

Mission Lessons From History:

A Laboratory of Missiological Insights Gained from Christian-Muslim Relationships

by Lyle VanderWerff

The history of Christian-Muslim relationships provides a laboratory from which can be drawn many lessons for those committed to fulfillment of the Great Commission. The church would do well to research the record of the centuries since A.D. 622. Where in the past has the church been effective in its witness amidst Islam and where has it failed in its work of reconciling men and women to God in Christ's name? It is a bitter-sweet record with lessons both negative and positive. In this brief study we will seek to highlight several of these lessons.

There is a need to shift from a confrontational or adversarial relationship to one of open communication and exchange. Dialogue and witness must replace animosity and polemics. The Muslim world still requires a *preparatio evangelica* to ready it for a fuller acceptance of the Gospel. We pray for a larger groundswell of Muslims for the Messiah as well as individual conversions and the awakening of people groups. While we pray and labor from the perspective of Christ's return, we must confess that it may take a hundred or thousand years. Thus pioneering missionaries must tap the insights of the past fourteen centuries as well as live expectantly. May we be granted the patience of God, that is a power that stretches far beyond our expectations.

Islam's Formative Period

One of the factors prompting the rise of Islam was that the church had "Neglected Arabia" (title of a publication of the Reformed Church in America under Samuel Zwemer and James

Cantine). The deserts and cities of Arabia had been passed over by churches which failed to realize the spiritual hunger of the predecessors and contemporaries of Muhammad. There were Christian communities such as the Arab tribe of the Ghassanids and the Persian tribe of the Lakhmids but these were barrier builders rather than bridges for the Gospel. Likewise, there was little evidence of reaching out to the Arabs by the churches in Bahrain, Yemen, and Ethiopia, although it is known that some of Muhammad's earliest disciples embraced Christianity after fleeing to Ethiopia. However, the heartlands of Arabia received only the heretical, fringe expressions of that faith, leaving Muhammad still seeking.

Because of the rapid expansion of Islam during its first century (A.D. 622 to 722), Muslims openly borrowed from many cultures incorporating much into Dar Islam (House of Islam). Islam continued to draw from the religious and cultural heritages of Syria, Egypt, North Africa, Spain, Eastern Turkey, Armenia, Mesopotamia, Persia, Northern India, and other Asian contacts.

Although Muslim caliphs and army generals were the power brokers who insisted upon surrender or death, they soon harnessed the *dhimmi*s (subject and protected peoples) who paid the annual tribute tax according to the Pact established by Umar. These terms of subjection severely handicapped Christian influence, but it was still amazing that so much knowledge, religious discussion, and technology was transferred into the House of Islam.

However, there was mutual mis-

understanding between Muslims and Christians from the beginning of Islam. Muhammad originally saw all monotheists as being co-religionists, but in his quarrels with the Jews at Medina there developed an animosity which influenced outside contacts. Muhammad made a direct appeal to the Jews of Medina, considering himself to stand in succession of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Animosity increased as they rebuffed his overtures and he reciprocated by expelling them or killing their male leadership (cf. Banu Qurayzah). He charged Jews with corrupting the Scriptures where they differed with his "revelations." Although Muhammad's attitude towards the Jews soured, he solicited a more reconciliatory stance toward Christians and other "peoples of the Book." He urged his followers to count Christians as friends (Surah 5:82).

At first he sought to protect Christian leaders and places of worship. But as the forces of Islam expanded politically these freedoms were curtailed. The military conquests under the first four caliphs would further erode Christian-Muslim relations. Religion was used to sanction this expansion. Warfare has a way of obscuring the best of intentions. Records of theological discussions are limited. Political, economic and military issues stole the limelight. Muslim Arab rulers discourage fraternization, keeping their troops stationed in garrison towns nearby.

