

Evangelicals, Stereotypes, and Diversities

J. Dudley Woodberry

The cover story by David Van Biema, entitled “Should Christians Convert Muslims?”, in the *TIME* magazine issue of June 30, 2003 turned out to be far more balanced than many of us had feared. Originally we received copies of an internal memo (sent to *TIME* reporters researching the article) that indicated a very negatively-biased attitude toward missionary work by Evangelicals. Upon learning that the internal memo had circulated widely in the missionary community and discovering, as a result, that many missionaries were refusing to give out information, Van Biema circulated another memo that promised the greater balance the final article demonstrates.

On the positive side, the article, for the most part, does not stereotype Evangelicals. It indicates that they express a broad range of methods and

J. Dudley Woodberry is Professor of Islamic Studies at the School of World Mission of Fuller Theological Seminary. He has served in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia and as a consultant to U.S. government agencies.



Many in the secular press do not fully grasp the diversity and historical developments within Evangelicalism.

attitudes concerning Muslims, and that some show exquisite sensitivity. It uses pseudonyms and omits many locations to protect those in or returning to Muslim lands. Van Biema and his team of reporters note the missionary motivation of love and that claims that their deeds of charity are merely a “cover” for proselytizing do a disservice to them. They rightly note that some of the unwise actions on the part of missionaries should be

attributed to “short-termers” or to those sent without proper training by nondenominational churches.

TIME did some good background

work. For example, they correctly note the thrust toward “unreached people groups” resulting from Ralph Winter’s Lausanne presentation in 1974 and the focus on the “10-40 Window” coming from Luis Bush since 1989. It points out the dangers of retaliation and even death to evangelists, but especially to converts from Islam, and the negative repercussions on pre-existing churches and aid groups. *TIME* likewise notes the ethical issues that laws against proselytizing raise for those who feel called to witness in these contexts.

Despite a better grasp of the varieties of Evangelicals and their history than is commonly reflected in the secular press, it is in these areas that

the article’s major weaknesses are to be found. First, it sometimes falls into the trap of associating the movements the authors considered sensitive to Islam with Mainline denominations and those they considered insensitive with Evangelicalism. The article does not adequately portray the overlap between “Mainline” Protestants and “Evangelicals”. Such Evangelical networks as the National Association of Evangelicals, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, and AD 2000 and Beyond include many Mainline churches and individuals, e.g., Presbyterians and Anglicans/Episcopalians. These Evangelicals are in denominations that are part of the World Council of Churches and that have influenced the World Council’s statements on world religions (including Islam) to include evangelism as well as the social gospel.

Second, along this same line, *TIME* emphasizes Mainline Protestants’ and Roman Catholics’ focus on a social gospel that has stressed aiding the poor over preaching the gospel, contrasted with Evangelicals’ focus on evangelism. However, they fail to note the holism of word and deed expressed in the Lausanne Covenant (a major statement of Evangelical principles), though they do mention the relief and development ministries of some Evangelical groups.

Third, the article does not reflect the ecumenical concerns of many Evangelicals. It is true that many Evangelicals tend to ignore or scorn the indigenous churches of the Middle

East, but other Evangelicals (such as groups like Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding) focus on understanding and cooperation with the ancient churches. Many in the secular press do not fully grasp the diversity and historical developments within Evangelicalism. The breadth of the movement is one factor that has led both to internal tension and external misunderstanding.

Fourth, although the article understandably focuses on Christian efforts to convert Muslims, it does not mention the simultaneous attempts of Muslims to convert Christians. Hence any onus that may be inferred is only on Christians. In reality, both are missionary religions with a message for all people (Qur'an 25:1; 38:87; 3:20; John 3:16). Both faiths claim the final messenger (Qur'an

33:45; Heb. 1:1-2). Both groups are called to be witnesses (Qur'an 2:143; Mt. 28:19-20). Both scriptures make exclusive claims for their message (Qur'an 3:85; John. 14:6; Acts 4:12). Yet both are called to witness in a gracious manner (Qur'an 16:125; 29:46; 1 Peter 3:15).

Although the article understandably focuses on Christian efforts to convert Muslims, it does not mention the simultaneous attempts of Muslims to convert Christians.

Finally, the article raises important issues for Evangelicals, such as the appropriate form of Christian witness at the present time in Muslim areas like Iraq. Jesus certainly showed the importance of timing when he healed a leper and then said: "Tell no one" (Mt. 8:3-4). Factors suggest caution in verbal witness in the current situation in Iraq, where verbal witness can be seen as opportunistic and where American motives are mistrusted. But ultimately witness includes both deed (Mt. 25:31-46) and word (1 Pet. 3:15). We also should note that the Church has been resident in Iraq for years – including the Evangelical (Presbyterian) Church as well as the ancient churches – and therefore whatever is done now by expatriates would be best done in consultation and cooperation with them. 🌐

One Perspective from India

Ralph D. Winter

The *TIME* cover story tells us what many Americans think about missions. People in India may have much more critical views. In the July 12 issue of the *Economic and Political Weekly* (www.epw.org.in, an Indian type of the *Wall Street Journal*), after apologizing for even bothering to read so biased a magazine as *TIME*, one author says,

Western, largely American, Christian evangelist fundamentalists appear to be convinced that the time has now come to wage an all-out spiritual war against Islam. Islam, as many of them see it, is a Satanic-inspired programme of terrorism that bodes ill for all humankind, and represents the greatest challenge to Christianity and Christendom (sic).

Referring specifically to the *TIME* cover story, he observes,

As an American evangelist, identified simply as Barbara, puts it, Islam is in itself the ultimate weapon of mass destruction. Charged with a fanatic zeal to spread their faith to benighted Muslims, the story speaks of scores of Christian evangelists following close on the heels of American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, offering aid, both material as well

as spiritual, with the latter, of course, being tied to the former.

He comments on his own perspective:

Personally, I have no problem at all with anyone wishing to change her or his faith, or even to anyone eager to convince others of the claims of his or her own religion.

What he despises, rather, is:

...any sort of proselytisation that disguises itself and conceals its ultimate goals is thoroughly condemnable.

He speaks of his own experience:

In the course of my travels, which have taken me across large parts of India, I have had numerous encounters with fiery evangelicals on the lookout for unsuspecting victims. Some years ago one could find them loitering around in Connaught Place, Delhi, passing around pamphlets and glossy tracts, proclaiming the end of the world and the impending dawn of the Day of Judgment. This literature was specially designed to catch the unsuspecting eye, keenly aware of the Indian penchant for vibrant colours. They were filled with brightly coloured cartoons of a bearded stern Jesus perched atop a fluffy cloud brandishing a sinister-looking sword; swarms of

red-cheeked, white-faced, distinctly European-looking angels astride galloping horses, their manes blowing wildly in the wind; hordes of men and women wearing crosses around their necks being lifted up to heaven on angelic wings; and a large swathe of humanity, dark-faced ghoulish most of them, going up in a ball of flame and smoke in Hell.

He proceeds to give careful and impressive details about several large Evangelical ministries in India and concludes with the following statement:

I have the most serious differences with right wing evangelist crusaders for whom all those outside their narrowly inscribed circle of chosen followers are doomed to eternal perdition. We have enough of such paranoid megalomaniacs in our country among Hindus, Muslims, Christians and others to deserve any more! If this be the road to salvation, then I, at least, would rather remain among the damned!

He assumes (incorrectly in most cases) that all Evangelical humanitarian efforts in India are mere smokescreens for evangelism rather than concrete ways of portraying the love and concerns of God. 🌐