

Breaking the
Islam
Code

J.D. Greear



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Contents



Prologue	9
<i>A Story of Friendship</i>	
Getting to the Issues of the Heart	13
1. Creating an Environment for Conversation	19
2. Understanding What Moves the Muslim	25
3. Understanding What Your Muslim Friend Believes	39
4. Misconceptions	51
5. The Muslim Salvation Code	61
6. Re-coding the Gospel	75
<i>A “Gospel for Muslims”</i>	
7. The Gospel Confronts the Ultimate Religion of Works	93
<i>Understanding Islam as a Self-salvation Project</i>	
8. The Objections, Part One	105
<i>About God, Jesus, and the Cross</i>	
9. The Objections, Part Two	119
<i>About Prophecy, the Bible, and Christianity</i>	
10. The Challenge and the Hope	133
Additional Resources	143
Appendix: Speaking in Islamic Code	147
<i>How Far Is Too Far?</i>	
Notes	163

Creating an Environment for Conversation

I used to think that the most effective way to share Christ with Muslims was to prove to them that Christianity was right and Islam was wrong. I thought that if I showed Muslims all the holes in Islamic logic, the factual inaccuracies of the Qur'an, the violent history of Muslims, and the superiority of Christian truth claims, they would become Christians. Overwhelmed by the force of my logic, they would rush to Christ. So I studied diligently.

My study paid off, at least in one sense. I won lots of arguments. Unfortunately, I won no Muslims to Christ.

That is because the roots of Muslim beliefs are not found in their minds, but in their hearts. Most Muslims do not choose to believe in Islam because they have carefully studied the facts and become convinced Islam is the best explanation. They believe it because they are raised in it. It is part of who they are. They *want* to believe it.

This is true for almost all of us. Our “hearts” (that is, our desires, viewpoints) shape how we see things and determine what makes sense to us and what we accept as true. We are not unbiased, calculating reasoning machines. As the philosopher Blaise Pascal said, “The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of.” Or, in the postmodern words of nineteenth-century philosopher William James, we believe what we believe because we have the “will to believe” it.

Believing certain things makes our lives easier, helps strengthen family ties, and gives us security for the future. That is often *why* we choose to

believe them. Few of us, if any, believe what we believe solely on the basis of “pure reason,” even if we think we do.

The apostle Paul explained centuries before Blaise Pascal or William James that our primary problem with knowing God is not that we are ignorant of truth but that our sinful, dark hearts have suppressed the truth that we do grasp. God has revealed his truth all around us—we simply do not want to see it (that is, until God creates a desire in us to see it—Romans 1:18-21; see John 7:17 and 1 Corinthians 2:14-16).

A Message for the Heart

Your message cannot be simply a defense of Christianity and an attack on Islamic beliefs. You have to get beyond Muslims’ minds into their souls. You not only have to understand what they believe but *why* they believe it. You have to understand what is important to them, what disappointments they find in Islam, and what questions they are still asking about God. This will mean three things for you as you attempt to share Christ with the Muslim.

First, *you can most effectively share Christ with Muslims when you are genuinely friends with them.* Life on life is as important with the Muslim as mind on mind. Because the decision to trust in Christ is a *soul* decision, not just a *mind* one, it will most likely not be arrived at in the heat of debate. We have to show, in a way Muslims can see and understand, that Jesus is better than anything else they hold on to for security, and that he is the treasure worth selling the “field” of their lives to obtain (Matthew 13:44). Like Christ, we must “incarnate” ourselves in the lives of Muslims and show them his love and joy in the context of friendship. Christ did not shout at us from heaven, leave gospel tracts on our porches, or broadcast his message in from heaven via radio. He came to live among us. He served us. He lived out the love and joy of God in front of our eyes. We “looked upon” him, and our “hands handled” him (see 1 John 1:1-2).

Second, *you must learn to listen to Muslims.* Listening is how you will discover what is going on in their hearts, what is important to them, and where God is already at work in them. As I will try to show you in this book, God has already planted questions in their heart. Once you learn what you’re listening for, you’ll see they are asking them over and over and over.

