

The Great Muslim Challenge

Learning from Their Dedication

As we look at the Islamic challenge, at their dedication, consecration and obedience, there is much that Muslims can teach us concerning our faith and walk as Christians. Not only can and should we pray for them, but also pray with them.

by J. Christy Wilson, Jr.

In Romans 15:20 the apostle Paul says, “I have made it my goal to preach Christ where He was not known.” Yet today, less than 2% of the Protestant Church’s missionary personnel are working among Muslims, who form the largest unreached people bloc in the world. Over a billion are following a false absolute, a false prophet and a false hope, expecting to have salvation and eternal life through a works oriented religion. In Romans 3:21 the Bible clearly states that no one will be justified by the works of the law. Yet we Christians have done so little to reach the Muslims.

Evangelism is Essential

I remember coming back from Afghanistan to bring our oldest daughter to enter Wheaton as a freshman in 1969. At that time I was able to attend the North American Congress on Evangelism headed by Billy Graham, in Minneapolis. While there I heard Dr. James Kennedy, who had a special meeting for ministers. Since I was the pastor of the Community Christian Church in Kabul—an international congregation there—I was able to attend. There were over 600 pastors. He asked, how many of us, either in a Bible school, a Christian college, or a seminary, had had a course that taught how to lead someone to Christ. Out of over 600 pastors, only three hands went up. He said, “Do you see? We are emphasizing all kinds of good things in our training, but we have left out the most important.” When our Lord formed His school and called His disciples, He said, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men, (and women)” and that is what He did. That was His main goal.

At that time, I didn’t realize I’d be teaching in a seminary; I planned to spend the rest of my life in Afghanistan. But I determined that if I ever taught in a Christian school I would teach a course on personal evangelism because I didn’t learn it in seminary; I learned it from a Christian layman who was a businessman. He would come to the secular university where I was and have a Bible study, and the students would argue with him; and he would not only turn to the Bible to talk with them, but he would lead them to Christ. That’s how I learned to lead people to the Lord. I taught at Gordon-Conwell—but I had a hard time trying to get faculty to pass a requirement to have evangelism taught regularly in the M.Div. program.

It’s thrilling to see that one of Dr. McGavran’s last books was on evangelism, a subject so vital. We must recognize the immense importance of Christians learning how to lead others to Christ. That is our task!

That is why I was thrilled with the emphasis that Dr. Wang gave concerning AD 2000 at a recent ISFM Conference. He asked the same questions that he asked at the Lausanne Congress II in Manila. “How many of you believe the world can be evangelized by the year 2000?” When he asked that question about 10% said, “Yes, it is possible.” Then he asked it a second time, and about 20% said it was. The third time there were about 30%. But as Dr. Ralph Winter has pointed out, it doesn’t mean that it necessarily *will* happen. It is possible, if we Christians will really get on the job of doing what the Lord has told us to do in world evangelization.

Learning from Muslims

As we look at the Islamic challenge, it is important for us to recognize that they have a lot to teach us in their dedication. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini used to spend two and a half hours a day at prayer, even with all his responsibilities. He prayed five times a day, a half hour each time, completing the ablutions, and then going through the prayers. Their prayer is not like Christian prayer or intercession. Their prayers are rote sayings of the first chapter of the Qur’an—repeating it over and over again.

But Muslims put many of us to shame with their dedication to prayer and fasting. Many of them don’t eat or drink anything from early morning, at dawn, all through the day, until sunset. They don’t even take medicines, not even aspirins. Many Christians have forgotten all about fasting; and yet, our Lord said that when the Bridegroom would leave, His disciples would fast. In the Sermon on the Mount He said, “When you fast,” He didn’t say, “If you fast.” So Islam’s dedication in prayer and fasting is a great challenge to us.

Muslim Christology

Islam also challenges us in relation to christology. Islam believes far more about Christ than liberal “Christians.” Muslims believe in the virgin birth and that Jesus was perfect and without sin. They believe in His miracles, that He was raised the dead, that He gave new eyes to the blind, new limbs to the lame. They believe that Jesus foretold the future that He ascended to heaven and that He’s alive in heaven right now. They also believe in His second coming.