There were some rays of light. Positive Christian-Muslim communication is reported in the accounts of: John I, Patriarch of Antioch; Nestorian Patriarch Isho Yabhb III; and Rector John of

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Nikiu who was over the Coptic bishops. Christians were often courted by the ruling caliph as their help was needed in ruling this expanding dynasty. Syrian Christians had much to offer. Tribal desert Arabs had yet to learn to manage a rich cultural heritage, a heterogeneous empire. The Umayyads would appropriate many Byzantine policies and practices at Damascus. There was a steady flow of Christian contributions helping Muslims to shape their dream of a better society. Trade and correspondence benefited all parties. Emperor Leo III writes to clarify some Muslim misunderstandings about the Christian faith. He urges Muslims to read the whole of Scriptures, and answers the charge of corruption. He discusses the nature and work of Christ, the judgment and resurrection, future life, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Leo's letter had a positive impact on Umar. As a reformer Umar would also converse with Pope Gregory and John of Damascus. In the persons of Umar and Gregory, one can observe the benefits resulting from sincere and cordial conversation. Unfortunately some Muslims jealous of the high offices held by Christians pressured Umar to restrict those who were not politically correct. Properties, positions, and pressure tempted many to convert to Islam.

Light from the Ummayyad Period

John of Damascus (ca. 665-750) exhibits some of the qualities needed in effective witnesses amidst Islam. This Christian held high office and served as a personal counselor to the caliph. His pen represents a knowledge of the Quran and Islamic beliefs, and a dialectical style influenced by Aristotle. In his book on heresies, he classifies Islam as a Judeo-Christian offshoot. Sadly he moves from sympathetic scholarship to verbal attack. It is hard to say where dialogue leaves off and debate begins. In his work on disputations, he describes a technique whereby Christians should

answer Muslim questions. Such argumentation would have crippled a sensitive quest for the Gospel. This reactionary style would influence Christian-Muslim communication for centuries. It would take great patience to move beyond the controversial format which Christians and Muslims borrowed from Greek philosophers. A thousand years and more would pass before Christian apologetics would take a more conversational tone.

The Abbasid Period

Many Christian leaders continued to serve as physicians, financial administrators, political advisors, etc. In turn, Muslim rulers settled disputes between Jacobites, Marionites, and Nestorians. Christian professors served in the universities at Alexandria, Baghdad, Damascus, and Jerusalem. There was a hunger for physics, astronomy, philosophy, and literature. Classical works were translated from Greek and Latin into Arabic and Syriac by men like Theodore of Edessa (d. 785). It was a season of theological ferment.

Under the Abbasids, Islam and Christianity were impacted by rationalism and suffered a "hardening of the arteries." The scholastic theology of Al-Ashari (d. 936) represents an institutionalized religion. Al-Ghazali (d. 1111) attempted to recover an experiential faith by drawing from Sufism which has drawn on the wellsprings of Christianity, but still much was to be desired. Islam and the West became isolated from each other. Nearly a millennium would pass before exchange in the public square would allow discussion as to the nature of God's redemptive rule in Christ. Christians, as *dhimmi*s, were protected, yet, under the millet system, they struggled to survive by turning to science and technology (much as did Christians in China under the cultural revolution, 1966-1976). The surprise is not that many Christians became Muslim to escape the poll-tax and politi-

cal pressure, but that millions of Christians stood their ground sacrificially.

Nestorian Patriarch Timothy, in his extensive correspondence (780-823), reveals a commitment to mission regardless of the cost. He spent two days at the court of Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi in 781 giving expression to a orthodox faith. The Caliph commended Timothy for his meaningful theology but lamented his failure to accept Muhammad as a prophet. They differed too in their discussion of the unity and trinity of God. For Timothy, the Quran and Muhammad lacked the confirmation by miracles, a seal dear to Nestorians. Other Christians like Al-Kindi (ca. 830) were not so gracious in their dialogue and appeared more concerned to score points against Muhammad rather than share the grace of God! Aristotelian logic became a substitute for the Gospel. Where discussions retained a biblical basis, Christian-Muslim dialogue was more productive. The Word of God remains a trysting place, an encounter in truth.

Herein is a lesson not to be lost. Both Christianity and Islam purport to be grounded in revelation. Islam acknowledges the authority of the Scriptures in spite of the sometime charge of "corruption." Of necessity, Muslims are committed to the fact that God reveals Himself and that He preserves what He reveals.

