**OUR APPROACH TO MUSLIMS**

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**1. Al-Qaeda, Bin Laden and Islamic Terrorism**

Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 the Muslim world has constantly made its presence felt in the traditionally Christian world. It has grabbed the headlines time and again, invariably for all the wrong reasons. The destruction of the Twin Towers in New York on the 11th September 2001 coupled with numerous other attacks such as hijackings, embassy bombings, kidnappings and hostage-taking have made Muslims anathema to most people in the West, especially the USA.

Reactions to insults against their religion have aggravated the increasing divisions between Islam and the West. Cartoons depicting Muhammad as a bloodthirsty terrorist, pastors publicly burning the Qur’an, Rushdie’s infamous book The Satanic Verses, and other provocations have resulted in violent threats and actions from Muslims determined to gain venomous revenge in the name of Allah against all whom they perceive to be the enemies of Islam.

Osama Bin Laden became the symbol of murderous Islamic aggression after 9/11. His terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda remains a thorn in the flesh of international peace and security. As I write this the USA has just closed 20 embassies in various countries in response to Al-Qaeda’s latest threats.

**2. The Christian Response: Charity or Militancy?**

Prior to the great colonisation of 85% of the Muslim world by European nations from the early 18th century onwards, the Muslims had always been a threat. The Christian nations usually responded in kind and the adherents of the two faiths usually only met on the battlefield. Since the fall of communism, the last of the great 20th century oppressive ideologies in Europe (including Nazism and fascism), it seems to be BAU again – business as usual. Only this time Christians are responding to *Muslim* aggression.

A thousand years it was the other way around. In 1095 Pope Urban II preached a fiery sermon at the Council of Clermont calling for a Christian military crusade to liberate Jerusalem from the heathen Saracens and to open the way for Christian pilgrimages to the city. Inspired by the Pope’s decree *DeusVult* – “God Wills It”, hordes of soldiers invaded the Middle East for the next three centuries mounting up to fourteen crusades that forced the Muslim nations of the region into an incessant series of wars they neither wanted nor provoked.

The crusaders were ruthless, slaughtering armies. garrisons and civilian populations while plundering their possessions and lands at the same time. Even Constantinople, an Eastern Christian city at the time, was sacked and its inhabitants decimated. All its treasures were taken away. When Godfrey De Bouillon conquered Jerusalem in 1099 he slaughtered every Jew and Muslim in the city. Christian records bragged that their blood literally flowed through the streets.

The Crusades were the Christian equivalent of Muslim jihad and can only be called Christian jihad in return. Nothing Al-Qaeda terrorists have done since then is without parallels from Christian actions during the Crusades. Many Christians today see Islamic terrorism as a sign that Muslims are inherently aggressive and that Islam is a religion of war and plunder as opposed to the peaceful mission of Jesus. A study of religious history, however, shows that violence in religion is a human problem, not an essentially Muslim one.

What is our response as believing Christians to be to Muslims today? Are we to become militant in our attitude towards them, not resorting to crusading violence but nonetheless treating them as enemies to be opposed and resisted? Or should we not choose what Paul called a “more excellent way,”1 an attitude of love, kindness and compassion towards them. What exactly is the Christian mission – to protect our vested interests or to lay our lives down so that others may find eternal life?

**3. Loving or Opposing the Enemies of God**

I have often heard born-again believing Christians responding vindictively towards Muslims in recent times. A woman I know was quite in blunt in describing how terrible Muslims can be and what they have done to deserve to go straight to hell. “They are the enemies of God,” she exclaimed. I responded that we are called to love our enemies, to pray for them, bless them, and care for them. “Yes I know we are called to love our enemies, but we are not called to love *His* enemies,” she replied. I suggested that if God cannot love his own enemies, he cannot expect us to love ours!

Christians have opposed the building of mosques in many towns in South Africa, often getting petitions together and submitting them to local councils. In a nearby town there are about thirty churches to one mosque. There was an outcry from local Christians when the Muslims planned to build a second one. In my home town a similar petition was drafted to stop a mosque being constructed in an area where many Muslims have come to live since the exclusivity of whites-only areas was scrapped prior to the 1994 democratic elections.

Whenever I have expressed my astonishment at such attitudes Christians have responded: “Yes, but look at what the Muslims are doing throughout the world!” My response has been – and I emphasise this – that *it does not matter what Muslims are doing*, the Christian response *always and without exception must* *be to desire their salvation* *and to act in compassion and love towards them.* “Let all that you do be done in love,”2 Paul declared. Let me put it quite simply: the cross of Christ takes away your right to dislike anyone.

Paul again: “For if while *we* were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”3 All human beings are by nature enemies of God, and God showed *his* love for his own enemies when he redeemed *you and me*! About thirty years ago I was driving through a local Muslim area and saw a poster on a mosque reading “ISLAM: I Shall Love All Mankind”. I immediately thought of the only approach that Christian believers can have towards Muslims: I-S-L-A-M must mean only one thing to us: ***I S****hall* ***L****ove* ***A****ll* ***M****uslims*. If necessary, write it out 10 000 times until it sinks in.

**4. The New Covenant – Grace, Love and Forgiveness**

Muslims are only going to be won to Christ when Christians not only share the Gospel but act in love towards them even under extreme provocation. Paul said to the Christians of Thessalonica: “But we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.”4 By far the majority of Muslim converts testify that it was this factor more than any other that brought them to faith in Jesus – the sacrificial love of Christians towards them.

