

APOSTATES OF ISLAM

by Abu Daoud

1 THE CHURCHES AND ISLAM IN THE WEST: IGNORANCE AND XENOPHOBIA¹

As a Christian living in the Middle East one becomes easily alarmed by the points of view one hears from the West regarding Islam and Muslims in general. Many go to great extents to explain that Islam is not in itself a terrorist religion, and the well-known trope that terrorists have “hijacked Islam.” But this argument falls short very quickly when one realizes that the Prophet himself did not hesitate to use and endorse non-defensive violence on several occasions to further his vision of God’s sovereignty and dominion over Creation. (One thinks of the dozens of raids on caravans wherein people were killed; one thinks of the Quranic injunction for men to hit their wives if they are insolent; one thinks of the slaughter of hundreds of Jews of the Quraiza tribe with his blessing.²) In other words, violence is part of the sunna, the path, the example, of the Prophet. It is, then, profoundly un-Islamic to dismiss one sort of violence—terrorism—as un-Islamic, for it fails to grasp that there is a certain sacramental role for violence within the life of Muhammad and

the Islam (submission) of the nations to God’s order and will.

On the other hand one hears more and more calls for forced expulsions and legal discrimination against Muslims. These voices are, in general, not from the ruling parties—many of which are desirous to get votes from Muslims and investment from the wealthy petro-states of Islamdom. Objections are raised that this would be tantamount to religious discrimination, but the argument can be made that such discrimination would not be against a religion qua religion, but against a political ideology. It is true that Islam claims to comprehend and seamlessly unite religion and politics and economics at once, so there is some truth to the argument that such discrimination is more an action against a dangerous and hostile political presence than a religious community, but there are still problems. Namely, is there any basis to believe that a society can engage in wholesale discrimination on such a scale and not inflict on itself deep wounds both spiritual and societal? Finally, we have seen clearly that a good number of the mujaahidiin are native born citizens: there is nowhere to expulse them to. If terror attacks in the West continue, which I think they will, and grow more effective and sophisticated, then look for such calls to increase and gain greater traction among the voting masses.

1 The author intentionally refrains from using the term “Islam - phobia” as one can dislike Islam while loving Muslims in Jesus’ name—something that the media seems to largely ignore.

2 I am glad to provide references in the Quran and the hadith for these well-known events.

2 A THIRD WAY: THE CONVERSION OF MUSLIMS

But there is a third option that most people, including Christians, seem to not consider: the conversion of Muslims. Even in the days of Muhammad, during a strategic sojourn in Ethiopia, one of the companions of the Prophet left Islam, thus becoming the first known apostate or *murtaad*. Today many Muslims who apostatize do not embrace any religion at all in its stead and tend towards a form of agnostic humanism. Most of the remainder embrace Christianity: the reasons for this are multiple and I present to you a broad outline of them here. Sources are infamously difficult to come by and much information is transmitted orally, which is still the predominant custom here in the East. There are studies by missionaries and missiologists regarding the matter, but they tend to go unpublished because the readership would be slight, so these documents are copied and disseminated in the form of Acrobat and Word files. All this is to say that if one wishes to deploy the multifarious armaments of Western scholarship against my claims some will not withstand the pressure. This information was not engendered in the West, and only with some difficulty is it translated into Western formulae. *Caveat lector*.

Dreams and visions are often cited by converts. The dreams, like the miracles of Jesus in the Gospels or the Apostles in Acts, defy easy classification. Some of them remain nebulous and incomprehensible until a conversation with a Christian clarifies that the man of their dreams

was Jesus. One Muslim realized he was dreaming of Jesus so he consulted his local Muslim religious leader who said he was blessed for having dreamed of one of the prophets. Some dreams focus on the Bible as something that the person must read; some actualize what is perceived to be a supernatural healing of an illness; one showed a man in a white robe holding a chalice and a round piece of flat bread. But other dreams feature angels or saints like Mary and John the Baptist, both of whom are known to Muslims through the Qur'an by the Arabic names Maryam and Yahya. However, dreams and visions do not generally lead to conversion in and of themselves. An interpretation is often required, wherefrom the vision or dream becomes part of the conversion of the Muslim. Not all dreams lead to conversion, they follow no concrete pattern: some recur, others do not, some are clear, others are not.

