

CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN GHANA : UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES FOR BETTER ENGAGEMENT

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■ ABSTRACT

Properly understanding and engaging Muslims with the gospel is a challenge for Christians in Ghana, where evangelism can lead to serious conflict. Thus, many Ghanaian Christians choose to sweep Christianity and Islam's differences under the carpet as a pretext to ensure peaceful coexistence. Unfortunately, forgetting these differences does not often result in peace and harmony. Instead, a better understanding of the essential convergences and divergences of the faiths is necessary for sharing the gospel with Muslims. This article raises awareness of these similarities and differences within the context of Ghanaian folk Islam and considers existing bridges, theological mediums, and the existential needs of folk Muslims that enable bridges to be built for Christian-Muslim engagement.

Keywords: Christian-Muslim Engagement, Evangelism, Interreligious Dialogue, Theological Bridges, Folk Islam

I. INTRODUCTION

Finding the right understanding in Christian-Muslim engagement and evangelism is a major issue facing people of both faiths, because of a long history of hatred and mistrust that has characterized the relationships of Christians and Muslims. John Azumah, for instance, has noted that conservative evangelical Christians have reservations towards engagement with Muslims that can be categorized in four main headings: “Denial of truth claims and the uniqueness of Christ; Suspicion and concerns about compromise and syncretism; Questions about dialogue, evangelism, and mission; [and] Lack of a level playing field.”¹ These attitudes and circumstances often prevent Christians from sharing the gospel with Muslims, and when Christians do make attempts, the results may be polemics and violence. On the other hand, Muslims may think that Christians derive a sense of superiority over adherents of other faiths, based on their truth claims. They appeal that Christians revise their claims or at least be at parity with Muslims in the name of interreligious peaceful coexistence, because there are “bits and pieces of truth scattered” in different religious traditions.² Thus, most Christians have adopted an attitude of forgetting the differences between the faiths to achieve a prevailing peace. However, this attitude

1 John Azumah, “Evangelical Christian Views and Attitudes Towards Christian-Muslim Dialogue” in “Christian-Muslim Relations,” special issue, *Transformation* 29, no. 2 (April 2012): 130.

2 Azumah, “Evangelical Christian Views”: 132.

has resulted in the Christians' failure to build bridges, so that folk Muslims can cross over from misunderstanding and anti-Christian polemics to a proper understanding and reception of the gospel.

A change is needed, but what kind of change? Johnson Mbillah, former coordinator of the Programme for Christian Muslim Relations in Africa, recalls an encounter in the mid-1960s between Nigeria's first president, the late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Sir Ahmadu Ibrahim Bello (1910–1966), a leading Muslim statesman and Sardauna of Sokoto (Nigeria):

The two leaders had met to discuss the growing tensions between coalition partners in central government (the Northern People's Congress and the National Council of Nigerian citizens). The tension brought into the open divergences between the majority Muslim north and the majority Christian south which was degenerating into ethno-religious antagonism. In the cause of dialogue to restore some understanding, Dr Azikiwe is quoted to have said to Ahmadu Bello, "Let us forget our differences." Ahmadu Bello replied, "No, let us understand our differences... By understanding our differences we can build unity in Nigeria."³

This exchange between the two leaders reveals that a par-

3 Johnson Mbillah, "African Churches and Interfaith Relations: Food for Thought," in J. Mbillah and J. Chesworth, eds., *From the Cross to the Crescent: A PROCMURA Occasional Paper* (Nairobi: PROCMURA, 2004): 7–8.

adigm shift must occur, from forgetting or burying differences between the two Abrahamic faiths to understanding, affirming, and living with differences for the preservation of peace and harmony in the Christian-Muslim context of evangelism.

Ah Young Kim, a leading scholar in Muslim-Christian relations in South Korea, asserts,

Nowhere is the agenda for an inter-religious dialogue more pressing than with the adherents of the two largest religious communities, Christian[s] [and] Muslim[s]. Together, these two communities encompass nearly one-half of the world's population. From a pragmatic point of view, to say nothing for theological reasons, the pressing issues facing our increasingly interdependent world should stimulate all Christians and Muslims to review and reconsider their relationships with one another.⁴

Considering this, a proven way of sharing the gospel with Muslims within the Ghanaian context of predominantly folk Islam centers on a better understanding of the essential convergences and the divergences (Christological) in Muslim-Christian engagements. This article aims to raise awareness about these essentials and suggests approaches of engaging folk Muslims with the gospel. It takes into consideration existing bridges, theological mediums, and the existential needs of folk Muslims.

⁴ Ah Young Kim, "The Muslim Presence in Korea and Its Implications for Korean Evangelical Missiology" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, August 2003), 3.

II. BUILDING BRIDGES WITH EXISTING METHODS

In order to ensure better, non-violent engagement, it is helpful to first understand the proven, existing methods employed by other practitioners for building bridges to share the gospel with Muslims.

1. Direct Approach (From Argument to Persuasion)

Islam contains truth, as well as serious weaknesses, that may lead to controversy when sharing the gospel with Muslims. Sam Schlorff notes:

The amount of truth which is included in the Religion of Islam has... commended it to the acceptance of vast multitudes of our fellow-creatures. The errors, superstitions and falsehoods with which these doctrines are mingled have deceived the followers of the "Arabian Prophet" to their ruin. The evil results which have followed are everywhere patent.⁵

Due to the mixture of truth and errors in Islam, attempts to share the gospel with Muslims have ended in hot debates and confrontations that did not yield much evangelical progress. For example, Henry Martyn began a Protestant mission-

5 Sam Schlorff, *Missiological Models in Ministry to Muslims* (Upper Darby, PA: Middle East Resources, 2006), 4.

ary approach to Islam, from 1781 to 1812, during which he wrote three polemical tracts debating Muslims in Persia. These debates, referred to as the “Mohammedan Controversy,” often took the form of aggressive polemics.⁶

