

Advancing Strategies of Closure

Counting the Cost to Closure or *What about the Nomadic Peoples?*

by *Malcolm Hunter*



These are days of high excitement and exhilarating prospects on the missionary scene. As plans and serious commitments are made to prepare for countdown and closure it seems that Joel's "afterward" has arrived: when the old men dream dreams and the young men see visions. If these are truly the days when God pours out His Spirit on all people then who would want to miss them?

It may seem unkind to say anything that will detract from the euphoria, but there is another side to this coin of closure. What is it going to mean in practical terms to get the job done? It seems clear that the people who are still unreached are unreached because they happen to live in the wrong sort of place. Either the climate is not very congenial, the religious or political opposition is too strong, the mail service is too far away, or the cultural barriers are so difficult that no missionary has yet been able to find a way through them. Whatever their difficulty, they are the people who are lost by chance, not by choice. The stark reality of the situation is that the remaining task of world evangelization has been left to the most delicate bunch of disciples that the church has ever produced, and that task is going to be tough! That is why we have 92% of new missionary workers from the West and 97% of those from third-world countries going to "heavily Christianized populations in predominately Christian lands," and not to the frontier peoples.

The Problem of the nomadic pastoralists

If we look carefully at the unreached peoples we will find that there are certain segments of homogeneous social groups who appear to be uniformly unresponsive. The first reaction is to classify them as resistant to the gospel, or to consider their culture as hostile to our proclamation. The fact is that it may be our proclamation that is hostile to their culture, or put more politely, our witness may be inappropriate, and therefore ineffective.

One such sociologically and geographically distant block of ethnic entities are the nomadic pastoralists. These are some of the most authentic and ancient societies on the face of the earth; those who have established such a dependent relationship on their domesticated animals that their identity is inseparable from their stock. These may be cattle, camels, goats, sheep, llamas, yaks, horses or reindeer. It is part of their amazing adaptation to their environment that they know which types of animals will best suit their situation. The relation

Malcolm Hunter is a consultant for the development of nomadic pastoralists with SIM international. He also serves as director of the Institute for Nomadic Studies at the US Center for World Mission and chairman of the Department for Nomadic Studies at William Carey International University,

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ship with their animals is not just an economic dependence, or an easy way to carry your food supply; it is a deep psychological and sociological necessity.

Most of us are familiar with some of the more colourful desert dwellers, such as the Tuareg of the Sahara or the Bedouin of the Middle East. A few may have heard of the Fulani, more than 10 millions of them ranging for thousands of miles with their huge uniformly coloured herds right across West Africa to the borders of Ethiopia. But who has heard of the hundreds of smaller groups of pastoralists or semi-nomadic peoples who cover approximately one third of the earth's land area, not just in Africa but also in South America and probably most of all in Central Asia. They may be considered as semi-nomadic or seasonal migrants. They may well engage in a little cultivation when and where the rains allow, but their real dependence for food, status, marriage, burial and all other cultural practices rests in their cattle. When conditions are favourable they may live for periods ranging from a few weeks to a few years in one location, but their essential values are so firmly orientated to their animals that in times of drought, intertribal warfare and even political upheaval, they can usually survive by moving on with their livestock.

What makes nomadic people so different?

It is this fundamental orientation to mobility, an irrepressible readiness to move if and when necessary, that makes a nomad pastoralist essentially different from other people who want to own land or property which cannot be moved around. It also makes him a uniquely different challenge to the Christian missionary movement as the church which will be effectively established among them will have to be very different from the usual pattern we expect. As one old Somali camel herder said to me, "When you can put your church on the back of a camel then I will believe that Christianity is for us." All he had ever seen were some

very concrete and permanent Roman Catholic Institutions and a mud-walled, tin-roofed building where a few Protestant government workers met on Sunday mornings at 10 o'clock. Until we can show him that the Christian faith has really nothing to do with buildings, organizational structures and dressing up in special clothes I do not think that it is fair to say that he has had a relevant and appropriate chance to hear and see the gospel. I also think that most of us would agree that we could benefit considerably from rediscovering this truth in our Western Churches.

It seems to me that the problem is ours in our concept and communication of what is the Christian Church. God obviously has no problem in communicating with nomadic peoples. The first men He ever chose to be His special people, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Co. were all very definitely nomadic pastoralists. It is my conviction that we could learn some great lessons about spiritual and physical survival and fitness from these successors to Abraham's profession.

Why should we think specifically for nomadic pastoralists?

First, they are probably the last major block of unreached peoples groups left on earth. They may be relatively few in number, certainly in population density they are the least of all, but in the number of ethnic groups without any church they must be the largest homogeneous socio-economic block. The collective total may be between 100 and 200 million, depending not just on definition but also on prevailing political and climatological conditions, as in Sudan.

