

Radically Changed

✖ One of the highlights of my life is the time I put flowers on the grave of a man I had never met. I first heard this man's name—Samuel Zwemer—in the 1980s during a class at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, the oldest and most prestigious Muslim university in the world, sometimes called the “brain of Islam.”

My professor taught us that throughout history Christians had attempted to destroy Islam. He reminded us of the bloody battles Christians had waged against the Islamic world during the 200 years of the Crusades. He pointed out the Western colonialism that had been practiced from the late 1700s to the mid-1900s.

“Now Christians have a new strategy to defeat Islam,” he added. This strategy was embodied in the name and picture I saw in my textbook: that of Samuel Zwemer.

“This man's philosophy is very dangerous to Islam because he was the first to say that physical attacks would not work,” my professor stated. “He has persuaded Christians to attack us intellectually instead.” Even though Zwemer had been dead since 1952, the leading scholars of Islam remembered the 17 years he had spent in Cairo, usually visiting Al-Azhar weekly.

My professor continued.

“Not only do they plot against us, we also know that this man would come to the mosque here on campus and walk around it, praying for students and faculty to leave Islam. Many Christians today are also doing this.”

He was aware of this fact because the leaders of the university are kept well-informed by the Egyptian secret police about Christian activity in the country.

I was filled with anger at Zwemer. "How dare this man commit blasphemy on our campus! Why can't these people leave us alone? Why do they come all this way to do this?"

Never did I imagine how radically my opinion would change in just a few years. I went on to finish my doctorate in Islamic history and culture, and I became a lecturer for the university myself. I too taught my students about the dangers of Zwemer's ideas and modern Christians who try to convert Muslims.

One day a student came into my class with an exciting story. Earlier, he had been riding a bus on which a Christian young man had been handing out pamphlets about Jesus. As soon as the Muslims on the bus saw this, they began hitting and kicking the Christian young man until they nearly beat him to death. In the classroom we all celebrated their actions.

"These Christians say they want peace, but they are all secretly plotting to convert us," I told my students.

That was our mentality toward Christians who shared their faith with Muslims. God, however, was at work answering the prayers of Zwemer and others like him.

Now go forward in time with me 10 years. Again, I was standing in front of hundreds of people eager to hear what I had to say about Islam and Christianity.

This group was not Muslims sworn to defend their faith, however. These were hundreds of people whose passion for life was to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Muslim world. This was the annual Samuel Zwemer Muslim Mission conference in Holland, Mich., and I was the keynote speaker.

After the conference I was astonished to learn that Zwemer's grave was there in the city of Holland. I had to visit.

On a clear spring day I knelt down at his simple cement

gravestone with tulips in my hands and said: "Thank you so much, Brother Zwemer, for your life that you sacrificed so that I and the world I came from might see the light of Jesus Christ. I am here to say that the seed you planted at Al-Azhar has borne fruit."

Christians who reach out to Muslims often become discouraged when it seems as if their message isn't received. But my life is a witness that when the seed is sown, God will bring the harvest.