


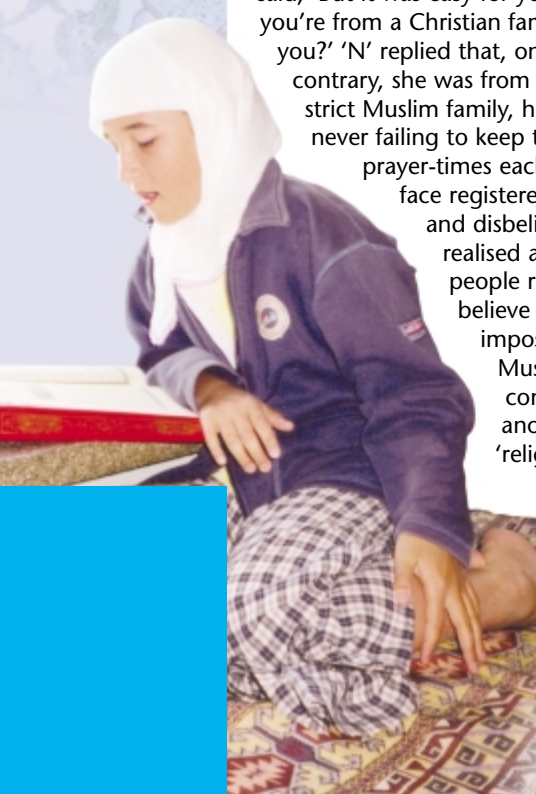


OPPORTUNITIES

Reaching out with the Gospel in a Muslim-majority, yet secular, country.



The last call-to-prayer of the day had sounded from the local mosque, but we were still sitting around the meal table, deep in conversation, hardly aware of the passing of time. It was one of those evenings when time didn't matter, as a sense of God's presence and of his leading in conversation had been with us from the moment we had sat down. 'N', a believer from the little church I was attending in the city, had shared her testimony with 'O', whose family originally came from the east of the country. 'O's face was full of earnest inquiry and she had asked searching questions all evening.



When 'N' finished explaining how she became a Christian, 'O' sat back and said, 'But it was easy for you because you're from a Christian family, aren't you?' 'N' replied that, on the contrary, she was from a very strict Muslim family, her mother never failing to keep the five prayer-times each day. 'O's face registered shock and disbelief, and I realised again these people really do believe it is impossible for a Muslim to convert to another 'religion'.

So here, at this moment of opportunity, we had hit a huge obstacle; it happens all the time. It is easy in this Muslim-majority country to talk of your Christian faith. The people love to talk, and 'religion' is not a taboo subject to them. But for a Muslim to get beyond the point of general interest to a deep, heart-felt, personal awareness that the God of the Bible is the One, True and Living God, and that we can only come to him through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, can take years of faithful witness and friendship on the part of the Christian worker.

Despite the late hour, the conversation continued. By now we were sitting around the low coffee table, laden with fruit and nuts, and I was beginning to relax a little. But a second obstacle was about to enter the conversation and it came in the form of a simple, yet loaded, question: 'Are you missionaries?' It was the dreaded question. Both local and national media had instilled fear and hatred of so-called 'missionaries' into the hearts of the people, portraying them as political activists, deceivers, instigators of civil unrest. Locals are warned to stay clear of them. Consequently, a Christian worker will never refer to himself as a 'missionary'. I asked 'O' how she would define the word and, on the basis of her definition, I replied, 'No, I am not one of those.' I then quietly explained that, having found the joy of knowing Christ and the assurance of eternity in heaven, I would never want to be so selfish as to keep this treasure to myself.

A few weeks later I again encountered a similar problem in conversation with another friend. I first met 'NH' two years ago and we have since had many deep conversations about the things of God. 'NH's home situation is very difficult and she had become ill with worry and the sheer frustration of knowing there was no way of changing her circumstances. We were talking about how God, through Christ, can come and give us deep and lasting joy. 'NH' turned to me and said: 'I know this is not true of you, but there are foreigners who come to our country and befriend people just because they want us to change our religion.' Even though she had not accused me of false motives, I took her comment as a word of caution.

Friendship evangelism has, for many years, been the regarded as the main approach to Muslim evangelism, but after 'NH's comment, I began to see even this has its pitfalls. *True* friendship with Muslims, where the Christian genuinely shares his life with his friend and tells the gospel out of deep concern for his soul, is of course a necessary approach in a



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country where friendship is rated very highly. But, in order to be effective, this needs wisdom and must, in fact, not be regarded as a 'method' or a 'technique', but as a way of life.

It is, of course, very time consuming and the Christian worker will often struggle with this issue. The concept of true friendship in this culture is very different to what it is in the West. To their way of thinking, to be a true friend will involve hours and hours of time each week. In a 'tent-making' situation, this may mean you really only have one or two such friends. Should your time and energies be spent like this? And, unless you've shared your faith at the beginning of the friendship, how can you avoid being regarded as one who has befriended under false pretences?

For this reason, some Christian workers in the country tried a more direct approach. They boldly went to a new town and, from the start, publicly made themselves known as

church workers. This resulted in negative media attention and careful scrutiny by the local police but, in this case, a church was eventually planted. In recent years, the Christian workers and the local believers have become more bold in their witness. Often this has resulted in arrests by the police, but court cases are more frequently being won by the believers, who are becoming increasingly aware of their rights in this secular, yet Muslim-majority, country. Opportunities for evangelism are increasing.

Whatever their rights by law, a Muslim-background believer in Jesus will suffer varying degrees of persecution even in this secular country. The fear of rejection by their family is one of the most powerful hindrances to becoming a Christian. Although things are changing in the cities, most people have grown up into a more communal way of life. The wider family is your community and no major decision is ever taken without consulting the rest of the family. To become a Christian would automatically exclude you from this. In a poor country, survival without the support of your wider family is almost impossible.

I hit the obstacle of the wider family when in conversation with 'M'. She had come to church one Sunday, and I had invited her home for a meal with two believers. The whole evening was spent in deep conversation, comparing Islam with true Christianity. At the end of the evening, 'M' requested a Bible but also voiced her deepest concern: 'What about my family?'

This constant interaction of opportunities and obstacles reflects a society full of contrasts and confusion. There is tension between western ideas and the more inbred eastern culture and thinking. There is a pull in two opposite directions; some favour acceptance by the west, others plant their feet firmly in the Muslim heritage.

Likewise the Christian worker will often be caught between tensions. There will be days when opportunities to share the glorious message of the gospel will give cause to rejoice greatly. Yet there will also be seasons when it seems the work is constantly hindered by numerous obstacles. In the midst of all this, what better thing to do than look to the unchanging One, for whom there can be no obstacle and who has said that he will build his Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it? ■

