

Unlocking the Heart of Islam

Saudi Arabia's government tries to stop the spread of the gospel inside this tightly sealed nation. But foreign converts are evangelizing faster than ever.

Are the world's 17.5 million Saudis hostile to Christians and their Jesus? In theory, of course not. The Muslim holy book, the Quran, reveres Jesus as a prophet and calls for respect for both Christians and Jews as "People of the Book."

But in today's reality, it looks otherwise. Certainly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia leads the world roster for unbending regulations designed to keep its 100 percent Muslim population untainted by Christian influences. After all, the Muslim prophet Muhammad ordered his followers to protect Islam's two holy cities by keeping non-Muslims out of Mecca and Medina, and today's Islamists think the ban should cover all Arabian soil. Some 1.2 billion Muslims bow in prayer several times a day toward Mecca, where they are expected to come on pilgrimage at least once in their lifetimes.

So at every international airport and border crossing into Saudi Arabia, customs officers comb through suitcases, confiscating everything from cross emblems to Christmas cards. Some travelers even have to fight to keep their personal Bibles because first and foremost the goal is to stop copies of Christian Scriptures from getting into the country.

The kingdom's unbending intolerance of all non-Muslim worship within its borders is even more notorious. Although almost a million of the country's 7 million foreign workers are Christians, Saudi law categorically forbids them to gather for public worship. The royal family insists it recognizes the right of non-Muslims to worship in private. But it's no secret

that the religious police, or mutawe'en, offer a standing bounty of 50,000 riyals (five years' salary) for exposing a house church.

In particular, these religious vice squads target house churches of non-Westerners discovered to be worshiping secretly, usually forcing the arrest and deportation of their leaders. Any Westerners tend to be handled with kid gloves, but other expatriate Christians are severely mistreated while under arrest.

They may be subjected to verbal abuse, beatings, cruel lashings, or refused meals and thrown into filthy, crowded cells. In the absence of due process of law they are rarely granted either legal or consular access for months on end.

Saudi Arabia's ruling Wahhabi interpretation of Muslim beliefs and practices declares that Islam thrives on "hostility toward infidels." Islamic religious teaching has dominated some 70 percent of the nation's educational curriculum in recent decades. In the last few years, Saudi youngsters have also been carefully indoctrinated against Christian beliefs.

"Young schoolboys are eager to tell you now that the Jews didn't manage to kill Jesus, that the Bible has been changed, parroting all the usual Muslim attacks against Christian beliefs," one former businessman in the kingdom says.

One of the best sellers in Mecca and Medina during the last year was a 1,200-page compilation of the greatest fatwas (religious prohibitions) on modern life. Good Muslims were warned to shun all non-Muslims—don't befriend them, don't smile at them, don't greet them on their religious holidays.

Even on the Internet, more than 2,000 Web sites are blocked by Saudi authorities. According to a Harvard Law School study, most of the blacklisted sites are “sexually explicit, or about religion.” Undoubtedly the government’s biggest headache is trying to block all the new Web sites popping up almost weekly inviting surfers to read the New Testament in Arabic online.

The paranoia is so intense that the name “Jesus” is a search-engine word in the Saudis’ sophisticated surveillance system, which monitors all telephone calls and e-mail messages in and out of the kingdom.

An Old Dilemma

It all adds up to antagonistic resistance to the gospel, so far as the Christian public worldwide understands it. It’s a blanket rejection of Jesus and His message, right?

Not according to one veteran missionary to one of the world’s toughest places for spreading the gospel.

“I don’t believe the Saudis have rejected Jesus,” Brother Andrew told Charisma. “They just haven’t met Him yet.”

According to Christians with years of firsthand experience inside the kingdom, the Dutch founder of Open Doors is right. But to the shame of the Christian church, this dilemma is nothing new. It’s been true for all of the last century, and many before.

“As there is practically no native church in Arabia,” missionary J.C. Young wrote in 1906, “one can scarcely speak

of Islam's attitude toward it."

Essentially, say those committed today to seeing that "native church" formed, Saudis have not had a chance to know the truth about Jesus because Christians are still hiding behind a bundle of ready-made excuses, such as Muslims don't want to talk about Jesus; evangelism is too dangerous; it's illegal; and so on.

"During my seven years in Saudi Arabia, my students asked me questions almost daily about Jesus and Christianity," one former university professor told Charisma. "Sure, they were scared to talk about this with me in front of anyone else, but they were astonished to meet a devout non-Muslim."

In contrast, another professor, also a believer, told Charisma that during his first year in the Arabian Gulf as a university lecturer, none of his Arab students seemed remotely interested in his attempts to develop spiritual conversations, unless it was to ask him, condescendingly, why he hadn't become a Muslim yet. An encounter with one student, however, revealed that the devout practice of Islam can sometimes be an unwitting attempt to satisfy a genuine spiritual hunger.

One early morning, after being unusually awakened by God, the professor had opened his Bible and started to read and pray. Slowly he was flooded with an overwhelming sense of God's presence.

"I felt literally 'washed' in God's presence during that hour," he recalled. "It was one of the deepest experiences of intimacy with God I have ever known."

