

Shining the Light

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it. There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe ... The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world (John 1:5-9).

As believers, we are called to be a light in the dark places. Unfortunately, though, interactions between Muslims and Christians tend to involve more heat than light. I know people who will happily engage in a debate but who refuse invitations to genuine discussions: they want to win, not to understand.

I have a book containing correspondence between Christians and Muslims, written during the first three centuries of Islam's development. These letters reveal an amazing lack of understanding of what the other believes. In many ways it can be characterised as:

M: Our prophet is the last and greatest prophet.

C: Oh yeah, well, ours is the light of the world.

M: Oh yeah, well, so is ours. Ours is the light of creation.

C: Well, ours is the word of God.

M: No, he's a word from God, and to obey the word of our prophet is to obey God himself. So he brings that final word. So there!

C: Well, ours is the Son of God.

M: Oh yuck, that's a disgusting thought that God would have sex with a woman. Ours is beloved of God from all time.

You get the picture. And, in one form or another, with varying degrees of finesse, this "my prophet is bigger than your prophet" approach to witness has been utilised in much of the dialogue between Muslims and Christians. However, few in each community really know what the other believes. For example, when Christians defend the idea of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) to Muslims, they don't realise that Muslims understand the Trinity to mean "Father, Son and Mary". And when the tenor of

interactions is that of feeling attacked and needing to defend (on both sides), the result is conflict, not relationship.

Many expressions of Islam

Persians, Bengalis, Pakistanis, Indonesians: these are all large populations that are mainly Muslim. Indeed in the new Pew Report on Islam in the World we see that most Muslims aren't Arabs: "More than 60% of the global Muslim population is in Asia and about 20% is in the Middle East and North Africa."¹

Each Muslim community has its own flavour and expression of Islam. True, just as going to Catholic Mass or to McDonalds is fairly much the same the world over, Muslims can go to any Mosque in the world and feel at home in the ritual and prayer. But in an unfamiliar community, they may also find outlooks, beliefs and practices that astonish them. In Bangladesh, for example, there are hymns of praise to the prophet Muhammad, which traditionalists in the Middle East are appalled at. And in India there are Muslim holy shrines where people go to pray for children and healing, something which the traditionalists also oppose.

We do ourselves, our message and our Muslim neighbours a disservice when we assume that Islam is a monolithic whole. We need to get to know the individuals and their community, their beliefs, their outlook on the world and who they are in their setting. This will mean asking questions and being willing to listen and learn, and making ourselves available to spend time with them, including sharing

meals and attending events together. Don't be afraid to share the celebration of Christmas, as Muslims honour Jesus and are generally happy to celebrate his birth and share in the Bethlehem story. Similarly, prayer is an expected part of public and private life for Muslims. To offer to pray for your neighbours in their daily experience is usually warmly welcomed. In praying with Muslims we have seen people experiencing healing, peace in difficult times, and provision when it was needed. One man said, "Each time I came here I felt such peace. How could I not respond?"

