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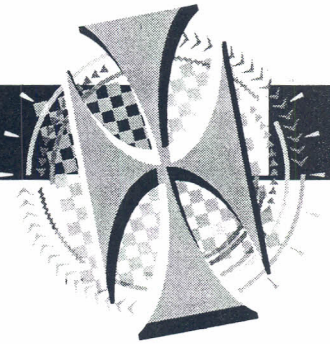
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MODERN CHALLENGES



Some *Major* Challenges In Missions to Muslims

Robert Douglas

Christians do not live well with ambiguity. Yet ambiguity is basic to life, missions—everything. Certainly, the Muslim world is characterized by a strong dose of ambiguity. It is a world of a strange convergence of factors beyond our control, a world where God’s fingerprints are often difficult to see clearly, yet where change is underway—and, with change, opportunity for Christians (who reflect great ambiguity toward Islam) to minister.

To speak of the Muslim world is to imply that it is a world. In reality, it is and at the same time is not. It is a world that straddles the earth’s waist, spanning vast continents, numbering more than one billion people, encompassing extremes of riches and poverty, education and illiteracy. It somehow defies singularity. The Muslim world, by virtue of its vastness and complexity, embodies pluralism. Yet within all its diversity there are threads of oneness that knit nation to nation, people to people, and individual to individual and thus create a global tapestry that extends back through the centuries, tying today’s Muslims to their rich history and countless forebears.

The Muslim world captures a large portion of the attention of our media today. Many of the events reported reflect an interesting mix of “success” and “failure,” often in spite of the “best” and the “worst” of people, highlighting more our culture and its fears than anything else. In the midst of it all, God is sovereign and brings to pass what he wants!

We can only hope that God’s people can be more aroused to meet the challenges presented by the Muslim world. Whether our primary concern is peace, justice, human development, or evangelism, the Muslim world calls for our best thinking, deepest faith, and most innovative and courageous action. Here are some of the major challenges in that call.

Secularization, Religious Fundamentalism, and Geopolitical Instability

This is a time of resurgent conservative religious expression—Jewish, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim. In each case, the faithful feel that their fundamental values and lifestyle are under assault. There is a longing for the “old ways,” the tried and true values, as a means of checking the growing secularization of society. The Muslim world embodies these same currents with all their contradictions. Various shades of reaction are underway. Since the impact of modern education and technology will not go away, the debate about what it means to be Muslim will continue. Struggle, social disruption, and violence are all too common by-products.

A major part of the debate within Islam and between Muslims and non-Muslims focuses on politics, law, power, and government and the appropriate interplay between them as vehicles to shape and control culture.

The church was never more involved in politics than during the era of the Holy Roman Empire (starting in A.D. 800). Under the empire Christianity became "Christendom." Such an arrangement worked only so long as there was a more or less homogeneous, cohesive society segmented into more or less stable social classes. Cohesion became increasingly difficult to maintain in the face of growing pluralism and social mobility. Finally, with the rise of national ethnic consciousness fueled by the drive for religious freedom, the formal structures of the religious empire collapsed. These same dynamics animate today's Muslim world.

Some Muslim fundamentalists are little interested in considering how Muslims and others might be integrated into a society where religion is not enforced or enforceable. At the same time, the form of Islam that departs from the tradition of voluntarism is difficult if not impossible for Westerners to endorse.

Islam has always conceived a political role for religion, a fact that has become increasingly apparent to Westerners faced with Muslims in their midst. Westerners are caught in a bind in the face of Muslim demands: the logic of religious toleration requires making concessions to Muslims, while the logic of privatized Christianity, of religion taken out of the public arena, disqualifies Westerners from dealing effectively with Muslim theocratic demands. Is a meeting between these two positions possible, and if so, on what grounds and to what end?

The late Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran once complained that Muslims have been robbed of their heritage through Western connivance. Western agents, he charged, "have completely separated [Islam] from politics. They cut off

its head and gave the rest to us." The reference is to the creation in Muslim countries of the secular national state as the successor to the transnational Islamic caliphate.

It is important to recognize the new context in which Muslims have encountered the West: not as a subjugated people in a colonial empire but as free people looking for opportunities. Westerners cannot preserve religious toleration by conceding the extreme Muslim case for territoriality; a house constructed on that foundation would have no room in it for the pluralist principle that has made the West hospitable to Muslims and others in the first place. The fact that these religious groups have grown and thrive in the West at a time when religious minorities in Islamic societies have continued to suffer civil disabilities reveals the unevenness of the two traditions.