We do well to begin our conversations with the Old Testament. Christian-Muslim dialogue must be founded on what God has done. It is well to start with the basic biblical truths: creation, fall, redemption, covenant and kingdom. Ask the basic question of Abrahamic faith: How did Abraham experience righteousness in the sight of God (Genesis 15:6)? Muslims as well as our Jewish neighbors need to address such foundational issues. It will be amazing how much common ground we share. Today Christians in Europe and the United States are in a comparable position

with an influx of peoples of Muslim background. There are new opportunities for dialogue, for fulfillment of Christ's call to bear witness, and to reap a rich inter-cultural harvest of great blessing.

Early and Reformation Mission Models

Initially Europe responded to Islam out of fear. Muslim expansion threatened her existence. It is no wonder that the literature of the West was filled with harsh caricature and stereotype. Muhammad and Muslims in general were given "bad press" in Medieval Europe.

Fortunately more accurate information began to circulate and more positive models of Christian witness began to emerge such as: Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny (1092-1156); Peter of Lombard (d. 1164), author of his *Sentences*; Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), founder of the Franciscans; Raymond of Penaforte (d. 1275), who won many Muslims to Christ in North Africa and in Spain; Thomas Aquinas (d. 1272) whose *Summa* was concerned for witness to peoples of other religions; and, Roger Bacon (d. 1292) who sought to view others free of prejudice. The last part of the 13th century could be called, "the hopeful decades."

One of the most outstanding figures in the Medieval Period was Raymond Lull (1235-1315). Convinced of the futility of violence (i.e., the crusades) and undergoing a drastic conversion at about 30, he made a covenant with God to serve the Muslim world in the Spirit of Christ. For over fifty years he devoted himself to three things necessary for effective witness.

First of all, Lull sought an accurate and comprehensive knowledge of the languages of the people. After painful grappling with Arabic for nine years, he established a college at his hometown, at Marjorca, to train Franciscans.

He urged the Pope at the Council of Vienne (1312) to form five more colleges for languages, geography and culture. These colleges were located at Rome, Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and Salamca. Teaching himself in biblical and mission studies at Paris, he appealed to popes and kings to reach out to

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Muslims in love.

Secondly, Lull's prodigious literary output resulted in several hundred pieces. His autobiography and mystical work on the "Book of the Lover and the Beloved" was as popular as his "One Hundred Names of God" was practical. Witnessing to Muslims at Tunis, North Africa, he made the case for "the law of Christ." He revealed a faith that was experiential as well as rational.

In the third place, Lull proved to be a man of action as well as words. He would witness to Christ and gather converts in Tunis even though he knew it was prohibited on pain of death. He sought an open forum, a parliament of religions. He discussed with the leaders Islam's weaknesses: namely, the lack of love in its concept of God, and the lack of harmony in its attributes of God. Martyred at age 79 (June 30, 1315), Lull remains known for his exemplary life. That life was shaped by the motto, "The soul that loves not, lives not."

Space does not allow for a thorough treatment of the Roman Catholic and Pre-Reformers who contributed to a healthier attitude towards Muslims, fuller knowledge of and compassion

for the Saracans. Protestants are often distressed to learn that reformers, Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564) were so slow in developing a clear concept of missions. The truth is that Luther was preoccupied with renewing congregations and supplying pastors who always were in short supply.

He had a "sending" heart but inadequate resources. He did argue that the Pope should send evangelists to the Turks rather than troops.

Scholarly John Calvin was also convinced that only a reformed church could convey the Gospel to all nations. He corresponded with 300 Swiss-French Calvinists who settled in Brazil and took the challenge to evangelize the Indian peoples there, but unfortunately these letters have been lost. However, Calvin's global vision of a sovereign God and a sinful world would later form the impetus for the modern mission movement!

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Light on Mission Methods

From 1800 to the present, Christian witnesses in India (including Pakistan and Bangladesh), have provided many insights as to effective communication with Muslims. William Carey, Henry Martyn and the evangelical chaplains, Thomas Valpy French, Robert Clark, and others learned to encounter Islam without the sharp clash of the controversial method. Alexander Duff, J.N. Farquhar, A.G. Hogg, among others, learned that education could become a vehicle for preparing the way of the Gospel as well as equipping future leadership in the land. Medical missions and other social services in India demonstrated the reality of God's love in Christ and gave the national churches a place in the sun.

