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# The Challenge of Missions in the Islamic World

DAN McVEY

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Who would have thought just a few years ago that “Sunni” and “Shia” would be common words in the everyday vocabulary of Americans? Yet, with the wars in the Middle East (or Southwest Asia as it is more commonly referred to today in socio-political circles) and the emerging global influence of Islamic cultures around the world, we are increasingly cognizant of the religion and history of Islam. Beyond the twenty-first century’s abundance of ethnic, religious, international and politically strategic tensions that have varying levels of connection with Islam, there is the fact of the growing Muslim population in the traditionally non-Islamic world. In addition to more than 1.2 billion Muslims in historically Islamic people groups and nations, there are 4 million Muslims in Germany, 400,000 in Sweden, 1.5 million in the United Kingdom, and 150,000 in Denmark. Muslims make up 6% of the population of the Netherlands, 3% of Switzerland and 1.5% of Norway. Brussels, Belgium, saw 57% of all births in 2005 within Muslim families. In the next fifteen years, it is estimated that 10% of Europe’s population will be Islamic. More than five hundred Islamic organizations dot the landscape of France, with the Muslim population already larger than the Protestant.

The United States is no exception to this shift in population. Some estimates reveal that we could see the Muslim population in this country reaching upwards of 16 million by 2014. At present, Muslim families in the United States have an average income of \$50,000 per annum, making them one of the more prosperous and potentially politically influential ethnic/religious constituencies. With both the United States and the European Union expecting large immigrant populations over the next generation to maintain the present levels of economically viable worker/retiree ratios, it is safe to assume that Muslim population figures within the Western world will increase dramatically. Coupled with the dramatic population growth figures for most Islamic countries (double that of Western societies), we can know assuredly that the Islamic religion, cultures and worldviews are now part of our world.<sup>1</sup>

Western peoples of North America and Europe have long had as part of our cultural and religious biases a certain tension toward Islam and Muslims. This dates back to early Christian and Jewish refutations of Islamic theology beginning in the seventh century, just after the career of the Prophet of Islam, Abu Qasim Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim, or as we know him “Muhammad.” Beyond the polemics of theological debate, the Crusades forever seared into both the Islamic and European cultural consciences the stereotypical positions of conflict and animosity which we often assign to each other: Christians are ignoble, selfish, shameless, indulgent corrupters of true religion who wish evil on Islam. From the European view: Muslims are ignorant, violent, oppressive followers of a prophet who does not measure up to minimum standards of righteousness. From these tensions and presumptions have flowed generations of Christians and Muslims who at best tolerate one another in the complexities of living on the same planet,

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1. These figures are easily obtained from sources like the Population Reference Bureau, European Union, U.S. Census Bureau, *Operation World*, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, etc. While actual figures and/or percentages may vary somewhat, the trends are consistent in all resources.

and who at worst periodically wage war in the name of religion, civilization, political ideals or economics.

With the conflicts raging in the Middle East over the past two decades, we in the Western world are being introduced once again to the testing realities of a religion that challenges our belief systems, our cultural values, and our economic dominance of the world. Islam is a religion that claims to be the most perfect rule of life and faith ever revealed to humankind. It has proven itself capable of inspiring great civilizations, nobility and dignity of life, but not according to “Christian” principles, and certainly not with any indebtedness to the West. As one of my Arabic professors of Islamic theology would always remind me, “My ancestors were doing algebraic logarithms, reading Plato and Aristotle, ruling most of the known world and delving into the arts of medicinal research and astronomy when your ancestors were yet eating one another.” A famous twentieth century Egyptian Islamist reformer, Sayyid Qutb, summarizes the pervasive view of the holism of Islamic value systems in his well known quote: “Islam is the crucible of the whole of life in which all its forms and hues are fused.”<sup>2</sup> As we encounter Islam again and again, its holism continues to challenge our Western cultural values of individualism, the benign nature of religion, the compartmentalization of religion/family/community as separate entities, and the presumed superiority of modern Western political systems.

Until recent times, the history of Western missionary attempts to evangelize and/or dialogue with Muslim people has not been encouraging. Because of the historical context of the Christian/Islamic cultural and religious divide, most attempts have been minimally successful for a variety of reasons. First, the two religions seem to be mutually exclusive. That is, Muslims regard Christians as apostates, and Christians generally reciprocate that sentiment. Second, the missionary goals have been fairly consistent in seeking to establish forms and structures of Christian faith among Muslims that not only resemble traditional European/American models, but which expect allegiance to these models and theologies as a necessary component of salvation. Third, in many cases Christian missions have equated colonial and neo-colonial definitions of civilization and progress with the “Christian” worldview, resulting in the erecting of cultural and social barriers that mitigate against a positive response on the part of Muslims. In other words, the missionary approaches have most often been interpreted as condescending and socially disruptive.

