



RCA Missionary Update

from the Fords

The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus seeks to train specialized evangelists who will help their congregations reach out in Christian love to their Muslim neighbors. As part of this goal, Peter Ford directs the program in Christian-Muslim Relations at Mekane Yesus Seminary. Through his teaching at the seminary and in various workshops, Peter enables Christian leaders to better understand the faith and practice of Muslims in the Ethiopian context, and how they can share the message of the gospel in an honest yet respectful manner.

Ethiopia facts:

- Population: 65 million
- Size: 704,000 square miles (about twice the size of Texas)
- Major religions: Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, 48%; Islam, 35-40%; Evangelical Christianity, 12%



MINISTRY

Theological Education

LOCATION

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

PARTNER

Ethiopian Evangelical Church
Mekane Yesus

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Dear Friends,

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Since my last two letters have focused on my family and ministry, I thought I'd devote this one to a continuation of my periodic series examining various topics in Islam. Previous letters have focused on the Qur'an (April 2007), Muhammad (October 2007) and the Muslim view of God (March 2008). My purpose in these short lessons is partly to illustrate some of the content of my teaching ministry here at Mekane Yesus Seminary, but also to help all of you gain a better understanding of what Muslims believe, especially in comparison to what we believe as Christians. My hope, as always, is that such understanding will lead to a desire to build relationships with Muslims based on some common ground between us, relationships that will explore our differences with respect and love as we seek to bear witness to what God has done for us through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In fact, the person of **Jesus** is my focus for this letter. Perhaps you've read or heard that Jesus is an important figure in Islam, that there are several beliefs about Jesus that Muslims affirm along with us; but also that there are important differences in the way Muslims and Christians view Jesus' nature and vocation. I'd like to highlight not only these points of similarity and divergence; but also to arrive at some appreciation for the reasons why these various beliefs have developed.

First, let's look at some of the beliefs about Jesus in Islam that correspond to what we as Christians believe. This correspondence revolves around the concept of "prophethood" in Islam. Muslims believe that Jesus was one of many prophets sent by God to reveal his message to humanity. According to the Qur'an, God has sent prophets to peoples of all times and places in order to show them how to worship and obey him. Jesus was one of those who came to the Jews, following other prophets before him, such as Abraham, Moses, David and John the Baptist. All of these prophets are said to have preached that people must reject idols and worship only the one true God; and that they must live according to God's laws regarding justice, mercy and kindness towards others. In the case of Jesus, the Qur'an says that God "gave him the Gospel, in which is guidance and light and confirmation of the Law which came before him" (Qur'an 5:46).

In fact, Jesus is considered to have been one of the most important prophets of all, and that God confirmed his special status in several ways. One sign of Jesus' prominence was his miraculous birth. The account of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary is strikingly similar to what we read in the Gospel of Luke. Upon hearing the news from the angel Gabriel, Mary asked, "How shall I

have a son, since no man has touched me, and I am not a prostitute?" Gabriel responded, "So shall it be. Your Lord has said, 'It is easy for me'" (Qur'ān 19:20-21). Furthermore, Jesus is given several unique titles in the Qur'ān, such as "Messiah," "Word" and "Spirit." And unlike most other prophets (even Muhammad), Jesus is said to have performed many miracles by God's permission, especially healing the sick and raising the dead. Also, Muslims believe that Jesus still has a future role to play when he returns to earth at the end of time to fight against evil and prepare the way for God's final judgment.

These points of similarity regarding Jesus can enable us to enter into some interesting conversations with Muslims. Sometimes they are surprised to realize that Christians share some common views with them. When we converse, we can simply ask them what they believe about Jesus according to their faith, and listen as they outline some of these ideas, affirming those things that we believe in as well.

