

Cultural clues

Read the cultural clues for each lesson as you prepare that week, these are written specifically for those with a limited understanding of Muslim culture, and are important in giving background for each week's lesson.

Lesson 1

Starting points with BMBs

The starting-point of this lesson is a conversation between a Muslim and Christ's follower. This Muslim's attitude is rather typical, though not all Muslims are the same.

'Come Follow Me' is designed for those who are already Christ's followers, but Lesson 1 explains the steps to faith because:

- This helps you, the advisor, check the spiritual understanding of the learner(s).
- Any who have not previously prayed to receive Christ, have the opportunity to do so.
- It gives learner(s) a simple way to explain these steps to a Muslim seeker.

The steps to faith described in this lesson are fairly standard, except for the last step about 'joining Christ's community' which is often underemphasized in Western presentations of the gospel. It is extremely difficult for believers from Muslim background to survive without fellowship. For them 'Christ's community' may be an organized church, an informal group of BMBs, or even meeting secretly with another believer, but some kind of fellowship is vitally important. We will study this more in Lesson 7.

New believers and counting the cost

It is realistic to point out the potentially high cost for Muslims to follow Jesus. However, some believers from Muslim background think it is off-putting to overemphasize this. Although question 13 describes the cost, question 14 makes clear that it is worth it. Ask for God's guidance about how to balance these truths according to the situation of the learner(s).

Lesson 2

Jihad

When Westerners hear the word 'Jihad', they often think of religious extremists in the news. But the Arabic word jihad only means a 'struggle'. It includes armed conflict, which in Islam is technically called the 'lesser jihad'. The 'greater jihad' is the struggle to submit oneself to Allah's moral standards. It is a similar concept to the 'spiritual battle' we fight against sin. It may be helpful to explain it in this way. However, be sensitive to the learner(s). If the term jihad means religious extremism for them, then do not make the analogy.

Postures of prayer

In the picture in question 20, the palms are turned upwards in prayer, not clasped together. Have you ever asked yourself why Christians typically bow their heads, close their eyes and join their hands in prayer? There is nothing wrong with it, but Scripture never commands us to do so when we pray, and actually gives examples of many postures.

Muslims often pray to Allah with their palms up, and your learner(s) will be familiar with this. It can be a helpful way of depicting how we come to God empty-handed, asking Him for mercy. If you wish, ask the learner whether they previously prayed this way and whether they would still like to do so as Jesus' follower.

Lesson 3

Calling God 'Father'

For Muslims, Allah is completely transcendent and he shares his divinity with no one. For them, the Arabic word *shirk* means associating any creature with God himself. Muslims believe that fatherhood is a human concept connected to sexual activity, so to call God 'Father' would be *shirk*. But when we call God 'Father', we are emphasizing his nearness to us and the relationship he wants to have with us through Christ, not implying that he is human as we are. This is explained more in Lesson 3.

Nearness to God

Muslims often view Allah as distant and unreachable. Even though they speak of him as 'closer than the vein in our necks', yet this does not mean two-way communication. The notion of a close relationship to God is foreign to most Muslims, though the

Sufi strand of Islam seeks after it. The Christian idea of God is radically different – God has actually sought us to save us, and he invites us to call him ‘Father’.

Lesson 4

Experiencing the Trinity

Muslims may turn to Jesus Christ without fully understanding his divine nature, or how this connects with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the Trinity. Afterwards they want to make sense of it, so Lesson 4 explains a little about the triune God, without going into full detail as this is an introductory course. The main emphasis is on how we experience God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit in our lives, even if we don't fully understand him.

Some believers of Muslim background have turned back from following Jesus, partly because they received no satisfactory explanation of the Trinity, so it is an important topic. Also, they need a simple way to defend this doctrine to Muslims who will attack them on it. However, we cannot be fully satisfied intellectually on this topic, and sometimes it is an excuse for moral failure. You as advisor will need to discern how deeply to go into this discussion with your learner(s) at this time.

The Holy Spirit makes God real to us, giving us access to the Father and gradually making us more like Jesus. Because of the emphasis on self-effort in Islam, this lesson stresses that only by the Spirit's power can we live as God wants. This is very important for former Muslims. According to this lesson we need to be filled every day with God's Spirit, asking him to control more and more of our lives. The lesson seeks to avoid controversy over specific Pentecostal doctrines.