As we consider some of the challenges of missions in the Islamic world and look for helpful solutions, it is advisable that we begin by noticing the great similarities between Islam and Christianity. Although many Western Christians are not aware of this, Muslims and Christians worship the same God. To followers of both religions, the one true God is the Creator, Lord of the Worlds, God of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus and Muhammad. The Arabic name for God, “Allah,” is linguistically closely related to the Hebrew and Aramaic words for God, rooted in the Semitic “El.” If objections are raised regarding possibilities of some animistic notions being part of the pre-Islamic concept of “Allah,” we need only be reminded of the linguistic, historical and non-biblical religious roots of our common names for God—the Germanic tribal “Gott,” not to mention the roots of the French “Dieu” and Spanish “Dios” in the ancient name “Zeus.” Beyond the linguistic commonalities, furthermore, are the more important theological concepts of divine unity, authority, will, character and relationship to mankind shared by Islam and Christianity. This is not to say that our views of God are identical by any means, but it is to affirm that we are speaking of the same God when it comes to non-transferable, eternal characteristics and identity. The distinctions come more under the categories of how these characteristics of God are portrayed in divine revelation and what implications arise for the relationship between God and humankind. For example, Christian theology posits the view that fallen humankind is in dire need of a savior, thus Christ came as the divine atoning deliverer. Islamic theology emphasizes the distinction between God and creation as so great that any concept of incarnation is reprehensible on the one hand and unnecessary on the other, since God forgives purely

2. Sayyid Qutb, *Islam and the Problems of Civilization*, 1962, as quoted in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 300.

on the basis of his own will to show mercy.

Other strong similarities between Islam and Christianity are represented by the shared emphasis on the fact that God reveals his will to humanity through prophets and the written word. Again, there are significant differences in the identification of some of these prophets and the nature of revelation in the body of holy scripture. However, the commonalities we have in regarding God as a communicating God who seeks his will to be known and fulfilled in this world, along with the emphasis on judgment and a purposeful progression of history are so striking that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are often called the Abrahamic faiths. Beyond emphasizing the shared roots of faith in the one person who is equally honored by all three religions, this classification also reminds us of the common theological, historical, geographical and cultural contexts out of which our faiths emerged.

Muslims believe that Moses (Musa) was God's prophet to the Jewish people and to him was given the Torah, a holy book. Furthermore, they believe Jesus Christ (Isa al Masih) was God's prophet to the people of his time, Jewish and Greeks, born of the virgin Mary, a great miracle worker, full of compassion and grace, sinless and too good for this world. To Jesus was given the "Injil," or gospel. They believe Muhammad was the last in the long line of tens of thousands of prophets of God, given the Qur'an, a holy book consisting of the collection of the revelations given to Muhammad over a twenty-two year period. His message and ministry were first to the Arabic people, but his prophethood is in fact a sign to all mankind to submit to God in the perfection of the original religion given by God to man, reformed and perfected by none less than Muhammad himself—Islam. The moral codes, lives of service, authoritative voices, and spiritual enlightenment evidenced in each of these great prophets or messengers to humanity have resulted in many common beliefs and practices between Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Prayer, communities of faith, moral virtue, love, wisdom, faith, mercy, generosity, gratitude and hospitality are all ever-present themes in both Islamic and Christian religious lives. What we often see as such a drastically different faith system, Islam, is in fact much like our faith in most major themes. Yet, there are fundamental differences that have eternal implications.

Islam denies the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the need for atonement, the death and resurrection of Christ, and the fullness of salvation in Christ alone. There are some diverging views on these issues within the many sects of Islam, but for the most part, Islamic belief systems do not allow for the biblical revelation regarding the uniqueness of the person of Christ. In addition, some of the later messages of Muhammad in the Qur'an reveal a harsh view of the "People of the Book" (Jews and Christians):

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| 98.1–6    | People of the Book are the worst creatures.                               |
| 3.100     | People of the Book are a threat to Muslims                                |
| 9.30      | The curse of God is on anyone calling Christ the Son of God               |
| 5.116–120 | Jesus will be questioned by God as to why people call him the Son of God. |

These are only a few among many points of not only diverging views but actual direct contradictions between the two faith systems. Just as there are similarities in beliefs and history that draw us together, the mutually exclusive claims of theirs being the only religion of salvation, made by both Muslims and Christians, push them apart.

