

Storm in the Desert

More Muslims have come to Christ in the last two decades than in all of history. God is orchestrating a profound miracle in our generation.

The temperature was in the 130s when more than 150 people, mostly evangelists and pastors, crammed into a shack to participate in a seminar on church planting I was conducting in Khartoum, Sudan, in 1996. This is where I met El Faqi for the first time.

A smiling father of seven and a former Muslim imam, El Faqi had come to Christ just a few months before and asked me, with tears in his eyes: “What can I do to win my Muslim brothers to Jesus? They are quite interested in the person of Jesus, but the church turns them off. Too formal, too Western, none of the family atmosphere they are so used to in the mosques.”

I told him: “Well, then don’t bring Muslims to church—bring the church to the Muslims! The nature of church is to be an extended, organic family, sharing life with God and each other in the power of the Holy Spirit just as you read in Acts 2.

“When this grips you, it transforms you and your house; it starts to touch others until it becomes an unstoppable, almost viral, movement that jumps from house to house. Do you think God can use you to do that?”

I will never forget the smile that spread across his face as he began to comprehend what I was saying.

The mid-1990s, I remember, was a time when, among mission-minded Christians, it was mostly a dream that Muslims would

come to Christ—and remain in the faith in any large numbers. Typically, according to my own field research during my postgraduate studies at the Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission, the average missionary reaching Muslims saw one convert per year.

Half would integrate into Christian churches. The others would return to Islam or, should they decide to stay with Jesus, face persecution from their families. Those who survived were often forced to flee their countries.

So I was in for quite a surprise when I came back one year later to revisit El Faqi and his family in his humble brick-and-clay home in Omdurman, outside Khartoum. My prophetic friend Erich Reber from Switzerland was with me.

In 1990 Reber had seen in a vision what he believes detailed a move of God in the Muslim nations, including Sudan. He had come with me to see for himself—and to speak this prophetic message to the Christians in leadership in the country.

However, we hardly could believe our eyes when El Faqi made us greet a long line of people who were standing patiently against the wall inside his compound.

“These are all people that came to Jesus in the last few months. More than 120, in fact,” he told us. “I put into practice what you taught me about church planting—and as you can see, it works!”

I remember discussing with him and a few friends how such an indigenous church-planting movement could reach 1,000 new house churches in the next five years. However, God allowed

another path for El Faqi. A militant Muslim group got wind of his work and threatened him with death.

Just before his executioners came to his door, he and his family were able to get away, and ultimately found asylum in the U.S. Sadly, he died there in a mysterious car accident.

El Faqi is for me more than a lost friend and personal hero. I keep his picture on my prayer wall because he symbolizes an imminent move of God among Muslims. And, dare I say it, there are now many El Faqis out there—and the movement has definitely begun.

A Millennial Moment

Let me back up a little bit to explain why I believe we are witnessing a millennium event. Fourteen centuries ago, Islam overran previously Christian nations such as Egypt and Tunisia.

For the last 1,000 years, Christians have found it difficult to win Muslims for the gospel. Islam, with 1.4 billion adherents, is the world's second-largest religion after traditional Christianity, and for many centuries it has been mostly resistant to the gospel.

As a young Christian, I heard few sermons on missions to Muslims, and most of them had a simple bottom line: "It is practically impossible to win Muslims for Christ." Today I know this was a message from hell. It was, in my opinion, born of centuries of pseudo-missionary frustration.

Ineffective missionary methods; cultural misunderstanding; non-integrative, imported and functionally unbiblical churches on the mission field; and a fantastic lack of faith among top Christian leaders right up to the 1990s combined to create a climate of missionary unbelief. In 1982, only 2 percent of all Christian missionaries were working among Muslims—then almost one-third of the world's population—a ridiculously small proportion.