However, by the turn of the twentieth century (c. 1900–1930), Protestant missionaries had to rethink the polemic approach to Islam.⁷ A direct approach was adopted by most missionaries, since a concern for the proper Christian attitude towards non-Christian religions started to preoccupy the missionary enterprise during the World Missionary Council held at Edinburgh in 1910.⁸ The report of the conference admitted the absoluteness of the Christian faith but maintained that the Christian attitude towards non-Christian religions should be one of understanding and sympathy through knowledge and charity. It affirmed that all non-Christian religions exhibit fundamental needs of the human soul that only Christianity can meet.⁹ Thus, a direct presentation of the gospel message should help people encounter the truth of God in his Word, while demonstrating his love through both the hands of God’s people and the demonstration of God’s power. In this manner, people may see, feel, touch, smell, and taste for themselves the things leading to the discovery that Christ is the Lord. This implies deliberate efforts to respect, tolerate, and lovingly persuade Muslims in a way

6 Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, 4.

7 Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, 7.

8 Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, 8.

9 Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, 8.

that is not offensive. There are different classes of folk Muslims with different levels of understanding, and to reach out to them, Christians should apply the principle of being all things to all men (1 Cor 9:19–22). By demonstrating love and care, Christians may end up winning Muslims for Christ.

J. Christy Wilson Sr. (1891–1973), a Presbyterian missionary to Persia, was a representative of the direct approach in an Islamic context. He observed that anyone who would like to share a direct presentation of the gospel with Muslims must be an expert in avoiding argument.¹⁰ Argumentation, defense, and confrontation are the common grounds on which most Muslims engage Christians; therefore, a Christian who engages Muslims in a confrontational or argumentative way is fighting on Muslims' own ground. This must be avoided. Christian-Muslim relations are generally marked by mistrust, fear, and hostility, which are embedded in historic roots of bitterness as old as Islam itself. The challenge for Christians remains approaching and responding appropriately to various classes of Muslims.

Some Muslims, especially militant Muslims, are aggressive, but others are peaceful. The reactions of these two kinds of Muslims revolve around different perspectives on the interpretation of Qur'an 2:256; 4:89; and 47:4. Adopting a polemic or aggressive Christian attitude towards non-Christians, including folk Muslims, is unlikely to win any souls for Christ. Just as Wil-

10 Christy J. Wilson, "The Christian Message to Islam" (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1950), 41–42, cited in Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, 13.

son warned against polemics, Walter T. Fairman (1874-1941) was a missionary who also favored the simple, loving, “full preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” devoid of all polemics. He observed that “there are no Moslem lands today where something is not being attempted to win Moslems to Christ. Yet relatively, and actually, very little has been accomplished. . . . The failure is on our part, and its secret must lie in the method we have hitherto adopted.”¹¹

2. Indirect or Fulfillment Approach (Using Positive Elements as Bridges)

In the nineteenth century, Islam was considered to have a latent power through which missionaries could build a presentation of the gospel. Thus, in the twentieth century, the attitude of Christian missionaries of Muslims underwent a turnabout, as Christians began to see elements of truth in Islam. A group of Islamicists and missionaries reasoned that if Islam contains some truth, then the errors cannot completely invalidate what is true; thus, Islam should not be evaluated by its errors and its truth be swept under the carpet.¹² They asserted that the positive elements in Islam could be used as a basis to unveil the gospel message. Bevan Jones noted that if Islam contains some truth,

11 Walter T. Fairman, “The Approach to Moslems,” *The Muslim World* (July 1926): 272-74, quoted in Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, 9.

12 L. Bevan Jones, *The People of the Mosque* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1932), cited in Sam Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, 15.

then these truths might have been the result of the work of the Holy Spirit:

How else are we to account for the innumerable fragments of truth to be found in other religions except on the ground that God's Spirit is quietly at work in the hearts and minds of men, notwithstanding human opposition and imperfection? So then we require patience, understanding and sympathy in our study, and with these, faith to believe that there is something of real worth to the Kingdom of God at the heart of Islam...¹³

In this view, Islam is genuinely struggling towards the goal of God, in spite of the human elements that distort the whole truth of God.

There certainly is some form of truth in Islam that Christians can use as a launch pad to share the gospel with Muslims, but these truths must be sieved from the errors when engaging Muslims. Thus, we must major in the positive, not on the derogatory or misleading facts within Islam. Christians must not approach Muslims solely with the intent to change their beliefs, but also with the aim of providing the necessary understanding or missing link that helps transform the perceptions and attitudes of adherents of both traditions towards one another. Christian engagement must not be centered on "confronting Islam and Muslims with biblical truth as well as exposing what they consider to

13 Jones, *People of the Mosque*, cited in Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, 15.

be 'falsehood' and 'dangers' in Islamic teaching."¹⁴

Bevan Jones asserts that preaching the gospel to Muslims must make an appeal to spiritual experience.¹⁵ Just as Jewish Christians, despite their prejudices, have come to faith in Christ because of their spiritual experience through the Holy Spirit, Muslims can also come to faith by the work of the Holy Spirit. It is therefore important to exercise patience when dealing with Muslims. They must be lovingly engaged for them to understand and experience the work of the Holy Spirit, who is able to convict them and bring them to a saving knowledge of Christ. This spiritual experience can satisfy Muslims' deepest needs that Islam is unable to satisfy.

