

Understanding Somali Culture and Ministry

A Guide to the Somali People, Islam, and Sharing Christ Among an Unreached People Group

Part I: Understanding Somali Culture

1. Somali History

There has been an African population with less ethnic diversity than Somalis. Somalis share a common culture (language (Somali), ethnicity and traditions, poetry and customs.) They have had a history of thousands of years of being nomadic pastoralists that were dependent on rainfall to determine if their young would survive. A person's wealth was based on how many camels he owned and therefore a man's honor rested with the number of animals he owned. In order to ensure that everyone would survive during times of drought or starvation it created a society of generous and courageous people that took care of their families at all costs. In fact, hospitality is still considered a sacred tradition today, when you invite someone into your home you cannot harm them.

Islam entered the Somali Peninsula by way of coastal trade routes in the 7th-9th century, which combined the identity of the Somali people with Islam for well over 1000 years. During the Colonial Era, Britain controlled British Somaliland while Italy ruled Somalia. France also established control of parts of the area now known as Djibouti. The unification and independence from these colonizers occurred in 1960. However, civil war erupted in 1991 after the collapse of the central government. As a result of the ongoing civil war, Somalis experienced over two decades of violence, widespread hunger/famine and massive migration/displacement. Therefore, there are millions of Somalis living outside of Somalia. There is one of the largest refugee/diasporic communities around the world. Today, there are large groups of Somalis in Kenya (in particular refugee camps like Dadaab), in the Gulf States, in Great Britain, in Holland, in Canada and in North America (for example, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Toronto, Columbus, and Seattle.)

Ministry implication: Most Somalis encountered in North America or Europe carry a story of displacement, loss, and resilience. Trauma-awareness and patience are essential; assumptions of comfort or stability may not apply.

2. The Ancient Somali Religion

Before Islam was developed in the Horn of Africa, there were already spiritual and religious views within Somalia. These beliefs connected the physical world to an invisible spiritual world. The most central element in this view was belief in a higher being called Ebbe Waaq (also referred to as Waq or Waaq/Waqa).

Waaq in the traditional sense is believed to be the Creator of the universe. He controls everything created by him; specifically, he controls rain, fertility and blessings. Humans are dependent on Waaq for their very existence. In a land where people depend on animals, pastures and rains for their livelihoods, it follows that the Creator is viewed as the essence of life. There are other elements of the traditional religion of Somalia including fear of spirits, honoring of ancestors and seeking supernatural assistance for rain, protection from evil and removal of curses — all which still exist with Islam today.

3. How Islam Came to Somalia

Around AD 615, a group of early Muslims who were fleeing persecution in Mecca sailed across the Red Sea to Abyssinia (now modern-day Ethiopia & Eritrea) with their faith and brought Islam to the Horn of Africa. In the next few hundred years, Muslim merchants traveled up and down the Somali coastline via ports like Zeila and Mogadishu.

In contrast to other areas that were invaded by an army, Islam arrived in Somalia largely because of the trade, marriages, visiting teachers, and religious leaders that were well-respected in society. It was not until the 13th century that Islam would firmly take hold in the region: mosques were built, schools were built where children could study the Quran, and eventually Islam and being Somali became almost one-in-the-same. This means for over 1,000 years to be Somali is to be Muslim. Many Somalis will tell you they are simply "born Muslim". To many Somalis, Islam is not only a faith system – it is cultural heritage, family tradition, national identity.

4. Clan: The Heart of Somali Society

Somali people live in clans which have their own form of governance. Therefore when two Somalis meet they usually start with questions such as, "What is your name -- and what is your abtiir (clan)?" To Somalis asking these types of questions is completely normal. A person's clan gives him or her identity, where he belongs, who will protect him, his family connections, expected marriages, those who will defend him or be a negotiator, etc., and those who will eventually bury him.

There are five main clan groups including Darod, Hawiye, Dir, Isaaq, and Digil & Mirifle (Rahanweyn). Each clan has many smaller clans and lineages based on patrilineal descent. Clans are not simply the genealogy of people but also act as a system of social security. It includes obligations to one another, protection from others (diya payment if someone harms another member of the clan), marriage arrangements, and resolving disputes (customary law called xeer).

One of the first assessments made by Somalis regarding other Somalis is how much loyalty, generosity, etc. they owe their fellow clan members because clan membership shapes all aspects of trust, hospitality and social status.

