

# Islam in the West—U.S.A.

*One of the greatest mission opportunities of our generation is to evangelize segments of the unreached peoples of the world right in our own cities and neighborhoods. Here is the challenge of a lifetime—bringing the Gospel to our Muslim friends in their different immigrant acculturation situations. But reaching them with the Gospel will require first rate cross-cultural evangelization, generous love, and above all, earnest prayer.*

by Richard P. Bailey

“**T**here is a major difference between Islam and Christianity...” Thus began the words of an American convert to Islam, who rose to a place of leadership in American Muslim circles before turning to Christ. His words show why he chose to follow Jesus after many years of seeing Islam from the inside. “...Christianity teaches us to love our enemies. With Islam, it’s quite the opposite. You should be just, but you should hate the enemies of Islam. And if they openly struggle against Islam, they should be eliminated...” (*Christianity Today*, April 7, 1989).

What about “the fastest growing religion in America”? How many Muslims are there in our country? Are they here to take away our jobs and blow up our country, or has the Lord sent them here because of our failure to reach them for Christ in their own countries? Can Muslims be saved, and can we effectively share the Good News of Jesus Christ with them?

## History of Islam in the West

Although there is evidence of Muslims in America almost from its beginning, the number was negligible until about 1960. The earliest record of an organized Muslim gathering for prayer was 1900 in Ross, North Dakota. A mosque was built there in 1929, but later abandoned. As other Muslim immigrants arrived and their numbers increased in many urban areas their gatherings multiplied. Islamic organizations began to appear in Highland Park,

Michigan in 1919, in Brooklyn in 1923 and in Cedar Rapids, Iowa in 1925.

The last gained a mosque in 1934, and is the oldest extant mosque in America. Social and ethnic organizations later became mosques or Islamic centers, and then leagues of Muslim organizations were born, such as the Federation of Islamic Associations (FIA), which held its first convention in 1952. The Muslim Student Association (MSA) was established in 1963 and now has several hundred university chapters across America. After the demise of the old FIA, a new continent-wide organization called the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) came into being in 1971. In 1982, the MSA became one of many organizations under the umbrella of another federation of Islamic organizations called the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA).

The real flood of Muslim immigrants began as a result of the change in U.S. immigration laws in 1965, which gave much larger quotas to Muslim nations. The affects of that change began to be felt by 1970, and today more than half of the Muslims of America have come since that time. At the present time, Muslims comprise an estimated 14 percent of new immigrants entering this country. Borge Schantz, in an excellent article entitled, “Islam in Europe” *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXI, No.4, October, 1993) describes how the great immigration of Muslim workers into Western Europe during the 60s and 70s has now stopped. This is

not the case in the USA, where Muslim immigration really got going in the 70s and continues until today.

The other major factor in the growth of Islam in America is the movement among African-Americans. It began with a pseudo-Islamic cult with roots going back to 1913 when Noble Drew Ali established the Moorish-American Science Temple in Newark, New Jersey. He was followed by W. Fard Mohammad, who was believed to be Allah, himself. The real growth of “the Nation of Islam” began about 1950 under the leadership of Elijah Mohammad and Malcolm X. There were 15 “Mohammad’s Temples” in 1955, and 50 by the end of 1959. Malcolm X’s conversion out of the Nation into orthodox Islam in 1963 (and assassination in 1965) and the elevation to leadership of Warith Deen Mohammed (upon the death of his father, Elijah Mohammad, in 1975) brought both transformation and division. W. D. Mohammed carefully brought about “the change” from the fantasy and racist theology taught by his father to orthodox Islamic teaching. In the process of this drastic change, Louis Farrakhan and others left to start a new “Nation of Islam” in order to maintain the original teaching of Elijah Mohammad. Others also started new groups, such as “the Five Percenters” and the “Nubian Nation,” with a jumble of teachings borrowed from Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Today, according to a *New York Times* article (May 3, 1993), there are as many as 18 different

## Islam in the West—U.S.A.

groups of African-American Muslims. The largest is “Al-Islam” under the unofficial leadership of W. D. Mohammed. Edgerley and Ellis do an outstanding job of outlining the history and development of most of these groups in their pamphlet, *The Emergence of Islam in the African-American Community*. According to a *U.S. News & World Report* of October 8, 1990, African-American Muslims now number over one million, or 25 percent of the American Muslim presence. The American Muslim Council, quoted in a February 24, 1993 article in *U.S.A. Today*, estimates they comprise 42 percent (over 2 million).

