

The Ethics of Silence in Witness to Muslims¹

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Typically, criticizing Islam is unhelpful in religious discussions with Muslims.

Consider the following conversation between a Muslim and a seasoned missionary in the Middle East:

Nader, persistent, asked again, “What problem do you have with Islam?” Giving in I said, “Well, for example the place where it says ‘it’s necessary and good at times to beat your wife.’” “It doesn’t say that,” Nader replied.² “Or where it says a woman is only worth half a man. She is only entitled to half the inheritance that a man is entitled to” I added. “You don’t understand. That is because a woman is married and will be provided for by her husband” he replied.

Then, walking up to the car, I decided to go for it. “Islam and every other religion besides Christianity teach that a person must work to earn forgiveness and salvation from God. Christianity teaches that no one can earn forgiveness by doing good works. Jesus came to die for the sins of man. Forgiveness and salvation from sin is a gift provided by Jesus and received by faith. That is the main problem I have with Islam . . . and any other religion.” Nader replied thoughtfully, “You’re right about that.”³

Nader may or may not embrace Christ in future, but it’s worth noting the change in his responses when the conversation moves from criticism of Islam to a discussion of grace in Christ.

Adding to this anecdote, it is interesting that evidence from qualitative conversion research I conducted in 2003 points in the same direction: Rejection of Islam is not a

¹ The content of this article was presented as a paper at the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) Conference in Baltimore in November 2013.

² The Qur’an’s Sura 4:34 states (in part), “As to those women On whose part ye fear Disloyalty and ill-conduct, Admonish them (first), (Next), refuse to share their beds, (And last) beat them (lightly);” Yusuf Ali’s translation. All quranic citations in this article are drawn from his translation.

³ Source protected. Information conveyed to the author in March 2013.

primary factor in Muslims coming to Christ.⁴ In fact, my findings from Israel/Palestine and Bangladesh suggest that any rejection of Islam “occurs independently, or subsequent to converts’ encounters with Jesus. Major conversion patterns . . . do not show Muslims turning to Christ because they believe Islam is wrong. Accordingly, missionaries desiring to see converts should not attack Islam but should concentrate on pointing Muslims to Jesus instead.”⁵ Jesus, after all, is the focus of the New Testament and the gospel (i.e. the good news of Christ’s death on the cross for our sins and his resurrection from the dead) is the means of salvation (1 Cor 15:1-5).

While the good news of Jesus should be a Christian’s focus, a Muslim’s background cannot be ignored. Islam must be addressed in our witness to Muslims. However, in avoiding unhelpful criticism of this religion, some missionaries have encouraged Muslims to embrace Christ without relinquishing Islam. This approach may start with a version of Kevin Greeson’s well-known “camel method.”⁶ Essentially, Greeson argues that the Qur’an’s Sura 3:42-55 points to Jesus as the Savior. He derives the acronym “camel” from the words Chosen, Announcement, Miracles, and Eternal Life, which he draws from this passage, and asserts that it indicates Jesus “is holy . . . has power over death . . . [and] knows the way to heaven.”⁷ However, reading this passage carefully shows it comes nowhere close to presenting the Son of God who died for our sins. It has other problems too. Sura 3:47 states specifically that Jesus was created and

⁴ Ant Greenham, *Muslim Conversions to Christ: An Investigation of Palestinian Converts Living in the Holy Land*, EMS Dissertation Series, ed. Richard L. Starcher (Pasadena: WCIU Press, 2004).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁶ Kevin Greeson, *Camel Training Manual* (Bangalore, India: Sudhindra, 2004). Other missionaries use the term “camel method” simply to imply one must be sensitive to Islamic realities when presenting the gospel to Muslims, without endorsing Greeson’s (questionable) methodology.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

3:49 conveys a legendary tale (from The Gospel of Thomas the Israelite)⁸ that Jesus brought clay birds to life. Thus we have a created-cum-legendary Jesus, whose cross and resurrection from the dead are nowhere to be seen. This is hardly the biblical Savior! Greeson concedes that the Qur'an "falls short of presenting the full gospel message,"⁹ but it doesn't prevent him from speaking favorably of a convert called Raja who reads his Bible, but teaches fellow Muslims about Jesus from the Qur'an.¹⁰ Allowing an ongoing role for the Qur'an in new believers' spiritual lives like this certainly suggests these individuals remain in the fold of Islam.