In the past, there was no central government in Somalia. Instead, elder men would gather under trees to resolve disputes using customary laws. Age, wisdom, consensus and relationship-building were important considerations.

A clan helps create loyalty, generosity, protection and a sense of belonging. No Somali should ever have to go through hard times without being helped out by their clan. However, the clan system can lead to tribal rivalries, revenge, favoritism and divisions within a group. Clan rivalries were among some of the driving forces behind Somalia's Civil War and still remain a sensitive issue today.

Ministry implication: A single Somali convert rarely represents an isolated decision — their choice affects an entire kin network, and conversion can mean loss of the clan's protection and belonging, often a far greater felt cost than doctrinal disagreement. Ministry strategies must account for whole-family and whole-network dynamics, not just individual persuasion.

Jesus created a new family rather than asking people to hate their families. Ephesians 2 says that Christ destroyed the barriers that prevented groups from being hostile to each other, and as such Christ made believers of every tribe and ethnic group a single family; although doing so did not cause them to lose their earthly identity.

5. Honor and Shame

Somali culture has its own way of operating -- primarily through the lens of honor/shame, and not guilt/innocent that is prevalent throughout most of the western Christian world. Sharaf (honor), is a group oriented, with family, clan,

community being considered as "us", and not "I". Therefore when a member brings shame, everyone within that family/clan/community feels it. It is also through hospitality, generosity, modesty etc., that individuals demonstrate sharaf; conversely, public humiliation/exposure/betrayal of family/community members are very much feared and avoided.

Individual actions can have a profound effect on the entire family and clan, leading many Somali believers to be secretive about their faith -- not always due to fear of physical harm for declaring their faith, but mostly out of fear of bringing sharaf (shame) onto the ones they love. For this reason, making a public confession of faith in Jesus Christ and receiving baptism can be a courageous decision.

An apostate from Islam is seen as a public transgression against his/her family and community's sharaf -- often more of a social issue than an intellectual one. A Somali believer may make public declarations that he/she does not believe in Islam while privately questioning aspects of their faith, since family decisions regarding beliefs/public confessions can be extremely difficult to reverse.

Understanding these dynamics changes the way we do evangelism -- requiring us to be patient, build trust, demonstrate unconditional love, and take our time.

Ministry implication: Gospel presentations built solely around "sin and guilt before a holy God" may not land the way they do in guilt-based cultures. Framing that engages honor, shame, covering, and restored belonging — concepts rich throughout Scripture, such as the prodigal son, Christ bearing our shame at the cross, and adoption into God's family — tends to resonate more deeply.

Hebrews reminds us that Christ suffered the cross with disdain for its shame. In suffering the cross, Christ suffered the shame we have suffered; but in Christ's resurrection and adoption of us as his children through the gospel, he has given to us a new standing of honor. Therefore, the Gospel provides the ultimate answer to the most basic desire for honor-and-shame cultures.

6. Family and Community Values

Somali society is deeply communal; the individual is never viewed in isolation. Extended family and communal identity take priority over individual autonomy. Children belong to the extended family — grandparents help raise grandchildren, and aunts and uncles function like parents. Decisions (marriage, career, even personal faith) are rarely made alone and are frequently made in consultation with, or under the authority of, family elders; marriage joins families, not merely two individuals.

Elders are highly respected, and age and gender hierarchies structure social interaction. Gender roles are generally traditional and clearly defined, and cross-gender interaction between unrelated adults is often limited, especially in more religiously conservative households.

Hospitality is highly valued and a matter of honor — guests receive the best food, even from families with very little, and tea often begins conversations. Relationships matter more than schedules.

Ministry implication: Relationships built through households and families, rather than individual, decontextualized encounters, are far more fruitful and appropriate. Ministry teams should be mindful of gender pairing (women engaging women, men engaging men) as a matter of cultural respect.

7. Oral Tradition and Storytelling

Somali people have a long history of preserving their history through oral traditions such as poetry (gabay), and by telling stories. The fact that there was no written form of Somali until it was standardized in 1972 has contributed to an emphasis on retaining identity through stories. It's common for many Somalis to be good at communicating with others and because they have a strong connection to stories.

It's one of the reasons why chronological Bible storytelling, which takes listeners through the entire biblical narrative from creation through Jesus Christ, can be so successful in reaching Somali people. Rather than trying to reach Somali people with abstract arguments based upon a series of disconnected verses (or proof texts), they are able to tell the overall story to them on their own terms.

