

Why Revival Is Exploding Among Muslims

It started with a dream. In A.D. 610, a man named Muhammad retreated alone to a cave in Saudi Arabia to meditate. There he believed he was visited by the angel Gabriel in a dream. It is said the disturbing experience thrust Muhammad into a depression until he received another **angelic message**: “O Muhammad, verily thou art in truth the prophet of Allah.” This **revelation** was the beginning of many for him and birthed a religion—Islam—that would profoundly change the course of the world.

Today thousands of Muhammad’s followers are having **dreams and visions** of their own—experiences that rock their world. While political revolution avalanches throughout the Middle East, tremors of spiritual change are also being felt on a widespread scale, especially within countries hostile to Christianity. Ironically, thousands of stories are emerging from around the world of Muslims being awakened to the gospel, literally from their dreams.

- Karima*, a Muslim, dreamed she was in a car when it crashed. She was knocked out, but when she opened her eyes (in her dream), she saw that Jesus was the driver. “Come to me,” He told her, “I am with you. I love you.” That experience led her to seek out a Christian church, where she responded to the gospel.
- Omar had been locked up and tortured for years in a jail cell in a nation ruled by a dictator. One night a messenger visited him in a dream, telling him he would be set free. Within days he was released from prison and traveled to America where newfound friends reached out to him. When he was given a book with a picture of Jesus on the cover, his eyes lit up. “I know him,” he said. “He came to me in a dream.”

- Yasmin was fearful and anxious. She cried out to Allah, asking him to help her, but she remained unchanged. One night while visiting friends in the U.S., she was awakened from her darkness with an epiphany. “Walking around the house of my friend,” she now explains in broken English, “suddenly I felt that I was blind, [but] now I can see.”

That terminology, though cliché to most believers, was foreign to Yasmin, who was born in an Islamic nation and was never exposed to “Christianese.”

“It was very obvious,” she recalls, describing it as a feeling as if something literally changed inside her head. “I felt that it was Jesus who did something to me.”

She later learned her sister—a Christian still living in her home country—was praying for her. Yasmin received a Bible, was baptized and began to grow with her new church family. (Her sister, now in ministry, has also had supernatural encounters, saying that she’s heard the voice of God seven times, “like a man beside me, talking to me. Whatever He says to me, it happens to me,” she describes.)

Testimonies of dreams and other encounters with Jesus can’t always be verified because by definition spiritual experiences are personal. Further, in countries where owning a Bible is illegal, **Muslim converts** are subject to persecution and even death, so their stories are not always documented. But believers who work among Muslims tell of life-changing conversions resulting from dreams. Like martyrs from antiquity until today, believers who have had profound, unexplainable encounters often develop profound, unshakeable faith.

Still, if converting to Christianity comes with such high stakes, what is it about these dreams that compels Muslims to forsake their religion and embrace Jesus?

“I think because it’s a direct communication from God,” says

Craig Keener, professor of New Testament at Asbury University in Wilmore, Ky. "Some people are more open to it than others. In the Bible we see people making major decisions based on dreams." Keener has written 14 books, including one on miracles and his latest, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*.

Indeed, the Bible is replete with examples of God speaking through dreams and visions, yet one New Testament encounter demonstrates an extreme spiritual makeover. Saul, a zealous persecutor of believers, was dazzled by a bright light while on the road to Damascus. He heard a voice saying: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? ... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ... Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (Acts 9:4-6) Blinded and shaken, he went to Damascus where he fasted for three days.

Meanwhile, a Christian named Ananias had a troubling vision. God told him to go to a specific house to pray for Saul because the renowned enemy of the church was God's chosen instrument. When he arrived, Ananias learned that Saul also had a vision informing him of Ananias' coming.

Saul's blindness was dramatically healed, both physically and spiritually. He became known as Paul, one of Jesus' most devout followers, writer of nearly half the New Testament while imprisoned for his faith, and the first apostle called to unveil the gospel to gentiles.

Who is 'Isa?

Clearly, God can reach anyone, regardless of how strong his or her opposition is to His Son. Although Muslims are familiar with Jesus, they believe in 'Isa (Jesus) as a prophet but not as Savior—at least not for today.

