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The Role of Missionaries in the Muslim Countries: Problems and Challenges

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Editor's Note: This Cape Town 2010 Advance Paper has been written by Andrea Zaki Stephanous as an overview of the topic to be discussed at the Multiplex session on Islam. Responses to this paper through the Lausanne Global Conversation will be fed back to the author and others to help shape their final presentations at the Congress.

Missionaries played and still play an important role in the Muslim countries. They brought technological and social development to the countries that they served. From their early days, they were concerned about economic, educational, health, social and spiritual development. However, the presence of missionaries in the Muslim countries raises problems as well as challenges. Political and religious contexts have shaped the development of anti-mission sentiment in the Muslim World today.

Western Intervention

The political reality is that, in the Middle East, the West preaches democracy but supports autocracy; Western leaders privately pander to aggressive domestic pressure groups, but advocate peace and tranquillity in public.

During the Cold War, the cohesion of the Arab World depended on the presence of

the Soviet Union as an alternative patron to the United States. Now that the Cold War is over, the contemporary Arab World is characterised by division into sub-regions and states, each having its own view of its role in the sub-region and in the region as a whole. (1) This has led to the West's new agenda for Arab World stability based on United States power. Unless modified, this agenda is likely to engender renewed antagonism rather than political, social or economic progress. (2)

The constant pressure on Arab states is to conform to the new world order led by the United States.(3) The United States' strong support of Israel has had a very negative impact on its image in the Islamic world. Likewise, the Iranian revolution has had an important role in shaping the US view of the Islamic world. The Iranian model is not only hostile to the US, but is putting pressure on US allies in the region, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, to distance themselves from US policies. (4)

The belief of Western states in their right to direct military intervention in the Arab World as a foreign policy tool has been demonstrated on numerous occasions since the start of the 1980s. A good example is Iraq. Western interventions during and in the aftermath of the second and third Gulf Wars are only the latest in a series. This belief of Western states is not limited to military intervention alone, but extends to the West's active promotion of universal standards for human and minority rights, grounded in the general belief that Western democratic systems of government are not only more effective practically, but also morally superior. (5)The tension between Western intervention on the one hand and Arab sovereignty on the other has become a critical issue among Middle Easterners.

Arabs have become uncomfortably aware of the recent direction of Western attitudes favouring intervention in the name of superior moral and legal principles.(6) Western intervention in the name of democracy has failed and created more hostility towards the West. The strong support of Israel, the attacks against Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq, the support of undemocratic Arab regimes and the collapse of the Soviet Union have all led to antagonism toward the West. Autocratic rulers without consistent policies have tried to gain internal support by attacking the West, leading to more confusing and contradictory policies.

The connection between Western intervention and mission work has been evident in the Muslim countries. Especially in the period of colonialism, different missions established their work under the protection of the colonial powers. However, such connections have become very sensitive and critical with the current Western

interventions. Muslims have become more and more suspicious about such relationships, considering the recent attack on Iraq as if it were a direct attack on Islam. In the modern Islamic view, the major concern of the West is to distort Islam by establishing the image of Muslims as terrorists, and through the missions' efforts to form an alliance between military intervention and humanitarian rescues.

Promoting Modernity or Modernisation

The term "modernity" is crucial to our understanding of the relationship between Islam and West. Modernisation is a political project associated with the establishment of the nation-state in the first half of the twentieth-century. In any case, modernisation has been introduced to the region and, since it is an imposition, the debate between modernisation and Islam has not ceased. Perhaps it will be helpful to look at the differences between modernisation and modernity. Hopwood draws the distinction:

Modernisation is the introduction into society of the artefacts of contemporary life – railways, communications, industry (less often nowadays), technology, and household equipment. Modernity (modernism) is a general term for the political and cultural processes set in motion by integrating new ideas, an economic system, or education into society. It is a way of thought, of living in the contemporary world and of accepting change. (7)

Modernisation began in Europe through the economic process by which people adopted new methods of production and distribution, and abandoned the traditional modes of economic relationship. Accordingly people became able to make individual economic choices and decisions. Such choices led people to leave behind the traditional way of life and become more mobile, and more capable of conceiving and absorbing change. (8)

We can consider modernisation as the process normally leading to modernity, which begins when a society assumes an attitude of enquiry into how people make choices, whether moral, personal, economic or political." (9) The terms "modernisation" and "modernity" (modernism) are used in this article to indicate the Western concept of modernisation that led to modernity; in other words, I will consider modernisation as one side of a coin, with modernity as the other.

