

Ongoing Strategy Debate in Muslim Missions

God's people have grown in their concern for winning Muslims. However, many issues of strategy remain unresolved. This article highlights some key areas of ongoing discussion—contextualization, social action, tentmaking and human rights.

by Robert C. Douglas

The caller was searching for “the silver bullet.” He explained that he had only a few minutes to talk. He was attempting to figure out how to think about ministry to Muslims—a group only recently thrusting themselves into his consciousness. “What is the key to reaching Muslims?” he asked.

Another of those searches for the sure-fire way, word, book, technique that can't miss! I feel a bit chagrined to have to confess that I didn't have a handle on the bullet. I also feel a bit of resentment. When will people cease trying to reduce outreach to Muslims, who are so rich in diversity, to a one-step recipe? But, thank God that more and more Christians are developing an awareness of the world of Islam — and at least beginning to ask questions.

The world of Islam, encompassing more than one billion people, touching every continent, challenging Christianity theologically, socially and materially, is a world undergoing incredible changes. Exploding population, economic upheaval, religious revival, urbanization, modernization and secularization—these are but a few of the currents sweeping through the Muslim domains. This impact among Muslims spills over to the rest of the world. Who would have anticipated it fifty years ago? Who can see clearly where it will lead in another half century? Whatever else may be said, it is an exciting time to be alive and involved in missions to Muslims.

Mission can be defined in many different ways. One definition is: “Mission is discovering what God is doing in

the world and then becoming His partner.” The emphasis in this definition is exactly where it ought to be—on God. For, ultimately, missions is God's business. This definition suggests that God is a God who is fully engaged in His work, which means that an awareness of trends in the world equals an awareness of God's pointers. Clearly God is at work among Muslims.

With the increased ferment in Islam there has come a concurrent increased interest on the part of Christians to effectively evangelize long-neglected Muslim peoples. The evidences of this are everywhere. The growing attention of Islam at Urbana through the past twenty years, the creation of new organizations, or departments in older institutions, whose aim is to concentrate on Muslims, the Zwemer Institute, the Assemblies of God Center for Ministry to Muslims, the Muslim “desk” in SIM, Frontiers, the rush of agencies into Central Asia, the “Adopt-a-People” program, Open Door's Muslim focus, the 10-40 Window, all of these, and much more, point to a stirring of God's people to seriously penetrate a very needy segment of humanity with the Gospel.

Agencies of all kinds, old and new, charismatic and non-charismatic, large and small, East and West, are working at seeking to find their way forward in tackling what may be the “last frontier.” Evangelical Christians, with all their diversity, are in complete unanimity when it comes to the question of basic Muslim needs. It is Christ! The uniqueness of who Jesus is and what He did to save humankind propels for-

ward the increasing mission focus on Muslims. There is great unity here.

Agencies committed to Muslim work come at the task with a variety of approaches. Some may have their own corporate equivalent to “the key” to winning Muslims. Diversity abounds in terms of strategy. Underlying the strategic or methodological questions lurk a host of spoken and unspoken assumptions. Assumptions about Scripture, its nature, authority and use, culture and the social sciences and a theology of culture, the possibility and perimeters of syncretism, as well as the nature and influence of the demonic in things Islamic. The old adage “Ecclesiology determines missiology” is surely true. Behind ecclesiology are theological and worldview considerations which influence all else. Diversity of methodological decisions reflect much of the above.

A practical result of differing underlying assumptions is a series of ongoing debates—usually friendly—about several facets of mission to Muslims. Included are: 1) questions about contextualization, 2) the relationship of evangelism and social action and human services, 3) the place and legitimacy of tentmaking, and 4) the extent to which human/religious rights issues are legitimate concerns and, if so, how they ought to be addressed. Until now these have remained—and undoubtedly to some degree will remain—unsettled questions in mission to Muslims.

Contextualization

The term “contextualization” is in wide usage in mission circles today—and

much debated. In some circles it has all but supplanted the older language of “indigeneity.” It is one of those words that now has the power to evoke intense feelings by its mere mention. To imply that someone is “for” or “against” contextualization is almost instantaneously to pronounce them blessed or cursed, depending on one’s perspective.