The history of Christian outreach to Muslims has been dotted with many strategies and methodologies. From the early centuries of Muslim/Christian interaction in which refutation and confrontation were the rule of the day, the Christian approach has gradually shifted to dialogue, especially during the last hundred years. This approach has been much more effective in drawing Muslims to the table for meaningful discussion of both similarities and differences. However, the larger historical and political contexts of Western colonialism of Islamic lands, the rise of radicalism within Islamic lands, the emergence of modern nation states in Islamic cultures, and the social pressures of Modernism and Postmodernism have made for rocky going in

most attempts to reach out to Muslims with a positive message of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> Because Islam does not preach a separation of religion and politics, Western cultural and social inroads into Islamic peoples have been interpreted as “Christian” missionary attempts to destabilize and weaken Islam. Into these super-charged political and social situations have gone many brave Christian witnesses. Other inter-religious settings have been primarily one neighbor reaching out to another with a message of faith. Many times, these witnesses do not emerge successful, and in some cases they do not emerge at all.

Persecution, theological prejudice, perceived and real threats, geopolitical dynamics, economic competition, cultural shifts, and social rifts all play a part in any context today in which Muslims and Christians pursue dialogue. The tenuous nature of such missionary outreach calls for a solemn assessment from our standpoint regarding several primary issues.

First, what is our purpose in engaging Muslims in dialogue? Are we out for the defeat of Islam? Are we seeking effectiveness and efficiency in missionary methods? Are we seeking to establish Western style churches with Western theology? Are we seeking to spread Western social values of government, family and religion? Islam will challenge and if not defeat at least strongly weaken any Christian message of faith that aligns or intertwines itself with an assumed aura of cultural, social or ethnic superiority. Islam is a strong, firmly established faith system, embedded in the hearts and souls of Muslims, fully confident of its history and its future. What we judge from a biblical standpoint to be spiritually deficient should not be measured as religiously weak or incapable of inspiring cohesion and devotion.

Second, what is our message to Muslims? Simple comparisons of the Bible and the Qur’an, Christ and Muhammad, salvation by grace through faith with salvation by obedience in submission, cultural norms and moral standards which have evolved from centuries of interaction with scriptural foundations accepted by the particular religions, will usually result in little progress, quickly degenerating into the fragmentation of debate. Any message that would compare the religions side by side in terms of historical and social achievements will fall upon the dust heap of failed attempts because of the failure of either faith system to maintain any sustainable socio-cultural superiority. Lest we be too hasty in condemning Islam wholesale based on the actions of extremists and jihadists, let us remember how much blood has been shed by “Christian” nations over the past one thousand years, including the “enlightened” twentieth century.

Our message to Muslims is not the religion of Christianity, nor the Western social values of Christendom. It is equally not to be identified as a particular denominational flavor of Christian theology. Our message to Muslims is Jesus Christ. Apostle Paul said, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2.2, NIV). In spite of Islamic objections to the moral need for the cross and their denials of its historicity, we must allow the gospel story to be told in historical terms, not theological, and also allow the cross of Christ to find its place within Islamic cultures. Jesus Christ is above any human system that would encase and display him. His presence and his person in kingdom manifestation of the gospel of truth are so unique and empowering that what he asks of us is our faithful witness (John 6.37–44; 1 Cor 4.20; Acts 16.14). Jesus sent out his disciples in positions of vulnerability, trust, simplicity, authenticity and service (Luke 10.1–11). It is not our creative efficiency or the juggernaut of Christian history and cultures that will open the hearts of Muslims to see Jesus as more than a prophet. It is our faithful testimony by life and word to his uniqueness and his absolute transcendence in his submission to the will of God. This matter of dialogue and persuasion among Muslims is not about intelligence or logic, but about allegiance.

Third, how best do we approach Muslims with this message of Jesus? Again, the complexities of our present world, seen in the tensions and tattered garments of history, make missionary outreach, cross-cultural ministry or any other type of Muslim/Christian dialogue difficult at best. The traditional models of

3. Samuel Huntington’s work *The Clash of Civilizations* is one of the best broad treatments of these developments. Also, the works of Bernard Lewis are considered a relatively fair treatment of both Western and Islamic views of these issues.

Western missions basically molded in the past two hundred years have arisen within the social constructs of colonialism and neo-colonialism. As that world is quickly fading away, we have the opportunity to explore new methods and strategies of missions. As we are challenged by the difficulties of Islamic evangelism, we may renew our efforts to turn to more basic understandings of what our faith is and, thus, what it is we have to offer. As we distinguish between *islam* (the concept of submission to God) and *Islam* (how that concept has developed into a religious structure), if we can focus less on getting Muslims out of *Islam* and more on getting Christ into their *islam* we may see profound transformation and conversion. Also, since traditional missions models are not generally successful in Islamic lands, we have the obligation to look at concepts like creative access, platform lifestyle and vocational missions. Actually, it is a fresh call to “mission by migration,” or living among people with our own sources of livelihood that make us part of the communities and open doors to meet people on the levels of everyday life. There, we can build relationships, pray for the community and individuals, learn, and give testimony to Jesus: We position ourselves among people and wait for the Lord to move.

