

The Nomadic Church Takes Off

When Protestant missionaries returned to southern Ethiopia following the Second World War, they found that the handful of believers they had left behind had become a people movement to Christ numbering more than 10,000. God had been doing a mighty work in their absence.

by Malcolm J. Hunter

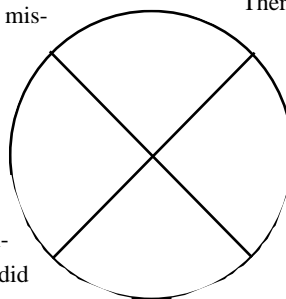
The growth of the church in southern Ethiopia is one of the most exciting and instructive examples of missionary endeavour. The explosion of numbers of new believers through the terrible times of suffering during the Italian occupation 60 years ago, beginning among the Walayta tribe, is well documented. A tiny group of barely literate believers who could be counted on the fingers of two pairs of hands before the missionaries were driven out by the Italian soldiers became a people movement numbering more than 10,000 during the seven years that the missionaries were away, with no communication between them.

The growth in numbers within the Walayta tribe is not so amazing, however, as the cross-cultural expansion of the church that began to gather momentum as some of the first believers moved out from Soddu to escape the persecution, sharing their newfound faith wherever they went. They went naturally to neighboring ethnic groups who spoke similar languages, the Gamu and the Gofa. The first believers in the Gamu tribe did not know that the gospel had come from overseas until several years later they heard that white missionaries had returned to Soddu and were inviting all the Christians to meet them there. The missionaries who had returned were naturally astounded to find that thousands of new believers were gathering to welcome them back.

The missionaries found it hard to believe not just the numbers, but also that the new believers could be sound in doctrine without a Bible or missionaries to teach them. When they carefully checked the beliefs of these new believers, however, they found to their amazement that when God builds a church he gets the doctrine right. They did find one possible misunderstanding in some areas where the believers appeared to be operating a canine extermination program. Someone had heard the instruction, "Beware of dogs," and had taken it literally. As many of the dogs in Ethiopia are carriers of rabies, this was not altogether a bad thing.

Cross-cultural outreach—which no missionary had had a chance to teach or organize before the Italians arrived—the new believers at Soddu undertook as their responsibility. They just did it, encouraged along the way by the fierce assault of the Italians against the tiny Protestant church. By the time the foreign missionaries returned, the Walayta church was already spread thinly over most of their own tribal area and

overflowed to at least three other ethnic groups. This established a pattern of cross-cultural evangelism which continues to this day in the third generation of believers.



There are still a few of the original evangelists leading the advance 50 years after they received the gospel in their home areas adjacent to Walayta. One of these is Ato Mahe, an indefatigable pioneer for the kingdom with the biblical gift of an apostle if ever there was one. He has personally planted more than 60 churches in five different ethnic groups and is still going strong. He believes that God has promised him that he will not die before the church is established in all the people groups of southwest Ethiopia. As he is now 77 years old and there are seven ethnic groups left where the gospel has not yet taken root, this seems like quite a challenge.

However, this is not so impossible as it may at first appear, as 32 evangelists are now working among those seven tribes. Ato Mahe is the much loved and respected leader who is sent and supported by the 750 churches in Walayta

to assist and encourage the younger evangelists, especially eight new men recently sent by Walayta to work among the Hammer, Bunna, Herborey, and Dassenetch people. These eight have joined more experienced men from six other ethnic groups where the church is well planted. In southern Ethiopia an ethnic church is not considered to be properly established until it sends out evangelists to other ethnic groups.

Dr. Malcolm Hunter and his wife Jean recently left Ethiopia, where they began their missionary work in 1963. They have served with SIM in East and West Africa and as consultants for ministry to nomadic peoples in Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, Niger, Benin, and Burkino Faso. In the last two years, Malcolm has made survey visits to Nepal, Tibet, Northern Pakistan, and Western China. Plans are in the making to visit Mongolia. The Hunters will continue to seek the Lord as to how best to serve his purposes for the unreached nomadic peoples of the world.

Missionaries
found it hard to
believe not just the
numbers, but also that
the new believers could
be sound in doctrine
without a Bible
or missionaries
to teach them.
When God builds a
church, he gets the
doctrine right.

Strategy for Mission Among the Fulbe; (continued from page 28)

- d. *Savior.* Since there is no need for salvation in a Christian sense, there is no need for a savior. If there is a savior in Islam, it is the Qur'an which contains/brings the will of Allah, the knowledge and doing of which can lead to eternal life. To summarize: Christians would say we need salvation from sin, a salvation which is found in Jesus Christ our Savior. Muslims would say we need salvation from ignorance of the will of Allah which is found in the Qur'an, the bearer of Allah's will, essentially the savior. It is interesting that both the Qur'an and Jesus are seen as the Word of God, but the one a book, the other a living person like us. This is consistent with the understanding of God's character in each religion.¹⁰
- e. *Sacrifice.* Within Fulbe Islam there is no concept of blood sacrifice as a payment for sin, as redemption. For example, the sacrifice at Layya seems to be a commemoration of what Abraham did, not a vicarious sacrifice of atonement for the worshiper. I have found that whenever I explain the gospel in these terms, my hearers stare at me blankly, even when a redemptive analogy is applied.¹¹ We should not be surprised. Since salvation comes from knowing and doing the will of Allah, and since mankind does not need saving from his sinful nature and Allah's character is not rooted in his perfect justice, holiness, and love, there is no need for a process of salvation to be implemented. Allah already has enough power to save anyone he wants. Further, he would not limit his freedom by binding himself to some process.
- f. *Scripture.* Finally, there are differing views of the inspiration of Scripture. In Islam Scripture is dictated word for word by Allah himself. The Qur'an is co-eternal with God and as such is almost a second in a Muslim trinity. One does not dissect the Qur'an, one simply accepts it and draws power from it. How is it, then, that the Christians have four Linjilas, or Gospels? How can all four be God's word? Muslims fail to understand that the Bible is rather an account of men's and women's experience of God down through the centuries, an account inspired by the Holy Spirit.