Inquiry into the person of Jesus son of Mary is another path, or often a complementary path, to conversion. Jesus is featured often in the Qur'an, and his features are striking: born of a virgin, worker of great miracles, and called *kalamat allah*, the WORD OF GOD (there is no capitalization in Arabic). He is to some Muslims an intriguing figure. Because of this, some resort to the four Gospels as a source of information regarding his life and teaching. This is, in itself, a bold step because the orthodox tradition of Islam, while it is not stipulated specifically in the Qur'an, dictates that the Gospels of the Christians are corrupted and unreliable

deformations of the true Gospel (injiil) which descended verbatim from Allah to his prophet Jesus via an angel, just as the Qur'an descended verbatim to Muhammad via Gabriel. Nevertheless, some Muslims feel compelled to look into these sources. Others are simply presented or sent a Bible or a New Testament or a pamphlet containing, say, the gospel of Matthew or John, by a Christian friend or acquaintance (perhaps a missionary him- or herself), and start to read it. I heard a story of a Christian man traveling through the backcountry of Yemen (which has no indigenous Christian population and one of the fastest growing populations in the world) who met with an elder (sheikh) who said that many years earlier a traveler had presented them with a book, and they had many questions about it. This book was, of course, the Bible.

The Bible and especially the Gospels are compelling to many people; several Muslim converts actually refer specifically to Matthew 11:28 as central to their conversion. The Qur'an makes the claim that it is self-validating, and when a sign was demanded of Muhammad to validate his prophetic office he explained that the Quran was his sign. But many Muslims find the Gospels to be equally self-validating. The authority and coherency and integrity of the teaching and preaching of Jesus testify to its divine origin and salvific validity. His acceptance of the repentant ones on the fringes of society and his antagonism towards the self-righteous religious rulers are profoundly refreshing to many Muslims, who have long suspected that they live in such

a situation, but had never received approval of such a stance. His lack of concern for political power and rejection of violence even in the case of self-defense are opposite the life-style chosen by Muhammad. Muslim believers tend to base their understanding of the Gospel much more on the Gospels than on the Pauline epistles, as is the case in much of the Reformation tradition, which can lead to some interesting situations on the mission field.

In Islam, there is no assurance of salvation. Readers might think that the phrase is relevant to only one Christian tradition—evangelicalism—but by assurance I am referring to confidence and great hope on the Day of Judgment, which is a constant concern for many Muslims. The accurate frame of mind is formulated in Ephesians 3:11, 12: “According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord: in whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.” Much like the dreams that featured Bibles, saints, and even Eucharistic elements, the confidence and boldness transcends denominational and ecclesiastical differences. This great hope and confidence in pleading another's righteousness on your behalf before God is of great comfort for Muslims, and has led to the conversion of some. For in Islam the mercy of God is indeed an object of hope, but its actual dispensation is capricious and one can only hope for it—though certainly not with boldness or confidence. One missionary explains the difference thus: “If you go to the king's palace and demand to see him,

the guard will ask you who you are, and if you give him your name, he will not know it and send you away. If you go to see the king, and the guard asks, 'Who are you?', and you say, 'An envoy of the US President or the British Prime Minister', and you can show evidence, then you, even though you are no one, will meet with him immediately." The parable may seem childish or simplistic, but much more importance is attached to the concepts of sending, receiving, and the weight of a name in Arab culture and Islamic societies in general, than in the West. The inner release of not relying on your own righteousness is of great comfort to some.

Heretofore I have presented reasons why Muslims converted to Christianity, but there is another important reason that must be discussed. Every religion—however one wants to define that word—makes certain promises. Christ promised persecution in this world, substantial redemption among those called out (the Church) from that earthly kingdom, and eternal life in the Kingdom come. Islam promises, for the society that abides by God's will (the sharii'a), prosperity, peace, justice, and political domination. That is no small promise. Some Muslims have questioned that promise: given that there are dozens of Muslim-majority countries throughout the world, including many who make an explicit claim to abide by the sharii'a, how is it that these countries are generally characterized by (excepting oil and gas) economic inferiority, political corruption, lack of human

rights, and a devastating level of governmental oppression? On a more empirical level, why is it that so many people from these countries desire to leave them for countries ruled by mushrikin or associators—that is, those who associate another with God, namely Jesus Christ? Such questions place traditional Muslims in an uncomfortable situation since Islam and Islamdom must be considered superior to any other civilization or geographical locus. There are a number of possible responses to this reality, but most Muslims resort to a psychology of victimization. Since Islam is in fact superior, but empirically inferior, there must be some sort of massive and coordinated attack on Islam by non-Muslims.

