The Challenge of Discipling Muslim Background Believers

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INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest missiological challenges of the twenty-first century church is ministering to Islamic adherents. From its inception, Islam has grown from its humble beginning in the Arabian Peninsula into a world religion of over a billion followers from the Atlantic shores of Africa, the South Pacific, and the United States of America all the way to the steppes of Siberia.[1] Islam has not only become a religion, but has dominated and integrated itself into the culture of its adherents. Islam according to J. Christy Wilson "is a very tightly–knit system. It determines just how every act of life shall be performed, from morning until evening and during the night, and it exercises control over all of life, from the cradle to the grave."[2]

 In addition, Islam holds a community devotion and solidarity that Wilson likened to "faith and patriotism combined."[3] Therefore, Christians have been generally frustrated in their efforts to reach Muslims for Jesus Christ. However, in some parts of the world, there have been some encouraging results like: Indonesia in the 1960s, Bangladesh, and more recently in Nigeria,

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[1]Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 2002), xviii.

[2]J. Christy Wilson, *The Christian Message to Islam* (New York, London, Glasgow: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1950), 7.

[3]Ibid.

Chad and other places.[4] In effect, "more Muslims have come to Christ in the last 25 years than in the entire history of Muslim missions combined."[5]

However, one of the most perplexing concerns in Muslim evangelism is the cost of accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In almost all Muslim societies, it has become increasingly difficult for individuals to openly profess their faith in Christ Jesus. Muslims who change their faith by accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior face all kinds of persecutions and death threats to their lives because there is a prescribed penalty of death for those who adopt another faith. However, a far stronger deterrent to becoming a Christian is the fact that doing so will break the bonds of family life and bring aspersion and persecution not only upon themselves, but also on the members of their own household, whom they love.[6]

Recently I was involved in a negotiation between a family and their daughter Miriam (not her real name). Miriam, who is 19, accepted Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior and is being threatened with death, deportation and abuse because of her new found faith. What complicates the issue is that the girl is also dating another young Christian of 21 years old. As you can imagine, the family is Muslim from the Middle East and the parents feel that she had abandoned not only her faith but her culture and tradition. For her safety, Miriam moved out of her home last weekend and stopped working. However, we were able to get her father committed to her safety, and allow her freedom to attend a church and have one of the Christian leaders visit regularly and teach not only Miriam but her parents what faith in Christ entails. However, the psychological warfare continues as the parents keep on pressuring her that her decision will bring

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[4]Stan Guthrie, "Muslim Mission Breakthrough" *Christianity Today*, December 13, (1993): 20-26.

[5]Rick Love "Discipling All Muslim Peoples in the Twenty- First Century" *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, vol. 17:4, (2000), 5.

[6]Wilson, *The Christian Message to Islam*, 106.

shame to the family.   It should be noted, this is in USA, not in far away Middle East, Africa or somewhere in Asia.

This factor of high price raises a number of issues, among them, how would the church disciple Muslim converts? Especially, when Muslim resistance to the Christian faith has partly been attributed to "missionary extractionism."[7] In response to this challenge, I will first underscore the colossal nature of the challenge of discipling Muslim converts to Christianity by highlighting some of the theological and cultural baggage that former Muslims bring into their new faith in Christ Jesus. Second, I hope to examine some of the measures adopted by missionaries by analyzing the meaning of extraction and its antonym integration, in Muslim outreach, and how the methodology of extraction and integration affect the new converts. Finally, I hope to suggest some practical ways of discipling new Muslim converts for maximum benefits in the gospel outreach to the Islamic world.

<div align="center">**Background of Ex-Muslim Believer in Christ**</div>

Sense of Community

The new Muslim convert to Christianity comes to faith in Christ with the background of Islamic society, the *umma*, which is the brotherhood of Islam. According to George W. Braswell, Jr. "the *umma* established by Muhammad cuts across all lines of race, class, tribe, and ethnicity. Religion was integrated with society, and the new community was Muslim."[8] Relationship based on kinship was abolished and all Muslims are regarded and treated as brothers. Muhammad "declared the inviolability of a man's person, property, and honor. Muslim

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[7]Sam Schlorff, "The Translational Model for Mission in Resistant Muslim Society: A Critique and an Alternative" *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. XXVIII, 3. July (2000), 312.