How should we regard this phenomenon? A group of Christ-following Muslims, who continue to identify themselves as Muslims, is typically called an Insider Movement. Timothy C. Tennent describes the people in such a movement as those "who have accepted Jesus as their Savior but continue legally, socially, and religiously to identify [sic] with the mosque and the wider Islamic community."¹¹ Interestingly, Tennent concedes "that followers of Jesus who remain within the mosque . . . frequently have a deficient, truncated understanding of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit."¹² He goes on to imply that such believers need (but do not have) a biblically-based understanding of the Trinity. His pointer to this deficiency is noteworthy, since he anchors his entire missiology (and by implication his discussion of the Insider Movement) in the doctrine of the Trinity, as the subtitle of his work indicates.

⁸ This apocryphal document is not to be confused with the better-known (Gnostic) *Gospel of Thomas*.

⁹ Greeson, *Camel*, 75.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 101-03.

¹¹ Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century*, Invitation to Theological Studies Series (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 499.

¹² *Ibid.*, 503.

A specific example of Insider Movements' Trinitarian weakness emerges from a case study presented by John Kim.¹³ Kim portrays an insider movement (in an unidentifiable Muslim location) positively, but relays an occasion when a leader from the movement publicly introduced himself as a Muslim, recited the Muslim statement of faith, and then declared that Jesus is the Word of God and the Spirit of God.¹⁴ This led to vehement opposition on the part of his Muslim hearers and the leader was arrested. While this individual's desire to include Jesus in the interchange is commendable, his understanding of the Word and Spirit of God was deficient. Even a cursory reading of John 14–16 shows that Jesus clearly distinguished himself from the Spirit of God. Moreover, the leader's references to Jesus occurred after he affirmed Muhammad (as he would have to do in reciting the Islamic confession of faith). And as it turned out, this failed to keep him out of trouble. It seems that the use of an Islamic framework did nothing to dissuade the surrounding community that the Insiders were actually Christians who sought to make them Christians too. The Insiders' claim to be Muslims failed to convince, but more to the point, this came at the price of a Christianity leaving much to be desired.

The difficulty of hiding one's Christian identity in a Muslim context is also seen in the case of Nazir, an individual who has been a believer for fifteen years, although his family is still Muslim. As Tim Green notes, due to opposition from his wife, Nazir neither declares he is a Christian nor does he read his Bible at home. However, "Nazir's compromises and deception trouble his conscience. He feels guilty praying the Muslim

¹³ John Kim, "The Anotoc Story, Continued: Group Dynamics Within an Insider Movement," in *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?* ed. David Greenlee (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013), 169–79.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

way at the mosque or at home . . . [and] asks God for forgiveness.”¹⁵ The serious difficulties facing this believer aside, the trouble he has with his conscience suggests he is wrestling with an ethical issue.

Quite frankly, all the problems presented here, of believers in Christ continuing to use the Qur’an, demonstrating Trinitarian weakness, and succumbing to social pressures, are ethical ones. This is so for a very simple reason: Islam and Christianity are not the same. The Qur’an calls for submission to an ultimately unknowable God. It does not lead us to a relationship with the Father through the perfect life, substitutionary death and glorious resurrection of his Son. Islam is focused on God’s oneness to the extent it regards any association with God, including associating the Lord Jesus Christ with him, as the unforgivable sin.¹⁶ It rejects God’s supreme work of taking on flesh that he might take us to be with him. And Muslims identify themselves as those who submit to a final revealed religion, which surpassed, completed, and hence replaced the monotheistic faiths preceding it. They do not accept as fellow Muslims Christians who claim the title Muslim because they “submit to God,” but do so by way of Jesus. They rightly see such claims as deceitful.