Sacrifice and covenant

Though the Quran and Hadith do not officially teach that sacrifice takes away sin, popular Islam often teaches that sacrifice in some way takes away sin. This is depicted in the Muslim feast of *Eid al-Adha*, when Muslims remember the sacrifice Abraham was willing to make of his son (compare Genesis 22). However, even though some Muslims think that sacrifice does remove sin, they do not relate it to a covenant that God makes with the one who offers the sacrifice.

By contrast, in Exodus 24, animal sacrifice was not just for the removal of sin, but also a sign and seal that God's people are bound to him by a strong bond we call the 'covenant'. In the New Testament, Christ sealed the new covenant by his blood. Your learner(s) should understand that although Christ's sacrifice sets free from past sins, it does not mean we are free to go and sin again! Instead, we are bound to him strongly. We will study this more in lesson 15, questions 17-22.

Discipleship in Sufi thinking

Sufi practices are widespread in many (not all) Muslim countries. Those who strongly follow the Sufi way, find a spiritual guide/teacher called '*murshid*' in Arabic or '*pir*' in Urdu. This man has strong authority over his 'disciples' who take an oath to obey him in everything.

Depending on the background of your learners, this analogy might help them understand how strongly we are committed to following Jesus Christ (though your learner(s) might not like to call him their '*murshid*').

Muslims, the Holy Spirit & Gabriel

The Course Book here at question 8 mentions answer a) because many Muslims think the Holy Spirit is a name for the angel Gabriel (*Jibrail* in Arabic).

Lesson 5

Theology of prayer

In Chapter 3 we noted how the Christian concept of knowing God as Father – in an intimate and personal way – is foreign to Muslims. This affects prayer as well, since Christians view prayer as deeply relational. For Muslims, the compulsory ritual prayers are mainly seen as a way to remember Allah throughout the day and to earn his favour. Although Muslims also have informal prayer (called 'dua') and some do mystical meditation, yet those who become Christ's followers are delighted to find a new relationship with God they had never known before. You may like to ask the learner about their experience of prayer before and after receiving Christ.

Sufi meditation

The Sufi mystics have had a big influence in some Muslim traditions. Sufi poetry uses human love as an allegory of the soul's longing for God; the lover in search of the beloved is the human in search of God (while in Christianity it is the other way around!). Sufi meditation involves rhythmic chanting called *dhikr* (Arabic) or *zikr* (Urdu) with the aim of achieving a trance-like state and feeling God's presence.

Muslims, prayer and 'wudu' cleansing

Muslims always do the ceremonial washing called *wudu* before they carry out the ritual prayers. It is seen as a way of cleansing oneself before coming to prayer. Your learner(s) might find it helpful to think of confessing our sins as being like a spiritual *wudu*, though of course it is God himself who cleanses us, not the act of confession. However, if this analogy does not resonate with the learner(s), there is no need to push it.

Making a prayer list

The suggested prayer list starts on a Friday because this is the weekly holiday in some Muslim countries. In other places, it is Sunday. Writing the names of Muslim friends and family members might not be wise if the learner is living with them and if they might discover the course book. You could also suggest one of a variety of prayer list apps available for smart phones including 'PrayerMate' which allows for the creation of a or prayer topics and rotates them daily.

Lesson 6

Muslims and the inspiration of scripture

Muslims have a different understanding of holy writings to Christians. For them, the Quran is Allah's eternal word, written in heaven and revealed through the Angel Gabriel to Muhammad. Muhammad merely wrote down in Arabic exactly what Gabriel dictated. Christians, however, believe that God inspired or literally 'breathed into' humans to write Scripture. God used the human writing process for his divine purpose and saved it from error. Muslims see the Arabic Quran as the only word of Allah; all translations fall short of this status. Christians believe that the Bible can be translated into any language and still remain just as much the Word of God.

Most Muslims believe that the Bible has been changed. Your learner(s) may be convinced of its reliability but may still need help in how to explain that to their Muslim friends. Also, they may be puzzled about variations in the wording of different translations, or about why so much of the divine scripture describes the activities of humans.