[8]George W. Braswell, Jr. *Islam Its Prophet, Politics and Power* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 113.

law establishes the principal crimes: murder, damage to body, fornication and adultery, theft and highway robbery, and consumption of alcoholic beverages."[9] The Islamic families also tend to be large, strong and closely-knit. Furthermore, both the family and society serve to give identity to a Muslim. It is almost unthinkable to do anything without the sanction or approval of the community or to take an action that will bring disrespect to one's family or community. Phil Parshall insists, "the greatest tragedy in a Muslim's life is to see dishonor brought upon the family's name. Such shame will cause internal convulsions within the complete extended – family structures. The hurt, embarrassment, and perplexity of family dishonor will have a negative effect on the name and reputation of future generations."[10]

Cultural Integration

Another important element in Muslim background believer is the integration of culture and religion. Generally, in most Islamic countries, politics, economics, and socio-cultural activities are regulated and guided by the Islamic law. The new convert is often shocked with the Western culture, which he often mistakes to be the Christian culture. Ray G. Register, Jr. observes that while in Islam, his "personal decisions are controlled by the extended family under patriarchal control. He is shocked by the individualism and moral laxness of Western culture. He sees these as products of a basic weakness in the Christian faith. Christianity, to him, is a religion of the West, of Greece, Rome, and America. It is judged as inferior to Islam which has its root in the Middle East."[11]

Fear of Persecution

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[9]Ibid.

[10]Phil Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism* (Waynesboro- Georgia: Gabriel Publishing, 2003), 89.

[11]Ray   G. Register, Jr. *Dialogue and Interfaith Witness with Muslims* (Kingsport, Tennessee: Watson Lithographing Company, 1979), 13.

Another fundamental concern a new Muslim convert struggles with after deciding to become a follower of Jesus Christ is persecution. Often as Ron Peck points out, "when a new convert from Islam makes his faith known to his family, he may be totally cut off from his family members. This can create a serious financial hardship."[12] In some places like Egypt, the new convert is derided and discriminated against. It has been suggested that this accounts for the reason why the Coptic Church has been identified with the cross more than any other Christian church. Edward Wakin observes, "While the Copts share the cross with the rest of Christianity, with no other group is its presence so obsessive. This ranges from the Patriarch, who holds the cross in front of himself as though it were both a shield and a weapon, to the ragged village children who run after strangers, with crude blue tattoos of the cross on the inside of their right wrists and crosses around their neck."[13]

Persecution in some contexts may involve loss of job, excommunication from family and the community, prison and in some cases ultimate price of death. According to *MIA FOCUS*, a news magazine about Muslim Iraqi Arabs, most missionaries in Muslim countries find that only ten percent "of those who make public profession of faith in Christ remain faithful to their vows. It is very difficult for a convert to mentally, physically, and spiritually survive where they were known before becoming a believer. Muslim converts are opposed and persecuted by their societies and governments for several reasons."[14] Some of the reasons include the following: first, is the conception that any Muslim that changes religion is a traitor to Allah. Second, Christianity in many Islamic societies is associated with Western colonialism, culture, and value

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[12]Ron Peck, "Speaking on Behalf of Muslims" *Intercede*, July/ August, (2000), 2.

[13]"The Plight of Eastern Christianity under Islam." [on-line]; accessed 5 October 2004; available from http://www.safeplace.net/members/mer/MER_p008.htm, 7.

