

Concerning the Muslims Among Us

by Rudolph D. Gonzalez, Ph.D.

On the heels of hostilities with Imperial Japan in 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order No. 9066 which gave the Secretary of War the power to remove any citizens or aliens from designated areas of the country. Roosevelt hoped this order would minimize sabotage, espionage, and fifth-column activity. By some estimates, the order led to 100,000 people of Japanese ancestry being placed in internment camps or in relocation centers until the end of the war in 1945. Most were displaced from the states of Washington, Oregon, California, and Arizona. While there were also significant numbers of Italian and German citizens and aliens affected, the Japanese community in the western United States (U.S.) bore the brunt of the policy.

As we now know, Executive Order No. 9066 was devastating for many Japanese families. Tragically, Christians did not reach out to the Japanese-American community during this trying time. While history records that members of the Catholic Maryknoll order voiced opposition to the policy, the Protestant and evangelical community was largely silent. There is no doubt that the immediate dislocation of hundreds of Japanese families created tremendous opportunities to live out the gospel in word and deed. Lamentably, for the most part, those opportunities were squandered.

There is a well-known story that General Douglas MacArthur asked for a number of missionaries to go to Japan during the time of its reconstruction.¹ With the defeat of their forces, MacArthur saw an opportunity to introduce the gospel. The call went mostly unheeded, as only 95 Protestant missionaries were sent to Japan. Apparently, General MacArthur was not aware of American indifference to the plight of the Japanese. The church had not shown any concern for its Japanese neighbors. Was there any reason to expect that the church would reach out to Japanese people across the Pacific?

Today, the number of Christians among the Japanese—in this country and abroad—remains stubbornly small. Caught in an ethnic culture resistant to Christianity, 97 percent of all Japanese and Japanese-Americans remain unevangelized. The gospel is just too Western for many.

To be clear, there has been no order to consign millions of Muslims in the U.S. to internment camps, and it is unlikely ever to happen. Moreover, while the Japanese are an ethnic race, Islam is a religion that includes people of every ethnic background. While the differences are real, there is every indication that national fears about the Muslim religion run deep throughout the country. While national policy has not moved in the direction of internment camps, believers must ask if the Christian community has not, in effect, reacted similarly to Muslims as it did to the Japanese. Have Christians created internment camps in our minds—believing that ignoring the Muslims is preferable to engaging them in a meaningful way?

Is God giving Christians an opportunity today to reach out to Muslims as never before? I believe He is, but there are several things to keep in mind.

The Nexus of Land and Religion

First, there is no doubt that the ongoing war against terrorism is almost exclusively being waged against certain sects of fanatical Muslims. Herein is the challenge. While American political leaders go to great pains to stress repeatedly that the U.S. is not in a religious struggle, Muslims see the U.S. as fighting with Muslim nations.

Even if Islam is not the state-sponsored religion, it is the *de facto* religion of most Middle Eastern countries. Countries in which Islam is the primary religion demand uncompromising observance of Islamic laws, and there is little differentiation between the state and religion in the minds of many Muslims. Because the dividing line between the state and religion is so blurred, when the U.S. attacks a country like Iraq—which is ostensibly secular in its government—it is seen in the Arab street as attacking Islam.

Actually, this close connection between land and religion is found in the Bible. The Old Testament is full of references that cite the Promised Land as God's promise to Israel. So long as Israel was faithful, it could expect to dwell and prosper in the

¹The number of missionaries called for varies. This writer is aware of 1000, 5000, and “a battleship full.”

land that God promised to Abraham and the Patriarchs (see Deut. 6-11). However, if Israel should turn from serving Yahweh, then they would forfeit their right to possess the land (see Deut. 28:15-68).

Stephen, a deacon of the church at Jerusalem understood the strong connection between the land of promise and the religion of Israel, and he voiced a strong rebuttal to its validity in the wake of what Christ had accomplished on the Cross (see Acts 7).

In his defense, Stephen told the religious authorities three things. First, while God had given the land to the Patriarchs, He was still with Israel when it dwelt outside of the land (see Acts 7:2-16). Second, when God gave Israel a deliverer, Moses, the people rejected his leadership and were judged for 40 years in the desert (see Acts 7:17-43). Finally, while the tabernacle was God's way of showing Israel His continuing presence with them, even under discipline for their unbelief, Israel moved away from God's pattern.

