



Christian Mission within the Muslim World

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AS RETIRING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE DIVISION FOR GLOBAL MISSION OF THE Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I have recently observed our work in Senegal where Christian missionaries witness to the crucified and risen Jesus among Muslim people. It is a good time to ask why and how the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is in Senegal. To answer these questions is to speak to the issue of Christian mission within the Muslim world.

I. FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL

At the end of the twentieth century, living within a western culture permeated with epistemological and ethical relativism, why are we still crossing geographical and cultural boundaries to witness to Jesus? When Christian mission efforts have been critiqued, sometimes validly, for offensive and domineering

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The size of the Muslim world, the history of Christian-Muslim relations, the fact of Christian missional neglect, and above all the imperative of the gospel require an understanding of the Christian mission in the Muslim world. What is the nature of that mission? The author, who envisioned an ELCA focus on Islam, develops a theological approach from a specific engagement.

approaches to other peoples and cultures, why are we here? Christian mission has always begun and still begins with the reaffirmation that it is rooted in God, the mission of God, and the truth of God. It reaffirms that ultimate reality, the heart of the universe, the face of God, has been encountered in, with, and through the face of Jesus. The one who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," is the one "who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). The resurrection-faith announces this evangelical presupposition: that God has identified Godself in the crucified and risen Jesus.

This resurrection-faith, when questioned, points to Jesus crucified and asks, Is he not of God? Is this humble prophet, whose passionate embrace of humanity is as wide as the cosmos itself, not of God? Does not Jesus, who calls for love that even embraces the enemy, speak for God? Does not Jesus, who heals the sick, liberates those possessed of demons, makes the blind to see, act by the power of the Spirit or the kingdom of God (Luke 11:20)? Is not Jesus' absolute faith in the cosmic Abba and his moral integrity calling for righteousness and justice rooted in God? Is not Jesus persecuted and tortured unto death for righteousness' sake honored by God? Is not Jesus most powerful in incarnating a love that is willing to be humble and vulnerable, even unto death on a cross? Can such power have its origins in anything other than God? Has not God given Jesus the name above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:11)? Has not God raised him from the dead?

Mission is centrifugally impelled from this fountain of faith which believes that "such wondrous love as this" is the ultimate reality of the universe. Every human being has the right to hear this, know this, and live within the life-transforming awareness of this cosmic reality.

Ultimately, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is in Senegal for no other reason than that Muslim peoples may know through the crucified and risen Jesus the passionate embrace of God and the power of God's kingdom that bring life out of death!

II. FOR THE SAKE OF VULNERABILITY IN MISSION

Dr. Willem Bijlefeld, in another essay in this issue of *Word & World*, describes what he calls "a burdensome past." Centuries of tension and antagonism have marked Christian-Muslim relationships. Christ calls us, as Christians, to confession for the Christian community's participation in attitudes and actions that have been prejudicial, destructive, cruel, and at times even vicious in relationships with Muslim peoples. Christian attitudes and actions have not only not been molded by the mind of Christ, they have been at times a blatant denial and betrayal of Jesus' own lordship of suffering servanthood (Isa 42:1-4).

The people of Senegal have been witnesses to this "burdensome past." Millions of Africans purchased by distant "Christian" nations for labor across the ocean were shipped out of Goree Island. After three hundred years of the slave trade, French Christian colonialists dominated their lives for another century. A

revered Muslim saint, Mamadu Bamba, is recognized not only for his spirituality but for his resistance to French domination.

Christian mission must be carried out among Muslim people in order that Jesus, vulnerable and *crucified*, might be known as God's power. Authentic Christian mission, in contrast to every form of domineering imperialistic effort, must be molded by humility, vulnerability, and servanthood in order that the Jesus who washed his disciples feet might be seen by Muslim people as the one designated to represent the cosmic Lord of the universe. The primary purpose of the mission of the body of Christ is to introduce Jesus—a servant, crucified Jesus—to Muslim people. Missionaries are called to be bearers of the cross in the radical terms of the gospel.

Harold Vogelaar, who also has an essay in this issue, tells of a young Egyptian Muslim artist named Muhammad. He had painted a portrait of a powerful young man who held a sword in one hand and a dove in the other. Vogelaar asked about the significance of the painting. Muhammad replied that the dashing figure symbolized Islam, which always came offering peace but if it was not accepted carried a sword to impose Allāh's will on society. Vogelaar asked whether he had ever considered painting a man who held the dove of peace with two hands? Muhammad thought for a long time and then replied, "I would have to paint a portrait of Jesus." How do we as ambassadors for Christ carry peace with two hands? How do we more effectively witness to God's suffering servant who does not quench a dimly burning wick (Isa 42:1-4)?

