

Helping Christian Children to Learn about Islam: Teaching about Islam through Qur'anic Stories

By Margaret O. and Kenneth J. Thomas*

ABSTRACT

In order that Christians responsibly discern Jesus' words, "You shall love your neighbor," Christian education today should include learning about Muslims. And, particularly since the religious life of Muslims is at the root of their otherness, Christian children should learn more than the customs of Muslims' daily living. One educational method, for those who do not have natural contacts with Muslims, is an approach familiar to American Christian children – story-telling based on scripture, looking at characters in the Qur'an who are also in the Bible. Islam must be understood as a religion that emphasizes orthopraxis, right living through following God's will. Thus, Christian children can use the stories to talk appreciatively about both Islamic beliefs and practices. In the process, they can reflect on their own.

The stories of Noah, Abraham, Joseph, and Moses and the Qur'anic material about God as Creator are appropriate to use. The storyteller needs to develop some specific purpose for each story-telling that will enable it to be a vehicle for learning about Islam. In the example of the story of Moses, the Islamic practice of saying "God willing" and "in God's name" can be related to the idea that it is God who guides human life. The Islamic parallel between Moses, who received God's law, and Muhammad, whose message is about how God wants people to live, can be explored.

* Kenneth J. and Margaret O. Thomas are parish associates in a Presbyterian congregation in New York City.



Introduction

Teaching Christian children Jesus' words, "You shall love your neighbor," with meaning for the practice of daily life requires thoughtful discernment today. Jesus' teaching makes it clear that the neighbor is more than the person next door or the others within one's own group; but what

about those who, for any number of reasons, are outside the bounds of the child's sphere?

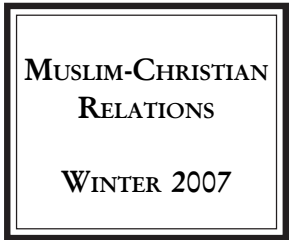
In the religiously plural society of the United States today, there are many Muslims, who—for large numbers of their fellow-citizens of every age—fall into the category of being uncomfortably different and therefore outsiders. On a global scale, conflicts today are often interpreted in terms of religious identity, many of these involving Muslims. Consequently, American Christian children hear and see stereotypical caricatures of Muslims in a variety of places; they hear Muslims labeled as Muslims whenever they appear in negative media reports. A large proportion of the American public carries unsympathetic attitudes toward Muslims, fueled by international conflicts, fear of terrorism, and a sense of cultural distance. Children can simply absorb negative attitudes without particular thought.

On a global scale, conflicts today are often interpreted in terms of religious identity, many of these involving Muslims.

It may seem strange to think that learning about Muslims should be a part of responsible Christian education today, but it is certainly important to the discernment of Jesus' words, "You shall love your neighbor." The responsibility for including children in this education is perhaps most easily accomplished when they have some positive interaction with Muslims naturally but, even then, something more than rubbing shoulders with others may be required. And the task is more difficult when there are no Muslims nearby with whom a child might have a straightforward, unplanned relationship.

A simple form of teaching about people who happen to be Muslims is to look at their customs of daily living and perhaps their holiday observances. Children's books that do this are available. But stopping here leaves an important segment of other peoples' lives in mystery; in many

ways, it is the religious life of Muslims that is deemed to be at the root of their otherness, and this portion of their lives is indeed significant. When this element is avoided, children can intuitively sense that the spiritual or religious dimension of others' lives is off limits. Conversely, with help, children can live in a religiously plural environment in which they fully grow in their own faith but also acknowledge other persons with the respect that "love of neighbor" requires. This can include learning something about others' religious beliefs and practices.



Using Story

Our own children, now adults, grew up in a predominantly Muslim environment outside the U.S. Thinking about how they learned about Islam has been illuminating for us. Experiences with friends and in society taught

Islam is not primarily a religion of words—that is, a religion of *orthodoxy*, or right belief—but of *orthopraxy*, right living guided by God's will.

them something we and they can now articulate: that Islam is not primarily a religion of words—that is, a religion of *orthodoxy*, or right belief—but of *orthopraxy*, right living guided by God's will. The words that our children recall from childhood are stories that are not prescriptive but descriptive—for example, anecdotes about Mullah

Nasruddin, a whimsical character whose antics lead to thoughts about human behavior. They also interacted with children who had been born into a community that teaches through example. Some of the practices they saw around them—people chanting the call to prayer, praying, going on pilgrimages, reciting the beautiful words of the Qur'an, carrying out the activities of family life—revealed some of their meaning even to our children, who were outside the community.

