

Contextual Witnessing Among Luo Muslims in Western Kenya

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Abstract

Islam is a religion that has dominated many parts of Africa. The attempt to convert the Muslims through the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ has been marred by many challenges including the tendency to generalize Islam and by extension applying general or old conversion strategies. However, conversion from one faith to another should be understood from a localized or a contextual perspective. Through qualitative and library research, the discussions centre on three key areas that are fundamental in developing strategies appropriate to Muslim witnessing with special reference to Luo Muslims in Western Kenya. First, a historical background of the coming of Christianity and Islam to Kenya and their perspectives to the African cultures have been provided. Second, a focus on how Islam has interacted with local cultural death practices among the Luo Muslims in Western part of Kenya has been carried out. Lastly, the understanding of who Jesus is, which is pivotal in Christian salvation, has been appropriated. Missiological and theological approaches have been devised as necessary bridges in conversion experience among the Muslims together with the training in Muslim evangelism. In conclusion, rather than looking at Islam from a general perspective, this study of Islam and the Muslim people takes the local context into consideration, with a particular cultural area of emphasis in this paper being death and burial

practices among the Luo Muslims. It is through the in-depth understanding of cultural issues that the church can develop strategies relevant for Muslim evangelism.

Key Words: Christian, witnessing, Great Commission, culture, contextual, theological and missiological approaches.

Introduction

The Great Commission found in Matt 28:19-20 is the Christian mandate. The Church in the Western part of Kenya, where this research focuses, has had tremendous outcomes in evangelism. However, evangelism to the Muslim community, whose population is growing exponentially, has not been successful. Islam in Kenya is widespread mainly in Northern Kenya, the Coast, and Western. Islam in Kenya came along the coastal region into the interior parts, including Kendu Bay (western Kenya). Interviews, which are part of qualitative research, were conducted among 50 Muslims in Kendu Bay alongside library research.

“European missionaries established Christianity in Kendu Bay in 1902 and were engaged in many activities as Benjamin opines” (Soares, 2006, p. 161) while Islam was introduced in the region in 1906. Islam grew faster than Christianity in the region due to several reasons. First, Islam is an amenable or adaptable religion. This includes, but is not limited to, polygamous marriages, local medicines, and acceptance of funeral rites such as widow inheritance. Second, many Arab Muslims intermarried with the local people. Finally, Islam is viewed as a religion that practices hospitality. This is evident in funerals, where Muslims bring food as well as offer social and financial support to the widows and their children. Many Muslims in western Kenya can be described as “popular” Muslims (Kim, 2014, p. 177). The dominance of popular Islam is evident in both Christianity and Islam, a fact that Shipton alludes to: “Neither Christianity nor Islam has managed to expunge aspects of indigenous religion in East Africa.” (Shipton, 2009, p. 69). Death is such an area with the

highest number of ritual practices, that is usually associated with witchcraft, magic, and wife inheritance (Prince, 2009, p. 68).

Historical Background of Christianity and Islam in Kenya

“Christianity and Islam have interacted with each other in the continent of Africa for a long time.” (Soares, 2006, p. 1). In Kenya, this apparent interaction started from the coastal region, then spread to different parts of the country, including Western Kenya. The Luo, which is a major group in the Western region, is the largest group of the Nilotes (Ogot, 1967, p. 127). They are originally from the Southern South Sudan (Odede, 2010, p. 4) and as Odede reports, conflicts led them to spread to different parts of Africa, including Kenya (Odede, 2010, p. 10).

Muslim Perspectives of Luo Traditions

Islam has both positive and negative perspectives on Luo traditions. Identifying with the Luo traditions in multiple marriages is positive in the sense that it has attracted many African men to convert to Islam. On the negative, Islam is perceived to deny any association with sorcery, witchcraft, evil eye, evil tongue, and the domestication of jinn (spirits) by fellow Muslims. These practices are mostly associated with popular or folk Muslims as opposed to orthodox. These factors are important bases of Muslim evangelism. Since the doctrine of Christ is pivotal to conversion, the Muslim view of it is very critical.