[14]"Would You Pay The Price?" *MIA IRAQ FOCUS*, October, (1996), 1.

systems. "Christians are those people seen in Western television programs –selfish, dishonest, greedy, and immoral. These characteristics and values are offensive to most Muslims."[15] The third reason is that "becoming a Christian brings great shame and dishonor to a person's family values and relationships."[16] Something Muslims would resist with great passion.

Philosophy of Education

The majority of Muslims live in non-Western societies and their learning process differs considerably from the Western-Greco-philosophical inductive reasoning. Larry Poston differentiates the two learning processes as follows; the Westerner employs teacher-student, Aristotelian methodology. Passing on knowledge by giving the facts of the desired behavior, the teacher does not need to practice or experience what is being taught. Furthermore, the personal life of the teacher is irrelevant to his professional ability to perform and linear system is the method of instruction.[17]

On the contrary, most Muslim converts have been oriented in the Eastern philosophy of learning. It is master-discipleship based; it communicates knowledge through modeling and motivation. Furthermore, the teacher in order to be effective must exemplify the teaching, as his entire life both public and private will be relevant in teaching the students. The method of instruction is often circular in arrangement.[18]

Theological Baggage

With respect to spiritual convictions, Muslim converts often come with floods of unresolved theological difficulties. Some of the questions include: the deity of Christ, and the

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[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Larry Poston, "Evangelizing Muslims" *Institute for Muslim Studies* Wheaton College, Il., 9.

[18]Ibid.

Trinitarian concept, the exclusivity of the Christian faith, the substitutionary atonement, death, resurrection, forgiveness and assurance of salvation. William J. Saal observers, "shortly after you begin to discuss spiritual things with your Muslim friends, you will discover several commonly held misconceptions of the Christian faith. Some of these misconceptions are the result of specific Qur'anic allegations; others seem to be more closely related to the history of contacts between the Christian and Muslim communities."[19]

Closely related to the theological problems is the issue of reverence to holy or spiritual objects. Waleed Nassar in his *Ten Stumbling Blocks to Reaching Muslims* insists "in the eyes of Muslims the way we talk to and about God reflects our reverence for Him or our lack thereof."[20] According to Nassar, "Americans are virtually addicted to entertainment and unfortunately this has invaded the church both practically and theologically. Muslims are turned off by this lack of reverence and find excessive humor from the pulpit offensive. After conversion, former Muslims would like to keep revering God while enjoying Him as Father."[21] How has the Christian mission responded to these cultural and theological challenges in the context of Muslim discipleship?

EXTRACTION AND INTEGRATION

Extraction in Muslim evangelism and discipleship contexts refers to the abandonment of Muslim tradition and culture after conversion to the Christian faith. Extractionism theory according to Sam Schlorff, "claims that missionaries have often demanded that converts turn

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[19]William J. Saal, *Reaching Muslims for Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 63.

[20]Waleed Nassar, "Ten Stumbling Blocks to Reaching Muslims" *Mission Today* (1995), 19. See also, *Ministries Today*, July/August, 1994.

[21]Ibid.

against their own culture and convert to a foreign culture."[22] This practice has been blamed for Muslim resistance to the Gospel. It is said that by extraction of the new converts, missionaries reject the culture of the people and impose their foreign culture on the new believers. A practice some scholars have labeled as double conversion, first to Christ, and then to the culture of the missionary.[23]

On the other hand, integration speaks of leaving the new converts within their own culture. In modern missiological terminology, integration is associated with different forms of contextualization, especially in tradition of John Travis and expanded by Phil Parshall.[24] H. L. Richard argues that extraction is practiced in India among the Muslims and high –caste Hindus for two reasons. First, according to Richard, are geographical factors. The Muslims and Hindus are often living in areas of existing churches. Therefore, "evangelists stand outside the society and call for individuals to profess Christ and come out to join the Christian. This means the extraction of new believers from their homes and society, and the destruction of bridges for the gospel into those societies."[25] The second reason advocated for extraction is that of persecution. In India, it is falsely assumed that "no one from Hindu or Muslim backgrounds will ever face severe opposition if a better strategy for evangelism is adopted. Certainly there will be

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[22]Sam Schlorff, "The Translational Model for Mission in Resistant Muslim Society: A Critique and an Alternative," 312.

