



For 500 years before Muhammad was born Christians speaking Arabic used "Allah" for God. It is not an ideal word for God except that no word in any language is ideal.

Ralph D. Winter



Dear Reader,

Here are a few interesting questions. (This is not a quiz!)

1. Why did Muhammad reject the concept of the Trinity held by the Christians he knew?
2. Why did he come up with the idea that Jesus did not die on the Cross?
3. What person in the Qur'an has the attributes of Divinity?
4. Why do 30 million Christians in the world today pray to "Allah" and read that same word for God in their Bibles?
5. Why do some Muslims mutilate the genitals of young women?
6. Why do many Muslims pray five times a day?
7. Why is a world movement like Islam important just because within it families with six children are very common?

Okay,

1. *Why did Muhammad reject the concept of the Trinity held by the Christians he knew?*

Answer: Those particular Christians had the wrong view of the Trinity, one that Christians today would also reject.

2. *Why did he come up with the idea that Jesus did not die on the Cross?*

Many scholars believe that he was reacting against Jews who claimed Jesus was nobody because they were able to kill him.



Ralph D. Winter is editor of Mission Frontiers and the General Director of the Frontier Mission Fellowship.

After the Crusades Muslims took that passage in the Qur'an to mean that Christians were wrong.

3. *What person in the Qur'an has the attributes of Divinity?*

Clearly, Jesus. That's why quite a few Muslims who understand the Qur'an have become full believers in Jesus. By the way, very, very few Muslims can understand it (even scholars) due to its ancient Arabic—and even if they memorize it in its entirety, which millions do!

4. *Why do 30 million Christians in the world today pray to "Allah" and read that same word for God in their Bibles?*

For 500 years before Muhammad was born Christians speaking Arabic used "Allah" for God. It is not an ideal word for God except that no word in any language is ideal. The English use of "GOD," which has a pagan background, turns out all right once it is in the Bible.

Missionaries have employed hundreds of words for God, all of them with original pagan meanings.

5. *Why do some Muslims mutilate the genitals of young women?*

One hundred and forty million women in Africa have suffered this barbarism. However, it is a grotesque, horrible custom that Islam *inherited* in one area, just as the even more horrible custom that Christians *inherited* was burning people tied to a stake—Christianity eventually eliminated it. (Note that a form of execution was more readily defeated than something that happens to every woman.)

There is nothing in the Qur'an or the Bible about either of these pagan customs.

6. *Why do many Muslims pray five times a day?*

Christians with whom Muhammad was in contact prayed six times a day, every four hours. Muhammad thought that was a good idea but eliminated the midnight prayer time.

7. *Why is a world movement like Islam important just because within it families with six children are very common?*

In the wealthier parts of the world new births alone do not usually maintain the population. It takes an average of 2.1 children per family to sustain a population even without any increase. In Japan, Germany, USA, etc., if it were not for constant immigration, the overall population would be shrinking.

Amazingly, in the USA, the Anglo population is way below the 2.1 level (which barely keeps up). It is only 1.6 children per family. Miami is now a largely Spanish-speaking city. Los Angeles is fast moving in that same direction. Other cities will follow.

Spiritual Indigestion?

Once before in history our country was deluged with newcomers who did not share the dominant spiritual values. That was roughly 1870-1920, when our population quintupled and cultural and spiritual indigestion resulted.

But within 50 years many of these newcomers were won to Christ through the ministry of D. L. Moody and other forces.

Today we are coping with millions of people crossing a border we cannot control, leaving their families behind, and becoming a USA sub-population far more difficult to assimilate.

Meanwhile the rest of the world is getting larger rapidly while the West is shrinking—apart from immigration.

Can We, Must We, Digest Islam?

Potentially a major counterforce on the global level is the ongoing winning to Christian faith of millions upon millions of people. This is clearly the last best hope. But, how likely will this work?

Much of contemporary Christianity—everywhere in the world—is disturbingly superficial. We have developed a simplification of the Gospel

It is no more likely that huge percentages of Muslims will become known as “Christians” than huge percentages of Greek Orthodox will become Evangelicals.

to the point where people are raising their hands to “get saved” without ever knowing much about Who is saving them, or for what God-honoring good works they are saved. This brings far less “salt and light” results than might be expected.

By contrast, and normally invisible to the eyes of Western Evangelicals, are the good works of Muslims (we tend to look for the bad). I think of the ambulance and school service for new mothers which is nationwide in Pakistan. I think of the superb small loan organization in Bangladesh that has brought a Nobel prize to the Muslim behind it.

In this issue of *Mission Frontiers* the concept is probed of “Christian faith” growing within Islam.

It is no more likely that huge percentages of Muslims will become known as “Christians” than huge

percentages of Greek Orthodox will become Evangelicals. And it is very obvious that Muslim countries are outgrowing Christian countries.

What we can at least work for, and hope for, is that Jesus will reign in the hearts of millions more Hindus and Muslims. That’s right—whether we saw this coming or not—the number of devout, Bible-reading people who are still culturally Hindu and Muslim far exceeds the number of Hindus and Muslims who have opted out of their cultural background to take on a culturally Christian way of life. And those that do often regret it.

As we have been saying in issue after issue of *Mission Frontiers*, our calling is to preach Christ, not Christianity. Christianity can readily continue to absorb many of the world’s poor and uneducated—those who have little to lose in giving up their way of life.

But when we run into stable, ordered ways of life like many of the huge varieties of Hindu and Muslim cultures we have to do like the Apostle Paul—we have to let Greek pagans become Greek followers of Jesus Christ. They don’t have to wear our cultural clothing. They can believe while still wearing their own cultural clothing.

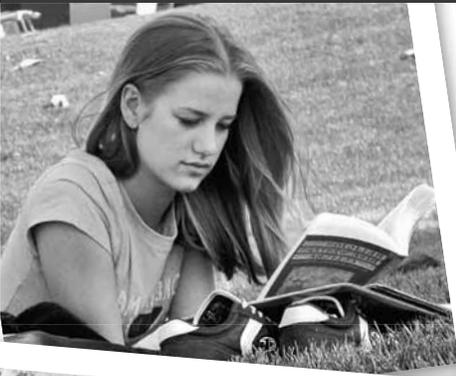
If you find that hard to understand, the true stories you will find in this issue of *Mission Frontiers* will be a big help.

The lead article this time comes from the book described on page 29. The editor of that book, Dudley Woodberry, Harvard Ph.D., former missionary in the Middle East, and former dean of the Fuller School of World Mission, is arguably the most highly qualified Evangelical scholar of Islam in the world today. f

Connecting students to God’s global purposes.

A pastor and parent share about INSIGHT, a college-level worldview program of the U.S. Center for World Mission, available for 32 college credits at locations nationwide:

Insight
Intensive Study of Integrated Global History and Theology



“...a God-entranced vision of reality that will make all other study, and all the rest of life, deeper, richer, and more in sync with God’s ultimate purposes for your life.”

John Piper
Pastor, Bethlehem Baptist Church

“The INSIGHT Program was a life-changing experience for our daughter....My wife and I consider the money invested in the program to be one of the best investments we ever made with any of our children.”

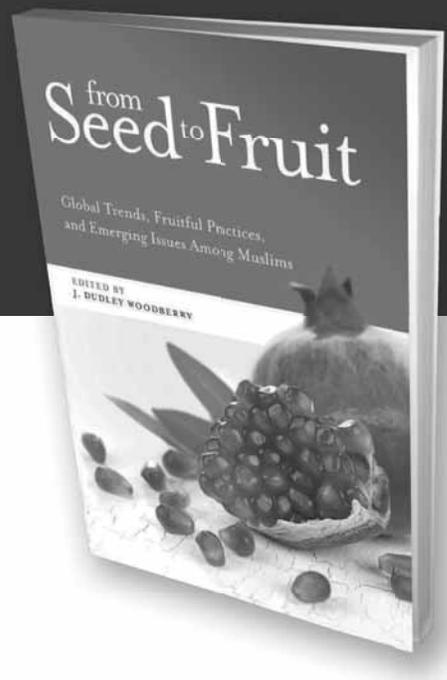
Doug Birdsall
Executive Chair, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization



Contact INSIGHT for program locations: insight@uscwm.org



Fruitful Practices



A New Generation of Workers Has Discovered Encouraging Alternatives

by Don Allen

*"Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. . . . Hear then the parable of the sower."
Matthew 13:16, 18*

Picture yourself, a foreigner (expatriate Christian worker), in a crowded guesthouse in a Central Asian city. Accepting your invitation to dinner is a Jesus follower (another expatriate worker) from your home country, widely

respected for his love for and good relations with Muslims. As he sips hot chai, his eyes glance about the room, which reeks of musty clothing and cigarettes. Your own eyes are smarting, and not just from the smoke.

"Tell me the secret," you plead, despairingly. "What is happening here?"

He looks startled.

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"How is it possible that your Muslim friends

are becoming followers of *Isa*, and forming communities of faith in the Messiah? My friends and I have been here three years since we left our home country to serve God here, and we haven't seen a single new community of *Isa* come together like this. Not one!"

"How is it possible that your Muslim friends are becoming followers of *Isa*, and forming communities of faith in the Messiah? My friends and I have been here three years since we left our home country to serve God here, and we haven't seen a single new community of *Isa* come together like this. Not one!"

He looks a bit puzzled as he settles back into his chair, resting his cup on the slight rise of his stomach. "Tell me your approach," he says.

Your cup clatters on its saucer.

"My friends and I have established a successful business. It brings jobs to our neighborhood." You tick off your carefully rehearsed points on your fingers. "We are well respected in the community. In fact, people look up to us and recognize that we are God-fearing people! Our neighbors regularly drop in for tea and conversation. We seem to be doing everything *you're* doing. Your town is so close and so similar to ours, I can't blame it on culture differences. I just don't get it!" Resting your forearms on your knees, your eyes meet his. "What are you doing that we're not doing?"