In some instances the reactionary nature of fundamentalist fever will prompt people to seek a way of life beyond what Islam offers. Fundamentalist Islam is in the main a friend of the gospel (though not friendly to it), since it disrupts established patterns of thinking and living and drives questioning people to look for alternatives, providing opportunity for the good news. How are we to respond, and what does all of this have to do with ministry?

Refugees

This is the age of refugees, immigrants, and displaced people. The United Nations reports that there may be as many as thirty million refugees in the world, more than at any other time in this century. In the Muslim context, refugees are everywhere. Senegalese have been expelled from Mauritania and Mauritians from Senegal. Somalis have been driven into Ethiopia and Kenya, Eritreans into Sudan, Ethiopian Muslims into Sudan; the Yao, a Muslim people in Mozambique, have spilled over into Malawi. One-third of Afghans live outside of their homeland. Five million Iranians are scattered around the world. Azerbaijanis have been dislocated in their conflict with Armenians. And on it goes.

Christians need to try to think theologically about Muslim refugees! What is God doing and saying? Refugees have always had a special place in the heart and purpose of God. Abraham, the father of the faithful, was a refugee. Jacob was displaced as the result of economic problems. Israel grew up in Egypt but then was expelled into the desert. Later, Israel was displaced again—ten tribes into Assyria, and Judah into Babylon.

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It has often been in times of dislocation that people have come to new spiritual insights. Abraham would never have learned what he learned about God had he remained in Ur. It was in the course of the Exodus that Israel learned much about the power of God. It was in exile in Babylon that the Jewish people once and for all got over their love affair with idolatry and polytheism. There they developed new religious institutions, such as the synagogue. How shall Western Christians partner with God in responding to this challenge?

Urbanization

Ours is a world that is becoming more and more urban. David Barrett says that 55 percent of all non-Christian people are found in cities. By the year 2000, there will be 400 megacities, 150 in the third world alone.

The Muslim world is caught up in urbanization. Seven of the world's twenty largest cities are basically Muslim in ethos: Cairo, Istanbul, Baghdad, Tehran, Karachi, Dacca, and Jakarta. Islam is in fact an urban religion. Islam was born in a city, Mecca, and moved to a city, Medina. It leaped from city to city—Jerusalem, Damascus, Alexandria. It built great cities, Cairo and Baghdad. Islam thrives in the city. Muslims feel that they comprehend the breadth, the complexity, and the depth of city problems, and they are not put off by them. Islam's theological holism allows it to tackle city problems eagerly—jobs, education, health care, crime, and pollution.

North American evangelical Christianity has not done well in urban areas in the twentieth century. When cities are mentioned, the temptation is to react negatively. The city is too much like Sodom, Babylon, or Rome. It is a place of congestion, of dirt, a place of crime, of drugs, of prostitution, of evil. It is a place that dehumanizes. It is to be rejected. The tendency has been to flee the city and close our eyes to both its problems and its possibilities.

In the Bible, cities have a very special role with God. Abraham was an urbanite. He came from one of the biggest cities in the world of his day. It was on the outskirts of a city that God performed his greatest acts in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. It was from city to city that the gospel initially spread. And, like it or not, the picture of the destiny of the faithful is not a garden but a city (Rev 20). Cities clearly have special significance with God.

God, somehow in the convergence of migration, the rise of the urban world, and Islam's connection to both, is bringing together a context that can provide rich opportu-

nities for the expansion of his kingdom. To meet the challenge of Muslim cities, God's people must find greater willingness to be cooperative, give greater attention to the range of problems associated with high density living, and discover responsive population segments in a very diverse social maze.

Religious Tolerance/Minorities

Everywhere in the Muslim world one finds ethnic and religious minorities. In the past, Islam handled this phenomenon with a degree of effectiveness through the millet system. Today, the old system has been fractured. People are not as willing to be submissive (Kurds, Kashmiris). A global village encourages cries for respect and autonomy. Islam is being challenged to respond in new ways while a wider world watches. The world's growing attention to issues of religious freedom and human

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rights is a particular problem in Muslim areas. The record of religious intolerance in Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Iran is tragic and, fortunately, well publicized. Pakistan's treatment of non-Muslims and Muslim sects such as Ahmadiyyahs remains harsh. The small Christian presence is threatened with further isolation by the attempt to install discriminating identity cards.

