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Eternity

## **“What do you say to 120 million Muslims?”**

Interview with Bassam Madany

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Many American Christians are finding their own knowledge of Islam inadequate to understand the developments in Iran, Africa and the Arab world. Missions to Islamic countries report a fresh openness to the gospel, and last October saw 150 missionary strategists gathered in Colorado Springs to analyze Muslim evangelization.

The following interview with Bassam Madany, a Syrian-born radio evangelist with the “Back to God Hour,” probes some of the unique aspects of Muslim work. Madany’s daily radio broadcast is heard from Morocco to Iraq, attracting 1400 letters a month from this Islamic heartland. Madany is a graduate of Reformed Presbyterian (Pittsburgh) and Calvin Seminaries and prepares his broadcasts from the “Back to God Hour” studios in Palos Heights, Illinois, near Chicago.

### **How do you explain the rising world interest in the Middle East?**

I think there are two basic reasons for our preoccupation with that part of the world.

The first, of course, is the emergence of Israel, thirty years ago. This event brought about a confrontation between the Arab countries and the young Jewish state, as well as the active involvement of the super-powers.

The second, is the sudden richness of the oil-producing Middle Eastern countries. It has become inevitable that the West be more involved in the affairs of the Middle East in order to ensure a continuous supply of this lifeblood of their economy.

### **Is there such a thing as a thoroughly Christian approach to the problems which beset the Middle East?**

I believe there is. I am aware that a great number of evangelical Christians are committed to a specific doctrine of the “last things” which influences their attitude to the state of Israel. I do not want to enter into the details of that subject but I do want to emphasize that all Christians in the Western world *must* speak out for a just and peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli problem.

It is unfortunate that this whole matter has been consistently approached from a purely nationalistic point of view; as if there were no specific religious factors in the conflict. Christians simply must not accept the secular world’s explanation of the root causes. At the bottom of this ongoing confrontation is a religious factor which we Christians should be the first to understand; that is, if we look at it from a biblical point of view.

### **Are you implying that there is a faith dimension here?**

Exactly. At the bottom of the Arab-Israeli problem lies the inability of the Arab nations to accept the reemergence of a state which claims allegiance to a faith which has long been supplanted by Islam. I believe the western world has failed to understand the dynamics of the Islamic assertion that God, having given mankind two “heavenly” religions, namely Judaism and Christianity, has finally given the world a completed “heavenly” religion, that is Islam. Probably few Westerners are even aware of the basic beliefs of this religion which numbers 600 million adherents.

### **When you put it this way you almost imply that a Christian mission to Islam would be impossible.**

Difficult, yes; but not impossible. I would like to emphasize that we cannot maintain a truly Christian stance vis-à-vis the Middle East, or any other part of the Muslim world, unless we define our Christian obligation to these people. This obligation can be placed under the category of the Christian mission to Islam. There is no such thing as a purely abstract, coldly detached, scholarly approach to our subject: Not if we believe that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. We have an obligation to bring this gospel to these people.

### **What is the explanation for so little having been done in the past?**

We must take into account the facts of history. Islam spread throughout predominantly Christian areas in its early years. The peoples of the Middle East and North Africa had been converted to the Christian faith for several centuries. They gave the world some of its Christian leaders.

Unfortunately by the seventh century, which was the time of Mohammed and the phenomenal spread of Islam, the church had lost its evangelical fervor. It no longer lived out of the Word of God.

It has always been puzzling to me how so many precious biblical truths could have been forgotten. However, one could hardly expect the church which had lost the evangel to evangelize its conquerors! And they were conquerors who came with a super confidence because they believed that their religion was the fulfillment of all the previously revealed religions.

### **Since there seems to be an unprecedented interest in Islam among evangelicals, can we expect a breakthrough in the near future?**

First of all, I am thoroughly convinced that God has a plan for both the Muslims and the Jews, and I have no doubt whatsoever that when the end comes there will be multitudes of saved people coming from both these groups. The question which faces us now is how we can bring about the evangelization and re-establishment of a church in an area which has been so fruitless for 1300 years. And our answer must reside in the patient, loving and relevant presentation of the entire scriptural revelation to the Muslims and Jews of today.