There are other problems which we do not have time to go into here. Concepts of meekness and humility are weak and so Muslim Fulbe cannot conceive of God's allowing his prophet to be humbled to the point of death on a cross. There is the problem that the marabouts also do miracles, traveling magically from Bamako to Mecca everyday to do their prayers. Thus accounts of Jesus' miracles don't always have the effect we think. And there are other problems.

This presents a dismal view and I don't think the problems are overstated. The challenges seem overwhelming at times. Sometimes I sit behind the mosque in our village when the men go in for their evening prayers. At those moments Islam seems to me like an immovable wall. How will these men, on the surface so united and sure in their beliefs, break ranks with their history, with their peers, with their leaders, with all they have ever been taught? We know they will not change except through the working of the Spirit who can change everything in an instant. We know he can, we know he will someday. The biggest problem, at least for me, is within myself: my lack of patience to wait on his timing, to wait on his sovereign will.

Endnotes

1. I thought maybe I would be proved wrong when two years ago four villages in our area got together and started a development cooperative. I was asked to become

involved with the cooperative. It soon became clear that in spite of whoever was the titular president of the cooperative, the real leader was a powerful marabout.

2. This is becoming an Achilles' heel for Islam in at least one area among the Fulbe. In western Mali among Fulbe refugees from Mauritania, Pulaar literacy has become the rallying cry for Fulbe pride over against the Muslim Moors who drove them out of their country. There is great openness to Christianity since it promotes prayer in Pulaar, "the way our fathers used to pray." It is also interesting that in some of the first translation of the Bible done in central Mali, the informants wanted to use *Laam£o* for God. They felt that Allah was inappropriate since it was a borrowed term.
3. Some of these beings are more good than bad, others more bad than good, but none are purely one or the other, including God. Their power is available to all who know how to manage them and the power they hold. The myths of many tribes are full of tales about how clever men tricked these beings into giving assistance. However, God is considered too powerful and remote and is almost always excluded from such manipulations.
4. This is a concept developed by Eugene A. Nida, *Religion Across Cultures* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 21. The "upper story" is that area of religion that deals with questions of the afterlife and worship of the creator God while the "lower story" of religion handles the problems of everyday life. In Christianity these two stories have been collapsed into one since God in Christ is Lord over all areas of life. However in other religions of the world the afterlife is poorly understood, the creator God is distant, and so people turn to lesser, more immediate, spiritual power for help and guidance with everyday problems.
5. Culture is built on worldview. The Western penchant for change and progress is built on Christian worldview. Christians have been freed from fear by being turned to a God who has created an abstract stable law, who is changeless, who is good. Thus Christians are able to fulfill, although in an imperfect and partial way, the original creation mandate (Gen 1:28).
6. For an excellent discussion of this problem, see "Discipleship in Islamic Society," S. P. Schlorff, North Africa Mission, 1981.
7. In fact some Fulbe have told me they are not sure that violations of ritual law can even be forgiven, or if so, only with difficulty. Others have told me that Allah is only concerned about ritual law and does not forgive sins against moral law. Forgiveness for these sins can only be had from the one who was offended.
8. This also accounts for the extremely careful and thorough ritual washing of bodies after death. This is basically the ultimate ablution before the final presentation to Allah.
9. There is an interesting article in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* on this subject: "The Gospel for Shame Cultures," Bruce Thomas, *EMQ*, July 1994, pp. 284-290.
10. For a good discussion of the views of salvation and savior in Islam, see "The Bible and Islam," Bassam Madany (6555 West College Dr., Palos Heights, IL 60463: The Back to God Hour, 1987), pp. 13-14.
11. The Fulbe of our area have a good analogy: it is called *tonno*. Traditionally when a person is severely ill, the person is suspended over a pit of hot coals, a white sheep is sacrificed, and the blood of the sheep is dribbled over the body of the sick person.

Short Bibliography

- Geisler, Norman L., and Abdul Saleeb. 1993. *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Madany, Bassam. 1987. *The Bible and Islam*. 6555 West College Dr., Palos Heights, IL 60463: The Back to God Hour.
- Nelson, Ron. 1981. "Fulbe Cultural Elements as Contact Points for the Gospel." Thesis. Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission.
- Parrinder, Geoffrey. 1977. *Jesus in the Qur'an*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Reisman, Paul. 1974. *Freedom in Fulani Social Life: An Introspective Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Richardson, Don. 1981. *Eternity in Their Hearts*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books.
- Schlorff, S. P. 1981. "Discipleship in Islamic Society." Ecole Radio Biblique, BP 2014, 13201 Marseille cedex 01, France: North Africa Mission.
- Van Rheenen, Gailyn. 1991. *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

[Editor's Note: sections three, and four of Larry Vanderaa's excellent study, "Strategy for Mission Among the Fulbe," covering "Presentation," and "Discipleship," is available upon request to the reader subscribers of the *International Journal of Frontier Missions*.]

Larry Vanderaa presented an earlier version of this paper at the WEC International Fulbe Conference in The Gambia, September 22-27, 1997. Revised January, 1998.