

Christians, Muslims and the responsible exercise of freedom

Churches and mission agencies should consider how to present the message of Christ in a manner consistent with the character of Christ - whether or not Muslims reciprocate.

by Joseph Cumming



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Because of my position at Yale University, I have unique opportunities to meet regularly with some of the very top Muslim religious leaders around the world. For some I am the only evangelical Christian they have ever met, so they naturally ask me about issues in Evangelical-Muslim relations.

They are often surprised to learn that religious liberty is among the paramount concerns we wish to raise with our Muslim friends. We are concerned about discrimination and restrictions placed on Christian minorities' religious expression in Muslim-majority countries.

We are concerned about "blasphemy" laws under which it sometimes seems Christians are presumed guilty until proven innocent. And we are concerned about "apostasy" laws which threaten the death penalty against those who conscientiously change their religion. My wife and I have personally cared for friends who had been tortured with beatings and electric shocks because of their faith.

Muslim leaders respond to me that in principle they are supportive of full liberty for Christians, but they believe discussion about freedom must not be separated from discussion about responsible exercise of freedom.

Specifically they feel that Christians evangelise Muslims in irresponsible and unethical ways. They believe Christians exploit the poverty of the poor to entice or coerce Muslims to convert. They feel that instead of positively presenting the Gospel as Good News, Christians too often focus on negative, disparaging attacks on Islam as Bad News.

They feel we engage in deceitful practices, and that we are not honest about hidden political or even military agendas of the Christian movement worldwide. And they feel we hold up converts from Islam as "trophies" to humiliate the Muslim community. They argue that we should not talk about freedom unless we also talk about how Christians abuse freedom. Additionally they argue that Muslims' religious liberty is not as fully protected in Christian-majority countries as most Christians think it is.

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I respond that these Muslim leaders have heard exaggerated or even false reports about Christian mission. I am very familiar with how Christian work among Muslims is conducted around the world, and I believe the above description is unfair. I respond further that Muslims are also guilty of unethical conduct in their da'wa (Islamic outreach), for example secret use of oil money to promote intolerant forms of Islam in Nigeria.

Nonetheless, Jesus says we must remove the logs from our own eyes before removing specks from others' eyes, and that only after removing our "logs" will we "see clearly" to help others with their "specks" (Luke 6:41ff.). Jesus adds that we should do unto others what we would have them do unto us (Luke 6:31), whether or not they do good to us in return (6:32ff.).

This means Christians must outspokenly defend religious liberty for Muslims whether or not Muslims reciprocate. It means Christians must admit that sometimes we do preach the message of Christ in an un-Christ-like way, and we must address these ethical lapses whether or not Muslims address ethical lapses in Islamic da'wa. And it means that only when we do these things will we "see clearly" to ask Muslims to address violations of Christians' religious liberty and ethical lapses by Muslims.

Into this situation, like a breath of fresh air, comes the new declaration "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World," issued jointly by the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the Vatican's Pontifical Council on Inter-religious Dialogue.

It is nearly unprecedented in the millennium since the schism of 1054 AD for representatives of nearly all major church bodies worldwide to agree together on a single statement. It is all the more remarkable that it is a statement on missions and evangelism which robustly affirms what evangelicals believe: "Mission belongs to the very being of the church. Proclaiming the word of God and witnessing to the world is essential for every Christian."

It rightly continues: "At the same time, it is necessary to do so according to gospel principles, with full respect and love for all human beings." It goes on to explicate in detail what those "gospel principles" are, addressing precisely the kinds of ethical issues which Muslim leaders raise.

Some evangelicals have noted that one or another theological point important to evangelicals was omitted from this document. I too would have added other points if I could have written it unilaterally, but it is inevitable in a joint declaration by the WEA, WCC

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and Vatican that the final document may not contain all that one might have wished. This document is remarkable for the very strong and biblically sound principles it includes.

This historic declaration deserves to be widely studied and implemented by churches and mission agencies as they consider how to present to all nations the message of Christ in a manner consistent with the character of Christ. They should do so because it is the right thing to do – whether or not Muslims reciprocate. But they can do so also recognising that this removal of logs from Christian eyes will mean we have more integrity when we ask Muslims to address our concerns for religious liberty and unethical da'wa around the world.

Last week I hosted a meeting of thirty highly influential Muslim, Christian and Jewish religious leaders from around the world. At that meeting a prominent American Muslim leader spoke about how grateful the Muslim community has been for the way Geoff Tunnicliffe and the World Evangelical Alliance have spoken out courageously in defense of Muslims' religious liberty in the West. Several international Muslim delegates said afterward – without prompting from Christians – that they had been deeply moved to hear that the WEA had done this, and that they felt challenged to do more to stand up for religious liberty of Christians in Muslim-majority countries. We should do these things because they are right – whether or not Muslims reciprocate. But it is nice to know that sometimes Muslims do reciprocate.

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