Stories that relate to the "honor-shame" worldview (the fall as breaking God's order or shalom and causing humanity to lose their honor, the prodigal son, Joseph being betrayed and restored after his humiliation, Christ taking shame on himself when he died on the cross) tend to resonate more strongly than those presented as primarily based upon guilt, or strictly based upon law.

8. Identity Crisis: Who Am I Now?

Imagine growing up with the constant message: "You are a Somali because you are a Muslim." And then discover Jesus. As soon as this happens, immediately people say: "You're no longer a Somali," "You belong to the foreigners," "And you've betrayed your ancestors" — the new Christian is now in an identity crisis.

But the Bible has answers. A Somali follower of Christ is still a Somali; he just became a Somali follower of Jesus. A person can keep their language, show hospitality, compose poems, be respectful of elderly members of their family, have love for their families and at the same time worship only Christ. Instead of destroying all cultural practices, the gospel will redeem culture.

9. Common Somali Perceptions of Christianity

Many Somalis have had little opportunity to meet an adult Christian, therefore their perceptions about Christianity come primarily from what they hear in the media or as rumors/religious polemic. Some common beliefs/perceptions include: "Christians believe in three Gods", "Christians altered the Bible", "Jesus did not die on the cross for our sins", "Christianity is for white Westerners", and "To follow Jesus you will abandon your family". There is no one view held by all Somalis (each person has their own), so it would be unwise to assume these views are held by each individual — many have real questions and are open to discussing their faith if approached with kindness and respect.

Due to some of the previous assumptions/beliefs, Christians should patiently teach scripture from the Bible, rather than assuming both parties share the same definition(s). In addition, a positive approach to sharing Christ includes showing love; listening; and being respectful; building relationships; honoring others; staying curious; being hospitable; faithfully praying; clearly sharing the Word of God; and remembering that conversion is truly the work of the Holy Spirit, not human persuasion.

Part II: Understanding Islam

1. Basic Beliefs

The Shahada (Creed) — "There is no God except for Allah; and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah." — is the most basic declaration of faith in Islam. The Five Pillars of Islam include: Shahada (Declaration of Faith), Salat (Five Daily Prayers), Zakat (Charitable Almsgiving), Sawm (Fasting during Ramadan), and Hajj (Pilgrimage to Mecca). The Six Articles of Faith are: Belief in Allah, Angels, Books (Torah, Psalms, Gospel, and Quran which is believed to be the last and corrected Book), Prophets (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Isa/Jesus), Day of Judgment and Qadar (Divine Predestination).

Islam is strictly monotheistic (Tawhid) — Shirk (associating partners with Allah) is the most serious of sins. Jesus (Isa) is recognized as a Prophet and Messenger by Islam, He was born to the Virgin Mary (Maryam) and performed

Miracles — however Islam does not recognize Him as being Divine, nor His Sonship, nor that He died on the Cross. Salvation in Islam is typically seen through submitting to Allah's Will and having your good and bad deeds weighed — instead of being saved through Atonement, Grace or Good Works alone.

2. Similarities and Differences with Christianity

Shared beliefs include the belief in One Creator God; the existence of angels and other non-physical, non-visible, spiritual entities; the belief in being accountable to God for our actions and the concept of an afterlife where we will be judged; and the veneration of many of the same individuals (Abraham/Ibrahim; Moses/Musa; Mary/Maryam; Jesus/Isa). Many Christian and Islamic communities also emphasize similar values in regards to prayer, fasting, giving to others, and the authority of scripture. Furthermore, many Muslim and Christian traditions accept humanity is sinful and accepts God's mercy.

Theological differences that are significant include: the nature of God (the Trinity of Christianity or the singular unified nature of God in Islam), the identity of Jesus (Jesus as the divine son of God who died and resurrected from the dead; Jesus as a man/prophet of God who did not die on the cross), the means of receiving salvation (salvation through grace because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross; salvation based upon one's own submission to God's law and the weight of their deeds), the nature and reliability of scripture (the Bible is considered by Christians to be the fully revealed word of God while many Muslims have been told that the Bible has become corrupted/tahrif'ed and has been replaced by the Quran), and finally assurance of salvation (many Christians believe they can know that they will be saved because of what Christ has done while few Muslims can say with certainty how they will be judged).

