

Planting the Church Underground in Muslim Contexts

Rediscovering a biblical paradigm for effective and fruitful church planting in environments hostile to Christianity.

by Joshua Massey

An enraged mob of Muslims in Nigeria brutally behead a Christian, placing his freshly decapitated head upon a spear to lead their procession through the city as they shout “Allah Akbar!” [God is great!] The rampage doesn’t stop until nine churches are burned, two pastors killed, and 165 Christians injured.¹ An evangelical church in Chad is attacked in broad daylight by a group of about 600 young Muslims. The church’s bookshop is completely robbed and everything in the church is destroyed.²

Could these tragedies have been avoided? While such carnage is far from commonplace in the Muslim world today, we are hearing more and more reports of persecuted Christians in Islamic lands. For instance, Muslims who convert to another religion in Sudan are subject to capital punishment. In the summer of 1994, four Sudanese Muslim converts to Christianity were executed by crucifixion. An Egyptian Christian, active in evangelism in upper Egypt, was shot dead in front of his family by Islamic zealots, who have also destroyed Christian homes, fields, shops and churches. In addition to the government-sponsored execution of several Muslim converts to Christianity in Iran, key Christian leaders there have been mysteriously abducted and martyred. In 1991 Pakistan passed a law requiring capital punishment for anyone “blaspheming” the name of Muhammad, giving Muslims alternative opportunities to settle disputes with Christian neighbors. Rather than deal legitimately with economic or land disputes, Muslims can merely accuse Christians of blasphemy. Even if the Christian is not killed by a mob before trial, a

Christian’s testimony in Pakistani courts is worth only half of a Muslim’s.

We don’t often reflect on the uncomfortable reality that Muslims see the same phenomenon in Christian dominated lands where Muslims are a minority. Consider the case of Serbian “Christians” opening concentration camps and massacring thousands of Bosnian Muslims under the banner of “ethnic cleansing” in 1992. Not content with such savage genocide, Serbians “Christians” raped and impregnated thousands of Muslim women as a matter of policy.

Most Muslims citizens throughout the Islamic world are certainly *not* hostile towards Christians; however, we cannot but be concerned when Christians become targets for violence. The silent voice of such persecuted believers is seldom heard. Merely “raising their voice” often increases their vulnerability. Occasionally the news reaches us in the West as a plea to defend our fellow Christians by lobbying politically to withdraw financial aid from the same governments who, actively or passively, tolerate such human rights abuses. Major initiatives at the national level in the United States are commencing as never before. Sometimes we also hear of opportunities to assist victims with funds to provide supplies, replace burned books and rebuild demolished churches.

While we find many faithful disciples for Jesus in these lands, truly loving the very Muslim parties responsible for their torment, we are not as well acquainted with the even more prominent fact that the overwhelming majority of Christians in these Muslim lands don’t seem too concerned with reaching

their Muslim neighbors for Christ. When the faithful among them plead with these Christians to consider outreach to Muslims, reminding them that the consequence for their apathy may mean hell for Muslims, more than a few have said “Good! Hell is the best place for them!” Enduring many generations of unjust discrimination and sometimes even bloody hostility, it’s not hard to understand why many who call themselves Christians would love to see their Muslim neighbors go to hell. However, we must ask: What has happened to the church in these lands? Surely, few in the Western world can even imagine the painful effects of growing up as a religious minority in a land where offending the religious sentiments of a Muslim can result in the death penalty. And yet, we must ask: What is this social organization whose members publicly call themselves “Christians” who tell their sons and daughters with utmost seriousness, “Never trust a Muslim!”

Laws forbidding Christians from purchasing land to build churches, banning Christian children from government-financed education, and special taxes on Christians, these are some of the most common forms of socio-economic persecution. But did the apostles or our early church fathers lobby the political authorities for the right to erect public church buildings? Did the followers of Christ during Nero’s reign even openly identify themselves as “Christians”? Furthermore, what does all this have to do with how we establish churches among Muslim peoples today?

To answer these questions, let us take a brief look at the history of the

church, taking special note of how early Christians experienced continued growth amidst deadly hostility, what factors may be responsible for changing this apostolic pattern of growth, and how we might apply these historical lessons today in our outreach to Muslims.

Growth in the Early Church

When the church was established at Pentecost in A.D. 30, it was seen by both Jews and Gentiles as a Jewish sect. Persecution of believers therefore came primarily from Jews who objected to their doctrine and their admission as Gentiles who did not observe the Law. In A.D. 35, the church went underground after Stephen's martyrdom. Jewish leaders began going from house to house to drag followers of "The Way" off to prison—they were not yet called "Christians" until about six years later.³ Stephen, as a Hellenist, spoke Greek and adopted a freer life-style than conservative Jews. It is interesting to note that while Jewish persecution of "The Way" did affect Jewish disciples of Christ in Jerusalem, the outburst was particularly aimed at the more "liberal" Hellenists. But rather than stop the growth of the church, this wave of persecution only fulfilled Jesus' words by thrusting more witnesses into "Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Philip, another Hellenist, brought the Gospel to the half-Jewish Samaritans and saw a great harvest (Acts 8).

Although early followers of Jesus referred to themselves as "Jews," "followers of the Way," "brethren," "disciples," "the faithful," "elect," "saints," "believers," and "the household of God," unbelievers referred to them as "Nazarenes," "Galileans," and "Jes-saeans."⁴ By A.D. 41, there were so many Gentiles who had joined The Way that people started calling them "Messiah-nuts" (the likely idiomatic connotation of the Greek term "Christian").⁵ Perhaps the term arose in Antioch because the behavior of Gentile believers,

in contrast to Jewish followers of The Way, was so "non-Jewish" that they could hardly be called a sect of Judaism. Yet because of the enduring presence of Jewish believers, what we call "Christianity" today was seen as a sect, or possibly a "cult", of Judaism even as late as A.D. 59 (Acts 24:5, 14).

Under the wing of Judaism, The Way enjoyed the same rights and privileges which Roman law bestowed upon the highly respected Jewish minority. Therefore, followers of The Way, like Jews, were exempt from the cult of emperor-worship. But as the number of Gentile believers kept increasing, it became more and more difficult to tag along with the Jewish community. Eventually, the privileges given to Jews by Rome began slipping away from Gentile believers.

The refusal of The Way to burn even a pinch of incense to the divine Emperor was seen as unpatriotic. The Roman position toward believers therefore grew worse and worse. In July 64, followers of The Way entered a severe period of persecution when Nero used them, according to the Roman historian Tacitus, as a scapegoat to shift blame for the fires of Rome away from himself—rumor held Nero started the fire which destroyed much of Rome.

First those who confessed to being Christians were arrested. Then, on information obtained from them, hundreds were convicted, more for their anti-social beliefs than for their fire-raising. In their deaths they were made a mockery. They were covered in the skins of wild animals, torn to death by dogs, crucified or set on fire—so that when darkness fell they burned like torches in the night. Nero opened up his gardens for this spectacle and gave a show in the arena. (Annals-15.44)

The final event to polarize disciples of Jesus as an independent people separate from Jews occurred during the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66-73. Rather than use this Jewish revolt as an opportunity to avenge their oppressors under Nero, who ruled until 68, most

believers completely disassociated themselves from Judaism. Their refusal to join Jews in this revolt led to Jewish perceptions of believers as national enemies. From this point on, few Jews joined The Way.