So, the differences between Christianity and Islam are fundamental. And it is surely fair to say it is unethical to confuse the two, whether one does so deliberately or not. More important though, a new believer has a new identity in Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:17). This identity must take priority over everything else and color all that a new person in

¹⁵ Tim Green, “Identity Choices at the Border Zone,” in *Longing for Community*, 55.

¹⁶ Note Sura 4:48, “Allah forgiveth not That partners should be set up With Him; but He forgiveth Anything else, to whom He pleaseth; to set up Partners with Allah Is to devise a sin Most heinous indeed.” The implication for Christians is spelled out in Sura 9:31: “They take their priests And their anchorites to be Their lords beside Allah. And (they take as their Lord) Christ the son of Mary; Yet they were commanded To worship but One God: There is no god but He. Praise and glory to Him: (Far is He) from having The partners they associate (With Him).”

Christ thinks, says and does. As Paul urges the Colossians whose lives are “hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3), “whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:17).¹⁷ This applies to believers from Muslim backgrounds, as much as it applies to believers from any other background.

The challenge before us then is how to counsel believers in Islamic contexts to exercise their new identities in Christ ethically.¹⁸ First, launching an all-out war on Islam is extremely unwise. Muslim-majority countries have social mores, if not specific laws, against denigrating Islam. In addition, a death penalty for apostasy has been a feature of Islamic law from the earliest times. Publicly identifying oneself as a traitor (which is how apostates in community-oriented cultures are seen) and attacking one’s erstwhile religion openly, only antagonizes Muslims at large. As noted above, research indicates that this is not a good way to bring such people to Christ. Second, as already indicated, hiding one’s Christianity behind an Islamic fig leaf is not the way to go either. Perhaps another approach, whereby one focuses on Jesus Christ and one’s new identity in him, while practicing a selected and judicious silence on Islam, is better.

I would like to call this approach the ethics of silence in witness to Muslims. Concentrating on Jesus and one’s life in him is central. However, to what extent does one maintain silence in the midst of likely, if not unavoidable, discussions on key Islamic issues? Specifically, should a believer alert a Muslim friend to the negative effect of Islam on freedoms of inquiry and choice, to the traditional Muhammad’s moral failures,

¹⁷ Biblical quotations in this article are from the *English Standard Version (ESV)*.

¹⁸ To be fair, I need to stress that this is also the concern of certain missionaries advocating some form of Insider Movement.

or to the lack of evidence for the traditional Muhammad? Let us examine each of these elements in turn.

It is apparent that a focus on submission discourages free scrutiny and decision. We don't know what actually happened, but according to an important hadith or tradition of Muhammad (Bukhari 1:1:3) the following interchange took place when the angel Gabriel came to him the first time, in the cave of Hira near Mecca:

The Prophet added, "The angel caught me (forcefully) and pressed me so hard that I could not bear it any more. He then released me and again asked me to read [or recite] and I replied, 'I do not know how to read.' Thereupon he caught me again and pressed me a second time till I could not bear it any more. He then released me and again asked me to read but again I replied, 'I do not know how to read (or what shall I read)?'¹⁹ Thereupon he caught me for the third time and pressed me, and then released me and said, 'Read in the name of your Lord, who has created (all that exists) has created man from a clot. Read!

The significance of this is not so much in what he recited as in his having to recite (or read). This demonstrates a key feature of Islam: Muhammad has to submit without question to the revelation he is given. Islamic history has known exceptions to this principle,²⁰ but overwhelmingly, Islam has been characterized by the response Muhammad exemplified in the cave of Hira.