3. Respectful Engagement

- Approach your conversations with other people with a willingness to learn from them, and to be open to new ideas. Remember that when you approach someone else, it's about building relationships, not just winning debates.
- Learn the right words to say so that you can show others that you are serious about respecting their world-view. Use the correct Arabic words such as Isa (Jesus), Injil (the Gospel), Tawrat (Torah), and Zabur (Psalm).
- Avoid being disrespectful of the Quran, the Prophet Muhammad or how Muslims pray. When eating together, do not serve pork or drink alcohol. Be aware of prayer times and Ramadan.
- Do not interrupt the person who is speaking by rushing to respond. Listen to what they are saying. Somalis take hospitality seriously in conversations. They expect that there will be disagreement but that disagreements will be respectful.
- Many Somalis experience some form of Islamaphobia or suspicion in western countries. Therefore, build trust with warmth and respect towards them. The last thing you want to do is to start off with a confrontational meeting.
- Don't try to push the issue of the crucifixion at the beginning of your relationship. Build trust and develop a true friendship first.

Part III: Sharing Christ with Somalis

1. Building Friendships

Long-term, consistent friendships with Somalis is the primary, best way to access their communities. Somali people are relational (relationship-first) not program-based (program-first). Consistency is better than intensity - be there for a year or two and then maybe three; learn the birthdays of your friends' children; celebrate when they get married; show up at the funeral; build trust through shared experience as you live out your faith with them.

2. Hospitality Ministry

Because hospitality is an integral part of being Somali, when you do ministry with shared meals, tea, or in people's homes, you're speaking in their native tongue, which they can both understand and honor. Being receptive to someone else's hospitality - just like sharing your own - gives you an opportunity to honor your friend by letting them be the host and the server to show respect to each other (mutual), rather than continuing the traditional dynamics of "helper" and "helped." Ministries that provide practical assistance - such as teaching English classes, helping refugees find jobs, providing tutoring services, coordinating meal deliveries for new mothers, and receiving refugee families into your home - create opportunities to build relational connections while addressing genuine, felt needs.

3. Story-Based Evangelism

Oral communications are part of Somali culture, as they have had an oral tradition of storytelling through poetry (gabay). Storytelling in chronological order provides listeners with the opportunity to experience the overall Biblical narrative; also many people connect better with stories that relate to their Honor-Shame worldview rather than legal or guilt-based stories. One of the most natural ways for Somalis to communicate about their faith is by telling their testimony; a personal account of their journey of faith, particularly how God has answered their prayers.

4. Prayer Ministry

Somali people; since they are followers of a prayer-based religion and in general have an openness to praying for their needs (health, family, provision, etc.) it is common to find them receptive to praying for them when you ask. Prayer for health or a need of some kind said 'in Jesus' name,' will be a natural and safe way for the Somali person to tell about how God has worked in their lives. All other efforts of outreach would likely follow many years of praying specifically for this group of people.

Part IV: Creating a Somali Ministry Strategy

A one-year ministry plan framework that a team can adapt with specific dates, names, and local context.

1. Prayer Strategy

- Establish a core prayer team that is praying regularly (weekly), for the Somali community in your area as well as named family members/individuals working among them.
- Organize prayer walk/drives throughout the areas of town where Somalis live at least on a monthly basis.
- Set up four specific times each year for prayer and fasting based on significant times in their culture such as during Ramadan.
- Document and share examples of how God has answered prayers to keep both the team and others encouraged and believing.

2. Relationship-Building Strategy

- Find natural connection points for building relationships in communities of people who are likely to be Somalis – school systems; ESL programs; refugee resettlement organizations; community centers; work places; large apartment buildings that have high concentrations of Somalis.
- Pair two or three people on your team together as friends, but focus on developing strong friendships (deep) versus having many shallow relationships (broad).
- Instead of focusing solely on how many conversions you make, set specific relationship-building expectations such as eating a meal together once per month or going to a community event together at least once every quarter.
- Build cultural competence among the members of your team throughout this process through continued learning about Somalia and its culture; Somali speaking mentorship and consultation; and team debriefing.