3. Interreligious Dialogue: A Dialogical Model

Liberal theologians and those in the ecumenical movement have adopted an indirect approach, which was positive in the sense that it affirmed the good elements of Islam. Evangelicals used the direct approach, which was considered to be a negative approach because they directly opposed the elements of Islam incongruent with their evangelical position. However, both the indirect and the direct approaches had their pitfalls, which led to the abandonment of polemic methods. Those who

14 Azumah, "Evangelical Christian Views": 134.

15 L. Bevan Jones, *Christianity Explained to Muslims: A Manual for Christian Workers* (Calcutta: YMCA Publishing House, 1938), cited in Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, 16.

were inclined to the positive elements of Islam saw themselves alienated from biblical authority, while those who committed to biblical authority and held negative attitudes towards Muslims failed to distinguish the similarities between the gospel and the Islamic culture.¹⁶

An Anglican bishop, Kenneth Cragg (b. 1913), was the first to lay the theological background for dialogue with Islam.¹⁷ He actively contributed to the field of Christian Muslim relations and served as a role model for those who wanted to remain faithful to their traditions while showing honesty and sympathy in dialogue with Muslims.¹⁸ Dialogue with Muslims as it stands today was developed by the World Council of Churches (WCC), or the ecumenical movement. After a series of meetings in the 1990s, the WCC released a statement in 1997, condemning proselytism as a “scandal and counterwitness.” In it, they defined proselytism as “the encouragement of Christians who belong to a church to change their denominational allegiance, through ways and means that ‘contradict the spirit of Christian love, violate the freedom of the human person and diminish trust in the Christian witness of the church.’”¹⁹

The WCC is right in saying that authentic witness involves

16 Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, 19.

17 Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, 20.

18 Jason Odem, “Reviewed Work(s): Muhammad and the Qur’an, The Task and the Text by Kenneth Cragg,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 6, no. 2 (2004): 74.

19 World Council of Churches Central Committee. “Towards Common Witness.” Resources. World Council of Churches. September 19, 1997. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/towards-common-witness>.

respect and understanding for other Christian traditions and confessions by speaking the message of the gospel with respect, speaking the truth in love (Eph 4:12), treating others as we would like them to treat us (Matt 7:12), and respecting people of other faiths.²⁰ However, the WCC does not seem to leave any room for evangelism that leads to conversion, soul winning, or baptism of Muslims into Christianity. The condemnation of proselytism or conversion is in contravention to the missionary spirit of both Christianity and Islam and tends towards relativism. Disciple-making and Islamic *da'wah* (evangelism) are essential parts of the two faiths, respectively, and neither has ever renounced its practice.

Still, Kim points out that many Muslims today are conscious that an attempt to do away with another religion through the aggressive *da'wah* strategies leads to failure. Furthermore, the “arrogant and triumphalist rule of one religion over other religions is nearly dead.”²¹ Adherents of many religions are becoming aware of the need for dialogue, peaceful coexistence, respect, and mutual tolerance. In keeping with this idea, Christians can make a theological appeal to Muslims on the basis of the Qur'an, through peaceful dialogue and conversation as an appropriate method of engaging them with the gospel.

Both Islam and Christianity are missionary religions struggling for human souls. Islam possesses a “defense mechanism”

20 World Council of Churches, “Towards Common Witness.”

21 Kim, “Muslim Presence,” 205.

that stands against the core elements of the Christian doctrine, and this makes theological dialogue with Muslims a difficult and often frustrating effort.²² Due to the controversial nature of the innermost core of Islam, one must see folk Muslims as they see themselves. Muslims consider themselves as sharing the same spiritual heritage with Christians; both are united by faith in God and look forward to an eternity following death and resurrection. Muslims and Christians have assurance that God has sent prophets to communicate a divinely revealed word that is recorded in the sacred books. Adherence to the revelation makes them believers. However, the two faiths differ in the nature of revelation and the character or form of the sacred books. Christians who are aware of these essential theological divergences and convergences between the Bible and the Qur'an will be able to engage folk Muslims in a truth encounter.

III. ESSENTIAL THEOLOGICAL DIVERGENCES AND CONVERGENCES (MUSLIMS' UNDERSTANDING OF JESUS)

1. God's Self Revelation and Oneness

The first complex issue between Muslims and Christians

22 Kim, "Muslim Presence," 221.

is the nature of God and how God has revealed himself. Both religions are emphatically monotheistic, affirming the ultimate truth that there is only one God. This ultimate realization of the monotheistic nature of Christianity and Islam led a mixed group of scholars from both religions to produce a joint book entitled, *We Believe in One God: The Experience of God in Christianity and Islam*.²³ However, the faiths disagree on the nature of this oneness. The heart of Islamic doctrine expresses the oneness of God as *tawḥīd*, which intimates that God is one person because he is not made up of parts. In contrast, Christians believe that God is one in three persons, which is the doctrine of the Trinity. The Qur'an condemns the latter view of God: "disbelieved have those who say God is the third of three; there is no deity except one deity" (5:73). In effect, Muslims criticize the Trinity as a belief in three gods, but Christians also condemn tritheism as heretical. Final revelation, according to Christians, is fulfilled in Christ: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Aside from this, both faiths hold a similar view of the nature of God. Islam asserts "God as eternal, personal, sovereign, powerful, wise, holy and just" as revealed in the Qur'an:

23 Annemarie Schimmel and Abdoldjavad Falaturi, eds., *We Believe in One God: The Experience of God in Christianity and Islam* (London: Seabury Press, 1979), cited in Kim, "Muslim Presence," 223.

Allah is He, than Whom there is no other god; Who knows (all things) both secret and open; He, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Allah is He, than Whom there is no other god; The Sovereign, the Holy one, the source of Peace (and Perfection), The Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, The Irresistible, the Supreme: Glory to Allah! (High is He) above the partners they attribute to Him. He is Allah, the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of Forms (Colors); To him belong the Most Beautiful Names. Whatever is in the heavens and on earth declares His Praises and Glory: And He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise” (59:22-24).²⁴

The power, sovereignty, holiness, and eternal nature of God are all reference points that Christians also appeal to (Ps 111:1-5). The Qur’an admits that the God who revealed himself to Moses and Jesus and is worshiped by both Jews and Christians is the same God whom Muslims worship, the same God who revealed the sacred Qur’an to the Prophet Muhammad. Montgomery W. Watt remarked that,