However, things changed, as these reports from South Asia-based American missionary Kevin Greeson indicate:

“One morning in May 1999, I read a report in a Bangladeshi national newspaper, quoting a Member of Parliament who stood before his colleagues and asked: ‘What is happening to our religion? Muslims in the capital are throwing their Koran in the trash, and in one district they even throw the Koran in the river.’

“What was going on? One day, an imam held the Koran up in the mosque, saying, ‘This book has done nothing to improve our lives.’ Then he threw the book in the river. The congregation of around 4,000 men followed their leader's example, throwing their Korans in the river too.”

Greeson's reports show something of the inner erosion happening in Islam. Just as with traditional “churchianity,” animism or Buddhism, the core of Islam generally just preserves the status quo of poverty, uncertainty and illness for most—and riches for a privileged minority.

Moreover, religion can only superficially answer the questions every person faces: Why am I here? What am I supposed to be

doing? Where am I headed?

The Bangladeshi imam spoke for many in his recognition of the truth. In this phase of religious resignation, most people simply perform religious rites perfunctorily—outwardly going with the flow, inwardly questioning.

Let's fast-forward a bit. In the spring of 2005 I ate lunch with three missionaries who were working among Muslims.

One of them said: "In the past two years, I've seen over 5,000 Muslims come to faith in Jesus in northern India. The work is growing so fast that the number will very likely soon pass 50,000. They meet in multipliable house churches, and ever more mullahs [Islamic clergy] are joining the movement."

Another said: "From our own experience and through other reliable sources, we know that in Bangladesh 7,000 Muslims were baptized each month in 2003. They are radical followers of Jesus. In 2004, an incredible 120,000 joined them. Since 1997, the number of Muslims following Jesus has grown by a phenomenal 522,000."

More than a half-million? That's more than the number of evangelical Christians in Switzerland, Austria and France! Is that possible? What has happened?

"More Muslims have come to Christ in the past two decades than at any other point in history," says respected Baptist missiologist and author David Garrison. "In North Africa, 16,000 Muslim Berbers turned to Jesus; in a central Asian republic, 4,000 Muslims have found Christ; 15,000 Kazakh Muslims found Christ in the past 15 years. Even Islamic

experts recognize what is happening: a massive missionary movement of Muslims to Christ.”

Greeson’s story again is an example of what’s happening. In his Camel Training Manual, he writes:

“In September 1997, I lay down on my hotel bed in Singapore, where I was attending missionary training. Before going to sleep, I saw a vision of thousands of Muslims in Bangladesh going to Hell. The vision’s realism gripped me so strongly that I began to weep—for the first time in 22 years.

“The scene changed, though; the Muslims were given a new directive, were rerouted and went to Heaven. The next day, I was excited to hear that 30,000 U.S. Christians had taken part in a prayer campaign for the people group among which I wanted to work, and that they had been praying the very hour I had my vision.

“My first years there as a missionary brought no fruit; after two years, we had gathered 23 women who worked weaving baskets for export to the West. Then we heard of Abdul (not his real name).”

The Camel Knows

Abdul was a saved Muslim, or Isahi, which is translated “one who belongs to Isa (Jesus).” Greeson says that in 1998 Abdul saw 50,000 Muslims baptized and had seen 8,000 churches planted by 2003. He was doing something different, and Greeson’s team learned from him that they also must do things differently.

“We told the women to invite their husbands to a meeting; they all brought their husbands or fathers, and we explained verses from the Koran which speak of Jesus, showing Him to be far more than just a prophet.

“They were excited and angry—excited, because they recognized the truth about Isa (Jesus), and angry [because] their Imams ... had withheld the truth from them. Then we showed them the Jesus film in their language.

“What then happened was unbelievable; the men insisted on meeting again the next day. For four days, they sat there and listened to the gospel. They all turned to Jesus, and six new jamaats [house churches] were formed.

“Over the following 2-1/2 years, our team saw 4,500 Muslims baptised and 314 new churches started. Two years later, the number of churches had grown to over 800. The movement is still growing.”