Stephen says, "It was Solomon who built a house for Him." (Acts 7:47, NASB). Stephen goes on to affirm adamantly, "However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands" (Acts 7:48, NASB). Stephen's point should not be lost—the religious leaders of Israel mistakenly continued to believe that God dwelt in a localized area—Israel, where the temple was. However, Stephen knew that the God of Israel was not limited to a geographical locality. Stephen declares of God, "Heaven is My throne, and earth is the footstool of My feet" (Acts 7:49, NASB; see Isa. 66:1). For Stephen, the tabernacle depicted perfectly the fact that God is not static—everywhere is His domain! The deacon of the church at Jerusalem paid with his life for proclaiming this important bit of biblical truth.

Understanding the emotional connection that exists between land and religion can help believers avoid unnecessary issues that impede sharing the good news of Jesus. There is a reason evangelical/biblical Christianity is not tied to pilgrimage sites. God dwells in the human hearts of the redeemed—those are His tabernacles today. While we may visit a place for its religious and historical significance, we do not invest such places with the power to save. Salvation is not found in an ancient religious site, it is found in the person of Jesus Christ alone. The fullness of all that God has to offer is available by grace through faith in Jesus Christ—period (see Eph. 2:8-10).

This conviction about the dwelling place of God has profound implications for evangelism. The gospel should be presented devoid of any and all traces of nationalism and patriotism. Though most Muslims think only in those terms, Christians must work to overcome such an erroneous concept. If it was wrong for Israel to believe that God was limited to dwelling in the land of Israel, it cannot be right to imply that being a Christian and being an American are inseparable realities. However, Christian outreach efforts often reflect a land and religion mindset.

Often, the American messenger clouds the message of Christ's salvation for all people. Sometimes it is the choice of words, the manner of dress, body language, lack of concern for cultural protocol, ignorance of basic facts related to their native lands and their religion, disrespect for traditions they hold deeply, mutilation of their language, etc. In all such cases, Muslims often see brash Americanism, rather than hear the call of Christ. It is necessary for Christians to understand the world in order to not become a stumbling block to those who need Christ.

Paul as a Model for Interfaith Evangelism

In many ways the apostle Paul is a model for outreach to people of other religions. In Acts 17:16-34, he witnesses in Athens. What is interesting is that he is perfectly at ease dialoguing with Jews, Gentile god-fearers in the synagogue, epicureans, and stoics in the marketplace (see Acts 17:17). Later on, before the Areopagus, the apostle acknowledges their religious zeal and quotes a local poet in order to show respect and knowledge of Athenian tradition (see Acts 17:22-28, 28). In the end, Paul gained a hearing for a time. Significantly, it was the resurrection of Jesus from the dead that the Athenian philosophers could not bear (see Acts 17:32). It was the message of the Cross, and not the messenger, that was the offence. Nevertheless, Scripture records, "But some men joined him and believed" (Acts 17:34, NASB). And so it should be every time believers have an opportunity to share the good news of salvation. When believers can build upon a group's tradition to proclaim the fulfillment of all religious longing in Christ, it is very effective. However, all believers should make sure to avoid being the stumbling block to faith in Christ.

A Word on Christian Citizenship

As citizens, Christians should stand shoulder to shoulder in support of the nation's efforts to root out terrorism wherever it is found. As Christian citizens of this country, it is the believer's privilege and duty to pray for those who make decisions about war, that they might be guided by divine wisdom (see Rom. 13:1; 1 Tim. 2:1-8). However, Christians are also responsible to demand that in waging war, the U.S. also sows seeds for future peace. Hebrews 11:32-34 is a powerful statement about war executed in the right way. Surely it results in the conquering of kingdoms, quenching the power of fire, and putting foreign armies to flight. However, war is also an opportunity to perform acts of righteousness. The term *to perform* literally means *to work towards establishing something*—in this case justice. From a biblical frame of reference, war can be the instrument God uses to enforce and bring justice to a nation. The U.S. Armed Forces must be zealous about tearing down an oppressive regime, but their zeal must extend to building up a downtrodden nation. Guided by the biblical principle that war is not just an opportunity to destroy, the U.S. must build good will in these lands and remove entrenched animosities.