Storylines and God's self-revelation

The Bible is structured as a great story spanning from Genesis to Revelation – from creation to new creation. At the core of this story is God sending himself to us. The Quran contains statements about Allah's character, and prescriptions for living according to Allah's standards; it has a mix of short stories throughout, but they are not in chronological order and there is no unifying narrative running through it. In Islam, God revealed himself by sending a book, but in Christianity, God revealed himself by sending himself, and this self-sending is at the centre of the Bible's story.

Lesson 7

Two special stones

Millions of Muslims have gone on pilgrimage to Mecca, where the black stone of the Ka'ba marks the very centre of their devotion. But for us, Christ himself is the even more precious stone at the centre of our devotion, and the cornerstone of our 'spiritual house'!

Healing a divided identity

One British Pakistani girl grew up confused about her identity, torn between the British part of her and the Pakistani Muslim part of her. When she turned to Christ she said she found one new identity, and it was 'astounding'. The Bible passage which spoke to her most powerfully about this was the one we have just studied, 1 Peter 2:9-10.

Ummah

Muslims have a deep sense of belonging to a worldwide community which they call the ummah. For them, the ideal ummah is the community that follows the Law of Allah (*shariah*) and in theory should be governed by Islamic leaders (*caliphs*). This global community is demonstrated visibly at the annual pilgrimage, when Muslims from many countries gather in Mecca, all dressed alike. In practice however, divisions and discrimination (including racial discrimination) mean that the Islamic ummah falls far short of its ideal.

In some ways, this is similar to the Church's ideal of global community, which Christians worldwide do not always live up to. Some Arabic translations of 1 Peter 2:9 use the word '*ummah*' for God's people, and it may be helpful to discuss with your learner(s) similarities and differences.

Weighing up the risk

In some Muslim countries, there is a risk when believers meet together. Sometimes informers penetrate a group, pretending to be believers themselves. They obtain names, contact information and photos of the believers in order to expose them, and this can bring a lot of damage. In such situations believers are wise not to expose themselves to everyone straightaway, but to get to know them slowly and carefully. The Holy Spirit will show them whom they can trust more and whom they should trust less. They will be very careful about having any photos and videos of their group. However, there is also a risk the other way. If everyone is like Majid and refuses to trust others, the community of believers can never grow. Also, isolated believers grow cold in their faith. They will have no one to help them in time of need. And if their children never enter the community of believers, they will go back to the old religion. If believers want the best for their children's future they have to find their place in the community of Christ. Therefore, there is some risk if we meet with other followers of Jesus, but there is a bigger risk if we do not.

In the West, believers of Muslim background who join a church are not usually in physical danger. But in some situations, they may still want to be discreet (for instance, to avoid causing embarrassment to their families). It should be their choice whom they tell when. Christians should not gossip about them to Muslims.

Lesson 8

BMBs and the Muslim community

Muslims who turn to Christ often feel torn between their old Muslim community and their new community in Christ. Family and community ties are very strong in Islam, and those who follow Christ often face hurtful rejection by those they love the most. How may they seek to mend those relationships over time? And will they find a new 'family' in Christ's community which is as close as the old one? These are pressing and painful questions for most BMBs. Lesson 8 teaches that Christ's followers belong to two communities, the old and the new, and that they should try to play their part in both so far as possible. (This is true of all first generation believers, but the conflicts are often acute for those from Muslim background).

Lesson 9

Advising BMBs in persecution

Christians in the West can sometimes have a skewed view of persecution. We may underplay its effects or we may glamorize it. For BMBs who are experiencing persecution it is important to counsel them wisely, at both practical and psychological levels. Practically, it is usually best for BMBs to remain in their family and community, responding patiently to opposition until it settles down. In cases where there is severe danger, a BMB may be wise to flee to safety, but even then to try to rebuild contact with the family over time. Danger to life is unusual for BMBs living in the West.

Psychologically, it is important to realise how deeply hurt BMBs feel when rejected by their families, and how much they miss them afterwards. A key aspect of turning persecution to good, is to gain God's perspective on it, which is the main aim of this lesson.

Lesson 10

Revenge and forgiveness

This lesson was originally written for a country where the 'cycle of revenge' has had devastating effects over a whole generation. Although not all Muslims advocate revenge, yet it is a strong undercurrent in many Muslim cultures. Sinful human nature found in all cultures, combined with a desire to 'look strong' and to 'restore honour' in traditional societies, mean that many Muslims assume it is natural to take revenge. Therefore, Muslims who encounter Christ's command to love our enemies (this week's memory verse) find it a radical new teaching, and many have been drawn to him as a result.

