

UPDATED AND EXPANDED EDITION

Muslims, Christians, and Jesus

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF ISLAM
AND OVERCOMING THE FEARS THAT DIVIDE US

CARL MEDEARIS



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2017945989

ISBN 978-0-7642-3031-8

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Cover design by LOOK Design Studio

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17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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To my three amazing kids.

They have followed me (without much choice) for most of their lives and now are following the Jesus that Mom and Dad have tried their best to follow. They are shining lights in a dimly lit world and have inspired so many others to follow this Jesus that we all speak of in these pages.

This one's for you, kiddos. I love you.

—*Dad*

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INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, I was finishing up the manuscript of the original *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus*, wondering if anyone would want to read it. After all, among my Christian friends, my interest in Muslims had always been an anomaly. When I first went to the Middle East in 1983, people in my Christian circle placed me comfortably in the box of “foreign missionary.” My job was to reach people “over there.” So it came as a bit of a surprise to me when, after moving back to the U.S. from Beirut in 2004, my good friends Ted Dekker and Floyd McClung encouraged me to write my thoughts down. And it came as a bigger surprise when Bethany House was interested in publishing those thoughts. And the greatest surprise of all—that I am sitting here on my balcony in Dubai writing an introduction to the revised and updated version of a book I wasn’t sure anyone would buy.

The principles in this book arose from my own personal journey of finding myself to be a good-hearted and faithful but failed missionary. I loved Jesus. I knew Jesus loved Muslims. So I became a Christian missionary to the Muslims. Made perfect sense.

My wife, Chris, and I moved with our kids to Beirut, Lebanon, in 1992. Little did we understand or realize the transformative journey we were beginning, where our understanding of what it means to love like Jesus and preach the gospel would be completely upended.

The world changed a lot while we lived in Beirut. Before September 11, 2001, few of my Western friends knew or cared much about Muslims. But 9/11 shifted everything. As the world watched smoke and ash spew into the Manhattan sky, I was (ironically) busy teaching a bunch of students in Kansas City about loving Muslims. In fact, I had just drawn a diagram on the whiteboard showing how we so often think in an *us-versus-them* paradigm, and I was literally erasing the line between the words *us* and *them* when someone burst into the room in tears telling us what had happened. The next week, our family returned home to Beirut on one of the first flights out of a deserted Chicago O'Hare airport. For days after our arrival we received a steady stream of visits and calls from friends saying how sorry they were. One friend, Ahmed (not his real name), came by our house, slumped onto our couch, and rubbed his face with his hands. "Carl," he said, "these terrorists have seriously hurt the peace we have worked so hard for."

"What do you mean?"

"America will go to war," he said, shaking his head, "and I am afraid that it will not end for years."

"I know."

"The West does not understand us. They see an Arab and they feel fear. They hear talk of Islam and they are suspicious. I am afraid that things will spiral out of control and that hatred will grow between my people and your people." He sighed. "Again."

“Ahmed,” I said, looking him in the eyes, “we are each other’s people. We are both followers of Jesus, friends of God, and brothers in a way that boundaries cannot take from us.” A tear slid down his face and he tried to wipe it away before I noticed. I think my friend Ahmed was speaking prophetically that night.

A few years later, after our visas to live in Lebanon were denied, we returned “home” to suburban Colorado. Despite the difficulty of transitioning ourselves and three teenagers from a Middle Eastern to an American cultural setting, Chris and I were both surprised and encouraged to find that nearly everyone we met who knew where we had lived wanted our opinions on world events. It seemed that few knew what to do, what to say, or even what to hope for.

I received invitation after invitation to speak at universities, churches, and other places. I was puzzled by my newfound popularity. One day I realized the truth. It wasn’t *me* that people were interested in; a thirst had awakened, a desire to become more familiar with the 1.8 billion people called Muslims.¹ My ego wasn’t deflated at all. In fact, my heart surged with hope. Many Christians were choosing the road less traveled, driven to learn about these wonderful people God loves and thirsty to see if there was a way to reach out to them in a proactive and productive way.

In fact, when I’m asked—as I often am—what is the answer to the issues in the Middle East and I answer “Jesus,” I am often mocked as being simplistic, even by my committed Christian friends.

They are looking for a political answer that simply doesn’t exist.

When I can’t make sense of something, I pull everything back to its simplest point, stripping away the confusion

and noisy complexities. What matters is what has always mattered:

Jesus.

