RESISTANCE, RECEPTIVITY, AND MISSION AMONG MUSLIMS

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A common Christian stereotype about Muslims is that they are strongly and uniformly resistant to the Christian message. This stereotype is seemingly supported by the varied expressions of Islamic opposition to Christian mission that are visible around the globe. The fact that Muslims almost everywhere respond to evangelistic invitations at a relatively low rate also lends support to the stereotype.

While the realities mentioned above are undeniable, there is another reality that is also undeniable. Christians of all denominations invest a tiny fraction of their mission resources in the 10/40 Window where most Muslims reside. In light of this sobering reality, Christians need to challenge themselves with two questions: Should some people who are labeled as “resistant” more properly be called “neglected”? Are Christians comforting and excusing themselves for what they have not done by labeling certain people “resistant”? (see Liao 1979).

This article will suggest that one of the necessary steps toward more effective mission among Muslims is a deeper understanding of resistance and receptivity from a theological perspective. Developing a theology of resistance and receptivity is important for fulfilling God’s mission among Muslims.
What is “resistance” in the mission context? Michael Pocock says that “the resistant are those who have or are receiving an adequate opportunity to hear the gospel but over some time have not responded positively. They are not simply ‘unreached people’” (Pocock 1998:5). To be “adequate,” gospel teaching has to be shaped in a way that allows it to enter the hearer’s cultural-religious frame of reference and must take place over a sufficient time for the hearer to make a life changing decision. Inadequate gospel teaching may be rejected, giving the impression that the hearer is resistant when that may not be true.

Pocock’s statement about resistance refers to related missiological terms—the “unreached” and, by implication, the “reached.” His definition implies that a “reached” person is one who has had an adequate opportunity to accept the gospel. Referring to the famous motto “The evangelization of the world in this generation,” John R. Mott said that the motto does “not mean the conversion, or the Christianization, or the civilization of the world, no matter how much the volunteers may believe in each of these. It does mean that the Christians of this generation are to give every person of this age an opportunity to accept Jesus Christ” (Mott 1897:141). In other words, every non-Christian must be reached or be given an adequate opportunity to accept Christ during their lifetime. This goal sets a very high standard for mission in terms of the magnitude of the task and the need for excellent methodology.

What proportion of Muslims living today have been reached? Only God really knows the answer but the proportion may be distressingly low. Reaching all Muslims is not a minimalist objective, like trying to have every person to hear one broadcast or receive one piece of literature. On the contrary, giving all Muslims an adequate opportunity to accept Jesus implies a depth of missionary education and commitment of resources well beyond what Christians are now doing. If, through God’s power and grace, a significant number of those reached are to be converted and be fully discipled, the challenge is even clearer. Because most converts to Adventism have historically come from other Christian denominations, Adventists do not always realize how long and hard the conversion journey is for many Muslims. If the journey from being a Methodist or Baptist to being an Adventist is comparable to climbing a step ladder, the journey for Muslims

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1The eternal destiny of the unreached is not addressed in this article. Adventists usually affirm that God’s justice would not doom an unreached person to eternal death if that person had responded positively to the unseen voice of Holy Spirit and to general revelation. This belief does not decrease the missionary challenge of each generation of Christians to reach all non-Christians.
might be comparable to climbing a fireman's ladder to the top of a skyscraper. This highlights the significance of understanding what makes Muslims and others resistant or receptive to the gospel.

The church growth school, led by Donald McGavran (1955; 1959; 1970) and Peter Wagner (1971; 1976; 1979), originated the missiological discussion of people groups who are receptive or resistant. Missionaries encounter people not as isolated individuals but as members of groups which have different characteristics. As groups, some are more inclined and some less inclined to accept the gospel. Over the passage of time, groups change their receptivity levels. This implied that the movements of people groups should be observed so that mission initiatives could be selectively targeted toward the most responsive groups. Within people groups, the most responsive segments should receive priority. “Mission strategists should direct most of their efforts to the receptive mosaics and ‘occupy lightly’ the people groups or parts of the mosaic that are yet resistant” (Van Engen 1998:28).

One of the key biblical supports used by the church growth school is the parable of the sower (Matt 13:1-23). Peter Wagner wrote that the parable “teaches that intelligent sowing is necessary” and that before sowing one must “test the soil” (1971:42). The goal is to find the good soil so that the perennially scarce seed (mission resources) will produce the best possible yields.

For church growth thinkers, a receptive people group was one in which “some churches were growing rapidly” and where a “people movement” could be discerned (Van Engen 1998:31). Dayton, McGavran, Wagner, and others developed a “Resistance-Receptivity Axis” which ranged from “Highly Resistant” (-5) to “Highly Receptive” (+5). Careful study was done to define the factors that would cause a people group to occupy a particular position on the axis. Most of the factors involved the sociological, economic, political, institutional, or historical characteristics of a people group.