For children who do not have access to any of these realities except in very artificial settings, it is perhaps helpful to experience things that are a bit more familiar. One of these is story-telling based on scripture, which can look at characters in the Qur'an who are also found in the Bible. What, then, would telling stories from the Qur'an to Christian children entail?



- They will hear names in the Arabic forms, in the language of the Qur'an. Muslims regularly speak of God as Allah, which is simply the Arabic word for God, a word used by Arab Christians as well as by Muslims.
- They should be told that, because Muslims understand the Qur'an to be the very word of God, both its words and the actual book are handled with utmost respect.
- They can accept stories as they are told by the Islamic community. Islam shares much of its narrative with Christians and Jews. Nevertheless, the Qur'an is distinctive, though it is not an historical narrative, as such.¹
- They can be led, through the stories, to talk about beliefs and practices of Islam—and to reflect on their own beliefs and practices. They can discover that they are learning from their encounter with Islam. This can lead to clarification of Christian beliefs, but, in guiding discussion, Christian teachers who seek to “love the neighbor” must always remember to avoid the invidious comparison that looks at the best of one’s own beliefs and practices together with the worst of the others’.

Specific Story Suggestions

Here are some stories in the Qur'an that would be appropriate to tell children.

Noah (Surah 11.25-49)

The story of Noah (Nuh), considered a prophet by Islam, introduces the Islamic concept of a prophet as one who warns people. Children can be asked how Noah warned the people and what their response was. They can talk about prophets as speaking the message of God and about warnings as signs of God’s mercy. This could lead to a discussion about whom God uses to warn us today and how this occurs.

Abraham (Surah 2.122-133)

Going on pilgrimage (*hajj*) to the shrine at Mecca is one of the obligations of each Muslim once in a lifetime, if able. The story of Abraham (Ibrahim) tells about Abraham and his son Ishmael building a place for worship in Mecca. The ritual of the pilgrimage reenacts the events in the life of Abraham; this can be described to the children or researched by them. Teachers can emphasize the reality that all Muslims worship God in the same way, no matter where in the world they live—shown clearly in the pilgrimage. The climax of the pilgrimage, the Muslim holiday *id al-Adha* (the Feast of Sacrifice), is a remembrance of Abraham's sacrifice of an animal in place of his son. Children can be led to see Abraham's behavior as an act of faith and can talk about why it is important to remember what he did.

MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN
RELATIONS

WINTER 2007

Joseph (Surah 12)

A whole chapter in the Qur'an, tells the story of Joseph (Yusuf), the son of Jacob. Muslims think of Joseph as an example of how to live. The story in the Qur'an emphasizes that God led Joseph to resist evil and to do good for the benefit of others. Children can be asked to identify what things Joseph did that would be a good example to follow. Muslims have a strong belief that God is in control of all creation, which is evident in the story of Joseph. There can be a discussion about how God controls our daily lives and the bigger events of history.

God (Surah 57.1-11)

The concept of God is very important in Islam. In popular Islamic spirituality, God is said to have "ninety-nine names." God is considered both to be unseen or distant and to be very near, as near as one's jugular vein. It would be appropriate to read part of Surah 57 to children, so that they can hear about many of the aspects of God as understood by Islam. In this Surah, God is the one who created the heaven and earth in six days and who holds control over this creation; God is powerful and wise, grants life and death, and is aware of everything. The children could be encouraged to find the various attributes of God in these verses and to think about what it teaches about God. Discussion can emphasize that God is absolutely



unique—totally different from any human person—and that there is no other God. Teachers may introduce the *shahada*, the Islamic confession of faith, “*There is no God except God and Muhammad is the messenger of God,*” which stresses the oneness of God.