It is only as we become two-handed bearers of peace that we bear witness to God who comes not to crush the human family into conformity to God's will but who is willing to be crushed in order to constrain our wills and draw our hearts and minds to the foot of the cross.

III. FOR THE SAKE OF CLARIFYING THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

Early Islam encountered a theological version of the Christian faith found within the Qur'an which would not be recognized by us. On the one hand, Jesus is born of a virgin; designated prophet of God while in the cradle; taken into God's glory at the time of the cross; and recognized as word, sign, and spirit of God with a cosmic role in God's future final judgement. On the other hand, Jesus is not believed to have died on the cross nor participated in divine reality. Christians are reprimanded for believing in tritheism (that is, three gods), thereby denying the unity of God, and for blasphemy (*shirk*) for equating something belonging within the realm of creation (Jesus) with God.

Christian mission among Muslim people is carried out for the sake of reinterpreting for Muslims the Christian understanding of the gospel. As Christians we feel compelled to share that our trinitarian language, in contrast to tritheism, is spoken in order to maintain our witness to the unity of God. Our incarnational language, rather than *shirk* (associating partners with God, for Muslims the greatest sin), affirms that Jesus is truly human and not some ethereal phantom or ghostly spirit. Further, our incarnational language witnesses to our conviction that

we have encountered the Word of God in the total person and mission of Jesus and not just in his prophetic message.

Needless to say, this message of clarifying the meaning of the gospel is a long and arduous task. What makes it a seemingly impossible task is the fact that in mutual conversations with Muslim peoples, Muslims hear incredibly diverse interpretations of the Christian faith. There are Christians who see Jesus as one among many legitimate prophets as well as Christians who claim that there is no truth outside of Jesus Christ. There are Christians who describe the Trinity in terms of three personalities involved in mutual conversation (L. Hodgson) and others who speak of God as one personality (center of consciousness) manifest in three hypostases (K. Barth). There are Christians who describe the whole Bible in Qurānic terms as the infallible word of God and enter into debates with Muslim scholars about which sacred book is truly infallible. There are other Christians who embrace the fallibility of the biblical witness to Jesus (the Word of God) as one more sign of God's willingness to be vulnerable in our midst as God speaks to and through fallible prophets and poets.

Mission among Muslim peoples is a challenge to Christians to rethink the Christian articulation of the gospel. What does it mean to trust that God has been Emmanuel, that is, God-with-us, in Jesus crucified and risen? Muslim questions concerning Christian interpretation of the Trinity and the atonement are often perfectly legitimate, pointing to contemporary problems with Christian confessional language. Perhaps God raised up Muhammad, among others, to critique our theological discussions and to force such conversation around our theology.

IV. FOR THE SAKE OF LIFE, JUSTICE, AND PEACE

Contrary to common stereotypes most Muslims, like most Christians, are wonderful people who simply desire to have their children grow up in a world which is marked with life-fulfilling values and peace. The prophet Muhammad challenged the world of religious pluralism to compete with one another in good deeds (Sūra 5:48). Jesus Christ called his followers to love their neighbors as themselves and their enemies as God does. Muslims and Christians live out of the conviction that God calls the entire human family to be responsible for life, justice, and peace.

Christian witness among Muslim people is called to testify to this common task. In some countries this means that Christian witness begins with Christ-formed identification and solidarity with people who live on the edge of human survival. It may mean vaccinations for babies, simple cures for diarrhea, or the combat of cattle diseases that threaten the life-support of families.

In other areas of the world it may involve initiating efforts designed for the reconciliation of Muslim and Christian people. I am, today, writing in my apartment in Dakar, the capital city of Senegal. Senegal is a country where 90 percent of the population is Muslim. Yesterday at dinner I was told that a German evangelist was holding an evangelism campaign in Dakar on Thursday. He has been invited by evangelical Christians in the city to witness to the gospel. This is the same

evangelist whose evangelism “crusade” led to bloody riots in Kano, Nigeria, about four years ago.

