

When Failure is Our Teacher: Lessons from Mission to Muslims

by J. Dudley Woodberry

Failure can be one of the best teachers, because it encourages us to keep reevaluating our approaches rather than blindly carrying on business as usual. Our reevaluation must look at the missionary, the approach, the context, and the receptors. Since the thrust of our reflection will center on the approach, let us briefly look at the other elements.

Though no mission work has had less success than Christian mission to Muslims, the failure should not be laid primarily at the door of the missionary, for no finer train of Christ's ambassadors have appeared in missions. None have surpassed them in dedication, training, and perseverance.

The obstacles have been primarily in the nature of the receptors and their context. The barriers have been first *sociological*. In most regions where Islam predominates there is group solidarity, which leads to family and community ostracism and persecution of the convert to Christianity. In some cases the historic Law of Apostasy in Islam has resulted in death to the convert. Recently this has taken place in many places such as in Iran and Pakistan.

The second type of barriers have been *theological*. Since Islam is the only world religion to rise after Christianity, Muslims believe that all that is of value in Christianity is contained in Islam, and they commonly hold that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures have been corrupted. As traditionally understood, their Qur'an also specifically denies such cardinal Christian doctrines as the Trinity and Christ's incarnation, sonship, and crucifixion.

The third barriers are *political*. Since Islam is understood to apply to every area of life, including the political realm, non-Muslims are commonly *de facto* (if not *de jure*) second class citi-

zens. Despite ancient churches which date back to pre-Islamic times, Christianity is often associated with the West, and considered foreign.

This identification has led, fourthly, to *cultural* barriers. Western forms of worship have often been imported without the recognition that most Muslim forms of worship have been adopted or adapted from Jews and Christians.

Fifthly, *historical* obstacles are based on the fact that much of the contact between Muslims and Christians militarily, politically, and religiously has been hostile. The Muslim enemies have included successively the Byzantines, medieval Europe, the Crusaders, the colonial powers, and Western "economic imperialists" and supporters of Israel—all in some way considered "Christian" by Muslims.

Finally, there are the *spiritual* obstacles, for "we wrestle not against flesh and blood." The popular forms of Islam actually encountered have often been mixed with occult elements from local folk religions.

Historic Approaches

One approach that led largely to failure was the attempt by missionaries under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission to work almost exclusively to be catalysts in the revival of the ancient churches of the Middle East, who in turn would be the major evangelists to the Muslims. Although there have been notable exceptions up to the present day, generally the barriers of fear, prejudice, custom, and even language, alienated the Muslims and militated against the traditional Christians being interested in reaching out to the Muslims. Particularly after the massacres of Armenians and Nestorians by Muslim Turks and Kurds, Christians

wanted to emigrate from Muslim areas and not seek to bring the Muslims into the Church. *The first main lesson to be learned is that missionaries should not choose antagonists of Muslims to be the major means for reaching them.*

Related to the choice of people for outreach to them was the choice of language. Many missionaries to the Middle East learned Armenian or neo-Aramaic to work with the traditional Christians, but this made them incomprehensible to the Muslims. Even among Muslims the choice of Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, or Persian could alienate the missionary from other Muslims, where cultures were in conflict even if they understood the language. *Lesson two is to choose the heart language of the Muslim people to which one is called.*

Since groups such as Nestorians, also called Assyrians, were more responsive to the gospel as preached by Western Protestants and Roman Catholics, missions tended to cluster where the Nestorians were found. The result was considerable competition among Christians, leading to confusion, not to mention cynicism, by Muslims as to what true Christianity was. *The third lesson, therefore, is that Christians should practice comity—at least by people groups.*

Though missionaries often opposed the actions of their home countries, in the eyes of those they hoped to reach missionaries were linked to colonial powers. When these colonial powers were seen to betray Middle Easterners in the partitioning of land after World War I, for example, this reflected badly on the missionaries and their message. The same is true today when the missionaries' sending countries support such locally unpopular causes as Zionism. At times missionaries have

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been viewed as the vanguard of foreign military and political incursions. Independence or revolution in many Muslim countries, such as the revolution in Libya in 1969, led to the banning of foreign missionaries.