Many BMBs hold hurt and resentment in their hearts towards those who persecuted or rejected them for their faith (as in Question 15, for example). Release from this is very important to help them move forward in Christ. It is for this reason that the topic is stressed so much in this lesson, and is illustrated repeatedly. Discussion of this topic may release strong emotion, but may this lead to healing!

Question 5 draws a contrast between Jesus who died forgiving his persecutors, with leaders who died on the battlefield cursing their enemies. The hint is to recall the leader Hussein, whose death at the battle of Karbala in 680AD is remembered

strongly by Shia Muslims, and which stands in contrast to Christ's death. It might or might not be appropriate to mention this to your learner(s), depending on their attitude to the Shia form of Islam.

Lesson 11

Marriage in Islam

Among Muslims as in all cultures, some marriages are harmonious and some are full of conflict, so it is hard to generalize. Muslim family life is often attractive in many aspects, though there may also be hidden abuse and heartbreak.

Islamic scholars vary in their interpretation of the Quran's teaching on marriage, and some male-dominated societies oppress women more than the Quran itself does. However, this course tackles concepts that are widely held in Muslim societies, e.g. that a man may beat his wife or divorce her easily, he may marry up to four wives, and that one valid reason for taking another wife is if the first does not bear a son. The wife also has rights under Islam, though these are less extensive than the husband's. In principle, marriage is more of a contract than a covenant.

This lesson aims to help your learner(s) re-examine their imbibed notions of marriage and build a more Biblical foundation. Common Muslim concepts are tackled throughout this chapter, in contrast to Biblical teaching, and question 10 deliberately brings these to a focus using a widely-known Quranic verse 'your women are your fields' (Surah 2:223). The Bible's teaching of one man staying married to one woman for life, and of the husband showing sacrificial love to his wife, are especially important. Lesson 11 only makes a start in this big topic, and if your learner is already married or preparing for marriage it may be good to give more teaching. This also applies if they would like more discussion on bringing up children.

Motherhood in Islam

In Islam, the mother is highly esteemed. Muslim sons are commanded to give high respect and loyalty to their mothers and there is usually a stronger emotional bond to the mother than to the father. Also, traditionally in most Muslim cultures the bride leaves her own parents at marriage and joins her husband's family, but there is no 'leaving and cleaving' for him. Hence his emotional loyalty may remain stronger to his mother than to his wife, and the mother may manipulate this to her advantage and the bride's disadvantage. This lesson addresses these issues. But these are only generalizations, and in more westernized settings the joint family system is not quite so strong.

Lesson 12

Disputes and how to solve them

All humans in all societies have disputes at different times, and Muslim societies are no exception. The three 'bad ways to solve disputes' described in Questions 7-10 are found quite often in Muslim societies, reinforced respectively by cultural values of revenge, avoidance or hierarchy. Gossip also complicates matters. Of course, these problems are found in other societies too.

Many Muslims come from honour/shame cultural contexts. That is, their idea of right and wrong is closely related to their status in their local community. If a family is publicly shamed in a community, they may feel justified to restore their honour by getting revenge. The Near Eastern culture of Jesus' day may have had these tendencies. For those in the West, Jesus' teaching to forgive usually confronts the personal level. But for those from honour/shame cultures, Jesus' command might specifically speak to the communal level, where revenge may run in family feuds for generations.

After their initial delight at joining the community of Christ's followers, BMBs very frequently encounter conflict and grow disillusioned. Learning to work through this and come out the other side is an extremely important step in their discipleship. This includes learning how to deal with disputes in a constructive, not destructive way. Lesson 12 sets out some practical steps to help them put this into practice.

Does God have emotions?

In Islam, the Creator is separate from his creatures and unlike them. Muslims deny that human actions can make him glad or sad, or that he feels our pain, because this sounds like dragging him down to our level or making him in our own image. Yet for Christians, the incarnation reveals a God who is willing to come down to our level and to share our pain. Jesus Christ felt strong emotion (compassion, anger, joy, grief) and gives us a picture of what God is like. When BMBs realise this, it changes their view of God, for he feels their pain (see Lessons 11, 18) and is saddened when they sin (as here in Lesson 12).