"Hm." He ponders the question. "Tell me about your language learning."

"Language isn't the problem, either." You shuffle your chair to one side as an old man stumbles past you, pulling a bottle from inside his coat. "Everyone in our team is fluent in Russian, and each of us shares the good news about *Isa* with everyone we meet."

Your guest sips his chai as he listens; his eyes follow the old man weaving his way toward the door.

"Well, for the first few years living here, our story was much like yours," your companion says. "We

Don Allen is in his fifteenth year as Director of Training for the U.S. office of an agency working among Muslims. He has also spent the past five years in Fruitful Practices research. He and his wife Karen spent several years working with Kurdish refugees in the Southwest United States. He holds an M.Div. in New Testament Studies and a D.Min. in Leadership Development.

Excerpted, by permission, from the new book From Seed to Fruit, edited by Dr. Dudley Woodberry. See p 29 for more information on this book.

felt we were stumbling around in the dark, even though we, too, were fluent in Russian. And like you, we spent countless hours with our local friends, actively sharing with them about our life experience with *Isa*. But nothing happened. Then about three years ago, everything changed for us...

“Really? How?” The questions tumble out of your mouth. “A spontaneous work of God? Someone with a special gift in convincing people?”

He smiles, shaking his head *no*.

“Then what? A special program?”

“Not exactly,” he laughs.

“What changed?”

He leans toward you and tells you his story.

“Seeing and Hearing” How God Blesses Muslims

So what was the problem when “you” tried unsuccessfully to share with your local friends about the love of Jesus? Did you fail to take good notes in your seminary classes back home? Should you have followed your supervisor’s philosophy of ministry more closely? Did you lack the spiritual maturity of your countryman who witnessed so much fruit in a neighboring town? Did you simply need to pray more effectively?

Such questions are asked because people like you and I often invest a lot of effort living in another culture and sharing about how a community can be transformed when *Isa* comes to occupy a central place in it without seeing the fruit of that labor. Thank God for selfless servants who persevere for years in such conditions! Certainly, this demands authentic sacrifice. But this offers no relief for those who want to see this transformation take place quickly. And when fruit is not forthcoming, you may receive one of two admonitions: a) work harder at following the advice given you back home, or b) love Jesus more. Both imply that you are spiritually inept.

Many frustrated workers reject what they learned back home; in desperation, they use a “scattershot” approach, trying everything under the sun. But this approach may still not lead to people coming together into communities that focus on *Isa’s* teaching and lifestyle, whatever the projects and methods used. We often call this “reinventing the wheel.” As one prominent thinker on this topic acknowledges, “Some people say we need twenty years of experience. But often twenty years’ experience is really just *one* year, repeated twenty times, with no better results after the twentieth year than the first!”

Recently, a new generation of worker-observers has

discovered an encouraging alternative. As they examine common practices among colleagues living in the Muslim world, certain patterns emerge in places where Jesus-centered communities do blossom. So as we labor to make disciples, there may be some patterns which are more effective than others. We call them “Fruitful Practices”¹ because they are principles and activities which have resulted in such communities. Imagine the potential for new fruitfulness around you, if you knew that some practices were more helpful than others!

Fruitful Practices enable us to *delight in seeing and hearing* how God is building a people for himself among all the nations of the world, including Muslims; and empower us to join him in his work. We echo the Psalmist, who declares, “Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them” (Psalm 111:2). We study his works so we can labor alongside him in this awe-inspiring process of sowing, reaping, and bearing much fruit for eternity.

Discovering Fruitful Patterns

What is our method of studying and applying the common practices that most often lead to reproducing communities that are focused on the person of Jesus in the Muslim world? Here is what we did:

Research

We asked questions across various regions and contexts throughout the Muslim world. Rather than hypothesizing about which practices are most fruitful, we surveyed and interviewed effective teams from thirteen organizations representing over 5,800 workers in the Muslim world.

Analysis

We examined questionnaires, interviews, and case studies for common patterns of attitudes and activities among people working cross-culturally. We compiled a list of the practices that were common among those teams that had witnessed the emergence of at least one Jesus-centered fellowship. This working document was issued as a “Primer” to the participants of a larger consultation that brought together many more individuals walking the way of Jesus in another culture.

During the Consultation, we conducted an additional survey in each of the four major areas of discussion:

- Witnessing
- Discipling
- Gathering Fellowships
- Gathering Teams of Ministry

In each of the surveys, we asked participants to respond to each practice in two ways:



- “My team does this fruitful practice (yes/no).”
- “How important is this practice to fruitfulness in church-planting (unimportant/somewhat important/very important).”

We compared these responses to the ministry profile of each participant, as it pertains to their particular focus, the place where they live and other similar factors, in order to discern their individual level of fruitfulness.

Finally, we conducted 100 recorded interviews and collected notes from twenty-five discussion groups that met daily throughout the five-day consultation. The results from all our research tools gave us over 300 responses from individuals experienced in planting fellowships representing over thirty organizations, two-thirds of which have witnessed the emergence of at least one Christ-centered community in the Muslim world. We combined and analyzed the list, the surveys, interviews, and the small group notes.

Benchmark

This book represents the first stage of analysis of the Consultation material. Where do we go from here? We believe we must continually evaluate our plans, goals, attitudes, and activities against the standard of Fruitful Practices. Our approach differs significantly from those who use a *deductive* method of ministry (following the anecdotes and practices of a particular leader, seminary, or missiological theory.) We believe the inductive approach promises to be more fruitful (discovering how God is currently operating to bless the nations by inviting them into his Kingdom among Muslims so we can better partner with him in sowing and reaping.)

Cooperating with God

This process is our imperfect attempt to understand the *mystery of ministry*. As noted above, all true ministry involves God’s part and our part. 1 Corinthians 3:5–7 vividly describes this dynamic: “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe.... I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.” We cannot transform people. That is God’s part. But we can share faithfully God’s Good News of Jesus and demonstrate his love. That is our part.

Fruitful Practices enlighten us as we endeavor to do our part. They show us how God works through certain principles, practices, and innovation to accomplish his purposes. *They point us in a direction that has great potential to bear fruit for his glory.*

People Factors

Differences among individuals within our team—such as personality, skill set, gifting, and personal holiness—can affect fruitfulness. How does team unity affect fruitfulness? What happens if there are no gifted language learners in the team? We can explore such questions thanks to the data from our surveys, interviews and focus group discussions.

Differences among Muslim people groups also affect our ability to bear fruit. Some of the key questions we must ask include:

- Are they literate or oral?
- Are they urban or rural?
- Are they a minority group oppressed by the majority, or do they enjoy social equality?

The challenge is to discern how the divine-human partnership results in fruitful witness. The subsequent five chapters in this section explore the entire process. Here we should just single out some representative processes in three areas—language, learning and leadership.

Language: God Tells His Story

Scene: The urban guesthouse. You lean forward, pen and paper at the ready, as your friend tells his story.

Like you, we poured ourselves into learning Russian; as the trade language, we needed to communicate well to government officials and businessmen. So initially, this made sense to us. But we discovered that while our friends were happy to discuss politics and money in Russian, they changed the subject whenever we brought up spiritual matters—or worse, talked specifically about Jesus.

At first, we thought that people were not interested in spiritual issues. But no; new mosques were popping up all over the city, and we noticed a resurgence of fundamentalist Islam. We thought, “Maybe people are hungry for God, after all.” So we spent a week praying and fasting, asking the Lord for discernment.

Later that week, I met a new disciple of Jesus for tea. He said that he heard about Jesus, but because the message was in Russian, he thought Jesus was a foreign god and he didn’t want anything to do with it. But then a cousin shared with him about the stories of the Injil in his own language, and suddenly Jesus made sense to him. He said, “I would never accept a Russian Jesus. But when I heard about Jesus’ love for me in the language of my heart, I knew that Isa al-Masih must be for me.”

The God who sent Jesus to take the form of a servant and live among us (John 1; Philippians 2) also speaks the language of our hearts. Because of this reality, some teams choose to focus on the heart language first, so they can tell the Good News much sooner. Still others, recognizing the need to communicate effectively in the trade language, the language of trade and education, assign certain members of their team to focus on the trade language while the rest of the team focus on the heart language.

Fruitful Practice (FP) 1: Seeking to communicate a culturally-relevant biblical message in the heart language of the people.

With respect to a culturally relevant biblical message (i.e., using Scripture that addresses the assumptions of the people's worldview and creates spiritual hunger), 99 percent of the practitioners said it was important or very important and 94 percent said they practiced it. With respect to communicating the Gospel in the heart language of the people, 99 percent considered it important and 86 percent practiced it.²

Learning: God Reveals Himself Through the Way People Learn

FP2: Sharing the Gospel in story form for oral societies (98% considered important, 73.5% practiced).

Is it wise to teach literacy to oral societies so they can read the Bible? In previous generations, the answer was an obvious yes. Recently, however, some teams discovered that the answer is found by discovering how beliefs are embedded into the local worldview and how people learn about life. They generally conclude that the written Scriptures are best for peoples who are used to reading and writing; and the word in story form is best for oral cultures.

Consider this South Asian team, who discarded the use of written Bible studies and bound Bibles when they discovered the power of the Good News in story form. Observing how the local community passes on its values about God, community, and social "rules", they learned to ask community leaders their "rules" for telling stories, even asking them for help to craft biblical stories that relate to everyday issues such as truthfulness and forgiveness. Because community leaders were involved, these stories have become so popular that the imam uses them in the local mosque! ("Stories and the Qur'an in South Asia," Interview #3 by Interviewer 02 at Southeast Asian Consultation in Spring of 2007)....

Leadership: God Works Through Faithful Influencers to Establish Communities of Faith

FP3: Developing leaders with methods that fit the local context.

The mentoring of leaders is planned and normally occurs in non-formal ways such as apprenticeship (98% considered important, 80% practiced).

