

Grace for the Day

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Formulating a Christian Response to Muslims (Part 2 of 2)

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Please see Part 1 of this same article in last week's discussion.

Part 2: Getting Our Own Head and Heart in the Right Place

As recent as ten years ago, I would hear Christian missionaries struggling to present the Gospel to Muslims. Today, the conversation has shifted. It is about violent jihadists. I hope I am wrong, but I sense a growing detachment of Christians towards mission to Muslims. Is it because they are trying to kill us?

Ten years ago, we know how to relate to Muslims. We are called to present the Gospel to them. But our relationship with Muslims seems to have become complicated. Many things have transpired and it is only reasonable that, as Christians, we need to take stock of how we ought to relate to Muslims, in light of the recent global upheavals.

I used to live in Southeast Asia among warm friendly Muslims. It was easy for me to love Muslims, and to want to share with them the forgiveness of sin found in Jesus. But it gets harder for me to love them when I know there are some Muslims bent on killing indiscriminately in the cause of their religion. And I may become a victim of their action.

While I know that the violent jihadists form a small percentage of the Muslim population, it is also apparent that they do get the support of a wider community. So how do I love those who

support those who want to kill in the name of Islam?

It may surprise some to learn that the Bible has given us instructions on a situation that is virtually identical. That is, "How do we relate to the larger silent community that gives tacit support to a smaller violent group from within their midst?" In addition, "How do we relate to those who try to kill us?"

What the Bible says about our response as Christians

In the life of Jesus, the people who opposed him were the Sadducees, Pharisees and Herodians. At his trial, the Council, which made up primarily Sadducees and some prominent Pharisees, managed to get a mob to call for his crucifixion. All these groups that opposed Jesus still add up to a small number. The Sadducees (possibly the descendants of Zaddok the priest) were the sect appointed by Rome to serve as priests in the temple. As Roman appointees, they needed to retain their favored position. The Sadducees were a very small elite group; certainly not popular among the people.

The Pharisees were the largest sect, and they numbered about 6,000 (according to Josephus the Jewish historian who wrote at the close of the first century). They were also a minority of the people.

The Herodians were the beneficiaries of the Herodian kings. These were the local kings appointed by Rome. Herodians were lackeys for the Herods, and were generally despised by the main Jewish population.

The majority of the population were ordinary people trying to eke out a living. We have no idea how many were positive about Jesus, and how many negative. The fact that we do not see a conversion of the majority of the Jewish population suggests to us that, though Jesus had a considerable following, most of the Jews were not followers of Jesus.

It is true that many people, especially people with anti-Semitic tendencies, say that the Jews killed Jesus and persecuted Christians. The reality is that only a small number of Jews (together with the Romans) crucified Jesus.

Did the Bible recognize the difference between the silent majority and the violent minority? Yes!

The people who were trying to kill Jesus were "the chief priests, the scribes, and the Pharisees (who were in the Council) (Mt 26:3; Mk 14:1; Lk 22:2; Jn 11:47). The people who arrested Jesus were the chief priests, scribes, elders of the people, officers of the temple police, and Pharisees (Mt 26:47; Mk 14:43; Lk 22:52; Jn 18:3). The people who stood in judgment over Jesus were the elders that made up the Council, namely, the high priest, chief priests and scribes, (Mt 26:57; Mk 15:1; Lk 22:66; Jn 18:12-13).

At the same time, this distinction should not be pressed as an absolute. Peter urged the people of Jerusalem to embrace Christ, saying, "Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, *as did your leaders*" (Acts 3:17). Unlike the earlier distinction between the ring-leaders and the general population, here, Peter said that *both* groups acted out of ignorance.

The Bible is not inconsistent. You can see that these statements are incidental. But when we put them together, they show a remarkable picture. When the narrative identifies those who killed Jesus, the culprits are the identified few. When forgiveness of sin is offered, it is offered to all, including those directly involved in killing Jesus. *When blame can be assigned, it is limited to the culpable few. When grace is offered, it extends to the ignorant majority and the culpable few!* O the wonder of grace!

The grace from God extends to those who had been responsible for the death of Jesus just days earlier! How can we, in our small-minded simplicity ever hope to understand God's grace?