But such an explanation can become very thin and unsatisfying. If one wants to insist that Islam is under attack, one must ask, for example, why the Zionists and the Crusaders have not simply destroyed Mecca and Medina, which would be a relatively simple feat in martial terms. One must also face the plain fact that millions of young Muslims want to leave the land of Islam and go to the land that is supposedly attacking them. This scrutiny of the Islamic understanding of its theoretical superiority and synchronous empirical inferiority has led some to discard the entire edifice of Islamic thought. Other factors that create cracks in the dam of the traditional understanding of Islamic exceptionality are the dismal situation regarding women's rights, dating straight back to the days of the Prophet; rampant and virulent anti-Semitism; unending infighting

among Islamists; lack of freedom of the press; and so on.

Muslim converts in the West often cite the witness of Christian communities in their conversion. Much is to be said for the few bold churches and ministries that seek to minister specifically to Muslims, but a specialized ministry is not always called for. One woman found herself alone in a new city and was simply invited to church by her neighbor: not knowing of any mosque and recalling that Christians received respect from Muhammad that other non-Muslims did not, she decided to go. That was the beginning of a long conversion. Another young man in the Middle East went to church out of curiosity, having heard of debauched Christians having sexual orgies in church. What he found was a community (including women) of people who with all their faults treated each other with dignity and respect, something he had not encountered before. I might finally mention the counsel of one former Muslim, himself not a Christian, to someone leaving Islam to find a local church (not a fundamentalist one, he said) because the people there will welcome you to be part of their community even if you do not believe in Christianity.

Accounts suggest that almost all Muslim converts have multiple religious encounters prior to their apostasy, whether they are miraculous healings, dreams, visions, enlightening readings of the Bible, listening to preaching and teaching by radio or internet, the witness of Christians' charity or faith, or the reading of testimonies

of others apostates. While there are accounts of Muslims who hear Christian broadcasts by radio and baptize themselves in the bathtub, conversions infrequently occur without the personal witness or guidance of at least one Christian.

The question of community leads to a different topic though: how do the churches in the Middle East respond to Muslims who come seeking advice and guidance regarding these purported revelations—whether dreams or healings or epiphanies? Do the Christian churches (whether Arab, Coptic, Assyrian, or what have you) indigenous to the Middle East, for example, welcome such inquirers openly? Related to this question, one might notice that we do not find above Muslims who are moved and converted by the liturgy of the church. It might be expected, given the highly ritualistic nature of Muslim worship, that some would simply find Christian worship to be superior: more divine, more enlightening, more empowering. But that is not the case.

It is not the case simply because the liturgically-oriented churches, and thus the majority of churches indigenous to the Middle East, do not appear to have an interest in Muslims who might convert. Such an aversion is understandable in the Middle East, where a government can, with one fell swoop, shut down churches, clinics and schools. Additionally, one must be on the lookout for false converts seeking financial gain or a permit to emigrate, for spies, and such. This is a practical reality for these churches. Due to such difficulties, Catholic and Orthodox

churches in the Middle East do not, in general, receive or invest any time in individuals interested in the matters outlined above. This is, as far as this author can discern, the reason why liturgy is not present anywhere in the literature of conversions from Islam. One priest told me clearly that he had several Muslims approach him every day wanting to convert from Islam; he said that some of them were false conversions, but that he knew that some of them were genuine. He gestured with his hand around him towards the beautiful church that encompassed us, and lamented that the government would take all of it away if he disciplined and baptized such people. Another priest explained to me that Muslims could not genuinely convert from Islam because of the satanic nature of Islam. One woman went to a Catholic priest and told him of her dream of Jesus: he wept and told her that it meant she should be a better Muslim. (One should note one important exception: the very excellent apologetic ministry of the Coptic priest Abouna Zacarias, who is both famous and infamous throughout the Middle East for his erudition in all things Islamic and has no doubt been the occasion of a few headaches for imams and scholars, as well as numerous conversions.) Therefore it has become the purview of certain evangelical, charismatic and Protestant congregations, and some non-affiliated congregations comprised almost entirely of converts from Islam, of caring, teaching, catechizing, discipling, and baptizing these people. This work is not easy and requires great discernment and caution

on the part of the leaders of those congregations, but they retain a vision that the Gospel is indeed more powerful than any juridical dictates levied by governments or rulers, and notwithstanding any theological or ecclesiological deficits they may suffer, they carry forward the simple work of going to “teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you...” (Mt 28:19, 20).

