

How Muslims See Us

BY DONALD WAGNER

Islamic revivalist movements are reshaping culture, politics, and personal ethics throughout the Muslim world from Morocco to Indonesia. Islamists are impatient with their regimes, their way of life, and the intrusion of western materialism and sexual promiscuity. Unfortunately, many have linked Christianity with the evils of the secular west.

When Jerry Falwell stated on *60 Minutes* in October, 2002, that the Prophet Mohammad was “a terrorist” and “a violent man of war,” Muslims from Egypt to Indonesia poured into the streets by the tens of thousands to express their outrage.¹ The President of Malaysia was forced to broadcast a national call for calm to prevent violence against churches and U.S. businesses. Falwell’s remarks followed a series of similar statements by Christian leaders—Franklin Graham, for example, called Islam a “very evil, wicked religion” and Pat Robertson echoed this view on the Christian Broadcasting Network, which is viewed throughout the Muslim world. The timing of these statements could not have been worse for the image of Christianity and of the United States in the Islamic world, given the unpopular war in Iraq and President George W. Bush’s initial description of the U.S. response to the attacks on the World Trade Towers as a “crusade.”

Despite the President’s corrections, these pronouncements stick in the hearts and minds of Muslims with serious ramifications for local Christians and missionaries in what some mission agencies are calling the “10/40 window.”² In this vast region between ten and forty degrees north of the Equator, and from Morocco and Tunisia in North Africa to Indonesia and the Philippines, a more conservative form of Islam has been reshaping cul-

ture, politics, and personal ethics. This is true especially in the Arab nations which are the focus of this article.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISLAMIC REVIVAL

Dr. John Esposito, Director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, cautions against using “Islamic fundamentalism” to describe the diverse revival of Islam now underway. The term is pejorative and is usually applied to “those who are literalists and wish to return to and replicate the past,” he notes, though “few individuals and organizations in the Middle East fit such a stereotype.”³ (I will substitute the terms “Islamic revivalism” for the movement and “Islamists” for the individual adherents.) In fact, most Islamic revivalist movements are engaged in providing a more hopeful future, while at the same time calling Muslims back to a more conservative interpretation of the Qur’an and Shari’a, or Islamic law. They are returning to old traditions while embarking on radically new political initiatives.

Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (1281-1919), the Arab nations have suffered an extensive period of degradation, domination, and defeat. The humiliation continues to a degree, with successive defeats at the hands of various European powers, the United States, and Israel. Israel’s victories, with significant support from the United States in the wars of 1967, 1973, 1982 (Lebanon), and the Palestinian Intifadas (1987-1993 and 2000-present), have brought various Arab regimes and revolutionary movements to their knees. Perhaps more significantly, the Arabs have been unsuccessful in regaining control over their third most holy site, the Haram al-Sharif (the “Noble Sanctuary” which includes the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque) in Jerusalem.

During the period of colonial struggle since the mid-nineteenth century, many Arab states experimented with secular Pan-Arab Nationalism. Since the late 1960s under strong secular leaders such as Gamal Abdal Nasser (1918-1970) in Egypt and the Ba’athist (Renaissance) Parties in Syria under President Hafez al-Assad and Iraq under Saddam Hussein, this movement led to strong military governments but limited freedom for the people. Others experimented with Marxism, which had little success in the more theocentric Islamic culture of the region. Islamic monarchies have ruled the Gulf since the early nineteenth century, as in the case of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and to a degree in Jordan. Because these monarchies are in close alliance with the United States, they are targets for the Islamists.

Arabs, thus, have witnessed decades of failure in their political and economic systems. All models of political change have failed, whether secular Arab nationalism or alliances with a super power, the Soviet Union or the United States. The Arab people have fallen further behind the developed world in nearly every quality of life indicator: civil rights, median

income, education, social services, technology, participatory democracy, and personal and national security. Yet throughout the region Arabs and Muslims see the prosperity of the west on their television sets, computers, and movies. While their conservative personal mores despise the exaggerated materialism and sexual promiscuity transmitted to their region, the people yearn for a higher standard of living and the basic freedoms enjoyed by the west. They also despise how the United States and some European countries privilege Israel, often applying a double standard in human rights and international law in favor of Israel but hostile to Arabs.