The cry of martyrs in the Book of Revelation gives us a glimpse of the persecution that followed in the province of Asia under Domitian (81-96):

"How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood? They were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow-servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed. (Rev. 6:10-11)

By the early second century, public profession of "Christianity" was a capital offense. If a person was found to be a Christian, they were given opportunity to renounce their faith—execution awaited those who would not deny their Lord. Martyrs would kneel blindfolded, awaiting decapitation by sword. Bishops and church leaders were brought to Rome for execution. Grasque mentions that the legal grounds for the persecution of Christians during the second century were often obscure,

Apparently, simply to bear the name "Christian" was a crime, probably because rejection of the gods of the Romans was felt to threaten the peace and prosperity that the gods were believed to bring. Refusal to worship the Emperor could also be taken as a sign of treason.⁶

Decius (249-251) gave an imperial edict commanding all citizens of the empire to make sacrifices to the Roman gods. Certificates were given as evidence of obedience to the edict. Some Christians obtained certificates from sympathetic pagan neighbors, or corrupt officials, without actually performing the sacrifices. Others complied to avoid execution. Sporadic persecutions continued. Emperor Diocletian issued four severe edicts against Christianity in 303. A large number of Christians and their entire town in Asia Minor were

destroyed by soldiers. Christians of Palestine, Egypt, and Syria seem to have been targeted with the most intense persecution.

The Underground Church of Jerusalem

Rather than annihilate the church, it seems that periods of persecution only drove the church underground, where its number could slowly but steadily increase unnoticed by its enemies. Acts 9:26-27 teaches us several lessons about how the underground church of the first century operated:

When he [Paul] had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.

We see from these verses that Paul's first attempts to find the disciples failed because they were afraid of him. He was an outsider, not privy to the knowledge of where believers met. No one trusted him enough to give him that confidential information, lest they gullibly mistake his profession of faith and end up becoming an accomplice to the massacre of the whole underground church in Jerusalem. Those unwilling to help Paul locate the disciples probably suspected him of trying to deceptively infiltrate their trusted network so he could continue to imprison and persecute the saints for which he was well known (Acts 25:10-11).

Years had passed since Paul's conversion on his way to Damascus, but it seems that confirmed reports of such news never made it to Jerusalem, or perhaps the disciples dismissed such reports as deceptive rumors designed to trick them into trusting Paul someday—as he was now requesting. Paul probably asked around discreetly, trying to find a

disciple who could introduce him to the community of believers, where he could also meet the apostles. But no one believed his testimony. No one believed he had truly become a follower of Jesus, not until he found Barnabas.

According to Gal. 1:18-19, it appears that Barnabas probably met with Peter

This pattern of meeting from house to house is well suited for hostile environments. If outsiders do not know where believers will meet from week to week, how can they raid their meetings?

and James (and maybe other disciples) seeking permission to bring Paul into their midst so they could examine his testimony to verify for the whole church that Paul was indeed now a genuine disciple of Jesus. Barnabas, also called an apostle (Acts 14:14), was a trusted man of great integrity. A.T. Robertson, in his classic work on Greek word pictures in the New Testament, notes that Paul's visit to Peter came not only after his endorsement from Barnabas, but probably while Paul was preaching in Jerusalem. In other words, Paul may have been under observation to quell their suspicion before agreeing to meet him. Peter and James eventually did consent to meet Paul, probably in a neutral location, not one of the secret sites where believers met together. In contrast to the fearful disciples, Peter and James were the brave ones who volunteered to take the risk and responsibility of evaluating Paul's testimony so that no one else need expose their identities to such a distrusted newcomer.

If Robertson is correct about the fact that Peter and James granted an audience with Paul only after observing his bold preaching, we can only imagine what Paul might have been thinking as he

labored to demonstrate that his faith was genuine: "I'm not lying! I really am a disciple of Jesus! Would an infiltrating spy risk his life by talking to Grecian Jews so boldly? Watch this!" According to Acts 9:28-30, Paul debated the Hellenistic Jews so aggressively that they tried to kill him! Threats upon his life were so serious that the disciples evacuated Paul to

Caesarea and then sent him off to Tarsus! Paul passed his test with flying colors! He was now accorded the trust to fellowship with the disciples at Jerusalem.

The Apostolic Model

Christians of the first three centuries did not meet in special church buildings. To do so would only have invited their destruction. Rather, they met in private homes, as was the custom recorded in the New Testament. This pattern of meeting from house to house is well suited for hostile environments. If outsiders do not know where believers will meet from week to week, how can they raid their meetings?

Archaeological evidence suggests that the first actual church buildings began to emerge in the middle of the third century during one of many peaceful interludes between persecution. After over two hundred years of underground growth—when Christians were on their way to becoming a majority population in some areas—a handful of fellowships could finally gather as many as one hundred people under the same roof. Still, the evidence points to the fact that the overwhelming majority of Christians met in small and quiet house-based fellowships until the beginning of the fourth century.

The New Testament requirement of elders being "able to teach" also provides a healthy grassroots, guerrilla-style ecclesiology to insure continued growth amidst deadly persecution since they will be able to shepherd the splin-

ter groups that scatter if some of a fellowship's leaders are executed.

Before Stephen's martyrdom, it was generally known where followers of The Way lived. But during the periodic persecutions which forced the church to go underground, the identity of believers became less public and more private. Newcomers did not gain entry into the community of believers until leaders were convinced that either their faith was genuine or, at least, that they were earnestly interested in learning more about the Way of God (Acts 18:26). Given that inquirers put themselves at risk just by being associated with The Way, screening out impostors was not as perplexing as one might imagine.

Church Growth Amidst Secrecy

One might ask: How did the church grow so rapidly if public identification as a "Christian" was a crime punishable by death? Asked another way: How did believers evangelize without the opponents of the church discovering they were "Christians"? The open-air preaching we read about in Acts became a hazardous style of evangelism after Nero's persecution, and is seldom mentioned in the second and third centuries. While the early apostles enjoyed preaching in synagogues, this method of evangelism was no longer an option when followers of The Way refused to join in the Jewish revolt against Rome (66-73), completing the polarization of Christians as a distinct people, no longer considered a sect of Judaism.

The underground church of the first three centuries grew primarily by what we today call "personal" and "life-style" evangelism. Christians were not silent about their faith, just selective about who they shared it with. In a society where integrity, honesty, and sexual purity were not commonplace, Christians stood out as people to be trusted. When a plague broke out in Alexandria, Christians stayed behind to tend the sick and bury the dead while most everyone else fled.

Persecution was sporadic; it didn't hammer the church for three solid centuries. The church enjoyed some mobility and tolerance during several rather lengthy periods of peace in the second and third century when classes for inquirers could actually be held in neutral locations. But when persecution was renewed, most Christians maintained a very low profile to avoid unnecessary suffering. They had even developed secret symbols to identify themselves as Christian to other believing strangers. The fish symbol, popular among Christians even today, was probably used because the Greek word for fish (ICHTHUS) formed the acrostic: *Iesous Christos Theou Uios Soter* (Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior), serving both as a secret symbol and a concise summary of Christian belief. A dove, shepherd, and even a special sailor's anchor (which revealed a cross to Christian insiders) also served as secret symbols to help strangers recognize other brothers and sisters in Christ. But unlike today in the West, such symbols were effective to assist the networking of early believers precisely because outsiders had no clue of their hidden meaning.