A lot has changed in the past decade. We face the largest humanitarian crisis of our era in the refugee crisis. The number and percentage of Muslims in America and the West have steadily increased, making friendships and relationships with Muslims much more commonplace. No longer are they “over there.” Rather, they are right next door. A new generation is graduating into adulthood with a global landscape much different from when this book was originally published. It is for these reasons that we felt it was important to update the original edition of *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus*.

Maybe you’re reading this book because you want to understand your Muslim friend or neighbor. Maybe you feel conflicted by the fear and angst you hold in your heart toward Muslims, and Jesus’ clear call to love our neighbors as ourselves. Maybe you want to go to the Middle East to share Jesus’ love with people. Maybe you’re just curious about what makes a Muslim different from you. In any case, my intention is to give you some information to help you befriend a Muslim and practical tips on how to live a life that’s truly good news to a Muslim. I cannot hope to speak for every perspective on every issue. I’m not infallible, I’m not the final word on Islam. I’m only a follower of Jesus who loves Muslims. This book is not intended—in any way—to be the complete and final treatise on this matter.

Many chapters include sections entitled “A Christlike Perspective,” which are what I believe would be a response sanctioned by Jesus Christ. For those of us looking to live our lives

as much like Jesus as possible, I lay out what he might want us to do with the subject at hand.

Throughout the book you will also find sections called “A Story of Faith.” Though many of the names have been changed for privacy’s sake, the events are true. And while many of the stories are mine, I’ve also included stories from several friends who have been gracious enough to share their experiences with us. Their hope, like mine, is that the stories will provide important insights—and inspiration—for your own interactions and friendships with Muslims.

CHAPTER 1

Before the Pillars: The Foundations of Islam

In the late sixth century AD, a boy was born in Mecca, Arabia. His father was already deceased, and his mother would die when he was six. From these circumstances the boy would grow into a man who would unite the Arab people, wage military campaigns, and become revered as a prophet to billions of people for over a millennium.

His name was Muhammad. He is one of the most well-known individuals in all of human history, and his name is synonymous with the modern personality of Islam.

Outside of Islam and its reach, Muhammad is held at arm's length in the interest of scrutiny and theology. Recent observations have shed much light on his person, his language, his culture, and his shaping. The latter is of primary importance to scholars, evangelists, and apologists who wish to either explain his ways or reject them. Regardless of this scholastic influx, it must be said that first and foremost, Muhammad

was a leader of men. Today, the religion that bears his mark is arguably the world's fastest-growing religion, with 1.8 billion adherents. Muhammad was obviously a visionary teacher.

Not much is known of Muhammad before his fortieth year, but historical studies of the period can fill some gaps. His birth city, Mecca, was an important hub for trade routes and enterprise. It was a through route for caravans and also held an important position in the maritime trades, providing a product and financial clearinghouse of sorts for both India and Africa. It is speculated that Muhammad was involved with commerce from an early age, taking business trips to as far as Syria before he was fifteen.

Although Muslims regard the era of Muhammad's birth and childhood as the end of a time of ignorance, there was, without doubt, a platform of various religious beliefs and practices in Arabia. The Arabs of the period were largely pantheistic, and many were idolatrous, worshiping a variety of deities and idols. Christians as well as Jews had also settled in many places in Arabia for purposes of business and expansion.

Nevertheless, the shrine of Mecca—the *Kaaba*—already was a recognized religious center for Arabs. The Kaaba is a haven for a series of sacred stones, the most important of which is the Black Stone, believed to have come from heaven. The Black Stone is built into the eastern corner of the Kaaba, and annual pilgrimages require the sojourners to come before it and perform various rituals. At the time, though, as many as three hundred deities may have been worshiped at the Kaaba.

Early Jewish and Christian cultures had an impact on the Arabs, which is evident in the Muslim holy book, the Qur'an. The Jews shared their beliefs with their Arab neighbors, as did the Christians, spreading at least a superficial understanding

of the religion of the one God and the man Jesus. Many stories in the Old and New Testaments are also found, at least in part, in the Qur'an, including the creation, the fall of Adam and Eve, the flood, the birth of Jesus, and Jesus performing miracles.

The Life of Muhammad

Although nothing was recorded about Muhammad until over a century after his death, Muslim scholars report that he was raised by his grandfather and uncle, in the tribe of his family, the Quraysh, who were, at the time, responsible for the care of the Kaaba. Thus, the influence of religion began during his earliest years.

According to legend, Muhammad was in a caravan when he met a Nestorian monk. The Nestorians call themselves "The Church of the East." They are the only people on earth who still speak the Aramaic language of Jesus. This monk believed that Muhammad was a prophet, and supposedly told him so.