My twenty years of experience in radio missions among the Arabic-speaking Muslims of the world has given me a special inside view of this new era of missions. It has convinced me beyond a doubt that there is a general curiosity, even a thirst, among the Muslims for the facts contained in Holy Scripture. They are eager to know more about the Old Testament prophets. They are fascinated by the life of the Messiah. Not enough information has been available to them in their holy book concerning all the messengers who brought God's Word to the world prior to the seventh century. There is a new openness to hear the contents of the Scripture.

No one should conclude, however, that the age-long barriers have suddenly crumbled or disappeared. They haven't. It is just that there are opportunities today which have never been present before.

**You must have developed a specific approach to the Muslim. Could you give us some idea of how you go about presenting the gospel to them?**

Gladly. Since Islam, to a great extent, arose because of the failure of the early church to evangelize the Arabs, I consider it of utmost importance to share the Scriptures with the Arabs of today. Radio gives the church the ideal means to do this. In a daily ministry it is possible to be very systematic and to reach the entire Muslim world with the exposition and proclamation of the Word of God.

But I would like to stress at this point that it is very important that our goal remains always before our eyes – namely that we are engaged in a Christian mission to Islam. This new means – namely radio – is important in the sense that it gives us the tool to reach the Muslim; but far more important is the message.

One must be conscious, when opening the Scriptures to the Muslims of today, of the many misconceptions they hold concerning the major doctrines of the Christian faith. For example, in the doctrine of the Word of God, they believe that Moses received the Pentateuch from God; David, the Psalms; and Jesus, the gospel.

They are not aware of the real contents of the Word of God; such as the books of Kings, the prophets, the wisdom literature of the Old Testament or the epistles of the New Testament. Something even more serious in their concept is that they regard the whole Word of God as *purely law*. Even the word "gospel" to them is simply the title of a higher law which was revealed to the Messiah.

One cannot, of course, avoid mentioning the Muslim misunderstanding of the doctrine of the holy trinity, which creates one of the greatest obstacles to their acceptance of the gospel. The impossibility of a Trinitarian God is the subject of endless Islamic sermons; a misunderstanding which has become firmly entrenched over the centuries.

The denial of the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as of the historicity of the crucifixion, are two other beliefs which contribute to the difficulties one faces, and which prompted the late Samuel Zwemer to describe our work as "the glory of the impossible."

**These would seem to be insurmountable obstacles. How can you open the Scriptures to a Muslim? Aren't they completely immunized against the Christian understanding of revelation and redemption?**

Before answering these questions I would like to emphasize that my strategy, if you call it such, does not lie in the area of polemics about the aforementioned doctrines. I begin with, and continually emphasize the plight of man and the grace of God.

You see, what we often forget is that Islam, like Judaism, denies the necessity of redemption. This denial is based on a thoroughly nonbiblical view of man. In other words, the weakest point in Islam is not merely in the area of theology or Christology, but biblical anthropology. Islam teaches the basic goodness of man and does not recognize an inherited sin from our first parents. And yet, the realities of life within and without the Muslim world, cannot be squared with such an optimistic view of man.

In my evangelistic work via radio and the printed page, I remind Muslims of the realistic biblical doctrine of the fall of man. What makes the Christian message "good news" is that it clearly proclaims God's remedy for the plight of man. I am very thankful for the theological disciplines which shaped my missionary training, but it is absolutely necessary to have a thorough commitment to the full authority and complete reliability of Scripture, in order to lovingly and patiently proclaim the message of historic Christianity.

It is true that everything in the Muslim's historical and cultural background immunizes him against the reception of the Christian gospel. However, we often forget, in our extreme busyness with doing missions that our role in the Christian mission to Islam is purely secondary. The major work of missions among Muslims (or any other people) is the present activity of the Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Christian missions to Islam is not psychological warfare. It is the activity of God through his church commissioning evangelists to proclaim the gospel.