"Allah [God] sent multiple messengers throughout the years, starting with Adam," explains Abraham Sarker, founder of Gospel for Muslims in Dallas. "Every generation received a prophet—whoever followed him for that period of time will go

to heaven. So whoever followed Jesus during His period of time will go to heaven."

Muhammad, meanwhile, is revered as the last prophet of Allah who came with the best and final revelation. Muhammad believed that the Bible, canonized centuries before he lived, had become corrupt over time as a result of translations. He claimed Allah's true word was supernaturally delivered to him over the course of 23 years and recorded in the Quran. According to Islam, "If we still follow Jesus, we are backward, like Windows 95," Sarker says.

Growing up in Bangladesh, Sarker was groomed to be an Islamic evangelist. He devoutly followed his religion, fasting and praying and never questioning his faith. Then, three times in one week, he dreamed that he died and went to a lake of fire.

"I was very confused," Sarker says. "I was thinking, *I am not sure if I die right now that I would go to heaven, and I don't know what I've done wrong.*"

Praying all night in the mosque, he asked God to help him. Suddenly he felt drops of oil falling on him and even smelled its fragrance, he says. He claims another time he heard an audible voice telling him to read a Bible—an abomination to a Muslim. "We would not touch a modern-day Bible," he says. "This voice immediately put a desire in my heart. It is so vivid, so clear, so overwhelming. Still today, I could not forget that voice."

Sarker's faith journey took a U-turn four years later when he was in the U.S. as a Muslim missionary and came across a Bible in his own language. Reading it, he was changed: "I was so moved that my Creator loved me unconditionally."

Because Muslims are told the Bible is corrupt, many are loath to read it. Some are even afraid of its power.

Khalil was being trained as a jihadist in Egypt. He was given

the important assignment to write a book proving that the Bible couldn't be trusted, but he was afraid to even go near one. "Whoever reads this book comes under a spell!" he says in a video depicting his story at the website .

He had no choice but to submit to his orders, but as he examined the claims of 'Isa and His death and resurrection—which aren't included in the Quran—Khalil began to question his own faith. One day after someone stole his briefcase containing his Bible and passport, he panicked and then decided to pray. That night, 'Isa came to him in a dream, telling him, "I'm the one you've been searching for." 'Isa told him to read his Bible and that he would find his missing copy in his closet. When he opened the door, it was there. Khalil's heart was transformed from one of hate and violence to love and compassion.

Spirit, Science or Superstition?

Though most Muslims find Jesus and the Bible as the two biggest factors to reckon with in converting, they rarely wrestle with the means through which God is penetrating the Islamic world today. Indeed, **dreams and visions** have been a core part of Islam since its beginning.

In today's Western world, psychologists understand dreams as a toss and turn of conscious and unconscious thoughts, and the brain's neurological activity can be measured during REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, when most dreaming occurs.

Still, theories about the origins and purpose of dreams abound, and there is no real consensus in the scientific and psychological communities. During ancient times, however, dreams were thought of as messages from the gods. And in Middle Eastern cultures people still regard dreams much the same as they did in biblical days, particularly in folk or popular Islam.

That's part of the reason Nik Ripken, a 28-year veteran of the

mission field, believes God continues to use dreams and visions so prominently to reach Muslims. Ripken says a person's willingness to believe in the validity of dreams directly impacts his response to them. After gathering research in nearly 60 countries, Ripken says Muslims' dreams are, for the most part, like any others.

"But what is miraculous is that God breaks into them!" he says. "They hear a voice without a body telling them to find Jesus; they see a bright light; they dream of a Bible [and for some reason it's almost always blue]."

Ripken says 20 years ago, Christian leaders in his circle didn't buy into reports of the miraculous. They—like most Westerners whose worldview is fundamentally logical and scientific—found stories of Jesus appearing in a dream too mystical to accept. But over time the testimonies and life changes were so compelling, they couldn't be denied.

"I remember seven or eight years ago when we [sheepishly] said, 'If God wants to do this, we'll let Him,'" Ripken says. Now he's convinced: "It's very clear ... everything that God has done in the Bible, God is still doing. God's not waiting for you and me to get there."

Crossing Over

Even Christians who are skeptical of modern-day Christophanies must recognize the value other cultures place on dreams and the life-changing role they play, because ultimately it's not the dreams themselves that lead people to Christ; it's believers.

