



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 How Muslims See Us
(*Christianity and Islam*,
pp. 18-27)

Suggested Article:

📖 Questions Rooted in Faith
and History
(*Christianity and Islam*,
pp. 84-88)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful
for your personal or group
study? Please send your
suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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How Muslims See Us

Islamic revivalist movements are reshaping culture, politics, and ethics in the Muslim world. Islamists are impatient with their regimes, their way of life, and the intrusion of western materialism and sexual promiscuity. Unfortunately, many link Christianity with the evils of the secular west.

Prayer

We pray for those we know who have suffered evils of all kinds, who suffer still from their wounds, and who long for security and salvation.

Teach us again, as Jesus taught us, to pray for enemies and bless those who curse us, so that prayer may be turned into peace and cursing transformed into blessing for all of us, your people, and for our posterity.

God, you are the Alpha and the Omega, the First, Al-Awwal, and the Last, Al-Akhir.

May we find our ending as our beginning in your peace, God of peace, As-Salam, and may we dwell in your house of peace forever and ever. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Genesis 17:1-7

Reflection

A beautiful illumination in the twelfth-century *Bible de Souvigny* depicts Abraham holding the righteous in his bosom. Among the twenty smaller figures that face one another in conversation, one holds a Bible, and all of them are gathered together by the arms of the larger figure, Abraham, who gazes out toward us, the readers of scripture. Due in part to the Muslim influence on the artist's work, it sometimes is titled "Jews and Arabs in the arms of Abraham." One source identifies the small figures as "Jews, Muslims, and Christians," for in varying ways all three trace their spiritual descent from God's covenant with Abraham.

Genesis carefully places the story of Ishmael's birth to Abraham and Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian slave, between the first account of the covenant (15:1-21) and its restatement with the sign of circumcision (17:1-7). God's protection of Hagar and Ishmael will be mirrored in Abraham's love for his first son, who is circumcised with him as a sign of the covenant (17:23-27). Though God extends the covenant through the promised son Isaac, God blesses Ishmael with twelve princely sons who will lead a great nation (17:20-21). Muhammad considered himself to be a descendent of Ishmael, as do the people of Arabia today.

Our common heritage in Scripture is more difficult than ever for Jews, Christians, and Muslims to acknowledge and explore. A source of friction is the rhetoric of "Islamic revivalism," for though this movement primarily targets the politics and culture of the West, it is often antagonistic toward Jews and Christians generally. Some reasons for this, Wagner says, may be found in:

- ▶ *the recent political history of the Middle East*. Since the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1919, Arab nations have suffered political defeat by various European nations, the U. S., and Israel, and loss of control of the "Noble Sanctuary" in Jerusalem. Political and



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economic systems—experiments with secular Pan-Arab Nationalism, Marxism, and Arab monarchies—have failed to keep pace with the developed world’s advancing quality of life. “Middle Easterners who once were fascinated with things American and maintained a keen desire to visit the United States are now becoming angry with U.S. policies,” Wagner notes. “The United States has replaced England and France as the hated colonial power, the occupying power that needs to be repelled from the region.”

- ▶ *the personal experience of prominent leaders of the revival, like Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966).* Living in the United States during the 1950s, Qutb was deeply troubled by “churches using secular entertainment schemes to draw larger numbers; rampant sexual immorality; racism toward African-Americans; and Israel receiving unconditional support by the U.S. government and in mainstream media.” He returned to Egypt and portrayed the powerful United States as morally bankrupt.
- ▶ *our confusion of Gospel with empire.* Earlier missionaries often had close ties with western governments. Despite “the wonderful accomplishments of Catholic and Protestant missionaries in spreading the Gospel and establishing educational institutions and medical facilities,...all too often as missionaries exported western political interests and culture into the Islamic world, the essence of the Gospel was compromised.”

Can we approach Muslims with “a humble attitude, a listening heart, and a contrite spirit,” as Wagner recommends? “At times the journey will be difficult and controversial. We will discover rich growth in our own Christian faith as well as make new friends on the path of dialogue that seeks understanding.”

Study Questions

1. Can the Gospel be separated from western culture? When we share the Gospel, what do many Muslims hear?
2. Describe the “10/40 window” approach to Christian missions. What caution does Wagner raise for the evangelical missionary agencies that adopt this approach?
3. Wagner sketches the inclusivist, exclusivist, and pluralist paradigms to approach people of other world religions. Why does he recommend the exclusivist paradigm? Do you agree?
4. How does the hymn “To You, Our God, We Fly” balance our repentance with a call for God’s protection?

Departing Hymn: “To You, Our God, We Fly” (verses 1, 2, 3, and 8)

To you, our God, we fly / for mercy and for grace;
O hear our lowly cry, / and hide not, Lord, your face.

Arise, O Lord of hosts! / Be jealous of your name,
and drive from out our coasts / the sins that put to shame.

Your best gifts from on high / in rich abundance pour,
that we may magnify / and praise you more and more.

Give peace, Lord, in our time; / O let no foe draw nigh,
nor lawless deed of crime / insult your majesty.