### Ethnographic Outline

According to a series of articles in the *New York Times*, May 2-4, 1993, on Islam in America, approximately 95,000 legal Muslim immigrants entered the USA in 1991, of whom 35,000 are ethnically from South Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Guyana and Trinidad); 21,500 from Persian countries (Iran and Afghanistan); 21,500 from Arabic countries; 7,500 from African countries; 6,000 Malays (from the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia); and 2,300 from Turkey. Somehow they neglected to mention European Muslim immigrants from Albania and the former Yugoslavia. While this gives us a picture of the present immigration ratios, in the past the percent of Arabs was higher. It is clear that the largest ethnic groups of Muslims in America today are African-American, South Asian, Arabic, and Persian, probably in that order, with smaller numbers of all the other Muslim ethnic groupings as well.

### Size and Growth Rates

Because of the census bureau’s stubborn policy against obtaining any information about religion, it is impossible to get exact figures of the number of Muslims in the USA. Researchers and organizations have made

estimates ranging from two and a half to nine million. My own estimate is five million. In an interview in *Christianity Today* of April 7, 1989, Steve Johnson, a former American Muslim leader, estimated that there were 4.6 million Muslims in America, including 40,000 to 75,000 white American converts (“Probably two-thirds of the Caucasian converts are women who marry Muslim men.”), 1.3 million Black Muslims, and 3.2 million immigrants. In that same article, he also said that, “Some say the number increases by ten percent a year.” My estimate is a growth rate of six percent annually, based on my own calculation of the following four factors.

#### 1. Immigration

Using the figure of 95,000 legal Muslim immigrants per year from the *New York Times* article and adding an estimated additional 45,000 illegal immigrants, we have about 140,000 immigrants.

#### 2. Conversions

There are something like 28,000 conversions to Islam annually in America, mostly from the African-American community.

#### 3. Marriage Conversions

Annually about 7,000 American women marry Muslim men and convert to Islam for the sake of their marriages. Many of these men have come here as university students or on business or tourists visas.

#### 4. Birth Rate

Immigrant Muslims, especially, average more than twice the number of children that other Americans have. I estimate that this year’s increase of births over deaths will be about 125,000 this year. The total of these four figures is 300,000 more Muslims in America this year.

### Geographic Factors

As is the case with all immigrants, most Muslim immigrants reside in the large metropolitan centers of

America. There are about 700,000 in both Los Angeles and New York, with lesser numbers in Chicago, Detroit, Washington and Houston. There are growing numbers in all the other cities as well. Certain ethnic groups seem to prefer certain locations more than others. Iranians, for example, are in Los Angeles, Houston and Washington while Pakistanis are mostly in New York and Chicago. Arabs are concentrated in Detroit, New York and Los Angeles; Turks, Central Asians and Bangladeshis are largely in New York; Indonesians in Los Angeles.

Another characteristic of Muslim immigrants is that the second and third generations as well as the most highly educated tend to move out into the suburbs and the smaller towns. There are growing numbers of educated and successful Muslims in the suburban areas, and it is common to find Muslim doctors practicing medicine in many smaller towns across America.

### Organizations and Movements

Zaheer Uddin, in the cover story of the January, 1990 issue of *The Message International* (published by ICNA), gives an excellent overview of the various activities and organizations of Muslims in America, starting with the local mosque. A great variety of buildings have been converted into mosques. Some are former houses, apartments, lodge halls, warehouses, churches and synagogues, while others are consecrated rooms in office, factory and college buildings. Increasingly Muslims are erecting new buildings as mosques, many of which are very impressive. One of the most beautiful is the Islamic Cultural Center on Manhattan’s upper east side, which was completed after 20 years at a cost of \$17.5 million.

In 1986, the American Institute for Islamic Affairs estimated that there were 600 mosques in the USA. In 1989, the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington, DC published a booklet on

“Understanding Islam and the Muslims” in which it stated that there were 1,000 mosques in the United States. This figure was based on records being kept by ISNA and other Muslim groups. In 1993, the ICNA listed 1,400 established mosques (on the basis of a survey it had done in one city, the ICNA estimates that there may be as many as 3,000, counting the less official, unlisted locations where there are regular Friday gatherings in homes and offices). This means the rate is accelerating and there are presently at least two new mosques opening per week in America!

