

The Crescent Moon Rises Over Europe

While Muslim immigrants pour into England and France, most churches there are unaware or unconcerned about the threat—and the opportunity they have to reach Islamic nations.

The old face has some new lines in it. Perhaps you've seen them—the streets in London where even the sternest fish-and-chips devotee must resort to eating Turkish kabob or remain hungry, or the districts in Paris where years have passed since the sidewalk cafés played their last chanson (distinctly French troubadour song). Close to 20 million immigrants from the Muslim countries in North Africa, the Middle East and Asia live in Western Europe today. Etching their own impressions into a newfound culture, they are changing the face of old Europe.

Many of these socially and culturally uprooted new Europeans, especially the young, are deeply frustrated with life and desperately seeking for answers. The Muslim world has not been late in responding to them.

Never lacking in funds, new Muslim religious and social institutions are mushrooming all across Europe. Some are “progressive,” endorsing a “European Islam” but still advocating an Islamization of the once Christian continent. Some are aggressively fundamentalist, unabashedly using the freedom of the West to decry its license. The latter, especially, boast about recruiting young and jobless men for the wars against “infidels” (non-Muslims) in such places as Bosnia, Chechnya and Afghanistan.

The Christian church in Europe, on the other hand, pays little

attention to the demographic revolution that has deposited millions of people from distant, unreached nations onto its very doorstep. One group that is—one of the largest Christian mission organizations in the world, based in London—has so far been unable to raise support for its first center for reaching Muslims.

“For 10 years now we have been restricted to running a coffee bar once a week in a back-street church,” Egypt-born mission director Maruan Said told Charisma. “We would need a center that is open all week in neutral facilities, and offering social assistance in addition to coffee, but the British churches are not interested.” (For security purposes, Maruan Said is a pseudonym, and his organization is unnamed.)

Ali Arhab, a Kabyl, or “first-nation Algerian,” and the director of CNA—a Christian television station based in France and broadcasting in Kabyl and Algerian Arabic—told Charisma that some French churches close their doors on North African seekers.

“Recently a successful North African evangelist in a northern town was told by his French pastor to stop bringing Arabs to church,” Arhab says.

The fact that very many Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian immigrants to Europe are not Arabs, but Berbers who have suffered from Arab political and religious colonialism for centuries, added to the hurt from the pastor’s racist attitude.

“Big city churches are more cosmopolitan and open, but I do not know of any French church reaching out to North Africans,”

Arhab notes.

Meanwhile, God is showing His deep interest in the Muslim multitudes by revealing Himself supernaturally in dreams and visions to many of them across Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. In a number of cases documented by Charisma these encounters with Christ were preceded by very little or even no contact with Christians.

Arhab heard the gospel from a Christian girl while visiting Berlin as a teenager in the early 1980s. He even followed the girl's pastor in saying the sinner's prayer, but his life did not change until years later when Jesus intervened in person.

"It happened in 1989," Arhab told Charisma. "I was laying on my bed in Algeria, completely fed up with life, when all of a sudden somebody materialized in front of me! He was shining, and I just knew it was Jesus. Maybe He was there physically, I cannot tell. But I was not asleep, nor were my eyes closed.

"The first thing Jesus said was, 'Today you are going to die!' Then He walked me through my whole life for two hours, and there was nothing I could do but cry and say, 'Please forgive me!'"

Karim Yahia, another Kabyl Algerian working for CNA, was not convinced by the arguments offered by the chance Christians he ran into. Still the questions in his heart demanded an answer. One night he put the Bible and the Quran on a table and prayed, "God, if it matters to You, let the false book burn!"

At 3 a.m. both books were still unharmed, and Yahia thought he might as well go to bed. But in that very instant two

fireballs entered the room and moved toward him.

“I immediately knew that one ball was God, and the other Jesus,” Yahia recounts. “Right in front of me the two balls converged and became one. That is how I learned that Jesus is not just a prophet the way Islam teaches, but God.”

Yahia’s copy of the Quran was not consumed by God’s fire, but his heart was. He immediately started talking to fellow North Africans in Marseille about Jesus. He soon had some 30 to 40 seekers gathering regularly in his home. But in Yahia’s case, just like in the northern town previously mentioned, a French pastor intervened and stopped his ministry, claiming that Yahia, because he is North African, had no business “doing church.”

A Man of the People

In Paris, Charisma visited the first church in France being pastored by a North African–Algeria-born Amar Lamamra (not his real name).

“We need churches with a North African leadership to show that North Africans are not inferior in God’s eyes, and for cultural reasons,” Lamamra says.

“But,” he adds, “there is a difference between being an ethnic North African church and a church with a North African leadership. Most of our 50 to 60 attendants are North African, but there are also French believers among us and, by the way, Americans.”

Culturally, Lamamra explains, it would be difficult for the French to evangelize the immigrants even if they were willing to. That's because North Africans, like all Muslims, believe Christianity is the "religion of the West." Lamamra notes that North Africans believe "you cannot become a Christian without giving up your own culture and identity." It takes churches led by North Africans, he says, to testify reliably that Jesus isn't just for Westerners.