Some teams, acknowledging that leaders can either be bottlenecks or avenues for their community, are slow to pass the baton of leadership until those potential leaders receive extensive training. Others, however, look for existing influencers of integrity and release them quickly. In the former, the team builds leadership principles in the emerging community. In the latter, the team employs existing leaders, empowering them quickly. Both approaches depend on the local context.

And both approaches have risks and rewards. Among the villages of this African people exist numerous mosques which are led by the village sheikh, or leader. "Daood," the team leader, entered such a village mosque one day; as an unexpected guest, he was invited to present a greeting. Instead of a standard greeting, Daood decided to tell the story of God's call to Abraham from Genesis 12:1-3. After briefly describing the idolatrous culture in which Abraham received his call and telling the story, Daood turned it over to the sheikh for his interpretation.

The sheikh explained that while many people are seeking after God, the good news is that God is seeking us; he initiated his call to Abraham and is calling out a community of righteous faithful from Abraham; and that today God is calling their community to be righteous and follow God's will. He did not identify his own mosque as the company of righteous believers, but rather was calling a new community of transformed followers of God! ("Empowering Existing Leaders," Interview #19 by Interviewer #250, Spring 2007).

While there may be significant risk to such an approach, this team has discovered that the sheikh has validated the new community, defending its existence because he acknowledges that God is doing a new thing among his people. In such a case, faith is not a battle between "Christianity" and "Islam," but a total submission to God and to holy lives. As a result, the cross-cultural worker does not have to fight the stigma of "foreign intrusion."



Conclusion: The Fruitful Practices Approach

The existing list of Fruitful Practices is a snapshot of current wisdom among many teams across the Muslim world, not an exhaustive catalog of formulas. We are just beginning to discover the common practices of effectiveness between us. It serves as a helpful but limited benchmark of what God is doing among us.

As a benchmark, the Fruitful Practices are a description of effective works among Muslims, but they are not a prescription of detailed instructions to follow. Neither should you expect any guarantees. While Fruitful Practices report what we see happening among us, there is no substitute for prayer and reflection. Even then, we should expect surprises, as Jesus reminds us: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3:8).

Even so, our search continues to “see and hear” what the Father is doing among Muslim peoples, as we discover more questions: “Are some Fruitful Practices limited to specific regions? How do Fruitful Practices compare between teams who are engaged in humanitarian efforts, and those who are engaged in business? As you commit to a Fruitful Practice approach to your work, how should you track your progress?”...

Scene: You have returned to the rustic and smoky guesthouse in your Central Asian city. This time, it is two years later, and you have been invited to meet a young worker who recently arrived in your area, hoping to share the Good News of Jesus. “Tell me the secret,” he begs, trying to keep the despair from his voice. “What is happening here?”

You smile at the familiar conversation. “What do you mean?”

“How is it possible that so many of your Muslim friends are becoming followers of *Isa*?” he implores.

You place your tea on its saucer. “Let me tell you my story . . . ”

“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” (John 15:8). †

To order copies of this new book see page 29.

Endnotes

1. The designation “Fruitful Practices” has been a modification of the business term “Best Practices” to convey that the results, like fruit, are dependent on factors beyond our control, such as the sun. The witness, like the farmer, has a role to play but there are also divine factors beyond our control. According to Melisse Rumizen, “Best Practices, processes, and techniques are those that have produced outstanding results in another situation and that could be adapted for your situation. Like all knowledge, it is contextual. A best practice is what is best for you.” Also see Carla O’Dell and C. Jackson Grayson, *If Only We Knew What We Know: The Transfer of Internal Knowledge and Best Practices* (New York: Free Press/Simon Schuster, 1998).
2. Such a notation indicates that 99% of the participants felt that the practice was important or very important and 86% practiced it.

Special: \$15 off 500 or more Post Card Prayer Cards!
Use code: DSC37P4

Turning Pictures into Prayers

“You all have been the **best prayer card company** I’ve worked with (and I’ve been on the field for about 8 years and used a lot of the different companies out there). We’ll definitely use you all again. We’ve been so pleased with the speed and quality of service.”
- Betsy (Pioneers)

www.dpimagine.com

Can a Muslim Be a Follower of Christ?



The Arresting Story of a Devout Believer

by Paul-Gordon Chandler

Excerpted from the book, Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road by Paul-Gordon Chandler

Family Honor Is Shaken

If you are not going to cease being a Christian, then go and at least be a good Christian," Mazhar's uncle exhorted him. Amazingly, this was only three days after that same uncle had attempted to take Mazhar's life by slitting open his throat in public with a large knife.

When Mazhar initially returned to his hometown after having been expelled from the military, his family and his local community were both shocked and wonderfully pleased at the dramatic change in his life. He had left them as an irresponsible drunkard, and returned a completely different person. Instead of being aloof and isolating himself from others, he aggressively sought out ways to help them—even to the point of volunteering to cut the nails and wash the feet of his elderly uncle (something seen in that society as a lowly task, and therefore culturally considered a very honorable thing of someone of Mazhar's status to do). A few years later, Ahmed Swayden, a well-known Muslim writer from his hometown, wrote the introduction to Mazhar's first novel, *The Traveler*, which focuses on the transformation Christ can bring to a person, and in it Swayden described the tremendous difference he observed in Mazhar after his decision to follow Christ.

Though Mazhar's family was overcome with joy at the change they observed in him, it was Mazhar's insistence that it was all because he had become a "Christian" that caused them deep grief. Not understanding anything about his new faith in Christ, they felt as if their son or brother was

rejecting them and all they believed in, loved, and stood for—culturally, socially, and spiritually. Also, they had secretly continued to hope that Mazhar would still someday become a Muslim cleric, and that was now an impossible dream. The only followers of Christ that Mazhar had met so far were Arab Protestant Christians, and therefore he naturally assumed, knowing of no other possible identity at the time, that following Christ made him "a Christian." However, the term "Christian" is a term loaded with negative associations in the Muslim context, due, as we have seen, to the atrocities of the medieval Crusades, to the Church's link with Western colonialism, to the values of the "Christian" West, and to perceived lifestyles of many of the historic Arab Christians. Albeit with good intentions, having been influenced by the beliefs of the few Arab Christians he knew, but really with very little understanding of his own new "Christian" faith, Mazhar even went to the local mosque and shared with them his view that they were worshipping the wrong God. Understandably this provoked a strong reaction from both his family and the local Islamic community, and led to his being completely rejected by them. With their long history and rich culture, Syrians are a very proud people. Maintaining one's honor and avoiding shame at any cost, while important all over the Arab world, is especially so in Syria. Consequently, shortly after this, his uncle attempted to murder Mazhar directly in front of the local mosque for having shamed his family. A scar on Mazhar's neck still testifies to this attack. The attempted "honor killing" was a deliberate act to publicly clear his family's name in the community, thereby removing their shame. However, as the murder was not successful, Mazhar today believes that perhaps it was attempted with the intention of only appearing to be a murder. Mazhar was rushed to the hospital, unconscious. Upon his release three days later, he went to see the uncle who had tried to take his life. Mazhar told him how much he still loved him.

Paul-Gordon Chandler is a U.S. Episcopal priest serving in the Middle East. He grew up in Muslim West Africa and has lived and worked extensively throughout the Islamic world with churches, Christian publishing, and relief and development agencies. He is the author of God's Global Mosaic. He can be reached via www.paulgordonchandler.com.



It was then that the uncle, amazed at Mazhar's response, gave him his blessing and told him in that case to "go and be a good Christian," as opposed to the morally, religiously, and socially bad perception his community had of Christians otherwise, particularly those involved in what Muslims considered disreputable occupations—the selling of alcohol and prostitution.

Undeterred in his quest for a "Christian" identity, which is what local Christians were putting pressure on him to undertake, he tried to officially change his religion. However, in Syria, as in most Muslim countries, it is illegal for Muslims to convert to Christianity or otherwise change their religious identity. Even today, having been a follower of Christ for over thirty years, Mazhar is still registered as a Muslim, as are his Christian wife and their two children. When Mazhar submitted an application to the court in his province to change his religious identity, he was promptly called in by the provincial governor. The governor, who was from a traditional Muslim family, was very kind and listened to Mazhar's faith journey. He was so taken by the radical transformation that had resulted in Mazhar that he said to him, "I wish I had more time to listen to you, as I do want to know what really happened in your life. I don't know much about Islam, and I am not trying to make you return to it. Maybe I could walk with you in your journey. I would like to learn more. Do you have something I could read?" Nevertheless, knowing how delicate and sensitive of a situation Mazhar's desire to change his religious identity would be, the local governor advised him that it would not be possible, and strongly encouraged Mazhar to leave Syria, believing "any idiot could now kill you without having to have a reason." Mazhar sent him a New Testament not long after, and a few years later, when his first novel was published, sent him that as well.

Mazhar's decision to follow Christ was a revolutionary event in that small and completely Muslim town. Naturally the talk of the entire community, it still intrigues those living there. Over thirty years later, when Mazhar returned to live in Syria for a short time, an old acquaintance whom he had not seen all those years recognized him, and came over to welcome him. Immediately after the greetings, he asked, "So are you still following Christ?" Another occurrence, albeit a humorous one, illustrates the long-term impact Mazhar's actions had on the entire community. More than thirty-five years after leaving Syria, while at the Tunis Book Fair in Tunisia, North Africa, Mazhar ran into a distant relative who did not recognize him. Immediately this relative began to recount the tragedy the Mallouhi family had suffered many

years ago with "this person who brought shame on them all by becoming a Christian." Mazhar led the man on for a while, suggesting they get rid of him once and for all. The relative responded by saying, "He must have 'connections,' as he is one of the most public followers of Christ in the Arab World today and his books are everywhere, and he somehow doesn't seem to be afraid." Eventually Mazhar showed his relative the scar on his neck and with a smile asked him, "My uncle began here, do you want to finish it?" Until fairly recently, Mazhar was the only known person in his hometown of thirty thousand to have become a follower of Christ. However, the number of those in Mazhar's greater family following Christ today is slowly increasing—not officially as Christians, but instead in the manner Mazhar himself chooses: following Christ within their Islamic culture.