At other times missionaries have been linked too closely with local governments which suppressed various local peoples or engaged in unpopular or unjust acts. In the factional politics of parts of the Muslim world close association with a government becomes a disadvantage when that government is deposed. Although the gospel speaks prophetically to political structures and people, *lesson four is that missionaries need to avoid close alliances with governments, both foreign and local.*

Another failure involved the approach to the decision making process. Missionaries from the West, where individualism is a dominant value, have often approached individuals, who became extracted from their clan and families as they became Christians. At times children were approached with the gospel in contexts where they had little influence on the decision making of the family and clan. The results led to ostracism and persecution of the individuals for breaking from group beliefs and practice, and little impact was made on the groups as a whole from which they came.

Although many other factors are at work, there have been greater results in places like Bangladesh where conscious effort was made to involve decision makers of the village or clan by delaying baptism of individuals until the head of the family could also be baptized. *Lesson five is to seek to use the natural channels of decision making process in each culture.*

Failure to understand or incorporate sound biblical contextualization has also led to failure. Missionaries have often failed to understand that the form of Christianity they brought had been contextualized to their own culture by the

questions their ancestors asked or did not ask of Scripture and by the ways they found worship meaningful.

Furthermore, the missionaries failed to see how God contextualized his relationship with humans in succeeding generations. For example, God's covenant with Abraham was expressed by passing between severed animals and by circumcision—both practiced in the local culture.

Likewise, the structure of the church in the New Testament was originally patterned after the synagogue, which was not divinely instituted but developed in the dispersion where Jews could not get to a central temple in Jerusalem. At first the church had only elders like the synagogue but then added deacons as more functions were needed.

Some of the forms of worship brought to Muslim lands were particularly offensive. In this respect missionaries could have learned much from observing the types of Islam that flourished among different Muslim peoples. For example, why did the Naqshibandi order of mysticism with its dancing and music flower more among some Kurdish Muslim groups than the traditional forms of Sunni mosque worship without music and dance?

Many missionaries branded so-called Muslim forms of worship and religious vocabulary as wrong, without knowing that virtually all quranic religious vocabulary, including the name "Allah," and virtually all the forms of worship, except those specifically related to Muhammad, were used by Jews and/or Christians before they were used by Muslims. Thus, unless they have taken on unbiblical meanings during their sojourn in Islam, they could bear the gospel again if local people found them helpful, as in Bangladesh where the New Testament has been translated using vocabulary that Muslims use and where followers of Christ have been free to adopt forms of prayer like their

Muslim neighbors without compromising biblical content. *The sixth lesson is that attention needs to be given to the Muslim receptors to see how the gospel can be most relevantly expressed and contextualized to them.*

This contextualization process will not only employ vocabulary and forms of worship but also motifs or metaphors that are used to explain the theology of the gospel. For instance, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, used the sacrificial system to explain the atonement. Paul in the Roman Empire was guided to use the language of the court of law. Throughout history Christian scholars have developed various theories to explain the atonement. For example, Anselm developed the satisfaction theory where one person of God satisfies another person of God. Yet this division of God is harder for Muslims to grasp than some other explanations.

Missionaries have often gone to the field ill-equipped to understand Islam. They have been trained in "The Christian Message to Islam" and think of Islam as a monolithic system rather than a cluster of beliefs, practices, and cultures. They have only studied formal Islam, whereas perhaps most of the Muslims they encounter have beliefs and practices heavily influenced by local folk religion. They have emphasized the cognitive, the theological, only to find that folk Muslims are more interested in power. (Does God through Christ have more power than the spirits I fear?) They have assumed Muslims have the same felt needs as the Christian missionary, not realizing that the folk Muslim commonly sees the need for a savior from fear more than the need for a savior from sin. The Qur'an describes human nature as essentially good or neutral, unlike the Bible which describes it as sinful and biased towards wrong. Hence Muslims often only ask, "What is the will of God?" while Chris-

tian ask,” How can I be transformed to do His will?” *The seventh lesson, overlapping the lesson on contextualization, is that missionaries need to learn the great varieties of Muslim peoples and their felt needs and longings, in order to meet them with the Gospel where they are.*