David Windibiziri, Bishop of the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria, and Yusufu Magaji, a Muslim government official from Jalingo, Nigeria, jointly sponsored a conference on reconciliation following the Kano riots triggered by Bonnye’s crusade. I had the privilege of attending that conference held near Jos, Nigeria in November 1993. I heard these two men testify concerning their commitments to common conversations for the sake of peace. Bishop Windibiziri told of being in one of his Lutheran congregations when the report of the Kano riots was first given to the people. It was reported that hundreds of Christians had been killed, and this was followed by silence. When it was reported that over 1,000 Muslims had died, clapping and cheering filled the assembly. At that moment, the bishop said that he knew he had been called into a ministry of reconciliation.

Magaji reported that there had also been Christian-Muslim tension in the city of Jalingo. He and his family had been dragged from their home by rioters. Voices called for his death because he represented the rich and powerful who crushed the poor. Other voices said he was not rich and not an oppressor but simply living in a big government house. Other voices said he is a Muslim and our Christian churches have been burned. In the middle of this chaos it was reported that the military was approaching; the crowd disappeared. Magaji said, “At that moment, I decided to go on a *jihād* (all-out effort) of peace.”

At this time and this place, a Christian and a Muslim brother began a mutual conversation for the sake of life and peace. Approximately forty persons, Muslim and Christian, prayed together, shared their deep though different faith commitments, and struggled for possibilities of reconciliation within a country that threatened to disintegrate.

In a recent article entitled “The Clash of Civilizations,” Samuel Huntington describes the future of the world in terms of gigantic religious and ideological clashes.¹ One such boundary of contention is the Muslim-Christian encounter. In such a world, Christian mission in the name of the “one-dove-in-two-hands Prince of Peace” is called to join common conversations and efforts on behalf of life and peace.

V. FOR THE SAKE OF NEW CENTERS OF FAITH AND MISSION

The Gospel in Its Local Context

I asked Oumar Diallo, a Senegalese Christian who had come from a Muslim family, about the unique features of Senegalese Islam. He had given over four years of his life working with a western religious researcher, David Maranz, in studying the culture of Senegal and its tremendous impact on local Islam. Diallo spoke immediately about the role of the type of religious leader called a Marabout,

¹Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993) 22-49.

who serves as a direct mediator with God for the local religious community. As a local Muslim surrenders his total life to the Marabout he is promised salvation and also comes under the temporal and spiritual protection of the Marabout. This may include employment or financial aid in times of difficulty as well as sacred amulets worn for protection against evil spirits or demonic forces. Included within the dedication of one's life to the Marabout is an obligation to contribute financially to the Marabout; for example, giving a percentage of one's harvest. Among some sects there is also the guarantee of prosperity as well as the promise of spiritual resources that put one in contact with powers capable of controlling life or seeing God.

I asked Diallo what was the central gospel message for Muslims in this land. He replied, liberation from slavery to the powers that bind one's life in so many ways, whether from subjection to religious authorities or from the fears of demonic forces. I said, "The gospel then is the announcement of the power of God in Jesus Christ to set people free." He replied, "Exactly!"

The Miraculous Birth of Faith in Jesus Christ

One hears amazing and different accounts of how people come to faith in God incarnate in Jesus. It reminds one of Jesus' statement to Nicodemus that the Spirit blows where it wills (John 3:1ff.).

During the conversation, I asked Diallo how he had come to faith. He told the story of a Senegalese Muslim of Mauritanian ancestry, Djibril Fall. When this young man finished his Qurānic studies, the Muslim scholar who had been his teacher gave him an Arabic Bible. Reading the Bible, he committed his life to Jesus Christ. Without contact with the Christian community but through the power of the Spirit working through the biblical witness to the gospel, Djibril Fall surrendered (*islām*) his life to Christ. That newborn apostle was the source of Diallo's Christian faith. It was a faith that had liberated him from an obsession with discovering and manipulating spiritual powers.

Another Christian, formerly a Muslim, was asked by an ELCA missionary what Christian person had been most influential in his spiritual journey. He spoke of studying in North Africa and encountering racial prejudice within the Arabic community. He shared the fact that this had raised questions for him about his faith. Then he told of visiting Germany. While there he lived for a short time in a German home and was deeply moved by the devout mother of the family who always insisted that her family have grace, a word of prayer, before eating. She more than anyone had touched his life.

A woman missionary from Finland, who lived in a mission building which was the center of work and worship as well as a hostel for young women working in the city of Dakar, told of a miraculous vision seen by a few of the young residents. They returned one evening from the city and entered their room; there they saw a vision of light. In fear they fled from the room screaming for help. A

guard entered the room and also saw the light. The Muslim women were convinced that they had encountered Jesus and became Christians.

