

The North American Conference on Muslim Evangelisation October 1978

A personal assessment by Vivienne Stacey

The Agony and the Ecstasy

The North American Conference on Muslim Evangelisation was held at Colorado, USA, from October 15 – 21, 1978. The conference was jointly sponsored by the *North American Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation* and *World Mission International*. The small committee which planned the conference claims that the conference, as well as being an event, was part of a process. The process started six months before the conference, with the sending of Conference foundation papers to several hundred people around the world. Two or three papers were received by each individual each week, and the writing of responses to at least ten papers was one of the conditions for attending the conference.

The conference papers were divided into three groups – *Concepts*, *The “Givens” in Christian Encounter with Islam*, and *Responses to the Situations*. Among the papers on Concepts, I would particularly like to draw attention to *The Gospel and Culture* by Paul C Hiebert, *Contextualisation: Indigenisation and/or Transformation* by Charles R Taber, and *New Theological Approaches in Muslim Evangelism* by Bruce J Nicholls.

Nicholls suggests that “*we explore the Biblical concept of the Kingdom of God as the one that effectively meets both the religious and the cultural needs of the Muslim, and offers a comprehensive response to the Muslim understanding of al-din and dawah The Kingdom of God is good news to be proclaimed. The Great Commission is the mandate of the Kingdom. It is the call to preach the Gospel, to baptise the new believers, to teach the new community and to heal the sick, and to demonstrate the power of God over the demonic Evangelism and church planting, the prophetic rebuke of social injustice, the compassionate service to the poor and oppressed find their unity in the Gospel of the Kingdom. Thus service through medicine, education, aid etc. is not an instrument of proselytation, but the evidence of the transforming power of the Gospel. Jesus never debated the priority of one aspect of mission over another; He just lived according to His own mandate.*”

The second group of Conference papers – the “Givens” in Christian encounter with Islam – includes *Islamic Theology: Limits and Bridges* by Kenneth Cragg, a series of papers on the *Comparative Status of Christianity and Islam in the West, Turkey and Iran and many other areas*, also the current status of Christian literature, radio broadcasting and Bible translations for Muslim peoples. If I select one paper for comment it would be *Popular Islam: The Hunger of the Heart* by Bill Musk. Musk writes: “*Pinned to children, poked into crevices above door lintels, strapped to the arm beneath outer garments, swinging from rear-view mirrors in taxis and trucks, amulets and talismans betray to the initiated a second Islam, the Islam of popular religious practice.*” Musk goes on to quote a recent writer who has lived for many years in Indonesia: “*I have come to the conclusion that the power of Islam does not lie in its dogma and practices, nor in the antithesis of the Trinity, against the Lordship of Christ and His redeeming death, but in the occult practices of its leaders, thus holding sway over their people.*” (D. Scheunemann) Musk questions whether Christian disciples should not, therefore, seek a “*power encounter which will promote a faith-allegiance directly to Christ. The ordinary Muslim understands the power of the Qur’an to heal, or the use of the rosary to divine and guide. He needs to discover*

that Christ can heal, can give power, can defeat demons, can speak supernaturally to man to guide him.”

The third group of conference papers was under the heading “*responses to the Situation*” and included *The Value and Methodology of Planning Strategies* by Edward R Dayton, *Building the Network of Research Centers* by Roland E Miller, and *Levels, Styles and Locations of Training Programs* by Vivienne Stacey. All these papers included practical suggestions on how to share the good news of Christ with Muslims, and how Christ’s disciples might prepare for this responsibility and also improve in their present involvement.

There were some notable gaps in the material covered by the foundation papers. One wondered why there were no papers on Islam and Marxism, the Muslim’s view of his world, the problems of modern technology and Islamic law. Without such papers it followed that few suggestions were given on the orientation and training of Christians to work in Muslim areas dominated by Islamic socialism or Marxism. However, not everything can be covered in one conference and the existing papers, taken one or two at a time, make fruitful study material for groups or individuals.

The conference itself was attended by 150 participants, the majority of whom were North Americans. Some Africans and Asians were invited as regional consultants, and there were a few like myself from Europe. The North Americans included several Arabs now working in USA and some missionaries on home leave. The conference co-ordinator, Rev Don McCurry, is a former missionary to Pakistan. His warm personality together with his undoubted commitment to evangelism among Muslims in practice and in theory made him an ideal person for this difficult assignment. Each conference participant had his slot. There were theologians, mission executives, anthropologists, missions professors, communicators, missionaries and Islamicists. The conference was certainly a working conference – fourteen hours of programmed time daily during the six days with only one afternoon off. At meal times and in small discussion groups there were invaluable opportunities to meet many interesting people.

The “agony” came at the beginning of the programme, with many reacting against unfamiliar techniques to get people thinking, talking and interacting, and the strong emphasis on planning strategies for hypothetical situations. Some of us were not only unused to these pedagogical devices but were unconvinced about their usefulness in such a conference. The organisers were gracious and flexible enough to adapt the programme, and we were spared a third day of the imaginary. The “ecstasy” came in a spontaneous, unscheduled prayer meeting in which Egyptians, Lebanese and many others poured out their hearts to God for their Muslim friends and Muslim lands. The Holy Spirit was manifestly present at the last morning session when people expressed willingness to be used and to do whatever the Lord chose. A “word of prophecy” was given – *“If you would be the men and women you say you want to be, then you must be men and women of praise.”* I realised more than ever before how important it is that all our evangelism and strategy-making should come out of our worship of God.

Four task forces - on *Church and Nationhood, Evangelism and Church Growth, The Use of the Media, and Theological Research and Training* – presented concrete proposals for future action after setting goals and objectives. The diversity of the North American scene was breathtaking to a European like myself, and one sensed a variety of attitudes including some anti-missionary feeling, a concern to strengthen the future relationships of missions and churches, a need to listen more to Asians and Africans who live in areas of Muslim majorities and to give them more opportunity to express their views in ways that are culturally familiar to them. One was aware of an increased sense of responsibility by the North American churches

for the Muslim minorities on their doorsteps – students from many lands, immigrant groups and the Black Muslim movement. The influence of the Church Growth movement and the ideas proceeding from the School of World Mission of the Fuller Theological Seminary were dominant. The lack of opportunity to get a consensus of the conference in plenary sessions was somewhat frustrating. The time for question and discussion was minimal.

If indeed this conference was an event in a process, we shall hear more of its impact, not only in North America but in other parts of the world. I would certainly urge those with a concern for the evangelisation of Muslims to obtain a copy of the Conference Compendium. Along with the conference papers and Conference Statement, it will include many new ideas and suggested strategies which could be tested and adapted for the glory of God. The Compendium is due to be published in the USA in the Spring of 1979. In this way we can share in the “process” even if we were not present in the conference “event”. In meaningful ministry among Muslims *“May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy”*. Here is the real “agony” and “ecstasy”.