From Muslim to Christian to Muslim Disciple of Christ

Mazhar believes the core issue is that we all too often confuse spiritual identity with cultural identity. Within the complexity of this cultural and religious tension, Mazhar and his life experience teaches us a great deal about how someone from a Muslim background may follow Christ without having to leave his Arab and Islamic culture and community. He is an example of someone who has kept his Islamic culture and Christ as his Lord, presenting us a distinctive example of a Muslim following Christ remaining culturally fully "Arab" and not dislocated from his "birth" culture.

As both a committed follower of Christ for four decades and also an insider in Islamic circles, Mazhar's approach is not one of radical discontinuity from his Islamic Arab culture. Mazhar, who calls himself a "Muslim follower of Christ," says, "Islam is my heritage. Christ is my inheritance." As it is almost impossible to separate Islam and Arab culture, he is therefore instinctively Muslim. Yet as he is also at the same time a follower of Christ, he challenges our religious and cultural presuppositions.

Living within the clash of cultures and beliefs and having had to negotiate between identities all his life, he provides an example that Muslims who desire to follow Christ need in order to visualize how they too can retain their cultural identity.

Mazhar's spiritual journey has taken him from being completely dislocated from his community to once again becoming very much an insider in Islamic society. Having grown up in a conservative Muslim family that planned on his becoming a Muslim cleric, he initially left his Arab Islamic culture and

society to enter a “Christian community” in order to follow Christ, only to begin a slow, but steady, return journey to his Arab and Islamic roots, all while maintaining his loyalty to Christ.

When Mazhar became a follower of Christ, Arab Christians told him that he needed to leave his cultural past behind, so he dislocated himself from his Islamic culture (family, community, etc.) and attempted to take on a “Christian culture.” They encouraged him to change his name (to take a “Christian” name), to stop socializing in cafés (the primary meeting place for Arab Muslim men), to stop attending his family’s religious celebrations, to keep his distance from mosques and Muslims, to cease fasting, to pray in a different posture (not bowing or prostrate), to use “Christian” as opposed to Islamic Arabic greetings and words when speaking (such as “good morning” instead of “peace be upon you”), and even to eat pork to prove he was converted.

Desperate not to be alone, as in Islamic society people who are alone are suspected of being mentally ill, Mazhar aggressively adopted a Christian culture and ended all relationships with Muslims. He became a “churchian” because that was the only option presented to him. Desiring to be accepted in his “new family and community,” he even went to extremes in order to please them. The local Christians tried to put upon him all their traditions and views, such as inspiring him toward hating Islam, encouraging him to denigrate his own religious and cultural background, and even to embody Zionism, praying for the success of the new State of Israel (something completely contrary to Arab society). Furthermore, he was encouraged by the local Christians to emigrate to the West, or to a country like Brazil, where he could be free to be a “Christian.”

Uncomfortable with the way he was being indoctrinated, Mazhar faced a deep internal struggle. He knew that not to be a “Christian” culturally would be tantamount to denying Christ to the Christian community that had taken him in. Yet, ironically, no matter what he did, due to having come from a Muslim background, he still was not fully accepted by the local Christian community as one of them. This explains why, for many years, he found himself still having a deep craving for respect and friendship from Western Christians.

As Mazhar quickly became alienated from his family and all his former friends, he faced a profound crisis of identity. He was on the road toward destruction—spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically. This is sadly the case for many followers of Christ from Muslim backgrounds who have become culturally “Christian” and therefore dislocated from their own communities. Mazhar recalls a friend who had a

similar background and experience. He ended up so indoctrinated by Christians against his Islamic past that he became irrationally paranoid about Islam and mentally unstable.

Many Christ followers from Muslim backgrounds struggle the rest of their lives, never fully fitting into a Christian culture. Consequently, they regretfully end up following Christ in lonely places. In 1991, when Mazhar was required to leave Egypt, one such young man wrote him, “I looked at you as a son looks to his father. The day you left I ... lost a father. ... I am not exaggerating to tell you I became like a dirty sick donkey everyone avoids being near. ... My fellowship is limited to myself, my wife and my little daughter.”

In explaining the challenge followers of Christ from Muslim backgrounds face and the damage it causes to their persons, Mazhar shares a short story about a turtle and an eagle. Once there was a turtle who asked an eagle to teach her how to fly. The eagle at first refused, but after repeatedly being asked by the turtle, the eagle took the turtle between his claws and carried the turtle up and then left her to fall. The turtle of course fell and broke her shell. Just like the turtle, Muslim followers of Christ are led to believe they can fly like the eagle, and yet in attempting to do so they end up seriously wounded and scarred.

When Muslim followers of Christ leave their cultures to become “Christians,” they can often end up in an even worse faith condition. Mazhar loves to tell the well-known Arab parable about how crows came to waddle when they walk. One day the crow became jealous of the hud-hud bird (a bird in the Middle East that walks with a dignified strut). The crow therefore tried to imitate him. However, the crow was unsuccessful and as a result lost the ability to walk correctly, thereby being stuck with a waddle forever.

Regardless of how much Mazhar assimilated himself into a “Christian” culture and appeared to be Christian, he never felt truly at home. He often found himself feeling he was betraying his heritage and people. Even years later, while attending the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., during the time of the Gulf War in 1991, he felt himself to be a “traitor” to his culture and people by just being present, as the West had become so anti-Arab and anti-Islam. It put him into a state of delirium.

Mazhar’s struggle of identity continued for many years. He recalls being deeply influenced in this area by the writings of E. Stanley Jones, the Methodist minister who served in India in the first half of the twentieth century. Jones loved the Hindu and Muslim cultures in which he found himself, and respected them, demonstrating a spirit of humility.



In Jones, Mazhar sensed a kindred spirit. To this day Jones is still one of the few authors he has read in the English language.

Over the years, Mazhar slowly realized that following Christ does not require him to be against his own self, but rather that following Christ is all about enhancing and fulfilling his true identity. Reflecting today on his experience, Mazhar tells the parable of the Middle Eastern donkey who wanted to be a lion. The donkey tried to be one by dressing like a lion, walking like a lion, talking (roaring) like a lion, and eating like a lion. However, in the end, he was eaten by a lion. The point, of course, is that changing one's outside appearance does not actually change the essence of who and what one is. For example, Mazhar's official identity papers still list him as a Muslim, as the Syrian government does not allow a change in one's religious identity.

After a long and arduous journey, Mazhar rediscovered his roots, albeit returning to them in a fresh way. It was a process of gradually beginning to see and call himself "culturally" a Muslim and "spiritually" a Christ follower. He realized that following Christ does not mean denying his loyalty to Middle Eastern culture and becoming part of an alien "Christian" culture. Though he follows Christ, he now deeply embraces his Middle Eastern, and even his Islamic, roots. Tunisian Muslim writer Jalel El Mokh describes Mazhar as "someone with Christian faith that is culturally Islamic."

Today Mazhar is very proud of his heritage and identifies himself as a Muslim according to his family, people, and culture, and enjoys breathing that air. Yet he also openly shares that he loves and follows Christ. He enjoys praying and meditating in the quiet reverent atmosphere of a mosque, where he sits on the carpeted floor and reads his Bible and loves to talk with people about his and their faith. While there, he often visits the sheiks and imams, who are his friends. He has kept a lot of the Muslim practices, from

using "Muslim" greetings and prayers, to fingering his Islamic prayer beads, to reciting the character of God (or meditating on sections of the Scriptures, such as the Psalms, particularly phrases like "the Lord is my shepherd"), to spending a lot of time in Arab cafés. Interestingly, cafés in the Arab world are often exclusively the milieu of Muslims. (In Egypt, Mazhar recalls an Egyptian Christian declining Mazhar's invitation to go sit in a café, saying, "If someone in my church sees me, they will kick me out of the church." This shows the divide in religious cultural practices.) He leads most of his studies of the Gospels with others in the Arab cafés or in mosques. Mazhar, after all these years of following Christ, still feels the pull of the culture when he hears the call to prayer or the Qur'an melodiously chanted.

Some Westerners might incorrectly assume that Mazhar's return to being an insider in Islamic circles is a means of becoming contextualized to more effectively share his faith in Christ with his fellow Muslim brothers and sisters. Yet for him it is not a means to an end, but rather a "coming to rest in his true identity" discovering who he really is, a finding of his way home.^f

HAVE YOU DISCOVERED THE IBMR?

Now with 3 convenient formats:

PRINT / PDF / HTML

- \$23.⁰⁰ one year, print edition
- \$9.⁹⁷ one year, e-journal edition
- Free one year, e-journal for students*

When you subscribe today to the 56-page print edition—for \$23 including postage worldwide—you will receive 4 issues a year by mail AND immediate access to the e-journal's PDF and HTML formats. The e-journal edition alone is available for \$9.97 a year.

*Full-time, current students may receive 4 issues of the e-journal free. See www.InternationalBulletin.org/studentoffer.html.

International Bulletin
Missionaries as Heroes and Villains

On This Page

- 01 Mission and Ethics
- 02 Mission in History
- 03 David A. Ross 1945-2008
- 04 Theological Education Today
- 05 History of Missionary Work
- 06 Theological Education Today
- 07 The Legacy of David A. Ross
- 08 Theological Education Today
- 09 Book Reviews
- 10 Book Review

of Missionary Research

INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN OF MISSIONARY RESEARCH

To use a major credit card, visit
www.InternationalBulletin.org

You may subscribe online, call customer service at (203) 624-6672, ext. 309, or mail a check payable in U.S. funds to IBMR, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834.