Lesson 13

Muslims and witness (*Shahada*)

For Muslims, giving witness primarily refers to reciting the Islamic creed (*shahada*): “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His apostle.” The *shahada* is central to Islamic identity and is one of the ‘pillars’ of being a Muslim. It is whispered in the ear of a newborn infant and chanted in the five-times-daily call to prayer.

For Christians, the earliest witness was that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and that he indeed is Lord (Rom 10:9). This witness is central to our Christian identity, and so it might be useful to use the word *shahada* to describe to BMBs the act of giving witness to Christ’s resurrection and Lordship. However, your learner(s) may dislike using Islamic terminology in this way, so be sensitive to their preference.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for ‘testimony’ also means ‘martyrdom’, and the same linkage is found in Arabic. A witness (*shahid*) who gives testimony (*shahada*) can become a martyr (*shaheed*). This is literally true for BMBs who die for their faith, like Mehdi Dibaj in this lesson. Many Iranian Christians are inspired by the example of him and other Iranian martyrs for Christ. Lesson 13 makes these connections and the learner(s) may find them quite meaningful.

For BMBs, it is a real struggle to know how, when and to whom they should speak of Christ to their Muslim family members. They may feel fear about witnessing or guilt about not witnessing. The learner(s) might be quite emotional as they speak of their struggles in this area, and their longing for family members to find Christ. Let that emotion be expressed.

Boldness or Caution?

For some BMBs, their witness and spiritual growth are damaged because they are too fearful to tell others about Christ. By contrast, others spoken out very boldly and quickly, and this too can be damaging when it provokes the wrong kind of conflict at the wrong time. Therefore, many experienced disciplers feel that it is best for BMBs to prepare the ground gradually for explaining their new allegiance, but not to stay secret for ever. How quickly to ‘come out’ as Christ’s followers this depends on circumstances, including the attitude of the family, and whether freedom in that country is very restricted or more open (as in the West).

Also, bear in mind that there is a middle position between being ‘secret’ and ‘open’. Many BMBs are open about their faith to some people whom they trust, and closed to others. Opening up is a gradual process. However, sometimes BMBs find that their faith is exposed to their Muslim relatives accidentally or suddenly, and they need to be ready for this too, with appropriate answers.

This whole topic of how to give witness is extremely important for BMBs. Lesson 13 seeks to open up the issues in a balanced way, but how these are applied will vary from one learner to another. Therefore, much wisdom and prayer is needed in advising individual believers.

The ‘Bridge’ diagram

The diagram in Supplement 2 is similar to the well-known ‘bridge diagram’ but adapted for Muslim culture in the following ways:

- It does not show any picture of God.
- It shows God above us, not at our level.
- It speaks of the Straight Path not the Bridge.

However, it is also possible to keep the picture horizontal as in the traditional Bridge diagram, and to build on the Muslim concept that we have to cross a narrow bridge to Paradise. Most Muslims are taught that this bridge is ‘narrower than a human hair’ and many are worried that they will fall off it and not reach Paradise.

We can explain that Jesus Christ is the only one who can carry us safely across that bridge. The story is told of a man Blondin who crossed the Niagara Falls on a tightrope and offered to take others across on his back. Most refused, but one trusted him and got on his back. Blondin carried him safely to the other side. Jesus Christ offers to take us safely to Paradise but we have to entrust ourselves to him. As part of this lesson you might want to show a short video clip about Blondin as suggested in the lesson plan.

Feedback requested: Please show your learner(s) the diagram in both versions: vertical (as in the course book) and horizontal (as with the bridge to Paradise). Ask them which version will communicate better with a Muslim. Please give your feedback to comefollowmecourse@gmail.com so we can change the course book later if needed.

Lesson 14

BMBs and baptism

Baptism is an important step for BMBs. It marks their allegiance to Christ and to his community. However, their Muslim families and community see this step as a mark of betrayal. In their view, the person being baptized rejects their old family and brings

great dishonour on them. This makes the family and community very angry, and in some Muslim countries they might even kill the believer. There is less risk in the West, there will probably still be severe hurt and rejection. It is important to be aware of this and to try to reduce the shock and shame for the family so far as possible.