Even with such an elaborate underground system of secrecy, many Christians were discovered. Perhaps they shared their faith with someone who betrayed their confidence; or maybe they were the bold ones who exercised less caution in their witness. But rather than discourage church growth, the public display of Christian martyrdoms only seems to have achieved the very opposite. In view of the relative few Christians who renounced their faith, unbelievers could only admire the supernatural peace of those who willingly laid down their lives for the One who was executed for them. Tertullian wrote "the blood of the martyrs is seed." As foreign as it might seem to us today, many believers were actually enthusiastic about the prospects of martyrdom. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, actually begged Christians in Rome

to avoid any attempts at preventing his execution. According to Eusebius, just before Polycarp was burned alive he blessed God in public prayer for counting him worthy in the number of martyrs to partake of Christ's cup.⁷

This special number of martyrs has its likely origin rooted in Rev. 6:10-11. As a boy in Alexandria, Origen had to be forcibly restrained by his mother from joining the martyrs in their suffering. Martyrdom was seen by many as a high privilege to fellowship with Christ in His suffering (John 15:13; Php. 3:10; 1 Pet. 4:13). Those who were martyred before baptism were seen as experiencing a "better baptism in blood." Smith notes, "The sufferings of the martyrs at Lyons and Vienne in A.D. 177 encouraged several bystanders to declare themselves Christians, even though it meant almost certain death for them too."⁸

People were intrigued by a community whose hope could not be extinguished. Believers quietly and steadily multiplied in number and influence. By the middle of the third century, a minority Christian community existed in almost every province of the empire. Historians note how intense persecution in the late third century actually helped purge the church of its more lukewarm members.⁹

So what was the result of nearly 250 years of "covert" and "clandestine" underground church operations amidst such deadly hostility? It meant phenomenal growth! By AD 300, Christians actually formed a majority in several provinces of Asia Minor and Africa. And then, like a new chapter for Acts, which chronicles the victorious arrival of the church in Rome, the year 312 saw a decisive victory as the church *conquered* the Empire when Emperor Constantine himself became a Christian.

The Post-Constantine Church

With the Edict of Milan, Christianity became an officially tolerated religion

of the Empire in 313 and Christians finally enjoyed the freedom to worship and to publicly identify themselves as Christians without fear of persecution. Such freedom gave opportunity for dramatic changes what Christians did and especially in the way Christians gathered for worship. Large and impressive churches were soon built throughout the Empire. In 395 Christianity actually became the *only* official state religion. But was this official acceptance really a victory for the church and its mission?

Linder, Professor of History at Kansas State University, comments on this period of church history:

Many historians feel that the acceptance of Christianity during the fourth century as the official state religion seriously damaged spirituality, as Christian leaders became confidants of emperors. Others go further, and interpret this period as the “fall of the church” from its apostolic purity—as the beginnings of a new era in which the issue of the right relationship between the church and state had to be resolved.¹⁰

While thousands, no doubt, became new members of the church with genuine spiritual repentance, thousands more came into the church because Christianity was now “respectable”—it being the religion of the Emperor! Like good citizens emulating the preferences of their ruler, many probably entered the church as the “fashionable” thing to do.

So while it may appear that Christianity was on the brink of even greater victories, says Linder, history shows that as Christianity swept across the Greco-Roman world, it lost some of its original zeal, as well as much of its earliest simplicity.¹¹ Nominalism and lukewarmness became endemic. With the threat of persecution now removed, calling oneself a Christian in the post-Constantine era cost very little.

Whereas in the past, persecution purged the church of its lukewarm members, the absence of persecution now ushered in an era of lukewarm Christianity unknown in prior church history. Although commonly used to describe many who identify themselves as Christians today, the word “hypocrite” was not likely a term used for Christians during the first three centuries—they knew all too well that the cost of following Jesus could require their own lifeblood.

The thorough examination of genuine

The church structures established under the Protestant thrust of the nineteenth century weren't much different. Henry Venn pointed to a kind of religious imperialism that was reluctant to establish truly indigenous churches...

faith before admittance into an underground church combined with threat of martyrdom has a strange way of weeding out those who aren't serious about following Jesus! But all this changed in the post-Constantine era. The simplicity of church leadership through elders was replaced by a highly sophisticated and institutional ecclesiastical order. House-fellowships were replaced first by synagogue-type clusters of worshipping households (*ekklesias*), and later by elaborate and expensive architectural masterpieces.

Islam and Underground Reformers

Ironically, not long after Christianity became the only official state religion, the Western half of the Roman empire began precipitous decline until it collapsed during the fifth century. The widespread nominalism of the church combined with the long-standing anti-Roman

spirit across North Africa and Semitic areas of the Middle East provided fertile ground for Islam in the late seventh and early eighth centuries.

Not until the ninth and tenth centuries do we see any significant spiritual renewal in the Western church, attempting to raise the spiritual level of those who called themselves “Christians.” Along with such renewal, numerous groups emerged calling for a return to “apostolic” Christianity, denouncing the worldliness and corruption of the church. During the twelfth century, whole areas of Europe began to demand the “purification” of the church. However, such people were quickly branded as heretics.

Chief among the heresies of the Waldensians was their “unauthorized” preaching of the Bible and their rejection of the clergy as mediators. Waldensians believed anyone could perform communion, not just those who have ascended to high ecclesiastical orders. Waldensians also rejected the doctrine of purgatory, for which they found no biblical evidence. But now, rather than angry Jews or pagan Romans killing these “heretical” Christians, “Christian” mobs began burning such believers at the stake. By the early thirteenth century, capital punishment for such heretics became official papal policy—a policy which Protestants also adopted later when their turn came to quell dissent, diversity and purification.

The Waldensians avoided extinction by fleeing to inaccessible European alpine valleys. Such a retreat from society is in great contrast to an underground church whose members scatter to *populated* regions where their anonymity allows greater mobility to spread the gospel. Fleeing to unpopulated areas, on the other hand, can result in a kind of isolation where the church grows only by procreation. Those who opt not to flee

during persecution, as the apostles did in Jerusalem, may do so to slowly and quietly introduce change, staying out of the public eye by going “underground” until things calm down. But in fairness to the Waldensians, they probably had fewer options than the early church whose persecution took time to spread outside of Jerusalem. In spite of their retreat to lonely alpine valleys, Waldensians helped lay a solid foundation for the Protestant movement by exchanging ideas with John Wycliff, who produced the first English translation of the Latin Bible.

Wycliff, condemned as a heretic in 1380, taught that Christians could interpret the Bible for themselves. Wycliff’s Lollard movement went underground in 1414 amidst strong persecution as heretics, but Lollardy had already deeply influenced the teaching of John Huss. Both Wycliff and Huss are seen as forerunners to the Protestant Reformation which also adopted many Waldensian beliefs. Recognizing the spiritual richness of these so called “heretical” reformist groups, many devout Catholics gradually attempted to introduce a similar spiritual depth into the church through monasticism and mysticism. But it could not be stopped, the Protestant Reformation arrived in the early sixteenth century.

So, it seems that the church—or at least parts of it—came full circle. Starting as a sect of Judaism that soon went underground in the first century amidst deadly Jewish and Roman hostility; enjoying a lengthy period of post-Constantine peace from the fourth century when covert worship was no longer necessary; returning underground once again as heretical reformist sects in the fifteenth century amidst more deadly persecution; then gradually reemerging into another post-Constantine-like era of peace after the heretical Protestant reformists reached a majority in certain regions in Europe, usually alongside political opposition to the Holy Roman

emperor. To comment on when Protestantism actually achieved the status of a “tolerated religion” among Catholics (or vice versa) would surely be a subject of considerable debate, just as many untolerated sects within Protestantism might assert that “post-Constantine-like peace” existed only for the self-appointed caretakers of the faith whose numbers were large enough to form a majority.

It is interesting to note the economic factors associated with persecution. One of the first things Christians did after massacring Waldensian Christians was to seize their land and church properties—perhaps the Waldensians didn’t learn the lesson of apostolic Christianity as well as they thought! The ownership of such valuable and *visible* real estate by minorities who have lost public favor is bound to trigger the envy of the majority who can invent a number of cunning methods to take it.

