

YEAR OF THE LAB RAT

By Basil Grafas

They say that it is the Chinese year of the Rabbit. Of such things, I must plead ignorance. I prefer, however, to call 2011 the Year of the Lab Rat. Now, you must be wondering why, in a Christian publication, we are speaking of such things, of laboratories and rats. Perhaps I can help with that. You see, a few years ago I attended a great gathering of people in Southern Europe committed to reaching the Muslim world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was an inspiring sight; 600 people gathered from the entire Mediterranean basin as well as from all over the world, all gathered in one place to address the urgent work of taking Jesus to Muslims. The place was filled to the top with national church planters from many places and with Western missionaries. We did all of the usual things that gatherings such as this engender. We worshipped, heard the word and attended all sorts of workshops. We ate together, sipped tea, plotted and planned. It sounds like heaven doesn't it? I wish that it were. If this were a Garden of Eden, there lurked a serpent, too. Behind the outer show of solidarity and commitment, an elephant stood in the room unacknowledged. We all chose to ignore the beast until one brave man, a Muslim background Christian pointed it out.

This is what he said: "I know that you missionaries like to consider our countries as your laboratories, but it would be nice to consult the lab rats once in a while." You could feel the silence in the room as we Westerners absorbed the meaning of his statement—an accusation really. Earlier in the week, someone had opened a booth in the hotel advertising a "contextual," "Muslim-sensitive" Bible translation of some kind, extolling the replacement of "Son of God" with some sort of ingenious replacement. The "lab rats", the Muslim background believers, had not, in fact, gratefully received it. It so offended them that they wanted it gone; yesterday would not have been too soon. The "innovators" of this Bible meant to make the Word more accessible, communicate more clearly, but all they

managed to do was suggest that the eternal Word had been brought down to their own muddy, pedestrian level. To these non-Western eyes and minds, the words now seemed to smack of hesitation, lack of conviction and compromise. The lab rats, you see, had gone through every kind of trial, test and torture to sit at the feet of Jesus. Now they were face-to-face with a visible surrender to Muslim sensibilities. Just in case you might be prone to confusion, let me say right away that what you read here are the clear sentiments of these brothers and sisters. You do not have to believe me, but I say without any equivocation that this characterization is, if anything, an understatement.

The response of Muslim background Christians everywhere to this sort of missionary innovation is volcanic. Missionaries can cast indigenous responses in any way they please, at least if truth is not their aim. I tell you, however, that in every part of the church emerging from within the Muslim world, new believers are speaking out in increasingly strident terms against a new kind of colonialism. It's the kind where Westerners show up with ideas, methods, structures—and oh yes, money—using the latter to ease their acceptance of or, just as well, force their way into the culture. From the vantage point of the lab rats, this is a show of force, a kind of sanctified gunboat diplomacy. Out went the whips, chains, and white man's burden; in came the wizards of anthropology, priests of the doctrines of “appropriate” contextualization. No longer would the lab rats have to bus tables, nurse the Westerners' children, clean the toilets and sit at the feet of Western religion. Now we have a newer, gentler, more photogenic version. Now we have reduced these manifestations of the *imago Dei* to marketing anecdotes, fodder fit for raising donations from the ever-gullible Western church-going public by the missionary sales force. People in the “young” world become snapshots, statistics, lab reports.

If it sounds as though I am angry (not mad I assure you), it sounds that way because real believers are affected by our adventurism. I care about them and they cannot speak for themselves. We write our rose-colored missionary anecdotes about people saved through our heroic experimentation, but these people are mute. We do not hear their voices. Who do we think we are? How can we be

so blind to our own cultural predilection to violence by other means, to the violence of coercion?

I remember my introduction to this sort of missionary mugging years ago when I attended a conference in a Muslim city. Convened by a missions organization, the event was attended by a fifty-fifty mix of nationals and Western missionaries. A young, fresh American lady strode to the front. She announced, breathlessly, that she had a gift for our national brothers and sisters. What could it be? It was the Book of Mark. The discussion sounded like this:

National believer: Strange, we already have one of those.

Missionary: Ah, but this one is different. It is, after all, written with a vocabulary familiar to the majority Muslim population.