William W. How (1871), altered

Suggested Tune: IBSTONE

How Muslims See Us

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review the social and political background of Islamic revivalism.
2. To consider how Islamic revivalists view Christians in relation to secular western culture.
3. To discuss how Christians should approach people of other religions in a pluralist world.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Christianity and Islam (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "To You, Our God, We Fly" locate the tune, IBSTONE, in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

"While Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Franklin Graham take an adversarial approach to Islam, others evangelicals like Brother Andrew present an attractive alternative," writes Wagner. "Very few, if any, evangelicals have reached the inner sanctums of the leading Islamists in the Arab and Islamic world as has Brother Andrew, who has not compromised his Christian witness but has reached out to Muslims with love, honesty, and compassion."

"I know you," a Muslim student in the Gaza Strip greeted Andrew after he delivered a lecture at the Islamic University. Andrew didn't recognize him, but the student continued, 'I was at the lecture in the auditorium last year.'

"Then why are you smiling? I didn't think you accepted what I said.'

"No, it was great!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you did not put us down. You left us in our dignity. That is why me and my friends admired you and what you said. We have never had the opportunity to hear about Christianity before" (*Christianity and Islam*, pp. 24-25).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and lift one or more of these celebrations and concerns before God. Conclude by reading responsively the prayer in the study guide; the leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Genesis 17:1-7 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Jews, Christians, and Muslims today find hope in their relation to God's covenant with Abraham. Rather than sort through the various ways they see themselves to be indirectly "children of Abraham," the study employs an image from the *Bible de Souvigny* to emphasize the three tradition's common origins in the patriarch. The often-reprinted image may be viewed online at www.artres.com.

The scripture reading stops with Genesis 17:7, because the next verse introduces the promise of "all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding," a portion of the covenant that applies only to the descendants of Abra-

ham's future son, Isaac. Ishmael and his descendants do not inherit the land of Canaan (see Genesis 21:8-21 and 25:12-18), though they live under God's blessing. For the story of God's protection of the slave-woman Hagar before the birth of Ishmael, or "God hears," see Genesis 16. God's care for Hagar and Ishmael after Sarah forces Abraham to send them away is described in Genesis 21.

Study Questions

1. On a personal psychological level, of course, it is difficult for us to separate *our presentation of the Gospel* from western culture. Missionaries, like other travelers, endure "culture shock" when they live in another culture. Encourage members to share their experiences from travels or short-term mission trips, or share their knowledge of the difficulties faced by friends and family members who have been missionaries. Can the story of Jesus' birth, ministry, death, and resurrection be presented without cultural accretions? If not, does the Holy Spirit enable people in other cultures to hear the Gospel despite these additions?

Wagner suggests Muslims must filter what Christians say from the interference caused by (1) "the exaggerated materialism and sexual promiscuity [of western secular culture] transmitted to their region" through television, movies, and the internet, and (2) "western nationalist politics." What are some primary examples of such interference in recent years?

2. The "10/40 window approach" focuses mission resources on the area of Africa and Asia that is between ten and forty degrees north of the Equator. Two thirds of the world's population (3.2 billion people) live in this region. 95% of the people are unevangelized (have not heard the Gospel message). While the predominant religion is Islam (865 million people), the "window" is home to 550 million Hindus and 275 million Buddhists.

Wagner reports that not only Muslims, but indigenous Middle Eastern Christian leaders feel that "they are being targeted by a new 'Crusade,' led this time by the U.S. military and Christian evangelicals." He quotes Josh Anderson's warning in *Sojourners Magazine*, that "With a portion of American Christians waving flags around a radical foreign policy and simultaneously sending missionaries to the nations, the danger of a 'poisoned gospel' is real indeed. To 'muddle maps' in this way is to taint missionary efforts with the intrinsic violence and self-serving nature of the U.S. government's foreign policy. For Christians committed to the expansion of the reign of God, efforts to keep the missions movement free from the national political agenda are crucial." Can we direct mission resources to evangelizing "unreached people groups" without raising fears among Muslims of a new "crusade"?

3. The paradigms differ on the role of Jesus Christ in God's saving action toward humankind. The *inclusivist paradigm* holds that God not only saves people through their faithful obedience to Jesus Christ, but also brings others to salvation, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, as they "do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience." *Exclusivism* says that "Jesus Christ provides the only means of salvation for humanity." The *pluralist paradigm* says "all people, despite their differing (and even contradictory) religious beliefs and practices, are on a path to God or ultimate reality." Wagner rules out the latter view as unacceptable to most Christians and Muslims. He favors the exclusivist paradigm as the dominant view in Christian history and as congruent with evangelical missions.
4. Verse 3, based on Ezekiel's prophecy of Israel's restoration (Ezekiel 39:21-29), asks God to purge us of "the sins that put to shame," even as Israel was purged during the Exile. Verse 8 appeals for protection from enemies of God, both without ("O let no foe draw nigh") and within ("nor lawless deed of crime") the society. What sins in our society might a Muslim say "puts to shame" the name of God? How would you respond?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.