Christians are also citizens of God's eternal kingdom, whose message is universal in the sense that it is the power of God to bring salvation to all who believe (see Rom. 1:16). The gospel must be presented with as little enculturation as possible. The reasons are obvious. Society is constantly changing and evolving. Thus, even within evangelical circles, there have been breathtaking changes in church life. Contemporary Christian music has changed virtually every church service in North America. Today, there are seeker sensitive churches, Christian circles of belonging, and countless house fellowships—all expressions of church that were almost unheard of just 20 years ago. Surely, serious assessment and change for the sake of reaching Muslims and people from other world religions is beyond debate!

People of the Muslim religion are a significant factor in the changing demographics of the U.S. There are an estimated six to eight million Muslims living in North America—hailing from the Middle East, Eastern Europe, the African continent, and Southeast Asia, among other places. Apart from those who come from other countries, a significant segment of the African-American community is Muslim. While a vast number of Muslims have arrived over recent years, many have been here for generations and consider America to be their country. Muslims stepped on to the shores of North America in the early 1800s. The first mosque was built in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in the 1860s. While it is true that a sizable number are here illegally, that is not the case with the vast majority. More than likely, the Muslims you work with or who live in your neighborhood are either immigrants or a descendents of immigrants who arrived here legally. They are either American-born, naturalized citizens, or they maintain legal residency. They are, in a very real sense, reflections of the American promise.

Regardless of when they arrived on the shores of this country, however, adhering to Islam must be a challenge to them. Islam is a religion that expects unbending observance of ancient customs and practices. Most adherents live a double life—needing to be faithful to seventh century rules and customs while they live and work in a twenty-first century world. Life in a secularized place like North America, which guarantees religious liberty for all, cannot be easy for a devout Muslim—who may come from a place where there is Islamic supremacy. One consequence of this daily challenge is that many Muslims, including moderates, struggle with knowing where to draw the line in assimilating western practices. Presenting the gospel in any way that forces them to make such decisions immediately only makes them more resistant. Such pressure is an affront to their cultural sensibilities, and will often close the door all together.

Suggestions for Meaningful Evangelism

It is often said Christians need to reach out in love and compassion to our Muslim friends and neighbors. What does this mean? Does it only mean being willing to share the gospel with Muslims?

Paul understood that in order to reach others, a believer must be willing to be all things to all people (see 1 Cor. 9:22). This may be the most favorable moment to model the vast difference that exists between adherence to a religion and the acceptance of a vital relationship with Jesus as Savior.

- Pray for the opportunity to witness to people of the Muslim religion. Consider doing a prayer walk in your neighborhood to identify Muslim homes, and begin praying about how God might open an opportunity to meet and befriend them. Make a commitment to nurture long-term relationships with anyone you might meet.

- Think deeply about the nature of the gospel and prepare to share the message in a way that is not unnecessarily associated with American cultural baggage. Be ready and willing to critique Western culture when it is in violation of clear biblical teaching.
- Read materials that present a balanced assessment of Muslims around the world, and specifically in North America. Read about the different subgroups in Islam. Understand the differences between them and show that you are not ignorant to the differences.
- Consider contextualized missiological principles when reaching out to people of any world religion. America is a vast mission field. Many enclaves in the major cities are microcosmic reflections of foreign lands.
- Read about Islam and how its doctrines differ from historic biblical Christianity. At some point, your Muslim friend is apt to ask why Christians believe in the Trinity, the virgin birth, and Jesus as God's son, etc. Reaching out to Muslims demands that we take our understanding and defense of biblical doctrine to a heightened level.
- When presenting the gospel, do not be combative or argumentative. Be clear about who Jesus is and what He offers through faith in Him alone. Your personal testimony can be a powerful piece of the presentation. It allows the hearer to understand that God's greatest ground of conquest is the human heart.
- Most importantly, live your faith in practical ways. Show your Muslim friends that your faith in Jesus Christ is an integral facet of your daily life.

