

The Banner
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Islam on the Move
Equipping Ourselves to Meet the Spread of Islam
By Bassam Madany

Early in our century, it seemed as if Islam had lost its staying power and was about to disintegrate. Most Islamic countries were dominated by Western nations. The symbol of Islamic unity, the Caliphate (personified by the sultan of the Ottoman Empire), disappeared in 1924.

These days, though, we see a global resurgence of Islam. Its membership has climbed to one billion, and the number of independent Islamic countries is increasing. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, for example, five Islamic republics, all in Central Asia, joined the World Islamic Congress. The Congress now totals 45 countries.

Most Westerners are also acutely aware of Islamic fundamentalism, the dark side of modern Islam. This movement poses a great challenge to world order, rattling even Muslim rulers from Indonesia to Morocco. The Muslim masses are attracted to fundamentalist radicalism primarily because they are disillusioned with regimes that have not enabled them to cope with the economic challenges of their daily lives. In their hopelessness, they are easily persuaded to pursue radical means in hopes of achieving a better existence.

We're also exposed to Islam through the millions of Muslims who have migrated to Western Europe and the Americas. We now have Muslim neighbors and coworkers. In my preaching and teaching, I often meet people who have a genuine desire to know more about these newcomers and about their faith. Christians are eager to learn how best to witness among Muslims. They would like, in the words of Peter, "to" always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks [them] a reason for the hope that is in [them]" (1 Pet. 3:15b, NKJV).

To understand how we can best relate to Muslims and to Islam around the world, we must know where this religion came from and how it became the world force that it is today. But even more, we need to understand the roots of its appeal and appreciate the power of its worldview. Islam is a religion of rigorous practice and strict moral values. Muslims will expect much in our witness to them not only personally, but on a national and global level as well.

Islam's Roots

Islam started in A.D. 610, when Mohammed began to preach the unity of Allah. He proclaimed himself Allah's last messenger to mankind and summoned the citizens of Mecca to forsake idolatry.

But Mohammed's preaching won him only a few converts, among them his wife, Khadija, and his cousin Ali. It was only after he moved to Medina and engaged in political and military action that he succeeded in making Islam the religion of Arabia.

His successors, the Caliphs, united the formerly warring Arabian tribes and launched them on a conquest of the world. By the year 732, 100 years after Mohammed's death, the Islamic empire

stretched from Spain to the western parts of India. To Muslims, that phenomenal success was proof that God was on their side.

During the golden age of Islamic civilization, around the ninth century, Muslim jurist-theologians divided the world into two parts: the household of Islam and the household of war. To engage in holy war, or *jihad*, was to extend the boundaries of God's kingdom on earth. And for centuries history seemed to favor the *jihad*. Even after the fall of the Arab-Islamic Empire in the 13th century, the newly converted Turks extended the household of Islam into Asia Minor and Eastern and Central Europe. And Muslim traders brought their faith to what is now known as Indonesia.

Spreading through Conquest

Islam is so tenacious and durable partly because of its Law of Apostasy. Once people become Muslim, they have no way out. Renegades are punished by death. That's what made it possible for most of the Muslims in the world to be brought into the faith by conquest.

The military conquest was immediate; the religious conquest was a slower process. The successive Muslim regimes, centered in Damascus, Baghdad, Cordoba, and Istanbul, gave Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians the right to remain in their own religions. But the regimes saddled these groups with heavy economic and social burdens such as a poll tax and the prohibition of any public display of their faith. Ironically, in theory and in practice Islam embraces all areas of life: personal, family, social, and political. Yet non-Muslims are expected to limit the exercise of their faith to their households and to their places of worship.

Thus, over a period of centuries, many of these *dhimmis*, as non-Muslims are called in Arabic, turned to Islam. As a result, by the beginning of the second millennium, North African Christianity, which had produced such church leaders as Augustine, disappeared. Middle Eastern Christians dwindled from their original majority status to a marginalized minority position.

That is Islam's past. Why does Islam attract people today, especially in the West? One answer is that Western culture's centuries-old process of secularization has left many people with no transcendent belief and no specific code of ethics. They are attracted to the certainty with which Muslims present their religion. Our history gives Muslims a golden opportunity to present their faith as the solution to the problems that vex us. As the theme of a Muslim convention held in Chicago in December 1994 put it: *Al-Islam li sa'adat albashariyya* (Islam is for the happiness of mankind!).

That same month, in an article in *First Things*, the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg wrote, "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."

Islam is also appealing because it is much more than a religion at least as *religion* is commonly understood in the West. Hence, we must respond to the challenge of this faith on several levels.

First, we must deal with the deeply religious dimension of Islam. In Islam, we face a thoroughly legalistic faith, and our challenge is to bring the redemptive message of Jesus Christ to its people. But in most Muslim countries, Christian missions are banned. So we have to use radio and print media to deliver the Good News. Tentmakers whose technical and linguistic skills have gained them access to the mostly closed areas of the Muslim world can also be successful. We should support them with our prayers and cooperation.