In many cases, the first mosques that are organized develop into “Islamic centers,” in which the social and educational as well as the religious needs of a particular immigrant community are being met in one central building. In addition to regular prayers and lectures on Islam in the mosque itself, there often are classrooms for instruction on Islam and ethnic languages. Many times there is a bookstore, an office, recreational facilities and/or an area for wedding receptions and the celebration of religious holidays within the building. Funerals are conducted there, sometimes including the preparation of the corpse according to Islamic practices.

Because Muslim parents are alarmed by the influence secular American culture is having on their children, many mosques are initiating teaching programs to teach their children the basics of Islam. These programs are of three types. The most common is having special classes on Sunday afternoon when children are free. A second type is after-school classes several days a week. In the case of a few mosques that are able, a full Islamic day school is organized to integrate Islam along with “the three Rs.” In 1990, the ICNA listed 60 such Islamic schools in America, and in 1993 their list had grown to 90.

In addition to mosques and schools, Muslims in America have organized publishing houses, colleges, youth camps, relief organizations, political action groups, college student associations, women’s organizations, as well as many different professional groups. Organizations, such as the North

in the spread of Islam. Thirdly, the majority of Muslims are somewhat uninvolved in this discussion, and are focused instead on simply meeting their own daily material needs. With the size and local leadership of the Muslim community rapidly increasing, however, these people will be pressured to take sides.

My fear is that most of them will eventually join the second group.

At this point in American history, it may seem unnecessary to entertain any question about two percent of our population having any significant influence on our American political system,

but I believe we must. “No man can serve two masters.” Islam’s “Shariah” (law) is a complete legal and governmental system and in my opinion is also incompatible with the U.S. Constitution. I believe therefore, we will be seeing an increasing number of Muslim U.S. citizens in direct defiance of our laws and insisting on their own laws. In effect, they will want the status of being a nation within a nation, such as the Muslims of England are now demanding, even insisting on immunity from Christian evangelism.

### Effective Evangelism

We can now address the whole point of this article. The history, growth, activities and locations of America’s Muslims is vital information only if we care about them! They have been taught that Jesus was taken to heaven without dying or rising again, that He is not the Messiah, and that they must earn their own way to Paradise. So according to God’s Word, unless they turn and receive Jesus as their Savior and Lord, they are headed toward judgment and eternal condemnation. It’s an item for great praise that God is bringing hundreds of Muslims into new life in Christ all across America and He is using caring believers to share the Gospel with

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American Council for Muslim Women, the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, the YMFA (Young Muslims for Faith and Action) and the Muslim Political Action Committee, reflect the level of adaptation Muslims are making to the American way of life.

### Political Factors

With regards to involvement in American politics, Muslims can be divided into three categories. First of all, there is a minority which fervently believes their best method of impacting America for Islam is to work within the system by voting and eventually getting Muslims elected to office. A second minority is equally convinced that the secular USA government system is anti-God and anti-Islam, and that they can best influence American society by being totally separate from it both in life style and actions. They feel that American law is “man’s law” and that they are obligated to obey only Allah’s law (the Islamic Shariah). Therefore this minority justifies ignoring marriage laws by performing second marriages in the mosque or overseas, hiding tax information about their personal or business income, and avoiding compliance with business and zoning regulations in order to have more money to use

them!

In order to understand how we can best reach them with the Good News of God's love for them, we need to see them as three separate groups, because each of the three groups requires a different strategy and approach.

### First Generation Immigrants

As stated above, some 55 percent (about 2.75 million) of America's Muslims are first generation immigrants. This means immigrants presently comprise the majority of the Muslims in the USA. Furthermore, unless the U.S. government's immigration policy is changed, their number will continue to grow until they reach a critical mass of about four million. At that point, new arrivals will simply replace earlier immigrants dying of old age. Four million is a huge group of people! That's more than the Muslim population of 18 individual Muslim nations, including Jordan, Chad, Albania, Lebanon and Kuwait.

Although Muslim immigrants coming to America believe they are coming here for economic opportunity and/or political freedom, we should see that God is actually bringing them here so that they can hear the Good News of Jesus Christ! This overwhelming fact is clear to those Christians who are praying for the Muslim world. Most of these immigrants are coming from areas where there is very little opportunity to even hear the Gospel. And if they have heard it, social pressure has not permitted them to carefully consider it. In other words, they have been cut off from God's truth about Christ both by geographical distance from true Christians as well as by their own society's hostility to the Gospel.