Public Church Expansion

When Christianity finally became a world religion during colonial expansion from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, Catholic missionaries had inherited this post-Constantine-like freedom to profess Christ publicly, without fear of persecution. This freedom was further bolstered by the fact that it was the missionary’s fellow countrymen who now ruled the land from which they sought converts. Never having experienced the need for an underground church in their generation, they carried on with the usual post-Constantine-like structures for the fledgling new church. The result was large impressive church buildings on huge plots of land, and complex ecclesiastical structures dependent on a foreign hierarchy.

The church structures established under the Protestant thrust of the nineteenth century were not much different. Henry Venn pointed to a kind of religious imperialism that was reluctant to establish truly indigenous churches

that were “self governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating.” Although void of a papacy in ecclesiology, most Protestant missionaries were also under the authority of foreign institutions. Protestants also built impressive churches, schools and hospitals—keeping with the post-Constantine tradition as if the church would forever exist in a peacetime era. Who could foresee a period when colonial reign would cease and local governments grow hostile toward the church?

Those who adopted the colonialist’s Christianity joined the religion of rulers, as did many of Constantine’s citizens. In many cases, the poor stood to gain far more than eternal salvation from aligning themselves with their ruler’s faith. We rejoiced to see many great people movements where masses embraced Christianity. The poor, as in India, were perhaps less inhibited about appearing like unpatriotic traitors to their fellow countrymen, who offered them less to retain their indigenous faith. Christianity was not only an opportunity for peace with God, it was also a chance for the low-caste to move up in socio-economic status; for competing tribes to gain a technological edge on opponents; for the sick to ensure better health from a sophisticated Western school of medicine; for the underprivileged to ensure a better future for their youth with education to keep pace with global transitions. Many no doubt surrendered in full repentance to God’s authority over their lives, but others preferred to enjoy the perks of membership to the ruler’s religious organization without genuine submission to God. Their trial and test had not yet arrived.

Persecution after Decolonization

The colonial era ended, as did the welcome mat for many missionaries throughout Asia and Africa. Colonialists were not just asked to leave; many were kicked out in what Winter calls the “twenty-five unbelievable years.”

By 1945, Europeans had virtual control over 99.5% of the non-Western world. Twenty-five years later, the Western nations had lost control over all but 5% of the non-Western population of the world.¹²

Many nations resented Colonial domination as well as what some considered the unrestrained raping of their land and resources. In most cases, where Christianity remained a minority, people saw the residual presence of the church as a political foothold from their oppressors. But now, instead of colonialists, it was their fellow countrymen who inherited and controlled these structures, proudly calling themselves by the same name as their colonial oppressors—"Christians."

As some of these churches attempted to maintain ties to the Western church—which appeared much like a political hierarchy of foreign benefactors—religious conversion once again was seen as national treason, threatening the very fabric of their society. If those Christian minorities happened to come mostly from the lower strata of society, as was the case in India, unbelievers saw Christianity as the poor man's religion, for dirty and uncivilized people trying to curry favor with the highest bidder. The impressive real estate they inherited from foreign benefactors became objects of envy, vulnerable to the schemes of the majority.

Communism and Islam now became the greatest persecutors of Christian minorities. The masses who converted to Christianity under the religious freedom and protection afforded by colonialism would undergo a testing of their faith. Some would taste intense persecution, while others mild.

The Church in China

After Mao's communist forces gained control of China in 1949, his government expelled all foreign missionaries, eliminated all church organizations,

and subjected Christians to systematic persecution designed to destroy any vestige of Christianity's so called imperialistic control. Although forced to relocate outside of China, missionaries continued their work with great diligence—on their knees in prayer! The missionaries in China were not schooled in underground church planting, nor had they ever experienced such sinister

“...we who have never experienced life in a Communist society are in no position to criticize those who face such difficult tests of faith.”

hostility toward the church. Many wondered if such persecution would destroy the church in China. Their work would soon be tested by fire. Very little news of the church came out of China until after Mao's death in 1976.

As reports began coming out of China, it became clear that the church not only survived; it thrived! "How?" was the big question on everyone's mind. Carl Lawrence wrote a whole book to answer this question. The short answer is that the church in China followed the apostolic (pre-Constantine) model.¹³ Maybe this was a conscious choice by some Christian leaders, or maybe it was so obvious and natural that they didn't need to develop a theological apologetic for going underground, silently singing hymns like a band of mimes doing a corporate lip-synch to avoid the notice of neighbors. Just as the apostolic church went underground during the intense persecution following Stephen's martyrdom, the church in China did the same. They attended small secret house-based fellowships where they devoted themselves to the study of the Word, prayer, and worship. The seeds planted by missionaries grew and flourished by God's grace.

Discussing several strengths of the church in China from which believers around the world can learn, Lawrence points to its "de-institutionalization" which enabled Christians to fellowship in homes, parks, fields, boats, cemeteries, or on mountains. Lawrence goes on to say, "The church [in China] is no longer a building, but truly the body of believers. ...the clergy-laity distinction common to institutions has largely been obliterated."¹⁴ Such a de-institutionalization of the church was clearly essential for its survival amidst such aggressive hostility toward any who publicly identified themselves as Christians.

The harrowing eye-witness accounts of how young Red

Guards of the Cultural Revolution humiliated, tortured, and martyred so many of the saints who refused to deny the Lord Jesus are so horrific that most Western believers can hardly imagine that this tyranny occurred in their lifetime.

While Americans were watching Ozzie and Harriet during the post-war economic peace and prosperity of the 1950's, a Chinese Christian woman was watching in disbelief and horror as Guards cracked her husband's skull open in front of her home.

But not all Chinese Christians persevered to the end. Many were imprisoned and "re-educated" until they renounced their faith. Many genuine believers, under great persecution, not only denied their Lord, as did Peter under less duress (Mt. 26:74), but they also betrayed their brothers in the Lord. Some Western critics—from the safety of their own society protected by their constitution and police—point to the Biblical mandate to confess Christ before all men, suffering for Christ at all costs. But as David Adeney wrote, "...we who have never experienced life in a Communist society are in no position to criticize those who face such difficult tests of faith."¹⁵

Yet there can be no question that if any lukewarm believers existed before the Cultural Revolution, they were surely purged! The church in China did not grow because going to church was “fashionable” nor even “socially expected.” It grew because believers were ready to give everything they had to follow the One who asked us to carry our cross (Mt. 13:46, Luke 14:27). Many Chinese Christians assume that suffering is a normal Christian experience, citing the words of our Lord,

Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other.... but he who stands firm to the end will be saved (Mt. 24:9, 10, 13)

The relative absence of nominalism undoubtedly had a synergistic effect on church growth, but we also see another factor reflected in the testimony of a Chinese believer, “The more difficult things became, the more we seemed to grow.”¹⁶ Samuel Zwemer, the apostle to Islam, stated it another way: “Opposition is a stimulus to greater activity.” There is something present in the very character of opposition which stimulates growth. Consider Walter Lippmann’s comments from “The Indispensable Opposition,”

A good statesman, like any other sensible human being, always learns more from his opponents than from his fervent supporters. For his supporters will push him to disaster unless his opponents show him where the dangers are. So if he is wise he will often pray to be delivered from his friends, because they will ruin him. But though it hurts, he ought also to pray never to be left without opponents; for they keep him on the path of reason and good sense.¹⁷