[23]Ibid.

[24]John Travis, "The C1 to C6 Spectrum" *Perspectives on The World Christian Movement: A Reader* Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne eds. 3ed. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999), 658-9. See also Evangelical Missions Quarterly, 34.3 October (1998), 407-8. And Phil Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism* (Waynesboro-Georgia: Gabriel Publishing, 2003), 59-74.

[25]H.L. Richards "Is Extraction Evangelism Still The Way to Go? Several Other Models Suggest some Possible Alternatives In Mission To Hindu And Muslims." *Mission Frontiers*: The Bulletin of the U.S. Center for World Mission. September/October (1996), 1. [On-line]; accessed 12 October 2004. Available from http://www.missionfrontiers.org/1996/0910/so966.htm. See also, H.L. Richards "Is Extraction Evangelism Still The Way to Go…" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* EMQ April (1994).

opposition, and occasionally there may even be expulsion, but everything possible must be done to minimize and eliminate these things."[26]

Another possible reason for extraction is that a good number of Christian leaders in Muslim lands were previously extracted from their culture and had paid the price of leaving family and society. Therefore, these groups feel strongly that they literally forsook all for Christ, and insist that others "should be called to that same radical step."[27] However, Schlorff suggests that the continual use of extractionism is because of the ideological nature of Islamic society. "Islam is a society dedicated to the proposition that all men are created to live in submission to God as prescribed by God's law, the *Shariah*."[28] According to this argument, the *Shariah* law makes provision for non-Muslims, but regards them as second-class citizens. The effect of this law has been the creation of Christian ghettos, which in turn creates more distrust of converts from Islam and segregates them from the main stream of the society.[29] Furthermore, Schlorff contends that the Islamic law of apostasy is even more extractionist in view of the fact that "in an ideological society where everyone must conform to the Law of God, apostasy (defection from Islam) is seen as equivalent to sedition."[30]

Advocates of integration, or rather contextualization, point to the "long story of negative, ineffective witnessing to Muslims and having more insight into cultural implications of

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[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Schlorff, "The Translational Model for Mission in Resistant Muslim Society: A Critique and an Alternative," 315.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid.

the incarnation that lie behind these approaches."[31] Gilliland disagrees with Sam Schlorff for

suggesting that Islam is to be blamed for extractionism, however, he concedes that Islamic

converts throughout history have always been persecuted and disenfranchised, but he insists that,

"it is no show of grace that Christian churches have been so inhospitable to Muslims when they

leave Islam. The facts are obvious, missionaries have expected Muslim converts to join their

churches and perhaps 90 percent have done so. Only a very few converts belong to churches that

are not the traditional C1 type."[32]

However, while integrationists are concerned about the relevancy of the gospel and the

need to see result, there is every need to be cautious about the problem of syncretism. This is true

especially in respect to contextualization spectrum C5 and C6. Phil Parshall who has been in

forefront of Muslim mission strategy also gave the following guidelines on contextualization.

First, the church must be acquainted with the biblical teaching on the subject of syncretism.

Second, more studies should be encouraged on Islam both as a religion and as a culture. Third,

an attitude of openness and careful experimentation should be encouraged. Fourth, the process

of contextualization needs constant monitoring and analysis. Fifth, cross-cultural communicators

must beware so as not to present the gospel as part of Western culture.[33] Granted, integration of

new converts should be encouraged, however, it seems too cautious and leans too closely to the

Islamic culture that the gospel truth may be compromised. If the goal of discipleship is to create

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[31]Dean S. Gilliland, "Modeling the Incarnation for Muslim People: A Response to Sam Schlorff" *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. XXVIII, No. 3 July (2000), 329.