Just coming to America, however, does not automatically enable them to hear and understand the Gospel. Here they are faced with a series of other barriers which cut them off from the

Gospel just as effectively. Although they are no longer geographically separated from born-again Christians, most of them are now separated from them by linguistic and cultural differences and are still unable to hear the Gospel. A recent Muslim immigrant may live near a church, have cable TV with access to Christian programming, have picked up an English Bible in a motel room, and even work alongside a born-again American Christian in his factory or office, but his limited English makes him unable to understand the full meaning of the words and expressions he hears. He is especially unable to understand the spiritual meaning of religious vocabulary used in the Gospel message.

Furthermore, although most immigrants may be removed somewhat from the social opposition of their Muslim families, American culture is as great a barrier to their understanding of new life in Christ as anything else. They are bewildered by the blatant immorality and indifference of unfriendly Americans, whom they assume are all Christians. They are almost never invited into American homes, they find that Americans are embarrassed to talk about God or religion, and those church visitation groups that sometimes come to their door seem to be in too much of a rush to drink tea or listen to anything they want to talk about. If they should ever visit a church service, they are usually mystified and "turned off" by the apparent irreverent manner of Christian worship. Not only do people enter with their shoes on and sit comfortably on cushioned seats next to their wives or girlfriends, but they never once bow down with their face to the floor in the worship of God! They even appear to be entertained by fashionably dressed singers and joke-telling speakers! In the article mentioned before, Borge Schantz points out how ineffective western mass-communication methods are among immigrant Muslims in Europe, because, "All Islamic cul-

tures depend upon personal relations."

These linguistic and cultural barriers are just as effective as the geographic and social barriers they faced before. It is imperative that we realize these people are basically unreachable by American Christians since they can be reached effectively only in their own language and culture! This is to say that evangelizing first generation immigrant Muslims in the U.S. is not "home missions," but foreign cross-cultural missions of the first degree.

The people who are best able to reach first generation immigrants are immigrant ethnic Christians and/or American missionaries trained in the languages and cultures of the immigrant Muslims. There are large numbers of Arabic Christians here in America and a good number of Iranian Christians. It is not surprising, therefore, that the largest groups of Muslim converts to Christ in America are Iranians and Arabs. Sad to say, there are relatively few immigrant ethnic Christians from the other parts of the Muslim world.

As far as missionaries are concerned, a few mission societies (such as International Missions, Inc.) are beginning to train and place missionaries here, but so far their number is insignificant. It is unfortunate that many American Christians seem to think that this is a job which should be delegated to retired missionaries living on social security, and our missions money should be sent overseas "where the need is greatest." When those same Muslims were far away we sacrificed our young people and money trying to send the Gospel to them, but now that they live next door, we shrug our shoulders and ignorantly think, "They don't need missionaries. All they have to do is come to church if they want to hear."

Immigrant Muslims in America are very much in touch with their societies back home, and they have a powerful influence on most of the Muslims of the world. It is time to recognize the stra-

tegic potential of this very significant group of Muslims living inside our own borders.

A good supply of literature and radio cassettes is available from overseas in all the major languages of Muslim immigrants, although there is a real need for such materials to be produced here, contextualized to the American scene.

### American Converts of Islam

Another 25 percent, or about 1.25 million of the Muslims in the USA, are American converts to Islam. Although these include some 80,000 Anglo-Americans, the great majority of converts are African-Americans. Their American sub-culture and their unique Muslim doctrines combined with their not-so-distant "Christian" cultural heritage require different workers as well as a different approach than that used with recent immigrants from the Muslim world. African-American Christians are best able to reach them for Christ, but there needs to be a new analysis of biblical answers for the African-American community's spiritual, cultural and economic needs being used to attract people to Islam.