Published quarterly by the
Overseas Ministries Study Center

200811



A Movement to Jesus Within Islam

This Will Stretch Your Faith!

by Rick Brown

The following account is based on the testimony of Brother Jacob and a foreign missionary. It was also investigated and verified by several Christian leaders in the country concerned.

There was a holy man, a Sufi master, whom I'll call Isaac. He lived in a remote and traditional region of the country, where he had a large following. Several thousand people were looking to him for spiritual guidance, for blessings for their crops, for prayers for health, and most of all for intercession for their eternal salvation. Master Isaac, however, was worried about his own salvation, and it troubled him that his thousands of followers believed that he himself could save them on the day of judgment. So he began to pray in earnest that God would show him the *sirāt mustaqīm*, the true path to salvation.

One night in 2002, while Isaac was praying to be shown the way of salvation, the Lord Jesus appeared to him in radiant white clothing. Jesus told him to travel to such-and-such a town and consult a holy man from such-and-such a village whose father was named so-and-so and whose grandfather was

so-and-so. Jesus showed him in a vision the way to the house. Isaac realized that this man's grandfather had been his very own Sufi master, and this excited him.

Although it was still very early in the morning and there was a terrible rain storm outside, Isaac vowed not to eat or drink until he met the man of God to whom

Jesus had directed him and had discovered from him the way of salvation. So he walked through the storm

to a bus station, boarded an early bus, and traveled some 40 miles to the town.

It was about six in the morning when Isaac reached the place that Jesus had revealed to him in the vision. When he knocked on the door, he was surprised to see a man wearing ordinary clothes rather than the robes of a Sufi master. It was Brother Jacob, who was the leader of an "insider movement" of Messianic Muslims. When Isaac asked Jacob about his father, his grandfather, and the village he came from, he realized that this was the very man that Jesus had told him to consult. So he told Jacob about the vision and asked him to reveal the way of salvation.

Citing passages from both the Qur'an and the Bible, Brother Jacob told Isaac the story of God creating the world as a good place, about Adam and Eve and the temptation of Satan, and about their disobedience of God. He declared that as a consequence of their sin, Adam and Eve became alienated from the presence of God and enslaved to darkness, sin and death. So how could their relationship with God be restored? How could they return to the Garden of Eden?

Brother Jacob went on to talk about Cain and Abel, the descent of the world into evil, and the rescue of Noah and his family. He noted that God called Abraham from Babylon to follow him and gave him eight sons. He talked about the descendants of Abraham, about David, about the disobedience of his son Solomon and his descendants, until it came to the true son of David, the true heir of Abraham's promises, the second Adam, Jesus, who was the first human being in history to completely submit himself to the will of God. He said that it was the will of God that Jesus the Messiah should suffer death on the cross to save mankind, and that God raised him back to life. God exalted Jesus to sit at his own right hand as Lord and Savior of the world.

Brother Jacob said that the Lord Jesus had appeared to him as well, in 1969, and had showed him that He is the way of salvation. He read in the Gospel

One night in 2002, while Isaac was praying to be shown the way of salvation, the Lord Jesus appeared to him in radiant white clothing.

Rick Brown is a Bible scholar and missiologist. He has been involved in outreach to the Muslim world since 1977.

This article is reprinted by permission from the 24:1, Spring 2007 issue of the International Journal of Frontier Missiology.

Rethinking Our Approach to Muslim Peoples

where Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." Jesus, he said, was Himself the *sirāt mustaqīm*. Master Isaac said he believed in Jesus and was ready to serve Him and wanted to be baptized right then and there. Brother Jacob, however, counseled him to wait. He said,

God has made you a great leader, and he wants all of your followers to know that Jesus the Messiah, and He alone, is the way of salvation. Go home and tell your wives and children first that Jesus is the Lord and Savior, and then tell your closest disciples. (Isaac agreed, and they set a date for Jacob to come and share the Good News.)

About two weeks later, at the appointed time, Jacob arrived to find a gathering of two hundred or more of Isaac's leading disciples. The Sufi master began by telling them all the story of his prayer and the vision he was given by God. He described traveling during a storm to get to Brother Jacob's house to ask him the secret of salvation. He then asked Brother Jacob to tell them all the way.

So Brother Jacob told the story again, starting with the Qur'an and then moving to the Bible. He told the story of creation, the fall, and the descendants of Adam down to Jesus the Messiah. He called them to put their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. All of the leaders agreed, but they said they must first share this news with their wives and children.

A few weeks later Master Isaac sent word to Brother Jacob to come back. Brother Jacob arrived to find that the Sufi master and 250 of his leading disciples were ready to be baptized. So Brother Jacob baptized Isaac and his wives and son. Then he told Isaac's wives to baptize their daughters. He then instructed Isaac to baptize the 250 senior leaders of his movement, and to send them home to baptize their own wives and children, and to share the word with others and to baptize those who believe. On that day several thousand people were baptized into the Kingdom of God. Thus began a "faith movement to Christ" within a culturally Muslim community.

Brother Jacob had brought along three cases of New Testaments, and he gave these to Master Isaac

for distribution to his leaders. But three days later, Isaac returned the cases, saying they were obviously not for his people, as they were not in his language, at least not the way they used it. There were too many foreign and ecclesiastical terms, and too many occurrences of words that pertained to a different ethnic group. Brother Jacob, however, had a poetic paraphrase of the Gospel story which he had prepared, using familiar and acceptable language, and he offered that. Master Isaac thought this book was wonderful, and he took a large quantity back with him for his flock. At that point Brother Jacob realized that these new disciples of Christ needed a Bible in familiar and intelligible language, and so he initiated a Bible translation project for them, starting with the Gospel of Mark.

These two insider movements continue as culturally sensitive house church movements, in spite of slander, threats and persecution instigated by traditionalist churchmen. Master Isaac has died, but the movement he led continues under the pastoral care of his sons. They are confident that since it was the Lord Jesus Himself who directed them to Brother Jacob and his insider approach, the Lord will also guide and protect them and through them bless the Muslim community to which they belong. f

DISCOVER a World of Difference



Introduce your community to fair trade and Ten Thousand Villages by hosting a Ten Thousand Villages festival sale featuring fairly traded handcrafted gifts and home decor made by skilled artisans around the world.



Call 800-592-7238 to learn more.

www.tenthousandvillages.com



Muslims Who Believe the Bible



by Rick Brown

Muslim Esteem for Scripture and Prophets

Most Muslims are taught the basic doctrines of Islam, namely that they should believe in God, the day of judgment, angels, prophets, and the Scriptures (or else eternal fire awaits them). They are taught that the four main books of Scripture are the Taurāt of Moses (the Torah or Old Testament), the Zabūr of David (the Psalms), the Injīl of Jesus (the Gospel or New Testament), and the Qurʾān (in addition to the writings of Abraham and other prophets). The Qurʾān itself commands Muslims to profess faith in the Scriptures that God revealed to Jesus and the prophets (*Āl ʿImrān* 3:84; cf. *Al-Baqara* 2:285). Given the importance of believing in these books, it is not surprising that most Muslims can readily name all four. Compare this with the fact that “only half of American adults can name even one of the four gospels” (Prothero 2007). But the average Muslim’s “faith” in the Torah, Psalms, and Gospel lacks substance, because they have little or no knowledge of the content of these books. This lack of knowledge is all the more serious given the warning in the Qurʾān that those who reject the guidance and verses of the Torah and the Gospel will face the severest punishment (*Āl ʿImrān* 3:3–4). In fact, the Qurʾān often says that its purpose is to confirm the previous Scriptures, and in that way it points the reader to the Scriptures that are being confirmed (e.g., *Al-Baqara* 2:97; *Al-Māʿida* 5:46; *Yūnus* 10:37; *Yūsuf* 12:111).

Muslims use the term “prophets” to designate people whom God used to call people to faith and repentance, whether by word or example. They describe many of the famous figures in the Bible as prophets: Adam, Enoch, Noah, Job, Lot, Abra-

ham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, John the Baptist, and Jesus the Messiah, but they know very little about most of them. The Qurʾān mentions many of them as examples to be remembered and followed, and it clearly assumes the listeners are familiar with their stories from the previous books. In *Sād* 38:42, for example, the reader is told to “remember Job,” who was “afflicted by Satan” and “cried to his Lord.” Job’s story is mentioned again in *Al-ʿAnbiyāʾ* 21:83–84 as something to be remembered, but the story itself is not recounted in the Qurʾān. Similarly the Qurʾān makes mention of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and the twelve tribes, without clearly describing how they are related to one another; it assumes the reader is familiar with them from the previous books. The Qurʾān mentions the disciples of Jesus, but says little to explain who they were. In fact, the Qurʾān not only assumes a familiarity with many of the people, stories and themes of the Bible, it refers the bewildered listener to those who study the Bible:

If thou wert in doubt as to what We have revealed unto thee, then ask those who have been reading the Book from before thee (*Yūnus* 10:94, Yusuf Ali’s translation)

Bible Study by Open-minded Muslims

Encouraged by this guidance from the Qurʾān itself, and by the requirement to believe in all of the Scriptures and prophets, a number of Muslims

“Muslim” as a Socioreligious Category

From a sociological perspective, Muslims are people who have a social identity as members of a traditionally Muslim community. They may be religiously observant or secularly nominal, but they are in the same socioreligious group, that of Muslims. For many Muslims, being a Muslim is an inseparable part of their self-identity, their background, their family, their community, and their cultural heritage, regardless of what they actually believe about God. It is this everyday sociological sense of the term “Muslim” that is used in what follows.

Rick Brown is a Bible scholar and missiologist. He has been involved in outreach to the Muslim world since 1977.