Mission work in the Near East posed a complex set of concerns. Angli-

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can and Reformed churches soon recognized that the weakened presence of the Orthodox Churches which had long suffered under the millet system needed revival if Christianity was to recover its larger mission. Presbyterians, the C.M.S., and others combined encouragement to these Eastern Brethren, as well as limited evangelization of Muslims. Pioneer missions by the Arabian Mission begun by Samuel Zwemer and James Cantine stretched from the Mesopotamia valley to Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman.

High points in the Twentieth Century are seen in the lives and labors of Temple Gairdner, a CMS missionary to Egypt, and of Samuel Zwemer, a Reformed Church in America missionary. The latter's tireless efforts founded the work and churches in the Arabian Gulf, before building an ecumenical network from Indonesia to Egypt to Europe to Princeton. Zwemer's reformatory theme of "Proclamation" would impact a generation of missionaries following Madras, 1938. Gairdner was sensitive to culture and the crucial needs of the national church. A respected scholar of Islam and committed to evangelism, he became an advocate of a "Christian Presence Amid Islam," an approach which matured under the superb leadership of Kenneth Cragg. In Zwemer and Gairdner one finds a balance which can still serve evangelical-ecumenical servants of Christ amid Islam.

Worldview and Witness

Turn of the century witnesses among Muslims will need to have a broad, maturing theology. Unless one has a solid view of God's sovereign claims in Christ and the kingdom, he or she will not be able to sustain a conversation about the realities of the Spirit-filled life. I have discovered that there are eight worldview questions which provide pegs on which to hang a discussion. These eight questions help keep the discussion focused, and open to either expansion, further definition and even

contraction. These eight are:

1. What is the nature of ultimate reality, of God himself? What can be known of God and how can it be known? Christians and Muslims can agree on the importance of this question.

2. What is the essence of nature, the creation, the cosmos? The temporal world retains worth, order, beauty because of its Maker and is the arena for discovery for saints and scientists.

3. What is the essence of our humanity? What does it mean to be human, male and female? What characteristics, potential, and destiny mark our shared humanness?

4. What troubles humanity? What ill or sin or problem disturbs the human race? How serious is the sickness?

5. What cure or solution is offered for this dilemma? Is there any salvation from this sin? Can we describe the means, the way in detail?

6. What is the good life or life-style or viable ethic that is sought? How then shall we live?

7. What shape should human community (a new society) take? How is the covenant community (*ecclesia, ummah*) subject to the transcendent kingdom of God? To what ends should human resources be employed? What is the mission (commission) or vocation which should engage the energies of those whose lives have been renewed by faith? Note the mandates that shape our labors.

8. What is involved in human history and destiny? What guidelines are gained from the lessons of history? What does the future hold? What will occur with the return of Jesus the Christ? What vision shapes our vocation? What energy flows from a biblical eschatology?

Christian-Muslim dialogue can begin with these larger questions and then focus more directly on the particulars of the Scriptures. This discussion can tap lessons from the record of more than two thousand years of Old and New Tes-

tament history. By keeping the discussion focused on these eight basic questions, there evolves a common quest for truth and less time for polemics and argumentation.

Ultimately every discussion must eventually center and conclude on Christ, regarding His person, word and work. The kingdom (reign) of God, which is the heart of the Gospel, eventually will become the unique issue that leads to "eternal life." In Him, we have the way, the truth and the life! Therefore, those who would witness to Muslims must have the patience of Christ, ready to labor long and hard, for a thousand years more if need be, in order to incarnate the love of God among them. Such steadfast affection and flexibility will help prevent rash words and acts. This will allow time for the Muslim peoples to hear and surrender to the rule of the Messiah.