Later on, Muhammad married a prominent woman, Khadijah, who was fifteen years his elder. Because she was wealthy and well connected to the trades, Muhammad became a man of importance by managing her caravan. He was a member of the guild at Mecca, as well as a prolific traveler. He traded stories and discussions about God and religion with many Jews and Christians, fervently absorbing as much information as he could. Muhammad and Khadijah had seven children together, six of whom died young, with no surviving sons. After Khadijah passed on, some twenty years later, Muhammad would marry a dozen or more women.

It is important to consider that Muhammad was, at least in the beginning, a man with a desire to discover God. As he circuited Arabia, discussing God with the Christians and the Jews and the pantheistic and idolatrous Arabs, he grew disillusioned with the likenesses of God that were available to him.

By the age of forty, Muhammad was becoming more and more concerned with the sacrilegious practices around him. He felt that mankind was straying from the path of God, that people were diluting the truth and falling away from true religion.

According to tradition, Muhammad found a cave on Mt. Hira, not far from Mecca, and he used the solitude of the place to meditate. It was during these meditations that he heard the voice of God, or, as some believe, the messenger of God, Gabriel the archangel (who is referred to as the “Holy Spirit” by Muslims).

Muhammad was given a series of messages that he believed were from God; he also believed that he was meant to give them to others. These messages were compiled some time after his death and formed into the Qur’an.

Muhammad kept his ideas and activities secret for a time, but as soon as he went public, the majority of Mecca wanted nothing to do with him. His message was extreme, and he promised that God would judge those who did not listen and obey. Those who did follow Muhammad’s teaching were called *Muslim*, which means, literally, “submitted to God.” Because he was vocal about the primacy of the one God, he was considered a threat to the Kaaba and the businesses around it, many of which thrived on the city’s religious culture.

In the beginning, Muhammad and his followers were persecuted. The people of Mecca were violent, and their aggression

was condoned by the leadership of the city. Before long, Muhammad and his family of believers moved to Yathrib (later renamed Medina), which was across the Red Sea from the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia (roughly modern-day Sudan and Ethiopia). There the people were more open to hearing the teachings of this new prophet. At first, both Christians and Jews were quite receptive to Muhammad, mainly because he was adamant about the sovereignty of the one true God and insisted that worshipping other gods would bring judgment and wrath.

It is at this point in history where *Islam*, meaning “to surrender” or “to submit,” transitioned from a family-sized cell into the beginnings of an actual religious movement and was institutionalized. The Muslim calendar began in AD 622. Subsequent military successes brought so much plundered wealth to Muhammad that more and more tribes joined themselves to him. Muhammad wrote in the Qur’an a chapter—The Anfal, which means “the plunder of war”—to describe this phenomenon. There were some seventy-six of these battles during Muhammad’s lifetime.

The presence of Christianity and Judaism was at first of no consequence to Muhammad. In fact, Muhammad is known to have preached and supported the veracity of the claims of the Torah, the words of the Jewish prophets, and the teachings of Jesus. But over time, it became clear that Muhammad was a different sort of prophet altogether, so the Jews failed to hold him in the esteem he desired, and because the Christians already had prophets, apostles, and a Messiah, Muhammad didn’t fit. After some time Muhammad found himself speaking primarily to his own tribal countrymen.

By the time of his death in 632, Muhammad had unified the Arab people, provided them with religious teaching and codified law, and given them military victories. By the 730s, Islam had spread as far as Spain and France, and whole areas had become Muslim, including Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Persia (Iran), Afghanistan, and all of North Africa (now Libya, Algeria, and Morocco).

A STORY OF FAITH

Family Time with the Bedouins

One of the many things our Arab Muslim friends taught us is the power of family. Young Muslims usually live with their parents until they're married. The idea of being on your own at eighteen is unheard of in most of the Eastern world. And when young people do get married, it's normal to add a level to the parents' house so they can have plenty of space—right on top of each other!

Businesses are run as a family. At important meetings and gatherings, even weddings and funerals, small children often run among the adults. Muslims fight, love, are born, and die as families. Don't get me wrong, it isn't all roses, but it is different from the West. One of our most cherished values—individualism— isn't a known quantity to most Muslims. They would say, "If it's been good enough for our forefathers, it's good enough for us!"

This was a good lesson for our family in so many ways. We learned to serve together in a way we would not have likely experienced living in the United States. In Lebanon, our three kids were part of the gatherings in our home. They helped serve the dinners, and they even planned and

organized events we hosted at community centers or in our home.