3. Outreach Activities

- Practical-needs outreach: ESL tutoring at no cost, assisting with jobs and resumes, after school homework assistance, welcome packages for newly arriving refugee families.
- Community events; block party, soccer league (soccer is a very universal sport), sewing circle for women, cooking circle for women, men's tea gathering.
- Hospitality events; as well as hosting and being hosted to share meals on culturally important occasions such as Eid, birth of children, wedding.
- Health and family support when needed (translation for health and legal appointments)

4. Follow-Up Plan

- Build a basic relational database -- an open, non-intrusive "team" journal of names, families, prayer requests, and relationships; this will help you know who is connected to whom and where relational follow-up should happen.
- Culturally-sensitive discipleship should be provided to new converts using a small group model (ideally in their homes), as opposed to immediately inviting them to attend a large public church service -- especially when dealing with cultural norms such as honor-shame, and safety concerns.
- Pairing new believers together, wherever possible, can also greatly minimize feelings of isolation – the home-based fellowship model is typically much easier on the local churches than asking new converts to suddenly become part of a larger church body.
- The planning phase of your relational discipleship process should include provisions for long-term pastoral care which considers the pressures from the individual's and his/her family's social networks, potentially relational loss, and creating a new 'spiritual family' which will give support to what has been lost.

5. Leadership Development

- Identify and disciple early on some believing Somalis who will be your next generation of leaders – outside leadership should have a plan for when it no longer needs to exist.
- Create easy-to-use, copy-able and pass-along disciple-making resources (Bible storying sets, memorized scripture, etc.) that can be passed along by word-of-mouth – this is an oral-based society;

there are few literate people.

- Mentor potential new leaders in both Biblical understanding and wise decision making – how to use Jesus' teachings to lead through their families, clans, and communities, but do so in ways that avoid offending them unnecessarily.
- Set a benchmark goal: after one year of ministry among Somalis you want to find at least 1 or 2 People of Peace (a relational connection point), and then train them to become reproducing leaders in their own family/clan/community network.

Part V: Why More Ethiopian Christians Haven't Prioritized Reaching Somalis

1. Historical Antagonism, Not Just Religious Difference

Ethiopia and Somalia have been engaged in conflict for many years (1964, 1977–78 Ogaden War), and they also have decades-long border tensions/land disputes with each other — specifically regarding the Ogaden/Somali Region which is inhabited by the Somali. All of this history contributes to a great deal of distrust on both sides — long before there was any religious motivation — and, many Ethiopian Christians now look at Somalis almost exclusively through the lenses of national security/conflict or ethnicity rather than looking at them as an unreached group who need the Gospel.

2. The "Hard Field" Reputation

Somalia is generally considered one of the most unsafe places in the world to openly practice christianity (execution by al-shabaab; executions as a result of apostasy from Islam in many parts of Somalia; executions or imprisonment for practicing christianity in many other parts of Somalia); therefore it may be more difficult to encourage Ethiopian churches to invest resources in this area than in less difficult countries.

3. Internal Church Priorities

Historically, evangelical efforts of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, Protestant Pentecostal/Evangelical churches, and Roman Catholic Churches are focused primarily on either reaching unreached populations (highland/lowland ethnic groups) inside of Ethiopia for example Oromo, Afar Animist populations, as well as disciple making and organizational development among existing Christian communities. In order to reach cross border/cross ethnic/muslim missions a special type of training is required that few churches have developed.

4. Language and Cultural Distance

Somali is not intelligibly understandable to Amharic, Oromiffa, or Tigrinya. In order for effective outreach to occur, there needs to be workers who are able to communicate in Somali and are also culturally aware, however this can be difficult due to the limited number of people that have been raised in an environment where they speak and understand both languages/culture. For example, few Ethiopian Christian youth are exposed to either of these cultures/languages growing up.

5. Theological and Relational Barriers on the Somali Side

Conversion to Christianity would be seen by many in Somalia as an ethnic betrayal (not simply a religious one), due to the close cultural identification that exists there of being Muslim and being “Somali”. As such, the Somali people

are likely to be among those most resistant to converting; this will discourage long-term investments from external actors (including Ethiopian) for conversions to occur.