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab (1703-1792) initiated a conservative Islamic reform movement in the Arabian Peninsula that would have even wider ramifications in the nineteenth century. Al-Wahab called Muslims to return to the original teachings of the Qu'ran and to interpret them much more strictly in relation to Islamic law, or Shari'a. Gradually his teachings spread across the mostly Sunni Islamic Middle East.

Within this social and religious context, as early as the late 1920s, conservative Muslim thinkers began to emerge with a new vision for the Arab nations, such as the Egyptian intellectuals Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949) and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) who gave prominence to the Muslim Brotherhood, a radical Islamic revivalist movement in opposition to the Egyptian government. Qutb lived in the United States in the 1950s and four things troubled him: churches using secular entertainment schemes to draw larger numbers; rampant sexual immorality; racism toward African-Americans; and Israel receiving unconditional support by the U.S. government and in mainstream media.

Qutb attended church functions such as dances and secular film screenings that struck him as immoral, and he concluded the churches were becoming centers of entertainment and promiscuity. On sexual permissiveness, he recounted being deeply offended by a conversation with a female student he met at a seminar in Greeley, Colorado, who told him that "the issue of sexual relations is purely a biological matter. You complicate the matter by imposing the ethical element on it. The horse and mule, the bull and cow...do not think about this ethical matter...and, therefore, live a comfortable, simple, and easy life."⁴

Qutb also thought the United States was turning a blind eye to the injustices committed against the Palestinians. "The creation of Israel led to [Arab] disenchantment with the west; Qutb perceived that the West had betrayed the Arabs," writes Ahmad Moussalli in summarizing Qutb's views. "The British, for instance, defaulted on their promises of independence for the Arabs and had been attempting to stifle the spirit of the Egyptian people as well as the movement of the Muslim Brotherhood's fighting forces in Palestine. Also, the United States had betrayed the Arabs by siding in the United Nations with the Zionists on the question of Palestine, and by sponsoring and approving the creation of the Jewish state."⁵

Dismayed by secular American culture, Qutb prematurely terminated his Ph.D. studies in the United States, returned to Egypt, and embraced the extreme form of Islam practiced by al-Banna. His deep-felt resentment toward the United States and Israel coupled with the growing intrusion of secular culture in Egypt led him to take up the pen and sword in the cause of Islam, the only answer to the Godlessness of the west.

The radicalization of Sayid Qutb may be a dramatic case, but it is representative of the new wave of Islamic revivalism that has spread in small cells from Morocco to Indonesia as the region grows increasingly impatient with its regimes, its way of life, and the intrusion of western materialism and sexual promiscuity. For these “new Muslims,” Islam offers a complete worldview that encourages them to reform their personal lives and their political systems. Unfortunately, many have linked Christianity with the evils of the secular west.

DISTINGUISHING THE GOSPEL FROM EMPIRE

The Arab and Islamic worlds have witnessed a series of crises and military invasions that at times mixed Christian missions with western nationalist politics, usually at the expense of the Gospel. The Crusades (1099-1187) are the most tragic and lasting example as European Christians sought to restore Christianity to the Holy Land in a ruthless invasion of lands that were predominantly Muslim. Rarely discussed is the fact that thousands of Jews and Arab Christians also were massacred.

Roman Catholic missionaries brought European culture with their Christianity, sometimes but certainly not always in violent and arrogant forms, beginning with the Crusades and continuing into the nineteenth century. Protestant missions entered the Middle East during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, often with intimate ties to western governments. This is not to discount the wonderful ac-

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complishments of Catholic and Protestant missionaries in spreading the Gospel and establishing educational institutions and medical facilities, but all too often as missionaries exported western political interests and culture into the Islamic world, the essence of the Gospel was compromised.