A More Detailed Story Suggestion: Moses

A fuller treatment of one story, the story of Moses, shows something about the general approach we would suggest, which attempts to provide an appreciative cursory introduction to Islam without dwelling on any critique of Islamic belief and practice. This approach begins by briefly tying concepts back to things that are familiar in Christian experience, thereby allowing children to reflect on their new learning as it relates to their own context. We then look at the way the concept we have highlighted in the Qur’anic story is significant for Muslims, and we see how this unfolds in life practice.

Background information for the adults who will be working with children

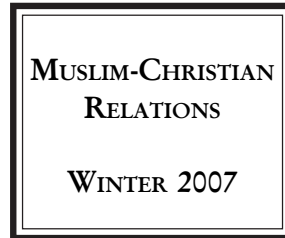
First, some background. Adults who will be working with children will be most prepared if they spend some time discovering more about the character about whom they will be telling the story. We’ve included here some of the kind of information that can be collected.²

Moses (Musa) is mentioned more often than any other person in the Qur’an. While the Bible has the story of Moses in a long narrative in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, various episodes in the life of Moses are related non-chronologically in a number of places throughout the Qur’an, as though it is assumed that the hearers/readers of the Qur’an would already know the story of Moses; therefore, it is only necessary to refer to incidents in his life to illustrate a lesson.

Moses (Musa) is mentioned more often than any other person in the Qur’an.

In the Bible, the leading of God is usually implicit in the narratives about the life of Moses; God’s role is not repeatedly emphasized. The Qur’an makes explicit the planning and leading of God in every aspect of the life of Moses.

Moses is recognized as the lawgiver in both the Bible and the Qur'an. The law is important in both the Old Testament and the Qur'an as the means of guidance for God's people. In the New Testament, Moses is primarily mentioned in connection with the law but, as the one specially chosen by God to free his people and give them God's law, he is also considered a model of faith (Heb 3:2; 11:24).



The Qur'an draws many parallels between the lives and struggles of Moses and Muhammad: both faced false charges of practicing magic and diverting their people from the faith, both were adopted sons, both went into exile, both received a revelation from God, and both wrestled with their own community. Muhammad is considered to have the same religion as Moses (Surah 42:13).

The Qur'an draws many parallels between the lives and struggles of Moses and Muhammad.

Session planning

After becoming familiar with a story, the adult needs to develop some specific purpose for the story-telling that will enable it to be a real vehicle for learning about Islam and for reflecting on it in a constructive way. We decided that the story of Moses is particularly suitable for introducing the concept of the guidance of God. Two particular Islamic expressions in common use are related to this concept and can be introduced in relation to this story: "*bismallah*" ("in the name of God") and "*inshallah*" ("God willing"). This connection ties the story to practical aspects of living and moves the story away from being used simply to describe some kind of belief system. Two incidents in the life of Moses, as narrated in the Qur'an, relate to these expressions and can be used as the basis for two story-telling and discussion sessions.

Session I

Each session needs to begin by getting the interest of the children through questions to which they can respond. After saying that the story of Moses is important in both the Bible and the Qur'an, the teacher/storyteller



can ask children, What do you remember about Moses from the Bible? How did God guide Moses in his life? The answers of the children will probably include incidents that are also in the Qur'an. They can be told that both the Bible and the Qur'an tell about how God guided Moses and gave the law, or commandments, that are a way God has guided people in how to live. It is good

to allow children to share their own answers, but some skillful prompting through use of additional questions may lead the discussion in appropriate directions.

This can be followed by telling or reading the story about the birth of Moses from the Qur'an. If the story will be read, the children need to be told in advance that God is speaking and refers to himself as "We" (a more formal and respectful pronoun than "I.") They should listen for how God arranges everything that happens in the story.

Surah 28.3-13 Story of the Birth of Moses

We shall recite in all truth to you some information about Moses and Pharaoh for folk who believe.

Pharaoh had acted haughtily on earth and split his people into factions, seeking to weaken a group of them. He slaughtered their sons and let their women live; he was so depraved! Yet We wanted to endow those who were considered inferior on earth, and make them into leaders and make them Our heirs. We established them on earth and showed Pharaoh and Haman as well as their troops how they should beware of them.

We inspired Moses' mother as follows: "Nurse him. If you should fear for him, then cast him into the river. Do not fear nor feel sad; We will return him to you, and appoint him as a missionary."