For such reasons, Lamamra encourages American and other churches interested in reaching North Africans not to send their own missionaries to the region, but to support the training of national workers.

"It takes too long and costs too much for foreigners to learn the language and the culture! Please help us to disciple North African leaders instead," he says entreatingly.

Prayer support is also needed, he adds.

"We are in a spiritual battle! And Muslim people want to see miracles. We pray constantly for God to give more dreams and visions."

Lamamra's church in Paris is not specifically North African in culture. French is spoken, and the worship band leads in translations of well-known American songs. Evangelism is traditional. Teams from his church hand out books and videos on city streets every Saturday.

In addition, much effort is being put into major, joint evangelistic endeavors undertaken with other charismatic churches in France, such as bringing in international speakers

Benny Hinn, Carlos Annacondia and others.

The Importance of Turkish Tea

In London, Egyptian pastor Sameh Metry's congregation has taken another course. Gathering Iraqi, Egyptian, Palestinian, Lebanese and other believers, it is thoroughly Arabic.

The worship songs filling the sanctuary are Asian in rhythm and melody, bearing testimony to both the distinctiveness of Arab culture and the ancient, original "cousin" relationship of the Jewish and Arab peoples. The lyrics displayed by overhead projectors are in Arabic and, of course, written in the beautiful Arabic script. The sermon is in Arabic only, without translation.

Metry fled to England in 1992 after the Egyptian government shut down the Bible school he led in Cairo.

"We had 350 students, a historic figure," he told Charisma. "Bible courses in Egypt usually gather some 10 to 15 people. So the government closed the school, and I was threatened and had to leave."

Once, while traveling by train in England, Metry had an unexpected but, as he describes it, "very clear" vision. "The Lord showed me a revivalist Arabic church and said, 'This is the church I desire to see in England!'" Metry says.

"We are now some 70 adults and 20 children, and I see lives being transformed as the Holy Spirit moves among us! My goal is that this church would become strong enough to send out

missionaries to the rest of Europe and to the Middle East.”

The Turkish-speaking Yasam Kaynagig (Life Springs Church) in London is less than a year old and numbers no more than two dozen adults, but it has already initiated a Christian work in Turkey. Founding pastor Matt Bennett, an American Pentecostal Holiness missionary from Georgia, travels to eastern Turkey with Apik Dersimi to visit Dersimi’s family. Dersimi has been a believer for two years and is an elder at Life Springs.

“We have met with relatives of mine in a few places and baptized seven of them already,” Dersimi says. “In one city in Turkey there is now a new church cell meeting.”

Bennett commented that evangelism among Turkish-speaking people, in London as well as in Turkey, is primarily a matter of making friends and networking families.

“Whom do we go to in Turkey? To Apik’s relatives. It takes a long time [for a nonrelative] to be accepted into the family, but once you are, you have earned the right to speak openly into their lives,” Bennett explains.

In London, he spends much time—over endless glasses of Turkish tea, or cay—building relationships with Dersimi’s friends and other believers’ friends. Yet he seeks out new ones, as well, from among the innumerable Turkish-run grocery shops and cafés in London, using his knowledge of Turkish as an icebreaker.

“I’d rather meet with five people in a café than hand out 500 tracts in the street,” Bennett says. “Last summer we turned out 500 Jesus movie videos [among Turkish-speaking immigrants in London], and I am sure God has touched some people through

it, but it has not brought one person to our church!”

Just like his colleague—pastor Lamamra in Paris—Bennett is convinced that revival, both in the Middle East and in the immigrant communities in Western Europe, will come through national workers, not through missionaries. “As a missionary I can be a facilitator, but I won’t bring the church growth, either in London or in Turkey. Apik and the other Turkish-speaking leaders will.”

A Church Unprepared?

The leaders Charisma met with in London and Paris all complained that the Christians in this region of the continent do not take the exploding Islamization of Western Europe seriously. They say the church here is not only largely missing out on a historic opportunity for evangelism—by overlooking millions of Muslims comfortably within reach in countries where religious freedom is allowed—but it is also not heeding the spiritual and social aspects of Islam itself.

“Islam is not just ‘another’ religion in Europe,” pastor Metry notes. “The Western church is so ignorant. Many think that Islam is peaceful. It is not!”

Born into a Christian family in Egypt, Metry says he grew up being “beaten by Muslims at school” and that the kids attacking him quoted the Quran. “At school I had to learn many Quran verses about hating the ‘enemies of God.’ There is no love or peace in Islam,” he says.

One seasoned British missionary to the Muslim world and to Muslims in Europe (who requested anonymity) claims the problem

is that Islam is fundamentally unethical. Islam, she says, is rooted in power, not in love, righteousness or holiness.

“First and foremost Allah is almighty, and being almighty he is not restricted by anything, not even by ‘his own’ ethics. He can be loving and still instill hate. If he chooses to lie, it is within his might,” she explains. “To a Muslim, a god who cannot do both good and evil—who cannot, for example, hate or lie at will—is no longer almighty.”