Although the Western modernisation "project" was developed in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, during the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, it became an international model in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. 'Ali summarised the basic elements of Western modernisation as follows:

As a process of change in social structure and social system through science and technology; as a movement of transition from a traditional society of religion, magic and superstition to a modern and post-modern society that is free from the religious matrix and traditional norms; as a process for change in the set of relationships between the individual and society; as a process of mobilisation, differentiation, industrialisation, and secularisation; as a process toward high economic growth, stable democracy, and a capitalist economy; as a process to overcome nature and become independent of its control; as a movement toward the construction of a healthy, peaceful, content, and prosperous society; and as Europeanisation, Americanisation, and Westernisation; a process that puts reason above revelation. (10)

Historically modernism is “what characterises the new way of thinking that has occurred in the West as a result of, or at least alongside, the industrial and scientific revolutions. It is marked by a strong belief in the powers of science and reason, and by a basic scepticism towards any substantial, absolute truth.” (11)

It is important to indicate that such a distinction between modernisation and modernity can also be seen in the voices of Islamic reformists who advocate a reconciliation approach, by which they seek to benefit from the advancements of modernisation rather than of modernity, in the sense of culture and values. It is also clear that some current Islamic groups accept modernisation as a technological development required by the Islamic world, but reject modernity, which they see as the values and principles of Western culture.

It is generally agreed that missionaries are promoting modernity rather than modernisation. They are concerned with the value system, models and structures of the West. Islamists refer to mission work as an outcome of Westernisation. In that context, they argue that modernity as a value system was the core of the mission project in the Muslim countries. Muslims in general prefer modernisation in terms of technological development but reject modernity as a Western value system that is incompatible with Islam. In that context cultural sensitivity becomes crucial.

Cultural Sensitivity

One major problem that faces mission work is cultural sensitivity. The re-emphasis of cultural identity has risen strongly with the development of globalisation. Although globalisation creates an international culture that accommodates and promotes models of behaviour that maximise consumption, it also promotes

cultural identity, at the local and national levels. Globalisation includes in itself this contradiction, that where international culture takes root in a place, the local culture awakens strongly to protect national identity and culture. Wars at the end of the last century in Europe demonstrated this contradiction within globalization. One impact of globalisation in the Arab and Muslim World was cultural protection.

In the past as well as today, missionaries have consciously and unconsciously promoted their cultures in different ways. This situation creates hostility among Muslims in general and Christians in particular. However, with the presence of Western troops in the Islamic World, cultural sensitivity has become part of public awareness.

In this context there are problems that face mission work in the Islamic World. Although these problems are difficult and have become rooted in the mind of the public, there are challenges and opportunities for missions that can be summarized as follows:

Theology of Transparency

Looking deeply at the gospels, we can see three aspects of Jesus' mission:

- 1) The whole gospel for the whole person, that is, social change and spiritual teaching together. (See Luke 5:12-14—the story of the leper who is healed and told to show himself to the priests and make an offering.) We can call this aspect social justice.
- 2) Spiritual teaching for repentance for the kingdom of God. (See Matthew 5:3-11—the Sermon on the Mount.) This aspect is evangelism.
- 3) Social transformation independent of spiritual teaching. The conditions of people are changed regardless of faith and commitment. Love of neighbour is at the core of this aspect of Jesus' mission. (See Luke 17:12-19—Jesus heals ten lepers) This aspect could be labelled compassionate service.

Together these three represent the total mission of the Church. Jesus practiced and intermingled all three. Each of the three aspects is viable and important in the modern world. Missions engage in all three depending on the individuals targeted and the activity involved.

