

TOWARD MUTUAL RESPECTFUL WITNESS¹

J. Dudley Woodberry

Our Muslim partners listed “the ethics of mission and proselytization” as the first item that they wished to discuss with partners from Fuller Theological Seminary. To facilitate this let me suggest some general definitions of terms leaving more detailed analysis until later in this paper:

Witness – the expression of our faith in God by worship, service, and proclamation. The Qur’an uses various forms of *shahada*, “to bear witness,” among people (2:143; 3:64) as Jesus told his disciples to be his “witnesses” (*martures*) to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Mission – being “sent” to share the “good news” of the gospel by word (*kerygma*) and deed (*diakonia*) and worship.

Da’wah – the “call” to share the message by word (Qur’an 16:125) and deed and worship.

Evangelism – as part of holistic missions, the focus on proclaiming and demonstrating the “good news” of the gospel toward the end that people will become disciples of Jesus and be transformed by God’s Spirit.

Proselytism – though a neutral or positive term in the Bible (e.g., Acts 2:10) and in international law, it has come to be used negatively of unworthy witness because of coercion or inducements external to the gospel or scriptural message. It will be used here in the latter, negative sense.

We shall demonstrate that witness through *da`wah* and mission are enjoined in the Qur’an and Bible respectively. Then we shall comment on the understanding and practice of the witness of each faith community worldwide. After indicating tensions and criticism that have arisen between them, we shall suggest guidelines for mutually responsible and respectful witness.

Scriptural Grounds for Mutual Witness

Both Islam and Christianity are missionary religions as we shall see and are called upon to engage in witness in a kind manner. To do this meaningfully we shall note both where our understandings of our scriptures agree and where they differ.

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Common Ground

Helpfully, we start with considerable common ground:

- We both worship the One God but understand some significant things about him differently (e.g., the type of unity [Qur'an 4:17; Galatians 3:20; Matthew 28:19] and whether God loves sinners [Qur'an 3:31-32; 1 John 1:14]).
- We honor Jesus and use some of the same descriptors of him even though we may mean different things by some of them—e.g., the word from God (Qur'an 3:45; John 1:14).
- We agree on humans as stewards of God on earth (*khalifa*) under God and over creation (Qur'an 2:30; Genesis 1:26-28).
- We have similar understandings of God's law,² but differ on its ability to transform society (Qur'an 46:12; Romans 7:18-8:4).
- We have similar views of the importance of faith and works but differ on their respective roles in salvation (Qur'an 19:60; Ephesians 2:8-10).
- We are both enjoined to invite to what is good and forbid what is wrong (Qur'an 3:104; Galatians 5:16-23).

Common but, at times, Competing Claims

What challenges our relationship is that some of the statements of our respective scriptures sometimes compete with each other:

- Both are missionary religions with a message for all people:
 - Qur'an 25: 1 "Blessed is he who has sent down the criterion (*furqan*) [for judging right and wrong] upon his servant so that he may be the warner to all beings."
 - Qur'an 38: 87 "This is no less than a reminder to [all] the worlds."
 - The intended recipients include Jews and Christians: Qur'an 3:20 "Say to the People of the Book and to those who are unlearned, 'Do you also submit yourselves (*aslamtum*)?' If they do, they are in right guidance, but if they turn back, your duty is to convey the message."
 - John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."
- Both claim the final messenger:
 - Qur'an 33:40 "Muhammad...is the seal of the Prophets."

² See Robert Roberts, *The Social Laws of the Qoran* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1925).

- Hebrews 1 : 1-2 "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by *His* Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things...."
- Both groups of followers are to be witnesses:
 - Qur'an 2:143 "Thus have we made of you community justly balanced that you might be witnesses."
 - Acts 1:8 "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."
- Both make apparently exclusive claims for their message, although some Muslims and Christians interpret the passages in less exclusive ways:
 - Qur'an 3:85 "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (or submission), never will it be accepted of him, and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost" (cf. vs 19).
 Note that the exclusiveness is determined by whether the Arabic word *islam* in this context describes a distinct religion or a general response of submission to God as when it is used of Jesus' disciples (Qur'an 3:52; 5:111-112).
 - John 14:6 "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes unto the Father but by Me."
 - Acts 4: 12 "And there is salvation in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."
 Some Christians would say that it is possible to affirm these verses and still trust, or hope, that God might save others through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus even though they do not clearly understand him, even as various Old Testament personages through their faith are included in heaven (Hebrews 11:16-40).
- Both are to witness in a gracious way:
 - Qur'an 16 :125 "Invite to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and good exhortation and dispute with them with what is better (or in a better way)."
 - Qur'an 29:46 "Dispute not with the People of the Book except with what is better (or in a better way)."
 - I Peter 3:15 "Always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you with gentleness and respect."

Understandings and Extent of Witness Worldwide

The late Isma'il al-Faruqi presented a paper "On the Nature of Islamic Da`wah" at the conference on "Christian Mission and Islamic Da`wah" in Chambésy, Switzerland in 1976.³ His description of it shows considerable parallels with Christian Mission. He says it is a call (Qur'an 16:125) therefore not coercive – a theme also stressed by Christian participants in the joint statement of the Conference as well as by John Stott, whom many would consider one of the two major spokespersons for Evangelical thought.⁴ Faruqi adds that *da`wah* is directed at Muslims as well as non-Muslims, which our subsequent overview of mission practice will also show to be true of Christians.