What did Greeson teach the Muslims that made them so open to the gospel? He says it has something to do with a camel.

“Every Muslim knows that Allah has 99 names, and many know of a tradition that says that only a camel knows his 100th name,” Greeson writes in his Camel Training Manual. “That name is ‘Isa’! The Koran, the Muslims’ holy book, does not answer the question directly, but gives enough clear hints.

“It says, for example: Jesus knows the way to heaven (Sura Al-Imran 3:42-55); it lifts Him above the status of a prophet because it says Isa is holy (3:42-48); Isa has power over death (49-54); and Isa knows the way to heaven (55-56).

“The Koran says about Mohammed (Sura 46:9-10): ‘I am nothing new among prophets; I do not know what will become of me or my followers. I am just a voice of warning.’ The contrast with Jesus’ statements about Himself (e.g. John 6:47 and 14:1-7) could hardly be greater.

“If you then ask a Muslim, ‘I want to go to heaven when I die. Which prophet can help me get there?’ the result is often a process leading them to read the Injil [New Testament]—and find Jesus.”

Greeson says those who want to help Muslims find Christ and remain in Him must:

Speak in a way Muslims understand. “Canaanite” language is as much a hindrance as calling oneself a Christian, which is so culturally and historically laden that Muslims believe a person with Western culture is ungodly and immoral. Using the term Isahi is far better.

Embrace the culture. Paul became a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks. Followers of Jesus must learn to overcome their fear of foreign cultures through love. Cultural conformity is not a hindrance, but builds important bridges.

Send converts out early. When Muslims who become Isahis are discipled and sent out early, they win others to Christ and plant new churches, thus starting a movement with church multiplication as one of its basic principles.

Plant culturally relevant churches. “Please do not bring newly saved Isahis to existing traditional churches!” Greeson

advises. That tears them out of their cultural surroundings and causes them to be rejected by their friends and families—exactly the people a church-planting movement should reach. A far better strategy is to start culturally relevant meetings. House churches provide an ideal structure.

For Such a Time as This

Australian reformer Alan Hirsch, co-author of *The Shaping of Things to Come*, reckons that 10 percent of the Western population is on a huge spiritual quest, ready to completely reconfigure their church world. After the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the 2004 tsunami that devastated the Muslim fundamentalist territory of Aceh in Indonesia, we should not be surprised to similarly witness a growing sense of true disturbance and honest searching among many Muslims.

They ask: Is Islam no longer the most powerful religion on the planet? Why are we humiliated? Why does Allah allow that suffering? And many of the poor ask, Why is there no upgrade in our life?

This growing quest for authentic spirituality among Muslims is joined with three timely facts that God has allowed to come together: (1) the emergence of culturally relevant Bible translations; (2) indigenous forms of church, especially house-church networks; and (3) innovative training and evangelistic methods such as Greeson's camel training that were previously unavailable.

What does this mean? The God of Abraham has not forgotten Ishmael, the boy crying to Him in Genesis 21, and He is answering his plea by revealing Himself to him and his

descendants. It also means the seed of countless excellent missionaries, who have laid down their lives for Muslims to come to Christ, is bringing fruit.

God has started a movement that is bringing in what others have sown. This will spark an unsuspected missionary force even within the West—Muslims who find Christ inside Europe and the United States will start winning other Muslim families to Christ at a speed no Christian church would be able to achieve at this point.

With many extended families in existence, a far less individualistic lifestyle, a healthy fear of God and a readiness for a very radical dedication to the things of God, these Isahis will create a missionary movement that will spread like wildfire.

Last, this means a huge learning and harvesting opportunity for all of us in the West. We are seeing the first fruits of a radically reformed Christianity that is finding its way back to its own apostolic and prophetic roots. That, in turn, will bring in a new and huge missionary response—overseas and at home.

As we all humble ourselves, go back to literal obedience to God's building principles, and give ourselves to God, one another and our land in complete dedication, heaven is the limit for what the future has for us all.

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