

Christian Missions to Islam & Western Culture

By Bassam M. Madany

As we approach the end of this century, we need a new vision of world missions based on a realistic description of our times. We are living in a new era of world history. In the early days of modern missions, between 1800 and 1950, the West was still more or less Christian, and its culture reflected the impact of the Christian tradition. "The mission fields" in Asia and Africa formed an integral part of the vast colonial empires of Britain, France, The Netherlands and Portugal. Not so today. Now the West is secularized, and those European empires are a thing of the past. Christian missions overseas can never be abstracted from what is going on in the homelands. Hence a need for the "support" group to be identifiably Christian and for the theology of missions to be firmly grounded in the basic tenets of the faith.

Furthermore, the post-world-war II period has ushered in a new Diaspora, which has brought millions of people from the former colonies to live in Western European countries. Due to the change in immigration laws in both Canada and the United States, the North American population is now more diversified than ever before. Such a mega shift in the global situation requires a thorough examination of our mission strategies.

For example, with regard to Christian missions among Muslims, it is tempting to dwell almost exclusively on the difficulties we encounter as we present them the claims of the Gospel. We tend to forget that whether working with Muslims or among the followers of other faiths, we are never on our own, but simply the messengers of Him who presides over the spread of His Good News and the building up of His universal church. We should never forget that the Bible teaches a theocentric view of missions. Our concern should be the faithful proclamation of the Word of God in the language of the people and in harmony with the historic Christian faith as we find it summarized and expounded in the ecumenical Creeds and the Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation.

Unfortunately, rather than basing their approaches on this solid heritage of the past, some missionary strategists have advocated the adoption of new policies which are supposed to make missions easier or more successful. Great stress has been placed on contextualizing the gospel in such a way that it becomes possible for a Muslim to convert to Christianity. Certain advocates of contextualization have espoused radical theories, which conflict with the teachings of the Bible. Their inspiration did not originate from within the Christian tradition but from their fascination with certain secular disciplines. Such approaches have alarmed those missiologists who have remained committed to the Biblical principles of missions. For example, in the fall 1993 issue of Trinity World Forum, Professor Edward Rommen drew attention to the divorce that has taken place between theology and the new discipline of missiology. In an article entitled the De-Theologizing of Missiology, Rommen wrote: "the elevation of pragmatism to the status of a missiological norm has led to an uncritical acceptance of applied social science." It is a very gratifying sign to notice that this professor of Missiology in the School of World Mission at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL is calling for "the re-theologization of North American Missiology."

Setting aside all theories, which advocate a radical discontinuity with the work of the pioneer missionaries, let us zero in on the Muslim world. Our approach should be marked by a macro or total vision of the real nature of Islam as a religion and a culture which encompass all areas of life. Even though today the majority of its adherents live in the impoverished third world, yet most Muslims are historically conscious and quite aware of their great past. Their faith in the rightness of their religion is unshaken. God has entrusted them with His final message to all mankind. They have taken it to distant lands and managed to found great empires. They consider their present predicament as transitory, an unfortunate phase which will soon give way to a revival of past glories.

In order to understand what is going on inside the Muslim mind, let us put ourselves in the shoes of a Muslim. Why should he convert to Christianity? He has nothing to gain. If he lives within a Muslim country, his conversion will inevitably lead to death. If he has immigrated to a Western land, he sees no specific benefits that would accrue from his adoption of the Christian faith. According to his worldview which he has not left back home, there is no such thing as a separation between religion and politics, or "church" and state. His culture is deeply religious and his religion has produced an assertive and self-consciously Islamic culture. Based on his experiences, he identifies Christianity with Western culture. He regards it as decadent and hurtling towards disintegration. His faith and fervor are rekindled; in order to survive he must go on the offensive and engage in da'wah, i.e., in missions. He calls Westerners to convert to Islam. This involves both a religious and political change of mind on the part of the converts. I will enlarge on this point by referring to the work and research of two prominent Christian professors, one from the United States and the other from Germany. They both refer to Muslims living in the West, their struggle to survive within a secular culture and their attempt to engage in missions within the host countries.

