

God is Doing Something Historic

DAVID GARRISON

For more than 25 years Dr. David Garrison has served as a missionary pioneer through the Southern Baptist International Mission Board. Garrison is the author of numerous articles and books on missions including Church Planting Movements. Many of his articles can be found on his website www.ChurchPlantingMovements.com. He is currently completing a two-year survey of Muslim movements to Christ that will be published later this year under the title *A Wind in the House of Islam*. Dr. Garrison currently lives in Colorado where he serves as the International Mission Board's Global Strategist for Evangelical Advance. Go to www.WindintheHouse.org or you may call (719) 322-1737 for more information.

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A wind is blowing through the House of Islam. The House of Islam, Dar al-Islam in Arabic, is the name Muslims give to an invisible religious empire that stretches from West Africa to the Indonesian archipelago encompassing 49 nations and 1.6 billion Muslims. Dwarfing the size of any previous earthly kingdom, Islam directs the spiritual affairs of nearly a quarter of the world's population. But something is happening today that is challenging the hold that Islam exercises over its adherents.

Today, in more than 60 separate locations in at least 17 of the 49 countries where Islam holds sway, new communities of Muslim-background followers of Christ are emerging. Each of these movements has seen at least 1,000 baptized believers and at least 100 new worshipping fellowships, all of whom have come to Christ over the past two decades. In some countries the communities have grown to number tens of thousands of new Muslim-background followers of Christ.

Though the total number of new Christ followers, perhaps as many as one to five million, may be a statistically small drop in the vast sea of Islam, they are not insignificant. Not limited to a remote corner of the Muslim world, these new communities of believers are widespread, from West Africa's Sahel to the teeming islands of Indonesia — and everywhere in between.

The price these converts pay for their conversion has not diminished with the arrival of modern times. Qur'anic prescriptions remain unflinching: "...if they turn renegades, seize them and slay them wherever ye find them" (Qur'an An-Nisa 4:89b). And these religious renegades are paying an incalculable price for their spiritual migration to Christ. Yet they continue to come. What began as a few scattered expressions of dissent is now emerging as substantial, and historically unprecedented numbers of Muslim men and women wading against the current of their societies to follow Jesus Christ. And it is only beginning.

To grasp the weight of this phenomenon, one must view it in light of the nearly 14-century backdrop of Islamic expansion and interaction with Christian populations. Within a century of the Prophet Muhammed's death in 632, his Arab warriors had defeated both Byzantine and Persian superpowers that had dominated the world, directly and through their predecessors, for more than a thousand years. Along the way, they subjected millions of Christians to Islamic governance.

Islam's advance did not stop until it had reached the Pacific Ocean in the 13th century and breached the walls of Constantinople in 1453. In many respects the advance of Islam, though more subtle, continues to this day. But, following the example of its founder, the Christian faith does not die easily. Though conquered by Islamic

armies, Christian populations lingered for centuries before persistent pressures and incentives to conversion eventually took their toll, relegating Christian ancestry for millions to a distant memory.

As the first millennium of Christian Muslim interaction drew to a close, tens of millions of Christians had been assimilated into the House of Islam, while not a single uncoerced Muslim movement to Christ had taken place.

MUSLIM MOVEMENTS TO CHRIST THROUGH HISTORY

The Colonial Era

The 16th and 17th centuries launched the age of Western colonial expansion with Spanish and Portuguese trade and conquests in Africa, Asia and the Americas, with Dutch, French and English traders racing to catch up in the 18th and 19th centuries. Though European colonization went hand-in-hand with the missionary enterprise in most of the non-Western world, the same could not be said of the colonizers' encounters with Islam. European traders typically took one of two approaches in relation to the Muslim populations they encountered. If the ports were controlled by Muslim sultans, the Europeans conspired with local non-Muslim factions to divide and conquer to gain an advantage. If the foreign lands contained insurmountable Muslim populations, the Europeans took a more accommodating approach, suppressing missionary efforts so as not to enrage local sensibilities.

By the close of the colonial era, Catholic mission historian Joseph Schmidlin had to admit:

Taken as a whole, the Moslem world with its two hundred million worshippers of Allah, has up to the present hour held aloof from both Catholic and Protestant Christianity, despite valiant efforts of individual missionaries.¹

Schmidlin went on to lament,

...the Crescent in Asia and Africa has even pressed forward to such an extent as to have become the most powerful rival of the Christian missions. Nevertheless, one must not for this reason declare that the Moslem is absolutely unsusceptible to conversion or incapable of receiving the Gospel, since

Christian communities were actually formed from among them, even during the nineteenth century -- at least by the Protestants in the Dutch East Indies, and in isolated cases as the result of Catholic efforts in Kabylia (Algeria) -- and have continued ever since.²

The two exceptions that Schmidlin highlights, "the Dutch East Indies (modern-day Indonesia)" and "Kabylia (a Berber region of Algeria)" bear closer scrutiny, as the only examples of Muslim movements to Christ in the great age of Western colonial and missionary expansion.