There are great opportunities to reach out to many African-American Muslims who are not deeply confirmed in their beliefs. Many, for example, are unaware that the Quran teaches that Jesus never died on the cross or that orthodox Islam teaches that people of all races are equal before God. Others, having converted for social reasons (for the benefit of protection from other violent prisoners in jail, for identification with a seemingly strong and self-disciplined group or for racial identity), may not have understood the full implications of Islam's teaching about sin and salvation. Then there are opportunities as a result of the doubts and confusion generated by various divi-

sions and diverse doctrines. For example, books written by leaders of one group proving that another group is not true Islam, or W. D. Mohammed trying to explain that his father, Elijah Mohammad, was a man sent from God and yet was wrong in what he taught. Or the argument between the Black Israelites and the Nubian Hebrew Nation (a Muslim group previously called "The Ansar") about the existence of "true Israel" today. Then there are the "Five Percenters," who claim to be the only true Muslims in the

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world!

There is a desperate need for sensitive and effective literature and preaching showing how the Black person can find "dignity, African identity and global significance" in Jesus Christ. People such as Carl Ellis and others working with him in "Project Joseph" need encouragement and support as they seek to fill this need.

### Second Generation Immigrants

The remaining 15 percent (approximately three-fourths of a million) are the descendants of immigrants, who came as children or were born here. This group of children and grandchildren of Muslims immigrants is exploding and will continue to grow at about twice the American birth rate as long as new immigrants continue to enter this country. In just a few years it will become the largest of the three groups of Muslims. Unlike first generation immigrants, who will reach a critical mass, this group will continue to grow as the fourth,

fifth, sixth and succeeding generations come into being. In other words, this group is future Muslim America for which we need to be praying and planning for now!

Not only will this group continue to grow in number, but it is also the group most accessible to the American church. Growing up in America, going to American schools and watching American TV, these Muslims are culturally and linguistically American.

They can be reached by Christian laymen through American church programs and evangelistic efforts if believers will just care enough to do so. I know of several in this group who came to Christ the first or second time they were invited to church! Sadly, however, 95 percent of them have no born-again Christian friends and are never invited! Is it any wonder that some of these young people are becoming the

strongest, most effective advocates of Islam in American society?

Now is the time for America's pastors to become familiar with the issues and beliefs of Islam and to lovingly preach and teach the Bible's answers to these questions without "Muslim bashing." There need to be classes in our Sunday Schools and Bible schools where these issues are addressed as "Islam in America" and not just "over there." It is time to wake up to the potential of either a great harvest or a strong opposition to the Gospel from among these young American Muslims.

### What Can We do?

What can the American Church of Christ do to insure that these three groups of unreached Muslims hear and understand the Gospel? As I see it, the following are crucial actions that must be taken by American believers.

#### 1. Awareness

First of all, we need to be concerned

## Islam in the West—U.S.A.

enough to do the research, to keep informed, and to plan seminars to inform others of the presence, beliefs, and needs of Muslims in America and in our communities.

### 2. Prayer

Secondly, as the information is gathered, we need to stimulate earnest and faithful prayer for the salvation of Muslims in our land. God is working in Muslim lives only in answer to earnest prayer.

### 3. Love for Muslims

Practical expressions of love must be shown to the Muslims living around us, such as speaking to them, being interested in them, inviting them to our social activities and homes, enjoying their company and sharing our hearts with them. This is the only way we will get rid of our prejudices and stereotypes.

### 4. Supporting Immigrant Workers

We need to have a greater eagerness to financially support qualified ethnic workers under responsible organizations. I know of a number of such people whose desire to serve the Lord among Muslims is frustrated by a lack of support.

### 5. Preparing Missionaries

We need to encourage those young people who express an interest in missions to reach Muslims for Christ here in America by standing behind them financially and prayerfully the same way we stand behind those going overseas to reach Muslims.

### 6. Publishing Literature

There is a great need for people and funds to be allocated for the task of publishing literature and preparing videos and cassettes that are culturally effective for each of the three groups of Muslims in America.

### Summary

We need to be aware of the history, size, growth rate, ethnic composition, geographical locations, and organizations of Muslims in the U.S., but our major focus should be on recognizing the need of prepared workers to reach three distinct groups of Muslims for Christ. Fully supported cross-cultural missionaries and national immigrant ethnic Christians are needed to reach the largest group of first generation immigrants; caring African-American Christians churches and laymen are needed to reach African-American converts to Islam; and all churches and Christian laymen, in tune with what God is doing, are needed to reach the rapidly growing second and third generation immigrant Muslims. May the Lord help us see these urgent opportunities right inside our borders and motivate us to effectively bring the Gospel to our Muslim neighbors in this decade.

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