Pharaoh's household took him in, so that he became an enemy and a source of sadness for them. Pharaoh and Haman as well as their troops were so mistaken! Pharaoh's wife said: "He'll be a comfort

for me and for you. Do not kill him! Perhaps he'll benefit us, or we'll adopt him as a son." They did not suspect a thing.

Next morning the vitals of Moses' mother felt empty; she almost revealed who he was, if We had not bound up her heart so she would be a believer. She told his sister: "Keep track of him."

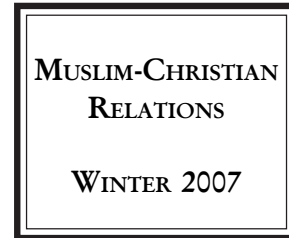
So she watched out for him from a distance while they did not notice it. We kept him from nursing at first, and so she said: "Shall I lead you to a family who will look after him for you? They will take good care of him." Thus We restored him to his mother so he might comfort her and she would not feel so sad, and so she would know that God's promise is true, even though most of them do not realize it.

The Qur'an: The First American Version.
Translation by Al-Hajj Ta'lim 'Ali.

The story can be followed by questions about how God acted in the story and what we learn concerning the ways God guides people in their lives. Then the children can be told that Muslims emphasize that God is in charge of everything we do in life. Muslims begin every new activity with the words, "in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate," (known as the *bismallah*) that are at the beginning of the Qur'an (Surah 1:1). This can be followed by a question, Have you ever heard anyone say "God willing" when he/she was planning to do something? Why would someone

say this? (Recall Jas 4:13-15 in the New Testament.) When you hear Muslims say "*inshallah*," they are saying, "God willing."

The storytelling and discussion session can conclude with an activity, such as the children writing in either English or Arabic the words they have been discussing: "In the name of God"





or “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.” They can use large construction paper and felt-tip markers. While working on this, the children can be asked to think about when they might say or write “in the name of God” if they were following the Islamic custom (e.g., on the top of a letter to Grandma, at the beginning of a meal, before giving a report at school). They might sense

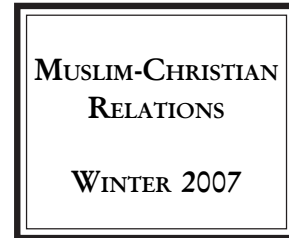


that there is some connection to times when Christians say grace or pray in Jesus’ name, and so on, and they should be encouraged to talk about this. Finally, the session can be finished with a prayer thanking the Lord for guidance in our lives.

Session II

A second storytelling and discussion session on Moses can begin by remembering the story of the birth of Moses and how God guided Moses’ mother and sister and a woman in Pharaoh’s family so that Moses would live and become a leader of his people. In a previous session on Moses, we learned that God is in control of all that God created and works in our lives to accomplish God’s purposes for the benefit of all people. As a way of remembering this, some Christians say “God willing” and Muslims say “*inshallah*.” If God wants us to live good lives, will God not guide us in what we are to do?

The subject of this session can be introduced by saying that Muslims talk about “the straight path” that God shows us (see Surah 1:6). Ask, What do you think of when you hear about God showing us a straight path? (Note the same vocabulary in Jer 31:9, and look at Psalm 1 about people being happy who do not follow “the path of sinners” but follow the law of God.) This could be followed by a discussion of the question, How might laws help us to go in a straight way?



The story in the Qur’an of Moses being given laws by God as guidance for the people can be read aloud or told.

Surah 7:142-146 Story of Moses Receiving the Law from God

We appointed thirty nights for Moses and completed them with ten; the appointment with his Lord was complete in forty nights. Moses told his brother Aaron: “Rule my people in my stead and set a good example; do not pursue the mischiefmakers’ course.”

When Moses came for Our appointment and his Lord spoke to him, he said, “My Lord, show yourself to me so I may look at You.” He said: “you will never see Me, but look at the mountain instead. If it remains in its place, then you shall see Me.” When his Lord displayed His glory to the mountain, He left it flattened off, and Moses fell down stunned.