She says this “arbitrary nature of their god creates arbitrary human authority” and concludes that a Muslim government has no religious obligation to be fair or truthful or to keep agreements.

Mission director Said points out that a number of the militant Islamist leaders in London are wanted for crimes in their Middle Eastern home countries. “It is amazing to many Middle Easterners that the British government allows these people to operate freely,” he notes.

Last year, on the first anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks, one of these militants, Abu Hamza—the Yemenite imam of the Finsbury Park Mosque in London—staged a big celebration under the slogan “A Towering Day in History.” At a follow-up press conference held in a mosque basement room named “Ground Zero,” Hamza told the international media that if England went to war against Iraq there would be suicide bombings in the streets of London.

Said points out that if the British government grants refuge to sought-after criminals, then at the very least it also should push the issue of human rights in the Middle East.

“There is no freedom in the Middle East for the Christian minorities,” he counters.

The Egyptian mission director said that he also questions the attitudes of moderate Muslim movements in England.

“Muslim schools demand the same rights as Christian schools, and that is reasonable,” he says. “But will the Muslim schools comply with the requirements? Will they be open to all children, for example to Jews?

“Islam teaches that you cannot permanently live under a non-Islamic government. Even moderate Islamic forces seek the Islamization of European law.”

Love: The Need of the Hour

Said, however, also warns against the demonization of Muslims.

“Most Muslims in the world are not really Muslim,” he says.” I have not met many Muslims who believe according to the Quran. If you tell them about God’s love and God as our Father, many agree. It is not in the Quran, but it is part of their heart’s religion.”

Bennett agrees that “many Westerners have the wrong perception of the people in Muslim countries.”

“We see Islam as an evil force, and it is, but most people are loving and hospitable,” he states. Bennett also points out that there are polarizations within the Muslim world that

create key distinctions among Islamic peoples.

“The young generation in Turkey is almost secularized. And then there are millions upon millions of ethnic Kurds, and Zazas in Turkey—people groups that are nominally Muslim but suffered severely under Islam for centuries, and still do,” he explains.

Reaching the Muslim immigrants in Europe will take much prayer but also much unconditional love, pastors agree. “If you show them love—consistently—sooner or later it will break their hearts,” Metry says.

Said and Dersimi, of Life Springs Church, keep praying for funds to run Christian community centers for Muslims in London. Exclaims Dersimi: “Why do immigrants who paid little attention to religion back home go to the mosques in London? Because that is where they get help! We must do the same!”

Miracles in Marseille

A North African pastor in France says his love for Jews is a testimony of Christ's love to both Jews and Arabs.

Amar Lamamra, the first North African to pastor his own church in Paris and a former Muslim, recently told Charisma during an interview in the French capital about his plans to plant churches across France.

“We have a team in Marseille,” he says, “and it is already reaching out to North Africans and Jews. There are many Jews

in Marseille.”

Jews? Former Muslims from Arabic countries evangelizing Jews?

“Yes,” Lamamra confirms, “I said Jews. We teach a lot about loving the Jewish people. Ninety percent of the North Africans don’t—for well-known political and religious reasons—but within the church these walls must be brought down. We want our churches to realize and appreciate that Jesus was a Jew.”

Lamamra says he already has held seminars with Stephen Pacht, the director of Jews for Jesus in France. Pacht told Charisma about a vision that has been growing in his heart: French Messianic Jews and Christian immigrants from Arabic North Africa joining hands to testify in unison about Jesus.

“The seminar with Amar was a great experience, and I believe we must let this thing grow little by little, connecting people rather than organizations,” he says.

Such a development would surely break new ground in a France that has been a leader in the new wave of Islamic anti-Semitism sweeping across Europe since the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada against Israel in September 2000. More anti-Semitic incidents—ranging from graffiti to physical violence—have been reported in France than in any other country. Synagogues have been burned and the attendants threatened with knives. During one incident, Jewish soccer players were beaten with iron clubs.

With few exceptions the assailants have been young North African immigrants living in the impoverished suburbs of Paris. Shimon Samuels of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Paris

told Charisma that in their extreme frustration, and cultural and social alienation, these young Muslims are an easy prey for the fundamentalist imams from Algeria who tour the no-name suburban mosques to recruit followers.

The new French government, elected in 2002, takes a stronger stand on law and order, and the situation has improved. But in Arab countries, government-sponsored Islamic anti-Semitism is still gaining momentum and is reaching the Muslims in Europe through Arabic newspapers and television.

The medieval myths about Jews, propagated for hundreds of years by the church and historically preparing the ground for Hitler's Holocaust, have been revived by Muslim media and Muslim "scientific" institutions in recent years. Jews conspiring to rule the world, and Jews killing Muslim (formerly Christian) children to use their blood for religious rituals are examples of such rumors.

Can the testimony of North Africans loving Jews and Jews loving North Africans help the young and angry Muslims in the suburbs of Paris see through the fundamentalist propaganda and look to Eisa (Algerian for Jesus) for better answers? Can it help more French Jews realize the power of the love of the Messiah?

Lamamra and Pacht believe this is their mission in a Europe that is in need of creative evangelism.

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