When the discussion of contextualization is applied to the Muslim world the level of intensity seems to increase. This is linked to assumptions regarding things Islamic. For instance, it is not uncommon for Christians to assume that: “If it is Islamic, we can’t have anything to do with it.”

Conversations regarding contextualization center on questions of “how much” to contextualize and where to draw the line. All cross-cultural workers are theoretically committed to getting into their target culture, if only by learning the language. Encouraging the translation of Scripture into the host tongue is an act of contextualizing, though it may not be thought of under that term.

More profound questions grow out of diverse understandings of the nature of religion and its place in culture. To dress as Muslims do, or observe their dietary rules, or greet one another in ways common in Afghanistan (for example) are not the crux of the debate. These are seen as cultural.

What is disputed is the use of Muslim “religious” forms. For instance, should one keep Ramadan or not? Are Jesus’ mosques (or tariqahs) legitimate? What role, if any, can the Quran have in Christian witness? Should Islamic (religious) terms for God, Jesus, salvation, etc. be used?

It is easy to imply that there is one right strategy (“the key” again!), which in turn suggests that there is a great uniformity among Muslims. In fact, the world of Islam is exceedingly diverse, which requires a host of approaches which take context (setting) seriously.

Underlying the contextualization debate are different assumptions about the Bible itself (no question of it being God’s Word) and its relation to culture(s), both ancient and modern. Where and how do the divine and the human come together in revelation, inspiration and resulting Scripture? Sorting through this is not easy. The decisions of some churches which seem to have reduced the Bible to just another book add a note of caution to the process.

A further fly in the ointment is uneasiness about the influence of the social sciences. All contemporary cross-culture workers are indebted to the insights developed by the social sciences over the last fifty years. As cultural anthropology, sociology, communication theory and linguistics have evolved, missionaries have found ways to make practical applications of these disciplines to their work. Missiology has taken on a life of its own, a delicate wedding of Scripture, theology and the social sciences. At the same time, Evangelicals have become more attuned to the assumptions driving the social sciences and have often judged them lacking in respect for the transcendent.

How to separate the practical insights of cultural anthropology from the underlying relativistic assumptions has been an enormous challenge! Some observers of contextualization conclude that theories of culture, with their social science moorings, have taken actual precedence over Scripture. Where this suspicion prevails, contextualization comes under a black cloud.

Another issue has muscled its way into the contextualization discussion in the last two decades. It centers in the demonic. Its contemporary expression arises out of charismatic renewal and the attendant emphasis on signs and wonders, and particularly spiritual warfare. Clearly, “charismatic” means different things to different people. The same is true of spiritual warfare.

Spiritual warfare clouds or clarifies

(depending again on unstated theological assumptions) the nature of efforts to reach Muslims. In its most emphatic expression it asserts, “If it is Islamic, it is demonic.” Clearly this view has implications for contextualization. For how can missionaries, or any Christian, have any association with the works of the devil?

One’s world view of theology, and one’s sense of culture and view of “religion” are swirled together so easily at this point. What is to be viewed as “Islamic”? In what ways is the Islamic different from the cultural, if at all? Also how does one assess the presence (or extent of presence) of the demonic? Extreme manifestations may be reasonably clear, but what about all the subtle forms evil takes? Where and how are theological assumptions at work?

Rarely stated is the assumption that Evangelicals come to this discussion free of “contamination.” Yet our theology and methodology give evidence of being shaped to some degree by our culture. Therefore, is it fair to state: “If it is Western (or Evangelical) it is demonic”? Is there confusion about syncretism (what it is, when and how it happens) and cultural accommodation? The easiest way of dealing with this mix of complex issues is by not dealing with it. A few good proof texts one way or the other takes care of so much.

No one wants to underestimate the presence and power of the demonic. Nor does the Evil One deserve more attention than is his due. Clear thinking and acting is vital. However, one wonders if things Islamic (whatever that means) have gotten a “bad rap”—due not so much to their inherent nature, but due to the fears, negative experiences, and culturally shaped theologies of those outside looking in.

