

Conference on Christian Witness to Muslims

CHRISTIAN WITNESS TO MUSLIMS IN THE ARAB WORLD

Christian witness does not take place in a vacuum. Therefore, when we speak about Christian Witness to Muslims in the Arab World we must have some knowledge about the various lands and peoples who make up the Arab world.

There are about fifteen to sixteen Arab countries which stretch from the Arabian Gulf (also called Persian Gulf) in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west. Over 110 million people belong to the Muslim faith. Even though they may live under various ethnic backgrounds, yet what unites the Arabs into one big family is the religion of Islam. This is the most dominant factor in the life of all the Arabs even though there are some minorities, here and there, which have not embraced the Muslim faith.

In order that we may get a concrete idea about the milieu where Christian witness is taking place in the Arab world of today, it is necessary, first of all, to give a rapid description of the situation of the various Arab countries, their problems and their preoccupations.

We begin with the Maghreb, i.e., the western Arab world. The entire Maghreb is situated in North Africa and comprises the lands of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. These three countries were part of the French colonial empire during the 19th and 20th centuries. In the case of Morocco, the period of colonialism was rather short; but in Algeria it lasted over 100 years and did not end without one million Algerian men dying to achieve independence.

Post-independence days did not usher in utopia. Some great problems face all the nations of North Africa. Perhaps the Moroccans are in the worst condition. There is political instability which saw the attempted assassination of King Hassan in July 1971 during his birthday party! This past August, on his way back from France, King Hassan escaped the same fate when his own air force turned against him and attempted to shoot down his private jet! Of the 15 million Moroccans, 60% are under 25 years of age, and about 20% of the work force is jobless. No one can predict how long the monarchy will last in Morocco and what type of government will succeed it; it is very possible a military dictatorship leaning to the left will take over.

Algeria is ruled by an army officer, Houary Boumedienne, a hero from the days of the war of independence. There is relative peace in this land of 14 million people. Algeria is blessed by huge quantities of oil and natural gas. It is still trying to do its utmost to change its orientation from a land dominated by French culture to an Arab one. This is not an easy job to tackle since most of the intellectuals feel more at home in French than in Arabic.

Of the three North African lands, Tunisia has experienced the least amount of struggle and upheavals. Habib Bourguiba, the father of modern Tunisia, pursues a moderate policy and is quite open to the Western world. His country does not have as many natural resources as his

neighbors to the west, and therefore Tunisia relies more heavily on a service oriented economy where tourism is extremely important as a source of income.

One third of the Arabs live in the Maghreb, the other two thirds live in the Mashreq, i.e., the eastern Arab world. Due to the fact that the British designated that part of the world as the Middle East (during the II World War), we have come to call it by that name, or even abbreviated it to Mideast. And what a turbulent part of the world it is!

Just for the sake of refreshing your memories, let me enumerate the Arab countries of the Middle East from west to east: Libya, Egypt, Sudan (all in Africa); Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Northern Yemen, Southern Yemen (Aden or PDRY), Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and the other smaller states or sheikdoms of the Gulf. Most of these countries have known violent changes of government (or coups d'états) since the end of the II World War. They are also involved, directly or indirectly, with the Arab-Israeli confrontation. There is hardly a day that passes without some news about the conflict between Arabs and Israelis, be it in the Middle East or in Europe.

Again, let me give you a rapid description of the situation in the Middle Eastern Arab countries. First, let us glance at Libya. Colonel Gadafi was in his early thirties when he overthrew the monarchy of his native land on September 1, 1970. He is the most radical leader of the Arab world, but his radicalism is on the right. He is a devout Muslim who seeks to lead his country back to the pure teachings of the Quran.

Egypt is the most populous and most important Arab nation. Over thirty six million people live in the valley of the Nile, and they are growing at the rate of 1 million a year. After the death of President Nasser, the Vice President assumed his place. A fellow officer of the original group which overthrew King Farouk, Anwar Sadat tends to be more right of center than Nasser. His latest act of sending the Russians home won him a considerable degree of admiration among the people of Egypt. His most urgent task is the solution of the problems which arose out of the disastrous June 1967 war.

Sudan experienced events during the summer of 1971 which could not have been thought of except by those who produce the TV program *Mission Impossible*. A communist coup brings a complete change in government, to be reversed four days later with the return of President Numeiri to power with the help of Messrs. Sadat and Gadafi. All those implicated in the short-lived communist takeover of the government were executed amidst the loudest protest of Russia and its sympathizers throughout the world.

Leaving Africa and coming to western Asia, we come closer to the heart of the struggle which dominates the life of the Arabs today. Jordan suffered more than any other Arab land as a result of the June 1967 war. It lost all its land west of the Jordan River and received at the same time a new influx of refugees. Furthermore, the rise of guerilla fighting among the Palestinians brought a strong reprisal from Israel which resulted in the destruction of the town of Karameh, in the Jordan valley across from Jericho, and the destruction of the irrigation system (built through American aid) known as the Ghor system. Two years ago, and immediately after the high jacking of the four airplanes and their eventual destruction in Jordan and in Cairo, King Hussein

brought an end to commando work from Jordan after a bitter struggle and the death of hundreds, even thousand of people both in Amman and in the other towns and refugee camps. Since that time, Jordan enjoys a relative peace under the shadow of an alert and loyal Bedouin army.

Lebanon is a peculiar Arab country with 50% of its people belonging to the Muslim faith and the other half to various Christian communions, predominantly of the Roman Catholic faith. This means that there is a very delicate balance to a degree which cannot be imagined by outsiders. For example, the president of the Republic must be a Maronite (RC church in Lebanon), the Prime Minister must belong to the Sunni Muslim group, while the Speaker of the House to the other Muslim group known as Shi'a. Usually the minister of defense is Druze and the Foreign Minister Greek Orthodox. The house of Parliament has 99 seats for 99 deputies and one must be Protestant! A big problem arose last April, which I was in Beirut, and not on account of my presence! The Protestant seat was being contested by two aspirants: one was a Protestant of Arab background, in fact a clergyman and secretary of the Bible Society in Lebanon and the other was an Armenian MD who was also a Protestant! The Armenians already have 5 or 6 seats allocated to them, and the argument of the pro-Arab Lebanese candidate was that the other candidate, the MD, was Armenian first and Protestant second! What a complicated life they lead! Yes, they do, but this is the kind of world we have to work with when we think of the only truly free country within the entire Arab world!

Syria is dominated by a leftist socialist party with strong ties to the Soviet Union. As a result of the June 1967 war, it lost one of its provinces to Israel, the territory usually known as the Golan Heights. Iraq, just east of Syria is dominated by another type of a leftist socialistic regime with very strong ties to the USSR. The Arabian Peninsula contains the rest of the Arab states and is the cradle of Islam. Its importance to the rest of the world is its natural resources, viz., oil. Saudi Arabia dominates the area and still is governed by a monarchical system which is slowly modernizing. To the south lies old Yemen, which suffered from years of civil war between the royalists and the republicans and is now beginning to recover. To the south of this Yemen lies the old territory of Aden which is known today as the Democratic People's Republic of Yemen: the only truly communistic state within the Arab world. It has the distinction of being aided both by Russia and China!

Finally, the Gulf area is one of the most exciting areas of the entire Arab world with Kuwait in the lead. Oil has brought other Arabs and other nationalities to those previously dormant parts of the Arab lands. The per capita income in Kuwait, e.g., is the highest in the world! The departure of the British from the Gulf area has brought some tensions because of the rivalry between Iran and Iraq, in particular. However, besides the occupation by Iran of some tiny islands in the Gulf, no real warfare has taken place there. The only one that rages is often verbal and faces the outsider with the necessity of choosing sides, i.e., by saying or writing: Persian Gulf or Arabian Gulf!

I trust that you have not become weary of this brief survey of the status quo in the Arab world today. I must repeat, we do not engage in witnessing in a vacuum, but in a real world with all of its problems and in their varied dimensions. This is why it is always necessary to have some kind of knowledge and awareness of the countries and the peoples of an area which we seek to bring to Christ.

Having said that, I must immediately add that my main interest is of course the Christian witness in these areas as it is taking place today. Therefore, we must devote the rest of our time to the discussion of what is being done or not being done in the lands between the Arabian Gulf and the Atlantic Ocean. Without any further qualifications, I would like to say that today, and thanks to the gift of radio, there is more witnessing going on in the Arab world to the saving message of Jesus Christ than at any previous period in history. This is not to say that the doors are wide open, nor does it imply that what was done in the past did not have any real significance. Conventional doors, such as existed during the colonial era, are not open to missions today, and if they are, on a very limited basis. The work that was done by the pioneers in the Arab world is of fundamental importance, and nothing could be one today without the basis and the foundation that were laid in the past. But, realistically speaking and with all praise given to God, never before the advent of radio missions did so many Muslim Arabs hear the Gospel so often and right in the privacy of their own homes or places of work! Here I have to revert to some type of regionalism, in order to make the picture clear to you.

The situation in North Africa is unique in that there is no presence of a national Christian church. The early church disappeared completely after the Arab conquest of the area which took place in the 7th century A.D. During the French occupation, several churches got established in North Africa, but they were foreign churches, and most of them were and still are Roman Catholic. Neither Morocco, nor Algeria nor Tunisia recognizes the legality of Christianity for the nationals. There are Christian believers in these countries, some thanks to the witness and work of conventionally missionaries, others to the Christian witness by radio and literature. But here is no visible Christian church in those lands. Often, believers are persecuted; literature returned to us stamped unknown or refused, while the addressee was neither unknown nor unwilling to receive what he had previously asked for. To embrace the Christian faith is not simply to relinquish Islam, it is to become a traitor, yes a traitor to a fatherland whose freedom and independence cost the life of thousands, even millions of martyrs! Therefore, while we rejoice in that the Gospel is being heard daily in all those North African countries, we must equally be fervent in our prayers interceding to God on behalf of our brothers and sisters in North Africa who yearn to be more than secret believers!

Of course, the situation in the Maghreb (NA) is duplicated in certain Middle Eastern countries. For example, there is no national church presence in Libya, Saudi Arabia and the two sections of Yemen. In the pre-Islamic era, the church did exist in the just named lands. While the visible church is not there, there are some believers and many sincere inquirers in these forbidden lands. Lately, I have been hearing from several young people in Mecca! Imagine, the city which is the holiest to the Muslims, the forbidden to the non-Muslims, this city which has never allowed a messenger of the Gospel to enter its walls since it was occupied by the Arabian Prophet, Mecca today hears the Gospel, or more concretely, young Muslims in Mecca hear, write and write again and wait eagerly for a booklet entitled: "Al Hurriyya Fil Massih", i.e., "Freedom in Christ". This is a commentary on Galatians.

Christian Witness to Muslims in the remaining part of the Arab world, such as in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait and Bahrain as well as the smaller principalities of the Gulf area, is carried on either by the missions which are still allowed to stay or through radio and

literature. There is very little direct Christian witnessing done by national Christians among their fellow-citizens of the Muslim faith.

This is a very sad fact. Why is it so? How can Christians live in those countries for centuries and never witness to their Muslim neighbors. To begin with, there is some witness which does go on, and this is through the different life styles which mark the Christian communities of the Middle East. Of course, this difference is disappearing slowly, sometimes rapidly, due to the impact of western secularism. But a witness which is simply nonverbalized is not a true Christian witness. Life in harmony with Christian faith is of utmost importance, for it authenticates the reality of the faith of the individual, the family or the community. But basically, Christian witnessing, according to the Bible, is verbalized. Just think of Romans 10 and the tremendous missionary implications of that chapter. "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved . . . with the mouth confession is made unto salvation . . . how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? Faith cometh by hearing . . . 9, 10, 14, 17."

While I do not condone at all the lack of verbalized witnessing by the Christian communities of the Middle East, I can offer an explanation for this lack of Christian concern and consistency. The invading Arabs who brought Islam to the Middle East faced the subjugated nations with the choice of Islamizing and therefore integration into the Muslim *Umma* (community), or remaining on their old faith. The Syrians, Egyptians and others who remained Christian were not allowed to witness to their conquerors. To witness to Muslims would be equivalent to proselytism, and this is unlawful within the lands dominated by Islam. For a Muslim to renounce his faith is to court death, for Islam has always insisted on a one-way spiritual traffic: from paganism or Judaism or Christianity to Islam, and not vice versa.

The Christian communities in the Middle East developed a defeatist mentality, and through long centuries of persecution and misunderstanding, they have reached an agreement within themselves not to share their faith with their Muslim neighbors. If they did manage to have spiritual encounters with Muslims, they were more in the field of polemics than missions and evangelism. On the average, no Christian from the Middle East feels that the Muslim is a potential convert to Christianity. He has mastered the art of respectful and peaceful co-existence with the Muslims of his country.

Due to the impact of 19th and 20th century colonialism and the cultural currents which have invaded the Arab world for over 170 years, it is no longer a monolithic bastion of Islam. The old order is certainly changing in every Arab country, and it is wonderful that God has given us the means to reach the Arabs of today with the total Gospel of redemption and reconciliation. This is not to imply that Islam has lost its grip on the masses; neither does it mean that the leaders of these nations are looking for something else. What makes our days different and in a sense unique in the long history of Islam (which is 1,300 years old) is the fact that the young people and some of the educated older men and women, are no longer passive and submissive to the teachings and practices of their forefathers.

For example, during my visit to the Middle East in 1969, there was a huge furor in Lebanon because of the publication of a book by a Prof. from Damascus, a Muslim by birth. The

title: “A Critique of Religious Thought”. It got its author in direct conflict with the authorities and landed him in jail for some days. Dr. El Azm criticized Islam and theism in general from a purely Marxist point of view. Such a book could never have appeared twenty years ago in any of the Arab countries. This year, while in Beirut, I noticed the name of another author who is criticizing Islam from a humanistic, secularistic point of view. He is a native of Saudi Arabia, the home of pure Islam, but he now lives in exile since he has criticized the Prophet!

It is not only these rebels in the literary world who indicate the birth of a new era in the history of Islam, but it is the thoughts and writings of the new generation which give us an indicator to the degree of alienation that many Muslims have reached vis-à-vis their religion. I picked up a book in Arabic entitled: “The Students and the Man of the Future” in which I was given a glimpse of what many a young person is thinking about today. Even though it was written by a professor of the Arab University of Beirut, yet the book contains several essays contributed by young men and women who study at the Arab University of Beirut. They seem to be looking for the coming of a future or a tomorrow in which a new man will be born, a Savior. However, the Savior who is being expected by these students is 100% human and the product of the Arab nation. It is interesting though that many of them did not look backwards to the sources of their religion, but forward to the hoped-for appearance of the Savior!

From the reading of letters to the editor, and most of them contributed by students of high school or university level, I often get the impression that Marxism and atheistic existentialism have captivated the minds of thousands, perhaps millions of youth in the Arab world. Even though one can understand why Palestinians act in ways that shock the entire world (I hasten to add that they in no way means condoning what they have done from the day they began high jacking airplanes to the massacre at Munich), yet a full explanation of their desperate acts can never be divorced from the revolutionary world-and-life view which has been adopted by many of their leaders.

And so, to go beyond the daily happenings within the Arab countries, which happenings often dominate our daily diet of news from various sources, we must look in an objective way at the scene and reach certain conclusions. These conclusions, I would like to share with you in order that our consideration of our theme may be meaningful to all of us gathered here at Reformed Bible College.

1. The present moment in the history of Islam is unique, and it must be recognized by all Christians. This religion arose in the 7th century A.D. and for about 800 years it was on the march, conquering vast parts of the world. Furthermore, Islam was very fruitful on the cultural level, especially during the Abbasid period which had its center in Baghdad, Iraq. During the last 500 years, Islam has passed through a period of decline, especially on the cultural level. Both during the periods of ascendancy and decline, Islam was “protected” from the influences which are at work in the world today. Muslims, e.g., never had the opportunity to hear –as they do today – other points of view and world-and-life views. Today, Islam is being challenged as never before, and right in its very homes within the Arab world. Young Muslims are espousing new faiths, which ultimately make them non-Muslims in their innermost beings. The old days of isolationism are over.

2. To the Christian, this new “order” which is emerging is God-given. It must be recognized for its tremendous value in reaching the Muslims with the Gospel of the Biblical Christ.

3. To put the above mentioned reality within the missionary perspective, this demand that the Christian Church today restudies the whole matter of reaching the Muslims (and specifically the Arabs) with the Gospel. To do this intelligently, the Church in the home must educate its membership concerning the peoples whom she desires to bring to the Lord Jesus Christ. Not just the “experts”, but all the membership of the Church must be acquainted with the challenge of Islam. The Christian witness to Muslims, should not be construed as the witness of a few enthusiasts, but of the whole Christian community, the entire people of God.

4. Again, speaking specifically of the situation in the Arab world, radio, and to a lesser extent, Christian literature, are at present the most potent force for Christian witnessing. Radio is penetrating every country and every town and every village of the Arab fatherland. In a sense, wherever there is a radio, there is a potential missionary for the Gospel. At present, there are about 14,000,000 radio sets in the Arab world! As the signals become stronger from the radio stations used to reach the Arabs, and as we use more the Medium Wave Band (AM Standard Broadcasting), the potential becomes more and more the actual.

5. Follow-up is of extreme importance in the work of Christian witnessing by radio. At present, follow-up is done by means of personal correspondence, Christian literature in Arabic, and in certain cases, by means of local individuals who are part of the Christian community.

Because of the existence of a huge Arab minority in Europe, it is of utmost importance to reach some of these Arabs who contact the Christian radio missionary, through some centralized mission house located in Europe itself. In my own ministry, we are in touch with a pastor of the Reformed Church in France who labors in Paris and who is willing to let us use the facilities of the parish house to contact university students and others who want to know more about the Christian faith and who may desire to become part of the Christian community by making public profession of faith and baptism. A group of North African Arabs are in touch with us at present and are seeking some local help from the Christian church in Amsterdam, Holland! These Arabs living in the new diaspora of the 20th century present to us a wonderful opportunity to bring them to Christ and to send them back home to become the bearers of the Good News of Jesus the Messiah to their own people.

6. The local Christian communities in the Middle East must be kept in mind as we plan our missionary strategy within the Arab world. There are over 5 million Arabs who belong to the various Christian communities of the Middle East. What a wonderful thing it would be if these Christian Arabs embrace the totality of the Biblical faith!! They have to learn how important it is to deal with their fellow Muslim compatriots in a spirit of true love and understanding. The Christians of the west have a great job to perform in teaching the eastern Christians the validity, importance and urgency of the Christian witness to Islam.

7. Since the Arab world forms about one fifth of the total Muslim world, and since the latter is really indivisible, the total effort of the Christian Church within Islam must be

coordinated. This means practically, that we must have at least one center in North America where Islamics are taught from a definite Biblical and Reformed perspective.

8. The Christian community in North America must develop a more sympathetic understanding of the Arab world. Certainly that section of the Muslim world is important, not because of its vast oil reserves and not because of its strategic position between East and West. To us as Christians, the Arab world is important because it presents us with one of the greatest challenges that the Church has had in its entire history. Granted that at present, one thinks of the Arab world and immediately associates it with the Arab-Israeli confrontation, with the Munich murders and the bombs exploding in the face of people opening their mail, but this is not an objective view of the Arabs nor of their lands. Above all, we must think of them as a people who are going through some traumatic changes never experienced by their forefathers, and who need the understanding that only consistent and sensitive Christians can provide. To any one who travels in the Arab world, and even though carrying an American or some other western passport, one discovers that the Arab is still very friendly even though he is furiously angry with our official stand towards him and his nation. To seek to bring Christ to the Arabs, while at the same time showing no sympathy with their present plight, is to manifest the worst type of dichotomy in our relationship to our fellow human beings. This is not to mean that we have to approve everything they do, but it simply means that we have to show genuine concern and real willingness to listen to them and to their way of seeing things.

The very fact that we have been called by the Reformed Bible College for a Conference on Christian Witness to Muslims is a very encouraging sign. Here we are, students and friends from various backgrounds, gathering together in this missionary college to consider the challenge of Islam. May this not be a mere occasion of speaking about the challenges of the hour, but above all a gathering of concerned Christians who want to do something about the Christian Witness to Muslims. The misguided Christians of the Middle Ages were so convinced that God wanted them to reconquer the Holy Land that they shouted: Dieu le veut, God wills it. We, Christians of the 20th century guided by the Word of God and the Holy Spirit of God, know that God wills it: not a battle with earthly weapons; rather God wills the evangelization of the Muslim world. Let all who hear the call of God today respond with an obedient and joyful Amen; and let us all work hard for the spread of God's saving Word throughout the whole Muslim world.