For that reason, it is so important not only to pray for Muslims, but also to pray *with* them. That's the great way to touch their hearts, because they don't know how to get answers to intercession for real needs by means of their rote prayers toward Mecca. We Christians, as we pray with them in the name of Christ, can lead them to the Lord. I've seen many Muslims come to Christ through Christians who would pray with them—not just for them. They believe that Christ is alive in heaven, and therefore you can pray to Him.

A Heresy of Christianity

The two main reasons that Islam is a heresy of Christianity is that they deny the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ—and that was mainly the fault of Christians! None of the Bible was translated into Arabic until 80 years after Mohammed had died. Yet Arabic was the only language Mohammed knew and therefore he had no chance to know the Bible in the one language that he knew. That's why in the Qur'an there are many references to the Bible—he had heard a lot of biblical stories—but there are no quotations of the Bible in the Qur'an. Islam arose in the Arabic context mainly as a failure of Christians missions to that region of the world.

In Mecca before Islam took root, every day they would pray to many idols. Mohammed saw that this was wrong. He had come across Christians in route in his caravan that went from Mecca to Medina, Jerusalem, and Damascus and back. He had contact with Christians. But he saw them worshipping statues of Mary instead of worshipping Jesus. He thought the Christian Trinity was God the Father, Mary the Mother, and Jesus the Son, and that's essentially what Muslims think today. When they ask you, "Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God?" and you say, "Yes," they think that you believe that God had sexual relations with Mary and produced Jesus the Son,

and that the Christian Trinity is a "Holy Family." So again it essentially is a failure of true missions. At the root of the problem to reach Muslims for Christ lies the failure to communicate the true Gospel message.

Islam denies not only the deity of Christ, but also the death of Christ. Muslims say that Jesus was too good a man for God to allow Him to die ignominiously on a cross. Instead, according to them, God caused the likeness of Jesus to fall on Judas and that Judas was the one who was captured and crucified, while Jesus ascended to heaven before the crucifixion. In this way Islam cuts the heart out of the Gospel of salvation.

One great Muslim scholar, Hajji Sutta Muhammad who had been to Mecca on a pilgrimage, came to Christ because he saw that only through Christ could his sins be forgiven. That is the great truth that the followers of Islam need to recognize.

Muslims not only are a challenge to christology, but they're also a challenge demographically, because there are so many of them in the world today. One out of every three unreached persons is a Muslim. For that reason I was concerned when I read the plans for the Congress in Seoul, Korea for GCOWE'95. At that time I mentioned to Dr. Thomas Wang the fact that in the Consultation there was nothing focused on the great Muslim challenge. Although there was a strong clear focus on unreached people groups in general, however, the majority bloc of unreached peoples are Muslims; two thirds of the nations in the 10/40 Window are Islamic. Yet there was no specific focus on this tremendous problem and challenge as such which George Otis calls the "greatest last giant." He wonderfully compares the occupation of the Holy Land, and the giants that were in the way then, to the evangelization of the world today and the giants that are opposing us today. He says that Islam is the greatest giant. I

wholeheartedly agree with him!

Theologically we need to study means of effectually reaching Muslims peoples for Christ. But we also need to send people to these groups. I am thrilled with what is happening now as many more Christians are studying Islam and are going to unreached Muslim peoples. I am also deeply impressed with the work Dr. Ralph Winter has done in mobilizing Christians to reach the unreached peoples of the world.

Evangelism by Muslims

As to the Muslim challenge, Dr. Wang has said, we have an evangelistic responsibility. Muslims put us to shame with their evangelism and even with their use of tentmaking witnesses. In a recent conference in Los Angeles the Muslims declared their goal to lead 70 million Americans to Islam. That is their evangelistic aim for this country.

They also have an eschatology that the whole world is going to become Muslim some day. They teach that Jesus Christ is coming back, at which time He will tell all the Christians that Mohammed was really the true prophet. At that point He is going to make Muslims of all Christians. After that He's going to die. They already have a grave for Him next to Mohammed's in Medina.