Confusion set in.

National believer: But we already have a new translation and it uses the same vocabulary.

Missionary: Not quite. We have made a few improvements you see.

National believer: Improvements? But how can we improve what God has made?

Missionary: Well, for starters, we have liberated the text from the impediments that make a Muslim's acceptance of Jesus virtually impossible.

Still more confusion.

National believer: What impediments? I came to Christ with a Bible in hand that said all sorts of things I did not accept as a Muslim, but God taught me better. No objections are beyond God's power and love. What are you talking about?

Missionary: Well, for one thing, phrases like "Son of God" make coming to Jesus impossible. So, because Muslims still need Jesus we replace the offending words with better choices that communicate the meaning God intended.

National believer: What words exactly?

Missionary: Well, we used *Isa al-Masih* for *Son of God*.

National believer: You did what? You got rid of the Words of God!

Missionary: Well, if you just understood that *Son of God* means *Messiah* . . .

National believer (interrupting): I don't care what you think it means! I don't want your opinion. I want to know what the Bible says.

Missionary: This is not really a problem. We can always footnote the original language.

National believer: Bibles do not have footnotes! If you want something footnoted, footnote your ideas, not the words of the Bible.

Another Western missionary #1: I just feel as though we need to really thank our sister here for her great work.

Still another Western missionary #2: We all need to keep in mind that we are trying many new things. We need to love one another and suspend our judgment. We have a difficult task and there are many ways to accomplish it. We just need to bless one another as we try our best.

Western missionary host: I want to thank each and every one of you for taking time to join us here. We have had a great time and I am so encouraged to see the many new and exciting ways in which God is expanding his kingdom. Let's pray.

The meeting breaks up and missionaries and national believers go home.

What did you hear? I hope you heard the sound of a great vacuum formed by the vast difference of perspective between the missionary and the national believer. In fact, on that eventful day, things truly lined up according to culture. The vast majority of Westerners in the room made supporting noises when the missionary spoke. The climate rapidly changed when the national responded. There were shouts and objections coming from all over the room from Muslim background Christians who were deeply offended by the biblical tinkering. As one Muslim background man told me (I was one of two Westerners I saw firmly opposed to the missionary), he was not at all interested in a missionary's opinion concerning the Bible. He wanted to see the real thing with his own eyes. He and his brothers were perfectly content to figure it out for

themselves. They did not need the condescending graces of the laboratory scientists. They needed to hear the Word of God in all its adornment. To them, it was not some sort of disposable form hiding a supracultural prize. It was all the Word, form and all.

I heard almost the same thing with almost the same tone in that first meeting I mentioned. Increasingly, our non-Western brothers and sisters in the faith, the lab rats, are running out of patience; and I am sorry to have to say this, but they long ago ran out of trust for the Western scientists, resplendent in their lab coat trappings of scientific method and social theory. These unhappy people have discovered a simple gospel truth and an articulate doctrine that strangely sound a lot like our Early church and Reformation ancestors. Theirs is a perspective uncluttered with the detritus of cobbled together modernistic perspectives. Rather, their view reflects the sanctified understanding of Muslims who, freed from their bondage to false religion, retained the zeal for one truth in one holy message. We are people of Madison Avenue and the West End. We surrendered long ago the evangelical flag to the encroaching demands of modernism, postmodernism and oneism. Do not let the clever spokesmen of a “better”, more effective, less confrontational Bible fool you. Please don’t; national believers are not fooled, but they have no voice. When all they have are their distant voices crying out from Indonesia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey and North Africa, your money, pouring into the coffers of the missionaries who run the laboratories, drowns out their voices.

This is an opportunity for the churches of the West. It is time to wake up and smell the burning brake pads on our evangelical car, as it continues its backward slide, away from the gospel; away from Irenaeus, Athanasius and Augustine, away from martyred reformers who litter a thousand landscapes with their burned, charred remains; away from the grand heritage of Wesley, Edwards, and Spurgeon; and away from brothers and sisters from Cote d’Ivoire to China. These latter day worthies, successors of the church fathers, know the truth and it is not in us. It is time for us to wake up because time is precious cargo; there is only so much of it. Let the year of the lab rat end!