6. Opportunities

- The Somali diaspora (in cities such as Minneapolis, London's Eastleigh district, Nairobi's Eastleigh, Toronto and Columbus) is also more accessible than Somalia itself – there is less social pressure in these areas for engagement in relationships, and there is greater opportunity for exposure to various world views. These areas may be more fertile ground for outreach efforts based directly in Somalia.
- Ethiopian Somalis (citizens of Ogaden region), who possess both Ethiopian citizenship and Somali ethnicity and language, may have much more natural access and credibility than an Amhara or Oromo evangelist attempting to reach the same people.
- Satellite / online media bypass many of the physical access and visibility issues that make it difficult to connect with Somalis by allowing individuals to view information privately, without being exposed publicly.
- Humanitarian and disaster response opportunities (drought, displaced persons, refugees; e.g., Dadaab Refugee Camp, Dollo Ado camps) provide entry points into forming relationships with individuals who have trusted you as a result of your provision of aid. Sometimes, conversations about the Gospel can occur after building trust through practical service.
- A developing global testimony of Somali Christians – although still a relatively small but actual number of Somali-background believers presently exists and are typically the most credible witnesses to their own people due to understanding of honor/shame and clan dynamics from within.

7. Limitations to Plan Around

- Legal risks for converts in Somalia include blasphemy and apostasy charges, potential clan-based social punishments, and physical threats.
- The Clan System is a serious hindrance because a new convert will lose their relationship with their clan members, therefore they will lose their clan protections and have no claim on their family's inheritance. This is a significant loss of practical support, not merely social isolation.
- There are very limited Christian materials available in the Somali language including Bibles; discipleship literature; media etc., compared to the high demand.
- Because of past historical conflicts there is a lack of trust by Somalis towards Ethiopians that would require extra effort on the part of an Ethiopian to avoid being perceived as having ulterior motives (i.e. political motivations) as a messenger.
- Any local believer(s) that are identified as Christians are at a security risk, which requires extreme caution when discipling them. Therefore, many times discipleship takes place using relational/oral/small group methods versus public methods.

8. Practical Ways to Reach Them

- To provide safe open doors into this group — we will focus on Diasporas/Refugee Camps first, which are safer — but also have an open door spiritually.
- We would instead invest in Somali speaking / Ethnic Somali staff members (or even Ethiopian Somalis), than send unilingual Amharic/Oromo Evangelist's to share the Gospel with them.

- Instead of sharing the Gospel directly, build relational trust over long periods of time before you present the Gospel — Friendship evangelism out performs Cold Proclamation.
- Since Satellite TV, YouTube, Radio & Messaging Apps allow people to consume Media by themselves — they are great ways to reach Somalis who do not want to be forced into groups or social settings.
- Create Discipleship Material that deals with Honor/Shame issues — Clan Loss Issues — New Believers need Practical Help Processing Family Rejection.
- As much as possible, Partner across Ethnic Lines, rather than presenting Outreach as “Ethiopian to Somali” — A Multi-Ethnic Team Softens Historical Conflict Optics.
- Finally — Pray and Prepare for Long Time Horizons — Somali People Group Work Worldwide is Generally Measured in Decades, not Short Campaigns.

Conclusion: Seeing the Somali People Through God's Eyes

Jesus had compassion on the crowd as he saw them. Compassion is far greater than seeing someone’s sins; it is seeing a flock that has no shepherd. In like manner, we are to see Muslims, not just Muslims. We are to see people made in the likeness of God – individuals with history, family members carrying honor or shame, wanting to belong, and loved by Christ.

Understanding the cultural context of Somalia will not bring about the gospel. Understanding the cultural context of Somalia will create fertile ground in which to plant the seeds of the Word of God. Let us go into the land with humility, compassion, patience and faithfulness while proclaiming Christ through truth and love.

Appendix A: Terminology for Outsiders

These words are occasionally used to refer to either Somalis who are not Muslim or people that do not identify themselves as Somalis. The degree of offense they may provoke depends on how they are used; therefore, their use should be exercised with discretion, particularly in external facing communications, due to the fact that several of them have a religious connotation (as Muslims versus non-Muslims), while others reflect ethnic/national identity alone.

In general usage, these words fall into two categories:

- Gaal—originally referred to “non-muslim/infidel” however, it has been used for many years by both Somali diasporans and Somalis at home as merely a neutral word to signify “not-someone-who-is-a-Somali”, or “non-Somali,” although, when used with a negative tone, can convey somewhat of an edge.
- Ajanabi—a borrowed term from Arabic which means “foreigner,” or “stranger.” Ajanabi is considered a more formal and/or neutral term to describe a foreigner.
- Faranji (or Faranjo)—is used in certain contexts and is used in a greater number of places throughout the Horn of Africa to describe someone as “Western/European” and is also historically related to Frank/French.
- Kafir — an Arabic-origin term meaning "non-believer," used less as an ethnic label and more religiously, but sometimes applied similarly to gaal.