The greatest opportunity we have for face-to-face missions is in Western Europe and right here in North America. Thousands of Muslim immigrants have come to live in our neighborhoods. We have the privilege to present them with the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ. While such attempts are fraught with difficulties, such as language and religious barriers and prejudices, we may not shirk our evangelistic responsibilities.

Second, we must understand Islam's all-inclusive worldview. The vast majority of Muslims living in the Western world have come from cultures in which religion and politics are inseparable. As a result, they have no concept of what it means to live in secular societies. They expect our governments to be Christian and to act and behave Christianly. They are thus baffled by our glaring inconsistencies and moral anarchy.

Therefore, our first duty as Christian citizens is to influence our governments. Domestically, we should manifest the power of the gospel by defending the value of human life and the cause of justice for all citizens. And internationally, we should plead with our governments to deal justly and fairly with Islamic countries. This will require, among other things, pursuing an even-handed policy as we face the problems between Israel and the Palestinians.

We must also challenge our governments to champion human and civil rights all over the world, including in the lands of Islam. Muslim governments deny human-rights problems among their minorities. Yet it is well documented that in many Muslim countries Christians are being persecuted. We hear tragic and shocking stories about the burning of Christian churches in Indonesia. Followers of the Messiah also face persecution in Pakistan, Egypt, and Sudan. Not long ago, two reporters from the *Baltimore Sun* appeared on public television and spoke about uncovering a slave trade practiced by radical Muslims against the Christians of southern Sudan, especially the children (see also "Christian TV Airs Freeing of Sudanese Slaves," May 12).

There is no quick fix for the plight of the religious and ethnic minorities within the household of Islam. But we may not stop pointing to the continual discrimination and persecution of minorities that persists in certain Muslim countries. Consistency on this front will win us the respect of our Muslim neighbors.

Islam challenges Christians morally and politically. Evangelizing its believers tests us spiritually. Responding to the challenge of Islam is every Christian's responsibility. And responding to the Muslim challenge must be on the agenda of all our leaders—educational, cultural, political, and ecclesiastical.

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Sidebar 1

THE GROWTH OF ISLAM IN NORTH AMERICA

Most of the early Muslim immigrants to the United States came from Ottoman-ruled Syria and Lebanon during the 19th century. They were fleeing conscription in the Turkish army.

Indian Muslims started arriving in 1947, finding North America a safe haven after the partition of their country. Turkish immigration accelerated in the 1950s, brought about by uncertain political and economic conditions in Turkey.

Not all Muslims in North America belong to the mainline Sunni tradition. Eastern Michigan, for example, is home to many Shiites. Urban areas have representatives of some minor Islamic sects.

Islam is growing fast in North America. The major concentrations of Muslims are in the following centers: Montreal, Toronto, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Madison, Atlanta, Denver, Dallas, Houston, Fort Worth, Austin San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento, Seattle and Washington, D.C.

--Bassam Madany

Sidebar 2

DIVISIONS OF WORLDWIDE ISLAM

The two main divisions in worldwide Islam go back to Islam's early years. At the death of Mohammed in A.D. 632, the leaders of the Muslim community agreed to create the office of Caliph. The third caliph was assassinated in 656, and Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Mohammed, became the fourth caliph. The division in Islam dates from this point: those who sided with Ali's rival came to be known as Sunni Muslims. The followers of Ali were known as the Shiites.

Sunni Islam became the mainline religion of the Islamic empires. Its followers profess the unity of Allah and the apostleship of Mohammed. They accept the Arabic Qur'an as the Word of God. An estimated 90 percent of the world's Muslims are Sunnis.

Shiite Islam, while accepting the authority of the Arabic Qur'an, believes in a succession of divinely guided leaders called *imams*. Most mainline Shiites regard the descendants of Husein, Ali's younger son, as the authentic imams. They look forward to the return of the 12th imam, who disappeared or was murdered by the agents of the Sunni caliphs. As they wait for his return, Shiites look to gifted leaders called *ayatollahs* to represent him on earth.

Shiite communities live in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf states. The only country in which they hold power is Iran, which in 1979 became an Islamic republic. Iran sponsors radical Shiite groups such as Hezbollah (Party of Allah) in Lebanon.

Shiite radicalism has in turn encouraged Sunni Islamic movements, such as Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza in Israel and the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, to engage in terrorist acts against their established governments.

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Sidebar 3

GOOD BOOKS ON ISLAM

Here's a list of helpful books on Islam:

Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey, by V.S. Naipaul (New York: Random House, 1982).

Islam: A Way of Life, by Philip K. Hitti (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1970).

The Bible and Islam: Sharing God's Word with a Muslim, by Bassam M. Madany (6555 W. College Dr., Palos Heights, IL 60463: The Back to God Hour; 1987).

Islam and the West by Bernard Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Islam: Its Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power, by George W. Braswell Jr. (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996).

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