Social Action

The world is rapidly shrinking due to modern technology. It is more and more difficult for nations to insulate them-

selves from broad political, social and economic forces. The Muslim world, touching all continents, impacts all dimensions of political and economic life in far more ways than oil, and is itself subject to ups and downs triggered by forces far afield. Ideology is often brought in by non-ideological dynamics beyond any group's control.

Today a number of areas within the Muslim world suffer from spasms of upheaval in spite of, or because of, globalization. The lack of freedom in general, self-determination in particular, and the absence of credibility of many governments spark unrest. In some areas new waves of nationalism are exploding. Conflict, economic underdevelopment and natural disasters have triggered waves of refugees. The specter of terrorism is never far away. Nuclear, biological and chemical capabilities add to uneasiness. The old systems of alignment (East vs. West; USSR vs. USA) no longer hold. Questions of who to look to for security and prosperity are uncertain. This situation is dangerous but also is an opportunity for Christian service. God has often worked in the midst of upheaval to bring people to new religious awareness and faith in Him.

Vast portions of today's Muslim world are wracked by economic crises generated by war, ecological irresponsibility, famine, natural disaster and economic mismanagement. In many places people have rising expectations. In some instances frustration due to failed hopes is growing. The gap between rich and poor is widening across the Muslim world as well as within individual nations. Solutions are hard to come by because globalization shifts critical decisions outside of national borders. Donor fatigue is a reality both in the hearts of humanitarians and the halls of government. Disasters, natural and man-made, are not likely to lessen,

but only shift from place to place.

Economic problems have frequently resulted in a new willingness to question and search (e.g. Central Asia) and a new openness to God's Gospel (e.g. Mali and Burkina Faso). Jesus confronted human need, manifesting His divine love in reaching out to the suffering. But what are we to do today?

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For much of this century, Evangelicals have wrestled with defining the proper relationship between evangelism and social action. What does legitimate social involvement entail? A host of concepts have claimed attention: benevolence, disaster, relief, development, peace and justice questions.

Among Muslims these same discussions are going on—often intensified due to the abject poverty in Muslim areas and due to Islamic accusations of missionaries "buying converts" to Christianity. It has mattered little that Muslims have offered a host of enticements to Christians to embrace Islam! Today's world is one of incredible need and increasingly restricted access to many Muslim areas. These factors have forced agencies to include greater social services in their agenda in order to qualify for visas. The importance of social service/action is not apt to decline.

Often a variety of practical considerations necessitates the development of independent structures, staff and finances as far as in-the-field evangelism and social action operation goes. The struggle to define purposes and goals for

each and to integrate strategies conceptually remains a challenge, and likely will continue into the future.

Tentmaking

A related area that is gaining increased attention is "tentmaking." A number of terms are in use to identify this strategy. Proponents have their favorite labels and a rationale for those

preferences. Within some circles there is a debate as to the validity or invalidity of tentmaking. Christian workers need to remember that "tentmaking" was basic to Christian mission for many centuries. It also was and is basic to Islamic expansion.

Beyond labels and broad decision for or against tentmaking are definitions of who is and who is not a legit-

imate "tentmaker." Does tentmaking cover full-time employees of major secular multinationals? Many seem to prefer tentmaking in the form of small business creation, or occupations otherwise involving limited time commitments. Often educational and medical service is considered. The variety of global situations will necessitate parallel variety in tentmaking format.

A more basic problem facing tentmakers is at an emotive as well as a conceptual level. It is the conflict many tentmakers feel between vocation and ministry. The lack of integration of the two breeds frustration, confusion, and for many, burn-out.

Many tentmakers see their vocation solely as a basis for presence among their target people. It merely allows them to "be there." Ministry involves activities and time separate from one's "job." For some, ethical issues of honesty and integrity versus deception are intense. Job becomes a "cover" and generates inner conflict, a sense of illegitimacy for the Gospel's sake.