The church growth approach has been critiqued for being dominated by modern demographic and sociological analysis while ignoring theological factors. Charles Van Engen affirms the usefulness of the church growth approach but says it does not probe deeply enough into the nature of people groups. The church growth school approach makes “second-level derivative observations” that describe growth patterns rather than “inherent or intrinsic” factors like “a group's worldview, its cultural or religious systems, its faith-issues, its spiritual openness, or its psycho-emotional willingness to receive new ideas” (1998:32-33). A first-level, or deeper-level, understanding about receptivity and resistance comes from theological reflection. In other
words, a demographic and sociological analysis about a particular Muslim
group in a particular context is helpful but it must be linked with deep
theological thinking about what makes people receptive or resistant so that
the best possible mission strategy can be shaped.

Van Engen’s critique of the church growth school analysis is relevant to
mission among Muslims because church growth analysis would rank most
of the Muslim world as resistant. The poor or non-existent church growth
rates in many Muslim contexts are undeniable. Thus, fresh initiatives would
be kept to a minimum as the church continued to “occupy lightly.” However,
the church’s obligation to reach all Muslims now living makes token or
wait-and-see-what-happens initiatives unacceptable. Furthermore, there is
anecdotal evidence of strong receptivity among some Muslim groups when
they are reached appropriately.

Church growth analysis ends up producing circular logic when applied to
mission among Muslims. Fact 1: Christian mission has historically invested
a small proportion of available resources in mission among Muslims; Fact
2: Mission among Muslims has been historically less productive than in
other contexts; Conclusion: Christians should continue to invest a small
proportion of available resources or to “occupy lightly” among Muslims. In
the language of Christ’s parable about the sower, the narrative would go like
this: The farmer had a field in which he had done little sowing for many
years. Because he knew the field was unproductive he sowed his seed in
other fields. The challenge of reaching every living Muslim demands that
Christians break out of circular mission logic. The starting point is to move
beyond what Van Engen calls “second-level derivative observations” about
Muslims to first-level theological reflection.

Toward a Theology of Resistance and Receptivity

To develop a theology of resistance and receptivity Van Engen uses a

All Humans Are Loved by God

First, “All humans are loved always by God” (Van Engen 1998:37). This
affirmation, based on John 3:16 and many other texts, has both a particular
and universal dimension. In other words, while God loves humanity as a
whole, he also loves each individual and the particular people group in
which that individual is immersed. God loves all humans and he also has a
particular love for Muslims and each segment of Islam.

The complementarity of God’s universal and particular love is clear throughout the Bible. In Genesis Abram’s particular chosen clan was to be a blessing to all nations (Gen 12:2). God’s particular love for Israel was to be the channel of blessings for all nations. In the Gospels Jesus was incarnated into a particular people group while he provided salvation for all humanity at the Cross. In Revelation, every language, people, and nation worship the Lamb (Rev 5:9; 7:9) and all the kings of the earth are among the redeemed (Rev 21:24).

The way God’s love is understood influences views of and responses to receptivity and resistance.

Too strong an emphasis on universality will drive us toward uniformity and blind us to cultural distinctives—and the differences in the particular response/resistance represented by a particular people group. Too strong an emphasis on particularity will push us to narrow our mission endeavor to only certain groups of people whom we have tagged as “receptive,” ignoring or neglecting others. Either option has serious consequences for following Christ in mission. (Van Engen 1998:41)

Could it be that Muslims lose out in two ways? To the extent that too much emphasis has been placed on God’s universal love, Christians may have seen mission as a generic activity and thus have failed to adapt it to the particular context of each Muslim people group. On the other hand, if Christians over-emphasize God’s love for particular peoples they may have given the bulk of their attention to peoples who are more responsive than Muslims. God’s universal love for humanity and his particular love for Muslims compel Christians to not merely “occupy lightly” because they perceive Muslims as a resistant people.

All Humans Are Receptive

The second affirmation is that “All humans are receptive: They have a profound spiritual hunger to know God” (Van Engen 1998:42). In spite of almost a century of communism and blossoming secularism, the human race remains incurably religious in the twenty-first century. That inner longing for God is strikingly visible among Muslims as they direct their prayers, songs, and hopes toward Allah.

The belief that all humans long for God is expressed in a range of missiological assumptions: When missionaries successfully navigate social,
cultural, linguistic, and relational barriers the innate receptivity of receptors is enhanced. When the gospel is contextualized and presented via receptor-oriented communication people will be more likely to accept the gospel. Certain life experiences can make people groups more receptive. “Contact points” and “redemptive analogies” can be used to appeal to the innate longings of humanity (Van Engen 1998:47-49). In other words, aspects of Muslim practice and belief that reveal the deep longing of the soul for God can be used as starting points from which to link them with Jesus, the water of life.

This second affirmation and the resultant assumptions produce some optimism about being able to reach Muslims successfully. Christians can affirm the Muslim longing for God as a point of shared humanity upon which to build an effective approach.