In the century following their 1806 arrival on the island of Java, Dutch armies rolled over most of the independent Muslim sultanates of what would become Indonesia. As had occurred in other European conquests, the Dutch pattern of colonization avoided conflict with the Muslim populations. Of the 245 missionaries that soon arrived in Indonesia, most were sent to evangelize the outer islands where Islam had not yet become established; only a few were sent to Java and their task was to minister to anyone except Muslims.³

For their part, Indonesians generally found the austere Dutch Calvinism unappealing, while Muslim nationalists pointed to its foreignness as a reason to embrace Islam and resist the West. By 1914, Abraham Kuyper, the most influential Dutch Reformed Church leader in Holland, suggested that with only 1,614 converts including women and children, perhaps it was time for the mission to exit Java due to its lack of response.⁴

Even as European churchmen were mired in frustrations, Eurasian and Indonesian lay evangelists began espousing a more indigenous gospel witness and making progress. A local Javanese evangelist named Radin Abas Sadrach



Surapranata (1835-1924) built on the approach of these early Indonesian indigenizers to greatly expand the response to the gospel. For this he is remembered by Indonesian Christians as “Sadrach: The Apostle of Java.” Sadrach used the newly published Javanese Bible translation and aggressive apologetics to engage Muslim leaders in debate, then gathered converts into contextualized, indigenous *mesjids* of Javanese Christian communities called *Kristen Jawa*, rather than extracting them into the local Dutch Christian churches.

At the time of Sadrach’s death in 1924, between 10 and 20 thousand Javanese Christians could be traced to the Apostle of Java’s ministry.⁵ Though they represented only a fraction of the world’s most populous Islamic country, these *Kristen Jawa* marked a historic breakthrough, as the first uncoerced Muslim movement to Christ in nearly 13 centuries of Christian witness to the Muslim world.

On the other side of the *Dar al-Islam* another experiment in ministry to Muslims was counting some success. In 1830 Algeria came under French control and was ruled as an integral part of France until its independence in 1962. Yet it was not until 1868, following a devastating famine that left many Arab and Berber orphans, that the Catholic church began actively witnessing to its Algerian Muslim citizens.

Charles Martial Lavigerie (1825-1892) arrived as the archbishop of the See of Algiers in 1868 and soon began gathering famine orphans into villages for ministry. Fearing popular unrest, the governor-general of Algeria, Marshal McMahon, forbade proselytizing Muslims. Lavigerie complied, ordering his priests to refrain from baptizing any of the non-Christians among whom they ministered.

In 1874, Lavigerie took an important step in removing barriers to Muslim reception of the gospel when he founded the *Société des missionnaires d’Afrique* (Society of missionaries of Africa), popularly known as the *Pères Blancs* or White Fathers, after the white Arab cassock and woolen scarf they adopted. The White Fathers learned Arabic and embraced many of the customs of the Muslim peoples among whom they served in hopes of easing the way for gospel transmission.

Nonetheless, the first baptisms did not take place until 1887, when three Kabyle Berber boys who were visiting Rome for the jubilee of Pope Leo XIII “tearfully implored baptism and received it...”⁶ That same year, Lavigerie allowed religious instruction for the first time, and then only if the local community was in agreement.

The Kabyle Berbers proved to be the most responsive of North Africa’s Muslim peoples, but they hardly exhibited

what could be called a movement to Christ. Many Islamic and Catholic obstacles stood in their path, not the least being the burden of Algerian subjection to the foreign, culturally Christian, French occupation force. As a result, as late as 1930 one could count no more than 700 baptized Catholic converts among the Kabyle.⁷

The latter decades of the 19th century saw the arrival of numerous Protestant missionaries into North Africa. Despite the heroism of the many who labored there, history records accurately and succinctly: “not many converts were won.”⁸

Though the 19th century was heralded as “The Great Century” of Christian expansion around the world, the century closed with only one Muslim movement to Christ, comprised of at least 1,000 baptized converts, in nearly 13 centuries since the death of the Prophet Muhammad. It would be 65 years into the 20th century before the next Muslim movement to Christ would appear, and this one occurred under great duress.

TWENTIETH CENTURY BREAKTHROUGHS

In 1965, Indonesia had the largest Communist Party in the world. In October of that year, an aborted Communist coup triggered a bloodletting that would not stop until half a million Indonesians were dead. Anyone with Communist or atheist leanings was imprisoned, executed, or massacred.⁹ Indonesia’s New Order government that rose to power in the wake of the violence abolished Communism and atheism in one fell swoop, demanding that every Indonesian citizen adhere to one of the nation’s five historic religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism or Buddhism. In the scramble that followed, two million Indonesians, some of whom had come from at least a nominally Muslim background, entered the nation’s Protestant and Catholic churches.¹⁰ Though it would be difficult to see this as a volitional turning of Muslims to Christ, it did result in many individuals later receiving Christian instruction and coming to faith who might otherwise not have.

Additional Muslim movements to Christ in various corners of the Muslim world did not begin appearing until the 1980s. Young Christians in the West invigorated by the *Jesus Movement* embraced the call to frontier missions to the world’s remaining unreached people groups. Near the top of every list was the world’s nearly one billion unreached Muslims.