Malaysia's steady erosion of religious rights for non-Muslims extends to language use. The Kalatan state is pushing for further conformity to Islamic law that would include the death penalty for a Muslim who adopts another faith. There is a growing concern on the part of evangelicals to respond to denials of religious freedom. This concern has led to a proliferation of new organizations, "desks" in older agencies, and networks for moni-

toring and sharing data regarding persecution that is occurring within Muslim areas.

But there is a lack of consensus as to what to do in addressing religious rights problems, the timing of action, and the appropriate channels to be used. Is there a place for public outcry? When does the threat of withholding government aid become counterproductive? To some, public (and even quiet, private) pressure smacks of nineteenth-century gunboat diplomacy. What about the possibility of fallout on local Christians who cannot leave and are not subject to deportation?

Behind this whole discussion is a philosophical/theological question—at least for Christians in the West. That is, how does one define religious rights, toleration, and the relationship of “church” (or, by analogy, mosque) and state? Our whole recent Western heritage predisposes evangelicals to come to the discussion with a well-developed set of assumptions regarding politics and religion. The possible implications of those assumptions have not always been thought through. Certainly, most Muslims come to the matter of religious rights, especially the freedom to change one’s religion, with a different frame of reference.

Evangelism

In addition to wrestling with socioeconomic and political issues, evangelicals must reflect on ways to carry forward evangelism in today’s Muslim context. The thought of evangelizing the Muslim world challenges the vision, faith, and strategic planning of God’s people as does almost nothing else. The challenge of Islam is tremendous. More than one billion Muslims! Approximately one out of every five people in the world is a Muslim. Muslims constitute the largest block of unreached people in today’s world, and their numbers are rapidly increasing because of a high birth rate. More than 930 different ethnolinguistic groups need churches planted among them—a task that calls mainly for cross-cultural missions.

During these latter years of the twentieth century, Islam is once again on the march. At a recent missions conference in Los Angeles, Muslims announced a goal of winning fifty to seventy-five million Americans to Islam—their target: “the strata of society suffering from the bankruptcy of the social order.” Further, they declared that they are in North America for the long haul, indicating a willingness to invest centuries, if necessary, to gain their objectives. As models of what may be required, they alluded

to their history of gradually becoming numerically dominant in Egypt, North Africa, and Indonesia.

Since the birth of Islam in Arabia in the seventh century, Christian mission efforts from both the East and the West among Muslims have been minimal. The church has traditionally viewed Muslim peoples as largely unwinnable. Such a view is reflected in the relatively small number of Christians working full-time with Muslims here and abroad. Some estimate that today only 2 percent of all Christian workers (traditional missionaries and tentmakers) worldwide are involved in ministry to Muslims. Even fewer are working at church planting.

Attitudes held by Christians toward Muslims, both first-world and third-world, are a major barrier to Muslim evangelization. These attitudes include indifference, a sense of the task’s being impossible, and basic resentment, fear, and prejudice toward Muslims. In the West, the political and economic events of the last twenty years have intensified older stereotypes. In some third-world areas, long years of discrimination and overt persecution have impacted believers negatively and led to isolation.

However, things are changing. There is growing evidence that the church’s heart is softening to its biblical mandate to carry out effective witness to Muslims everywhere. More publications are carrying accurate information regarding the nature and needs of the Muslim world. Significant conferences focused on missions to Muslims have been held at an increasing rate over the past decade. More agencies and churches are now taking intentional steps to allocate resources to Muslim work. More training/educational institutions are including Islam-related courses. More aspiring missionaries are designating Muslim peoples as the focus of their call. Yet the numbers involved remain very small. For major progress to be made in evangelizing Muslims by the year 2000 and beyond, several basic things are needed: vision, networking, and strategic planning.

God’s purposes unquestionably include the Muslim world. It is thrilling to be involved in what appear to be the beginning phases of a greater harvest. The coming harvest springs from God’s grace. The dedicated labor of many who cleared, plowed, and planted is not to be forgotten. Now is the time for Muslims.

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