Both Mohammed and those among his followers who are reckoned orthodox had and continue to have just and true notions of God, and his attributes (always excepting their obstinate and impious rejecting of the Trinity) appear so plain from the Koran itself and all the Mohammedan divines, that it would be loss of time to refute those who suppose the God of

24 Kim, “Muslim Presence,” 224.

Mohammed to be different from the true God.²⁵

In spite of these shared ideas, dwelling on the theological issue of the oneness or unity of God is not an ideal way to share the gospel. The doctrine of the Trinity itself is subtle and abstruse to the understanding of most ordinary Christians, who simply accept it by faith, without being able to explain it. However, Christians can help Muslims understand the concept by first understanding the rationale behind their rejection of the Trinity. In the pre-Islamic context of jahiliyya, traditional Arabian pagan gods supposedly married and gave birth to children. Muhammad considered the notion of pagan gods giving birth to be polytheism and, against this background, rejected any concept of God being three or having a son. The Trinity is reprehensible to Muslims because God cannot marry or have children (Qur'an 5:75; 6:100–101). The Trinity therefore should be explained to Muslims through love, respect, and dialogue.

Christians must be clear that the word “trinity” does not exist in the Bible. This word was introduced two hundred years after Jesus by Tertullian, a North African theologian, in an attempt to explain the human experience of God. It is an expression of God's love with inadequate human language. The Trinity implies that in God there is “communion, fellowship, loving rela-

25 Montgomery W. Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today: A Contribution to Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 1983), 45, cited in Kim, “Muslim Presence,” 225.

tionship, and unity.”²⁶ Since God is love, he came down to meet humanity in loving service and invitation to mankind. God revealed himself and his love to mankind by means of Jesus the Messiah and invites mankind to participate in his loving relationship, which is exemplified in Jesus the Messiah. Through the Holy Spirit, God empowered mankind to love one another just as Jesus loves. Although Muslims object the idea that Jesus is an associate of God (Qur’an 4:171), the same surah makes reference to the Spirit of God and calls the Messiah the Word of God. This mention of the Spirit of God and the Messiah is an open door through which the Trinity can be explained to Muslims. They must be lovingly pointed to the truth that the Son of God does not imply that God married and gave birth but represents the Word of God in human form. John 14:8-10 explains the oneness of the Messiah and the Father, and through the Messiah, we are invited to join the family of God to become adopted sons and daughters (Eph 1:5).²⁷

Christian evangelism aims to illuminate the nature of Christ so that people are able to confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. Muslims refer to Jesus as Isa, the son of Mary, and have a high view of him²⁸ as a prophet and the Messiah. While Muhammad is referred to as “the Seal of the Prophets” (Qur’an 33:40), Jesus is

26 David W. Shenk, *Journeys of the Muslim Nation and the Christian Church: Exploring the Mission of Two Communities* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 163.

27 Shenk, *Journeys*, 167.

28 Warren Larson, “Jesus in Islam and Christianity: Discussing the Similarities and the Differences,” *Missiology* 36, no. 3 (July 2008): 327.

sometimes referred to as the “the Seal of the Saints.” They honor him as one of the greatest prophets who ever existed, and some Muslims even name their children after Jesus. Even Muhammad, tradition claims, covered the Virgin Mary and her son with his coat when he got to them while cleansing the Ka’bah of idols in 630 CE. Fifteen surahs of the Qur’an and ninety three ayat speak about Jesus,²⁹ but the Qur’anic understanding of Jesus is quite different from what the New Testament says about him.³⁰ Jesus’ miracles and specific acts are told without much detail in the Qur’an, which constitutes a difficulty for Christians trying to aid Muslims encounter the gospel.³¹ Nevertheless, since Muslims already have a particular understanding of Jesus, Christians first need to understand what Muslims believe about him to lead them from the known to the unknown.

2. The Birth and Life of Jesus

Muslims acknowledge the birth of Jesus and join Christians in commemorating Jesus’ birth at Christmas. Some go to the extent of sending Christmas cards expressing good wishes to Christian neighbors. Although Muslims consider Jesus to be the son of the Virgin Mary, they do not consider him to be the Son of God as Christians do. The Qur’an account of Jesus’ birth and

29 Kim, “Muslim Presence,” 239.

30 J. Dudley Woodberry, “The Muslim Understanding of Jesus,” *Word and Word* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 173.

31 Kim, “Muslim Presence,” 240.

life bears some similarity to that in the Gospel of Luke, although there are important differences.

According to the Qur'an, Mary was committed to God for divine protection, and lots were cast to determine her guardian, Zachariah (Qur'an 3:37, 44). When she had grown up, God divinely provided Mary with food in the sanctuary where she lived (3:37). When visited by an angel, she was told that she was chosen and made pure, preferred above all women of creation (3:42). While the Bible does not affirm this backstory of Mary, the angel Gabriel, who delivers the news of Jesus' conception, does tell her that she is favored by God, and her cousin Elizabeth calls her blessed among women (Luke 1:30, 42).

The annunciation of the conception of Jesus to Mary occurs in two places in the Qur'an. The first version in surah three claims that an angel delivered the news, and the second version in surah nineteen states that "God's spirit messenger"³² (Qur'an 19:19) took the form of a well-shaped man and told Mary that God would bestow upon her a pure boy. In surah three, the angel's response to Mary's question of how a chaste woman could bring forth a boy is that "God creates what he wills by simply decreeing it" (3:45-47); in surah nineteen, God's spirit replies that "it was easy for God and that he would be made a sign for mankind, a mercy from God, and a thing ordained" (19:16-22).³³ In both accounts, Jesus is portrayed as a created being, but due

32 Some scholars translate God's spirit as an angel and add [Gabriel].

33 Kim, "Muslim Presence," 24.

to his unusual birth, Muslims elevate Jesus above ordinary human beings. The Qur'an thus closely parallels the narrative of Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:26-38), in which Mary is visited by an angel and inquires how she can conceive as a virgin.³⁴ However, the Bible states that Jesus' conception resulted from the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary: "And Mary said to the angel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?' And the angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God'" (Luke 1:34-35; Matt 1:18).