Therefore, in preparing a BMB for baptism, don't just think about the spiritual dimension but also the social implications. Discuss with the person:

- When is the right time for them to be baptized? (Usually God will show this to them by His Spirit, so don't rush the process; but when the time is right, don't hold back either).
- Which people should be present at the baptism? (At least some close trusted friends; but what about the wider church, or what about Muslim relatives? Discuss these questions with the believer, as circumstances vary).
- Will the believer tell their Muslim family beforehand? (This depends a lot on the family situation)
- Will photos be taken at the baptism and will there be any control on their spread? (With digital photos and Facebook this is a very important question! Public spread of baptism photos may bring danger to the believers and will certainly bring dishonour to their family. The most sensitive point is when the BMB is going under the water, ESPECIALLY if it is a male baptizing a female. Such photos should be strictly controlled. But group photos afterwards, of the newly baptized person with their Christian friends, are less sensitive).
- For female BMBs, what steps will be taken to guard their modesty as they come out of the water? (Thin clothes cling when wet. Wear thicker clothes and have a towel ready to wrap around as soon as she comes out of the water).
- Can a baptism certificate be given? (This is no problem in the West but can be a danger in strict Muslim countries, for both baptizer and baptized. But some proof of baptism is important. Discuss it.)

Ritual washing in Islam

In Islam, it is compulsory to carry out wudu (ritual washing of one's head, arms and feet) before the five-daily set prayers. Less frequent is the full bath or *ghusl* which is believed to cleanse major impurity. New Muslims are taught that all their old sins are washed away when they convert to Islam, and many of them do the full *ghusl* as a symbol of that. However, those who turn from Islam to Christ often focus more on baptism as a symbol of rising to a new life than of washing away sin.

Lesson 15

Shariah and law-keeping in Islam

Lessons 15-17 tackle a very important topic for those who turn to Christ from Islam. This is because 'law' is so important in Islam. Indeed, the Arabic word '*shariah*' is not merely law in its narrow sense, but a whole way of life. As Muslim scholar Badru Kateregga wrote, *shariah* is "the detailed code of conduct for Muslims to follow, both in their private and public lives". It tells a person "how he should eat, receive visitors, buy and sell, slaughter animals, clean himself, sleep, go to the toilet, lead a government, practise justice, pray" (Kateregga & Shenk: *Islam and Christianity*, Uzima Press, Kenya (1980), pg.67). Thus, sincere Muslims want *shariah* not only to mould their own lives, but also the whole of society and culture. This obedience is believed to bring Allah's blessings in this life and rewards in the next life.

People who leave Islam may be glad to be free of this detailed code of conduct but it leaves them with puzzling questions to work through. What place if any does 'law' have in the Christian life? If it has no place, are we free to do whatever we please? If it does have a place, then what is its nature and essence? Why do we obey this 'law of love': to seek reward or out of gratitude? How can we work out the specifics of, for instance, when to fast and how much to give? What principles guide us in obeying Christ as Lord when there are so few detailed guidelines as compared with Islam's *shariah*?

Thus, the theological background to Lessons 15-17 is different from the West. In some respects, it is closer to the Bible's theological background (though there are differences too between the law of Moses and the *shariah* of Islam). The purpose of God's law in the Old Testament, its abuse by the Pharisees and the new 'law of love' taught by Jesus, are all highly relevant to BMBs.

If the material in these chapters is new to you, ask your BMB friend(s) to comment on it from their perspective. Some former Muslims will be helped by understanding that in Christ we live under a new kind of *shariah*. Others have an emotional reaction against the word *shariah* because of its baggage from their past, but they still need to understand the concept that we serve a new Master and are not free to do as we wish.

Muslims and the straight path

Every day Muslims pray, "guide us on the Straight Path". They are taught that thousands of prophets came to teach God's straight path. Only some of these are named in the Quran and, interestingly, most of those are from the Bible: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and a few others. (Muslims call them Adam, Nuh, Ibrahim, Musa, Dawud and Isa).

Muslims believe that all these prophets came to show humans the 'straight path' of God's *shariah*, so that by following this they can earn his rewards and blessings. However, even if we know what is the straight path and want to follow it, are we actually able to do so? If not, why not? This is the theological starting-point of Lesson 15.