[32]Ibid., 333-4. The C1 to C6 refer to different levels of contextualization in Muslim evangelization and C5 and C6 argue for more radical shift by creating Messianic Mosques or allowing coverts remain Muslims while claiming to be followers of Jesus. See Phil Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism* (Waynesboro- Georgia: Gabriel Publishing, 2003), 59-74.

[33]Phil Parshall, "Danger! New direction in Contextualization" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* EMQ Vol. 34 No. 4. October (1998), 410.

an indigenous church that will be strong, evangelistic, and influential in Islamic societies, a new approach that is more radical needs to be devised both for discipling Muslim converts and reaching out to the greater population with the gospel. However, in order to appreciate the suggested principles, one needs to have a proper perspective of the root problems of Muslim discipleship.

THE ISLAMIC FAITH AND THE GOSPEL CLAIM

There is an impression being created in mission circles that Western missionaries are the problem in Muslim outreach and discipleship because of the problem of extraction. However, the problem of Muslim missions is far more complicated than the argument on mission methodology. Granted, there should be a lot more improvement in lifestyle, cultural sensitivity and strategy in Muslim mission, but the core of the problem lies with the nature of Islamic faith and the Gospel truth, both of which claim to be ultimate revelation of truth. Islam is more than a religious faith and belief but a total system of life complete with theocratic rules and cultural norms.

The claims of Christ and the Islamic teachings are fundamentally and dialectically opposed, that, conflict is inevitable. The history of the church and the contemporary Muslim militancy attest to this reality. In an essay in *Christianity Today*, Stan Guthrie remarks, "many Christians see Islam's revived militancy and repression as signs of weakness and the return to fundamentalism.[34] There is therefore, no level of contextualization, unless the gospel is compromised, that will make Muslim outreach easier or that would eliminate persecution and suffering of the new converts. Muslim converts "will always have to pay a price for their faith in Jesus and their conversion may prove equally costly for those who seek to bring them to

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[34]Guthrie, "Muslim Mission Breakthrough" *Christianity Today,*23.

Christ."[35] Consequently, it would seem appropriate to return to the New Testament model of discipleship. The New Testament's thoughts on faith and mission were not heavily influenced by the Western culture and mission methodology. Furthermore, much of the Christian faith and mission in the first two hundred years of church history were within the context of a repressive and authoritarian regime, conflicting values, and competing religious thoughts and cultural values. Yet, the early believers were able to conquer a greater part of the Roman world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Examining the New Testament, the following steps would be suggested for discipling New Muslim converts.

SUGGESTED PRINCIPLES

Community Context

In the early church, one of the factors that contributed to the survival, spread and strength of the church was the church's sense of Christian community. They had much in common, cared for, loved, and supported each other in a difficult period. In the same manner, ex-Muslim converts can be discipled within a community setting. According to a *Baptist Press News* analysis of the condition of Muslim converts, while it is true that many Muslims are turning to Jesus Christ to faith through visions, radio programs, and new strategies, many fall by the wayside. "Christian broadcasting and new mission strategies are reaching into the heart of the Islamic world as never before. However, after the vision, after the miraculous (or quiet) conversions, how are new believers being nurtured, discipled and brought into Christian churches? In many cases, they aren't."[36]

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[35]"Caring for Muslim Convert" *Communicating the Gospel to Muslims*. [On-line]; accessed12 October 2004. Available from http://www.answering-islam.org.uk/Gilchrist/vo12/3d.html. 3.

[36]Erich Bridges, "Analysis Many Converted Muslims Stand or Fall-Alone" *BP News* [On-line]: accessed 12 October 2004. Available from http://www.baptistpress.org/bpnews.asp?Id=4243. 1.