Two Additional Lessons

1. *Respect for Ancient Orthodox and National Evangelical Churches.*

A careful reading of history should heighten appreciation for the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches in lands with a Muslim majority. Those who have survived Islam's severe domination over 14 centuries, and yet have retained a vibrant faith and a caring ministry, deserve close examination. How did the Syrian, Armenian, Assyrian, Greek, Nestorian, Coptic, and other Orthodox churches sustain their faith? In the presence of Islam they still maintain body life in Christ's name for millions. Before we launch into creative, pioneer efforts in new locations, we are obliged to learn all we can from these "living saints" and form a partnership with them in the Gospel.

When the first Protestant missionaries of Reformed and Anglican churches arrived in the Middle East in the Nineteenth Century they were shocked by the conditions of the Eastern churches. They debated whether or not the

Eastern churches could witness without first undergoing a revival. Yet it must be said that even though sorely tried, they were still bearing witness to Christ as persecuted minorities. Since then, Eastern Christians have gained much deserved attention from Protestant and Roman Catholic brethren.

In the last two centuries, national evangelical churches have emerged. They represent the fruit of the modern missionary movement, mainly the result of Reformed-Presbyterian and Anglican workers. Such evangelicals in Egypt, Palestine/Israel, Lebanon/Syria, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, and the Gulf States deserve credit for providing a church home for both nationals and thousands of expatriate laborers and professionals. For example, in Kuwait the former Arabian Mission (1914—) has blossomed into the National Evangelical Church. There a vibrant Arab congregation serves host to other ethnic congregations, including an International English Congregation (organized 1962) which represents peoples from around the globe. Every day and night of the week, groups gather for study of the Word, prayer, stewardship and fellowship. Truly this is the Church of Christ, united as one, holy, catholic and apostolic household of faith. It is the church, evangelical and ecumenical. In addition to the churches of the Reformation there are Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox by the thousands. In the shadow of Islam, all often know they are joined by the Spirit for worship and witness.

There is no way that those who would be itinerant evangelists or pioneering witnesses can be effective apart from part-

nership with these indigenous bodies of Christ. It is scandalous when a touring Protestant evangelist visits an isolated house-church in Kuwait or Bahrain and reports that there are only a “dozen” Christians in the land while ignoring the tens of thousands who are there living out their faith with courage. We must not underestimate the breadth and depth of God’s work in our time. Likewise in our talks with Muslims about the form God’s covenant community should take, we must bear witness to the kingdom of God in Christ which transcends the present form of the church (*ecclesia*. . . *ummah*).

Muslims have yet to experience the birth pains which the church experienced in the Reformation. It gradually divested itself of political “principalities and powers” and had to learn to live as a “community of faith” in a pluralistic world. Because Islam has long visualized itself as a totalitarian system, it has been frustrated whenever it loses control. Even now, Muslim lands are struggling with the questions of religious freedom, espoused in the United Nations Charter. While there have been recent waves of fundamental reaction, the rising tide of modernity will spare neither Muslims nor Christians. Diversity, plurality, and modernity are often viewed with suspicion by evangelicals, but they can also serve as allies. The same forces that disrupt traditions and shallow religiosity can also prepare the way for a fresh encounter with the Living God. Religion, rather than secularism will prevail, but it will be a reformed faith. Christians and Muslims and Jews alike will be humbled by the testing of history. Christians will do well to always

remain advocates of religious freedom, giving all persons and peoples space in which to respond to the overtures and visitations of God.

To the degree that the Church is able to become the embodiment of the kingdom of God, she will become in Christ the bridge for reconciling all peoples to the living God. To the degree that Muslims and Jews and others draw close to God’s rule in Christ, they can be drawn into the circle of the Messianic community. If the church is to be both recipient and agency of the coming kingdom it is being called to transformation.

2. Future Witness to Muslims Requires Students of Islam.

Islamic and missiology must become part of the church’s curriculum. Ignorance is an enemy of effective witness. Not to know your neighbor is to nullify good intentions.

It is recommended that every mature Christian study a bibliography covering Islam’s origin, founder, history, civilization/culture, worldview, record of Christian-Muslim relations, current mission patterns and prospects. Enquiries regarding a basic reading list of Muslim-Christian relations may be made to the author or editor.

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