‘Major’ and ‘minor’ sins

Muslims are taught that some sins are more serious than others. God may overlook ‘minor’ sins such as telling a lie, but ‘major’ ones are more liable to punishment. Also, if someone has the ‘intention’ (*ne-ah*) in their heart to do something but does not actually do it, it is not sin. This stands in contrast to Christ’s teaching that lust in the heart is a sin, like adultery (see question 13).

This section teaches that Christ’s holy law actually sets a very high standard. In a moral sense, it is harder to keep than the *shariah* of Islam, even if it appears easier from a ritual point of view.

Lesson 16

Muslims’ motivation for obedience

Lesson 16 continues the discussion of God’s law, which began in Lesson 15 (see there for a general explanation). The starting-point in this lesson is the contrast between obedience to God’s law out of a hope for reward or fear of punishment, and obedience springing from gratitude for all he has done for us. This is a fundamental shift of outlook when a Muslim turns to Christ.

We love because God first loved us, as shown by Christ’s death on the cross. Therefore, in response, we want to obey the ‘law of love’ which is to love God with all our hearts, and our neighbours as ourselves.

Muslims, BMBs and hospitality

Many BMBs come from cultures that highly value hospitality. By contrast, Christians in the West have much to learn in the area of welcoming people into our homes. If a BMB came unannounced to your home, would he be welcome even without making an appointment beforehand? If people in your church tell a BMB they are her ‘family’, will they be ready to take her in when her own family throws her out and she needs a place to live?

Lesson 17

BMBs and the detailed guidelines of *Shariah*

After summarizing the main teaching on God’s law from Lessons 15 and 16, this lesson asks how Christ’s followers can act on this practically, when we don’t have the same kind of detailed guidelines that are found in Islam.

We look in particular at two of Islam’s ‘pillars’ where Muslims are told exactly what to do. They must fast from sunrise to sunset for the month of Ramadan and must give away a fixed amount of their wealth as zakat (charity-tax). What should Christ’s followers do on these matters? This lesson teaches biblical principles, while recognising that different churches apply them in different ways. So, as mentor, feel free to teach your own church practice, but remember that the most important thing is for the believer to understand the principles. Try to strike a balance between giving the person specific guidelines if they want them, but not controlling their lives. Help them to obey Jesus as Lord and to follow his lead above all.

BMBs and Ramadan

In many Muslim countries, Ramadan is a special time for family solidarity. Be aware that this is a time of year when BMBs may specially miss their families. (Another lonely time is at Christmas, when Christians are busy with their own families and forget that the former Muslim is left isolated without anyone to celebrate it with).

For BMBs still living with their Muslim families, Parveen’s dilemma is a real one, whether or not to join in the Ramadan fast. Some Christians believe that this can be an appropriate way to show family loyalty; the believer can fast for Jesus’ sake not out of Islamic duty, and it avoids unnecessary persecution on a non-essential matter. Other Christians believe that it is important to take a stand and break with the family on this matter, to show a clear witness and avoid deception. But then, is not fasting a good witness, if it makes Muslims think Christians are lazy in this matter?

Discuss these different viewpoints with the learners, bearing in mind that much depends on their family situation. And if they decide not to fast in Ramadan, will they try fasting at some other time, as the Lord leads?

Muslims and giving

In the zakat or charity-tax, the amount is fixed at 2.5% of Muslims’ disposable capital each year (not their income), with some detailed guidelines on how to calculate this once a year. Individuals are free to choose where to give it, so long as it meets certain criteria such as helping the poor or the spread of Islam. Also, many Muslims give voluntarily during the year for these purposes, or for mosque expenses etc.

Lesson 18

Muslims and magic

Westerners may be surprised to find out that 'fate' and 'magic' are important concepts for many Muslims across the world. Historically, these beliefs were already present in many cultures before the people became Muslim, and the resultant mix is known as 'folk Islam'. Also, in Islam itself, Allah is seen as remote. If he decides everything beforehand and humans can do nothing to change it, this emphasizes fate as controlling their lives. Moreover, because Allah is viewed as being so high up, Muslims are not sure if he cares deeply about their problems or listens to their prayers, so they seek help from other spiritual mediators who seem to be more accessible. All these factors influence Muslims today.