In the International Bulletin of Missionary Research (October 1993), the noted West African scholar, Lamin Sanneh wrote a thought-provoking article, Can a House Divided Stand? Reflections on Christian-Muslim Encounter in the West. Dr. Sanneh, a convert from Islam and a Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale Divinity School, commented in this article on the inevitable confrontation between the "pluralistic tradition of the West" and the demands of Muslim immigrants for implementing practices which stem from their theocratic view of the state. Dr. Sanneh wrote:

"It would be wrong for Westerners to think that they can preserve religious toleration by conceding the extreme Muslim case for territoriality*, because a house constructed on that foundation would have no room in it for the very pluralistic principle that has made the West hospitable to Muslims and others in the first place. The fact that these religious groups have grown and thrived in the West at a time when religious minorities established in Islamic societies have continued to suffer civil disabilities shows how uneven are the two traditions.

We risk perpetuating such a split-level structure in our relationship, including the risk to the survival of our great public institutions, unless we take moral responsibility for the heritage of the West, including tolerance for religion. Such tolerance for religion cannot

rest on the arguments of public utility but rather on the firm religious rock of the absolute moral law with which our Creator and Judge has fashioned us.

In view of growing signs of Muslim pressure for religious territoriality, often expressed in terms of shari'ah and political power, and in view of the utter inadequacy of the sterile utilitarian ethic of the secular national state, Westerners must recover responsibility for the Gospel as public truth and must reconstitute by it the original foundations on which the modern West has built its ample view of the world."

Coming from a tradition which considers religion as involving all areas of life, and having witnessed the moral collapse of Western societies, it is quite understandable that Muslims want to offer their faith as a remedy to the deplorable spiritual conditions within the host countries. Their boldness stems from their deep conviction that the West is rapidly entering the twilight of its civilization. Only Islam has the answer. As the theme of a Muslim convention which was held in Chicago in December, 1994, put it: Al-Islam li sa'adat al-bashariyya: Islam is for the happiness of mankind!

From across the Atlantic, a noted German theologian contributed an article in which he touched on the subject of Muslim minorities in the West and their zeal to engage in missionary activities. It appeared in the December 1994, issue of FIRST THINGS under the title: Christianity and the West: Ambiguous Past, Uncertain Future. Wolfhart Pannenberg who is Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Munich, wrote:

"If Western freedom in fact means no more than individual license, others do well to try to defend their communities and spiritual values against the encroachment of Western secularism. Beyond the defensive mode, Islamic missions in Western societies express a strong sense of missionary vocation aimed at liberating Western nations from the materialism and immorality associated with secularism. These Muslims view Christians as having failed in the task of the moral transformation and reconstruction of society. Such criticism is a serious challenge to traditional Christianity and to Western culture. A culture devoid of spiritual and moral values is not equipped to meet that challenge, and is bound for disintegration and decay."

These are very serious words and all Christians should ponder this analysis of a leading European theologian. We are not living in the days of William Carey or Samuel Zwemer. Their work was supported by a home front, which exhibited a Christian culture. Before World War II, the average Muslim in the Middle East thought of Americans as being thoroughly honest. He could trust them more than his fellow Muslims. Why? Because all the Americans he knew were either missionaries or educators who exhibited in their life the higher ethic of an authentic Christian faith! Early United States diplomats in the area were often children or grandchildren of the pioneer missionaries.

As we have noticed above, even after living a long time outside the household of Islam, Muslims still carry with them their own habits of thought. They cannot comprehend the stark reality that Western culture has jettisoned its Christian heritage. They confuse Christianity with Western

culture and regard it as exhibiting an inferior ethic. Thus, it is both their responsibility and opportunity to engage in missions among Westerners. It is also a very telling matter that such activity is not rooted in the idea of an organized and official "sending" by some agency. The Islamic view of missions is rooted in the concept of da'wah, i.e., calling people to Islamize. It is a spontaneous activity in which he engages as a Muslim, a person who has submitted to God's revelation in the Quran. His solemn duty is to share his faith by all means, peaceful at times, or through holy war --- jihad, at other times.

