

Why is the Muslim World So Resistant to the Gospel?

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The future shape of the world appears to be a worldview competition between Christianity, Islam, and Western Secularism. For Christians, both of these worldviews represent real and lasting challenges to evangelism. Neither of these is a particularly new challenge, and the Christian encounter with Islam is now over a millennium in duration.

Writing over thirty years ago, when most American evangelicals had little knowledge of Islam, missiologist J. Herbert Kane of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School outlined six reasons why the evangelization of the Muslim world has been so difficult. His explanation of “Why the Muslim Soil is So Barren” remains both instructive and important.

1. Islam is Younger than Christianity

Having borrowed from both Judaism and Christianity, Islam “has just enough Christianity in it to inoculate it against the real thing.” As with Mormonism, Muslims claim a later revelation that corrects and supersedes the Bible. This represents a very real challenge to the Christian, who will base the argument for the Gospel on the biblical revelation.

2. Islam Denies the Deity and the Death of Christ

Islam not only denies the deity of Christ, it finds the idea abhorrent. “If a missionary but mentions the deity of Christ the fanatical Muslim is likely to spit on his shadow to show his utter contempt for such a blasphemous suggestion.” Furthermore, the Qur’an denies that Christ actually died on the cross, thus taking away the very act of our atonement. “There appears to be no way around these two obstacles,” Kane lamented. “The Christian missionary can find many points of similarity between Christianity and Islam, and certainly he will want to make full use of these; but sooner or later he must come to the central theme of the gospel — the cross. At that point he runs into a stone wall. He can remove many offending things, but he can never do away with the offense of the cross. That and the deity of Christ are hurdles that can never be removed.”

3. Islam’s Treatment of Defectors

“All religions, including the broadest of them — Hinduism — look with disfavor on the devotee who changes his religion,” Kane advised. “But it remained for Islam to devise the Law of Apostasy, which permits the community to kill the adherent who defects from the faith.”

For Islam, “conversion is a one-way street.” Even when death is not a real threat, losing the bonds of community and family are huge costs.

4. The Solidarity of Muslim Society

Muslim societies are a solidarity, with religion, politics, economics, and personal life all accountable to Islam as a total way of life. Even where Muslims are not in a majority, such as in Western nations, they often concentrate in specific areas



or communities where this solidarity can be approximated.

Under such an arrangement, efforts by Christians to evangelize meet a unified resistance, and a decision to leave Islam can be construed as an unpatriotic act, tantamount to rejecting one's nation and people.

5. The Public Practice of Religion

Often overlooked by many Christians is the fact that a faithful Muslim demonstrates that faithfulness in a public pattern of prayers and observances. A convert who ceases these observances becomes immediately evident. This system of public prayer and ritual represents a powerful support for Islam and a powerful deterrent to conversion to any other belief system.

6. The Memory of the Crusades

As Kane explains, "To Christians in the West the Crusades were a bad dream, of which we have only the faintest recollection; but to the Arabs they are the greatest proof of the Christian hatred for Islam." Christians bear the burden of a long and intensely bitter Muslim memory. Though atrocities were common on both sides, the atrocities committed by Christians were uniquely a repudiation of central Christian teachings.

In the mind of many Muslims, the Crusades feel like a living memory. To many within the Islamic world, Christians remain Crusaders, and evangelism is just another way of continuing the crusading mission.

Professor Kane's breakdown of these obstacles is not only interesting and helpful, it also serves as a reminder that these issues are hardly new. At the same time, Christians must evangelize, no matter the obstacles to Christian witness.

Christians must remember that the Holy Spirit can break down the greatest wall of resistance and the Word of God is, as He says, like a hammer that shatters a rock. Dr. Kane's arguments help us to understand the challenge, but were not meant to suppress evangelism. To the contrary, he wanted the church to be better informed as we fulfill the command of Christ.

J. Herbert Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, revised edition (Baker Books, 1978/1983).

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