Second, nomadic peoples are often classified as 'typical Muslims' and therefore considered to be unresponsive. It is true that most of them do claim to be Muslims but it seems that this may be due mostly to the sort of Christian witness that they have seen (institutions, mission stations and famine relief

camps). To be a Muslim all you need is a prayer mat, and every one has an animal skin that will serve that purpose. To be a Christian it appears that they have to settle down and be somewhere at a particular on a certain day. Very few of them know when Sunday is, let alone 10 o'clock, and as for dressing up in special clothes, no thanks! To be a nomadic pastoralist is not synonymous with being a Muslim. There are plenty of animistic and Buddhist pastoralists, even some who have rejected Islam to return to monotheistic traditional worship.

Third, we need to recognize that what makes nomadic people distinctly different and requiring specific approaches is their relationship with their animals. For most of them, managing their family herds is an essential part of their identity. Cultivation is not just a secondary occupation left to women or slaves. It is an admission of failure and social disgrace. If we give the impression that you have to settle down to be a Christian then our witness is defective and inappropriate.

Fourth, it has been found in practice that attempts to evangelize nomadic pastoralists by Christians from neighbouring sedentary ethnic groups have been largely counter-productive. There are significant psychological differences and often deep historic animosities between the cultivators and the herds-men, as in North American history. It is certainly easier for a non-cultivating, non-land owning, highly-mobile western urbanite to understand the values of nomadic people. This could be especially true of the younger generation of missionary recruits who have followed the pattern of so many students in North America, moving from school to school several times in the process of their college career, joining whatever lively church or fellowship is nearby.

Fifth, to minister effectively to nomadic pastoralists would seem to require not just specific fresh missionary strategies, it also needs a broader, more specialized training. It needs a combination of technical skills and anthropological

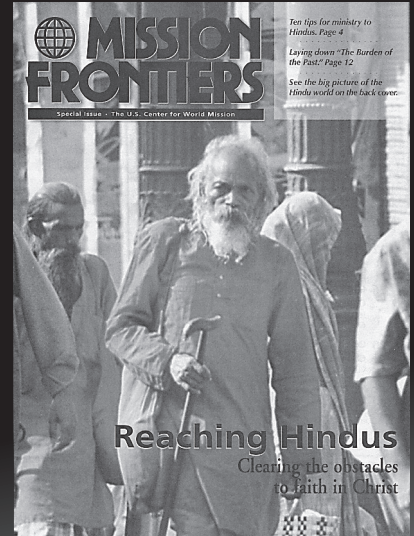
awareness that is not usually found in the traditional Bible Colleges and seminary training programs. Probably more than anything else it is going to take a level of long-term commitment, of old fashioned (dare I use the word!) sacrifice that is not very popular on the contemporary Christian scene. In an age when more than three quarters of those "going into missions" think in terms of less than two years and when almost half of those signing on for long term give up before they get to the fourth year, the size of the potential task-force for reaching those culturally and geographically remote nomadic pastoralists is very small. It is pathetically small if viewed in the light of the vast army of saints all singing heroically about marching on to victory and claiming the kingdom from the Devil.

The stark reality of the world missionary scene today is that we have unprecedented hordes of 'Christian cavalry' ready and willing to rush off to build orphanages in Mexico or take Bibles into China. These are very worthy endeavors and will presumably help to expand the horizons of some of those who take part in such a short-term 'charge of the light brigade'. If they do not produce any long-term 'heavy infantry' or what has been well described as "God's fox-hole missionaries", then the modern mania for cross-cultural experiences becomes yet another extravagant indulgence for sensation-hungry saints.

To focus specifically upon such distant and difficult people is not just an exotic

whimsy or anthropological adventurism. It is a missiological imperative. If God is to be taken seriously about His declaration that there are going to representatives in heaven from every tribe and tongue and nation the we have got to be a lot more intelligent in our deployment of missionary effort. Putting it bluntly, the Devil does not really mind how many more churches we plant in the already well-Christianized people groups and nations. He is positively delighted when another denomination comes in to add yet another flavour to the "ecclesiastical Baskin-Robbins", in any particular area as this is the surest way to weaken the unity and diminish the potential of a well disciplined indigenous national church. What does disturb the devil and invite his guaranteed hostility is the penetration of the gospel and the planting of the church in any of the unreached people groups. He knows that each one won for the Lord Jesus is "another nail in his coffin". The fury and violent opposition which he hurls at any attempt made to challenge his usurped territory and to establish the kingdom of God in a people group where there is no Christian church is a clear indication that he understands better than many Bible scholars, it seems, what each new penetration means and where his end lies. If this is the last item on the agenda of history then let us take the promises and purposes of God at least as seriously and prepare to tackle the most distant and difficult challenges remaining. **UJM**

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