Muslims are also a challenge to us in relation to religious liberty. For them it is a one-way street: They don't allow religious liberty in their own Islamic countries because any Muslim that leaves that religion is supposed to be killed. This is in spite of the fact that the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states that everybody should have freedom to express his or her own faith and decide what he or she wants to believe. Nevertheless, Muslims demand religious liberty in non-Muslim countries.

A Challenge to our Lethargy

Another challenge to Christians is our own lethargy. It is amazing how few Christians are working with Muslims, even in our country. Dr. William McElwee Miller, one of the greatest missionaries to Muslims, just passed away last year at 100. He spent 43 years in Iran and led hundreds of Muslims to Christ. He said: "The reason there are so few converts to Christ from Islam is not so much because of the perversity of the fish as it is because of the paucity of the fishers." In other words, if we had more fishing going on in the Muslim world for Christ, we would be leading more Muslim peoples to Him.

I'll never forget explaining the Gospel to a man in Afghanistan who heard it for the first time. When he understood it, he said, "Why hasn't anyone told me this before?" That's what over a billion Muslims can say. "Why hasn't anyone told us before?"

Muslims challenge us in the area of mortality and sacrifice. To work among for the Lord in Muslim contexts is truly a life and death matter! And our Lord pointed this out very clearly. He said, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of everlasting life." (Rev. 2:10)

Just a few years ago two very close friends of ours were martyred for Christ in Iran. One was a Presbyterian minister that I knew well, who also had been head of the Bible Society in Teheran, as well as pastor of the Evangelical American Church there. He was martyred.

Then there was Mehdi Dibaj, who became a missionary from Iran to Afghanistan. When he was in Afghanistan, he invited a Muslim convert to his room for dinner. They were having

such wonderful fellowship, praying and praising the Lord that they delayed eating their supper. The cat got into the meat and ate it instead. Then this cat suddenly went into convulsions and died. Someone had poisoned the meat to kill Mehdi Dibaj and his Muslim convert friend.

Mehdi Dibaj went back to Iran after being a missionary in Afghanistan. Because he himself was a Muslim convert, he was arrested under Khomeini's fundamentalist regime and put into a box just three feet wide so he couldn't lie down. He spent two years praying in that box. Finally, they let him out into the general prison. He spent his time reading the Bible, like John Bunyan, and praying. He led over 1,000 Muslims to Christ in prison! The government officials were at their wit's end. They didn't know what to do. So they tried him on December 3, 1993. Some of you have seen his defense. It reminds one of Paul's defense before Agrippa, because it is like Scripture from the beginning to the end. Because of his faith he was convicted to be hung on January 15, 1994.

The Iranians did not realize the power of fax transmissions because his message got all over the world by this means. I even sent a fax to President Rafsanjani saying how wrong it was to kill this person who had become a Christian pastor. Instead of being executed on January 15 as convicted and tried, he was released. On January 16 he went to church for the first time in ten years, and what great rejoicing there was having him in the service.

Then the pastor, who welcomed him into his home that following Wednesday, disappeared. His body was found 11 days later. At this pastor's funeral,

Mehdi Dibaj said, "He has stolen my martyr's crown." However, a few months later Mehdi Dibaj also disappeared and was killed.

Since the *Taliban* (from the Arabic word for "theological students" or "disciples") have conquered the southern half of Afghanistan, prayers need to be offered in a special way for that nation. This fundamentalist Muslim group has closed all schools for girls, do not permit women to work out of the home, are forcing men to grow beards at least five inches long and will not allow boys to fly kites, saying that they should be studying the Qu'ran instead. Let us claim Psalm 2:8, "Ask of me (the Father) and I will give you (the Son) the nations (including Afghanistan) as your inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth as your possession."

God has called us to take the Gospel to the whole world. Securing our salvation involved death for Jesus Christ. His followers are not exempt. It was God's will that our Lord die, and rise again, and ascend into heaven, and send the Holy Spirit to evangelize His world. We, like the apostle Paul, have been given the responsibility to preach the Gospel where Christ is not known and to do it with great dedication even if it means giving our lives.

Dr. J. Christy Wilson, Jr. served as a missionary for 23 years in Afghanistan and Iran. He is Emeritus Professor of World Evangelization at Gordon-Conwell.