In his innermost being the modern Muslim, who is also under the influence of western secularism, experiences the same problems and contradictions within his life as many other non-Christians. This inner lostness or malaise is realistically diagnosed and described when the full Christian message is expounded in his ears in terms understandable to him. This is never to be divorced from the inner working of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those who belong to Christ, a work which eventually blossoms into the beautiful confession "Jesus is Savior and Lord."

**Can you share with us some particular examples from your work of areas in which you avoid or use certain words to prevent confusion in the Muslim mind?**

I appreciate this question very much since my earlier emphasis on the extremely important role of the Holy Spirit in missions might be misunderstood as an excuse for a rather simplistic approach. I am convinced that our presentation of the Good News must be done in full consciousness of the totality of the Islamic culture and a thorough knowledge of the language of the area to be reached.

To be specific, as I have already noted, Muslims have been taught that Jesus was the recipient of a heavenly book called the *Injeel* (the evangel). When we open the New Testament to the Muslims we must be very careful not to give the impression that we have four different gospels – of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Unfortunately this is the impression given by the vocabulary used in the 1860 translation of the Arabic Bible, commonly used among the Christians of the Middle East. We must emphasize that there is one gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ; whether it be according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul or Isaiah!

Once a listener from North Africa wrote to me saying: “When you talk about sins in the *plural* I understand you, but I do not understand you at all when you talk about sin in the *singular*.” This was a very good observation. The Islamic heritage only enables Muslims to think of sins as isolated acts of transgression against the law of God. There is no original sin in Islam.

This remark from one of my listeners has helped me to be more interpretive in my handling of the Scriptures. What do we mean by sin in the singular? Most of us would answer that it is our sinful nature, the indwelling sin and our proneness to do that which is against the law of God.

But these are biblical words which are only understood by the initiated within the Christian communities. We must tirelessly put ourselves in the place of the Muslim and patiently interpret the basic biblical concepts in synonymous expressions hoping that one of them would pierce through the veil that surrounds his heart.

Take for example our Savior’s name. Jesus the Messiah is one of our most precious names in Scripture. *Al-Masih* (the Messiah) is commonly used by both Muslims and Christians in the Middle East. Unfortunately the name Jesus, or its Arabic equivalent *Yesu’a*, does not ring any bell in the mind of the hearer. Does this mean that we should drop the use of the word Jesus as the name of the Messiah? Not at all. But we must translate that word and make frequent use of its meaning – *the Savior*.

We do have the tradition of such usage in the Bible itself. Do we not hear Matthew saying Immanuel, which being interpreted means “God with us”? Likewise, when our Lord’s birth was announced the angel instructed Joseph: “Thou shalt call his name Jesus because he shall save his people from their sins.”

### **What are your hopes for the future based on your experiences?**

Notwithstanding many factors which make us rather pessimistic about the immediate future of the Middle East I remain hopeful for the future. These are my reasons:

Never before have so many Muslims heard the gospel as today. Multitudes are not only hearing but are in touch with those who are proclaiming it to them over the airwaves and through the printed page.

Another important point is that whereas in the past the Christian mission to Islam occurred within the context of European colonialism and appeared often to Muslims as part of the imperialistic thrust of the Western world, today we have no such burden accompanying our missionary endeavor.

Then there is the new diaspora or dispersion of Christians living and working in the Muslim world and Muslims living and studying in the Western world. This is a new and exciting phenomenon.

Ultimately, my greatest source of hope is God's plan for the children of Abraham, both through Ishmael and through Isaac. We do have a specific teaching in Holy Scripture (Rom. 9-11) concerning the future conversion of the Jews. I also believe there are enough general references to the ultimate triumph of the gospel among all nations with no exceptions (Rev. 7). I have no doubt that many of the saved will have come from the multitudes of the Muslim world.

I would like to say that we Christians must show a great love for the Muslims. The legacy of mistrust and misunderstanding must be replaced by respect and concern for their spiritual welfare. We must make it clear that we are not interested in imposing our culture upon them. This is not our calling. We must faithfully and relevantly share with the Muslims of today, the Good News of Jesus the Messiah.

As for results, we should not hide the fact from ourselves or from them, that only God can change the hearts of people and make them slaves of Jesus the Redeemer.