The root of these conflicts is theolog-

ical, cultural and methodological. Evangelicals are heavily impacted by neo-platonic philosophy with its sacred-secular dichotomy and the attendant segregation of job from faith. Confusion abounds in the way Evangelicals play concepts off against each other. Sacred-secular, earthly-heavenly, flesh-spirit, world-heaven. Methodologically the resulting dichotomy sets evangelism (souls) over against social action (bodies). In every-day terms, people become convinced that “church work” or ministry is a separate category from the stuff of parenting and making a living. Biblical theology moves in different directions.

The Lutheran perspective that equates vocation with ministry is much needed. Until serious thought is given to integrating vocation and ministry, along with internalization of the result, tentmaking will hardly realize its full potential.

Human Rights

Yet another place which remains unsettled in Evangelical thought is the area of human rights. Religious rights is a sub-category in the larger human rights field. There is wide recognition that Islam often discriminates against minorities living within Muslim states. Freedom to worship and minister is a problem. Freedom to change religion is almost nonexistent. Persecution inflicted on converts from Islam can be brutal.

Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Iran’s records of religious intolerance are tragic and fortunately well-publicized. Afghanistan, just emerging from a ten-year struggle, maintains a constitution that is increasingly Islamic. The new government has already added restrictions on secularists, women, and freedoms of the press.

Pakistan’s treatments of non-Muslims and Muslim sects like Ahmadiyahs remain harsh. The small Christian presence is threatened with fur-

ther isolation by the attempt to install discriminating identity cards. The federal, non-Sharia, court rescinded this law and may provide other judicial routes for Christians to live at peace with their Muslim neighbors and enjoy government securities. But the future remains uncertain.

Malaysia’s steady eroding of religious rights for non-Muslims extends to language use. The Kalatan State is pushing for further legislation to conform society to Islamic law. It would include the death penalty for a Muslim adopting another faith.

There is a growing concern on the part of Evangelicals to respond to religious freedom concerns. This has led to a proliferation of new organizations, “desks” monitoring religious rights for older agencies, and networks monitoring and sharing data regarding persecution occurring within Muslim countries and peoples.

However, lack of consensus exists in regard to what to do in addressing religious rights problems, timing of action and appropriate channels to be used. Is there a place for public outcry? When does lobbying leading to the threat of withholding government aid become counterproductive? Is public (and even “private”) pressure of this kind an inappropriate repackaging of nineteenth century “gun-boat diplomacy”?

Then there is the vulnerability of people in criticized nations. Obviously, agencies with staff in the field expose themselves to direct retaliation through overt action. And what about the possibility of fallout for local Christians who cannot leave, are not subject to deportation, and do not have embassies to act in their behalf?

In one way, the Church of Jesus Christ is the Church Universal, with the whole having a responsibility to show care for regional or local expression. In another way, churches exist primarily within local contexts and are faced with unique challenges to life and limb,

which must be addressed locally.

Behind the religious rights problem is a philosophical/ theological issue for Christians in the West. How does one define religious rights, toleration and the relationship of “church” (or by analogy - mosque) and state? Our Western heritage predisposes Evangelicals to come to this discussion with a well-developed set of assumptions regarding politics and religion. The possible implications of those assumptions have not always been thought through by Evangelicals; hence, debate sometimes takes place in a fog. Conversely, most Muslims come at the matter of religious rights, especially the freedom to change one’s religion, with a whole different frame of reference.

Islam has always conceived a political role for religion, a fact that has increasingly become apparent to Westerners faced with Muslims in their midst. Christians are caught in a bind in the face of Muslim demands: the logic of religious toleration, of hospitality, requires making concessions to Muslims, while the logic of individualized Christianity, of religion taken out of the public arena, disqualifies Westerners from dealing effectively with Muslim theocratic demands.

The church was never more involved in politics than during the era of the Holy Roman Empire. Under the Empire, Christianity became “Christendom,” and the political ruler was seen as God’s appointed agent, the earthly counterpart to the heavenly sovereign. In that scheme, political affairs and religious matters were two aspects of one and the same reality. Church and state were united for the same purpose, even though as institutions they represented different functions. While the church held custody of the absolute moral law, the state was concerned with enforcing the rules that gave practical expression to the higher spiritual law. Conformity rather than personal persuasion was the chief end of religious activity. This approach is little different from the

ideal society conservative Muslim thinkers aim for today.