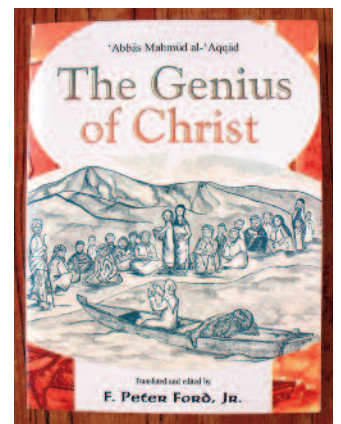
As we talk, however, we may hear certain concepts that will sound a bit strange to us. Although the points I mentioned above can form a kind of bridge toward building a good conversation and relationship, there will also be points of difference that will surface. While we both consider Jesus to be a prophet of God, we as Christians believe him to be much more than that. Muslims, however, follow the teaching of the Qur'ān which claims that Jesus, despite his distinctive role, was merely a human being. In fact, Christians are criticized in the Qur'ān for conferring on Jesus a divine status and are told, "Do not exaggerate in your religion, nor say anything about God except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was only a messenger of God... So do not say 'Trinity.' Stop! It is better for you. For God is one God. It is far from His glory that He should have a son" (Qur'ān 4:171). Another passage denies the crucifixion of Jesus, claiming that the Jews "did not kill him and did not crucify him, but it appeared to them as such... Rather, God raised him up to Himself" (Qur'ān 4:157-58). This passage has been variously interpreted by Muslims, but the common view today is that Jesus was rescued alive from the evil intents of the Jews and taken up to heaven where he remains, and that he will return at the end of time. Even the points of similarity mentioned above have their limitations: his virgin birth, though unique, signified only that Jesus was a special prophet, not a special Savior; his unusual titles do not carry the Christological nuances we find in the New Testament; the Gospel that he preached was essentially the same message found in the Qur'ān, which is regarded to have superseded the Bible; and his return to earth will be to confirm the teachings of Islam, and especially to correct the misguided beliefs and practices of the Christians.

How are we to understand these important differences regarding Jesus? First, we must appreciate the context in

which Muhammad preached back in the seventh century. The pagan Arabs had worshipped a variety of gods represented by idols; the more elaborate Christian teachings about Jesus apparently struck Muhammad as too close to such polytheism, and his emphasis on God's absolute unity and sovereignty could not entertain strange and seemingly unnecessary concepts such as Trinity, crucifixion and atonement. At the same time, we must recognize that Christians are generally treated with respect in the Qur'ān. Despite the criticism noted above, they are viewed as "People of the Book" to whom God revealed his will, and who observe many noble practices in their worship of God.

The differences we find between Christianity and Islam should not deter us from entering into meaningful conversation with our Muslim neighbors. Instead, we should welcome the chance to discuss our beliefs, starting with the common ground we share. As we move into some mutual recognition of where we diverge in our beliefs, we should do so with respect and with full freedom of conscience. After we listen to what our Muslim friends tell us about their faith, perhaps they will be willing to listen to us share about ours. Note a few Muslims have been led from their reflection on the Jesus of the Qur'ān to inquire about the Jesus of the Christian Gospels. Let us be ready to help them discover, step by step, a fresh insight into Jesus' redemptive role in God's plan of salvation.

Once again I'd like to end by noting a few books for those who would like to explore this issue further. One dated but still useful work is *Jesus in the Qur'ān* by Geoffrey Parrinder. Neal Robinson outlines various perspectives of Jesus in the Islamic literature of the classical (medieval) period in his *Christ in Islam and Christianity*. Kenneth Cragg provides a mature and intricate Christian reflection in *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration*. Finally, there is a little-known but fascinating Arabic work about Jesus by a modern Egyptian Muslim who took a very positive (though selective) approach to the New Testament Gospels; my PhD dissertation was a translation and analysis of this book which was later published as *The Genius of Christ* by 'Abbās Mahmūd al-'Aqqād (pictured here). Whether or not you feel able to read further, I hope that this short essay can help you appreciate both the obstacles and the possibilities for interaction with your Muslim neighbors concerning Jesus. May God enable us to find fruitful ways of both listening and sharing.



Peter Ford

To access extensive information about Peter, simply go to www.rca.org/pford.