When God sent the Israelites into the land of Canaan he ordered them to destroy every human being they found dwelling there. Women, children and invalids – none were to be spared. He had just introduced what we call the old covenant – a covenant which led him to destroy tens of thousands of law-breaking Israelites at the very same time as the destruction of the Hittites and other Gentile tribes living in the land. God had ordered the wholesale slaughtering – the militant Israelites were only obeying his commands. But when the crusaders invaded exactly the same lands less than 3000 years later and did exactly the same, slaughtering Muslims everywhere, they committed the worst crimes against the mission of Jesus that have ever been committed by its followers on earth. It was and probably always will be the ultimate low-point of Christian history.

What happened to change everything? Nothing less than God’s own attitudes towards all sinners living on earth. His original approach of absolute, in-your-face righteousness had yielded to a perfect covenant of nothing else but grace, mercy, love and forgiveness. He held out, and will do so until Jesus returns, both of his hands, promising to all who will grasp them complete forgiveness and the assurance of eternal life. He took the consequences of our sins on himself, and through the gift of his own Son opened the door for us to enter the kingdom of heaven without purgatory, judgments or reproaches to remind us of who we once were.

The Book of Revelation tells us who will fill the portals of heaven. John saw “a great multitude, which no man could number, from *every* nation, from *all* tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.”5 Jesus said “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached *throughout the whole world*, as a testimony to *all* nations; and then the end will come.”6 That includes Libya, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Algeria, Morocco – *and* Saudi Arabia. The return of Jesus will be heralded when *Muslims* in large numbers, from every closed Muslim country on earth, turn to faith in Jesus.

**5. How Far a Loving Approach to Muslims Must Go**

Francis of Assisi was a man centuries ahead of his times. He is still way out there in front of many Christians who today still think Muslims must be opposed rather than loved, respected and evangelised. He was, however, originally also a man of his own times. In 1219 he joined the Fifth Crusade against the Saracens (the popular name for the Muslims at the time) and ministered with a few other friars to the crusaders at Damietta in Egypt. The crusade had been launched to conquer Egypt and bring it under Catholic control. The pretext was that the soldiers were brave and noble servants of Jesus who were going to reclaim Middle-Eastern lands and bring them under Christian control. At Damietta the war had reached a stalemate. A river separated the Christian and Muslim garrisons and neither side could cross it and conquer the other on its own turf.

Francis was firmly committed to the Crusade but decided that, instead of overcoming the Muslim ruler of Egypt, Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, he should rather attempt to share the Gospel of Jesus with him, believing that if the Sultan became a Christian, the whole nation would follow suit. Francis knew, however, that this enterprise would have to be done at the risk of his life and without a sword or shield to protect him. Nonetheless, along with another friar, brother Illuminato, he crossed the river and walked defencelessly towards the Muslim camp.

Muslim soldiers soon arrested and physically abused them. They would have suffered no reproach if they had killed them, but they brought them in as captives to the Muslim camp. When they expressed their desire to meet with the Sultan himself, their captors stood both amused and stupefied at their apparent foolishness and arrogance. But when al-Kamil heard of it, he ordered them to be brought in.

For three days the two Christian friars conversed with the Sultan and many of his top generals, speaking to them all of faith in Jesus and calling on them to respond to the Gospel. The Sultan heard them willingly and treated them as visitors (not captives) with both respect and acceptance as fellow-believers in God. He resisted attempts by Muslim soldiers to have them beheaded and, impressed with their courage, faith and sincerity, ensured they were given an escort to lead them safely out of the city after their engagement was over.

The story has other fascinating incidents and consequences and was recorded in both Christian and Muslim chronicles of the time. But when Francis returned to Europe he changed his approach completely. He called on all Christians in Muslim lands, and those who might go there as missionaries, to be prepared to lay their lives down so that Muslims might hear the Gospel and believe it. He quoted the following text as an example of how they should conduct themselves: “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution.”7

He commanded them to be willing to suffer for the name of Jesus without reacting in their service to Muslims. His motto was “Be subject to Muslims,” expecting his companions to submit to their jurisdiction on their own soil and in their own lands, homes and cities. His approach was a complete reversal of the whole purpose of the Crusades – to bring the Muslims into subjection to Christians through bloodshedding, warmongering, slaughtering and plundering. He called for Christian love, patience, kindness, longsuffering and a willingness to exercise self-denial at all times.

Francis remains centuries ahead of his times, but the time has come for Christians everywhere to follow his example. Muslims are everywhere these days. Millions live in European countries and in the USA. The Christian call, as the traditional barriers between Christians and Muslims come down, is to be willing to share the gospel with them in both love and sacrificial service. It matters not what Muslims may be doing, what matters is only that we should be doing what Jesus called us to do: “Go and make disciples of *all* nations.”8

**Notes**

1. 1 Corinthians 12.31

2. 1 Corinthians 16.14

3. Romans 5.10

4. 1 Thessalonians 2.8

5. Revelation 7.9

6. Matthew 24.14

7. 1 Peter 2.13

8. Matthew 28.19

For further reading:

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Consult [***www.answering-islam.org***](http://www.answering-islam.org)

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