This article is an excerpt from the article, Biblical Muslims, from the 24:2, Summer 2007 issue of the International Journal of Frontier Missiology and used by permission.



are motivated to read portions of the Old and New Testaments, often in a group. They encourage one another, saying, “There are four books of God, but we are familiar with only one of them; let’s study the others together.” When they do, they are often delighted to find the information they needed to understand the many biblical allusions in the Qur’an. They also find that the narratives in the Old Testament are full of historical detail, and they see that the prophets were confirmed by many miracles from God. They gain new insights into God and his goodness and holiness, mankind and its fall into sinfulness and death, the creation and its corrupted goodness, and the promises of God’s salvation through a Savior-King, the Messiah, who ushers in an eternal Kingdom established by God.

It is good to start with Old Testament passages. Many say, “I never understood the New Testament until I read the Old Testament.” But when they read the four witnesses to the Gospel in the light of the Torah, they understand and respect the fact that Jesus was truly sinless, that he sacrificed his life in obedience to the plan of God, that he rose from the dead, triumphant over death, sin, and hell, and that he ascended into heaven. Reading Acts, they see that Jesus is active in the world as Lord and Savior of all, guiding, empowering, and protecting his followers as they proclaim his Kingdom to the nations. Then there is Romans. One well-educated Muslim woman said to me recently, “It was not until I had read Romans that I understood the significance of the Gospels.” Then there is Revelation, which is one of the most popular books, because it speaks to them like their dreams do and describes the return of Jesus and the age to come. Woodberry’s (2007: 27) observation about them is that “as they study the Bible and meet with other disciples of Jesus, these two resources become increasingly important in their spiritual growth.”

Reading the Gospel helps them to interpret the Qur’an. For example, most Muslim scholars interpret the vague verse at *Al-Nisā’* 4:157 to say that Jesus was not really crucified, but it just seemed that way. But a minority of Muslim scholars note that *Āl ‘Imrān* 3:55 and *Maryam* 19:33 say that Jesus was sent to die and then rise to God, and so they interpret *Al-Nisā’* 4:157 differently, saying that the Jews killed Jesus’ body but not his spirit. Ayoub (1980), for example, says that “the denial of killing of Jesus is a denial of the power of men to vanquish and destroy the divine Word, which is forever victorious.” When Muslims read the graphic and detailed accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and see that it was a fulfillment of what the prophets foretold and in accord with God’s plan of salvation, they find grounds to agree with the minority opinion. By believing the Bible and letting it be their guide to the interpretation of the Qur’an, they become rooted in the Bible, and we could call

them “biblical” or at least “sub-biblical” Muslims. In their opinion, however, they are simply being better Muslims by submitting to all of God’s books and prophets. (The word “Muslim” means one who submits to the rule of God.)

Biblical Themes that Appeal to Muslims

Open-minded Muslims find much in the Bible that is good news:

1. *God’s goodness, love, reliability, and care for his servants.*
2. *God’s guidance of history towards good ends as he works through events to oppose evil, to train his servants in righteousness and truth, and to fulfill his good purposes for his people.*
3. *The portrait of Jesus himself: his kindness, devotion, wisdom, power, self-sacrifice and ongoing reign as Savior and King.*
4. *The love and forgiveness exhibited by true followers of Jesus.*
5. *The offer of personal forgiveness and acceptance by God.*
6. *The offer of assured and complete salvation from hell and acceptance into God’s kingdom.*
7. *The offer of a personal relationship with the Lord, fully realized in the next life.*
8. *The offer of inner cleansing and renewal through God’s Holy Spirit.*
9. *The offer and example of grace to live a godly life through the strengthening and guidance of the Holy Spirit.*
10. *Power to resist and repel Satan and evil spirits in Jesus’ name.*

They are surprised and challenged by the divine characteristics exhibited by Jesus: He issues commandments, controls nature, creates matter from nothing, commands spirits, restores the dead to life, reveals the thoughts of others, forgives sins, and bestows eternal life.

Muslims Who Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ

As Muslims ponder these mysteries and pray for guidance, it is not uncommon for them to have a dream or vision that confirms the Scriptures and calls them to follow Jesus the Messiah as their Lord and Savior. Thus they become what we could call “Messianic Muslims.” In their own opinion, however, they are simply being better Muslims by submitting to the Messiah whom God sent to guide and save them.

John Travis (1998) classified Muslim believers of this sort as “C5” and “C6,” where C5 groups were open about their study of the Bible and their faith in the

Messiah, and C6 believers kept their faith private. In situations where C5 groups are expanding and multiplying across a network of social relationships, they have been described as “insider movements.” In the groups that Travis described, the Muslims rejected or reinterpreted traditional doctrines that were incompatible with the Bible. Woodberry (2007: 24) has studied one rapidly growing movement for many years, and he notes that these Muslims follow Jesus and “believe what the Bible teaches even where it differs from the Qur’an” (as commonly interpreted). It is a cause for rejoicing that Muslims are studying the Torah, Psalms, and Gospels and are becoming disciples of Jesus Christ.

Obstacles that Hinder Muslims from Studying the Bible

Several things discourage Muslims from reading the Bible. One is the Muslim belief that Jews and Christians have distorted these books, based on statements in the Qur’an (2:59, 75; 3:78; 4:46; 5:13). Muslim scholars disagree, however, whether this corruption involves the text of the Bible itself, which raises theological problems for them, or whether it refers to erroneous interpretations by Jews and Christians, which is what the Qur’an seems to say. Muslim readers take heart, however, from the sayings of Jesus that his words will never pass away (Mark 13:3; cf. Matt. 5:18 re the Torah).

Many Muslims fear that the Injil has been altered to teach people to worship three gods: Allah, Mary, and Jesus. They find relief from this worry in Mark 12:28–30, where the greatest commandment involves affirmation of the oneness of God and a commitment to love him totally.

They also fear terms like “sons of God”, because many have been indoctrinated since childhood, on the basis of the curse in *Al-Tawba* 9:30, that if they say or consent to any statement that someone is an offspring of God, then God will damn and destroy them. They regard the term itself as an earth-shaking insult to God, because it implies that God had sexual union with a woman in order to get children (see *Al-An’am* 6:101; *Maryam* 19:35, 88–92). (For discussion, see Brown 2005a-b and Brown 2007.)

Finally, Muslims fear that Bible study, especially if done with a Christian, could be an effort to get them to deny their own Muslim heritage and join a church, usually at the cost of being expelled from their family or community. John is a Christian who has been living in Southeast Asia for many years. He and his wife like to read the Bible with a few Muslim friends, sometimes including one or two who have already become followers of Jesus the Messiah. Most of their friends and neighbors, however, declined their invita-

tions to join them, in spite of their assurances that they were not proselytizing them. John and his family left the country for six months. When they returned, they found that one of their believing friends had started a weekly Bible study group, and this had grown to the extent that several different groups were now meeting in the area, each on a different day of the week. Teachers of Islam from two different schools have now become followers of Jesus as a result of the witness of these groups. The main attractions are the transformed lives of those who have been studying the Gospels, the stories of the prophets, the gripping encounter with Jesus Christ in the Gospels, and the fact that God now answers many of their prayers. When John asked one of the participants why he would not participate in a Bible study with him earlier, he explained the reason:

You are a Christian, and we thought your invitations were a scheme to get us into a church some day. But while you were away, we saw that Muslims were studying the Bible themselves, without going to a church or becoming apostates, and we felt safe joining them.

So John kept his distance from the Bible study groups, not wishing to interfere.

This fear of apostasy is amplified by socioreligious factors. From a cultural and sociological perspective, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and their subdivisions constitute social groups, each of which has distinctive “boundary-marker” customs that are shared within the group but not outside. Muslims view Islam as a complete culture, with its own historical heritage, art forms, greetings, holidays, books, customs, ethics, politics, values, and beliefs. They view Christianity the same way, not as a relationship to God through Christ but as a contrasting socioreligious grouping, with its own historical heritage, art forms, greetings, holidays, books, customs, ethics, politics, values, and beliefs. And indeed, Christianity in its various forms does exist in the world as a collection of closely related socioreligious groups, such as Roman Catholic, Orthodox (of various sorts), Protestant, and within that Evangelical, etc. So although the Qur’an guides people to the Bible, Muslims typically identify the Bible as belonging to the Christian socioreligious group rather than to themselves. This discourages them from reading the biblical books, especially if they come from overtly Christian publishers, bookshops, websites, or radio stations.

If a Christian invites a Muslim to study the Bible with him, the Muslim often becomes suspicious of the Christian’s motives, thinking he wants to draw him away from the socioreligious community of his birth and “win” him to a “Christian” socioreligious



identity. This is especially the case if the Christian wants the Muslim to read the Gospel of Jesus, because Muslims tend to view Jesus as belonging primarily to the Christians, in spite of Muslim traditions that affirm him. Indeed, both parties might view the matter as a contest between members of competing socioreligious groups. These exclusivist attitudes cause socioreligious boundaries to be one of the chief obstacles hindering Muslims from engaging with the Bible and with the claims of Christ. On the other hand, there are other Christians who view the “Great Commission” as a call to “make disciples of all nations” rather than to convert them to their own socioreligious group. Muslims find such Christians less threatening to their social identity, and they are more receptive to studying the Bible with them. By respecting the socioreligious identity and heritage of Muslims, these Christians lower some of the boundaries and remove these obstacles. Nevertheless, for a Bible study to develop into a “back-to-the-Bible” movement among Muslims, the Muslims need to be meeting to study the Bible on their own, inside their own community, without the presence of non-Muslim outsiders.