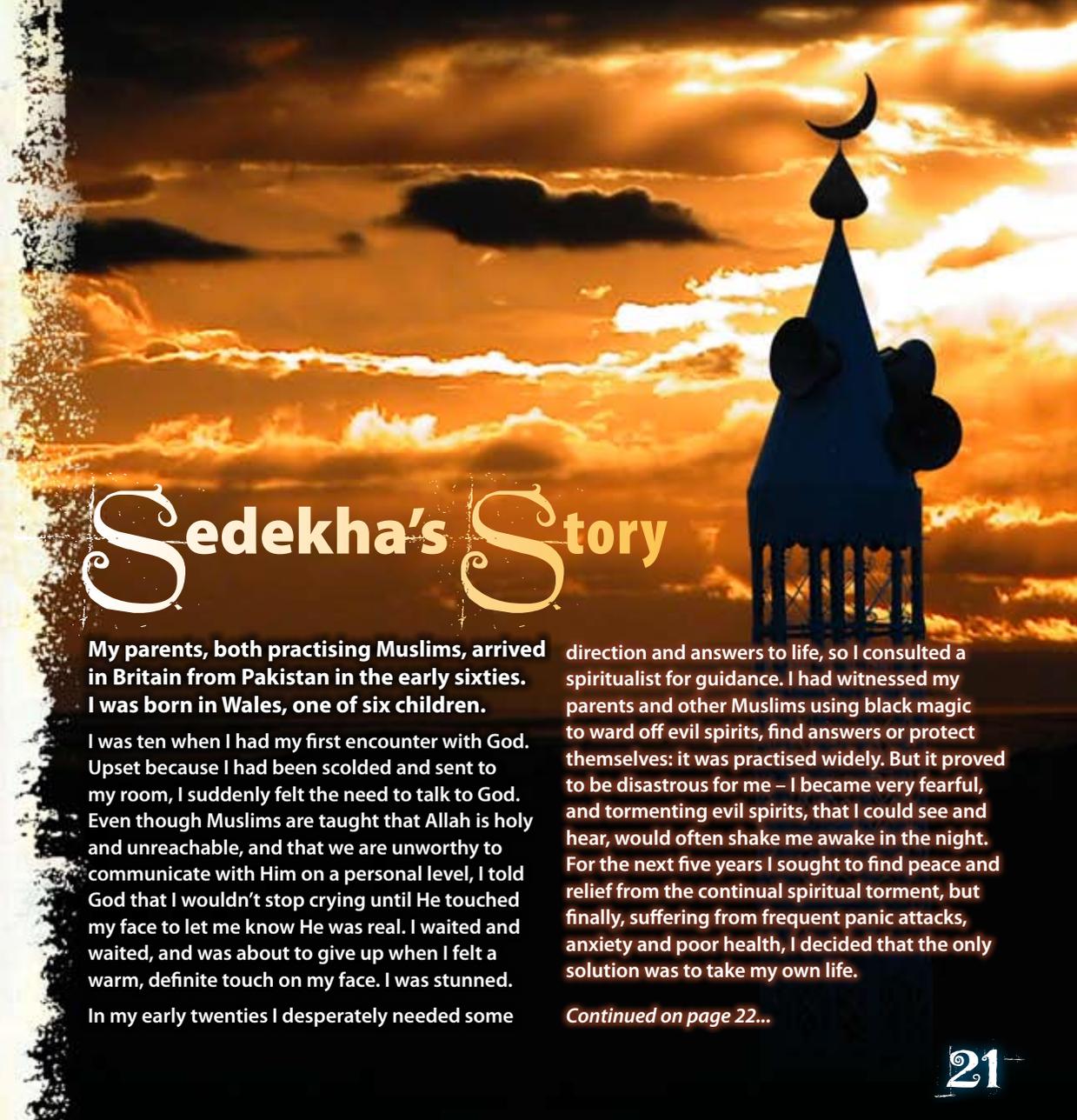
Called to testify

A Christian's primary role in witness is just that: witness. We testify to what we have seen and heard. We're not called primarily to argue against someone else's faith, to counter opposing arguments. We're called to say what we've experienced. We're called to tell our story.

I have a friend in Bangladesh, whose life was turned around by joining a Sufi group (kind of like a charismatic group headed by saints within Islam); he went from a life of violence and alcohol to one of piety. He discusses Christianity with many people and hasn't been at all convinced by any arguments.

There is one thing about Christianity, however, that gives him pause for thought: when he asks expatriate Christians, "So, what brought you to Bangladesh?" and they

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Sedekha's Story

My parents, both practising Muslims, arrived in Britain from Pakistan in the early sixties. I was born in Wales, one of six children.

I was ten when I had my first encounter with God. Upset because I had been scolded and sent to my room, I suddenly felt the need to talk to God. Even though Muslims are taught that Allah is holy and unreachable, and that we are unworthy to communicate with Him on a personal level, I told God that I wouldn't stop crying until He touched my face to let me know He was real. I waited and waited, and was about to give up when I felt a warm, definite touch on my face. I was stunned.

In my early twenties I desperately needed some

direction and answers to life, so I consulted a spiritualist for guidance. I had witnessed my parents and other Muslims using black magic to ward off evil spirits, find answers or protect themselves: it was practised widely. But it proved to be disastrous for me – I became very fearful, and tormenting evil spirits, that I could see and hear, would often shake me awake in the night. For the next five years I sought to find peace and relief from the continual spiritual torment, but finally, suffering from frequent panic attacks, anxiety and poor health, I decided that the only solution was to take my own life.

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reply, "Because God told me to come", that rattles his cage!

My friend would dearly love to hear the voice of God. He prays, he practises meditation and follows his saint, but he has never experienced God being with him. And that is the same for many Muslims: although they long to experience God, He is so great and powerful – and distant – that the idea of actually knowing Him, particularly as Father, and hearing from Him, is beyond what they can imagine.