More recently, U.S.-based mission agencies slowly but steadily are en-

gaging the Arab and Muslim worlds. After 9/11, a new and bolder blend of western Christian missions and televangelist broadcasting has been tied to the U.S. military presence in the Middle East. The evangelical mission rhetoric sometimes appears to converge with the neoconservative ideology of the George W. Bush administration: while neoconservatives such as Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and prominent journalists

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target Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Iran for “regime change,” evangelical mission agencies are targeting Muslim countries with aggressive strategies that rush into the region on the heels of war.

By adopting the 10/40 window as their target, evangelical missionary movements either inadvertently or intentionally are

embracing the strategy of the secular neoconservatives, notes Josh Anderson in a recent issue of *Sojourners Magazine*. Most Muslims, already hypersensitive to a thousand years of European and American intervention, feel they are being targeted by a new “Crusade,” led this time by the U.S. military and Christian evangelicals. Not only Muslims, but also indigenous Middle Eastern Christian pastors and denominational leaders have articulated this perspective. “With a portion of American Christians waving flags around a radical foreign policy and simultaneously sending missionaries to the nations, the danger of a ‘poisoned gospel’ is real indeed,” Andersen laments. “To ‘muddle maps’ in this way is to taint missionary efforts with the intrinsic violence and self-serving nature of the U.S. government’s foreign policy. For Christians committed to the expansion of the reign of God, efforts to keep the missions movement free from the national political agenda are crucial.”⁶

As a result of this linkage of U.S. foreign policy with evangelism, local Christians and missionaries are increasingly subject to violent reprisals. This is a relatively new phenomenon, but it exacerbates another serious problem that has been decades in the making: the indigenous Christian churches are slowly disappearing throughout the Islamic world and the Middle East in particular. British travel author William Dalrymple’s *From the Holy Mountain* paints a grim picture of the future of Christianity in these lands where the church took root. In Turkey very few Christians remain, especially in the eastern provinces where hundreds of thousands Armenian and Syrian Orthodox Christians once lived. Only a few elderly caretakers remain to care for empty monasteries and churches. The second worse case

is the Holy Land, where Palestinian Christians have declined from twenty percent of the population in 1900 to a meager one percent today. Indeed, the Christian presence in Jerusalem and the West Bank may be just one generation from extinction. However it is Israel's occupation and the endless violence, not militant Islam, which are causing Palestinian Christians to emigrate.

Columbia University's political historian Rashid Khalidi, while tracing the role of the United States in the Middle East, notes that Middle Easterners had a favorable view of the United States until recently:

...in the eyes of many in the region the United States has gradually changed in the past few decades. It went from being considered a benevolent, disinterested outsider to something quite different: a power with a massive presence in the Middle East, a broad range of interests there, and objectives not always compatible with those of the people of the region. While most Middle Easterners for the first century and a half of American involvement with the region shared this [positive] view, they do so no longer. It is in the context of this wide divergence between the two sides that the post-9/11 American interventions have taken place, with many Americans seeing not only the invasion of Afghanistan but also the much more fraught invasion of Iraq in these high minded terms, and people in the region generally taking a quite different view.⁸

Middle Easterners who once were fascinated with things American and maintained a keen desire to visit the United States are now becoming angry with U.S. policies. While many continue to separate the American people from what they interpret as unjust and militaristic imperial policies of the government, these boundaries are vanishing. In brief, the United States has replaced England and France as the hated colonial power, the occupying power that needs to be repelled from the region. While the United States proclaims a commitment to democracy and human rights, many Muslims and Arabs hear these pronouncements as empty phrases that are selectively applied, favoring Israel and targeting the Arab and Islamic world. Sadly, the image and witness of Christianity are perceived as associated with this imperialism, a fact all too often confirmed by the behavior and words of various evangelical missionaries.