As you listen, you will learn how to craft the gospel message in a way they can understand it. We must be people of “double listening.” We must listen

to God's unchanging message on one hand and the hearts of our Muslim friends on the other. Only then will we be able to craft the gospel message in a way that Muslims can understand it. This is partially what made the apostle Paul so effective. As he explains in Galatians 2:7, Peter preached a "gospel for the circumcised" (the Jew) and Paul preached a "gospel for the uncircumcised" (the non-Jew). This does not mean that there were two different gospels—Paul and Peter are clear that there is only one way for all people to be saved! (See Peter's words in Acts 4:12 and Paul's in Galatians 1:8.) Rather, it means that the one gospel can be expressed in different ways that will connect better with the people who are hearing it.

Listening is also how you will establish trust. As M. Scott Peck famously said in *The Road Less Traveled*, "To listen to someone is to love them." Listening, and understanding, is the core of friendship.

You and I often think of our role as Christians as explaining a message. But it is listening that makes our explaining effective! Listening establishes trust, and listening helps us make our message understandable.

Third, *you must look for the Holy Spirit to do in the heart of your Muslim friends what you cannot do*. Only the Holy Spirit can make blind eyes see; only he can make the gospel make sense to a Muslim. It is not some new insight you have or new angle I give you on sharing the gospel that will magically unlock your Muslim friend's heart. The human heart, until God opens it, is hardened against him, darkened in its understanding, and does not even know to ask the right questions about God! In what theologians call our "natural" state, the gospel seems like foolishness to us! It takes the illumination of God's Spirit and his regenerative work inside our hearts before we will ever believe.³

God himself has to plant the right questions within us and make us open to the answers. This is not the result of a new technique, but of a miracle that God does in us. The only thing you can do is faithfully explain the message, pray, and trust in God to awaken the heart.

Three Preliminary Questions

As you seek to really understand and befriend Muslims, there are three questions you should constantly be asking. These are the questions that true friendship and genuine understanding are built upon. In many ways, these three questions guide the thought of the rest of this book.

The first is, "*What does my friend actually believe?*" We'll get into what

Muslims formally believe in chapter 2. Beyond that, however, most Muslims actually buy into a number of unorthodox beliefs (such as animistic or superstitious practices) that help them relate God to their day-to-day lives. It is essential to understand these unorthodox dimensions of their lives if you want to share Christ effectively with them.

Psalm 19:4-6 declares that there are no people
anywhere who have not heard the voice of divine truth.

These practices often reveal a question God has implanted in their hearts that Islam has not satisfactorily answered. Missionary Don Richardson once noted that God has left in the cultures of all peoples certain “redemptive analogies” that prepare them to receive the gospel. After years of failed attempts to explain the gospel to the Sawi people of New Guinea, Richardson discovered an ancient custom, the “peace child,” that gave a perfect picture of what the gospel was. In Sawi culture, when two tribes were at war and wanted to come to terms of peace, a child from one tribe was exchanged for one from the other tribe. Each would grow up in the opposing tribe. As long as the child from one tribe was alive and well in the other tribe, the two tribes remained at peace. Using this “redemptive analogy,” Richardson explained to the Sawi how God had given his own peace child to men. His presence in our flesh guaranteed his continued favor on us.⁴

So, knowing what an individual Muslim actually believes—both in their “creed” and in their day-to-day practice—will help us see places where the gospel can speak to heart issues.

The second question is, “*Why does he believe that?*” Understanding the reasons *why* the Muslim believes as he does is as important as understanding *what* he believes. Understanding “*why*” reveals the “question behind the question”—that is, the soul question that must be addressed. When all the smokescreens have been cleared, what is it that keeps a Muslim within the Islamic faith? Is it fear? Tradition? Ignorance? Fear of rejection by others? To show how Christ is worth the losses that will come with becoming his follower, we have to understand what those losses will be! We have to show that Christ is better than all that the Muslim holds on to for life and security.

The third question you should be trying to answer when you’re befriending a Muslim is, “*Which of his beliefs, questions, and experiences can I affirm?*”

Starting with the legitimacy of his questions is the best place to begin dialogue. Romans 1:18-21 explains that all people have perceived divine truth from creation and from their conscience.³ Psalm 19:4-6 declares that there are no people anywhere who have not heard the voice of divine truth. Jesus told us that the fields were already “white for harvest.” In other words, the Holy Spirit is working pre-conversion to bring individuals to Christ. We should try to discover where he has already been at work in the Muslim’s heart.



Identifying what Muslims believe about salvation and how we can use those things to point them to Christ will be the subject of the next four chapters. But before we get there, let’s take a look first at how Muslims try to convert others. How they attempt to convert others provides a window into what they value in their religious experience.