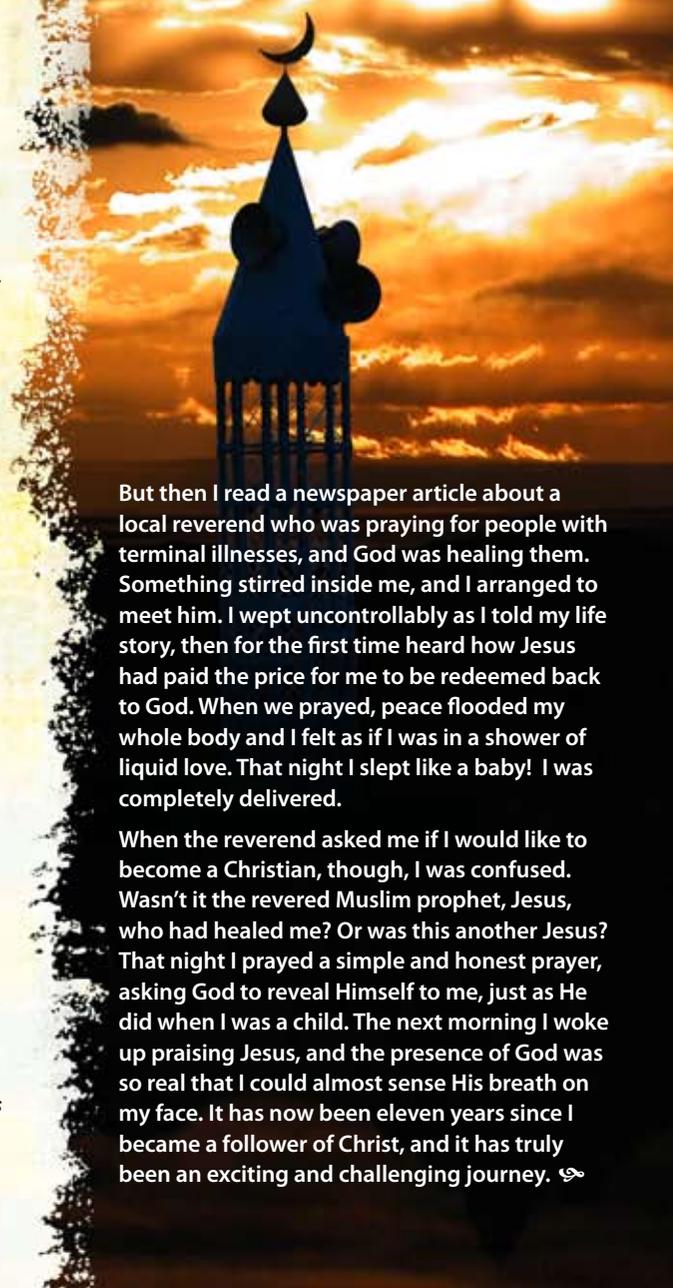


Our witness is our story – are we willing to share it? How did we come to know Jesus? How does He relate to us today? What happens when we pray? Yes, we must know our Bibles, and yes, the more information we have on their faith and ours the better, but the heart of our witness is our story: our experience and our relationship with Jesus.

We are not called to combative one-upmanship; any discussion along the lines of "my prophet is bigger than your prophet" will be fraught with defensiveness and aggression. However, as we build relationships with Muslims, and start to share our story, our testimony, we will be making claims that challenge their beliefs. To say that "I prayed for my neighbour and he was healed" is to say "Jesus heals". Our Muslim friend will be struck by the idea: "Wait a minute here - Jesus heals. But Muhammad doesn't." Similarly, to say "Jesus led me" is to say that Jesus is alive; for a Muslim, Muhammad is dead. We must let these comparisons arise naturally, in the course of our everyday interactions with Muslim friends: if we start to push them, then we will see walls raised very, very quickly. However, with gentle honesty and a simple telling of our ongoing story, we can be public about our faith in a way that expresses our love, and still allows the light of Christ to shine. ☞

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¹<http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=450>



But then I read a newspaper article about a local reverend who was praying for people with terminal illnesses, and God was healing them. Something stirred inside me, and I arranged to meet him. I wept uncontrollably as I told my life story, then for the first time heard how Jesus had paid the price for me to be redeemed back to God. When we prayed, peace flooded my whole body and I felt as if I was in a shower of liquid love. That night I slept like a baby! I was completely delivered.

When the reverend asked me if I would like to become a Christian, though, I was confused. Wasn't it the revered Muslim prophet, Jesus, who had healed me? Or was this another Jesus? That night I prayed a simple and honest prayer, asking God to reveal Himself to me, just as He did when I was a child. The next morning I woke up praising Jesus, and the presence of God was so real that I could almost sense His breath on my face. It has now been eleven years since I became a follower of Christ, and it has truly been an exciting and challenging journey. ☞