A rural Muslim cattleman has for many years worked with ELCA missionary veterinarians fighting the diseases which continually threaten his herd. He watched the Christian missionaries who simply served his community's needs from day to day. After about ten years he asked a missionary pastor to visit his village one evening to explain the Christian message. On the celebration of the naming of a new daughter, he invited the local religious leader to name the child and say the Muslim prayers. He also asked a visiting Christian pastor to bless in prayer his newborn daughter.

ELCA missionaries worked for fifteen years in a rural area of Senegal. They were involved in primary health care and agricultural development. The Division for Global Mission of the ELCA desired that Muslims experience Christian people not as their "colonial masters," a term continually used by the African population, but as servants whose lives are molded by the love of God incarnate in Jesus. One day three men with whom they had never worked walked onto a mission compound seeking baptism. They were local people who had been studying in North Africa for years. As a result of their experiences in North Africa and Europe, they were considering being Christians. One missionary reported that they "simply dropped out of the sky."

Other accounts are less surprising, as missionaries are involved in contacts and friendships that lead to baptismal classes and the emergence of a new church within the catholic body of Christ. However, what is most noticeable is that the Spirit blows where it wills (John 3:1ff.), often without our own plans and dreams as well as within them.

The Emergence of an Indigenous Church

As persons are grasped by the gospel and become believers, it is essential that they experience the privilege and necessity of community within the body of Christ. The Christian community is gathered (called out) from the human family by the call of Jesus Christ and they are gathered in Jesus' name as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). Within this community, Christ is present. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt 18:20). Christ is present, speaks, and acts as the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ is preached and taught. This preached and taught word is made alive within the believers and community through the power of the Holy Spirit. The same Jesus Christ is present, speaks, and acts through the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper. Within the Lutheran community, these are the only essential unifying marks of the church: the teaching of that gospel and the administration of the sacraments. All else may be created to enable the local church to be freely and powerfully a new expression of the body of Christ. The *Augsburg Confession*, Article VII, reads: "For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere." A more recent

statement by Herbert Butterfield states this more powerfully: "Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted."²

But are there any guidelines for an indigenous church in a Muslim context?

The Burden and Blessing of Our Wealth

When persons enter the worldwide Christian community through baptism, the question arises as to what form that church should take locally. How is leadership to be supported when there are only a handful of new Christians gathering? As a western church body, the Division for Global Mission of the ELCA has the resources to fund leadership development as well as salaried local staff. A multitude of churches on the African continent are financially dependent upon outside support for the sustaining of their work and ministry. A small Lutheran church in southern Senegal has thirteen clergy, all salaried by finances from Europe. One of the primary problems with having these newly baptized persons from another part of Senegal become members of that church is the financial dependence that immediately is present.

How does one enable a new church to emerge which has the possibility of being self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating? Is it possible to have leaders who have secular vocations for financial support and then also serve as leaders and pastors of the new church? How feasible is that in a country where unemployment is rampant? Is it possible for the mission to enable the church to become self-sustaining through income-generating projects without separating the leadership of the church from the newly emerging Christian community? How can one responsibly call the new leadership of the emerging church to make a sacrifice which is not shared by missionaries, who live rather comfortably within the Senegalese context? How can one have such financial resources available and not share them with the new church? On the other hand, how can one justify using the resources to possibly create a church that will not be able to be a self-sustaining member of the body of Christ?

As a Christian community with wealth, it is incredibly difficult to be part of such a process. It was, no doubt, in the providence of God that the early church of Jerusalem and Judea went into the world as the poor and as refugees. They could honestly say, "Silver and gold have I none" (Acts 3:6). We do not have the possibility of saying that; however, we do have the promise of God that with God all things are possible. Even though it means walking through the eyes of needles, the rich can be saved and they have used their resources to participate in the mission of the body of Christ through which the word of God has been planted and new communities of faith have arisen.

VI. CONCLUSION

Upon my departure from Senegal, I leave a place within the mission of God

²Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949) 146.

where there are new possibilities. New Christians are gathering, discussions of future plans are underway, and possible opposition is always present. As a missionary community of faith, we pray that we may be part of the plan of God as the Holy Spirit blows through Senegal. We pray that we may not be deaf to the Spirit's will nor resistant to the cruciformed Christ who wills in love to set people free and give them life. ⊕