As the Islamic Center of Raleigh asserts, "The word 'Islam' literally implies 'obtaining peace through submission to God.' A Muslim is someone . . . who submits to God and his will."²¹ In other words, where there is no dissent, there will be a semblance of peace; but it comes at the expense of free inquiry. This does not mean that individual Muslims (or those leaving Islam) are incapable of free inquiry. The problem is their deeply-ingrained context of submitting to God's inscrutable will. This context limits

¹⁹ In the Arabic text, Muhammad's second recorded response here is identical to his first.

²⁰ A discussion of the rise and fall of rationalists in Islamic history lies beyond the scope of this article.

²¹ This statement appeared on a flier distributed by the Islamic Center of Raleigh (NC) to guests attending their open house on July 25, 2009.

questioning in general, hindering analysis of key Islamic issues. And it is particularly intolerant of questions about the incomparable uniqueness of Allah and the role of his final messenger, Muhammad.

The subject of Muhammad is more sensitive than most. This may be seen in the widespread, violent, Muslim response to cartoons of Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper in 2005. The cartoons simply suggested that a causal link might be drawn between Muhammad's traditional teachings and recent cases of violence. However, instead of analyzing the suggested link, angry Muslims resorted to burning embassies, boycotting Danish products, and attempting to kill the cartoonist.²² Overall, a number of deaths resulted. More recently, a Coptic Egyptian living in the United States (with a criminal record) made a poor quality movie about Muhammad. In September 2012, a 14-minute trailer of the movie depicted him womanizing, torturing and killing. In the eruption of anger which followed, US government representatives were attacked in Egypt and the US Ambassador to Libya was killed.²³ One might have thought that an inferior movie made by a questionable individual wouldn't deserve serious attention. Even if it did, a question to be asked should concern the accuracy or otherwise of Muhammad's portrayal, given information about him in Islamic sources. But here the difficulty is that Islamic sources do depict Muhammad in a negative light.

Without getting bogged down in detail, the earliest records of Muhammad's life depict him as a raider of caravans (once he left Mecca for Medina), a warrior (with

²² Almost eight years later, one of the instigators of the violence, Ahmed Akkari, apologized for his actions. However, this remarkable turnaround led to his receiving death threats of his own. (See Michael Moynihan's "The Repentant Radical" in *The Daily Beast*, September 17, 2013, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/09/17/ahmed-akkari-repents-violent-opposition-to-danish-cartoons-lamprooning-islam.html>, accessed October 10, 2013.)

²³ The exact identity and apparent premeditation of the group which set the fire in Benghazi, thereby killing the Ambassador, is secondary to the broader context of angry protest in which the killing occurred, following release of the movie trailer.

animosity toward Jews), and the husband of at least ten women.²⁴ Noteworthy among the latter is Aisha, whom sources say he married when she was six-years-old, the marriage being consummated when she was nine.²⁵ However, pointing all this out is not welcomed by Muslims.

Beyond these issues is Islam's central claim that Muhammad is the messenger of God, and the accompanying assertion that the revelation he received (the Qur'an) is final and flawless. Closer inspection raises a host of questions though. The Arabic Qur'an is frequently unintelligible, even to native speakers of Arabic, and extant manuscript evidence indicates the absence of a single quranic text at the time of Muhammad.²⁶ Some scholars suggest that the Qur'an may be based, at least in part, on other languages, and a significant number of researchers point to the lack of independent seventh century evidence for the account of Muhammad as later Islamic sources render it.²⁷ A (non-Islamic) scholarly consensus has still to emerge on how Islam actually arose. However, it seems probable that a heretical Arab Christianity to the north of the Arabian Peninsula was co-opted to serve the needs of a growing Arab empire. This later became Islam as we know it, as the Qur'an was standardized and a plethora of stories was attached to an otherwise obscure prophet, now known to the world as Muhammad.

²⁴ A standard source is Alfred Guillaume's *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's "Sirat Rasul Allah" with Introduction and Notes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955).

