

My
MUSLIM
Friends

PETER YOUNGREN



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My Muslim Friends

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Celebrate Jesus International

PO Box 1891 Niagara Falls, NY 14302-1891 USA

PO Box 968, St. Catharines, ON L2R 6Z4 Canada

Robinson Road Post Office PO Box 647 Singapore 901247

PO Box 24 Chorley, Lancashire PR7 2GE UK

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to “My Muslim Friends.” First let me acknowledge that this book makes no pretense of an overall evaluation of Islam, the Koran or current events. It does not provide an analysis of terrorism or militant Islam. Many books that address these topics have already been written. My purpose is to show opportunities for friendship and dialogue between Muslims and Christians, and to highlight one question: who is Jesus?

Though my background gave me an attitude of suspicion towards those of non-Christian religions, I have come to recognize that people are people, with similar hopes, dreams and aspirations no matter where we live or what our cultural background is. Yes, there are extremists in Islam, but the vast majority of Muslims are peace-loving, hard-working people.

The title, “My Muslim Friends,” expresses my sincere attitude towards Muslims and I often use these three words as I address audiences that include tens of thousands of Muslims in various parts of the world.

Friendship is a key to human relations. You can respect one another without being in agreement on a range of issues. The most prominent Gospel preacher of the first century, the apostle Paul, practiced this principle of “respect without compromise.” Of course the apostle was merely walking in the footsteps of Jesus.

The reader will quickly discover that Jesus is the main topic of this book. He is a person of great interest to Christians as well as Muslims. The Bible as well as the Koran, Islam’s holy book, give Jesus a supreme position. Who is this Jesus Christ, born of a virgin, sinless, the Messiah and the One who will return?

My hope is that this book will be a journey of discovery for both Christians and Muslims.

Finally a few words of gratitude. Thank you Dr. T. L. Osborn for opening my eyes to the power of the Gospel, when it is preached with signs, wonders and miracles.

Thank you to Aril Edvardsen of Norway. Your love for the world and your approach of friendship towards those of a non-Christian religion has been a great inspiration to me.

Thank you Emmanuel Luther Ratiq for your writings. You opened my understanding to the witness of Jesus in the Muslim culture. - Peter Youngren

CHAPTER ONE



TAKE ANOTHER LOOK AT JESUS

Jesus is a point of contact between Muslims and Christians. The only ancient religious writings that give Jesus a supreme position are the Bible and Islam's holy book, the Koran, which mentions Jesus ninety-seven times. Entire chapters are dedicated to Him. Though there are stark differences in how Christians and Muslims view Jesus, still without question He remains a person of common interest and a point of dialogue.

Let me be very clear where I stand. Jesus came for the world; no religion or culture owns Him. He loves the world, died for all, and rose again to give new life to everyone. His grace extends to all religions including Muslims and Christians alike. Jesus is the Savior of all people.

One of the first comments I make to Muslim friends is, "*I am not trying to convert you to Christianity.*" That does not mean that I view Christianity in a negative light, though just like any religion, Christianity has its share of problems. It is just that no religion, no matter how well intentioned, has the power to make us righteous. That ability is in Jesus alone. For years I have endeavored to show Christians our need to receive new life through Jesus Christ. How we respond to Jesus is a crucial matter for every person regardless of religion. This is an area of complete equality; everyone, man or woman, Christian or

Muslim, rich or poor, who believes and receives God's love revealed in Jesus has eternal life.

My mission in life is to share this Good News of Jesus Christ. For thirty years I have enjoyed working with Christians of almost all denominations and in all parts of the world. Our common denominators are our love for people and our faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

MUHAMMAD, THE KORAN AND CHRISTIANS

In addition to working with Christians, I gladly work with all people who promote peace and mutual understanding. My travels have brought me into contact with many Muslims who are honest, hard-working and peace-loving individuals. I have often received friendship and understanding from Muslims. It has been my joy to extend a hand of friendship to people of other religions than my own, according to the example given by Jesus and the apostle Paul, who refused to discriminate against any individual or groups of people. My friendship with Muslims has not caused me to compromise my belief in the Gospel. On the contrary it has helped me to really focus on the core of our message, which is Jesus and what He has done for the world. When we turn from self-righteousness and self-reliance and receive the Messiah sent from God into our hearts, we receive peace from God. Jesus Himself is our Prince of Peace.