When he came back to his senses, he said: “Glory be to You! I have turned to You and am the first believer!” He said: “Moses, I have selected you ahead of all mankind for My messages and My word; so accept whatever I may give you and act grateful for it.” We wrote down a bit of everything for him on Tablets for instruction and as an analysis of everything: “Hold to it firmly and command your folk to hold on to whatever is best in it. I shall show you all the home for immoral people. I shall divert those from My signs who have strutted around the earth so proudly without having any right to do so.”

The Qur’an: The First American Version.
Translation by Al-Hajj Ta’lim ‘Ali.



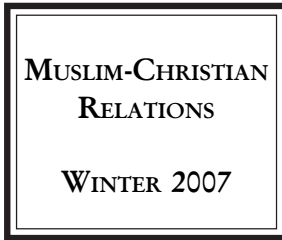
After the story, some questions for discussion could be: Why did God give the commandments to Moses? Have you been taught to follow some or all of the Ten Commandments? (Exod 20:1-17). What did Jesus say was the most important law? Which of the Ten Commandments is nearest to this? What did Jesus say was the second most important law? (Matt 22:36-40). How do you and your family try to follow these things that Jesus taught?

Tell the children that Muslims give great importance to laws by which to live. They can be asked, In what ways, do you think, do God's laws guide people? How do they help people know how to behave in many situations—personally, in the family, and in the bigger world outside of home?

The Qur'an says that Muhammad, like Moses, gave people a message of how God wants people to live. Laws guide people in doing this (Surah 28:42ff). Muslims follow laws today based on the Qur'an and on the way Muhammad lived. These laws are very practical and specific.

- All Muslims say the *shahada*: "I witness that there is no god except God and that Muhammad is God's prophet."
- All Muslims who are financially and physically able are required to go to Mecca on pilgrimage at least once in their lives.
- There are definite times in each day when Muslims are to perform their ritual prayers.
- Muslims are required to give a certain amount of their wealth to help the poor and needy.
- During one month of the year Muslims are required to fast from dawn to dusk.
- There are many other patterns for living followed by Muslims, for example, dressing modestly and not eating certain foods such as pork.

This can be related to Christian teaching: when we love God, we show it by obeying God (John 14:15,21). What do you think are the things we must do to obey God? Are there things that you do in certain ways because you are a Christian? Help the children think about characteristics that mark them as Christians and the source of this in the teaching of the church (i.e., attending church worship regularly may derive from “keep the Sabbath day holy,” or striving to be loving may derive from “love your neighbor as yourself”).



If there is time for a related activity, children can make a geometric border for the words written in the previous session. The geometric patterns used within Islamic art are an expression of the value given to the consistency of God’s law by Muslims. If there is interest, the children could look at geometric patterns used in tiles and mosques. They could also make posters with the words, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself.”

The session could be finished with a prayer thanking the Lord for the laws and teachings that guide us in our lives.

Accepting the Invitation

Adults who join with children in reading and discussing stories of the Qur’an will tread with the children into a place that, for “the neighbor,” is holy ground. We sense, at such a time, the need for prayer—asking for the humility to recognize new things that God will reveal to us through meeting others, if only through the medium of stories. In the adventure, both adults and children may discover new calls to faithful action for the future.





¹ Adults will need a copy of the Qur'an in order to find the stories discussed in this article, but hearing the actual English interpretative translation of the Qur'anic words will be too difficult for many children. We sometimes use the translation by T.B. Irving (Al-Hajj Ta'lim Ali), *The Qur'an: The First American Version* (Brattleboro, VT: Amana Books, 1985) because it is in American English, although it is not the version distributed by most American Muslims.

² The adult may wish to start by examining a biblical commentary, then using a source on the Qur'an. *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* as prepared by A. Yusuf Ali (Brentwood, MD: Amana Corp, 1983) includes readable commentary. This may require a team of people in a congregation. The person who is adept at doing the research may not be the best storyteller! Two resources that look at both the Bible and the Qur'an are: *Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Qur'an for Bible Readers* by John Kaltner (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999) and *Abraham and Ibrahim: The Bible and the Qur'an Told to Children* by Francien van Overbeeke-Rippen with study guide by Kenneth and Margaret Thomas (Louisville, KY: Bridge Resources, 2006) and available online: www.pcusa.org/bridgeresources/availabletitles.htm.