One such time was around Thanksgiving. We decided to give some of our toys to the Bedouin children who lived in tents in the Beka'a Valley (near Syria). We explained that the children were very poor and probably had no toys, while we had lots of toys. To our surprise (maybe shock is a better word), the kids came back with most of their best (read: most expensive) toys to give away. After my wife, Chris, and I recovered a share of our former godliness, we smiled and said, "Great, let's go."

We made the two-hour drive on the day after Thanksgiving. As we pulled up to one of the poorest camps we knew about, a mob of kids appeared seemingly from nowhere. They acted as if they hadn't seen a foreigner before. Running noses, bare feet, and big smiles marked these wonder-filled kids.

As soon as we told them we had gifts, about fifty more kids were suddenly hugging the trunk of our car. Honestly, we felt a bit overwhelmed. Funny how "serving the poor" often isn't the feel-good experience we expect!

I have no idea why, but we thought of singing them a song in Arabic before we gave out the presents. I think the fact that they were kids emboldened us—since we're not exactly the Von Trapp family. We tried to think of a children's song that we all knew and could sing in Arabic, which limited our choices to about . . . one.

"I have the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart. Where? Down in my heart." Know it? Well, that's what we sang. What a sight it must have been.

But the funniest thing was this: The word for *joy* sounds like "farrah." But the word in Arabic for *mouse* is almost exactly the same. The difference is so subtle that we didn't know we

were actually singing, “I have a mouse, mouse, mouse, mouse down in my heart.”

We couldn’t figure out why the kids thought the song was so funny, which of course, led us to sing it louder (which is what one does when you’re not being understood in another language). I can imagine the fires that night in the camp. “Mustafa, did you hear those silly white people singing about having a mouse in their heart? And they thought it was so cute. What was the point of that, I wonder?”

Anyway, we figured it out about a year later.

After we sang about the mouse in our hearts, we gave out the presents and then told them that God loved them.

I doubt any one of the children had an amazing experience with God from that encounter, but it was sure good for our family. And maybe that’s not so bad.

Who Is Allah?

It seems that Muhammad never intended to start a new religion. He did not consider Islam to be his creation. Rather, he considered Islam to be a call to return to the one true God, the God of Abraham—to submit to *Allah*.

It is vitally important to know that *Allah* is Arabic for “God.” Many people wrongly believe Allah is the name of a god whom Muslims worship—that Allah is a pagan god or some other strange deity. In fact, the word *Allah* was used by Arab Christians during Muhammad’s time, and it is still used today. Christians in the Arab world—even as you read this—pray to Allah every day. They’re praying to God. When any true believer prays in Arabic, God is Allah, and Allah is God. Moreover, every translation of the Bible into Arabic uses the word *Allah* for *God*.

There are some who disagree and contend that the word *Allah* comes from a pre-Islamic name for a moon god. The word may have connotations from earlier usage, but even if this is so, those meanings have long since lost their definitive quality. *Allah* comes from the Arabic root *Al-Ilah*, which simply means “the god” or “the deity.”

The word *Allah* is linguistically related to the Hebrew word *Elohim* and is also related to the Aramaic *Elo* and *Alaah*. The Aramaic word Jesus used on the cross when he cried out to the Father was *Alahi* (or *Eli* in some English translations), which was linguistically closer to the Arabic word for God than our modern use of the English word *God*, which derives its roots from the pagan Germanic word *Gut*, and, before that, from the Farsi (Persian) word for God still used in Iran and Kurdistan today, *Khoda*. Our English word *God* came from the Middle East!

In my reckoning, there is nothing helpful in telling a Muslim he or she believes in the “wrong God.” What may be true, and definitely more helpful, is to show our Muslim friends how they can believe in God more fully in and through Jesus Christ.

A STORY OF FAITH

“I’m So Sorry”

This story comes from my wife, Chris.

One evening, Carl and I and some close friends took the light-rail train to downtown Denver. Soon we were strolling down the busy cobblestone streets, chatting and laughing on the way to our favorite restaurant.

While our hearts were united in conversation about our lives and the new challenges we were facing, I noticed a sweet-looking Muslim woman, modestly dressed and wearing a hijab. My heart immediately raced with excitement and my feet seemed to carry me without effort away from my husband and friends and to this lone traveler.

I stepped up beside her and smiled. “Hi, how are you?”

“Fine,” she replied.

“Are you Jordanian, by any chance?”

“No, I’m Iraqi,” she said with a bit of surprise in her voice.

“Welcome to America,” I responded, not really knowing if she needed welcoming or not. I’m not sure why, but my heart was moved with compassion for her, and I added, “I’m so sorry for all the turmoil your country has experienced over the years.”