When we take these facts into account, we must conclude that it is the responsibility of all Christians to fight tenaciously the steady advance of secularism into the various spheres of their life and communities. The credibility of Christian missionary endeavors, at home within a pluralistic society, and overseas, depends on their distancing themselves from the norms and the lifestyles of the secular society, which surrounds them. They have so much to learn from the history of the first three hundred years of the Christian era when to be a Christian meant both a separation from the corrupt heathen environment and engaging that milieu with the bold Christian word-and-life testimony: Jesus is Lord.

Further pertinent quotes from Professor Pannenberg's article:

"And so, while we can envision a great resurgence of Christianity and Western culture in the third millennium, such a future is by no means certain. Western societies may ignore their need to recover the strength of their religious roots. They may continue headlong on a secularist course, unaware of its certain and dismal outcome. The end of Western culture, however, would not spell the end of Christianity. The Christian religion is not dependent upon the culture to which it gave birth. As it has in the past, the Church can survive and flourish in the context of other cultures.

The further secularism advances the more urgent it is that Christian faith and Christian life be seen in sharp contrast to the secularist culture. It is quite possible that in the early part of the third millennium only the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, on the one hand, and evangelical Protestantism, on the other, will survive as ecclesial communities. What used to be called the Protestant mainline churches are in acute danger of disappearing. I expect they will disappear if they continue neither to resist the spirit of a progressively secularist culture nor to try to transform it.

There is no alternative to the Church. The further the secularist dominance of the general culture advances, the more clearly the Church, in clear distinction from that culture, emerges as the reference point of Christian existence."

Taking into account the insights of Lamin Sanneh and Wolfhart Pannenberg, we conclude that at this juncture in world history, global missions should be the concern of every member of the church. We must factor into our strategies the revival of Islam and of the other major world religions. The old distinction between domestic and foreign missions is outdated. All members of the Body of Christ must spontaneously engage in the spread of the message. The Good News of Jesus Christ was never meant to be kept for one group or nation or continent. None of us in the

West should have the luxury of sitting back to "enjoy" the fruits of the faith while supporting missions merely in a purely financial way. The beautiful and ever relevant statement of Paul in Romans 10: 13-15 provides us with an agenda for a total involvement in missions.

For "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!" (NKJ)

It should be quite obvious that Christian missionaries overseas do not and should not operate on their own. We send them to work in lands where we cannot be physically present. At the home base we must be like the church in Antioch which sent Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13). While busy with missions within our own communities and country, we should ardently support those whom we have sent to distant lands, through our prayers and gifts as well as by a consistently Christian lifestyle. Let us not leave it just to the Muslims to be engaged in calling. We have a great message to share with all mankind: the Good News of Jesus Christ. Should we Western Christians shirk our missionary responsibility, Christians from Africa, Asia and Latin America will accomplish what God had ordained from all eternity, "That in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth --- in Him." (Ephesians 1:10 NKJ)

*Territoriality, as used in the article of Lamin Sanneh, refers to the history and practice of Islam in enforcing the Muslim way of life within the boundaries of the conquered lands. According to this faith, the world is divided into two camps: Daru'l Islam and Daru'l Harb, (the household of Islam and the household of war.) Within Islamic countries, the Shari'a Law is supreme. Until very recently, the vast majority of Muslims lived almost exclusively within Daru'l Islam. Now that many have migrated to the West, a different form of conquest, it is very difficult for them to fully practice their faith. Radical Muslims, enjoying the freedoms of the pluralistic societies of the West, would like to create conditions which will allow them to live as if they were still residing within an Islamic territory. But such a quest can only be realized where the Shari'a Law is enforced by a theocratic state!