

The Day of Salvation for Muslims Everywhere: An Interview with Bob Blincoe

By Bob Blincoe and Duane Alexander Miller Botero

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Question 1: You have written the authoritative book on the history of mission to the Kurds¹. What got you interested in the Kurds?

Bob: You are kind. Note that on the last page of my book it does not say “The End.” I hope someone will write the next chapter. While living in Los Angeles in the late 1980s I wanted to meet Kurds. I heard about a fellow that needed help moving into his apartment. That led to a friendship, and through him I met Kurds who immigrated from Turkey, Iraq and Iran. In 1990 my family moved to Jordan and in 1991 to Kurdistan of Iraq. I wrote the book while hard-pressed on every side but not crushed.

Question 2: You are an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church of the USA. Do you find any insights from the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition that you think are important or particularly helpful in relation to the topic of Christian witness to Muslims?

Bob: Hundreds of godly, persevering Presbyterians and Reformed missionaries served in the Middle East in the 19th and 20th century. They were full of zeal and they taught and employed the Christian minorities, being forbidden by the Ottomans to directly teach Christianity to Muslims. Missionaries abounded in doing good works, most prominently in building and staffing hospitals and schools. For two centuries these institutions

¹ Blincoe, R. (1998). *Ethnic realities and the church: Lessons from Kurdistan: a history of mission work, 1668-1990*. Pasadena, Calif: Presbyterian Center for Mission Studies.

testified to the love of Jesus Christ and to the sacrifice his servants were willing to make for the people of the Middle East. The day of running missions hospitals and schools is gone; new creative access has to be developed, and the Presbyterian and Reformed administrations have been struggling with how to make the transition.

Question 3: You are the US Director of Frontiers. Could you please tell us a bit about what makes Frontiers unique and different from other groups engaged in the Muslim world?

Bob: Frontiers has a lot in common with the other mission agencies and churches that are believing that now is the day of salvation for Muslims everywhere. I have the best job in the world; I get to send the next generation of teams to begin the work of the gospel where the need is the greatest, to do church planting among unengaged Muslim peoples. I have been freed up from all field-related responsibilities. Team leaders do not report to me; they report to other team leaders, in a unique “field-governance” model. I am accountable for just the one thing: recruiting, training and sending new teams.

Question 4: Frontiers and Wycliffe have come under a lot of fire regarding some translations of Scripture that do not translate *huios theou* as 'son of God'. The arguments for and against this policy have been outlined elsewhere by translators and scholars, and I'm not interested in those here. I'm more interested in hearing how you, as a Christian leader with a great deal of visibility, have been impacted by the whole controversy emotionally and spiritually, if you are willing to share.

Bob: The criticism has worked for our good, because we had to go to the Bible many times to get our understanding of how to respond: “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23).

Question 5: Some years ago I was looking for material on Muslim-background congregations. That is, not just studies of individual MBB's but of the congregations they form, and I could only find one single book on the topic. It

was *Planting Churches in Muslim Cities*² by your predecessor and the founder of Frontiers, Greg Livingstone. That book was not so much a study of existing congregations, but a strategy for church planting. The book is almost 20 years old now. What is your evaluation of Livingstone's 'Team Approach' at this point? How has it worked or not worked?

Bob: Greg Livingstone's book kept it simple, and that's good because "church planting among Muslims through a team approach" is going to get complicated. "The main thing," Greg says, "is to keep the main thing the main thing." A team leader in Frontiers is given an exceptional amount of authority to make decisions. His family and team are his first priorities. I just bought a copy of Patrick Lencioni's book, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else*³. I can do better in creating a healthy organizational environment, and that is why I bought this book.

Question 6: For at least a century there was one overarching Protestant/evangelical strategy for Muslim evangelism, which you call 'The Great Experiment' in your book, and which Vander Werff⁴ calls the 'via the Eastern Churches strategy'. This strategy proposed that the best way to make Muslim converts was to reform the ancient Churches of the Middle East into an evangelical American/British mold, and then those ancient Churches would evangelize Muslims. What happened to the Great Experiment? Is there an overarching strategy today among evangelicals?

Bob: The godly missionaries of a previous century did all that they could to inspire the beleaguered Christian minorities to bring Christianity to the Muslim Turks, Persians and Arabs among them. But what the Christian minorities wanted for themselves was protection from a mighty Christian nation, either the US or Great Britain. In 1938 many missionaries to Muslims gathered in Beirut to think about how little there was to show for all of their effort and strategies. They produced a very interesting paper, prefiguring all the issues that missionaries talk about today. That is, while holding firmly to the Biblical

² Grand Rapids: Baker 1993.

³ San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2012.

⁴ Vander Werff, L. (1977). *Christian Mission to Muslims: The Record: Anglican and Reformed approaches in India and the Near East, 1800-1938*. South Pasadena, Calif: William Carey Library.

doctrines the senior missionaries who met in Beirut talked through terms like “Christian” and “following Jesus in a Muslim setting” and “finding a way around these obstacles.”⁵ Those missionaries who gathered in Beirut were trying to get their bearings from the Bible, not from sociology, and it is so today as well.

Question 7: Let’s take a step back and look at the big picture of worldwide strategy.

What are the biggest shifts and changes going on in the world right now that will affect the contours and context of Muslim-Christian relationships? What are your areas of concern? Are there any movements or developments that you find particularly positive or helpful? Feel free to mention politics and economics here if you like, and not just 'religious' things.

Bob: It is no exaggeration to say that for the first time in history large numbers of Muslims are coming to faith. We had the sensational experience in Indonesia in the 1960s when the government ordered every citizen to choose a religion, and that is how millions of Muslims came to Christianity. But today they are coming to Christ, and to be clear I mean to the Christ of the Bible. No one is doing this so well that a strategy that works in one place can work in others, but we should pay attention. One person that has paid attention is Jerry Trousdale, who wrote the book *Miraculous Movements*⁶. He has done the research on more than 30 movements of Muslims to faith in Christ. We should watch and pray for a bright future for many millions of Muslims whom the angels will gather on the last day.

⁵ Cf. Henry Riggs, “Shall We Try Unbeaten Paths in Working for Moslems” in *The Moslem World*, Vol. 31:2 (April 1941), pp. 116–126. That article was based on the 1938 report mentioned by Mr Blincoe titled “Near East Christian Council Inquiry on the Evangelization of Moslems: Report” (Beirut: Library of the Near East School of Theology Beirut).

⁶ Nashville: Thomas Nelson 2012.