According to Muslims, Jesus spoke like an adult while in the cradle and is a miracle worker who "forms birds out of clay and gives them life" (Qur'an 3:46, 49; 5:110; 19:30). They accept that Jesus healed the leper, gave sight to the blind, and brought forth the dead, but only as a man with God's permission.³⁵ The Bible confirms that Jesus healed the lepers (Mark 1:40-42), gave sight to those born blind (John 9:1-7), and raised the dead to life (John 11:38-44), but there is no indication that he spoke in the cradle. The Qur'anic Jesus was the son of Mary, a prophet who bore a gospel to direct and admonish the children of Israel and performed miracles with God's permission. To Muslims, the miracles of his birth and healing ministry confirm the truth of his prophethood and are a sign (*aya*) of God's peace and mercy.³⁶

34 Larson, "Jesus in Islam," 36:328.

35 Woodberry, "Muslim Understanding," 16:174.

36 Kim, "Muslim Presence," 245.

In contrast, the Bible draws a crucial distinction regarding these miracles in relation to Jesus' identity. The biblical Jesus is God himself, who performed miracles as proof of his deity as the Son of God (Mark 1:1), able to forgive sins (Matt 9:6; Mark 2:9-11).

3. The Crucifixion and Death of Jesus

In addition to the virgin birth, the crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus are essential parts of the gospel proclamation (Matt 27:32-28:20), yet Muslims deny his crucifixion. Qur'an 4:157 implies that the claim of Jews to have "killed Jesus the Messiah, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah" is untrue.³⁷ According to the Qur'an, Jesus only appeared to be crucified and did not die. While Muslim commentators affirm that Jesus was not crucified on the basis of Qur'an 4:157-58/156, they are unable to say what happened to him. Muhammad and many scholars after him chose the interpretation that it was not the actual Christ who was crucified but rather someone who closely resembled him, because it is inconceivable for a prophet of God to suffer such an ignominious death.³⁸ This explanation is congruent with ancient gnostic views that a substitute died in place of Jesus: "his body was crucified while the true Jesus did not suffer."³⁹ Likewise, Kenneth Cragg explains that according

37 Woodberry, "Muslim Understanding," 16:175.

38 Phil Parshall, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism: Evangelical Approaches to Contextualization* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1992), 139.

39 Woodberry, "Muslim Understanding," 16:174.

to the Qur'anic consensus, "to Jesus at the Cross death did not happen," which results in an Islamic consensus that "it need not happen, and it should not happen It did not historically, it need not redemptively, and it should not morally, happen to Jesus."⁴⁰ In interpreting Qur'an 4:157-59/156-57, Muslims claim that Jesus went to heaven without undergoing crucifixion. Therefore, they expect the return of Jesus and his death to happen before resurrection day. Muslims thus consider Christians' witness of the death of Jesus as *kufr* (disbelief). When eschatologically considering the ministry of Jesus, the Qur'an states, "On the Day of Judgment he will be a witness against them" (4:159), indicating the people of the Book, or Christians, who indulge in the conjectures of human doubt (4:157).

While Muslims commonly refute the crucifixion and the death of Jesus, some Qur'anic accounts expressly affirm Jesus' death, which poses an intertextual contradiction. Qur'an 19:34 references a "statement of truth" about Jesus in Qur'an 19:33: "Peace be upon me the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I shall be raised up to life."⁴¹ This reveals that Jesus talked about his own birth, death, and resurrection. Thus, some Muslim scholars observe that Jesus did die and cite Qur'an 3:55, 48, which speaks of "the real death of Jesus." Al-Tabari (d. 923) points to three ancient authorities who interpret the text as the

40 Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (Oxford: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 178.

41 Kim, "Muslim Presence," 246.

actual death of Jesus, namely, Al-Razi, Ibn Kathri, and Al-Baydwi.⁴² Al Razi (d. 1210) cited Wahb B. Munabbih's statement that Jesus was received in death for at least three hours before his resurrection, while Ibn Kathri (d. 1373) referred to Wahb b. Munabbih to note that God caused Jesus to die for three days, after which God resurrected him and raised him.⁴³ Ibn Ishaq asserts that Jesus died for seven hours. Likewise, Al-Baydwi (1284-1316) emphasized that God caused Jesus to die for seven hours before raising him from death, and that is why Christians believe this truth. Ibn Anas notes that "God received Jesus in death when he raised Jesus to heaven."⁴⁴ Jesus' death is therefore a contradiction in the Qur'an, and the Muslim authorities who spoke about it only differ on the temporal aspects of his death.

In spite of this, Muslims generally disbelieve the crucifixion. Those who speak of Jesus' death claim that Jesus' body died, but his soul did not die (Qur'an 2:154/149), as emphasized by the New Testament: "Be not afraid of those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul" (Matt 10:28).⁴⁵ Since the crucifixion is essential in Christian witness, it becomes a challenge to lead Muslims to an understanding of the nature of Jesus' crucifixion and its purpose as it pertains to the sinner. Christians see Jesus as the Savior, and the cross was necessary for Christ to atone for the sin of all sinners: the shameful death was intended for

42 Woodberry, "Muslim Understanding," 16:175.

43 Woodberry, "Muslim Understanding," 16:175.

44 Woodberry, "Muslim Understanding," 16:175.

45 Woodberry, "Muslim Understanding," 16:176.

the eternal redemption of sinners. Thus, Christians believe that God's power was demonstrated after the cross, by raising Jesus from death, not before the cross. Muslims, however, do not profess a need for a savior but desire a guide to knowledge; they believe that humanity's problem is ignorance and not sin or evil as the Bible portrays (Rom 3:23; 6:23). The Qur'an refers to salvation (*najat*) only once (Qur'an 40:41/44).