²⁵ Bukhari 5:58:234–36.

²⁶ Recent works on this subject include Mondher Sfar's *In Search of the Original Koran: The True History of the Revealed Text*, tr. Emilia Lanier (New York: Prometheus, 2008) and Keith E. Small's *Textual Criticism and Qur'an Manuscripts* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2011).

²⁷ Relevant works include Dan Gibson's *Qur'anic Geography: A Survey and Evaluation of the Geographical References in the Qur'an with Suggested Solutions for Various Problems and Issues* (Saskatoon, Canada: ISP, 2011), Tom Holland's *In the Shadow of the Sword: The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Global Arab Empire* (New York: Doubleday, 2012), Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin's *The Hidden Origins of Islam: New Research into Its Early History* (New York: Prometheus, 2010), and Robert Spencer's *Did Muhammad Exist? An Inquiry into Islam's Obscure Origins* (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 2012).

Suggesting all this is devastating to a Muslim steeped in the standard Islamic account of his or her religion's origins. For the most part though, Muslims are simply unaware of the issues. Non-best-sellers, published in European languages, are typically ignored. However, this was not the case when a documentary by Tom Holland (Islam: The Untold Story) was aired by Britain's Channel 4 in August 2012. The documentary received over a thousand complaints, Holland was threatened, and a subsequent private screening, to be followed by a debate, was cancelled.²⁸ At this point then, it seems unlikely that scholars questioning the standard rendition of Islam's origins will loom large in the public square.

Despite the negative impact questioning Islam and its prophet is bound to have, such questioning plays an invaluable role in aiding our understanding. To what extent, then, should one use an ethics of silence approach when it comes to key Islamic issues? Basically, it is essential to underline the importance of questioning in all that we do.²⁹ This is because our foundational identity as human beings, male and female, is inextricably linked to questioning, to inquiry. As Udo Middelmann puts it, we "are the only beings who are not satisfied with merely living instinctually. . . . We do not just accept things but wonder why. . . . We think and act in the bounds of moral and philosophical categories. . . . While animals respond from instinct, we learn to question."³⁰ This is what it means to be human, to be made in God's image. It's also the way God deals with us. The fall of humanity notwithstanding, people are repeatedly

²⁸ Soeren Kern provides a useful report on this at <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3352/channel-4-islam-untold-story> (accessed October 10, 2013).

²⁹ I spell this out in more detail in my *The Questioning God: An Inquiry for Muslims, Jews, and Christians*, Areopagus Critical Christian Issues vol. VI, eds. Allan R. Bevere and David Alan Black (Gonzalez, FL: Energion, 2012).

³⁰ Udo Middelmann, *Christianity versus Fatalistic Religions in the War Against Poverty* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2007), 126.

called to respond to God in the context of mental and spiritual engagement. This is reflected throughout the Bible.

Consider the following incidents: God asks Adam and Eve, "Where are you? . . . Have you eaten of the tree? . . . What is this you have done?" (Gen 3:9-13). God challenges Abraham: "Number the stars, if you are able to number them" (Gen 15:5). At the burning bush, following several of Moses' questions and God's answers, God inquires: "What is that in your hand? . . . Who has made man's mouth?" (Ex 4:2-11). Or, at the same place (Horeb), another time, God asks (twice) "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9 & 13). Job questions God and then God questions Job, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2). Despite the devastating magnificence of his appearance to Isaiah, God inquires, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? (Isa 6:8). He also asks Jeremiah, "What do you see?" (Jer 1:11), and Israel (via the prophet Ezekiel), "What do you mean by repeating this proverb? (Ezek 18:2). Clearly, God expects engagement. Moving to the New Testament, Jesus does the same. Concerning John the Baptist he probes, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see?" (Matt 11:7). He interrogates the rich young man, "Why do you ask me about what is good?" (Matt 19:17). He asks two blind men, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Matt 20:32). Discussing the payment of tax to Caesar, he inquires, "Whose likeness and inscription is this? (Matt 22:20). Considering divorce he asks, "What did Moses command you?" (Mark 10:3). Crucially, to the now-seeing man born blind, he poses a question we all have to answer, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (John 9:35), and again, to his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt 16:15).