The next movement emerged in the most unlikely of places. After the shock of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, many Iranians discovered that an Islamic state was not the panacea they had imagined. By the mid-1980s, Armenian

Pentecostals in Iran were seeing growing numbers of Shiite Muslims turning to them to hear the gospel. By the end of the 1980s, in the face of severe government persecution, there was an indigenous growing swell of Muslims into the Christian faith.

The late 1980s and 1990s also witnessed the resurgence of Christianity among the Kabyle Berbers of Algeria. As a bloody struggle between the military government and Islamists raged, eventually claiming more than 100,000 civilian lives, Berbers in Kabylia renewed their search for alternatives. They were found in late-night shortwave gospel radio broadcasts and illicitly distributed *JESUS* films. This resulted in thousands of Berbers quietly turning to the gospel while the rest of the country descended into civil war.¹¹

The early 1990s saw the fall of the Iron Curtain and the economic collapse of the Soviet Union. Millions of Turkic Muslims in Central Asia who had grown up under Soviet atheism were suddenly faced with a new horizon of possibilities. American, European and Korean evangelicals seized the window of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) to bring the gospel to the descendants of the Golden Horde. By the end of the 20th century, evangelical Christianity could claim indigenous movements among Azerbaijani, Kirghiz and Kazakh populations with beachheads of believers among most of the other Turkic Central Asian people groups.

South Asia's Bangladeshi population also proved to be fertile ground for the gospel in the 1990s. Widely viewed as a cyclone-addled, failed nation state, Bangladesh was, in fact, a churning mass of hard-working and intellectually vibrant humanity who were transitioning from their ancient animistic Hinduism to a growing Islamic identity conflicted by the still-raw wounds of atrocities committed by their Pakistani co-religionists in the 1971 War of Independence.¹² In the midst of this percolating Bengali cauldron, the gospel was spreading virally, prompting tens of thousands of Bangladeshi Muslims to seek out baptism as evidence of their newfound faith in *Isa al-Masih*, Jesus the Christ.


MULTIPLE MOVEMENTS

To recap our review of the history of Muslim movements to Christ, in Islam's first 13 centuries we found a handful of coerced conversions to the Christian religion, but only *one* voluntary movement of at least 1,000 Muslim conversions to faith in Christ: the Sadrach Movement in late 19th and early 20th century Indonesia. This was followed by the fear-induced influx of two million Indonesians into Christian churches in 1965. Then, in

the final two decades of the 20th century, there was a surge of eight additional movements. These occurred in Iran (2), Algeria, Bangladesh (2), and Central Asia (3). By the close of the 20th century, 1,368 years after the death of Muhammad, there had been only ten movements of Muslim communities to faith in Jesus Christ.

It is this long history of frustration, a history that has seen millions of Christians absorbed into the Muslim world, that makes the current events all the more striking.

In the first 12 years of the 21st century an additional 64 movements of Muslims to Christ have appeared. These 21st-century movements are not isolated to one or two corners of the world. They are taking place across the Muslim world: in sub-Saharan Africa, in the Persian world, in the Arab world, in Turkestan, in South Asia and in Southeast Asia. Something is happening, something historic, something unprecedented.

A wind is blowing through the House of Islam. 

¹ Schmidlin, Joseph 1933 *Catholic Mission History*. Techny, IL: Mission Press, SVD, 584.

² Ibid.

³ Dent, Don "Sadrach: The Apostle of Java." 2-3. Unpublished paper cited 28 November 2012.

⁴ Dent "Sadrach." 27. Citing Sumartana, Th. 1993 *Missions at the Crossroads: Indigenous Churches, European Missionaries, Islamic Associations and the Socio-Religious Change in Java 1812-1936*. Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 89-92.

⁵ Dent "Sadrach." 26. Citing Partonadi, Sutarnan S. 1988 *Sadrach's Community and Its Contextual Roots: A Nineteenth Century Javanese Expression of Christianity*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 129.

⁶ Schmidlin *Catholic Mission History*. 591.

⁷ Latourette, K.S. 1947 *Expansion, Vol. VI*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 17. Citing Philippe, Antony 1931 *Missions des Peres Blancs en Tunisie, Algerie, Kabylie, Sahara*. Paris: Dillen & Cie, 143, 145, 146.

⁸ Latourette *Expansion, Vol. VI*, 19.

⁹ "Indonesian Killings of 1965-1966." Cited 28 November 2012. Available on the Internet at: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indonesian_killings_of_1965-1966.

¹⁰ Willis, Avery T. 1977 *Indonesian Revival: Why Two Million Muslims Chose Christ*. Pasadena: William Carey Library.

¹¹ Bouzid, Ahmed 2012 "Algerian Crisis, No End in Sight." Cited 2 Dec. 2012. Available on the internet at: www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/algbouz.htm.

¹² Bengalis' intellectual legacy took a severe blow when the invading Pakistani military summarily executed thousands of academics, social and political leaders at the end of the war. Nonetheless, Bengalis proudly count three Nobel laureates from among their ranks: Rabindranath Tagore (1913), Amartya Sen (1998) and Muhammad Yunus (2006).