3 THE CHURCHES’ MISSION TO MUSLIMS IN THE WEST: INITIAL STEPS

If we return to the initial situation I described regarding the West’s perception of Muslims, I think it is safe to say that churches in the West have not been very helpful. Some—mostly liberal Protestant—insist on regurgitating historical revisionism and syncretism for the sake of “religious dialogue”, ignoring that at a fundamental level the two religions present profoundly disparate accounts of God, humanity, salvation, revelation and ethics. Other churches give classes about the evil of Islam, which often present a simplistic or incomplete picture that fails to notice the nuance and variety in Islam, and much less encourage Christians to embrace Muslims in the love of the Christ. Both sides suffer from a deficit of scholars who have probed deeply into both Christian and Islamic thought and who yet are able to communicate between the two in a sincere and candid manner.

In the coming years much will rely on how the churches of the West present this issue. The church is called to be the pillar of truth, and so it should not be satisfied with panegyrics about human solidarity; the church is called to be bold and courageous, and thus to work for the conversion of the non-believer, not as an act of cultural imperialism or sectarian hegemony, but as an act of charity, full of hope that she is empowered by the Spirit of God and brings genuinely good news to a perishing world; she is also called to be a voice of love and compassion and advocate for human dignity. But that path wherein dignity and hope are both preserved would involve a robust effort—at the very least—to make it known to Muslims that the churches are open to them when they have questions and that there is a very real invitation to conversion, or at least to a consideration thereof.

Many Muslims have not ever thought about leaving Islam. The simple act of suggesting the possibility can in itself be a bold gesture in the direction of dialogue and conversation. The options open to churches are multiple, and those decisions rest with the churches and their leaders, but an unadorned statement from a major Christian leader that Muslims are welcome to come to their church and are encouraged to consider the way of Christ might well crack open a door that many never knew was there. Such a gesture might stir up some opposition from the Muslim community, but if the conversation thusly initiated is formed into an endeavor for truth, then no one—neither Muslim nor

Christian—will lose anything. Rather, both have much to gain. Wouldn't it be delightful for a bishop to proclaim openly and publicly that his diocese welcomes Muslims to attend church and is willing and able to catechize and baptize people interested in converting.

On the other hand, we should not expect Muslims to flock to our churches in large numbers, so such a step is no substitute for interaction with Muslims on their ground and in their communities. One such path for local outreach would include starting a program at a community center in an area with many immigrants—some of whom will inevitably be Muslims. One option is to teach English, but there are other possibilities, including tutoring or training in math skills or accent reduction or computer skills. Christian families can also help to resettle refugees from a Muslim country. One simply needs to find out the local agency that has been hired by the government to resettle refugees and contact it to inquire about the obligations entailed by such a commitment.

While working with the government or community centers generally implies limits in terms of explicit evangelization, there is nothing to stop a genuine friendship from being formed. And after the class is over or the family is resettled, and the charity and kindness of the Christian has been seen, one must pray for the movement of the Spirit in his friends' hearts and be ready at all times to give a reason for his or her faith.

Such is a short and incomplete list of the possibilities. If they seem too grand then one can

certainly begin with a prayer group for the Muslims of the world, learning about different sorts of Islam, different customs and so on. The point is that Western churches—especially those who believe strongly in the redemptive power of the cross of Christ and are not ashamed of the Gospel—need to take an active role in this work of evangelization, not only with an eye to help Muslims but with the firm intention of kindly and clearly presenting the Gospel.

Embracing the challenge of Muslim outreach will certainly put us in uncomfortable and challenging circumstances. But it is the only way forward wherein we can live out the Great Commission while avoiding the two vices of xenophobia and self-delusion which are so common in the churches of the West today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abu Daoud is a scholar and lay missionary involved with reaching Muslims in the Arab world. He is affiliated with Anglican Frontier Missions (www.afm-us.org). He holds degrees in Philosophy and Theology and will begin doctoral studies in 2008 in the field of world Christianity. In addition to English he speaks Spanish and Arabic. He blogs at islamdom.blogspot.com and is interested in mobilizing lay missionary families from churches in the West to work in evangelizing Muslims in the Middle East. His main country of interest is Yemen. Abu Daoud is a pseudonym used by the author due to the sensitive nature of his work.