Afterward, he left for work at his regular time, refreshed in his spirit beyond words. After classes, he was delayed and had to wait for a ride home. While he was working in his office, one of his students came by.

After the usual small talk, the Arab asked abruptly, "Professor, you are a Christian, right?"

"Yes, I am," the startled professor replied.

"So would you tell me what's so special about Christianity?"

Without hesitation, his teacher answered, "Personal intimacy with God." And then he went on to tell the young Muslim about his time alone with God that morning.

The student stared at him in silence. "Professor," he said after a long pause, "I would give anything for what you just described. I have done everything Islam requires of me.

"I do my prayers five times a day, I have memorized the entire Quran word- for-word, I fast during Ramadan, I have made a pilgrimage to Mecca—everything. But I have never, ever, experienced anything like what you just told me."

It was such a simple answer to give, the professor said later. "But God wanted to be sure I had it right, so He woke me up that morning so I wouldn't dare say anything else."

A Melting Pot of Christianity

Nevertheless, resident expatriates discount the occasional reports of “hundreds” of Saudis who have come to faith in Christ inside the country during the last decade.

“I think it’s the same wishful rumors getting recycled every year or so,” one long-term resident of the kingdom remarked wryly. Invariably, he said, they include veiled hints about one secret believer or another with “royal” connections, although no one is able or willing to verify the reports. Still, he is quick to confirm that he personally knows a number of Saudis who have chosen to follow Christ, whatever the cost.

“We’re meeting them now,” another Westerner agreed. “Some are being quietly disciplined, and certainly some are facing persecution—from their families if not local authorities.”

Often, something initially “quickenened their spirit” to the reality of the gospel—a dream, personal contact with a Christian believer, an isolated kernel of truth. One Saudi-born believer in Christ who “was afraid to read or even touch a Bible” all his life told Charisma that because of a dream he had he prayed to Jesus in a time of great need.

A zealous Muslim, he had won top honors in religious competitions at school and even led mosque prayers as a teenager. But then his parents divorced. Shattered, he abandoned his prayer habits and stopped believing in God.

Instead, he filled his life with his business career and making a lot of money. It was not until he was faced with a desperate problem he knew he could not solve that he suddenly remembered God again.

“For five years I hadn’t even thought about Allah,” he recalled. “I was ashamed to ask him for help because I wasn’t a Muslim any more. I didn’t pray, or believe, so I knew I deserved the death penalty.”

But he’d had a dream once about Jesus, so he began to wonder if the prophet of the Christians could help him. “Jesus, help me!” he had cried aloud.

Within 36 hours he learned that his dilemma had been solved, convincing him he needed to find out who Jesus really was. Then Jesus appeared to him in a second dream only days later.

“Right then, I started wanting to read the Bible,” he said. After one year of reading the Bible in an honest way, I found my way to the Lord Jesus Christ, and I found out how much God loves me.”

For the majority of Saudi believers, however, a final point of decision came as they wrestled with the powerful New Testament account of the life and words of Jesus.

Significantly, Western Christians admit they are not at the forefront of what the Spirit of God is doing inside the kingdom today. “With our preset agendas, we Westerners think we’re great mission strategizers,” one European commented. Twenty years ago, he said, God had a better strategy.

“Who would have ever thought of sending unconverted, nominal Catholic Filipinos to take jobs by the hundreds of thousands in Saudi Arabia, getting them converted to a vibrant, saving faith in Christ right there in the kingdom, and then releasing them to witness?” he asked.

The European recalled a secret meeting of Filipino believers he attended in one of Saudi Arabia's major cities in the mid-1980s. Some 120 Filipinos were present, each leading his own fellowship of 10 to 100 people. Together they represented some 10,000 Filipino believers. But when he asked how many of the 120 leaders had known Christ personally before coming to Saudi Arabia, only three raised their hands.

"These Filipinos just had the Scriptures, that's all," he said. "The first time they read through the book of Acts, they assumed the same things would happen to them—they would be beaten, people might suffer and even die, but there would be miracles, and it would be infectious!"

Together with other Asians and African believers, Filipinos continue to take the brunt of stiff crackdowns against their mushrooming underground meetings. But their grassroots witness will be felt for generations—lived out day after day while they work as maids, drivers, nannies, nurses, computer programmers, construction workers and in dozens of other jobs in Saudi homes, public institutions and private firms.

Largely because of the fervent impact of these believers upon the expatriate underground church, one deported Christian said that Saudi Arabia has become "the greatest melting pot for Christians in the in the heart of Islam!"

Prayer Before Politics

If nothing else, say Christians working there, their jobs give them a unique foothold to understand, love and pray by name for their indigenous Saudi colleagues and neighbors.

None of the expatriates here expect Christ's Great Commission to be fulfilled in Saudi Arabia through Western demands for "reciprocity" or legal guarantees of religious freedom. "It's the work of prayer, pulling down the strongholds of fear and revealing the power to turn from sin to God," one said.

"Something, someone has to dethrone Islam," another mused.