Regardless of the aspect, it is essential to implement each in a transparent way—without a hidden agenda, without manipulation, but with integrity. When working

with people to build awareness and to share a vision of change, transparency is an important tool as well as basis for such change. Without a relationship of trust established through transparency, work cannot be effective. In this work, the gifts of the Holy Spirit— wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety and fear of the Lord— and the fruits of the Holy Spirit— love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, friendliness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control— are very important. Transparency is key to success.

Theology of Co-existence

The basis for the theology of co-existence includes the New Testament examples of Christian pluralism and acceptance of the other. If we look back to the context in which Jesus taught, we see that Jesus' mission was to the Jews. When Jesus healed and taught Gentiles, his focus was still on the Jewish community. Through his interaction with Gentiles he forced Jews to think "outside the box," to broaden their perceptions and their hearts. Paul's insistence that Gentiles need not become Jews to become Christians is also an indicator of openness, of a vision that went beyond traditional faith "boxes."

The diversity of perspectives of the four gospels also encourages a pluralistic approach to Christianity. The gospels were written from different perspectives, stressing different aspects of the Good News, written to different communities, and presenting different emphases on who Jesus was, his major actions, his teachings and the basis for final judgment. For example, in regard to the basis for final judgment, Mark emphasizes perseverance in faith despite persecution, Matthew stresses what one does for the "least," Luke focuses on use of wealth and possessions, and John emphasizes belief in Jesus. The ability of early Christians to live in a pluralistic faith world provides an essential example encouraging co-existence today.

Diversity among early churches is another example. The church in Jerusalem, rooted in Judaism, was established on a model different from the Gentile churches which incorporated elements from their own cultures— for example, Hellenistic, pharaonic or Roman. Regardless, Paul encouraged the believers to live together, accept each other and love each other.

We have also Christ's injunction to love our neighbour, and the story of the good Samaritan, among others, to help us define who our neighbour is. These provide a theological basis for peaceful and supportive co-existence between different churches and between different faiths and cultures.

Some missions believe in cooperation and dialogue with people of other faiths. They practice mission through compassionate service and community cooperation.

Theology of Involvement

Mission agencies are called to go into the world. They are called to heal and reconcile and bind up wounds; to minister to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless; to engage in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger and injustice; to give of themselves and their substance to the service of those who suffer; to share with Christ in establishing a just, peaceable and loving rule in the world. Christian faith must be put into practice; it must have socio-political-economic implications.

Although theological doctrinal development in the Middle East favoured isolation of the church in the Islamic World, missions have taken a different path. Missions advocate that the church today needs to speak the language of the people; theology must be understandable and relevant to the person in the street. The theology of involvement is the theology of contextualization. Each mission must read critically the Word of God, conduct the analysis needed to read the core message behind the text, and reapply the message to the current context in order to put theology into practice. The way missions use this process is what I call the theology of involvement. It involves making a bridge or connection between the theological foundation and the current context. Here missions become involved in the life of society and become witnesses to their faith.

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2. E.G.H. Joffe, "Relations between the Middle East and the West," in *Middle East Journal* Vol.48 No.2., 1994, p. 252.
3. Michael C. Hudson, "Democracy and Foreign Policy in the Arab World," in *Democracy, War, and Peace in the Middle East*, David Garnham and Mark Tessler (eds.), Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995, p. 217. Huntington also claims that the United States is the dominant power in the new world order.
4. Eric Watkins, "The Unfolding US Policy in the Middle East," in *International Affairs* 73, 1, London: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 2-6.
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6. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
7. Derek Hopwood, "The Culture of Modernity in Islam and the Middle East," in

Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond, John Cooper(ed et al), London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998, p. 2.

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10.Muḥammad Mumtāz ‘Alī, “The Concept of Modernisation: An Analysis of Contemporary Islamic Thought,” in The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, 14:1, pp. 14-15.

11.‘Abd Al-Qādir Yāssīn, “Understanding Modernity on One’s Own Terms,” in The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, No.15: 2, p. 47.