The Islamic world meets us with great suspicion and curiosity. To minimize these barriers and maximize the possibilities, the burden is on us to humble ourselves to live and serve among people who seem in many ways to be opposed to the Christian testimony. God’s people are always at their best when in positions of vulnerability, humiliation and inferiority, for this is when our strength truly comes from the Lord and we bear his image in our own lives (2 Cor 3.18; 12.1–10). Couple this with a robust theology that embraces the truth of the fallenness of the world and the call of Christ to address and engage this rebellious reality in love and peace, and we have a call, methodologies and strategies that are built on grace, sacrifice and peacemaking. What we have to offer is ourselves. Will our message as American Christians be bullets and bombs via our military? Do we support and applaud kingdom progress only from a safe distance? Do we give ourselves, our sons and daughters, and sacrifice our national pride and personal security for the sake of the kingdom?

Satan has crafted a formidable scenario in which Islam seems to be impenetrable; however, more Muslims have chosen to follow the Way of Christ in the past forty years than in the previous fourteen hundred years combined. In spite of the jihadists, terrorists and seeming monolithic cultural barriers, there are many ways of reaching into the Muslim world. *As God’s word bears witness to the gospel and as God himself works in the lives and societies of Muslim peoples, our own witness of life and love can provide the third side of this great triangle of love—the word of God, the work of God and the witness of God’s people.* In Ephesians 2, Paul talks of the gospel as that which breaks down barriers, opening the covenant up to all people. Salvation in Christ has social dimensions, and our redemption has in fact social consequences. Therefore, anything that erects barriers is not part of the gospel. The forms and structures of our ecclesiastical systems, our particularly Hellenistic theologies, our evangelical tendencies to triumphalism, and our too often self-centered concerns in terms of goals and accomplishments, even in missions, are all impediments which can litter our way to true dialogue and relationship with Muslim people. The bridges we need to reach into the Muslim world are most often simply ourselves and our lives, for we become the bridges that connect Muslims to the God they know to be so far off. He comes near not only in Christ, but in us.

We must get beyond our visceral responses to threats, violence and animosity coming from some Islamic quarters. Furthermore, as God’s people, we must not allow ourselves to be controlled or our attitudes to be shaped by the knee jerk reactions to real or perceived threats to ourselves or our nation. We are citizens of God’s kingdom. To truly get beyond the surface of cross-cultural ministry and plant the seed of the kingdom in contextualized forms, we must be willing to make the sacrifices of time, resources, personal accomplishments, culturally defined standards of success, security and even life itself. In situations where worldviews and paradigms of religious and social thought are in such conflict, we need to be the ones exploring for commonalities and beginning points for gospel witness.

Any effort to share the good news with Muslims begins with a self-examination of who are we in Christ, what we really have to offer and what it means to follow Christ. We cannot assume that missionary outreach to Muslims is simply a repetition of tried and true methods from the past. The massive kingdom shifts in our time in which the churches of the South (Southern Hemisphere) are surpassing those of the North in growth, vibrancy and theological freshness require that we acknowledge God's hand and bow before his directing of the path before us. Our missionary roles have changed. Concepts like partnership, secondary supportive roles, going out in simpler and more humble fashion, creative access to difficult places, authentic community involvement without preconceived ideas of what responsiveness should look like, and a willingness to learn by doing and serving are worthy of our attention and our lives. Love is the greatest apologetic.

We in the Western world have long felt that if we reason and persuade in order to capture the mind, the heart will follow. Peoples of the Islamic world will meet our reason and logic at every turn. They rather value approaches to the heart, for where the heart is led, the mind will follow. Unfortunately, we live in a time when war, economics and social clashes dominate the news. However, what better time is there for the way of Christ to stand out in stark contrast to what it is not? Where there is war, we will sow peace. Where there is hatred, we will speak love. Where there is conflict, we will reconcile. Where there is darkness, we will live in the Light. This speaks of a holistic approach to life and missions that has always been relevant, but now is absolutely mandatory. With the testimony of peace and sincerity, with the intentionality of the gospel and with the wings of prayer, we can look to the future with eyes eager with excitement about what our Father will do. There is no better place or time than here and now.

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