

PRONOUNCEMENT

Pentecostal Response to Islamization

Released: 2015/06/10



THE STATUS QUO

The proportional percentage of global Christianity over the last century hovered around 32-33%. The dramatic church-growth from high-potential areas (eg. China and Africa) is more or less countered by the decline in the traditional Christian (postmodern) world.

During the same time Islam has grown from about 18-22%.

ISLAMIZATION

Basically Islamization is understood as the process of implementing or gaining recognition for Islamic values. If we talk about Islamization, we obviously refer mainly to traditional Western countries - which were until a generation or two ago also the traditional Christian bastions.

In a number of traditional Islamic countries over the last decade, Islamization implied that Christian minorities were even further reduced as many Christians sought refuge in Western countries due to increasing persecution and discrimination as well as increasing dangers as different Muslim factions are at loggerheads. The reasons being mainly party-political/cultural and to a lesser degree, religious. Examples hereof are Syria, Palestinian areas, Egypt and Lebanon.

The Islamization of traditional Western countries is mainly the result of migration and also because of the high birthrate and resulting larger families than is the norm in the West. The process is a non-violent jihad by employing economic and social methods.

It must also be remembered that Islam in its core (like Christianity) is a strong missional religion. Especially in Third World contexts like Africa, Islam gains much ground through charity work and educational involvement in poor communities.

In traditional Islamic countries there are rigid limitations regarding the practicing of other religions - even though it may pretend to have "religious freedom" enshrined in some constitutions. In these countries evangelization is mostly totally forbidden and proselytism is awarded with re-education and even death. The same rights that they demand in the countries they have immigrated to, is not allowed in their home countries. While they demand tolerance in Western Countries, there is not equal tolerance in traditional Muslim countries.

The response of the (Pentecostal) Church

Given this broad outline of Islamization, the question now is: What is the church's response?

To a certain extent the Church in the West finds itself uncertain and embarrassed in its response to Islamization. The aggressive nature and radical conduct of some fanatic Muslim groups may partly be the reason for the uncertainty, fear and hesitancy of Christendom.

Add to this the increasing cases of brutal attacks and murders of Christians by Muslims - even in countries with a majority of Christians (like in several countries in Africa) - make this Christian hesitancy even more understandable.

It also seems as if the Church in the West is uncertain about what it really believes regarding the Person of Christ. The Pentecostal Movement needs to express itself clearly on the person and uniqueness of Jesus Christ. What do we say about attempts to compromise as for example with "Chrislam"?

The lack of missional support and actions by the Western church in their own countries may also be enhanced by the fact that contrary to the situation in Muslim countries, Western governments are secular and humanistic in their stance and will not show any bias in favor of Christianity. On the contrary, it seems sometimes that there is more respect, tolerance and caution from some Western governments to Islam than to Christianity.

The Church should be reminded that we are apostolic and missional in nature. We cannot try only to maintain what we have. The main reason for our growth ought not to be through biological growth but by fulfilling the Great Commission.

It seems however as if the major impact of the church today (amongst Muslims) is not through conventional evangelism and mission outreaches. As Muslims use this era of globalization and migration as an important means to achieve their goal of the Islamization of the world, Christianity has an equal opportunity. A real problem is that the Church is often unsure how to approach the opportunities that do present themselves. Mission agencies are slow and even reluctant to respond as this asks for a new mindset - one that involves local churches.

There are indications that the use of the airwaves and the Internet is a viable alternative to conventional missional outreaches. The impact at this stage is however difficult to quantify.

In Western context we have opportunities in the marketplace to befriend and witness to Islam immigrants. On the other hand there is a large number of Western Christians working in traditional Muslim countries. In general these countries make great use of technology and expertise from Western companies to develop their cities and industries. Although active evangelism is in most cases strictly forbidden, the power and impact of a Christian lifestyle and their work ethic as witness, should never be underestimated.

It is exactly in this regard that the authentic Pentecostal/Apostolic reality of old is more relevant than ever. Ordinary believers, working people, people full of the Holy Ghost, whether in the market place and in their own safe environment or in service of a global corporation somewhere in a far-off Muslim country, can demonstrate and live Kingdom lives! It indeed cries out for a re-evaluation of the role of the laity - Pentecostalism is in essence a movement of people.

Of one thing we can be sure - no one cares more for Muslims than God! The death of His Son on Calvary was just as much for them. God also knows the challenges and barriers by which the forces of darkness are trying to prevent His love to reach them. But certainly God is not at a loss! Is that perhaps how one is to understand the many cases of supernatural revelations through dreams and otherwise that we hear of?

Whatever approach churches and believers are led to follow - whether in traditional Christian or Islam countries, we have one unequalled advantage - the role and influence of the Holy Spirit. Regarding our witness to Muslims, this is the one thing not to be forgotten - Nowhere in the Bible does God require from us to convince any person of the truth of the Gospel. It is the sovereign and exclusive work of the Holy Spirit. And no one can do it better. Yet, as a rule, He uses our witnessing to do the convincing. This is the reason why our missional outreach is not accompanied by force, aggression or intimidation.

The blessings of Abraham

Consider again the story of Abrahams' call by God to the land of the Canaanites (later Israel). I've often wondered why Abraham with his big household (slaves and animals) was so well received by the different heathen tribes of that foreign country. The answer may be in Gen.12:1-3. God blessed him and sent him to be a blessing. In fact all the families of the earth would somehow be blessed in and through him.

We know that this blessing was ultimately fulfilled in Christ. Yet the goodwill being shown to Abraham all through ancient Palestine and even down into Egypt is in contrast with the general tribal conflicts and wars of those days.

It is important to be reminded that Abraham is called the father of the believers. He is also the father of Israel. Through Ismael he is also the father of the Arabs (Muslims).

Now I wonder whether Abraham's benevolent approach and being a blessing to people like the Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, who were generally considered to be quite hostile and warlike, was not the reason why the country was opened to him? He was blessed and God blessed through him.

Now think about the general sentiments between Christians and Muslims and vice versa. It has always been mainly negative. Consider the outcome of the Crusades. I doubt whether it is much different today. Since 9/11 it has worsened and it is not difficult to see why.

What if Christians can regain the heart and mindset of their father Abraham and endeavor to be a blessing to all - Muslims included? What impact can we have if Muslim immigrants were received not with animosity and rejection, but with tokens of friendship and benevolence? What if Christian employees in Muslim countries pray and strive to bring blessing to that country and its people, if hatred and antagonism can be answered with Christlike love and blessings?

Was that promise only meant for Abraham? Or did Christ allude to it when He said: "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you"? (Mat.5:44)



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