Calling on the Prophets

In Christian Witness to Muslims

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COLIN BEARUP



Adam	Adam
Noah	Nuh
Abraham	Ibraheem
Isaac	Ishaq
Jacob	Yaqoob
Joseph	Yusuf
Moses	Musa
David	Dawud
Solomon	Sulaiman
Jonah	Yunus
Job	Ayyub
John The Baptist	Yahya
Zechariah	Zakariya
Jesus Christ	Isa Al-Maseeh

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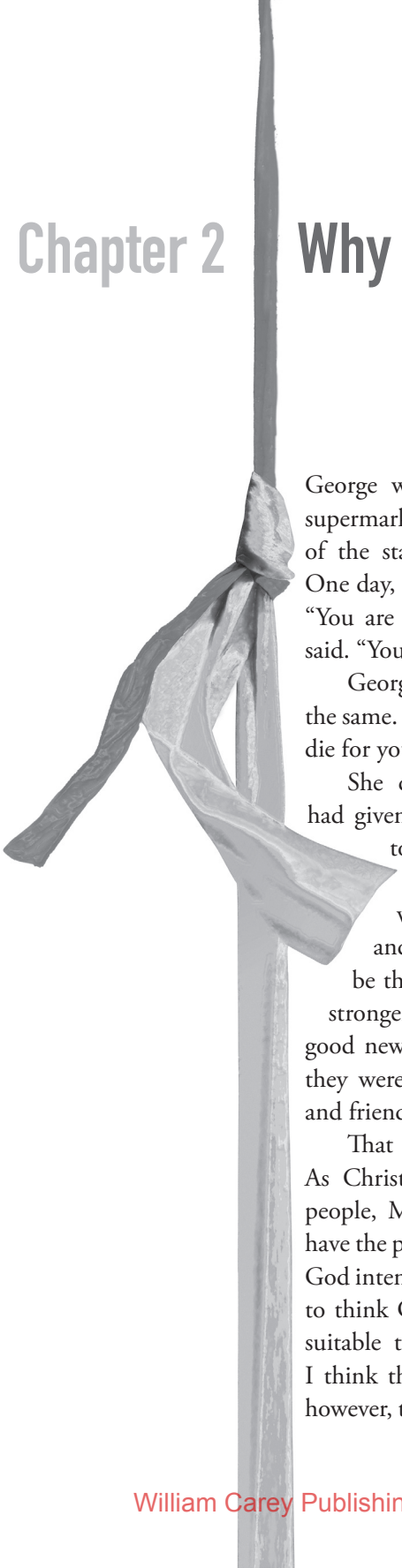
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Chapter 2 Why Read This Book?



George was the only Christian working in a supermarket in a British city. A good number of the staff were Muslims of Pakistani origin. One day, one of these Muslims spoke to George. "You are not like the other white people," she said. "You worship God. You and I are the same."

George's answer came quickly. "We are not the same. My God died for me. Your God did not die for you, did he? We are not the same."

She did not approach George again. He had given her an answer which made no sense to her. More than that, his answer communicated rejection. George was genuinely pleased with his answer and with her response. His desire not to be thought of as "like a Muslim" was much stronger than his desire to communicate the good news. He was quite correct in saying that they were not the same. She was approachable and friendly. He was not.

That is a true story, if a little extreme! As Christians, we do have good news for all people, Muslims included. More than that, we have the privilege and joy of being the ones whom God intends to speak through. If you feel inclined to think God could have chosen someone more suitable than yourself, you are probably right. I think that of myself all the time. In the end, however, that is God's problem, not ours. Our job

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is to believe it and to follow his leadings and promptings. In Christ, we are the light of the world (Matt 5:14). That, of course, has huge significance for how we live, not just what we say. In George's case, his faith in God was noticed, but when the opportunity came, he had neither the right words nor the right attitude. What should he have said?

The material in this book focuses on what we say and how we say it. How we speak is, and always will be, secondary. In other words, unless we live as light, our words will have no power to do good. To paraphrase 1 Corinthians 13:1, unless we love Muslims, our talk is just a noise. But if we are looking to God to help us love them as we should, and if we are trusting his Holy Spirit to enable and empower us, then it is entirely appropriate to apply ourselves to gain a little know-how, and that is where this book comes in.

Hidden Obstacles

When it comes to communicating the good news to Muslims, several obstacles that Christians aren't even aware of need to be overcome. To start with, many Muslims don't expect Christians to have anything to offer. At best, they regard Christians as second-rate Muslims. After all, they are taught that Islam came about to correct and complete the religions that had gone before. Even a faithful member of an older religion must be lacking something that is to be found in the new one. Muslims are taught to regard Jesus Christ as a prophet of Islam whose message has been misunderstood and distorted by his followers.

The mere fact of our being Christians makes us an unreliable source of truth. Furthermore, for the Muslim on the street a Christian is simply someone who was born into a Christian country. On countless occasions in the UK, I have heard Muslim individuals casually refer to their white British neighbours or work colleagues as "Christians." But when they look closely, they see people who don't know the first thing about God. Many Muslims are themselves pretty lax about religious matters, but were they to get serious, why should they expect to learn anything useful from "those Christians"? This is just one reason why godliness of character is so important.

Furthermore, Muslims don't know that they are "lost." That term is not in their vocabulary. Nor do they know that salvation exists, so why would they seek it? Salvation in the biblical sense simply isn't a feature of Islam. By and large, Muslims aren't trying to "earn salvation through works." That is just our evangelical perception of them. According to Islamic teaching, God created humankind to be weak. People need religion to guide them. God gives religion. Humanity's job is to submit. The very name "Islam" is the Arabic word for submission.