The Liberating Message of Christ

Without question, Islam is a religion with a rich cultural heritage. For most Muslims, turning away from Islam means rejecting their culture—which is unthinkable. Yet, many Muslims know, even if they don't acknowledge it openly, that Islam has been largely overtaken by radical Islamic fundamentalism. Whatever things of beauty Islam offers to the world, these have been eclipsed by the overwhelming negative images and rhetoric of hatred, oppression, and fanatical violence.

Many Muslims are deeply disturbed by these developments and question the validity of such a religion. Nonie Darwish, a former Muslim of Middle Eastern origin talks of her escape from Islam. "Islam," she says, "is rotting out from its core."² She notes that the Islam of today calls on the devout to submit, not to Allah, but to the brutal fanatical interpretations of fundamentalist clerics. In the mind of Darwish, and many like her, fundamentalist Islam has created a split between belief and practice. Notes Darwish,

I had to be conscious of every move I made and every word I said. As long as the façade was maintained I was safe. Behind the scenes it was a different story. Public behavior in Islam is what counts, while sins prohibited by Islam are alive and well in private. You have no privacy or choice but to conform and live in a straightjacket, at least publicly. I refuse to adhere to superhuman behavior in public and then release the tension and the truth in private. . . . I cannot submit to the observing eyes of other Moslems who treat each other as police enforcers of Islamic law.²

Unlike the oppressive system that has countless Muslims in its grip, people of the Islamic religion must see full Christian integration in life and thought. When they begin to see how Christianity redeems people and releases them to express the fruit of the Spirit willingly, they may begin to see the shortcomings inherent in all human religion.

Today, Nonie is a follower of Jesus. By encountering Christians who showed her the love of Christ, the Holy Spirit led her to make the necessary cultural adjustments in time. The North American church has a responsibility to reach out in a meaningful way to Muslims for whom Jesus died. Outreach to them presents exciting opportunities, but not without some serious challenges to how the gospel is presented.

² Darwish, Nonie, *Escaping "Submission," FrontPageMagazine.com*. Feb. 11, 2003.

³ Ibid.

Conclusion

Thank God that the U.S. has not issued a general order to round up all people of the Muslim religion. God, however, has issued an executive order to His church and it may have come in the most unusual way. Paul's vision of the man from Macedonia is instructive (see Acts 16:9-11). Upon seeing the vision he and his team concluded, "God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16:10, NIV). The evangelistic order was implicit in the vision and the vision was the Macedonian man.

Today there are countless people of the Islamic religion in virtually every sector of our North American society—in each one we have a vision and a call. Do believers have the discernment to understand His call to reach out with the message of Christ's love? God has called us to move forward in confidence that many will come to a saving faith in Jesus our Lord.

Rudolph D. Gonzalez, Director, Interfaith Evangelism

©2003, North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Alpharetta, Georgia

All rights reserved. The North American Mission Board grants permission for reproduction of this publication for educational purposes. Alteration of this publication is strictly prohibited. May not be sold for profit.

All other inquiries should be addressed to: Editorial and Design Manager, North American Mission Board, 4200 North Point Pkwy., Alpharetta, Ga. 30022-4176; or fax (770) 410-6006; or e-mail permissions@namb.net.



NORTH AMERICAN MISSION BOARD, SBC
NAMB

4200 North Point Pkwy.
Alpharetta, Ga. 30022-4176

A Southern Baptist Convention entity supported by the Cooperative Program and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering®

For further information visit the Interfaith Evangelism Web site, www.namb.net/interfaith,
or contact Interfaith Evangelism via e-mail at interfaith@namb.net, for available resources about the study of Islam.
The *Cross or the Crescent* video also gives excellent information for your study of Islam.

By clicking on <http://www.namb.net/iraqPrayer/devotions.asp>, you will see relevant facts about the war in Iraq
and the North American Mission Board's prayer efforts for them.

For general information, call (770) 410-6000 or visit www.namb.net.
To order materials, call Customer Service Center, 1 866 407-NAMB (6262),
fax, (770) 442-9742, or visit www.namb.net/catalog.

<http://www.namb.net/interfaith>