When the cherished beliefs of a zealous Christian college student are first challenged by an atheist or agnostic, he scurries to do his homework to try to refute them effectively. Had none opposed him, he may never have learned the apologetics which ultimately made him a

far better evangelist. Opposition, unlike tolerance and apathy, proves that the issue opposed is important and significant—perhaps even threatening. Perhaps this is why William Blake wrote: “Opposition is true friendship.” Communist opposition to the church in China merely fanned the flames of its wild growth. A recent six-month study of church growth conducted in China revealed that the total number of believers may now be over 100 million!¹⁸ The most conservative estimates start at 30 million, but the State Statistical Bureau in China estimated in 1992 that Christians in China number 75 million—all the more amazing when compared to only 5 million in 1949.¹⁹

In spite of public Three Self Patriotic Movement churches (TSPM) reopening under the banner of “religious freedom” in 1979, most house-churches did not choose to come out from underground. The TSPM church is the vehicle of the Chinese government to “free the Christian Church from imperialistic control.” TSPM pastors must, according to the government, help their flock become good “patriotic” citizens of the new socialist order, which will eventually eradicate the superstitious need for religion. TSPM churches are the only “legal” churches of China; independent house churches are illegal and guilty of breaking a law that forbids any religious activity outside the TSPM. Such a law effectively prohibits evangelism where it is most needed. So in spite of the fact that many sincere believers now worship publicly at TSPM churches, house churches (which far outnumber TSPM churches) refuse to disband their secret fellowships only to be ensnared by the restrictive trap of TSPM control which forbids the very expansion of the church through pioneer evangelism.

Persecution of underground churches has intensified since 1989. It now is clear that the official government policy wants to shut down all house

churches. Several thousand believers are known to be in prison, and some are being tortured.²⁰ But the underground church of China continues to experience unprecedented growth, stimulated by opposition and continually purged of lukewarm members.

Christianity’s Greatest Defeat

But persecution doesn’t always succeed in purging the church of the lukewarm, nor does opposition always galvanize the church’s zeal to spread the good news. This is plainly evident in the New Testament where the term “lukewarm” was used to describe the first century church in Laodicea which remained “neither hot nor cold” amidst intense persecution under Emperor Domitian (Rev. 3:16).

Christianity suffered its greatest defeat, according to Kenneth Latourette, in the seventh and eighth centuries when Muslim invaders conquered almost half of Christendom.²¹ The predominantly Christian populations of the Middle East and North Africa were quickly reduced to minorities, and Islam dominated. The phenomenal post-Constantine growth of the church seemed to vanish almost as quickly as it appeared. In spite of many valiant efforts by zealous clergy prior to the arrival of Islam, the lives of the masses who flocked into the post-Constantine church, writes Latourette, were not much better than those of the surviving remnants of paganism.²²

The church had experienced great decline since its public acceptance as an official religion of the Empire in 313. In contrast to the spiritual zeal of the apostolic underground church which not only *survived* the first three centuries of church history but *thrived*—as has the church in China since 1949—the overwhelming majority of Christians in the seventh and eighth centuries did not “stand firm to the end.” The small number of Christians who refused to embrace Islam did not try to go

underground, where their activity could have continued unmonitored. Like a truce after defeat, most agreed to keep their un-Islamic doctrines to themselves in exchange for a peaceful coexistence.

While it only took the apostolic underground church a little more than 250 years of covert *ekklesia* growth to gain a majority in several provinces of Asia Minor and Africa, and while the church in China is already beginning to approach a majority in some cities after less than 50 years of covert church growth, the public church of the Middle East and North Africa seems to have affected little change on its religious demographics after over twelve centuries—no thanks to the bloodthirsty Crusades (1096-1291) giving Christianity an indelible stigma of militant tyranny which Muslims have not forgotten even today.

But lest we pass judgment too quickly on these surviving Christians who cooperated with Muslim rulers by curtailing evangelism, do we not see similar patterns in the West today? The church of America is being attacked, according to Patrick Johnstone, by “an unholy alliance of minority rights groups such as humanists, homosexuals, New Age enthusiasts and pro-choice abortionists [who] exploit the provisions of the constitution and control of the media to disparage and mock Christians and limit or remove anything Christian in public life.”²⁴ Liberal churches in essence have—like Christianity after Islamic conquest—waved their white flags of truce to these aggressive minority groups. They not only agreed to keep their “intolerant values” to themselves in exchange for a peaceful coexistence, but many have actually accommodated the secular relativism which dominates our age and have even given positions of church leadership to members of the above minority groups. The result of this

compliant obeisance to secular hostility not only arrested the growth of liberal churches, but ensured their decline. In fact, it is estimated that 85% of America’s Protestant churches are either stagnating or dying.²⁵ Peter Wagner helps pinpoint this decline:

Beginning with the rise of the social gospel movement toward the end of

History makes it clear that the church of Jesus Christ has always had enemies, ranging from a violently hostile majority to a grudgingly tolerant minority.

the last century, mainline denominations embraced, to one degree or another, liberal theology. Liberal theology inevitably tends to dull the cutting edge of evangelism and church planting.²⁶

Wagner goes on to cite three denominational studies, all done by mainline insiders, contrasting a negative correlation of liberalism with church growth to a positive correlation of conservatism.²⁷ The fact is that while liberal denominations declined in church membership from 1965 to 1975, conservative evangelicals were growing vigorously.²⁸ Why? Perhaps this growth is related to the maxim expressed by Samuel Zwemer, “Opposition is a stimulus to greater activity.” Growth has accompanied the obstinate evangelicals who consistently anger the majority by their unbending and offensive assertion that Jesus is the only way and that the Bible is God’s authoritative Word. But liberals, who significantly outnumber evangelicals,²⁹ left their surrounding culture largely unchallenged, much like the post-Constantine Christians after Islamic conquest. They have adopted the values of their surrounding culture to the degree that unbelievers can hardly distinguish

them as significantly different from any other social institution. Blending in so thoroughly, they have little to offer that the world doesn’t already have, and therefore little to attract new growth.

So was “Christianity” really defeated under Islamic conquest, as Latourette wrote, or did such testing merely reveal the true composition of the church during that era? Religious surveys reveal that 86.5% of America professes to be “Christian,”³⁰ but one has to wonder what that number would be reduced to if military invaders hostile to the church conquered the country. Would all the faithful be martyred willingly, or would some go underground in secret house-fellowships, slowly and quietly evangelizing their invaders and apostate Americans?

One thing is sure: The post-Constantine model of the public church would cease to exist as we know it today. As church buildings were destroyed by order of the new ruler, surviving American Christians would have to meet secretly—especially after witnessing numerous executions of those who publicly professed Christianity. Large churches dependent on one primary leader or teacher would have to disband into smaller groups, constantly changing meeting places in their to avoid the notice of unsympathetic neighbors. New membership to these small house-churches would need to be taken with serious caution, lest a government informer infiltrate the fellowship to destroy it.

Missions to Muslims Today

History makes it clear that the church of Jesus Christ has always had enemies, ranging from a violently hostile majority to a grudgingly tolerant minority. Sometimes the church thrived under hostile conditions until it became a majority; other times it

called a truce and curtailed its growth in exchange for a peaceful coexistence. With the luxury of hindsight, we would be wise to heed the precept: “He who ignores the mistakes of history is destined to repeat them.” So let us attempt to explore ways in which we can not only understand the present situation of persecuted Christians in Muslim dominated lands, but also try to see how the above historical lessons might affect our methodology of church planting among Muslims.

The persecution experienced by Christian minorities in Muslim dominated lands comes in a variety of forms and for a variety of reasons. Christian minorities often live peaceful lives as long as they do not propagate their religious “heresies” among Muslim citizens.

