

Ethical Guidelines for Witness

Good Afternoon, and firstly I'd like to thank Bishop Richard for that introduction and to thank you all for taking the time to be here for the launch of these guidelines.

Over the past 14 years I've spent quite a lot of time talking to Muslims of all ages about my faith and listening to them explain what they believe and why. Many of those conversations have been interesting and fruitful, and experiences I would want to repeat. However, some have become quite competitive or even aggressive and have left me feeling frustrated, defensive and with no wish to go through it all again. I've also spoken to many people, both Christian and Muslim, who share these experiences. Meeting others and sharing faith can be fascinating, stimulating and even (dare I say it) great fun, so what marks those encounters out from the ones that leave a nasty taste in the mouth and put people off ever wanting to do it again? This is something that has exercised me over the past few years.

Exploring this further I've spent quite a bit of time reading a range of books on Christian-Muslim encounters and the theology of religions. Some of these books were even worth reading! What I became aware of was that, whilst many good scholars were debating whether or not Christians and Muslims should, or could engage in evangelism with people of the other faith, out on the street Muslims and Christians were just getting on with it. Many from both faiths who I talked to had a real sense of conviction that to express their faith authentically they needed to share their faith with others.

As a consequence of these experiences I, along with other colleagues on the Christian-Muslim Forum, became concerned not to stifle the conviction of those engaged in evangelism or Da'wah. Our concern is to help them consider what could be ways of doing this that we might want to describe as 'ethical'? How can they apply these principles into whatever models or approaches they might adopt? So in one sense this paper is borne out of pragmatism, but it also comes from a genuine desire to recognise and affirm those, of both faiths, who want to share their faith with others and to help them do it in a way that treats the people they meet Honourably.

There are three important things worth noticing about this paper

1) It's short. We could easily have ended up writing a book on ethics which would have been debated amongst academics and that would have been a worthwhile task. That wasn't our aim. Our concern is to help your average Muslim or Christian who isn't undertaking academic study but does want to share their faith with those around them. So we've deliberately kept it easy-to-read for anyone.

2) Our language. The trouble with a task like this is what definitions one uses. For Muslims the word "Da'wah" was considered readily acceptable to my Muslim colleagues on the Forum. However within the Christian faith we've got dozens of words and concepts to choose from. We could have talked about mission, witness, evangelism or evangelisation. All concepts that theological students can spend hours discussing. But many of the folk out there aren't concerned about all these terms (or even know about them). If one matters more than another to you, feel free to take these principles and apply them to your evangelism or mission or whatever it is you do.

3) We don't describe or promote one method over another. Christians and Muslims are an amazingly creative bunch. People are sharing their faith in a wide variety of ways, including, conversations over meals, social networking sites, when caring for the sick and needy through videos, bookstalls and debates. We want to recognise and affirm that diversity, but to challenge all of us to ask 'When I share my faith, am I doing it in a way that treats the other person ethically?', 'Does this booklet I'm giving out explain my faith without insulting or ridiculing the person who will read it?' 'Am I putting too much pressure on this person, are

they able to say 'No' if they want to?' 'Do they know what my motivation is?' 'Have I thought through the consequences for this person if they convert? How will I help them and their community understand the decision they've made?'

So we commend these short, pragmatic, yet heartfelt guidelines to you and pray that they may open up some honest and fruitful discussions about our approaches to Mission (or evangelism or faith sharing) or Da'wah in Britain today. I speak as a Christian working for Scripture Union an established mission agency that's been working in the UK for over 140 years. We take our inspiration from the Bible, which we believe to be the inspired word of God. So I would like to finish by reading a section from St Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians where he describes the way he, Silas and Timothy worked. I think this is an excellent example for us today:

"¹ You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. ² We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. ³ For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. ⁴ On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. ⁵ You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. ⁶ We were not looking for praise from any human being, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our prerogatives. ⁷ Instead, we were like young children among you.

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, ⁸ so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. ⁹ Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

¹⁰ You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. ¹¹ For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, ¹² encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory."

(1 Thessalonians 2: 1-12. Taken from 'Today's New International Version'.)