I remember how shocked I was to discover that the Koran speaks highly of the Gospel. Islam's prophet Muhammad taught that the Gospel is from God, but millions of Muslims and Christians know little or nothing about the Gospel. This ignorance makes the task of presenting Christ's Good News to all people extremely urgent.

In the early days of Islam, Muhammad had a particularly good relationship with Christians. Christians and Jews are called by the Arabic term “Ahl al Kitab,” meaning the “People of the Book.” The Koran puts forth this idea of goodwill towards Ahl al Kitab: “You will find that the closest to you in love are those who call themselves Christians, because there are priests and monks among them who do not behave arrogantly” (Surah 5:83).

Muslims were encouraged to accept the Scriptures of Jews and Christians, and to live in peace with them. “And argue not with the People of the Book unless it be in (a way) that is better, save with such of them as do wrong; and say: We believe in that which has been revealed unto us and revealed unto you; our God and your God is One, and unto Him we surrender” (Surah 29:46).

The Koran goes as far as saying that if a Muslim has questions they can refer to the “People of the Book,” “ask those who have been reading the Book before thee” (Surah 10:95).

During the later part of Muhammad’s life the Koran records instances of hostilities between Muslims and Christians, as well as rebukes of Christians. Still the verses quoted above show openness and good-will. I would rather focus on common denominators, and on building bridges, than on that which engenders further strife. Enough books have been written about wars between Christians and Muslims. My focus is Jesus and His love extended to all.

I am very serious when I say I do not try to convert people from one religion to another. This would be fruitless since no religion is able to save even one person. Christians are sometimes offended when I make this statement. It is very easy for us Christians to put our focus on the religion of Christianity

rather than the person of Jesus. A quick look at the Bible will reveal that salvation is not found in adherence to a religion. Statements from the Bible like: “he who has the Son (Jesus) has life” and eternal life is in “no other name than Jesus” put the focus squarely on Jesus and Jesus alone (more about this later).

While I do not try to convert people from one religion to another, I seek to influence people of all religions to embrace Jesus Christ and His righteousness, which is a free gift to all who believe. This is not all the same as trying to convert a person from one religion to another. In fact, millions claim adherence to Christianity, and still have no knowledge of the free gift of Jesus’ righteousness.

SEPT 11, 2001 HARDENS ATTITUDES

We are living in a difficult world that seemingly inches ever closer to the precipice of disaster. Tension in the Middle East is a constant factor and people everywhere feel the threat of terrorism. I think most people would agree the attitudes towards Islam worldwide have hardened since September 11, 2001. Many books with a negative bias against Islam have been written by Christian authors. Words that engender fear and anger such as “unveiling,” “de-masking,” “dark side,” “terrorism” and “jihad” are common in titles and subtitles. Unfortunately, many of the writers lack knowledge of Islam or the Koran. When one Christian leader heard I was writing a book about a friendship approach between Christians and Muslims his immediate response was, “No one will buy it.” I understand his thinking, though I strongly disagree. To use the words “Muslim” and “friends” in the same sentence may indeed be politically incorrect to some.

The last few years we have been inundated, not only with

books, but television documentaries and newspaper articles attempting to analyze Islam and its followers. Some Christian ministers have ridiculed Islam and belittled Muslims, while showing an appalling ignorance of Islamic beliefs and of the Muslim world. I heard one Christian preacher rally people to military action, speaking of the “historical confrontation” between the Western world and Islam. His tone and rhetoric had a sense of violence and hatred to it. It reminded me of what we read in history about the Crusaders who fought for the city of Jerusalem almost nine hundred years ago. Those “Christian” armies were promised an instant entry into heaven if they died in battle. This kind of fanaticism has existed and does exist in every religion. It is not the way Jesus approached people.

STILL CRUSADING?