*Marvelous grace of our loving God
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt
Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilled!
- Julia Johnston*

This is the same incredible grace of Jesus towards the Roman soldiers. The Roman soldiers mocked Jesus. They flogged his body, shredding it to ribbons. The Roman soldiers impaled Jesus to the cross and hoisted him up in the air. The Roman soldiers carelessly cast lots for his clothes. Instead of calling judgment on them, Jesus cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34).

Some people view Christian love as no more than a sentimental convenience that benefits us more than those we are called to love. Such wimpy love takes flight upon the slightest offense.

The love Jesus shows on the cross is as hard-headed as it is tender-hearted! Paul calls us to such unshakeable resolution, saying, "Do not repay evil for evil... If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink" (Rm 12:17,20).

This love was demonstrated powerfully during the reign of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius when the plague broke out (c. AD 166-180). It eventually killed as much as one-third of the people in the western provinces of the Roman Empire. The Christians were thought to be the reason for the plague because they neglected the pagan gods. A persecution followed. As people watched their loved ones die from the plague and blamed the Christians, the Christians were hated more than ever before.

In those dark days, the population abandoned the sick and the dying. But the Christians would tend to the victims of the plague. As many Christians died from the plague as the pagans. And some died on account of their

tending to the sick. This is returning good for evil. This is the unshakeable love of Jesus on the cross.

Through those dark days, Christian love spoke loudly as never before. Their unyielding commitment to the example of Christ became a turning point as many began to see that Christians have something they do not have. Christians now occupy the moral high ground, not through strategy or design, but through selfless sacrifice. Many historians believe that this was the great turning point which eventually caused the Gospel of Jesus Christ to triumph over the prejudices and hatred against Christians.

As Christians we have a clear obligation to rise up to the occasion to love those who hate us. To reach out to more than 1 billion Muslims so they may be delivered from the bondage of sin.

The Tension

We have a serious tension here. Let us, for a moment, allow the tension to remain as they stand, *viz.* (1) the non-violent Muslim community has been supportive of the violent jihadists who draw sustenance from these non-violent co-religionists; (2) Christians should be clear that we are to look at Muslims (including violent jihadists) as those ignorant of God's grace; that we should love them and show them forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

You shall see that God is doing a marvelous work in our world today. I am suggesting to you that the violent jihadists are doing more, to dismantle the barriers the Muslims have erected against the Gospel, than Christians can ever do. In the larger scheme of things, they are serving God's sovereign purpose.

Violent Jihadists Serving the Cause of Christ

In the year 2000, I made an observation to my congregation that with the fall of communism, the next big challenge of the Christians would be Islam. At that time, I did not know how things would shape up. But I think the situation is clearer now. I view the rise of violent jihadism as serving the cause of Christ.

Violent jihadism is supported by aspects of the Muslim community discussed in Part 1: (1) Islamic ideology, (2) Muslim sense of community, and (3) Muslim propaganda. These barriers have been major reasons why the Gospel has not reached the hearts of those in the Muslim community.

Islamic ideology. Violent jihadism has created a problem for Muslims. Muslim countries have always denied the freedom of faith to other religions. But the world ignores this persecution of Christians in Muslim countries. At the same time, Muslims who immigrate to the free world are allowed to exercise their faith. In short, Muslims want freedom of religion when they are in non-Muslim countries, but they deny freedom of religion to other faiths within Muslim countries.

For the longest time, Christians have been accused of intolerance by western secularists and liberals. But the blatant hypocrisy of the Muslims, who want to enjoy what they deny others, is brought into full public display.

They can draw the most offensive cartoons against others, but think they can tell the world what cartoons can or cannot be drawn about them. They can say that the Bible is corrupt, but we cannot say the Quran is not the word of God. They want to worship freely, but deny others that same right. All these have been true ever since the Muslims gained power in the Seventh Century. But the world is just too polite to call it hypocrisy, and intolerance – until now.

Thanks to the violent jihadists, Muslims are now confronted with their intolerance and hypocrisy. I do not recall, at any other time in history, when Muslims had to answer for this.