Another problem relates to utilizing methods that met felt needs but did not lead to an easy transition of planting self-financing, self-governing, and self-propagating indigenous churches. The missionaries brought in schools and medical clinics and hospitals. These presented a holistic gospel but also brought in institutions that could not be supported financially and in personnel by the local church, thus ensuring continued foreign involvement and the necessity of a major amount of time, energy, and resources to maintain the institutions. *The eighth lesson is that method and means should be emphasized that foster planting an indigenous churches that are self-governing and financing, and are self-propagating.*

Finally, missionaries have not always been sufficiently aware of “the fullness of time” for various people groups and cultures. For many peoples, a period of pre-evangelism is necessary; and history has shown that historic events lead to periods of responsiveness to the gospel. Such a time was the late 1960s in Java when the Communists made an abortive coup which provoked Muslim Santris to massacre many Communists and even suspected Communists. When it became necessary to choose a faith to show that Indonesians were not atheistic Communists, many chose Christianity because of the bad example of orthodox Muslims and the helpfulness of Christians. *The ninth lesson is that timing is important as increased responsiveness follows catastrophes, change of location or conditions, suffering from co-religionists, or disillusionment with peoples’ faith or faith community.*

God is Blessing

Despite the failures of the past, there is a greater responsiveness to the gospel among Muslims today than ever before. God is using some of the failures of society to bring this about. We shall look at five phenomena that God is using to bring Muslims to Christ.

First are *political* events. The revolution in Iran led to the imposition of strict Islamic law, but this in turn led to disillusionment with that form of Islam, with the result that there was an increase in the sale of Bibles and an increase of Muslims coming to churches to find Christ. Likewise in Pakistan when President Zia al-Haq tried to impose Islamic law into government, more Bibles were sold, more enrolled in Bible correspondence courses, and more proclaimed faith in Christ. When East Pakistanis suffered under their co-religionists from West Pakistan in the name of maintaining the unity of Islam, they not only formed Bangladesh but became more responsive Christ.

When the Kurds of northern Iraq suffered under their fellow Muslim Saddam Hussain, they likewise became more responsive. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the Muslims of the former central republics became responsive because of their spiritual hunger after 70 years of atheistic rule. God is using political event for the gospel.

A second phenomenon involves *natural catastrophes*. In places like Bangladesh these have involved tidal waves and Christian agencies bailing out “cups of water” in Christ’s name. In places south of the advancing Sahara Desert, it has involved drought and giving cups of water or milk in Christ’s name. But on the whole, Christian relief and development agencies have been more responsive than their Muslim counterparts, with the result that Muslims have seen the love of Christ and responded to Him.

The third phenomenon is the

migration of peoples. This has been from war or increased opportunity, as in urbanization. Flight from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan made over a quarter of Afghans refugees. Many fled to countries with greater freedom for gospel proclamation and found faith in Christ. Likewise, many refugees from the war triggered by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait were aided by Christians and turned to Christ. Still others migrated to cities, where they needed friends and were more open to new ideas. Later many have become secularized or disillusioned and adopt fundamentalist Islam, but during a window of opportunity numbers have been coming to Christ.

A fourth phenomenon is a *desire for power*, especially for those who feel powerless in the wake of sickness or fear of evil spirits. As more Christians are open to God, who demonstrates His power through them in answer to prayer, God is showing His power in healing, even as He in other situations shows His power through giving grace to see people through suffering. This has been a factor in the growth of the church in Muslim areas of Africa and elsewhere.

Finally, there is *ethnic resurgence*. God used this factor where Kurds were suppressed by their co-religionist Saddam Hussain. We also see this in places like Bangladesh where Muslims find that they can worship God in Christ through culturally relevant ways without feeling foreign.

Failure has been a good teacher, and the God whose strength is made perfect in weakness continues to work in our failures to teach us to become more effective witnesses for him in our mission to Muslims.

Dr. Dudley Woodberry is currently dean and professor of Islamic Studies at the School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary located in Pasadena, Calif.