Although this poses a significant challenge in evangelism because of Muslims' disbelief in Jesus' actual death and their traditional view that Jesus was raised before the crucifixion event,⁴⁶ Christians can address this challenge by respectfully allowing the Bible to speak for itself and by using a portion of the Qur'an, such as 3:55; 5:17; or 19:33, to clearly show the death of Jesus Christ.

4. The Nature and Sonship of Jesus

Christians view Jesus as the Son of God and exclude any form of physical paternity from the notion of sonship, but Muslims view Jesus as a man and not as God incarnate. Islamic tradition portrays Jesus and the mother Mary as the only people that Satan could not touch at birth. With this view, it is blasphemous to say that Jesus is the Son of God and dishonoring to claim that wicked men crucified him. Muslims respect Jesus as a

46 Woodberry, "Muslim Understanding," 16:176.

prophet, but the theological frame in which Muslims place Jesus is so removed from the Christian faith that their understanding seems to reinvent his nature.⁴⁷

For Muslims, Jesus' deity poses a threat to the Islamic view of the oneness of God. The Qur'an states that God cannot have an offspring: "Say: "He is God, One; God, the Eternal; he brought not forth, nor hath he been brought forth; co-equal with him there hath never been any one" (Qur'an 112). Many verses in the Qur'an categorically reject any form of sonship or acquisition of a son:

They say, "God has begotten a son" (10:68).

He to Whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth: no son has He begotten; nor has He a partner in His dominion: it is He Who created all things and ordered them in due proportions (25:2).

That they should invoke a son for (Allah) Most Gracious. For it is not consonant with the majesty of (Allah) Most Gracious that He should beget a son. Not one of the beings in the heavens and the earth but must come to (Allah) Most Gracious as a servant (19:91-93).

Had Allah wished to take to Himself a son, He could have chosen whom He pleased out of those whom He creates (39:4).⁴⁸

Furthermore, according to the Qur'an, referring to Jesus as

47 Larson, "Jesus in Islam," 36:327.

48 Kim, "Muslim Presence," 249.

the son of God is a form of shirk, an imitation of Arabian paganism or the unbelievers of old, as stated in Qur'an 9:30-31:

The Jews call Uzair a "son of Allah," and the Christians call Christ "the Son of Allah." That is a saying from their mouth; [in this] they but imitate what the Unbelievers of old used to say. Allah's curse be on them: how they are deluded away from the Truth! They take their priests and their anchorites to be their lords in derogation of Allah, and [they take as their Lord] Christ the son of Mary; yet they were commanded to worship but One God [Allah]: there is no god but He. Praise and glory to Him: [far is He] from having the partners they associate [with Him].⁴⁹

This presents a challenge for Christian-Muslim engagement, because the center of the Christian gospel is that Jesus is God incarnate. Removing Christology from the gospel proclamation leaves behind nothing to witness, for Christ's deity is the precondition for his sinless nature, by which he could make atonement for humanity.⁵⁰

Thus, Parrinder notes that the easiest way to open conversation with Muslims about the gospel is to point them to the Christ of the Qur'an, because "Jesus is always spoken of in the Qur'an with reverence; there is no breath of criticism for he is

49 Kim, "Muslim Presence," 251.

50 Woodberry, "Muslim Understanding," 16:177.

the Christ of God.”⁵¹ Instead of using the Son of God, Christians can use “Spirit, Prophet, Apostle, Preeminent One, Example, Sinless One, [or] Miracle Worker,” which are other ways Muslims refer to Jesus. Jesus is known as the Al-Masih (Messiah) in the Qur’an (3:45; 4:157, 169–170; 5:17, 75; 9:31), and Christians understand the Messiah to be the anointed one of God for the work of redemption (Dan 9:25, 26; John 1:41; 4:25).⁵² Jesus was a respected prophet from birth (Qur’an 19:21), and the Bible also confirms him as a prophet (Matt 13:57; Luke 1:76; 4:24; John 4:19). While Muslims consider Jesus as one of many prophets, the Bible portrays him as the ultimate prophet, “the culmination of the line of prophets” (Deut 18:15, 18; Luke 24: 25–27; John 6:14).⁵³ Everything he did validates his claim of being the Christ, the Son of God, who would give his life (John 20:30–31).⁵⁴

Although the Qur’an asserts that all prophets sinned and needed forgiveness, including Noah (11:49), Abraham (26:80–82), Moses (28:15) and Muhammad himself (40:57; 47:21; 48:1–2), Jesus’ sinlessness is confirmed by both the Qur’an and the Bible (Qur’an 19:9; John 8:46; 14:30, Heb 4:15; 7:28).⁵⁵ The sinless nature of Jesus the Messiah can thus become a starting point of engaging Muslims with the gospel, since God is the only one who is sinless.

51 Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in The Qur’an* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 1995), 16.

52 Larson, “Jesus in Islam.” 36:330.

53 Larson, “Jesus in Islam.” 36:329.

54 Larson, “Jesus in Islam.” 36:329.

55 Larson, “Jesus in Islam.” 36:331.

Using the Qur'anic designation of Jesus as "the Word" is another way Christians can bridge the gap in proclaiming the gospel to Muslims. In the Bible, Jesus is referred to as the "logos" (John 1) that creates (Gen 1; Ps 33:66; Col 1). Although the Qur'an denies the divine sonship of Jesus (72:3), it gives Jesus the title of "God's Word" (3:39; 4:171; 19:35).⁵⁶ Christians believe Jesus is the "Word" made flesh, the perfect representation of God (Heb 1:1-3) who dwelt among men and offers salvation to all who believe in him (John 1:1-4, 12, 14). Jesus is also referred to as the Injil from God (Qur'an 3:45). Thus, Muslims can be made to understand that the Injil is in the person of Jesus, who is the good news, the Word of God in human form. The gospel is not a book but God in human form.⁵⁷

However, some Qur'anic references will not help Christians share the gospel. When referring to Jesus, Muslims use the proper name Isa, but this reference does not help in witness as it obscures the biblical meaning of Jesus as the one who saves and as Immanuel (God with us) (Matt 1:21, 23; Isa 7:14). Muslims say the name Isa was imposed on the Prophet Muhammad by the Jews, who also referred to Jesus as Esau because of their hatred towards him. Additionally, the Qur'an refers to Jesus as the "son of Mary," which some Christian apologists in the Middle Ages regarded as humiliating. Within an Arab context, ancestry is only traceable to a father and not a mother.