**Because of Sin and the Fall, All Humans Are Resistant to God All of the Time**

The third theological point somewhat upsets the optimism produced by the previous point. “Because of sin and the Fall, all humans are resistant to God all of the time” (Van Engen 1998:50). This sobering truth has some implications for understanding resistance: Although resistance can be described in sociological or demographic terms, it is fundamentally a theological stance—refusing God’s invitation to fellowship. No matter how skillfully a person is reached, only the Holy Spirit can overcome the soul’s innate resistance to God. Humans are not neutral objects being manipulated by good and evil forces but subjects biased within on the side of evil who need “radical conversion and total transformation” (52). Finally, because they continue to “fight the good fight of faith” (1 Tim 6:12), missionaries themselves retain elements of resistance in their own hearts that should give them a very real sense of shared humanity with those to whom they witness. Mission could be characterized as the resistant pointing the resistant to Jesus. From this perspective Christians must approach Muslims in deep humility.

This third point reminds believers that the very best methodology for reaching Muslims will not be enough by itself. It also cautions against a naïve optimism that ignores specific factors within the Muslim context that build resistance to the Christian message.
Some Humans Are Resistant All the Time to All Missional Approaches

Fourth, “Some humans are resistant all the time, to all missional approaches” (Van Engen 1998:53). Van Engen challenges the application of the parable of the sower which calls for selective sowing. Rather, the parable teaches that “given the same gracious invitation on the part of God, different persons will respond differently” (53). The parable is primarily about reaping—not sowing. The farmer does not test the soil but sows indiscriminately, knowing that the seed falls on different soils which will yield differently when he reaps.

This interpretation of the parable has several implications about resistance: The gospel message is to be proclaimed freely, in appropriate ways, in places of mixed receptivity levels. Ultimately, people respond to God—not to the messenger. There are factors that cause some hearers to be more resistant. The harvest comes through the providence of God, however good (or bad) mission methodology may be.

Van Engen does not say that all selective mission initiatives are wrong but that the parable of the sower teaches indiscriminate sowing. There are texts that do support selective mission initiatives. In Matt 10:14 Jesus told the disciples to “shake off the dust” when people reject them. In Matt 10:6 Jesus sent his disciples to the lost sheep of Israel. In John 4 Jesus needed to go to Samaria, a specific people group. Van Engen does not specify when he thinks selective mission initiatives are appropriate and thus leaves some tension in his analysis. I believe that tension is inherent in mission strategy because the church never has enough human or material resources to do all that could be done. Some selective sowing is unavoidable.

The historically low level of mission engagement among Muslims suggests that this is not the time to sow sparingly but rather the time to sow more freely. As in the time of Jesus, his disciples regretfully have to “shake off the dust” when all mission initiatives are rejected by particular people segments. However, missionary withdrawal should always be seen as temporary. Under these circumstances, McGavran’s “occupy lightly” strategy seems appropriate.
Some Humans Are Resistant Some of the Time
to Some Things

Fifth, “Some humans are resistant some of the time to some things” (Van Engen 1998:57). If God was the exclusive agent in his own mission to humanity, rejecting his initiatives would be rejecting him. However, God has chosen to use human agents and this complicates the picture. The fallibility of the human agent means that sometimes people reject God’s agents and their methods without rejecting God himself.

Factors Causing Resistance

Van Engen discusses three factors that make some people resistant to some things some of the time:

Contextual Factors

First, there are factors in the local context. “These include worldview, religious, socio-economic, political, and historical factors” (1998:59-60). Because societies are in constant flux, effective mission planning requires constant analysis of changing conditions. But contextual analysis must include theological reflection that addresses certain key issues: What elements has God placed within the local context that are consistent with Scripture and are therefore useful as bridges for mission? How has God been working in the group through his providence to make it more receptive? Has the group gone through suffering that could affect its receptivity?

Clearly there are factors in the general Muslim context that increase overall resistance, even though Christians may refrain from indexing resistance levels for reasons already discussed. The power of positive thinking may be potentially helpful but naïve, and wishful thinking will hinder the serious, critical analysis that must accompany Spirit-led witness. The worst mistake is using the same habituated, comfortable methods used for generations in other contexts. For example, using the same evangelistic sermons and sermon sequence, possibly with the addition of ethnically appropriate pictures, that are used among Christian audiences will fail to reach Muslims effectively. Failure to adapt fully to the Muslim context is a failure of mission.
Institutional Factors

Second, there are factors in the church and among its agents. Christian churches have a variety of features that increase Muslim resistance to the gospel. Sometimes churches are so absorbed in the business of “doing church” that they lack a basic missional focus and intention. For some churches, Islam is a religion “over there,” while the Muslims “over here” do not even appear on the missional GPS. Some Christians lack the intercultural competence needed for developing relationships with Muslims. A low level of spirituality in the church weakens its witness. