

The Church Facing the Global Challenge of Islam

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At the dawn of the Third Millennium, we need a new vision of world missions based on the solid foundation of the Word of God coupled with 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 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, Germany, The Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. Not so today. The West is secularized, and those European empires are a thing of the past. Furthermore, Christian missions overseas should never be abstracted from what is going on in the homelands. **Hence the critical importance of reaffirming the uniqueness and finality of the Christian faith in our missionary endeavors within the global scene and for the support groups in the West to be identifiably Christian.**

The post-world-war II era has ushered in a new **Diaspora** that has brought millions of people from the former colonies to settle in Western European countries. And due to the changes in the immigration laws in 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 re-examination of our mission strategies.

At the outset it is very important to remind ourselves that whether working with Muslims or among the followers of other world faiths, we are never on our own. We are the messengers of Him who presides over the spread of His Good News and the building up of His universal church. The Bible teaches a theocentric view of missions. Our primary 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. We should keep in mind a Pauline missionary principle, "*Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the preaching of Christ.*" (Romans 10:17) The establishment of Christian churches in new fields follows a vibrant and faithful preaching of the whole council of God.

The majority of Muslims today live in the third world; most of them are historically conscious and quite aware of their great and glorious past. Their faith in the rightness of their religion is unshaken. God has entrusted them with His final message to 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 eventually give way to a revival of their past glories. They do expect the triumph of Islam all over the globe. This belief forms an integral part of their eschatology.

With regard to the evangelization of Muslims, we must realize that they come from a position of utter certainty about the rightness of their faith. They consider themselves as the custodians of God's final and complete revelation. Thus, they have hardly any reason to seriously consider the claims of a previous and inferior faith. Furthermore, an average Muslim is convinced that he has nothing to gain by converting to Christianity. 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. Western societies present him with a very confusing scene. Their mores are a threat to his family. Back in his homeland, society and the state cooperated with him in the faithful practice of his religion. Over here in the West, no such help is available. The freedom he sought in this New World of economic opportunity surrounds him at the same time with a devastating type of secularism. He does not understand 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 of living and working in the West, he identifies Christianity with Western culture. He regards it as decadent and hurtling towards disintegration. His personal faith and fervor are rekindled. In order to survive within a secular milieu, he must go on the offensive and engage in da'wah, i.e., in Islamic missions. He calls on Westerners to convert to Islam. This would involve both a religious and political change of mind on the part of his Western converts.

Thus, when we are considering Christian missions to Muslims in the twenty-first century, we must be fully aware that Muslims themselves are already engaged in a global effort to spread their faith. This is a new state of affairs, which was not at work when William Carey launched the modern missionary enterprise back in 1792. In other words, while we entertain a hope for conducting missions among Muslims, we must keep in mind that they will be tremendously engaged in a counter offensive, endeavoring to convince Europeans and Americans that Islam can bring order to the chaotic moral and spiritual conditions of Western societies.

I would like to enlarge on this point by referring to the work of two prominent Christian professors, one of them teaching in the United States and the other from Germany. They both address the subject of Muslims living in the West, their struggles to survive and their attempts to engage in missions within the host countries.

Before I quote from their works, a word of explanation is necessary concerning the traditional Islamic view of the world. According to Islam, the world is divided into two camps: *Daru'l Islam* and *Daru'l Harb*, i.e., *the household of Islam and the household of war*. Within Islamic countries, the Shari'a Law is supreme and is enforced within society through the arm of the state. Until very recently, the vast majority of Muslims lived almost exclusively within *Daru'l Islam*. Now that many have migrated to the West, it is very difficult for them to fully practice the requirements of their faith in an

environment where the state is neutral vis-a-vis religious matters. Radical Muslims, enjoying the freedoms of our Western pluralistic societies, are working hard to create conditions that would allow the followers of Islam to live as if they were still residing within an Islamic territory. However, such a quest can be realized only where the Shari'a Law is enforced by a theocratic state!

In the **International Bulletin of Missionary Research** of October 1993, the noted West African scholar, Lamin Sanneh wrote a thought provoking article entitled, **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 his 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.”

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.”

This analysis of a leading European theologian requires our serious reflection. After all, we are not living in the days of William Carey or Samuel Zwemer. Their work was supported by a home front that exhibited a Christian culture. Before World War II, the average Muslim in the Middle East, for example, 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! Quite often, early United States diplomats in the area were children or grandchildren of the pioneer missionaries.

As mentioned earlier, even after living a long time outside *Daru'l Islam*, Muslims still carry with them their own habits of thought. They do not comprehend the stark reality that Western culture has jettisoned its Christian heritage. Thus, they confuse Christianity with Western culture and regard it as exhibiting an inferior ethic. Therefore, it becomes both their responsibility and opportunity to engage in missions among Westerners. It is also a very telling matter that such activity has not always been an organized and official “**sending**” by a mission 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, as a person who has submitted to God's final revelation in the Qur'an. 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 conclude that in planning for missions to Muslims in the 21st Century, it becomes 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 the Christians’ missionary endeavors, at home within a pluralistic society, and overseas, depends on their distancing themselves from the norms and the lifestyles of the secular societies that surround them. Unless Christians lead lives that are concretely different from the lifestyles of the secularized citizenry, no Muslim will consider seriously what Christianity has to offer.** We 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 marked separation from the corrupt heathen environment and, at the same time, engaging it with the bold Christian word-and-life testimony: Jesus is Lord.

Going back to 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.”

While the opportunity to engage in missions to Muslims is, relatively speaking, easier in the Western world, we should not forget our duty to bring the gospel to them in their homelands. Of course, evangelizing Muslims within *Daru'l Islam* may be regarded as mission impossible. And yet what is impossible with man is possible with God. One of the last articles contributed by the veteran Reformed missionary to the Muslims, Samuel M. Zwemer, was entitled, *The Glory of the Impossible*.

However, we must not ignore the political, economic, cultural and most of all, the religious factors which are at work in the Muslim world today. I am greatly concerned about the near future since the general situation in the Muslim homelands is deteriorating rapidly. Those of us who live within the Western Hemisphere seem to have very little awareness of what is going on in the Arab world or in the larger Muslim world. As long as the oil supply is not interrupted, we hardly give any serious thought to that distant part of the globe.

But the rise and spread of militant Islam should cause us all to give serious attention to the Muslim world and its one billion people. Due to the failure of nationalistic ideologies to deliver on their promises to create just and prosperous societies, now radical Muslims have replaced them. Recently, I read a thought-provoking book with the intriguing title: *God Has Ninety-Nine Names: Reporting From a Militant Middle East*. The author, Judith Miller, was the Middle East correspondent for the New York Times for more than twenty years. Forecasting the future of this region, she wrote:

“John Page, the World Bank’s chief Middle East economist, believes that the global economy is developing so quickly that nations or regions that fail to make the necessary structural adjustments to compete for market share and capital are now likely to remain permanently poor. Today the Middle East attracts only 3 percent of global foreign investment; Asia gets 58 percent. The Middle East now buys almost 50 percent of all arms sold to the Third World.”

These disturbing facts clearly indicate the acute nature of the crisis that grips the Muslim nations today. Simply stated, Islam is not able to cope with the challenges of the modern world. While the radicals, now known as the Islamists, proudly and loudly proclaim: Islam is the answer, there are no visible signs that such slogans have any real power to solve the desperate conditions of millions of urban and rural Muslims.

Judith Miller's book ends with these solemn predictions:

“There is no shortage of Arab commentaries on the cause of the Muslim malaise. But as Bernard Lewis, the historian has observed: the writings fall into two groups. While some analysts ask, ‘What did we do wrong?’ others demand to know: ‘Who did this to us?’ While the first question leads to debate about how to set things right, the second leads only to ‘delusions and fantasies and conspiracy theories’ that intensify feelings of resentment, frustration, and victimization as well as ‘an endless, useless succession of bigots and tyrants and to a role in world history aptly symbolized by the suicide bomber.’ Much of the self-critical analysis written by Arabs in Arab countries, alas, falls into the second category.”

How sad it would be if after so much suffering the Arabs embraced yet another ideology [reference here is to Islamic radicalism] that seems only likely to compound the obstacles to regaining the prosperity, dynamism, tolerance, and imagination that once characterized their civilization.

Taking into account these insights and listening obediently to the teachings of the Word of God, we conclude that at this juncture in world history, global missions in general and missions to Muslims in particular, should be the concern of every church member. The old distinction between domestic and foreign missions is outdated. As noted at the beginning of my lecture, millions of Muslims and adherents of other world religions are now living in the West. Furthermore, a great number of Christians from America, Europe and the Pacific Rim are working in many parts of the Muslim world. They have ample opportunities for missionary activities not necessarily structured as in the past, but equally faithful to the mandate left for us by our victorious Lord.

Thus, as members of the Body of Christ, we must consider ourselves on active duty in the service of our Lord. None of us should have the luxury of sitting back and simply supporting missions in a purely financial way. 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, our generous gifts as well as by a consistently Christian lifestyle. We must not leave it to the Muslims among us to be busily engaged in “**calling.**” We have a great message to share with mankind. And if we, Western Christians, shirk our missionary responsibility, Christians from Africa, Asia and Latin America will accomplish what God had ordained from all eternity. The apostle John saw that glorious end and described it in these wonderful words: *“After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, And crying out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”* (Revelation 7:9, 10 NKJ)