And yet, even when Christian minorities are not guilty of evangelism, violence against them may be motivated by ethnic factors. After a South Indian Christian was brutally assaulted in the north, he asked why they beat Christians. They replied, “We didn’t know you were a Christian; just coming from the south was a good enough reason for us!” Whether we call it casteism, tribalism or racism, many bloody clashes are rooted in ethnicity, not religion. Because the acceptance of the gospel by tribal leaders has often led to the “Christianization” of whole tribes, the lines can get blurred for outsiders hearing reports of violence against “Christians.” Is it “persecution” or “tribal warfare”? Certainly we need to be concerned regardless of the motivation behind the killing of innocent victims, but it is also right to ask whether a “tribal clash” is being christened “persecution” to rally funds from sympathetic Christians.

Economic factors further obscure issues of “persecution.” There is strong evidence to suggest that the genocide of Christians in southern Sudan is more an issue of the desire of northern Sudanese (who are Muslims) to control the rich oil fields in the Christian

south—a predicament introduced by the decision of former president Gaffar Nimeiri to locate oil refineries in southern Sudan.³¹ Should we be surprised that the Islamic Republic of Sudan is using all their military power to prevent the secessionist armies in the Christian south from dividing the Sudan and taking such rich oil reserves with them? The fact that brown Sudanese Arab Muslims in the north have been killing black Sudanese African Christians in the south for years—much like white European settlers killed red native American Indians in the USA—adds yet another layer to the labyrinth of ethno-economic and geopolitical factors affecting the turmoil in Sudan. Lobbying to protect Sudanese Christians without addressing the underlying causes for invasion may fail to achieve any lasting impact.

Many Christians in Muslim lands have inherited valuable real estate from foreign missionaries who accomplished their work during the colonial era. But when the missionaries were asked to leave during the rapid decolonization of the world, protection also disappeared. Muslim majorities see such valuable real estate as free for the taking—especially since a small minority can’t fight back effectively enough to retain it. It should not surprise us to hear a Muslim say, “We don’t kill Christians because they call on the name of our beloved prophet Jesus, but because we want the land which was unjustly bestowed upon them for ‘kissing up’ to the colonialist dogs who raped our country!” Lest we think this phenomenon is the dastardly result of demonic Islamic inspiration, we don’t have to look far to see such carnage over economics in our own Western tradition. The Thirty Years War in the early 17th century is just one such example of anti-imperialist Protestants warring with the Holy Roman Empire until Germany was in ruin, her fields devastated and blood-soaked.

Furthermore, just as many Christian minorities view their suffering as

religious “persecution”—despite the clear ethnic, economic, and geopolitical factors involved—so too do many Iraqi Muslims see their present plight as an issue of religious “persecution” by Western forces. Saddam Hussein has made use of the term *jihad* [holy war] to rally the fervent support of his people against the “Great Satan” (USA). Iraqi Muslims are, in a sense, a religious minority totally outnumbered and outmuscled by a militant international “Christian” confederation—Muslims do not normally distinguish military forces as unrelated to Christianity’s dominance in the West. Yet if Muslims ask President Clinton why he authorized Operation Desert Strike to kill innocent Muslims, he would probably explain, “We didn’t invade Iraq to kill *Muslims* ! The fact that Iraqi forces were heading north into Kurdish territory without UN permission was good enough reason for us! Besides, the US must help keep peace in the Gulf to prevent oil prices from escalating.”

Oil? The same motivation as Muslims forces in northern Sudan? According to *The New Republic* ³² the Kurds are in the north, but the oil fields are in the south; and it is the oil fields of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (the latter deafeningly silent) that the no-fly zone is designed to protect.³³ So was President Clinton’s “strike” rooted in humanitarian concern for the Kurds or more of an economic interest? The fact that he deployed Operation Desert Strike just before an election has also exposed him to further accusations of using the military for his campaign, which, no doubt, is not unique to Western nations. Campaigning politicians garnering support by exploiting public hostility against a minority has long been a tactic to bolster popularity. So can we expect that the situation will be much different when Christians are the minority in Muslim dominated lands?

Many African Christians just south of the Sahara see the great financial

gifts given to local Muslim communities by oil-rich Islamic nations. They then look at their own plight and feel totally deserted by their Christian brothers who enjoy wealth and peace in the West. Faced with the serious need for basic survival and the financial opportunity in the Muslim community, more than a few Christians have embraced Islam. The economic, educational, and medical benefits offered by the missionary community have historically attracted what some have called “rice Christians,” whose need for survival or desire for advance far outweighed religious conviction. We should, therefore, not be surprised to see such “Christians” switch camps to “the highest bidder.”

However, amidst great poverty, others have stood their ground and said, “I would rather starve to death with my whole family than become a Muslim!” Upon closer examination, however, we may discover that some of the Christians who resist Islam do so not because of their unwavering devotion to Jesus, but rather because of their seething hatred for Muslims! Many have been conditioned since childhood to reject even a glass of water offered by a Muslim—lest it be laced with spit. Never mind the possibility of Christians actually inviting Muslims into their homes for a *meal* (Acts 10:28).

When a puzzled missionary visiting Pakistan asked a church official why they wouldn’t engage in any kind of outreach to Muslims, he replied sternly, “If you send any missionaries here to reach Muslims, we will go to the government and get them thrown out!” Why? Christian minority communities are indeed at great risk if missionaries stir up trouble in Muslim communities. Local Christians, who are usually innocent of any attempts to convert Muslims, may take the blame and be attacked by reac-

tionary Muslims long after the “trouble-making missionaries” have been deported. Unlike foreign missionaries, *local Christians have no plane tickets to flee persecution.*

But our question remains: Can the persecution of minority Christians be avoided in any way? If their churches were “underground”—as churches were

Some missiologists feel that mission efforts to Muslims should not encourage the use of the term “Christian” at all, polarizing the followers of Jesus into a separate community who appear to have completely rejected their indigenous religious heritage.

throughout much of the first three centuries of the Christian era—it would be far more difficult for Muslims to wreak havoc on minority Christian communities. How could hostile Muslims (most are not hostile at all) persecute Christians on such a wide-scale if they were not sure *who they were?* Christians could even develop a system of secret symbols as did early disciples like the fish, dove, shepherd and anchor.

Realistically, the fact is that most existing Christians in Muslim dominated lands today don’t have the option of going underground because everyone knows they are “Christians”! Unbelievers thought that the early Christians were Jews, and they were, in the truest sense.³⁴ Early followers of “The Way” continued going to the Temple in Jerusalem³⁵ as well as to the local synagogues.³⁶

Some missiologists feel that mission efforts to Muslims should not encourage the use of the term “Christian” at all, polarizing the followers of Jesus into a separate community who appear to have completely rejected their indigenous

religious heritage.³⁷ This, however, was not the case in the first century when the term “Christian” described the “Messiah-nut” reformist sect of Judaism. “Christianity” was born *within* Judaism, not in direct opposition to it. The polarization of followers of The Way from unbelieving Jews did indeed occur as numerous Gentiles were added to the faith, but only after about thirty-five years of *ekklesia* growth—not to be confused with modern concepts of “church growth”—providing a golden opportunity for the advance of the gospel *within* the synagogue structure.

It is not within the scope of this paper to defend or oppose such a position as it applies to the Muslim world, but it should be noted that the starting point for evangelism (i.e. from either *inside* the Muslim community or from *outside* of it) can greatly affect the persecution of existing “Christians.” If behind-the-scenes missionaries encourage the development of “Muslims for Jesus” fellowships which do not identify themselves as “Christian” but as a sect of Muslims (much like “Jews for Jesus”), then the existing “Christians” might be safer from the kind of persecution which normally results when Christians try to extract Muslims *out* of Islam and *in* to Christianity.

