

Strategy Questions: The Meaning of *Christian* and Using the Qur'an

By GREG H. PARSONS

Greg and his wife have been on staff with Frontier Ventures since 1982. They live in Southern California.



During the last 42 years on the staff of Frontier Ventures, I have heard many reasons why one strategy or another is bad or dangerous. Often, the arguments against a given approach are weak. Let me give a few examples.

“Believers must call themselves Christians.”

I don't hear this much in “mission” circles anymore, but many who have not been exposed to cross-cultural situations often do not notice how much of the world views Christians and Christianity. So, they naturally use the word “Christian” to describe themselves, without thinking about it. Many mission workers do not.

This is not because these workers are afraid of testifying about Christ. Quite the opposite. They are afraid of what the word “Christian” means to the surrounding culture and realize it may hamper their witness to their neighbors. Many (if not most?) Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists don't have a problem with Jesus at some level, but often, the long, painful history with Christians in their context is a stumbling block to believing faith in Christ. To many people, Christian means Western, as if Jesus was American or white! Naturally, once they know you follow Jesus, they will assume you are a Christian, since that is the only category they have. But you can both explain and live out what you mean by the words you use.

They are afraid of what the word “Christian” means to the surrounding culture and realize it may hamper their witness to their neighbors.

Worse now is that the whole idea of a “religion” (be it “Christian,” “Hindu,” etc.) is misleading. The paradigm of “religion” is a recent idea growing out of the Enlightenment. Saying someone is a Christian is almost meaningless without more information. It may be helpful on a global statistical level when demographers measure how many people call themselves “Christian.” But that includes a very broad range from Roman Catholic to Orthodox to Protestant, and even from Mormon to Jehovah's Witnesses. So basically, it only means they are *not* Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, or Jains. When we use the word, we mean someone is a committed believer seeking to follow Jesus with their whole life. Countless others do not.

A Christ-following Jewish friend of mine has ministered to Jewish people for a very long time. Her mother was not a believer, so I always asked her how her mother and other family were doing and prayed for them. When we talked a few years ago, I had a thought that I believe came from the Spirit. So, I said, “You know, you should tell your mom that she does not need to become a ‘Christian’ to follow Jesus.”

My friend, who has been very creative in ministry, quickly said, “You know, I never thought of that.” Last fall, her mom believed, just before she died. I don't think it was because of the idea I shared, but humanly speaking, it could have helped her in her journey.

“You shouldn’t use the verses in the Qur’an to witness to Muslims.”

I understand the argument. Our use of the Qur’an, in passages where it mentions Jesus for example, may make Muslims think we affirm or agree with the entire book. But think about it this way. It seems like a great idea to use a tool that is very familiar and important to them, especially when they may not be familiar with the Bible *and* may have misperceptions about it.

It seems like a great idea to use a tool that is very familiar and important to them [Muslims], especially when they may not be familiar with the Bible *and* may have misperceptions about it.

Just a few weeks ago, I heard a detailed testimony of a particular Jesus follower. Growing up in a strong Islamic culture meant he memorized the Qur’an as a child. Later, he came to Christ through his own study of

the Qur’an in a mosque. There were several references that he was trying to understand. When he asked the mosque leaders, they gave him a standard interpretation (which he knew already) or told him not to worry about it. It turns out they were positive and helpful references to Jesus. Now, as a believer in his home context, he continues to love and serve his Muslim neighbors.

In a future issue, I’ll consider additional strategy questions. One I plan to tackle is whether *movements are bad*. I recall a mission leader serving among unreached groups telling me he wanted to have “multiple teams using multiple strategies in the same people group.” In effect, since we don’t know what will work, we should try different approaches with the same people and places. As many have said, *the message is the same... the methods to communicate will vary*, just as it did in the Scriptures. This will be a topic for a later discussion. ❏

THE MISSIONS

What prevents the Gospel
from creating a ripple effect?

a podcast by



DROP