The search for answers to prayer or spiritual powers or hidden knowledge, leads some Muslims into actual occult activity. After turning to Christ, they may need deliverance from bondage. For others, it may be more of a general cultural influence, e.g. of tying amulets on wrists or vehicles for 'protection'. Others may have had little previous influence like this.

Lesson 18 gives biblical teaching on this topic. But merely to point out wrong activities is less effective than examining the underlying worldview. If BMBs can truly trust in Christ who came all the way down to our level (thus feeling our pain) and then rose high above all spiritual powers (so having victory over them), then at times of need they will be more likely to turn to Christ himself for help than to alternatives. Also, Christ's death overcame the powers of darkness and frees us from living in fear of these evil powers.

Muslims and spiritual powers

Many Muslims believe in 'spiritual powers' such as:

- Angels, including some named in the Bible like Gabriel (Jibrail), as well as personal angels who record every person's good and bad deeds;
- The 'evil eye', an unseen jealous influence which can cause harm to people, such as a baby who is praised for being beautiful;
- Fate, according to which people's destiny is already written down and they can do nothing to change it;
- Jinn, spirit beings which can be good or more often evil, for instance causing illness or insanity;
- Evil spirits, similar to the biblical concept.

Group members may describe different practices used by Muslims to ward off evil influences, including: amulets for people or vehicles, charms, pictures of an eye etc.

Muslims commonly also believe in *baraka*, the invisible 'blessing' which attaches to holy people or holy places (including saints' graves), and which they seek to absorb by coming physically close. Sometimes people tie cloths on trees near these shrines as a reminder of prayers or vows they made there.

Giving condolences

In most Muslim cultures it is common to visit the bereaved immediately someone has died, to sit with them and share their grief. It is an important way to show solidarity, and is closer to the culture in Bible times (e.g. John 11) than in the West today.

However, the typical way Muslims try to offer comfort is to say 'it was Allah's will', we just have to accept our fate. In question 6 we suggest that the BMB can offer a deeper kind of comfort, based on a different view of God: a God who comes close and shares our suffering.

Lesson 19

Foot washing in Muslim cultures

Many Muslims live in cultures where feet are considered to be very dirty, much like in Jesus' day. To 'lift one's heel' against someone or to throw a shoe at someone, is seen as a great insult. Washing someone else's feet, then, is a profound way of demonstrating Jesus' humble example.

Leadership issues in BMB groups

Disunity is distressingly common in BMB fellowships, both in Muslim countries and in the West. For an individual Muslim to become Christ's follower is hard; for those followers to come together as a group is harder; for that group to remain united under mature leaders is harder still. Good leadership of BMB groups is a hugely important topic!

The 'Come Follow Me' course is for new believers, so it hardly touches on issues of leadership. These are briefly introduced here in this lesson, but you can follow this up more in future, when the learner(s) are ready for it.

Lesson 20

Muslims, pilgrimage and paradise

For Muslims, it is a religious duty to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lives if they can, though this is only possible for a small proportion of the world's Muslims and is seen as a privilege. This course has made hints about Islam's 'pillars' in different ways, though not putting too much stress on them since some BMBs prefer to make a clean break from Islamic concepts.

In this lesson, the comparison is made with the Christian life as a pilgrimage to heaven (the famous book *Pilgrim's Progress* does this too). In Islam, heaven is described as a paradise with many pleasures. In Lesson 20, the main joy of heaven is taught that we will be with God himself and enjoy his close presence forever.

Jerusalem and Zionism

This is a hot topic in discussion with Muslims, and BMBs are often caught in a dilemma. Their Muslim upbringing may have taught them to hate the Jews and to react strongly against Zionism. But, becoming Christ's followers, they have to grapple with understanding God's covenant with the Jewish people in the Old Testament and with passages which celebrate 'Zion'. Moreover, they encounter different Christian interpretations of prophecy about the Jews, including some Christians who seem to support all actions of the modern state of Israel and even to view Arabs as their enemies. Yet if BMBs take a very pro-Israel stance it confirms the impression among their Muslim relatives that they are traitors.

All this can be confusing and hurtful for BMBs. So how can they fit it all together in their heads and their hearts? This lesson only touches on this issue very briefly and you don't need to go into detail, but you should be aware of its sensitivity.