Just like the Waldensians of the twelfth century, today’s Christian minorities have fewer options than the Jewish reformers of the first century. Christian minorities of today have already become polarized as an entirely separate religious community which isn’t too interested in praying at mosques nor in evangelism from *within* the Muslim community. As a matter of fact, the Christians’ own ethno-cultural and ethno-linguistic heritage make this latter option practically impossible.

Deinstitutionalization

While existing Christian minorities can hardly go completely underground today as the first century “Messiah-nut” Jews did, there are still ways to minimize their losses in the face of such violent hostility. Persecuted Christians can return to the New Testament model of meeting from house to house in cell-group fellowships which are also more easily reproduced by nature of their small size and deinstitutionalized leadership.

Perhaps it would be wise in Muslim dominated lands hostile to the church not to invest at all in church buildings, which are so vulnerable to outbursts of hostility. Church buildings make it too easy for angry mobs to find Christians. Given that the more conservative fundamentalists within the Muslims community often see the mere presence of a church building as a defilement of their land, why anger them unnecessarily?

The deinstitutionalization of the church in China into hidden house-based fellowships clearly facilitated its rapid growth.³⁸ The fact is that such quiet house-fellowships are often the *only* option for many Muslim background believers (MBBs) today. Even if the Christian minorities do trust and accept MBBs into their churches (Acts 9:26), the life of the soon-to-be-extracted MBB may be in danger, not to mention the lives of the minority status Christians who have been granted a peaceful coexistence on the condition that they don’t try to convert Muslims.

When a Muslim enters a public Christian church, the orthodox guardians of Islam often see it as their duty not only to examine the motives of the wayward (or “liberal”) Muslim, but sometimes also to punish the guilty Christian party responsible for deceiving, and perhaps even enticing, the Muslim into such an act of treason. The best option for everybody is usually to refer these Muslim inquirers to an existing underground church. While some countries have

leaders in the public church who cooperate with members of the underground church, other countries have very little cooperation between the two (e.g. China). Those “public Christians” who do have links of cooperation with the underground church usually don’t want to know any names and details of underground church leaders lest they be forced to divulge the information during a torturous interrogation.

But how might minority Christians in Muslim lands respond to the suggestion to deinstitutionalize their fellowship into house-based cell groups in an effort to minimize their losses? Rather than protect real estate, why not protect the Christian fellowships? If they define their “losses” as the monetary value of land and buildings, then deinstitutionalization *is* a loss to them. It is also possible that the ethno-cultural identity of some Christian minorities is irrevocably linked to the architectural Christian monuments of a bygone era. Given that some, like the Coptics of Egypt, have enjoyed church buildings since the early post-Constantine period, i.e., before the advent of Islam, we can hardly begin to grasp how unthinkable it would be for them to desert the monumental symbols of their presence in favor of home-based fellowships.

For a variety of reasons (all of which appear perfectly valid from a Christian historical perspective) many Christian minorities in Muslim lands seem to believe they have an inalienable right to worship in public church buildings. They believe the unquestioned assumption that there is nothing wrong with identifying themselves publicly as “Christians,” that they deserve all (if not most) of the same economic privileges from Muslim governments that a Muslim citizen enjoys. Yet, the pre-Constantine church never enjoyed such luxuries. Early Christians never had the government-approved right to practice their faith publicly, nor to own land for public church buildings, for Christian

bookstores or schools. While Muslims have been some of the most tolerant rulers throughout history, they changed their stance after the massacre of countless innocent Muslims by militant “Christian” Crusaders (1096-1291). Who can blame them? Why do Christian minorities expect first class treatment from Muslim governments when we in our Christian tradition have such a horrid history of murderous inquisitions? The history of Christianity is filled with reactionary violence in response to perceived heresy. Have we forgotten that Evangelicals were lynching Pentecostals in the early part of this century? We might ask, where did these Christian minorities get the idea that they have the *right* to worship in public church buildings? Not from the New Testament! The persecuted church in Muslim dominated lands is fighting battles the early church never fought—for privileges the early church never had.

While Paul did appeal to Caesar, he did so in a society which actually made provision for such appeals. Paul appealed to a Roman government who wasn’t altogether opposed to his Jewish faith. Paul, from a Roman perspective, was a member of the highly respected Jewish minority. But he clearly did *not* want to be judged by the *Jewish* legal system in Jerusalem. It was the Jews who were ready to lynch Paul, not the Romans (Acts 25:10-11). A certain amount of genuine altruism towards minorities must be present in a nation’s legal system if such petitions for justice will ever be seriously entertained. It is for this reason that Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violent approach was effective against Britain. Had India been ruled by tyrannical “Christian” Nazis, as Germany was under Hitler, a non-violent approach would have been suicidal. The only way Jews—and countless other undesirable minorities—could escape the death camps was to go into hiding, i.e., “go underground.” Sir Winston Churchill com-

mented, “If Hitler invaded hell I would make at least a favorable reference to the devil in the House of Commons.”³⁹

But while the world has yet to see a Muslim tyrant as wicked as the “Christian” despot Hitler, most Muslim governments do not want to appear anti-Islamic by using force to protect its Christian minorities from the excesses of the public. It seems as if many Christian minorities have actually adopted a post-Constantine type of *ecclesiology*, i.e. they believe that the church must be public and that to do otherwise would be to deny their Lord. Again we must ask: Where did they get this idea if not from the New Testament? Perhaps they just learned from the example of Western Christians whose own ecclesiology is rooted in a post-Constantine paradigm. Most Western missionaries have never experienced “church” in their homelands apart from their post-Constantine-like activities for religious freedom. In our sincere attempt to make disciples of all the nations, we may be overlooking some important realities about the way the apostles arranged the structure of the church to function in hostile environments.

Yet, deinstitutionalization into house-to-house-based fellowships (changing to multiple locations from week to week) will not only enable the church to grow in a decentralized guerrilla-style context, without direct monitoring by Muslim authorities, but it may possibly also produce an environment where Muslim inquirers might actually be able to attend without being seen and criticized by the orthodox guardians of Islam. The Muslim inquirers would, of course, need to persuade Christians that their interest in Jesus is truly genuine. Also, rather than viewing the surrendering of existing church properties as defeat, one might sell them—before they are forcibly taken or destroyed—and

distribute the money to the more needy members of their congregations (Acts 2:45, 4:34), or even help those who need assistance to purchase homes which could then be used to host such house-to-house fellowships groups. In other words, the monies gained from the sale of church properties could be reinvested into New Testament-like church properties—house churches. Although existing Christian minorities can not go completely underground, some, however, may be able to minimize their losses

tion, many Christians practice a kind of “secret” Christianity in the public workplace, showing few overt signs of their faith. They feel uncomfortable praying over meals in public restaurants or displaying religious artifacts in their office or on their car bumpers which would indicate their membership with those “fanatic” Christians. They may even have a modern-day equivalent of a secret fish symbol in their office like a Christian radio station sticker, or even a book discreetly displayed with a not-so-obvious Christian title.

Those further along on the spectrum of contextualization might even encourage these new believers to continue calling themselves “Muslims,” just as the early Christians continued calling themselves “Jews.” Even as the Jewish followers of The Way continued going to the Temple and synagogues, some Muslim followers of The Way might continue to attend prayers at the mosque, while others not. Most likely, orthodox Muslims would eventually call for a separation from these “heretical Muslims” in their midst—even as Jews eventually separated from the “Messiah-nut” Jews. They may even coin a derisive term like “Christian” to distinguish between the two kinds of Muslims.