There are many outright commands in the Bible of course, but we are always engaged as we turn to God. It is not a case of blind acceptance. God asks us questions to elicit our response (and we may question him in return). An ethical approach, then, is to encourage questioning as believers exercise their new identities in Christ. And this exercise means one excludes no question on rightly interacting with one's surroundings. In other words, legitimate questions would include the issues of Islam's negative effect on freedom of inquiry, the traditional Muhammad's moral failures, and the lack of evidence for the Muhammad relayed by Islamic tradition. However, these matters should be addressed as they arise, not as a first resort. As noted above, the good news of Jesus must be the primary focus. But as one comes to know the questioning God through Jesus, it is appropriate that a believer would address background issues such as these too.

So, with a focus on Jesus and who we are in him, questions on exercising one's new identity will constantly occur. They should be addressed, with integrity, as they are raised. They will include the Islamic realities in such believers' backgrounds and contexts. However, they should not be limited to Islamic issues. All of life is in view.

As a closing example, consider Jens Barnett's discussion of the extensive influences impacting an Arab believer named Awal:

Firstly, from the time of his birth, Awal has internalized Arabic, tribal, and nationalistic narratives as well as Islamic. Secondly, globalization has brought all manner of cultural narratives into his life and home, through phenomena such as Sri Lankan nannies, Western secularized schooling, satellite TV, and the internet. Thirdly, Awal has needed to internalize Hebrew and Greek scriptural traditions, narratives, and symbolism. Becoming a follower of Christ "involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one's world in its terms."³¹

³¹ Cited from George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religions and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 34.

Finally, to follow Christ is to be part of a global multicultural movement that “has received from the past a rich inheritance of Christian theology, liturgy, and devotion. No group of believers can disregard this heritage without risking spiritual impoverishment.”³² In Awal’s immediate context, this means that access to scripture often involves some form of discipleship or translation mediated by missionaries or ethnic Christians. Thus, no new Arab believer can—or should—completely avoid exposure to the cultural traditions of Western Evangelical and Eastern Orthodox Christianity.³³

Barnett goes on to suggest that such “multiple religio-cultural belonging” is a fact in the lives of individuals such as Awal, and further research should proceed from this understanding.³⁴ This is a valid observation and Barnett’s identification of specific, divergent, deep-seated influences on folks like Awal is helpful. However, it is dangerous to allow lesser influences to drive us. Ultimately, there is a belonging that trumps each of these. And that is a believer’s allegiance to the biblical Jesus. Life in him is our one essential identity and all other influences and belongings must be evaluated, continually, in the light of our relationship with him.³⁵

So, in that sense, there can be no ethics of silence. Everything calling for deference must be questioned and transformed, again and again, as believers exercise their new identities in Christ. At the same time, questioning does not preclude a judicious silence on selected Islamic (and other) realities. One cannot address everything at once, so passing over certain issues is inevitable. There is no need to look for trouble. The bottom line is our desire to see a growing population at the foot of the cross, not an

³² Cited from Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *The Willowbank Report: Report of a Consultation on Gospel and Culture*, Lausanne Occasional Papers, No. 2 (Wheaton: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1978).

³³ Jens Barnett, “Refusing to Choose: Multiple Belonging Among Arab Followers of Christ,” in *Longing for Community*, 25–26.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁵ Believers in community-oriented Islamic contexts face a particular challenge in working out the issues of identity and belonging. Exploring communal solutions in such contexts remains a Missiological imperative. Unfortunately, a broader discussion of the subject lies beyond the scope of this article.

assortment of angry, despondent Muslims who fail to see that Jesus takes care of everything.

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