The Muslim View of Christ

The doctrine of Christ is very foundational in evangelism. Understanding of how Muslims view Christ helps Christians to bring proper biblical and theological perspectives over this important area in Muslim evangelism. The Muslim view of Christ emanates from the fact that they have co-existed with Christians for many years (Goddard, 2006, p. 1). The question of faith and morality (Husseini, 2014), whether or not Jesus is the Son of God or God himself, and his death on the cross” (Siddiqui, 2013, p. 149) have been areas of debate in

Christian-Muslim relations. The debate divides the two faiths (Maqsood, 2009, p. 122) or strains their relationship. Crusades, colonialism, and current political policies of the 'Christian' West (Travis, 2017, p. 195). These are the bases of the Muslim view of Christ, which is both positive and negative. Positively, Muslims claim that Jesus (*Isa*) is a Prophet (*nabi*) and an apostle (Messenger of Allah cf Q 19:30; 4: 171; 2: 253; 3:49; 5:78; 57:27; 61:6).

Second, Jesus is viewed as the Messiah (Al-Masih), supernaturally born and respected in Islam (Djaballah, 2004, p. 19). Third, Jesus is viewed as the *Kalima* (Word) and *Ruh* (Spirit) of *Allah* (Q 2:87; 3:39; 4:171; 19:35). Fourth, He was born to a virgin and regarded as sinless. His virgin and supernatural birth declared (Q 19 16-21; 3:37-45). Fifth, Jesus is also believed to be a healer and a miracle worker. He speaks in a cradle. He also proclaims his Prophethood (Q19:29-31; 5:113). He heals and raises people from the dead. He breathed life into a bird made from clay (Q 3: 49; 5:110). Sixth, Muslims believe that Jesus was taken to heaven and will come back. They, in fact, say that Allah raised him to Himself (Q3: 54-55; 4:155-159). According to Saleeb, the words 'God raised him unto Himself' have often been taken to mean that Jesus was taken up alive to heaven without dying (Geisler & Saleeb, 2002, p. 67). Other titles include 'the Speech of Truth' (Q19: 34-35); 'a sign (*Ayah*) unto men', and 'Mercy from (God)' (Q19:21).

The Muslim negative views of Jesus are also numerous. First, Muslims claim that Jesus was just a prophet, not the Prophet. He was put lower than or less superior to Muhammad (Kateregga & Shenk, 1981, p. 47) (cf Q5:75). Second, there is a claim that Jesus was a Muslim and as such, his basic message was about the oneness of God (Q3:51, 19:36, 43:64). Third, many Muslims reject the notion that Jesus is God or the Son of God. These claims are viewed as pure lies and fabrications (Q 19:89-95; 112: 4; 18: 4-5) (Al-Madkhalee,

2004, p. 15). Finally, there is a vehement denial that Jesus suffered, died on the cross and was crucified (Q 4:157-159).

Muslims' defence of their claims are based on several factors. First is the Christian refusal to acknowledge Muhammad as the Prophet (Aydin, 2000, p. 105). Second, the confession of *Tawhid* (oneness of God) is meant to negate the Christian claim to the Trinity (Q4:168-169) (Johnson, 2016, p. 57). Third, the Christian gospel is considered compromised, and on the contrary, Muslims are ready to defend God against anything that would detract from his absolute sovereignty and transcendence (Shenk, 2003, p. 90). The whole issue of crucifixion has been turned to mean 'crucifixion' (George, 2009, p. 99). There is also the argument that a holy and righteous God could not allow his beloved prophet to be killed (Larson, 2008, p. 332). Another version is that Jesus was crucified but did not die on the cross. He was lifted to heaven to escape his enemies, and someone else was crucified instead.