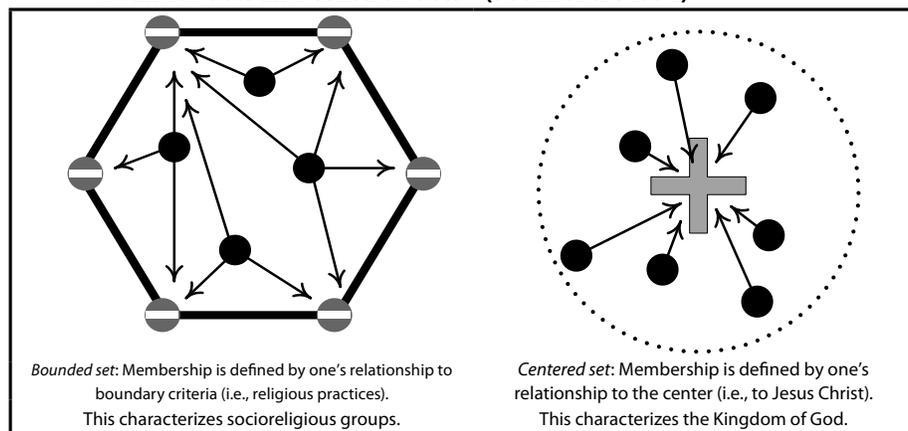
The Great Commission: Christian Religion or Discipleship to Christ?

Drawing on mathematics and philosophy, Paul Hiebert (1994) distinguished these two missiological viewpoints in terms of “bounded sets” versus “centered sets.” Hiebert applies this to believers in Jesus Christ. Bounded-set Christians define themselves as people who meet the boundary criteria of assenting to the same traditional creeds and religious practices (e.g., worship services on Sundays in a church building). As Hiebert notes, people with this view work hard to maintain conformity to these boundary markers and reject non-conformists as non-Christians or heretics. Centered-set Christians define themselves in proximity to the central exemplar, which is the ideal follower of Christ, a model provided by Jesus himself. So their chief concern is fostering greater conformity to this model. Another way to put this is that traditional bounded-set Christians define themselves in terms of a recognizable socioreligious category, whereas centered-set Christians define themselves in terms of discipleship to Jesus Christ. This corresponds to the distinction Charles Kraft has made between “cultural Christianity” and “essential Christianity,” where the latter con-

sists of allegiance to Jesus Christ. Hiebert’s point was that the New Testament presents a centered-set view of mission and holiness, in which the task of mission is to call and disciple people to Christ rather than promote a particular religious tradition in opposition to all others.

This difference leads to misunderstandings and conflicts in missiology. Some missionaries see their task as assisting the expansion and strength of their boundary-defined socioreligious group while others see their task as assisting the growth of God’s Christ-centered Kingdom. While both groups can speak in support of contextualization, they are contextualizing different things. One group is seeking to contextualize their brand of Christian religion, while the other is seeking to contextualize collective discipleship to Christ. So each sees the other as deficient and sometimes as threatening. Personally, I think there is a place for both in God’s plan, but the bounded-set approach often leads to conflict and recrimination between socioreligious groups and to suffering and shame within families. Even extracted, long-standing converts feel the pain of this competitive socioreligious approach. Mary has been a believer for seven years and is known as a convert. Yet she is hurt when Christians speak disdainfully of Muhammad and Islam. She feels they are insulting her culture and its most important historical icon. “Jack” is another convert. He works for a bounded-set mission that constantly denigrates Islam in their publications and broadcasts. He wants to see his people come to faith in Christ, but because of his work with this mission he says, “I feel like a traitor to my people.” “Joseph” converted over thirty years ago and even managed to change his legal religious identity to “Christian.” But because of his apostasy from the Muslim community, his highly respected family lost their position and their honor, to the extent that they could not find husbands for their daughters or good jobs for their sons. After thirty years Joseph returned and apologized to them

Bounded Sets and Centered Sets (See Hiebert 1994)



for all the heartbreak and disgrace he caused them, saying he should have remained in his family and community as a Bible-believing Muslim who follows Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

Biblical and Sub-Biblical Muslims

In any movement to Christ, it takes time for people's worldviews to conform to what is taught in Scripture, as God leads them into truth through his Holy Spirit. What is important is that they are moving towards the center, towards greater conformity with a biblical worldview. Until that process has matured, their worldviews (beliefs and values) are likely to be sub-biblical. That is true of all kinds of movements, so we need to distinguish between *biblical* C1/2/3/4/5/6 and *sub-biblical* C1/2/3/4/5/6. It would be less than God's best, however, for believers to remain with a sub-biblical worldview, such as one finds in liberal churches (which are usually C1 or C2), Mormons, and the like. So if there is anything one can do to encourage their maturation towards biblical worldviews, then it would seem desirable to do so.

The question, then, is which beliefs, values and practices are incompatible with the Bible? A related question is what role do outsiders have in deciding this issue? Some have taken the role of denouncing insider movements as syncretistic, because they remain within the boundaries of a Muslim socioreligious category and fail to match all the boundary criteria for a "Christian" socioreligious category. This bounded-set approach, however, is unsympathetic and ultimately unhelpful. Scott Moreau (2000: 924) offers the following guidance. First he defines syncretism as "the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements." Then he provides the following guidelines for identifying them:

Because of the convoluted nature of culture, the declaration of syncretism in a particular setting cannot be simply left in the hands of expatriate missionaries. The local community must be empowered to biblically evaluate their own practices and teachings. Missionaries must learn to trust that indigenous peoples are able to discern God's leading and trust God to develop and maintain biblically founded and culturally relevant Faith and Praxis in each local context. Finally, Christians of every culture must engage in genuine partnership with Christians of other cultures, since often the outsider's help is needed to enable local believers, blinded by culture and familiarity, to see that which contravenes scriptural adherence to the first commandment.

As he points out, the outsiders can give their perspective, but it is the responsibility (before God) of the local disciples of Christ "to biblically evaluate

their own practices and teachings." Hiebert (1987) offers some general guidelines on how they can do that well. These guidelines, however, are unsatisfactory for bounded-set missionaries, because they view a mixture of socioreligious boundary criteria to be a form of syncretism (regardless of the believer's actual beliefs and values). Even phrases like "Messianic Muslim" and "Biblical Muslim" seem oxymoronic and syncretistic to them.

Final Thought

In the article on page 16 I relate the story of Brother Jacob. Jesus appeared to the leader of a large Sufi sect and sent him to a distant house where he had never been, to meet Brother Jacob whom he had never heard of, with the assurance of Christ that Brother Jacob would show him the way of salvation. Brother Jacob was (and is) the leader of a large insider movement, but he had kept a very low profile. At the time of this event there were many missionaries in the country, and there were a number of C2, C3, and C4 churches that they had started. Jesus didn't send the Sufi leader to any of them. Jesus sent him to Brother Jacob, the C5 leader, and God started another insider movement through him and the Sufi leader. That does not mean that Jesus disapproves of C3 or C4; but it does demonstrate that he works in a variety of ways, and that one of those ways is C5. We would do well then to support them all, insofar as Jesus is guiding them in this way, and let Jesus lead them into the future he has for them, a future that we cannot yet see.^f

References

- Ayoub, Mahmoud Mustafa
1980 "The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion? A Study of the Death of Jesus in Tafsir Literature." *The Muslim World* 70:91-121.
- Brown, Rick
2005a Explaining the Biblical Term "Son(s) of God" in Muslim Contexts. *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 22(3):91-96.
2005b Translating the Biblical Term "Son(s) of God" in Muslim Contexts. *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 22(4):135-145.
2007 Why Muslims Are Repelled by the Term "Son of God". *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 43(4).
- Hiebert, Paul G
1987 Critical Contextualization [July]. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11:104-112.
1994 *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Moreau, A. Scott
2000 Syncretism. In *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 924-925. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Prothero, Stephen
2007 *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.
- Travis, John
1998 The C1 to C6 Spectrum. *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34:407-408.
- Woodberry, J. Dudley
2007. To the Muslim I Became a Muslim? *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24:23-28.



Wheelchairs from Jesus

by Rick Wood

They crawl across the rocky ground dragging their withered limbs behind them. They should be going to school but this is impossible unless someone carries them. They are often forced to grow up uneducated and beg for a living. They are the childhood victims of polio in Nigeria.

Nigeria has the highest rates of polio in the world, leaving thousands of children paralyzed and hopeless as they face a life of disability in an area of the world with few resources for rehabilitation and training. Some Muslim leaders have opposed polio vaccinations, so the toll of misery and suffering grows ever larger.

A band of Nigerian entrepreneurs with some outside help have built a uniquely designed wheelchair and distributed over 2000 of them to disabled kids in Nigeria. Many of these wheelchairs have gone to kids in largely Muslim areas, with an amazing impact on the lives of the kids and the thinking of the Muslim community.

In a deliberate attempt to bring the reality of the suffering of these children to the attention of the Muslim authorities, these Nigerian Christians have engaged the Nigerian Islamic clerics in a strategic partnership of joint wheelchair presentation. This was pioneered a year ago when there was a wheelchair presentation of 30 wheelchairs at the Jos Central Mosque. The emcee of the event

chastised all the Muslim high officials gathered, saying that the Christians were giving out these wheelchairs to the Muslims, but the Muslims hadn't done anything like this for their own people, let alone for the Christians.

Another joint event was held again on March 4th 2008, when about 50 wheelchairs were presented at the Central Mosque in Bauchi City, located about a 1 ½ hour journey north of Jos in a largely Muslim area. They have used such occasions to make a very strong case for expanded polio immunization and also the discouragement of street begging by Muslim disabled persons.



One leader of this effort says,

Whenever I am part of a wheelchair presentation in a Muslim area, I always tell the story of Jesus healing the paralytic who was lowered down through the roof. I also include the part about Jesus forgiving sins. I explain that as Christians, we try to follow the example of Jesus. Because Jesus went about healing the sick and disabled and giving sight to the blind, we are trying to do that in His name, by giving out these wheelchairs to both Muslims and Christians in the love of Christ.

The wheelchairs are 3-wheeled, self-pedaled "tricycles" made of bicycle parts, which work far better on the rough roads and trails of Africa than a Western-styled wheelchair. They have their own shop in Jos where they build them, 100 at a time, with 20 employees, both Muslim and Christian. Some employees are apprentices and some are disabled themselves. They are built at a cost of \$150 each.