Missionaries planting underground churches will need to get more savvy in security issues ranging from digitally signed and encrypted e-mail messages⁴¹, to resisting the temptation of writing down any kind of name or address lists of believers. National intelligence is usually very much aware of what most tentmaker missionaries are doing, but as long as they affect little noticeable change on society, they don’t seem to care. However, keeping house as if you assumed police will get everything you have is a good rule of thumb when developing security guidelines.

Among Muslims we need to form quiet house-to-house-based fellowships that can withstand the onslaught of intense persecution.

through some degree of deinstitutionalization.

Planting Underground Churches

For those whose philosophy of ministry includes the establishment of new churches (or *jamaats*⁴⁰) for Muslim background believers—rather than attempting to integrate them into an existing Christian church—the historical lessons of the past have additional implications. Instead of wrestling through the quandary of what to do with “secret believers,” one can decide from the very start that they will establish “underground *jamaats*” which could function much like the early church did after it went underground. They would, of course, need to exercise great caution before admitting new members into these decentralized house-to-house-based fellowships.

For us in the West, it seems we really are not very different from “secret believers.” As hostility towards Christianity increases in the West, with the prevailing cultural relativism and seculariza-

We do wonder what would have happened if early missionaries to Muslims had had a first century paradigm for church planting that wasn't "above ground." What if missionaries had purposed from the start to establish underground churches using the apostolic model as a kind of guerrilla structure to protect the emerging church during times of persecution? Would quiet house-to-house-based fellowships have hindered outsiders from knowing where to strike Christians when angry mobs arose? Might churches have actually thrived under the stimulation of opposition rather than fossilize under the numbing effects of institutionalized structures? Also, in all of our missiological training shouldn't we be teaching missionaries the underground church planting methodology?

Just as appropriate lifestyles change dramatically from periods of peace to war, we should not be surprised if extending God's Kingdom in lands hostile to the church requires totally different methods than those which have proven effective where the growth of the church is accepted and tolerated. Certainly we must pray and do everything within our power to assist persecuted Christians throughout the world. At the same time we may do well when we establish new churches among Muslims to encourage the formation of quiet house-to-house-based fellowships—planting the church underground—that can withstand the onslaught of persecution by its hostile environment.

End Notes

1 Richard Wurmbbrand, "Testimonies From Persecuted Christians" *Voice of the Martyrs* (INTERNET: <<http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/vom/testimon.html#2>>).

2 Ibid., INTERNET: <<http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/vom/testimon.html#10>>.

3 Acts 7:57-8:3; 11:26; 22:4.

4 Acts 1:15; 2:7,14; 9:2; 9:30; 11:26; 24:5,14; Eph. 1:1; 1Pet. 1:1; 4:17; Epi-

phanus, *Contra-Haeres* l. 1.-Haeres-29.

5 Acts 11:26 reads, "The disciples were called Christians..." supporting the view that insiders used the term "disciples" while *christianos* originated from outsiders. The derisiveness of *christianos* is alluded to in its second New Testament usage, also by an outsider (Acts 26:28). Paul, in the presence of fellow Jews, refers to Judaism as "our religion" (Acts 26:5). But in contrast to Paul's self-designation as a Jew, Agrippa implies Paul is crazy (as Festus already had) to think that he can be so quickly be persuaded to become a "Messiah-nut,"—*christianos* (Acts 26:24, 28). It appears Paul preferred not to even repeat the term and rephrased his identity, "...[may you become] *what I am...*" (26:29). The third and final Biblical occurrence of the term "Christian" helps us understand why believers would later adopt the term with pride. In light of the early stigma associated with *christianos*, 1Pet. 4:16 could read, "If anyone suffers as [or "by being called"] a "Messiah-nut," don't be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." In the very next verse, Peter, like Paul, also chose not to repeat the term but described believers as "the household of God", not "Christians" (4:17).

6 W. Ward Grasque, "The Church Expands: Jerusalem to Rome" in Eerdmans' *Handbook to the History of Christianity*, Tim Dowley, ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), p. 72.

7 Eusebius, *History of the Church*, IV 15

8 Michael A. Smith, "Spreading the Good News" in Eerdmans' *Handbook to the History of Christianity*, Tim Dowley, ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), p. 87.

9 Grasque, op. cit. , p. 72.

10 Robert D. Linder, "The Christian Centuries" in Eerdmans' *Handbook to the History of Christianity*, Tim Dowley, ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), Intro. p. iv.

11 Ibid., p. iii.

12 Ralph D. Winter, "The Kingdom Strikes Back" in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, Ralph D. Winter, ed. (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1981), p. 153.

13 Carl Lawrence, *The Church in China: How It Survives & Prospers Under Communism* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1985).

14 Ibid., p. 91.

15 David Adeney, *China: The Church's Long March* (Ventura, California: Regal Books-OMF Publishers, 1985), p. 203.

16 Lawrence, op. cit. , p. 121.

17 Walter Lippmann, "The Indispensable Opposition," in *Atlantic Monthly* (Boston, 1939: repr. in *The Essential Lippman*, 1982), pt. 6, sct. 2.

18 Lawrence, op. cit. , p. 90.

19 Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishers, 1993), p. 164.

20 Ibid., p. 166.

21 Latourette, Kenneth, "By Way of Inclusive Retrospect" in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, Ralph D. Winter, ed. (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1981), p. 158.

22 Ibid., p. 157.

23 Lawrence, op. cit. , p. 90.

24 Johnstone, op. cit. , p. 564.

25 Leith Anderson, *Dying for Change* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1990), p. 10.

26 Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1984), p. 33.

27 Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972). Hoge and Roozen, eds. *Understanding Church Growth and Decline 1950-1978* (Philadelphia: The Pilgrim Press, 1979) pp. 191, 241.

28 Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1984), p. 32.

- 29 Johnstone, *Operation World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1993) p. 564.
- 30 Ibid., p. 563.
- 31 Pan African News Agency, "Sudanese Army Ready To Protect Oil Fields" (INTERNET: <<http://www.reliefweb.int/emergence/sudan/source/pana/news/050896.html>>, 5 Aug. 1996).
- 32 *The New Republic* is an award-winning magazine which has as its purpose to go behind the headlines to tell what's really happening in the world of politics, books, and the arts. (INTERNET: <<http://www.eneews.com:80/magazines/tnr/>>).
- 33 The Editors, "Operation Desert Prick" in *The New Republic* (INTERNET: <<http://www.eneews.com:80/magazines/tnr/archive/09/editorial093096.html>>), September 30, 1996.
- 34 Acts 2:14; 6:1; 10:28; Rev. 2:9; 3:9.
- 35 Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:21-42; 21:26; 22:17.
- 36 Acts 9:20; 13:5,14, 42; 14:1; 17:2, 10, 17; 18:4,19; 19:8.
- 37 Ralph D. Winter, ed. "The Future of the Frontier Mission Movement: How Far Should We Go in De-Westernizing the Gospel?" *Mission Frontiers* (Pasadena: USCWM, September-October 1996), Vol. 18, Number 9-10. Phil Parshall, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1980).
- 38 Lawrence, op. cit. , p. 91.
- 39 Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: The Grand Alliance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950) ch. 20.
- 40 An Arabic equivalent to the Greek *ekklesia*, which has been needlessly translated "church" when in fact the same *ekklisia* is also translated "assembly" when referring to non-religious gatherings (Acts 19:32,39,41).
- 41 For those who suspect that encrypted e-mail will only draw unnecessary attention to themselves, they can use steganography to hide encrypted data in unnoticeable ways: "Steganography Info and Archive" (INTERNET: <<http://www.iquest.net/~mrmil/stego.html>>). See also "Crypto-Log: Internet Guide to Cryptography" (INTERNET: <<http://www.enter.net/~chronos/cryptolog.html>>).

Joshua Massey serves with a mission organization in South Asia where he has