Appendix B: Common Somali Phrases

Greetings

- Salaam / Assalamu alaykum — "Peace be upon you" (standard Islamic greeting, very widely used)
- Waalaykum salaam — the reply ("and peace be upon you too")

- Iska warran? — "How are you?" / "What's your news?" (very common, casual)
- Nabad miyaa? — "Is it peace?" (i.e., "Are you okay?")
- Maalin wanaagsan — "Good day"
- Subax wanaagsan — "Good morning"
- Fiid wanaagsan — "Good evening"

Introducing Yourself / Starting a Conversation

- Magacaygu waa... — "My name is..."
- Waan ku faraxsanahay inaan kula kulmo — "I'm happy to meet you"
- Ma fahantaa Ingiriisi? — "Do you understand English?"
- Miyaad Soomaali ku hadli kartaa? — "Can you speak Somali?"

Polite Basics

- Fadlan — "Please"
- Mahadsanid — "Thank you"
- Waan ka xumahay — "I'm sorry" / "Excuse me"
- Haa / Maya — "Yes / No"

Appendix C: Commonalities Between the Bible and the Quran

Shared Prophetic Figures

There are several similarities between the two religions but they have differences in how the stories of these people are told and in the theological context within which they are presented. In addition to being similar in terms of content, the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah (Nuh), Abraham (Ibrahim), Moses (Musa), David (Dawud), Solomon (Sulayman), Jonah (Yunus), John the Baptist (Yahya), and Jesus (Isa) are found in both faiths. Each religion honors Jesus' Mother Mary (Maryam). In fact, the Quran dedicates its nineteenth Surah to her and mentions her name much more frequently than does the New Testament.

Shared Core Theological Themes

- Monotheistic — both religions require that followers believe in and worship only one God.
- Creation narrative — both religions tell creation stories where God creates heaven, earth, man and woman and where Adam and Eve live in a paradise or Garden of Eden; their disobedience and subsequent expulsion from this paradise.
- The Flood — both religions relate that God sent a massive flood upon the world when he judged all mankind and that Noah built an Ark and was saved from the flood.
- Day of Judgment / afterlife — both religions believe in the Resurrection, the Day of Judgment and reward (Paradise) or punishment (Hell) for eternity.
- Divine revelation through prophets — both religions view history as consisting of periods during which God sends prophets/messengers to direct humans.
- Moral and ethical codes — both emphasize prayer, almsgiving, truthfulness, kindness to the poor/orphaned, no idolatry, etc. and provide general commands against such crimes as murder, theft and adultery.
- Angels and unseen beings — both include angels (as examples: Gabriel/Jibril as a messenger) as part of the cosmology.

Structural and Literary Commonalities

Each is viewed as holy writing inspired by God to a prophet — the Bible via multiple authors over time; the Quran through Muhammad over about 23 years. Both utilize parables/narrative/moral encouragement as methods of teaching. Finally, both refer to one another's tradition: the Quran explicitly references previous scriptures (Torah/Tawrat, Psalms/Zabur, Gospel/Injil) as previous revelations from God while claiming to be the last correction/revelation.

Key Differences Worth Noting

The Quran denies the crucifixion of Jesus and his divinity and sonship, while these are central to Christian theology. The Quran presents itself as the final, corrective revelation, and Christianity doesn't recognize it as scripture. The concept of the Trinity, original sin, and atonement through Christ's death are Christian doctrines without Quranic counterparts.

Appendix D: Sample Q&A for a Mixed Audience

When speaking in front of a diverse group that includes both Muslims and Christians, begin by referencing what you all share in common before highlighting how your faiths differ. This can be done by using common references such as one God; using commonly known figures as a form of reference (Abraham / Ibrahim, Moses / Musa, Mary / Maryam, Jesus / Isa); and then frame the point at which your stories divide as "how the story changes" instead of "which one is incorrect." The intent should be invitation rather than confrontation. If your goal is to present the gospel, a very common method within the realm of Muslim backgrounded people is to start by referencing Isa in the Quran. Reference his virgin birth, his titles such as Word of God and Spirit from God, his miracles etc., as a way to connect this information to the Bible's full understanding of who Jesus Christ truly is. Do not refer to either of these texts as "corrupt" or "incomplete." Use respectful language when referring to each other (use Isa and not just Jesus). Develop a strategy for addressing any questions that may arise directly related to the crucifixion or the trinity.