A century ago, American missionary Samuel Zwemer declared confidently that because 85 percent of the Muslims in the world had come under colonial rule he expected most of them to become Christians in short order. In fact, colonialism proved to be a great deterrent to the cause of Christian missions, even as the war on terrorism is proving to be today. The Christian message becomes blurred by association with Western politics and military objectives, raising a formidable psychological barrier for the Saudi Muslim to even want to consider who Jesus really is.

"Prayer has changed so much already," stressed one longtime resident of the region. "But still, it's only brought us to the edge."

At the dawn of 2003, Saudi Arabia remains wide open for one-on-one, holistic witness by thousands of foreign Christians. "It's up to us whether we're willing to be a part of it or not," one frontliner declared, "but Jesus is building His church there!"

Barbara G. Baker is the Middle East bureau chief of Compass Direct, a news agency raising awareness of Christians who are persecuted for their faith. She has lived in the Muslim world for the last 27 years.

ISLAM

Adherents worldwide: 1.2 billion

Largest concentrations: Islam comprises about 20 percent of the world's population. After Christianity, it is the largest religion in the world. The countries with the largest numbers of Muslims—more than 100 million each—are Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. Numerous other countries, primarily in North Africa and the Middle East, are almost entirely Muslim.

History: Islam was instituted in A.D. 610 when Muhammad received the first of a series of revelations, supposedly from the angel Gabriel, that were recorded and later became part of the Quran, Islam's sacred book. Muhammad doubted the origin of the revelations at first, but his wife convinced him that they were divine and encouraged him to teach what he had learned. Muhammad quickly gained a following. In A.D. 630 he took control of Mecca, and within a year he brought together all the tribes of the Arabian peninsula under the religion of Islam. Today the religion has two major sects—Sunni and Shiite—and several minor ones.

Core beliefs: Muslims have both beliefs and obligations. The obligations are required practices such as reciting the shahadah, a statement of commitment; praying; fasting; giving alms; and making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime. Core beliefs include:

* There is one true God, whose name is Allah.

* Between God and humans there are angels, two of whom are assigned to each person, one to record his good deeds and one his bad.

* God has spoken through many prophets, but Muhammad is the last and greatest of all.

America's Islamic Capital

Forget Ford and Chrysler. Detroit is now known as a hub of Muslim faith in this country.

Take a virtual tour through the Detroit suburb of Dearborn, Michigan, and you might think you've been transplanted to the Middle East. Signs for local shops are in Arabic. Mosques are as plentiful as churches. And the local McDonald's serves hallal, or "lawful," chicken nuggets, which are prepared according to Muslim dietary codes.

With an estimated 300,000 Muslims in metro Detroit, this is an unofficial hub of American Islam. Figures for the number of Muslims nationally are mostly unavailable, but estimates range from 1.5 million to 7 million. Largely because of immigration, the State Department considers Islam one of the nation's fastest-growing religions.

Despite media efforts to portray Islam as a peaceful religion, Christians in Dearborn say ministering to Muslims can be intimidating. One group declined to talk with Charisma because they feared backlash from Muslim leaders. They say Muslims are not permitted to convert, and those who do may be ostracized from their families.

Yet ministers reaching Muslims encourage Christians not to stereotype. Carl Ellis Jr., head of Project Joseph, a ministry to American converts to Islam, notes that most U.S. Muslims are loving people.

Partly in an effort to assuage harassment of Muslims and Arab Americans, Haaris Ahmad, executive director of the Michigan chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), portrays Islam as largely misunderstood. He argues that the oppressive practices in many Islamic nations misrepresent the Quran's teachings.

This moderate form of Islam is common in the United States, Ellis says. Many U.S. Muslims emphasize the peace-loving passages of Muhammad's earlier revelations, while militant Muslims focus on his later writings. However, Ellis says true Islam encompasses both perspectives.

Whether they believe Islam is peaceful or not, Christians will likely be surprised that the face of Islam is quite diverse. Seventy percent of the nation's 3 million Arab Americans are Christians—even in Detroit, where Muslims readily acknowledge that at least 50 percent of the Arab population there is Christian, though Chaldeans, a historically Catholic community from Iraq, estimate 70 percent.

CAIR reports there are 1,209 mosques in America with an estimated 2 million participants, 33 percent of whom are southern Asian, 30 percent African American, and 25 percent Arab.

Conversions have long been highest among African Americans,

who mostly practice orthodox Islam rather than the version taught by the Nation of Islam, which was founded in Detroit. Yet since 9/11, Ahmad says the media attention Islam has garnered has attracted new followers. Most are college-educated Caucasian women who have found that Islam “is a very rational religion,” he says.

Ironically, Ellis has observed that most American converts to Islam are former Christians who were searching for authentic Christianity. He says the key to ministering to them is threefold: praying, demonstrating Christ’s love, and wisely applying the Bible to their core questions and concerns.

Muslims who immigrated to the United States can be a harder sell, but Mark Gabriel, a former Muslim professor who converted to Christianity, encourages Christians to befriend their Muslim neighbors. “Love Muslims with the love of God,” he writes in his book *Islam and Terrorism* (Charisma House). “We must have the courage to reach out and touch their need with the gospel of love.”

Adrienne S. Gaines