"We do not find that dreams and visions alone ever change anybody's life," Ripken points out. "What it does, it seems, is to send them on a spiritual pilgrimage."

Interfacing with messengers from heaven are ordinary people, because although many Muslims report seeing angels or Jesus in

dreams, those heavenly beings often direct dreamers to a specific person who then provides a Bible or explains whom the biblical Jesus is.

As Keener says: “Ultimately, it’s the gospel that converts people.”

For example, one man in a nation hostile to Christianity says he heard a voice telling him, “Find Jesus, find the gospel.” He didn’t know what Jesus was—a chair, a tree, an animal? But the voice told him exactly what city and house to go to, so he traveled for two weeks, arriving directly at the door of one of only three believers in the city.

“God wants to take a people for Himself from every kindred and people and tribe and nation,” says Keener, quoting Revelation 14:6. He points out that, historically, different parts of the world have had a stronger Christian presence during different eras, even if only for a window of time. “There are places that it’s just so risky, God is intervening directly,” he asserts.

Sarker furthers this point with a grim reminder: “Most Muslims won’t ever hear the gospel, even here in America,” he says, adding that this underscores the importance of Christians worldwide praying for God to reveal Himself through dreams.

Miracle in the ‘Mundane’

Prayer certainly played a key role in the life of former Muslim Naeem Fazal. Shortly after coming to the U.S. from Kuwait, he attended a college-campus Christian event with his brother, who had become a Christian and was praying for Fazal to follow suit. As a Muslim, Fazal wasn’t impressed with the idea of a personal relationship with God, but one day during an argument he skeptically asked God, “If you’re real, why don’t You just show me?”

That night Fazal faced a terrifying encounter in his room.

What he calls a demonic presence left him paralyzed with fear in his bed. He describes it as a feeling of death.

When the presence eventually left the room, Fazal's brother told him that Jesus is the only one with authority over angels and demons, so Fazal prayed, "Jesus, I don't know You, but ... if you would help me I will give You my life."

Later that night he found himself staring at a very different presence. "It looked like a figure made up with light—solid, yet transparent," Fazal says. "It was an experience like no other. The peace I felt from this presence was so powerful, so aggressive ... and [He] introduced Himself to me and said, 'I'm Jesus; your life is not your own.' The next morning my life changed forever."

Fazal is now the pastor of Mosaic Church in Charlotte, N.C. Yet what's noteworthy about his story and people like him is that while their journeys with Christ may have launched from bizarre, otherworldly experiences, they're only furthered through the dedicated study of Scripture, personal worship and discipleship with other believers in Jesus.

Though Westerners often consider these things mundane, Ripken contends that much of the world—including Muslims who have encountered Jesus in dreams and visions—marvels at doing them openly, incredulously asking, "Why do you call common in America and the West what we consider a miracle?"

"The basic is relationship with Jesus," Fazal says. "God's Word is not magical. It's too precious to become activated just by saying it. When people live it, it's supernatural."

Unwelcomed ... but Unstoppable

How the Holy Spirit is rising within the world's most radical Islamic nations

Mission researchers estimate more Muslims have committed to follow Christ in the last 10 years than in the last 15 centuries of Islam. Yet Islamic governments make up some of the worst persecutors of Christians, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Despite the persecution, reports indicate God is moving dramatically in Islamic strongholds such as Indonesia, Pakistan and the following Middle East hot spots:

Iran: At the time of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 there were only about 500 known Muslim converts in the country, according to missions almanac Operation World. By 2000, there were a reported 220,000 believers, including Muslim converts. Even children of government ministers and mullahs have been converting to Christ, missions agency Open Doors reports.

Iraq: It's estimated that before 2003 there were only about 600 known born-again followers of Jesus Christ in the country. By the end of 2008, Iraqi Christian leaders believed the number had risen to more than 70,000. Meanwhile, millions of Arabic New Testaments and Christian books have been shipped into Iraq since the ouster of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

Egypt: Revival is reportedly widespread among nominal Christians within the nation's historic Coptic Church, whose members number about 10 million. Yet Coptics are under severe attack, according to Voice of the Martyrs. Also, the USCIRF's list of "Countries of Particular Concern" now includes Egypt, where since January 400 Christians have been murdered, hundreds more injured and multiple churches burned.

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