To my surprise, she immediately said, “And I’m so sorry for your soldiers who had to suffer in my country.”

Wow, when was the last time I’d heard something like that? We both agreed that we longed for peace and that God was the answer. My new friend’s eyes twinkled with a warmth that I’ve rarely seen. It seems a soft answer and a gentle spirit really does unleash a floodgate of hearts poured out.

I rejoined our group after a few more minutes of conversation with this dear woman, and I thought, *Why don’t I always initiate conversation in this way with strangers?* I pray the next person to meet this lady will take one more step forward in the long and often unknown chain of sharing Christ’s love!

A Christlike Perspective

The most important thing we can do as followers of Jesus is to do just that: follow him. Jesus himself is the good news. The message that we carry is Jesus. Not church, not capitalism,

not democracy, not doctrine, not the religion of Christianity, not Calvin, not Luther, not Democrat, not Republican.

If we truly wish to be able to build a relationship with a Muslim friend, the most important thing we can do is to follow Jesus' lead. Jesus had compassion for people, and he valued the same quality in his disciples, even above personal sacrifice.

If we begin with the attitude that we are going to debunk "all of that Islamic stuff," we'll be done before we get a chance to introduce Jesus, because we will have turned away somebody in the process.

Some suggestions when beginning a conversation:

Don't insult Muhammad, and don't be flippant with religious phrases or with God or your Bible. Show respect, and you may well be respected for it.

Do everything you can to keep it from becoming a me-versus-you debate. Or a my-religion-can-beat-up-your-religion diatribe. That's not how Jesus spoke to others, and we would do well to follow his example.

Get to know the person, not the stereotype. Various forces in our world attempt to paint a picture that all Muslims are either potential terrorists or peace-loving saints. Your Muslim friend has a story different from anyone else. Just like Jesus did, get to know the person, not the stereotype.

Show interest in your Muslim friend's faith not as a means of deception, but because you are interested in them and what they think about God. In fact, keeping the conversation on common ground and about everyday spirituality will prove to

be far more effective than confrontation. Many Muslims are uneducated regarding their religion, and any attempt to force a theological point will end in shared frustration.

One thing you will notice about Muslims in the Middle East, in particular, is that the Eastern perspective on logic is totally different from ours in the West. For example, when I first arrived in Beirut, I attempted to use C. S. Lewis's tried-and-true "Lord, Liar, or Lunatic" approach with my new friends. I said that because Jesus himself claimed to be the way, the truth, and the life, he was either who he said he was, or he was lying about it, or even worse, he was delusional. Those were the only options. It was either true or not.

"No," my friends said, shaking their heads. "He was a prophet of God, and he never told lies, and he certainly wasn't crazy."

"Don't you see," I would plead, "the only option left is that he is Lord."

"No. He was something else. You need more options in your argument."

"There aren't any," I said, palms sweaty. "I'm being logical, and Jesus was logical."

That raised some eyebrows.

Only later did I realize that they had raised an interesting point: Jesus had lived in their region, spoke a similar language, and had similar ethnic qualities. And then Carl the Great White Missionary flew across the world to tell them that Jesus was logical. . . . That's just like an American.

Be genuine and patient. Whatever denomination or church we come from, it is not our job to "secure converts." In bolder terms, we are not even here to "build the kingdom," but rather

to obey the king. Kings build their own kingdoms, and Jesus surely can build his. We are involved in the process because we follow him.

When speaking with a Muslim about Jesus, use his title as a term of respect, i.e., “Jesus the Christ” (or Messiah). This is actually a term that Muslims accept, and it shows a sense of reverence.

Many Muslims are pleasantly surprised when they see someone praying, reading a Bible, or treating religious things with a sense of devotion. In the West, we are so used to the separation of church and state that in public we acclimate to the nonreligious norms within our culture. Muslims see this as a blatant disregard of devotion to God. Many of my Muslim friends are surprised when I tell them that the president or some public figure believes in God. They don’t see it in the media, where talk of God is rare and devotion toward him seems nonexistent. Within Islamic nation-states, the opposite is true. Every Islamic state (even the secular ones) is permeated with religious devotion and/or tradition. Every public figure is a Muslim. Except for those in Lebanon, every political office carries with it some influence of Islamic law, to one degree or another.

We don’t want to wear our devotion on our sleeve, but we are free to be people who are obviously seeking to follow the ways of God and be more like Jesus. This is how we desire to live and what will pave the way for many genuine friendships.