Muslims claim that there was no way the death of one person could save others (McDowell & Zaka, 1999, p. 126). Fourth, the Christian concept of the Trinity and Jesus' birth is another area where Muslim defence abounds. They associate the Trinity with pagan worship that was very prominent in the pre-Islamic era (George, 2009, p.57). Trinity is understood to be the worship of three gods (the father, the virgin Mary, and Jesus). The Muslim interpretation of Jesus being the son is that God had a physical union with Mary (Saal, 1993, p. 64).

Approaches and Strategies to Muslim Evangelism

The Spirit-empowered living in evangelism to the Muslims requires that the church devise strategies that are theological and socio-cultural in nature. Christian training on what Islam is all about and the Muslim worldview is also necessary.

Theological Strategies in Muslim Evangelism

Theological engagements with Muslims should focus on the Bible and the Qur'an as relating to the issues that Muslims raise about Christ, such as his sonship, birth, death, and resurrection (Neville, 1999, p.166). The first task of a theologian is to explain his or her own tradition, which in this case is an understanding of Christology from a biblical perspective. It is out of this that we can now move to the next level of representing, interpreting and supporting our biblical position about Christ to the Muslims. Second, the Church should embark on Bible and Qur'anic readings and interpretation. Moving on from our own understanding of the Bible, we should then help Muslims to understand biblical passages that they have misconceptions about (Baron 2014, p.43).

Baron narrates a story of a missionary who used to read portions of the Bible with her Muslim tutor who consequently converted (Baron, 2014, p. 43). Testimonies abound of people who converted by reading the Bible (Qureshi, 2014, p. 23) or the Qur'an (Moucarry, 2002, p. 32). Stories in the Bible that have had an impact in the lives of Muslims include a study of the life of Jesus in the Gospels (Masri, 2014, p. 119), a story of how Christ washed the feet of his disciples, especially that of Judas Iscariot, knowing that he would betray Christ (Masri, 2014, p. 22).

Third, Christians should memorize and use Bible verses as appropriate in their conversations with Muslims. This is because Muslims are religious have respect for other people who memorize God's word (Masri, 2014, p. 56). There is, therefore, no doubt that they will respect and obey the word spoken to them out of memory. Speaking the gospel in a language that Muslims are most comfortable with could be the best, such as the Bible in Arabic, thus allowing the Muslims to understand it (Travis, 2017, p. 197). The study of the Arabic language would be a necessary undertaking that could enhance this Bible translation process. The grasp of the Arabic language will enable Christians to study texts about Jesus in the Qur'an and hadiths (Cragg, 1999, p. xiv).

The fourth point is centered on explaining the facts about Jesus. Many Muslims have misconceptions about Jesus. The gospels have valuable insights to help in our conversations with our Muslim friends (Matt 26:28; Rom 1:4; 10:9-10; Phil 3:10-11; 1 Pet 1:3; Eph 2:8-9; Acts 4:12) (Masri, 2014, p. 134). These truths or insights include sonship, divinity, death, and resurrection of Christ. Scriptures such as Isa 7:14 can be referred to when explaining the birth of Jesus. It should be explained that the word ‘Immanuel’ means ‘God with us,’ not ‘Prophet with us’ (Ziafat, 2018, p. 157). Scriptures that point to the Sonship of Jesus include Matt. 1:18—24; Lk 1:26-35. Jesus also lays claim to Sonship (John 5: 18; Mk 14:61-64; Matt 26:54); Thomas’ own confession proves that Jesus is Lord and God (John 20:28). According to some scholars, there are two Arabic words for ‘son’ that must be distinguished:

The word *walad* denotes a son born of sexual relations. Jesus is definitely not a son [waladdu’llah-’Son of God’] in this sense. However, there is another Arabic word for son, *ibn*, that can be used in a wider figurative or metaphorical sense. A traveler, for example, is spoken of as a “son of the road” (*ibnussabil*). It is in this wider sense that it makes sense to speak of Jesus as the “Son (*ibn*) of God. This is a metaphorical way of describing the eternal relationship between the Father and Jesus” (Halverson, 1996, p. 114). Rhodes summarizes the ancient Semitics and Orientals’ use of the phrase “Son of...” to indicate likeness or sameness of nature and equality of being. Hence, when Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, His Jewish contemporaries fully understood He was making a claim to be God in an unqualified sense. Indeed, Jesus as the ‘begotten Son’ is usually controversial and misunderstood by Muslims to refer to *physical generation* yet it should be a *special relationship* with the Father (Geisler & Saleeb, 2002, p. 264).

