

Strong Christian Winds Blowing Through the House of Islam

Ramadan is especially hungry in the Arab world this year.

As Muslims there observe the annual month of fasting, which began July 8, they face violence, chaos and growing uncertainty about the future. Have the hopes invested by so many in the Arab Spring finally died? Many think so.

“Roughly two-and-a-half years after the revolutions in the Arab world, not a single country is yet plainly on course to become a stable, peaceful democracy,” reported *The Economist* magazine in a recent cover story. “The countries that were more hopeful—Tunisia, Libya and Yemen—have been struggling. A chaotic experiment with democracy in Egypt, the most populous of them, has landed an elected president behind bars. Syria is awash with the blood of civil war.

“No wonder some have come to think the Arab Spring is doomed. The Middle East, they argue, is not ready to change. One reason is that it does not have democratic institutions, so people power will decay into anarchy or provoke the re-imposition of dictatorship. The other is that the region’s one cohesive force is Islam, which—it is argued—cannot accommodate democracy. The Middle East, they conclude, would be better off if the Arab Spring had never happened at all.”

But that view is “at best premature, at worst wrong,” *The Economist* contends. The millions of people in the region who want something better will not give up so easily. Nor should they. Political change comes slowly, but it comes. More than 20 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, for instance, the peoples once ruled by that dead empire still struggle under varying degrees of oppression. “The Arab Spring was always

better described as an awakening: the real revolution is not so much in the street as in the mind.”

The mind and the heart, meanwhile, are the unseen cradles of another, far more profound revolution. It has begun not just in the Middle East, but throughout the *Dar al-Islam*—the global “House of Islam” that encompasses 1.6 billion Muslims from West Africa to Indonesia.

For the first millennium of its existence, Islam expanded relentlessly, absorbing tens of millions of Christians, “while not a single un-coerced Muslim movement to Christ [took] place,” writes IMB strategist David Garrison, one of evangelical Christianity’s top scholars of church-planting movements around the world. Despite heroic efforts by missionaries and other believers, even “the Great Century” of Christian global advance (the 1800s) produced only one movement to Christ among Muslims that counted at least 1,000 converts.

Garrison’s forthcoming book, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, excerpted in the latest issue of *Mission Frontiers*, explores the cracks that have appeared more recently in the façade of seemingly monolithic Islam. Its biggest internal struggle, between Sunnis and Shiites, is obvious—and fuels many of the sectarian conflicts now tearing apart the Middle East. But a quieter shift is occurring behind the scenes, as Garrison confirmed in his travels to every corner of the Muslim world, where he collected interviews from more than 1,000 former Muslims who have decided to follow Christ.

“Today, in more than 60 separate locations in at least 17 of the 49 countries where Islam holds sway, new communities of Muslim-background followers of Christ are emerging,” Garrison writes. “Each of these movements has seen at least 1,000 baptized believers and at least 100 new worshipping fellowships, all of whom have come to Christ over the past two decades. In some countries, the communities have grown to

number tens of thousands of new Muslim-background followers of Christ.

“Though the total number of new Christ followers, perhaps as many as 1 million to 5 million, may be a statistically small drop in the vast sea of Islam, they are not insignificant. Not limited to a remote corner of the Muslim world, these new communities of believers are widespread, from West Africa’s Sahel to the teeming islands of Indonesia – and everywhere in between. ... And these religious renegades are paying an incalculable price [in persecution and rejection] for their spiritual migration to Christ. Yet they continue to come. What began as a few scattered expressions of dissent is now emerging as substantial, and historically unprecedented, numbers of Muslim men and women wading against the current of their societies to follow Jesus Christ. And it is only beginning.”

Some of these movements to Christ have occurred in places that seem, on first glance, unlikely breeding grounds for the Gospel: Iran, heart of the Shiite revival. Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world. Algeria, site of a murderous struggle between Islamists and the military that saw more than 100,000 civilians killed in the 1990s. Central Asia, ruled for generations by Soviet communism and, for centuries before that, by rigid forms of Islam. Bangladesh, born in the blood of a war for independence from Pakistan in 1971, ravaged by poverty and natural disasters.

What are the common elements? Conflict and wrenching change have played a role, to be sure. Political and religious oppression have given rise to a yearning for true freedom. But social and political explanations are inadequate. Could it be that God has chosen, in His time and by His power, to answer the prayers of many centuries, to reveal Himself in Christ to Muslims yearning for a true encounter with Him? Can there be any other explanation for the countless stories, offered by Muslims themselves, of Christ appearing to them in dreams and

visions?

“These 21st-century movements are not isolated to one or two corners of the world,” Garrison says. “They are taking place across the Muslim world: in sub-Saharan Africa, in the Persian world, in the Arab world, in Turkestan, in South Asia and in Southeast Asia.

“Something is happening, something historic, something unprecedented. A wind is blowing through the House of Islam.”

If this is true, how tragic it would be for Christians to continue responding to Muslims in fear and hatred—or worse, indifference—at the very moment of the greatest turning of Muslims to Christ in history. If God asks you one day where you were when He began opening the door to nearly a quarter of humanity, what will you say?

(Read an excerpt from A Wind in the House of Islam or visit Garrison’s new website.)

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