

THE ANABAPTIST ADVANTAGE AMONG MUSLIMS

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In 2007 I was studying Arabic with a former Muslim who had just returned from study at a Christian seminary abroad. We met for several hours per day and often shared personal stories of our lives in our sessions. When Ahmad discovered my affiliation with the Anabaptist people and I showed him photos of my family, he became excited. "When you live in the Middle East," he instructed me, "you need to hang a large picture of your family on the wall." He offered this suggestion realizing the impact a photo of my family would have on Muslims whose perception of Christianity and the West is shaped largely by modern media.

A Syrian friend I met in the oil-rich United Arab Emirates best illustrates the view that many Muslims have of the West. I met him first under the palm trees of an outdoor café in the town where I was studying. Almost immediately he was curious about my faith so I explained to him how following Christ affects my life. I explained that living morally clean and following the teachings of Jesus in a practical manner is of utmost importance to me. The tone in his voice revealed his surprise as he asked "Are there more people like you in America?" This was the first time he realized that there are Americans who aim to live godly lives.

Sadly, many Muslims are familiar with Christianity only as portrayed through Western media. They see Hollywood actors and actresses with crosses around their necks and watch the violent news from "Christian America" and form an impression of what Christianity must be like. Even their own religious teachers inform them of the immorality and violence of Christians.

They recall the savageness of cross-bearing warriors who invaded Muslim lands during the Middle Ages. The Crusaders captured Muslim-ruled Jerusalem in 1099 and massacred its inhabitants. A witness from the crusader camp described the bloodshed as follows:

Some of our men cut off the heads of their enemies... shot them with arrows, so that they fell from the tow-

ers...[and] tortured them longer by casting them into the flames... At nightfall the crusaders' hands were still bloody when they folded them in prayer and knelt at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, sobbing for excess of joy (Shelly 189).

It was a tragic time when Christians took up the sword in the name of Jesus, an era that Muslims have never forgotten and continue to associate with the cross.

More recently European colonialism has sullied the name of Christ in the East. Beginning gradually through trade in Muslim nations, "Christian" European powers took control of and eventually subjugated entire Muslim populations for long periods of time. The French invaded Algeria in 1830 where they seized 100 million francs and transferred about half of that to France (Ansary 244). A French commission sent to give recommendations for the annexed territory described the terrible treatment of the local population as follows:

We have sent to their deaths on simple suspicion and without trial people whose guilt was always doubtful and then despoiled their heirs. We massacred people carrying [our] safe conducts, slaughtered on suspicion entire populations subsequently found to be innocent. (Ruedy 50)

Such measures of control and suppression spread across the Muslim world by other European powers. Egypt was first invaded by the French and later brought under British authority for several decades. Gradually, local Muslim populations formed resistance movements. But it was not until the mid-1900s that the last Muslim nations shook themselves free from foreign rule. Then in 2001 the self-professing born-again President George Bush called for another round of violence against the Muslims when he said, "This crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take awhile" (Ford). For many Muslims, this was just further proof that the power-hungry Christian West continued its crusading zeal.

But as Anabaptist people we march to a different drumbeat. Our commitment is not to an earthly kingdom bearing guns and ammunition, but rather to Jesus and his kingdom of peace. This lifestyle of following Jesus has shaped us in a variety of ways that speak loudly to the Muslim heart and mind.

For example, when Muslims flip through my small album of family pictures and see Grandma, Grandpa, and seven children plus the grandchildren and all of them dressed modestly, they are stunned. “It’s like a Muslim family,” they proclaim as they observe an American lifestyle unknown to them before. A family visit can leave an even deeper impression. After taking a Palestinian to visit my family in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, he spent nearly forty-five minutes describing the experience to his family. Among other things, he highlighted the length of my father’s beard, the way my sisters dress, and the absence of television in the home. This same young man was nearly moved to tears several months later when a Mennonite church shared hundreds of dollars with him in a time of desperate need. “You people are the real Christians that the Quran talks about,” he said as we discussed the possibility of him going with me to church to thank the “priest.”

Furthermore, our commitment to Jesus means that our young men are not in Iraq, Afghanistan or Libya manning guns, fighter jets or warships. This commitment to the teachings of Jesus presently and historically is an enormous asset in reaching out to Muslims with the Good News. And it is especially so at present when Muslims are mistrusted and portrayed as terrorists and enemies of the world. The portrayal of Muslims as dangerous and frightening is not new to our age. During the time of the Reformation the Muslim Turks were viewed in a similar way. Catholic and Protestant leaders were terrified that an invasion by the Turks was imminent and active preparation was absolutely necessary. Robert Friedmann describes the general feeling of that time saying:

Today one can scarcely realize the fear and horror which Europe of the sixteenth century felt at the sound of the word “Turk.” It made everybody shiver and tremble. From the beginning of the century the Turks had advanced in ever renewed waves...killing, pillaging, burning wherever they came (73).

The Hutterites of Moravia suffered heavily during this time (1593-1606). Property was seized, women and children taken captive and their communities were virtually destroyed. One Hutterite brother, Salomon Boger, spent the next several years trudging through Ottoman territory to free Hutterite women and children who had been sold into slavery. He died before finding his wife and daughter who

had been taken captive by the Turks (Friedman, 73-86). Despite such tragic encounters with the Turks, Anabaptists refused to engage in combat against them.

Hans Denck, for example, wrote that all men should be allowed to “move and dwell in peace—be he Turk or heathen” (Klassen 292). Michael Sattler, who penned the famed Schleithem Confession of Faith, said at his trial:

If the Turks should come, we ought not to resist them...I would rather take the field against so-called Christians who persecute, capture and kill pious Christians than against the Turks...The Turk is a Turk, knows nothing of the Christian faith, and is a Turk after the flesh. But you, who would be Christians and who make your boast of Christ persecute the pious witnesses of Christ and are Turks after the spirit (Klassen 270).

Michael Sattler died for his commitment to Christ rather than agreeing to fight the terrorists. What are we doing? Are we like fellow Americans who cheer on our government as they drop bombs on people for whom Christ died? Or are we holding to the Gospel of love that extends to Muslims of any culture or ethnicity?

Studies have shown that the primary factor in bringing Muslims to Christ has been the lives of Christians (Woodberry *et al.*). The Gospel lived out among Muslims has a deep impact on their perceptions of what Christianity is about and opens their hearts to the truth. Through traveling, studying and living among Muslims for the past several years, I have become increasingly convinced that conservative Anabaptists have a distinct advantage in bringing the Gospel to Muslim people. No doubt there are weaknesses in our tradition that hinder us. However, our long tradition of practical obedience to the teachings of Jesus gives us an advantage in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ over and over again.

The founder of an evangelical mission organization in a Muslim nation summed up this argument succinctly, “God is raising up men within the Mennonite constituencies to take the gospel to the yet unreached people of the world. You are the ones that have practice behind your faith that God can greatly use to win the world” (personal email). We have a special gift to offer in this field of ministry. We must not bury it or cast it away, but rather, we must take advantage of our advantage and use it for building the Kingdom of God among Muslims.

TDW is a kingdom worker among Muslims. He is not identified by name to preserve his opportunities for travel and ministry in Islamic areas.

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