More and more of the world community are now telling Muslims: If you want freedom of religion, you must also allow it. If you want freedom of speech, you must allow it. If you want freedom for people to convert to Islam, you must allow Muslims to convert to other religions. If you want to use violence to achieve your religious ends, you must be prepared to face violence, employed to crush your religious ends.

The blatant uneven-handedness of Muslim countries or Muslim-dominated countries is now called to question. And if we ask who brought all these to light so effectively, the credit must go to the violent jihadists.

Most Muslims have NOT changed their ideology at this point in time. As the world puts increasing pressure on Muslims, there are recent developments that suggest that a small number of Muslims now want to distance themselves from such ideology.

No matter how inconsistent or blatantly intolerant Islamic ideology may be, nobody from outside of Islam can change it. But for the first time, Muslims are rethinking their own ideology as they are forced to address their inconsistencies.

I am not suggesting that they will finally reject Islam and embrace Jesus Christ. What I am suggesting is that we are witnessing a more critical self-examination among Muslims towards greater tolerance of other faiths. And should this come to fruition, Muslim countries may genuinely legalize conversion from Islam. Might this be the crack in the closed door through which grace would eventually make its entrance?

Muslim Community. The irrational mutuality of the Muslim community is beginning to fall apart. Even today, the majority of Muslims still stand against the world. But the rise of violent jihadism is causing rifts among the Muslims. As the blood letting of Muslim against Muslim continues, the Muslim community's powerful social pressures, applied to keep the Gospel message out, are beginning to change.

Today, many Muslims know that their worst enemies are other Muslims, and their allies are non-Muslims. They begin to realize that infidels can be more dependable than Muslims. Kuwait learnt it the hard way, and Saudi Arabia learnt it in a hurry so as not to become like Kuwait. I am not suggesting that these Muslim countries are even close to opening up to the Gospel. But philosophically, Muslims can no longer sustain the delusion that it is other Muslims who have their best interests at heart.

When we do see the conversion of Muslims, it is more likely to happen in a situation where they are displaced from their tight social community. A community that makes it all but impossible to begin contemplating the good news of Jesus Christ.

Violent jihadists have done more to break apart this stranglehold of Islam than any other factor – that I know.

Muslim Propaganda. Muslim propaganda against the rest of the world is highly destructive and remains a powerful tool of violent jihadists. By the same token it is apparent to those who would stop violent jihadism that this propaganda machinery has to be dismantled.

Muslim communities by and large, have always been insular, and the information they receive has always been distorted. Until now, the rest of the world does not bother to confront Muslim misrepresentation of the world because it does not concern them. The use of propaganda by violent jihadists requires a destruction of such disinformation.

When this is done, Muslims will have a chance to look at the world with their own eyes rather than through the prism of propagandists. While Muslim propaganda is more vitriolic now than say, twenty years ago, that level of disinformation would also serve to destroy it.

Conclusion

I can accept that the temporal (secular) powers should supply a forceful response to violent jihadists to protect the right to life and limb. That is a worthy task, but not one with ultimate worth.

Christians can confuse the right to life and limb, a human right, and think of it as a Christian duty. It is not. It is a secular responsibility of the state. And carnal Christians may be motivated to return tit for tat. That is also not the teaching of Christ.

Christians can be disillusioned with the seeming lack of progress in reaching Muslims. And the

actions of the violent jihadists all but confirm for them that this mission is hopeless.

I like to suggest the contrary. I like to suggest that the violent jihadists are used by God in his sovereignty to reshape Muslim communities so they become ready for the Gospel.

I also suggest that our love for Muslims cannot be based on some sentimental and unreal depiction of the Muslim community. We need to know them as they are, love them as they are, and offer the grace of God to them as they are, because God loves them as they are.

"Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ... And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints" (Eph 6: 12-18).

We are **NOT** in the business of fighting Muslims. Our mission is to win Muslims. We are fighting something though. We are fighting *"against the rulers, against the authorities, against the power of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."* We are fighting against the forces that keep Muslims in bondage to sin.

Let us rejoice and see that God is doing a mighty work among the Muslims. Let us look to that dawn of the Gospel in the lands where the shadow of death cast its gloom. That dawn will come as God works all things out in his sovereign control, and as we express his love to those who need Jesus.

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.