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Consequently, most Muslims assume that Christianity works essentially the same way; that is, we have to submit to our religion—end of story. They can't imagine that any Muslim would have anything to gain before God by changing from one religion to another. When they hear of someone converting to Christianity, they assume it must be for money or for other worldly advantage. What other reason could there possibly be?

Very Basic Principles

In order to help our Muslim friends, we need to get their attention; and then once we have their attention, we need to hold their interest. First and foremost comes how we live, especially that we love and respect them. Then we need to express truth in such a way that it interests our Muslim friends, stimulates questions, and opens up possibilities.

It is actually quite easy to say things that are *true*, but *not interesting*. George, for example, said something that was true, but incomprehensible. For his Muslim workmate, there was only one God, so why speak of two? And what sense does it make to say that any god could or would die?

Here is a more subtle point. Almost any statement that begins with "We believe" seems to be a statement *not about truth*, but *about Christians*. We do this all the time without realising it. Furthermore, the term *Christian*, for a Muslim, is an exclusive category. The Christians are *someone else*. There is no reason why something that *Christians* believe—even good Christians—should be relevant to them, except perhaps as general knowledge. It carries no incentive to learn more.

A subject of conversation becomes interesting when it is surprising, intriguing, and relevant. For example, if a Muslim assumes, as many do, that all "Christians" have given up on religion, then our bringing God into the conversation creates a point of interest. Talking about God's love and concern for all people (not just for that ambiguous word *us*) is a good starting point.

Similarly, my experience indicates that many Muslims have the impression that Christians are only interested in Jesus, whereas they see themselves as faithful to all the prophets. Indeed, many prophets are mentioned in the Qur'an, and the message they bring always matches that of Muhammad. Therefore, it makes perfect sense to them to say that they believe in all the prophets and that they feel no reason to actually read the Bible. Consequently, our bringing other prophets into the conversation may arouse the curiosity of spiritually alert Muslims. It's not that all Muslims are the same, but bringing the prophets into the conversation creates possibilities that many will respond to in one way or another.

In addition to saying something that is true and interesting, we want to say something that is useful. Many Muslims will quite happily talk with us about

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the evils in the world or how ineffective the legal system is or how far astray youth culture is going, but what they need to hear is the good news. From my perspective, something is *useful* when it takes them a step closer to understanding who Jesus Christ is, what he has done for them, and why they need him. It is quite possible to talk about religion with Muslims without ever making progress along that particular path. Jesus came to give them new life, and it is a tragedy if our Muslim friends never even begin to perceive that.

My aim in this book is quite narrowly defined. There are already a lot of excellent books that explain what Islam is and explain the basic dos and don'ts of presenting Christ to Muslim people. My intent is to address a subject which, to the best of my knowledge, no other book covers: namely, how to share the good news of Jesus by making use of the prophets of whom Muslims have heard and whom they respect. I see this book as an addition to all the good material that is already available.

The Lie of the Land

Whenever we speak to a Muslim about God, what we say will come under one of three headings: common ground, disputed ground, or neutral ground. We need to be aware of these categories and of when we are moving from one to another. It is not that some areas are off-limits, but we need to be thinking about what it takes to get through each kind of terrain. We can stroll casually down a country path, but we would pick our way very carefully through a minefield. Knowing which is which is, to put it mildly, very useful.

The common ground consists of those things on which we all agree, which is actually quite a lot. Many Christians have a tendency to be impatient to get out of the common ground and into disputed areas, but if we want to build good relationships and gain a listening ear, we should use the common ground to the full.

What precisely is the common ground? Examples include that there is only one God, that Moses was a prophet, that the world we live in belongs to the Creator, and that everyone must give account of their lives to God. The disputed ground consists of the areas of sharp disagreement. These are well known and concern some very important matters, such as Jesus being the Son of God and dying on the cross.

The map of disputed ground has been drawn for us; the lines are historic and well defined. We need to remember that if we blunder carelessly into one of these disputed areas and our friend is offended or upset, their reaction is not about their personal opinions or convictions. They are only responding according to their upbringing. As those who have good news to communicate and a commitment to love our neighbour, we are the ones responsible to find ways of navigating the disputed ground with our friends for their good.

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What is less apparent to many is the existence of a vast swathe of neutral ground, which consists of true information about God and the ways of God that are unfamiliar to Muslims. There is plenty to choose from, but what is useful is information which helps them understand the good news without setting off their defences. To get a hearing, our message needs to be interesting. Key subjects include the promises of God, the plan of God, and the lives of the prophets.

The approach used in this book is to use the common and neutral ground to the maximum. It isn't possible to bring someone to Christ without passing through the disputed ground as well, but we only enter it carefully, intentionally, and wisely.

And Finally: A Hint

Most Christians have a narrow view of salvation and how it works. They understand it the way their own church presents it. The Bible uses a wide variety of terms when speaking of salvation, but we tend to filter them according to our own culture and tradition. In Scripture, the lost are found, light has come to those in darkness, the separated are reconciled, and so on. The book of Hebrews speaks of salvation in terms of purification.

When we go cross-cultural, we need to be ready to broaden our understanding. This is not a compromise nor a deviation from the truth. The gospel is rich and deep, and there are many aspects of it that we rarely encounter within our own culture. People raised in a different culture will never see things exactly as we see them, nor should they. We too are perceiving the truth through our own cultural filters. To help people with a different cultural background, we need to access the diversity of the gospel. Our objective shouldn't be to get others to see God's Word from exactly the same angle we do, but rather that they engage with God's Word and receive it from *their* own angle. As we do this, our understanding will be enriched and we will broaden our own view of what the Bible is about. If you find that the material in this book looks at familiar prophets in unfamiliar ways, now you know why.

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