



Number 39

Как слышать без проповедующего?

# How Shall They Hear ....?

Siberia Letter of Rev. Alan Ludwig

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## Jesus and Islam in the Air

My call to serve in Russia gives me numerous opportunities to speak of Jesus Christ and His salvation, not only to seminarians and church members, but also to people outside the church. I do a fair amount of traveling, and on trips it's relatively easy to engage Russians in conversations about life and death and meaning.

Other opportunities present themselves as well—on overseas flights, for example. Sometimes seat mates don't want to talk at all, but sometimes they do.

### A Ready-Made Opportunity

My work and the place I do it almost inevitably invite discussion. A conversation may go like this:

"Where are you going/coming from?"

"Russia. Siberia."

"Oh, really? What are you doing there? Just visiting?"

"No, I live and work there."

"Really? What do you do?"

"I teach."

"Teach what?"

"Christian theology."

Then, if my *sobesednik* is European or American, the most common reaction is, "Interesting." The expression on the face says, *One of those*. "Hey, what about those Cubs?" says the American. The European turns back to her e-book.

But sometimes the discussion continues. So it was this past year, when I sat by a man from Pakistan, whom I'll call Mahmoud, who is studying in the States. The conversation began much as described above. When he learned that I was a Christian and a Lutheran, my interlocutor told me that he was a Muslim.



### True Tolerance

From this a rich exchange followed. I wouldn't call it merely civil. It was downright cordial. It was a discussion between two men with deeply held convictions, each believing the other was wrong and he was right, and yet with a willingness not only to speak but to listen and learn. Each of us had a deep respect for the other's sincerity, if not for the other's actual beliefs. Sometimes it's easier to talk about matters of faith with a person of a completely different religion than with a nominal Christian or with a secularist, who doesn't understand belief in anything other-worldly. At least a religious person knows what it means to devote one's life to a conviction and can respect that in another.

### Who Is Jesus?

"Mahmoud" showed some knowledge of Christianity. He asked me about Jesus, and I told him that for us Christians Jesus is the Son of God and our only Savior. We cannot save ourselves by our pitiful good deeds, but are saved by the cross of Christ and his resurrection. He told me that for Muslims Jesus is a great prophet, but a mere man, not the Son of God. When Jesus comes again, he will point the world to Mohammed as

the true prophet and Islam as the truth. Both of us well understood that these are two very different and incompatible views of Jesus of Nazareth.

### Islam

At one point "Mahmoud" asked me what I thought of Islam. I answered that I would like to hear more from a first-hand source. He explained the part about Jesus' role, and said that his faith teaches that in the last days Islam will prevail worldwide. I asked him about the different factions in Islam such as Sunni and Shiite. He said that wasn't such a big deal, that most Muslims accepted all of these factions as "true believers," even if misguided in some respects.

Not surprisingly, Muslims, like Christians, teach that only the faithful will inherit eternal life. For Muslims, this is based on their good deeds, which largely consist of keeping the laws of Islam. One of the surprising things that my friend told me was that "bad" Muslims will be saved in the end, but will spend some time in hell as punishment for their sins. What he told me seems very similar to the Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, which, although it is not hell, is still a tormenting place of fire for purification.

### Terrorists

This led to the question of Muslim terrorists. Are they true Muslims? I approached this question from various angles and could get no answer. I said, "If a so-called Christian murdered people in the name of Christ, we would not consider him a true Christian." No response. Finally I said, "After the tragedy in Beslan, Russia, some years ago, where hundreds of schoolchildren were taken hostage and many died, including the hostage-takers, I heard an Imam on Rus-





sian television say that those terrorists are in hell. Would that be your position as well?" "Mahmoud" readily agreed, saying, "Of course those terrorists will be in hell." Yet, after the previous part of our discussion, I gleaned that they are still considered among the faithful, not among the infidels. Their punishment, however long, will be temporary.

## The Contrasts

From this I came to understand why peace-loving Muslims generally will not denounce radical Islamists. Even if they don't accept the violent methods, they share the belief of terrorists that Islam must win out. Christians, by contrast, believe from the Scriptures that the number of the saved will be few, that there will be a "little flock." The Bible doesn't teach that Christianity will prevail in this world, according to power and numbers. As we come ever closer to the end of the age, the Christian church will be more and more subject to persecution.

Historically, Islam has spread by the sword. Christianity has spread by the Word. There are exceptions on both sides, of course. Some have tried to convert the world to Christianity by force. But those who have done so have betrayed their Master, who preached a kingdom of peace, not of earthly might. In this the two faiths differ at their cores.

Another huge difference, about which I didn't have the chance to go into depth with my friend, is the way of salvation taught by the two religions, and why it is so. For Islam, God (Allah) is one, and this oneness excludes his being triune. Although he is merciful, he is also just. Being outside the world, he cannot be the sole Savior of the faithful. They must work that out for themselves. By contrast, the Christian faith teaches that the one God is a Triune God. His justice demands holiness. His mercy works holiness for the unholy. The Son of God, Himself true God, came into the world as the Savior of a sinful race. The Spirit of God calls us by the Gospel, works in us faith in the Son and through the Son brings us to the Father. What God demands from us, what we cannot do for ourselves, the Triune God does for us from beginning to end.

## The Consequences

I'm not qualified to say whether "Mahmoud's" views are orthodox in every respect, that is, to what extent they accurately reflect the official teaching of Islam. But they certainly are true to the beliefs of many devout Muslims in his part of the world, at least. And they are more or less identical to what many other professing followers of Islam believe.

This conversation with a warm and caring Muslim man reminded me again that here in Russia we have many immigrants from Central Asia, and most of these nominally share his faith. Some are legal immigrants, seeking to earn a living for their impoverished families back home. They usually take the low-paying jobs that native Russians won't do. Others are here illegally. In either case, they are a field white for harvest. In general, they are hard to reach with the Gospel. Sometimes there's a language barrier: many know little or no Russian.

Often they know enough to get by, but are firm in their own convictions, even if they aren't really practicing Muslims. Like all people everywhere, they are in need of what only Christ can give.

The Christian faith differs radically from all world religions. While it is true that Christianity has in common with many religions certain standards of ethical conduct, its central message is as different from theirs as day is from night. Islam and all other religions in some way or other teach that people can find salvation, or happiness, or well-being, or prosperity or other good things by following the rules and standards set by that religion. Only the faith of the Holy Bible teaches that God in Christ has done it all, and that salvation is by God's grace alone. Sin is too great, too deep for us to overcome on our own. God's standard is too high for us to reach. While others teach the essential goodness or perfectibility of man, our faith teaches that man is too far gone to go it alone. Even divine help in the midst of human striving is not enough. God in Jesus Christ has done it all, and the gift of salvation is then received through faith, not by works.

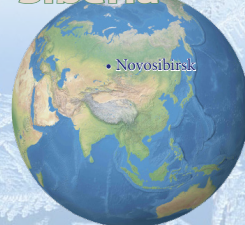
In this conviction and with this message we prepare future preachers of the Word. A few of our students have unique access to Muslim friends and relatives that we do not have. May our God give us the ability to prepare them, and give them wisdom and boldness to bring the true message of salvation to this group as well.

## Please Pray

- ✚ for "Mahmoud"
- ✚ for the seminarians, deacons and pastors of the Siberian Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church of Ingria
- ✚ for the growth of the Word in Russia
- ✚ for an open door for the Gospel among the many central Asians in the Russian Federation.

**Lord, have mercy.**

Сибирь  
Siberia



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