Such an arrangement worked only so long as there was a more or less homogeneous, cohesive society apportioned into stable social classes. Cohesion became increasingly difficult to maintain in the face of growing pluralism and social mobility. With the rise of national ethnic consciousness fueled by the drive for religious freedom, the formal structures of the religious empire collapsed and Christendom dissolved. These same dynamics are at work in some places in today's Muslim world.

The late Ayatollah Khomeini 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 of the secular national state in Muslim countries as the successor to the transnational Islamic caliphate. A similar complaint was made by Sadiq al-Mahdi, the Sudanese political leader who attacked the secular national state. In respect to such sentiments, Kenneth Cragg wrote: "The renewed and effective politicization of Islam is the most important single fact of the new [Islamic] century [which opened in 1979]."

These views have their roots in the Prophet's own personal legacy in Medina and Mecca where he established territoriality, dar al-Islam, as the handmaid of religious faith. It is from Ibn Taymiyya that modernist Muslim reformers in the last 200 years have received their marching orders, from Jalal al-Din Afghani to Sayyid Qutb and Ayatollah Khomeini. Ibn Taymiyya spoke about the indispensability of God and the Prophet in political affairs, what he calls "divine government and prophetic vice-regency."

Uncompromising words that

impute territoriality to religious orthodoxy make Muslims dissatisfied with a merely utilitarian political ethic. Yet they are words that also make it difficult to co-exist in a pluralist society and complicate a Christian religious rights response. There is a large body of material in both Muslim and Christian sources that supports a public role for religion without making territoriality a condition of faith.

It is important to recognize the context in which Muslims have encountered the West, not as a subjugated people of a colonial empire but as immigrants looking for opportunities. We must keep abreast of moderate Muslim counsels concerning the dangers of territoriality, and both sides need to come to an agreement about freedom of religion. Christians cannot preserve religious toleration by conceding the extreme Muslim case for territoriality.

When it comes to religious rights, a special area of concern is the role of women and family. The Muslim world has always placed great emphasis on the sanctity of the family, which has not changed. What is changing is the role of women in society. Attention has been given to renewed use of the "veil." This practice, which ebbs and flows according to the year and country, is symptomatic of wide-ranging debate over women's role. This discussion clearly impacts understandings of family. In some ways Islam is struggling with a 1,000-year gender gap.

In seventh century Arabia, the Quran's words regarding women could only be considered revolutionary, as they offered a great contrast to the despotic Arab society controlled by powerful males and tribal networks. But in the 1990s, the Quran's statements about women are foreboding and offer little hint of improving the status of half of the world's population.

Many scholars and legal experts have been proposing that the principle of

independent judicial-religious decision making be reintroduced in order to overcome some of the discriminatory practices against women and other minority groups that have evolved after the Quran was revealed.

Opportunity

The challenge of Islam is tremendous. More than one billion Muslims! Approximately one out of every five people in the world is a Muslim. Even more significant, Muslims constitute the largest block of unreached people in today's world. And their numbers are rapidly increasing due to birth rate. More than 930 major ethno-linguistic groups need churches planted among them—a task calling for the best in cross-cultural missions.

There are 38 nations where over 50 percent of the people are Muslim, and countries officially view themselves as Islamic. In these areas, Islam intends to remain dominant. People with power tend to resolutely resist efforts of non-Muslims to evangelize. Most predominantly Islamic nations would have to be labelled "restricted access" countries. In 25 other countries, at least 10 percent of the population is Muslim. Significant numbers of Muslims can be found today in all parts of the world.

It is clear God is at work among Muslims. This decade promises to be strategic for the Muslim world. In many ways the 1990s may be "the decade" of the Muslims.

The thought of evangelizing the Muslim world challenges the vision, faith and strategic planning of God's people as almost nothing else does.

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