⁵⁶ Parshall, *New Paths*, 139.

⁵⁷ Shenk, *Journeys*, 169.

Addressing the person of Christ in the Qur'an is a central task and a suitable bridge in Muslim evangelism because the Qur'an talks much about Jesus. From the known, Muslims can be brought to the unknown; what was once relative information can be known as the "absolute truth that Jesus Christ is God incarnate,"⁵⁸ the Messiah and the anointed one of God. The vacuum created by the obscure thought of Jesus and his title as the Messiah in the Qur'an can be filled with the truth of the gospel.

5. Jesus' Return

Christians believe Jesus will return, not to die again, but to judge both the living and the dead, and this constitutes an essential part of their proclamation in evangelism (Acts 1:11; 2 Tim 4:1). All Muslims believe that "Isa will return to this earth" to uniquely demonstrate his power and authority.⁵⁹ However, Muslims' opposing views regarding Jesus' return causes a severe challenge for Christian-Muslim encounters in evangelism.

In interpreting Qur'an 4:159/157, Al-Tabari asserts that the People of the Book will believe in Jesus between his return and death, and they shall be united with Muslims under Islam. The implication is that Muslims believe Jesus will return, but they believe that he will return and live on earth for forty years before he dies and resurrects to kill the antichrist as a just judge. Then

58 Parshall, *New Paths*, 144.

59 Parshall, *New Paths*, 139.

there will be great security so that “lions will lie down with camels and wolves with sheep while youth play with snakes without harm” (Qur’an 4:159), which the Bible also teaches (Isa 11:6–8). Qur’an 43:61 is also used to support Jesus’ return but without clarity in meaning, because some use “it shall be a known sign” referring to the Qur’an, while others say that “Jesus shall be a known sign,”⁶⁰ as follows:

And he [Isa (Jesus)], son of Maryam (Mary) shall be a known sign for (the coming of) the Hour (Day of Resurrection) [Isa’s descent on the earth]. Therefore have no doubt concerning it (i.e., the Day of Resurrection). And follow Me (Allah) (i.e., be obedient to Allah and do what He orders you do to, O mankind)! This is the Straight Path (of Islamic Monotheism, leading to Allah and to His Paradise; Qur’an 43:61).⁶¹

Ibn Khaldun asserts that Jesus will return to “the minaret of Umayyad Mosque in Damascus,” get married, bear children, and finally die after forty years.⁶² There is some level of understanding among folk Muslims that Jesus will return. Because folk Muslims in Ghana generally have no deep knowledge of

60 Al-Tabari, Abu Ja’far, *Commentaire du Coran*, abr. and trans. M. Pierre Godé, part 6 (Paris, 1983), 14–17, quoted in Woodberry, “Muslim Understanding,” 16:176.

61 Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali, trans., *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’an in the English Language: A Summarized Version of At Tabari, Al-Qurtubi and Ibn Kathir with Comments from Salih Al-Bukhari* (Saudi Arabia: Dar-us-Salam Publications, 1997).

62 Ibn Khaldun, “The Muqaddimah,” trans. Franz Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 2:194, in Woodberry, “Muslim Understanding,” 16:177.

the Scriptures (both the Bible and the Qur'an), the biblical story may still prove helpful to point out exactly what the Bible says about Jesus' return.

IV. UNDERSTANDING THE EXISTENTIAL NEEDS OF FOLK ISLAM

The incarnation of Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the gospel, yet evangelism is not exclusively the "action of verbal communication in which the name of Jesus is central;" it is inseparable from social action and is most effective when joined with social action. Deeds without the word is pointless, and the word without deeds results in empty rituals and an ineffective message.⁶³ Effective evangelism requires proclamation and practical demonstration. David Bosch rightly notes that evangelism is "a deliberate proclamation of the gospel through word and deeds calling people to repentance and faith in Jesus."⁶⁴

Muslim evangelism is the proclamation of the good news of Jesus to Muslims through practical, social actions rooted in

63 Lesslie Newbigin, "Cross-Currents in Ecumenical and Evangelical Understandings of Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6, no.4 (1982):149, cited in Krish Kandiah, "Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution to a Theology of Evangelism," *Transformation* 24, no. 1 (January 2007): 53. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/43052689>.

64 David Bosch, "Evangelism: An Holistic Approach," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 36 (September 1981): 43-63, cited in Krish Kandiah, "Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution to a Theology of Evangelism," *Transformation* 24, no. 1, (January 2007): 54. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/43052689>.

Christ's love to win Muslims into the loving community of Christ. The aim is to lead Muslims to a new faith in Christ that is accompanied by changes in behavior and worldview. One of the factors that led to the spread of Islam in Ghana was the early Muslims' attention paid to the economic circumstances of people in Northern Ghana. Likewise, winning Muslims to Christianity in Ghana will be most effective with the church's deliberate efforts to provide for Muslims' basic needs, most of whom already live in deplorable conditions.