Faruqi's characterization of *da`wah* as not only proclamation but also serving culture and civilization is similar to a Christian view of mission,⁵ though he does not recognize the fact. As Jesus healed a leper and then said "tell no one" (Matt. 8:4), Christians recognize that there are times where only the deed is appropriate, as frequently practiced by Christian relief and development agencies like World Vision.⁶

A preliminary quantitative assessment of the extent of Christian mission and Islamic *da`wah* includes the major church groupings (Anglican, Independent, Marginal, Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic) and Muslim groups with international ministries from the political Jama`at-i Islami to the largely non-political Tabligh-i Jama`at. In their published article comparing Christian mission and *da`wah*, the authors, Todd M. Johnson and David R. Scoggins, calculated that about 57,300 Christian missionaries worked in Muslim contexts and 141,630 Muslim *da`is* worked outside their home country.⁷ They have reduced the latter figure to 113,380 in a subsequent expanded but unpublished paper.

³ Reprinted in the *International Review of Mission*, v. 5, no. 260 (October 1976) and in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, v. 20, no. 2 (April 1996), 126-135.

⁴ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/009/2.50.html>

⁵ See, e.g., articles 5 on "Christian Social Responsibility" and 10 on "Evangelism and Culture" of the Lausanne Covenant of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, the most representative movement of Evangelicals worldwide. See: http://www.feb.org/lausanne_covenant.htm (accessed July 27, 2006). Also see "Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today" adapted by the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in Morges, Switzerland, 2000, p. 2 in *Ecumenical Letter on Evangelism*, no. 3 (Geneva: Mission and Evangelism, World Council of Churches, Nov, 2005), pp. 2-9.

⁶ See *Christianity Today* (March 2005), 50-56.

⁷ Todd M. Johnson and David R. Scoggins, "Christian Missions and Islamic *Da`wah*: A Preliminary Quantitative Assessment," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, v. 29, no. 1 (January 2005), 8-11.

The comparison indicates that the vast majority of missionaries from both faith communities minister among their own adherents to revive and equip them. Also the majority of Christians now are already in the Southern rather than the Northern hemisphere and in the East rather than the West so the previous power differential between missionaries and recipients has shifted.⁸

Respective Critiques of Forms of Witness

Since both Islam and Christianity are seen to be missionary faiths with a world mission, they can be and often are rivals, but there are other problems that exacerbate the situation.⁹ One is the disparity of power and wealth. During the colonial period this often helped the Christian missionary but not always. For example, Islam in Northern Nigeria prospered from the British support of the Muslim rulers. And Western interests such as the East India Company often opposed missionary activity. The Arabic press in the Middle East, however, ascribed a close linkage between Christian mission and Western imperialism. In the 1980s and 1990s the anti-missionary tone broadened to an anti-Christian one and thus was also directed against ancient churches like the Coptic Orthodox Church.¹⁰ Different types of power have hindered free witness. In Indonesia and Malaysia the Chinese Christians have economic power, but the Muslim Malays have political power. Then there is the power of religious tradition and the street. Even after police had released Christian converts when charges of apostasy or “blasphemy” have been dismissed, they were killed by common citizens in Iran and Pakistan. It is in the area of religious freedom that many Christians have concerns.¹¹

⁸ Mark Laing, “The Changing Face of Mission: Implications for the Southern Shift in Christianity” (*Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 34, no. 2 [Apr. 2006], 165-177).

⁹ For Muslim concerns see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic – Christian Dialogue – Problems and Obstacles to be Pondered and Overcome* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Muslim – Christian Understanding, 1998), 17-19.

¹⁰ Heather J. Sharkey, “Arabic Antimissionary Treatises: Muslim Responses to Christian Evangelism in the Modern Middle East,” “Arabic Antimissionary Treatises: A Select Annotated Bibliography,” *International Bulletin*, v. 28, no. 3 (July 2004), 98-106.

¹¹ See Paul Marshall, “Persecution of Christians in the Contemporary World,” *International Bulletin*, v. 22, no. 1 (January 1998), 2-8; Annual Reports of the United States Commission on International Religions Freedom, Washington, D.C.

Guidelines for Respectful Mutual Witness

There have been two consultations in particular that have been helpful in drawing up guidelines for mutual witness. The first, already mentioned, was the conference on “Christian Mission and Islamic Da`wah” in Chambésy, Switzerland, June 26-30, 1976, organized by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, in consultation with the Islamic Foundation, Leicester, and the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, England. The other in which I was privileged to take part was the “Christian-Muslim Consultation on Religious Freedom” sponsored by the World Council of Churches and held at Hartford Seminary, October 15, 1999. I have felt free to adopt and adapt materials from these consultation reports when they are relevant to our context with the hope that Muslim and Christian colleagues will feel free to make modifications if they do not agree.

- We recognize that *da`wah* and mission are essential privileges and responsibilities of Muslims and Christians.
- The respective communities, wherever they are a minority of the population, should enjoy the legal right to exist and should be permitted to conduct their religious life freely and have liberty to convince and be convinced.
- We as Christians and Muslims are grieved that our respective communities have caused each other suffering by sometimes denying the above freedoms or exercising our power in harmful ways.
- In making any comparisons of beliefs and practices we shall endeavor to compare similar issues—religious ideals with ideals and realities with realities.
- In joint activities we shall try to the extent possible to keep an equitable balance between Muslims and Christians and men and women.
- We shall strive to foster the peace and welfare of our life together.

If we Christians and Muslims abide by these guidelines, we shall be faithful dictators of our respective scriptures and, in doing so, facilitate contexts where people can live in harmony while following their conscience.