Q: The Quran says Isa was not crucified — it only appeared that way. How do you respond to that?

I completely get why that is the first question so many of you are going to ask, as it is a significant difference in these two works, and I am not trying to deny that.

Now, here is one way I might encourage you to consider this: Both works agree that Isa is presently alive with God (we have an agreement here). Where we have differences, however, is as to how Isa arrived where he is today. The Quran states that Isa was taken up by God alive and without death. The Bible indicates that he was physically raised from the dead on the third day after having died; and further, the Bible suggests that Isa's death was not a defeat, but rather it was the very reason for which He had come.

Wouldn't it be interesting to know if Isa truly is the Word of God and has been sent for a purpose greater than any other prophet? What could that purpose possibly be?

The Bible responds to this by saying that the cross was not something done to Him against His will, but rather something He chose to do out of love. This is a worthwhile read for yourselves in the Gospel accounts, using fresh eyes prior to making any decisions regarding it.

Tonight, I am not asking you to agree with me. Tonight, I am asking you to seriously examine my words through honest eyes, just as you would expect others to view yours.

Q: Christians believe in the Trinity — three gods. Doesn't that contradict the idea of one God that both our books teach?

It is a very valid question. First of all, let me make this perfectly clear. We are both on the same page here. Christians do not worship three different Gods.

We agree totally that there is only ONE GOD; that is never going to be a matter of contention between you and I.

The Bible simply states that the One God has revealed Himself in three ways -- as FATHER, as WORD (which is Isa) and as SPIRIT. Three expressions of ONE GOD. A MYSTERY. I am being honest -- it cannot be explained using human reasoning -- just like God Himself can NOT be understood or explained by man.

I would go back to where we have already found common ground this evening. The Quran refers to Isa as "A Word from God, and a Spirit from Him". The wording in the Quran, referring to Isa, is much more consistent with the Christian view of the TRINITY than many people assume.

Q: Why should I trust the Bible over the Quran, or the Quran over the Bible?

I'm not going to ask you to completely put your faith in one book tonight rather than another - that isn't a choice people should have to make just because someone asked it of them.

What I am asking is much smaller and more genuine: go read the Gospel accounts of Isa's life by reading Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John and see who Isa is on his own terms as well as through his own words and deeds. Read him for himself and don't rely upon some report about what he said. That's all I am asking. Everything else will be up to you and God.

20 Discussion 20 questions:

1. Why is it important to understand Somali culture before attempting to share the Gospel?
2. How has Somalia's history including Islam, colonialism, and civil war shaped the worldview of Somali people today?
3. Why are Somali identity and Muslim identity often viewed as inseparable?
4. How does the Somali clan system influence trust, protection, marriage, and decision-making?
5. Why can a person's conversion to Christianity affect an entire clan rather than just the individual?
6. What is the difference between an honor-and-shame worldview and a guilt-and-innocence worldview?
7. How can the Gospel be presented in ways that address honor, shame, and belonging?
8. Why are family, elders, and community relationships so important in Somali culture?
9. What are the basic beliefs of Islam, and how do they differ from the central teachings of Christianity?
10. What similarities between Christianity and Islam can serve as bridges for meaningful conversations?

11. Why should Christians approach Muslims with humility, respect, and genuine curiosity instead of a debate mentality?
12. How can learning respectful Islamic terms and customs help build trust with Somali friends?
13. Why is long-term friendship more effective than short-term evangelistic events when reaching Somalis?
14. How can hospitality become a powerful ministry tool among Somali communities?
15. Why is story based evangelism especially effective in Somali culture?
16. How can offering prayer in Jesus' name become a meaningful bridge to sharing the Gospel?
17. What are the essential components of a one-year Somali ministry strategy?
18. Why have many Ethiopian churches historically not prioritized reaching Somalis with the Gospel?
19. What opportunities exist today for reaching Somalis through the diaspora, media, refugee ministry, and Somali-background believers?
20. What practical challenges such as clan pressure, honor and shame, historical conflict, and security risks must Christians prepare for when ministering among Somalis, and how can they respond wisely?