The reason identified for this trend is loneliness. According to this report, Muslim converts to Christianity "do not have fellowship with other believers. Most of them revert to Islam after a short time. Some say 90 percent of Muslim converts in the Middle East revert to Islam—if not to agnosticism—within the first year after they decided to follow Christ."[37] Even if the statistics are exaggerated, they underscore the need for community- context discipleship. In regard to the challenge of creating communities where none exist, the first step would be, when a true convert is identified, he could be extracted for a limited time. For intensive teaching on the life of Christ, the place of suffering in the Christian faith, warfare prayer, major Christian doctrines, and the readiness to pay the ultimate price if necessary. The new convert must return to raise an indigenous community of faith starting from his immediate family. This new community of faith may take the form of house church or clusters of house churches. It has to be mobile, flexible, and non-institutionalized. Furthermore, it has to operate as a movement with an activist, non-violent mindset.

Muslim Immigrants and Students

In Europe and North America, there are thousands of Muslim nationals, students and migrant workers that can be witnessed to, discipled and sent back home as missionaries. In France for instance, it is estimated that there are about ten million Muslims of the general population of about sixty million. Most of these Muslims are of North African and Arab origin.[38] Here in the United States, "Muslim advocacy groups such as the Council on American Islamic Relations routinely cite a span of 6 million to 8 million people in describing the size of Islam in

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[37]Ibid.

[38]Patrick Johnstone and Jason, *Operation World* 21st Century edition. (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2001), 254.

America. That would be between 2 percent and 3 percent of the U.S. population and make Muslims greater in number than Mormons or Jews."[39]

If these Muslims can be reached, they will bridge the gap between the West and the Arab world in particular and the Muslim society worldwide. Large percentages of this class of Muslims are professionals and possess the expertise that many Islamic societies require for their development.

However, before being sent on mission (family, neighborhood, cities, or anywhere), they would have been given training on indigenous church planting, cultural studies and theological understanding on difficult Christian doctrines that may be relevant to Muslim background believers. The rest of the church should intentionally support them in prayer, financial aid and supply Christian materials for discipleship in form of books, cassettes, CDs, DVDs, CD-ROMs, and films electronically.

Non-Western missionaries

In view of the fact that Muslim societies identify Christian faith with Western culture, it may be necessary to encourage African, Asian and Latin American churches that may have closer cultural affinities with Muslim cultures to send missionaries into Muslim countries with the sole purpose of planting indigenous churches and developing leaders. Non-Westerners may be able to adjust, both culturally and socially while the church in the West provides technical assistance behind the scene.

In view of the increasing Muslim population in the United States, theological institutions may need to train ministerial students on Islamic worldview, different sects in Islam

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[39]Robert King, "Figures on Faith" Indystar.com [On-line]: accessed July 20, 2009. Available from http://www.indystar.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080719/LOCAL18/807190453/1111/LIVING09&template= printart. See also *Islam and America* by George Braswell, jr. pp.81-83, and http://www.cair.com; the official website of Council on American-Islamic Relations.

and their history for better understanding. Moreover, local pastors should be conscious of the fact that neighborhoods are changing. Muslims can be seen everywhere in our cities and institutions. The mission field is no longer in far away countries; it is everywhere in our streets, neighborhoods, shopping malls, hospitals, schools, and public parks. Therefore, the mindset should be missional and *glocal*; a concept that reminds us of the interdependency of all nations in a global community.

Finally, given the level of violence in the Arab world in particular and Muslim society in general, the Islamic worldview, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, it seems that the true believers who would reach the Muslim world for Christ and effectively disciple them will be those who are ready to pay the ultimate price of death. They will model their life after Christ, willing to die for the salvation of their kindred, disciples who will be radicals for Christ through sacrificial love, which will be example for others to follow. Zachary Harris poses this question, "can the Muslim community take seriously the claim of a church in hiding? Any indication that we live more in fear of secular governments and hostile world forces than in fear of God also injures our witness of his glory."[40] Therefore, Muslim background believers, as well as their Christian ministers, will still likely have to pay the ultimate price of death before a strong, indigenous, evangelistic, and culturally relevant church of God will emerge in the Islamic world.

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[40]Zachary Harris, "Theological Critique of Security" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, (EMQ) July (2004), 330.