The following story from one of the leaders of this effort illustrates the ongoing power of this ministry to open the hearts and minds of Muslims to the love of Christ.

Rick Wood is managing editor of Mission Frontiers.

As Fadi prepared for the wheelchair distribution, he deliberately chose to give some to Muslims. In fact, he gave seven to Muslims and eight to Christians. He went around and investigated who needed them the most and met with the traditional rulers in that area. In early November they invited the recipients to come to Kare the day before they were to be given. Fadi spent some time with them and their relatives, explaining how to take care of the wheelchair and explaining a little bit of the Gospel.

A few weeks later some of the Muslims began complaining about the sign “Jesus Cares For You” painted on the back of each wheelchair in the Hausa language. Some of the radical Muslims complained to the parents of the children who had received the wheelchair that they should not have the name of Jesus on anything they owned. They wanted to remove the name of Jesus from them. This complaint was eventually carried to the village head who is a Muslim. He

“Jesus is the one who brought these wheelchairs here. If you want to clean the name of Jesus off of them, Jesus might come back and take these away from us. Jesus is mentioned in the Qur’an and no one has cleaned his name out of the Qur’an”.

called together the parties who were complaining and said, “Jesus is the one who brought these wheelchairs here. If you want to clean the name of Jesus off of them, Jesus might come back and take these away from us. Jesus is mentioned in the Qur’an and no one has cleaned his name out of the Qur’an.” He then asked the people, “Do you want your children to start crawling around on the ground again?” They replied, “Oh no.” He then encouraged them to stop complaining. He called Fadi and told him the issue was settled and they would be happy to have Jesus bring any more wheelchairs to them.

Fadi said that this whole thing has caused quite a stir in the Muslim communities. He is receiving many reports of people sitting around under the mango trees talking about why and how this Jesus would do something so wonderful for them. In the past, they have thought of Christians as drunkards and immoral and violent people and have not really seen this side of Christianity before. They are now being forced to rethink their views about who Jesus is.



We might want to ask ourselves whether simply distributing Bibles or gospel messages would have had as great an impact on the hearts and minds of these Muslims as distributing wheelchairs has had.

Fadi also reported that the district head, the Muslim chief over many chiefs in that area, called him recently to talk about the wheelchairs. He was not able to personally come to the wheelchair presentation because of another function but had sent a representative. And apparently he was very pleased with what had been reported to him. He asked Fadi if the ministry had a headquarters building in Kare. Of course, Fadi had to say no. The chief said, “You know when white people are involved, they like to see things done properly. It would be shameful for the white man to come and there not be a proper place to receive him.” Therefore, he promised that he would give whatever land was needed for Fadi’s ministry to build a headquarters building in the area. He told him to go back to Kare and select any land he wanted and come and report back to him. Fadi did so. The chief sent a letter to the local government headquarters telling them that they should deed this piece of land over to them. He also told him that he would make a contribution toward the building whenever they started to erect it.

The next time we think that social action is unnecessary in evangelism or even a waste of time and resources, we might want to ask ourselves whether simply distributing Bibles or gospel messages would have had as great an impact on the hearts and minds of these Muslims as distributing wheelchairs has had.

If you would like more information or to get involved in supporting the ongoing distribution of these wheelchairs in Nigeria, please email me at: rick.wood@uscwm.org. f

Raising LOCAL Resources

by Glenn Schwartz

Spirituality and Personal Economics

The complexity of the physical world fascinates me. There is much of it that is beyond our understanding. Like the physical world we admire and enjoy but do not fully understand, there are some parts of the economic world that are also beyond our understanding. For example, who can say that what he or she knows about global economics is complete? Or who can say that what we prescribe will work at all times and in every place? The world of economics is far more complex than that.

While we may not have all the answers, there are principles in both economics and church planting that can help us both inform and transform the world in which we live. Whether we look at economic issues—or the challenge of the missionary task—two things pertain: 1) God's rules are important, and 2) He blesses those who follow them.

A few examples are in order. Things like *greed and corruption* break God's laws and have the potential to affect millions of people in places where they are practiced. *Unfair trade practices* allow some to become wealthy, while others become victims and suffer the effects of poverty. *Unwise use of time, money and other resources* can ruin the lives of those who make the decisions as well as those affected by them, such as children of alcoholic parents. *Unwise decision-making* can squander the resources of individuals, churches, governments and other institutions. One could add *lack of motivation, loss of dignity and broken human relationships* to the list of contributing factors.

Notice the italicized words in the previous paragraph. Each one has both the origin and solution in the realm of the spiritual. My first observation



Glenn Schwartz is Executive Director of World Mission Associates, based in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The author welcomes interaction by e-mail at glennschwartz@msn.com.

is that unless those spiritual issues are addressed, we should not be surprised that things like poverty and unhealthy dependency develop. A second observation is that if these are essentially spiritual issues, then simply providing charitable handouts is not a substitute for long-term transformation. A third observation—and this is very important—is that not all who suffer economic hardship do so of their own making. This means that those of us who are able, should stand ready to help those who are in need—to go to bat for them, if necessary—when they are unable to do so for themselves.

Spiritual transformation represents good news with long-lasting potential. Years ago in West Africa, a group called Faith and Farm introduced improved agricultural techniques to local farmers. They taught Biblical principles regarding the resources God put within their reach. Faith and Farm trainers knew that the mastery of better agricultural techniques could lead to farmers becoming more successful, but they were interested in more than just economic improvement. Their goal was to help believers learn how to use their wealth to provide for their families, help their neighbors and support their local churches. In other words, they taught that Christian stewardship should be built into the earning process.

God wants our spirituality to connect with the rest of our life, including both personal economics and that of the society around us. When done appropriately, what follows is transformation of a wholesome and long-lasting nature. Those who practice Biblical principles not only become better off personally, they become the hands and feet of Christ in the world in which they are called to serve.

There are many places in Scripture where spirituality and economics come together. One of the best examples is in 1 Chronicles 29, where King David is praying a public prayer before his people. (This was on the occasion of raising funds for building the Temple.) First, he draws attention to God's glory and greatness (verses 10–13). That puts God into perspective. Second, he reminds us of who we are in comparison by asking, "Who am I and who are my people that we should be allowed to give to God?" (verse 14). That puts us, as human beings, into perspective. Third, he says that everything we have comes from God's hand, and we are only giving back some of what He has already given to us (verse 14). That puts our possessions into perspective.

If we are to understand how personal economics and spirituality fit together, then a Biblical view of our possessions is a good place to begin. But when we begin to go down that road, it has the potential to affect how we work, give, share and worship. And that is real transformation, not just economic improvement. f



How Much Are We Blessing ALL the Peoples?

Greg H. Parsons



Most of us can remember where we were when we heard that airplanes were flown into the twin towers in New York on September 11, 2001.

After the initial shock, my first response was guilt. Why?

You probably remember that pre-9/11, most Christians were not very knowledgeable about Islam. Until that time, you couldn't find even one book in most Christian bookstores on Muslims. While William Carey Library (a ministry of the USCWM) had produced a number, sales were OK, but not what they should have been.

But those of us focused on the unreached were different. So, part of my reaction was that I felt like we had failed to make as much progress as we could have. What if we had prayed more? What if we had worked harder? What if we had gotten to those specific Muslim sub-cultures behind the terror with the message of love and peace in God's Kingdom through Jesus? How much might have things changed if the hearts of the radicals had changed first? Was I as determined at this "business" as Tiger is at golf or Bill Gates at software or global problem solving?

Ultimately God is sovereign, and yet he chooses to work through us. He tells us to pray. Given the focus of this issue, I thought of two questions:

- How do Christians view Muslims now?
- In particular, what more could be done now to reach Arab descendants of Abraham?

The answer to the first question ranges all over the map from deeper compassion (rare) to hostility (unfortunately, all too common).

The answer to the second question has become a "heated issue" for Christians as they have debated the role of modern Israel both politically and Biblically. Many Christians have favored the Jewish people over the Arabs in their attention, concern and prayers. This is understandable given the close Scriptural ties between Christians and Jews. But regardless of our theology and our views regarding the role of Israel today, Jews, Arabs and all peoples need and deserve the blessing promised to come from Abraham and his seed.

Genesis 12:3 says, *I will bless those who bless you* (referring to those who bless Abram). The verse continues to tell us that through Abram and his seed all families of the earth will be blessed. Ultimately, Jesus, the seed of Abraham will do that, and that is what we pursue in all peoples as our organizational purpose.

But later in Genesis, God clarifies who Abraham's immediate descendants are when it says of Ishmael, *But I will also make the son of the slave wife into a great nation, for he is your descendant too.* (Genesis 21:13, NET Bible) And later, *I will indeed bless him, and make him fruitful, and give him a multitude of descendants. He will become the father of twelve princes; I will make him into a great nation* (Genesis 17:20). We are told that Sarah will yet have a son, Isaac, and that God's perpetual covenant will come through him (Genesis 17:19). God sees both of these sons as those included in His blessing. Nowhere does God negate promises to Ishmael. Both are Abraham's immediate descendants.

As I was thinking about all this, I wondered; why don't more churches focus on blessing Arabs (as well as other peoples)? Usually, when we talk about blessing Abraham, we first think of the nation of Israel. We remember that those of us who are not of the physical seed of Abram on either side are grafted in (Romans 9-11) and thus receive the blessing of Abraham. But, John the Baptist reminds us (and Jews), *...and don't think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones!* (Matthew 3:9) Throughout the Scripture, God looks for faith. Faith is more important to God than ancestry.

Which people or culture does your church want to bless? You can bless several of course. Just don't wait too long to get started. †



Rev. Greg Parsons is General Director of the U.S. Center for World Mission. He and his wife have been on staff at the USCWM since 1982.