In explaining the concept of Jesus as the Messiah, it is important to clarify that the word ‘Messiah’ is a Hebrew word and means ‘anointed one.’ It is ‘Christos’ in Greek, ‘Christ’ in English, and the Qur’an uses ‘al-Masih’ (most Anointed) in Arabic. In fact, that

title is used for Jesus 11 times in the Quran. Nobody else in the Quran is called ‘al-Masih’(cf Q 3: 45; 5: 14, 75). Christians can use the many scriptures that point to the passion of Christ as he foretold it or testified by eye witnesses, so that Muslims can be enlightened (Math 16:21; Lk 9: 18-22; 22: 37; 23: 26-46; John 19: 13-20; Isa 12: 1-12; Dan 9: 25-26). In explaining Jesus as the Divine Word of God, Rhodes writes that in John 1:1, Jesus is called “the Word.” The Greek noun for “Word” in this verse is *Logos*.(Rhodes, 2002, p. 134).

Last, as Christians provide theological answers and correct misconceptions that Muslims have against the divinity of Christ from both the Qur’an and the Bible, they should exercise patience. Asking strategic questions such as “Have you read the Bible?” or “what do you think of Christians?” would help build a relationship and strengthen the conversation. As people respond and connect, and share their thoughts, they feel valued and respected (Rhodes, 2002, p. 55).

Whereas salvation is only by one’s faith in Christ, Christians must prove faithful by their good deeds (Ja 2:14-18). The Bible clearly states that no one was born righteous due to the inherited sin of Adam. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). This is in contrast to the Muslim belief that a child is born sinless and only becomes sinful when corrupted by the environment. Sins are only forgiven by Jesus who is also the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). Unlike the Muslims who believe that one can never be sure of receiving eternal life even after confessing his sins, the Bible assures us of the forgiveness we receive from Jesus in confession of our sins (1Jn 1:9). Christians are also assured of eternal life if one believes in Jesus (Jn 6:47).

Once one dies, one will either go to heaven or hell, depending on whether the person had received Jesus while on earth, and not even the prayers of the Bishop or Shaman could change the destiny of an individual. Christianity can never be divorced from the aspect of the cross, as Register explains: “The cross is the pivotal point of history for Christians. Without

the cross there can be no resurrection [1 Cor 15:14b]”(Register, 1979, p. 43). Whereas Muslims believe in Jesus as a good man, as one of the Prophets and a messenger of God, in Christianity, Jesus is more than that. He is the son of God eternally, yet he was once born as a human being in history not of the will of man but of God through the power of the Holy Spirit and has become the saviour of the world (Lk 1: 29-33 cf, Matt 1:21). The death of Jesus on the cross was a mystery just like his birth was. Even Mary, the mother of Jesus, was perplexed by the message of the angel that she would bear a son. She asked, “How will this be...since I am a virgin?” (Lk 1:34). The angel told her that it would be through the power of the Holy Spirit. The things of God appear foolish unless we have His Spirit to understand his mysteries on earth.

The understanding of Jesus’ death requires that one understands the character of God in depth. God is love (1Jn 4:8). The best expression of love is that love is self-giving (1 Cor 13:4-8). This finds its full expression when God (Love) gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life (Jn 3:16). The only way God demonstrated his love to mankind is by allowing his only Son to die on the cross (Matt 27:50). It should be also emphasised that Jesus died just like any other hero such as Muhammad except that he was hanged on the cross. The death by the cross was in itself the Roman tradition of executing death to persons who had committed the offence of treason. Since Muslims believe that Jesus was a good man, it should be pointed out how Jesus was wrongfully accused of treason, among other charges (Lk 23:5), but he forgave those who wrongfully accused him (Lk 23:34).

