

The Muslim World

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A CLOUD OF DARKNESS OVER THE MUSLIM WORLD

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Sometimes the truth hurts. But at the same time it purifies. Having read and pondered a couple of comments in recent newsletters from Islamic areas, we feel the need to tackle a rather problematic subject. From two different directions came pleas for our prayers (yours and ours) regarding the spread of Islam around the world. Missionaries working in Islamic countries feel a kind of anguish when they see Islam being presented back home, as a wholesome, appealing, and reasonable faith. And that is how it may easily appear, when flourishing in a Christian setting, here in America or in Western Europe. But that is not how they are finding it as they struggle against threats and outright persecution in Islamic countries that have known no other religion for centuries. Countries in which they have chosen to live and work. They ask for our prayers, not just for themselves and their work, but for our own immunity or safety against this spreading religion within the Western world. Islam is rapidly gaining recognition as one of America's "faiths."

A seminary graduate writing from central Africa talks about the challenge he faces. There is a concerted drive originating in Iran, to win Africa to Islam. Hundreds of mosques are being built with Iranian money. They are visible everywhere. And financial inducements are also offered to those who convert. With 80% unemployment, who can resist such an offer? There is another attraction. Polygamy is not frowned on; rather that position is promoted and sounds so much more reasonable than the church's ethical teachings on marriage. What a challenge indeed!

Another missionary carefully, but with an intensity of feeling, wrote about how desperate is the darkness that they battle on a daily basis. He hopes that someone is making that part of Islam known. We will do our best.

We began to re-read Judith Miller's fascinating book "**God Has Ninety-Nine Names: Reporting from a Militant Middle East**," after being reminded of it when we discovered an entire section of the **San Jose Mercury News** (January 21, 2001), in which she was a prominent contributor, along with Stephen Engelberg. The newspaper reporting was devoted to the subject "**Bin Laden's Global war.**" Miller and Engelberg belong to that rare kind of investigative reporters who have a serious agenda in mind in all that they are writing. They are well-informed observers and we do well to listen to what they have to say. Both her book and these articles stressed the continuing militancy of the Islamic world. The location of this latest piece of reporting was in the *Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan*. How does she dare? Considering the anecdotes that are sprinkled throughout her book, we ought not to be surprised.

Judith Miller's current piece of reporting was about Afghanistan and how it has become the location for the training of terrorists. Here is the profile of someone she interviewed: "Muhammad Khaled Mihrban, a polite, soft-spoken 26 year-old Pakistani, thinks he has already killed at least 100 people. Maybe more, he isn't really sure. "My goal was not to kill," he said, "But I had a line to follow, an Islamic ideal. I knew that Muslims needed their own country, a real Islamic country." Having decided to "consecrate my life to Jihad" while studying Islamic law at Punjab University in Lahore, Pakistan, he joined a militant group that was fighting India in the disputed province of Kashmir. His training took place in Afghanistan.

Judith Miller goes on to talk about the Saudi who has been financing these training camps and whose name is associated with a variety of bombings and crimes, the latest being the attack on the **USS Cole** in Aden Harbor, in Yemen. Evidently another one of our fleet named "**The Sullivans**" had been targeted the year before, but that attempt failed. Another article in the paper was titled "**Jihad**" and highlighted the vulnerability of Western targets.

You just have to open Judith Miller's 600- page book, **The Ninety-Nine Names of God**, with its full index, and 60 pages of informative notes, to realize that she is a fearless woman who has led an adventurous life. She could fill the pages of her book with true stories taken from her work in the following countries: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Algeria, Libya, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and Iran. The country of Iraq is excluded from this list because Ms. Miller was informed that she was permanently not welcome in that country *"I have not been permitted to go there since 1986. Shortly before the Gulf war, I co-authored a book about Saddam Hussein and his monstrous regime. I could hardly expect a visa in return. Not long ago, an Iraqi diplomat told me that I was on a very short list of writers who are considered the regime's 'eternal enemies'."*

So you could read this book according to country preference. In 1983 she went to Cairo as the bureau chief of **The New York Times**, but her actual reporting life began in that region back in 1971. She has been covering the Middle East for thirty years. She is a skillful writer and it makes for easy reading. Each section is filled with anecdotes and interviews of colorful personages.

In Sudan, and in disguise, she witnesses a prison execution. She is the only woman among a thousand Islamists who are waiting in a crowded prison courtyard to witness the hanging of an old man whose crime, supposedly, was that he had betrayed his religion. His real crime was that he was a reformer who had taken a stand against the current leader of Sudan and hence incurred his wrath.

