Share why *living in front of* Muslims and *praying for* Muslims are so important.