Whereas Jesus died on the cross, it is not the nature and the style of death that Christians emphasize but rather the fact that he rose again on the third day. This is the hope of the Church that there is life after death. The cross is symbolic of the sufferings of Jesus. This is also true even in the Arabic language: “The Arabic translation of the New Testament

uses the Arabic root of the word ‘shibh’ in several verses that refer to the suffering of Jesus. In every life, this word is used in some way to describe the death of Jesus on the cross.” (Register, 1979, p. 47).

Socio-Cultural Strategy of Evangelism to the Muslims

This section focuses on the socio-cultural issues that can contribute to meeting the felt needs of the Muslims. Theology is good, but this alone is not enough in our engagement with Muslims if its all intent is simply logical. “The doctrine of the union of divinity and humanity of Christ and Trinity makes no sense in a rational debate” (Thomas, 2008, p. 30). Mere arguments simply attract skepticism from Muslims (Bijlefeld, 1996, p. 128). In a Christian witness there is need to go beyond theological responses or inquiries from Muslims. The underlying reason is since majority of Muslims, unlike Christians, are practice-oriented than belief-oriented. It is orthopraxy as opposed to orthodoxy: “In religions of orthopraxy like Islam, actions express and articulate faith, and this is an important facet of the faith that non-Muslims should keep in mind.”(Kaltner, 2016, p. 28). Islam is a religion of actions (Q 9:105). Muslims tend to highlight praxis and give priority to jurisprudence (Zebiri, 2014, p. 9). Proper action is often considered as the true mark of one’s membership in the community. This, however, is not to underestimate the need for correction nor exaggerate on orthopraxis (Kaltner, 2016, p. 27).

Different approaches are therefore required depending on the context. Approaches, especially among ordinary (Folk) Muslims are healing and praying for miracles rather than witnessing through theological debates (Musk, 2004, p. 7). Different approaches are required because as Bennett puts it: “There is one Islam but many Muslim societies”(Bennett, 2010, p. 67). This diversity in Islam calls for contextualization, that is, exploring new and relevant ways of engaging with Muslims (Reisacher, 2017, p. 222).

Since Islam is more action-oriented, the heinous deeds committed during the crusades (11-12th centuries) need to be re-visited whenever the topic resurfaces. There is need to acknowledge that the massacre of the Muslims was evil. But at the same time Muslims should be assured that although what happened was not right, there are still many good Christians with good intentions in our society. There is need to hold genuine and open dialogue with Muslim friends over areas of cooperation and conflicts (Amjad-Ali, 2009, p. 577). In some situations, Muslims have responded well to the ministry of prayer, working, or miracles such as healing as well as power encounter ministry (Travis, 2017, p. 195). Qur'an also supports the idea of prayer (Q3:49).

There are many testimonies, some of which have already been explored, of Muslims seeking for prayers or showing how such prayers have brought healing and restoration in their lives. The ministry of power encounter is also valid, especially among ordinary Muslims whose primary concerns are centered on the evil eye, the fear of death, sicknesses, calamities and evil spirits. They seek for answers to these felt needs from witchdoctors and other shamans or traditional practitioners. In our contemporary society, where technology has thrived, the use of media can be useful with the Muslims at any available opportunity (Travis, 2017, p. 187).