MOVING TOWARD DIALOGUE

How can individuals, churches, and mission agencies approach the Middle East and Islamic world with greater sensitivity and awareness? Charles Kimball suggests that our commitment to Christ need not be compromised by greater sensitivity to our pluralistic world:

In my case, I am aware that being born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, as opposed to Cairo or Banaras made a great deal of difference in the

formation of my world view and belief system. Unlike past centuries, however, it is increasingly difficult to slip back into a comfortable parochialism after such matters have surfaced. While the act of faith and the intentional decision to follow Christ transcend the accident of birth, we cannot escape the ever present reality of pluralism.⁹

He examines three paradigms that describe how Christians approach this increasingly pluralistic world: inclusivism, exclusivism, and pluralism. We can benefit by surveying all three as we consider how to position ourselves in relation to Islam.

The *inclusivist paradigm*, which is more common among Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and mainline Protestant Christians, holds to the efficacy of Jesus Christ for salvation but opens the door to God's wider grace. It counsels against our making a final judgment against people of other faiths. The Second Vatican Council adopted this view:

Those who through no fault of their own, do not know Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.¹⁰

Even if we conclude that this paradigm compromises the Gospel, we can benefit from the sensitivity it offers. So, for instance, Kenneth Cragg in his remarkable collection of Christian and Muslim prayers recommends that we set aside our judgments in the encounter with Islam while not surrendering our faith:

Only 'a part' of either community will be ready and willing participants. Only 'a part' of what they comprehend in faith and doctrine will be present. On both counts there will be no question of 'the whole.' In sharing they will be 'apart' from their full identity and—as is always true in praying—they will have 'come apart'—as Jesus often bade his disciples, into quiet, seeking, or, as the Qur'an puts it, 'desiring the face of God.'¹¹

In other words, when engaging in dialogue and personal relationships with Muslims, Cragg suggests that we set aside our judgments and differences in order to establish common ground and first establish trust. Debates and judgments can come later.

The *exclusivist paradigm*, a dominant view throughout church history and the one accepted by most evangelical Christians today, is based on the conviction that Jesus Christ provides the only means of salvation for humanity. Kimball notes that this view can allow for dialogue and greater sensitivity toward other religions. While Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and

Franklin Graham take an adversarial approach to Islam, others evangelicals like Brother Andrew present an attractive alternative. Brother Andrew has felt a burden for the Islamic world since his days of smuggling Bibles into the former Soviet Union and China, famously chronicled in *God's Smuggler*, but today he concentrates on supporting the church in the Islamic world. In every encounter—whether meeting with leaders of Hizbollah, the “Party of God,” in Lebanon, or Hamas, the “Islamic Resistance Movement,” in the Gaza Strip and West Bank—he is clear that it is the love of Jesus Christ that compels him to love the Muslim people. When possible, he leaves Gospel tracts and copies of the Bible with his dialogue partners, and lets them know he is praying for them. When Israel expelled over 400 Hamas leaders from Gaza and left them on a mountain in the middle of winter in 1993, Andrew brought them food, blankets, and Bibles, and endured severe criticism from many evangelical leaders for “befriending the enemy.” Over the years he has found remarkable openness and has earned a loving trust with these leaders to the extent that they have allowed him to share his message at Islamic universities and institutions. Very few, if any, evangelicals have reached the inner sanctums of the leading Islamists in the Arab and Islamic world as has Brother Andrew, who has not compromised his Christian witness but has reached out to Muslims with love, honesty, and compassion.

“I know you,” a Muslim student in the Gaza Strip greeted Andrew after he delivered a lecture at the Islamic University. Andrew didn’t recognize him, but the student continued, “I was at the lecture in the auditorium last year.”

“Then why are you smiling? I didn’t think you accepted what I said.”