Some Christian writers have made it their aim to demonize Islam’s prophet Muhammad. One well-known author claims the suicide bombings in the Middle East are expressions of “pent up sexual desires similar to those of the founder of Islam.” These kinds of comments are not only baseless, but they serve only to enrage and alienate. Furthermore, this type of writing is unworthy of someone who claims to be a follower of Jesus. Those speaking of the “dark side” of Islam would do well to remember that dark sides can be found in many religions and philosophies including Christianity. The Crusader era exemplifies this dark side of Christianity.

Other Christian writers view every conflict only in the context of a Muslim conspiracy to take over the world. Regional wars in places like Chechnya, the Middle East and Kashmir are all viewed in this light with little or no consideration given to local conditions. One gets the distinct impression that the authors have never engaged in a serious conversation with Muslims or clerics of the Muslim religion. The tragic fact is that Mus-

lims have killed Christians and Christians have killed Muslims. In the Balkan war during the 1990's one of the atrocities was "Christians" killing Muslims in Kosovo. I put the word "Christian" in quotation marks because true followers of Jesus would not engage in genocide. When people kill in the name of Christianity it is to defend a tradition or an institution. This is not the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Many Christians have no idea that Jesus is mentioned far more in the Koran than Muhammad is. They don't know that Christians and Muslims have some beliefs in common. Sadly some Christians view Muslims as enemies and vice versa.

GOD IS LOVE

The basis for everything we know of God is that God is love. Any religion that drifts from this becomes dangerous. Without God's love religious teachings become lifeless words, which are full of condemnation. It doesn't matter which religion we speak of; words of condemnation always contain seeds of violence and hatred. On the contrary, wholesome religion reaches from the human heart toward a God full of love. When God's mercy, kindness and forgiveness touch people His love brings healing to the wounded human conscience. God's love becomes an instrument of restoration where division and strife have ruled.

Now a word to Muslims. In this book I ask you to take another look at who Jesus really is. The Bible has much to say about Jesus, but so does the Koran. *What does the Koran really say about Jesus?* Please, receive this book as an expression of love, care and respect. The last few years have been difficult for Muslims. Many have experienced discrimination and condescension, especially those living in Europe and North America. We see in the Bible that Jesus and the apostles never

treated others with disrespect. Jesus reserved harsh words only for religious bigots while common people received grace, mercy and love. If you have been mistreated simply because you are a Muslim, please know there are millions of Jesus-followers, who exhibit the non-condemning spirit of Jesus (John 3:17).

It is not possible to write a book like this without addressing sensitive areas. It is not my intention to offend anyone, Christian or Muslim. My hope is that people of all religions, including Christians and Muslims, will discover Jesus in a greater way than ever before.

A word to Christians. Many will receive this book joyously praising God for the witness of Jesus in Muslim culture. Others may have a difficult time with some of the content. You may have listened to preaching that speaks in a condescending tone toward Muslims and you may think that I am too loving, too open or even compromising.

I hope you will see I am approaching this matter in the way that Jesus, the apostle Paul and the other disciples did. The Biblical record is clear that true believers in Jesus do not speak in a derogatory manner regarding other religions. We are not people of condemnation, but of Good News! Our focus is sharing the love of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ.

A word about the Koran. All quotations are from well-respected English translations of the Koran. Some may suggest that since the Koran was recorded in Arabic, it is only understood by those who speak Arabic. I am sure legitimate arguments can be made as to the exact meaning of words in Arabic compared to English. In any translation from one language to another nuances can be lost and I'm sure this may also be the case with the English version of the Koran. At the same time, I

am encouraged to know that the English translations of the Koran have been done by esteemed Islamic scholars whose intent has been to give as exact a translation as is possible. Further the Koran itself claims to be a message to all people, so it would seem inherent that its message should be comprehensible to all including those whose native tongue is not Arabic.

May the following chapters provide for opportunities of dialogue. For Christians who have never thought of Muslims as friends, I pray your heart will be opened as you see those outside of the Christian religion in a fresh light. God loves the world. For Muslims and Christians I pray that you will discover Jesus in a greater way than ever before.