Christian Training in Muslim Evangelism

Christian training prior to missions among the Muslims should be considered a necessity. Goldsmith, in stressing this point, states: "Christians who are going to work in Muslim countries need to get some training beforehand in biblical and theological studies as well as in communication of the Christian faith in a Muslim context." (Goldsmith, 1982, p. 111). Learning the cultural background of the Muslims we intend to reach with the gospel is vital (Nehls, 1988, p. 35). A mastery of doctrines and duties of Islam is also very fundamental." (Miller, 1976, p. 43). But "Christians' study of the Bible must be a top

priority.” (Nehls, 1988, p. 35). Literature is also another resource that is useful in Muslim evangelism, especially among the literate Muslims (Goldsmith, 1982, p. 109). Christians need to identify forms and practices that are related to both religions and to adopt them in their worship services in an Islamic context (Cooper, 1985, p. 166).

In our Christian attempt to reach Muslims, we need to exercise a lot of patience. This emanates from what Abdul-Haqq observes that Muslim’s whole life is regulated by the code (sharia), expressing that through the sharia a believer comes to be related to God via His creatures. Christians must realize that even though our goal in Muslim evangelism is to see them saved, there is a great need for patience and sacrifice, and above all, to offer hope.

Regarding the study of Islam, Clarke notes; “

Islam reincarnation is anathema. Man is born, lives his life in accordance with or in opposition to divine law, dies, is judged, and rewarded with paradise or punished with hell. He has no second chance; hence that stress placed upon scrupulous observance of rituals and taboos expressed with a self-discipline which outside observers have often castigated as fanaticism. (Clarke, 2002, p. 177).

Following the above insight, our task as Christians is not to debate or win arguments but rather find some contact points that can help us relate the gospel in a way that our Muslim friends will be able to understand. Register gives insight to this when he says: “The burden then lies upon the Christian to relate to the Muslim the truth of the cross in such a way that the Muslim can come to a new understanding of God’s love revealed in the cross of Christ” (Register, 1979, p. 43). There are some similar truths from both religions, such as belief in resurrection (Sura 69:13-18; cf. 1Thess 4:16-17). These truths can be used to impart hope to the Muslims concerning the resurrection of the righteous in the last days. One of the reasons why the Church has not made much progress in Muslim evangelism is the high standard in which the gospel has been presented to ordinary Muslims, such that they cannot live up to it.

The gospel, therefore, needs to be presented in simplicity and in the cultural context of the Muslims. Mohammed explains this as he gives the example in the early missionary work: “Almost the first Christian attempt to use a missionary method to convert the Muslims was that of St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Mohammed was convinced that if Muslims were not converted, it was because the gospel had not been presented to them in its simplicity and beauty”.

Conclusion

The spread of Islam remains a challenge to the church in Africa. Many people, including Christians, are converting to Islam because of the zeal that Muslims have, which is centered on their drive to gain followers. While this study focuses on the Muslims in the western part of Kenya, it is my humble belief that the strategies that I have shared can be used in other wider contexts as well. The emphasis, however, is on the need to study Islam and the Muslim people in their varied contexts rather than generalization. My argument in this paper has been that the generalization of Islam and Muslims has been one of the failures of the church in Africa to gain success in Muslim evangelism. Generalization has resulted in using the same strategies of evangelism that have been used throughout the past century, but without success. It is my urge, therefore, that for the church to fulfill its mandate in Muslim evangelism, there is a need to bear in mind the context of the Muslim group being evangelized.

Together with this, there is a need to review the cultural issues in a particular Muslim community as well as their perception of Christ. The overall purpose of this is to develop theological and socio-cultural responses that are relevant and contextual in meeting their felt needs. A rigorous training of the church workers about Islam as both religion and culture, and the Muslim people, is paramount. Above all, the church must depend on the power of the Holy Spirit to realize the salvation of Muslims in their contexts. The fulfillment of the Great

Commission among the Muslims requires that the Church remain committed to discovering and applying relevant strategies, while at the same time depending on the Lord to direct them and bring the desired conviction of salvation to them. But equally important is the aspect of discipleship. As the Church receives the harvest of Christians from a Muslim background, it should also be prepared to disciple them as part of their commitment and obedience to the Great Commission.

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