“No, it was great!”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you did not put us down. You left us in our dignity. That is why me and my friends admired you and what you said. We have never had the opportunity to hear about Christianity before.”¹²

The “open exclusivist” paradigm modeled by Brother Andrew is very attractive to me. I would encourage at the same time the “suspension of judgment” suggested by Kenneth Cragg and Charles Kimball while establishing initial trust with individual Muslims or in small study groups.

The *pluralist paradigm*, as interpreted by Kimball, differs from the other two, for it does not see Jesus Christ as the unique means of salvation. Plu-

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ralists like theologians John Hick and Hans Kung believe that all people, despite their differing (and even contradictory) religious beliefs and practices, are on a path to God or ultimate reality. This paradigm is generally not an option for evangelicals or for most Muslims.

STARTING WITH PRAYER

Whether we live in an urban area or in a smaller community with a university, we have opportunities for dialogue and deeper relationships with Muslims. We might pause to ask God to ground our conversations with an increased sensitivity to our Muslim sisters and brothers. A significant period of personal and collective prayer within our Christian communities, seeking a compassionate and humble spirit, can go a long way in preparation for dialogue that leads to understanding. Later, as we begin to establish trust within individual relationships or small groups, prayer may become an important dimension of our meetings. Participants may consider jointly praying through Kenneth Cragg's *Common Prayer: A Muslim-Christian Spiritual Anthology*, a remarkable collection of prayers and theological reflections. Christian readers will find several Muslim prayers that echo the language of the Psalter:

Praise be to God, sovereign Lord, author of the universe, who raises the winds and orders the morning, worshipped in religion and the Lord of the worlds.... Praise be to God who hearkens unto me when I call upon him, covers my unworthiness when I have been rebellious and magnifies his grace upon me.... I will sing to his praise and make mention of him in thanksgiving.¹³

Though we may begin our journeys with Islam and the Middle East from differing points of vantage—with varying experiences, expectations, and interpretative “lens”—it is utterly essential that we place Jesus Christ at the center of our souls, and approach Islam and the complex political and religious dynamics of this region with a listening spirit, the compassion of Jesus, and the humility he recommended: “you all must be as children.” Fr. Anthony Bloom reminds us that the root for humility is the Latin *humus*, or the fertile topsoil that is more open and porous, thus facilitating growth and richness.¹⁴

We must have a humble attitude, a listening heart, and a contrite spirit as we encounter Muslims. At times the journey will be difficult and controversial. But we will discover rich growth in our own Christian faith as well as make new friends on the path of dialogue that seeks understanding.

NOTES

1 “Zion’s Christian Soldiers,” *60 Minutes* (October 6, 2002).

2 For an overview of the 10/40 window approach to Christian missions, see George Otis, Jr., ed., *Strongholds of the 10/40 Window: Intercessor’s Guide to the Least Evangelized Nations* (Seattle: YWAM Publishing, 1995). The 10/40 window includes about 90% of the

world's poorest nations. Within the Arab nations in this region, 38% of the population is under fourteen years of age. The overwhelming majority of these young people face bleak economic conditions, with unemployment rates in many areas being above 15%, or three times the world average.

3 John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.

4 Quoted in Ahmad S. Moussalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb* (Beirut, Lebanon: American University of Beirut Press, 1999), 29. Moussalli offers a sympathetic study of Qutb and his influence in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

5 *Ibid.*, 29-30.

6 Josh Andersen, "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition," *Sojourners* (February 2005), 32.

7 William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey Among the Christians of the Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999).

8 Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004), 35.

9 Charles Kimball, *Striving Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1995), 87.

10 Austin Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Company, 1980), 367.

11 Kenneth Cragg, *Common Prayer: A Muslim-Christian Anthology* (Oxford: One World Press, 1999), 2.

12 Brother Andrew and Al Janssen, *Light Force: A Stirring Account of the Church Caught in the Middle East Crossfire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 2004), 219.

13 "Ramadan Prayers" quoted Cragg, *Common Prayer*, 2.

14 Anthony Bloom, *Beginning to Pray* (New York: Paulist Press, 1970), 11.



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