In Syria, she interviews various people in the city of Hama after they had lived through a quite unbelievable massacre and destruction of a huge section of their city. This massacre was carried out on the express orders of the former president Hafiz Assad. Its purpose was to quell a revolt being triggered by the Muslim Brotherhood. The loss of life was estimated between 10,000 to 30,000. One entire quarters of the city was leveled beyond recognition. It made Assad's name and the name of Syria equal to "state terror". This occurred in February of 1982. It was a drastic object lesson to the rest of the country who could expect the same ruthless quelling of any sign of rebellion. A famous Syrian writer wrote a book titled **"Sorrow unto Death,"** which hinted that in Syria it had come to pass that you might be thrown into jail for your very "thoughts" which were visible from merely looking in your eyes! A subtle reign of terror took hold of that country. At the same time a deadly kind of peace covered the country also. There were to be no more uprisings during Assad's long tenure.

Reading the section on Israel, particularly Judith Miller's visit to the Hamas headquarters in Gaza, would make you understand even better what is going on in sad Gaza to this very day. While Syria ruthlessly exterminated any sign of Islamic militants in order to keep Assad in power, Israel allowed Hamas to operate openly in the Occupied Territories as a means to weaken the PLO and its leader, Yasser Arafat. The Israelis miscalculated. Hamas mounted a ferocious opposition to any peace settlement. What really gives one pause to think is that a man, who is one of the foremost leaders of this Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) was for quite a number of years a seemingly ordinary citizen of the USA. He was not alone. Many outwardly devout Muslims in America had appeared to be family men going about the normal routine of life. Much later, it was discovered that they were secretly quite active in this or that terrorist organization. They had used America as a place to raise funds for their deadly work.

In her notes, the author gives you the full details. She is not indulging in fanciful accusations but covers all that she says with documented evidence.

But is really proper for us to dwell on these matters? Are we not living in a pluralistic society where people from all religions and cultures must co-exist in peace and harmony? The entire Western world has become the home of many races and cultures. We know that non-Christian faiths are no longer over there, in far away Asia and Africa. While we do recognize all that, we must face this real world as it really exists at the beginning of the twenty-first century. And equally, we must beware of some Western voices that seek to downplay the challenge of global Islam by advancing the theory that the West has always been in need of a declared enemy. And now that the Soviet Union has fallen, we have substituted Islam as the great foe.

You might ask, but why zero in on Islam?

Consider the following facts:

Islam is not simply a religion, in the accepted sense of the word “religion.” Both in practice, (which historically came first) and in theory, Islam has been and still is an amalgam of “**Religion, Politics, and Culture.**”

Of all the major world religions, **Islam is unique in that it spread primarily through conquests.** When Islamic history is taught in Muslim lands, the Arabic word for the spread of this faith is “*fatah*,” (i.e. *conquest*), the plural is “*futuhat*.” Muslims make no apologies for the fact that, in the sixth and seventh centuries, they **conquered** such lands as *Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, North Africa, and Andalusia* (the Arabic name of Spain.)

Islam is the only major world religion that arose after Christ. Muhammad was born in 570 AD, he taught that God began speaking to him in 610, and continued to do so, until his death in 632. That speech was inscripturated in the Quran. Thus, Islam is unique in claiming to possess God’s final and complete revelation. However, the Messiah who is mentioned in the Quran is apocryphal; he never did exist in real history.

After centuries of domination by the West, Islamic countries gained their independence in the middle of the twentieth-century. Most of them experimented with Nationalism and Socialism. After the failure of these experiments, some Islamic leaders are clamoring for a return to the days of the old Arab/Islamic Empires. This translates into Islamic Fundamentalism or Radicalism.

In this world of globalization, we cannot avoid contact with this Islamic world, and being impacted by the dreams and actions of radical leaders clamoring for the re-emergence of the glorious past. Violent (terrorist) activities are sanctioned when carried on to reach that goal.

For the first time in 1400 years, millions of Muslims are living in Western countries. This new situation places them within democratic and open societies. Over here, they enjoy untold privileges that are granted to minorities, and they take full advantage of the opportunities of our freedoms. They painted rosy pictures of their Islamic roots, and engage in mission activities to win converts for their faith.

On the other hand, the Islamic lands remain thoroughly closed societies, where no genuine freedom of religion is granted to minorities. And wherever possible, Muslims are working hard towards dominating entire countries. This is what is going on in Nigeria.

It is such facts, that prompt us to speak about “Darkness and Militancy” in contemporary Islam. Of course, it does not follow that we have lost our zeal for the conversion of individual Muslims, whether they live among us, or in far away lands. Desiring the conversion of others should not imply refusing to see them in their true contexts, and to understand them, not merely as individuals, but as members of a faith with a total worldview that has been at work for fourteen centuries.

And so, with **the Bible in one hand** (as lived and expounded by a cloud of witnesses, who preceded us during the last 2000 years,) and reading books such as “**God Has Ninety Nine Names,**” we may develop a realistic vision of our world. This would allow us to properly fulfill the mandate of the **Great Commission.**