Sharing the gospel with folk Muslims must be supported by actions, caring deeds that turn estranged relations into ordinary encounters and present golden opportunities to share the gospel. References on the care for human needs are throughout the Bible (Matt 5-7; Luke 4:16-21; Acts 2:44-47; James 2:14-26),⁶⁵ proving that there is no effective gospel message without caring for needs and serving others. Jesus came "to serve and not to be served" (Mark 10:45). Thus, in sharing the gospel with folk Muslims, Christians must open their eyes to see numerous opportunities to serve Muslims. For Ghanaian Pentecostals, service to folk Muslims may include the following: helping to dig graves during funerals, donating to bereaved families, paying tuition for the son or the daughter of a folk Muslim in the neighborhood, offering hospitality to the *Kayaye* (porters of loads who migrate from north Ghana to the urban south), and responding

65 Evelyne A. Reisacher, *Joyful Witness in the Muslim World: Sharing the Gospel in Everyday Encounters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 116.

to the call of Jesus to feed the hungry, visit the prisoners, provide water to the thirsty and clothes to the less privileged, and care for the sick (Matt 25:34-40).

Christians can close the gap between themselves and Muslims through relationship building and must avoid cultural exclusivism. The culture of hatred, abusive language, and vain theological disputes must be replaced with loving words and patience. Christians and Muslims do share some common identities in Ghana. For this reason, Ghanaian Christians can adopt a communal lifestyle that builds stronger relationships during shared celebrations, such as ordinations, weddings, funerals, naming ceremonies, and political rallies, and they can extend a helping hand during Muslim religious celebrations such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

V. REMOVING THE GAP OF IGNORANCE: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Removing the gap of ignorance between Christians and Muslims will enable Christians to share the gospel with folk Muslims sympathetically and lovingly. Instead of looking at Muslims as brutal and violent people, knowledge about the Qur'an and a peaceful approach for engaging Muslims will yield a positive result. By using the Qur'an in engagement, I have experienced

a paradigm shift in relationship with Muslims. During a doctoral seminar in Islamic studies at Torch Trinity Graduate University, I acquired knowledge that was tested in relationship with my brother-in-law, a folk Muslim called Rama (pseudonym).

Rama and my sister were deeply in love and married without first considering their religious differences. Pauline (pseudonym) was a Christian but agreed to marry Rama, a Muslim, because she felt she had waited for a partner and found a sign of a good and loving partner in Rama. Rama, from the beginning, ignored his religious stance as a Muslim and went ahead to ask Pauline for her hand in marriage. Pauline had thought to convert her husband to Christianity, but Rama and his parents insisted that Pauline follow her husband into Islam. In a quest for peace, she accepted that, after marriage, she would bring her husband to Christ. Therefore, she underwent the Islamic marriage rituals and confessed to the Shahada, but later broke faith with Islam and continued her Christian journey. She tried several times to win Rama to Christ, but unfortunately, he did not give in. As a result, there was a communication breakdown and separation for some years. The entire family was divided and bitter as a result.

My doctoral studies offered an opportunity, during a telephone conversation with my brother-in-law, to engage him with the gospel using the Qur'an. After a simple exchange of greetings, I asked permission to share a portion of Scripture

from the Qur'an with him. Since it was the Qur'an and not the Bible, he consented. Quoting from Qur'an 2:256, I pointed out to him that the Qur'an admonishes Muslims that "there shall be no compulsion in acceptance of the religion," which implies he must not abandon Pauline because of her religion. Although she follows Isa (Jesus), the Qur'an testifies that Jesus is the Messiah, the good news (3:45). I suggested that if he recognizes Isa's authority in the Qur'an, then he must reconcile with his wife and speak to her according to what is said in Qur'an 16:125: "Invite all to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: For thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His path and who receive guidance."⁶⁶ Even though the discussion with Rama did not make him accept Jesus, he called his wife the following day and has since renewed communication with her. In this way, appealing to Muslims based on their Scriptures serves as a bridge to share the gospel.

VI. CONCLUSION

A better understanding of the similarities and differences between Christianity and Islam, rather than sweeping differences under the carpet, constitutes an effective approach for Chris-

⁶⁶ Kwesi Aning and Mustapha Abdallah, "Islamic Radicalization and Violence in Ghana," *Conflict, Security and Development* 13, no. 2 (May 2013): 157.

tian-Muslim engagement and evangelism. A direct approach, which involves a non-polemic proclamation of the gospel message, requires an attitude of understanding, respect, and empathetic consideration of Muslims. The indirect approach employs the use of truth within the Qur'an as a bridge. It affirms doctrinal convergence, and convergent truth claims can be used to build bridges between Muslims' understanding and the biblical understanding of Jesus, his birth and life, his crucifixion and death, his nature and sonship, as well as his return. Rather than engaging Muslims with the sole purpose of converting them from their roots, Christians can use Qur'anic scriptures to provide the missing link in Muslim-Christian relations that helps transform the perceptions and attitudes of adherents of both traditions towards one another. This, in addition to considering the existential needs of folk Muslims, can help better engage folk Muslims with the gospel.

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■ 한글초록

가나에서의 기독교-이슬람관계 : 두 종교간의 상이점에 대한 이해를 통한 무슬림 전도

Dieudonne Komla Nuekpe

가나의 그리스도인들이 무슬림들을 이해하고 적절하게 복음을 나누는 것은 쉽지 않은 일인데 그러한 시도가 심각한 충돌을 초래할 수도 있기 때문이다. 이로 인해 다수의 가나의 그리스도인들은 평화적 공존을 위하여 두 종교간의 차이에 대해서는 애써 외면하려고 한다. 그러나 불행이도 평화를 위한 이러한 외면은 기대와 달리 평화와 화해를 이끌어 내지 못한다. 오히려 주요한 상이점과 유사점에 대한 정확한 이해가 무슬림들에게 복음을 증거하는 일에 필수적이다. 본고는 가나의 민속 이슬람적 상황 속에서 기독교와 이슬람을 잇는 것과 가르치는 것에 대한 이해를 가지고 무슬림들의 실존적 필요에 닿을 수 있는 선교적 접촉점을 모색하고자 한다.

주제어: 기독교-무슬림 관계, 무슬림 전도, 종교간의 대화, 신학적 접
촉점, 민속 이슬람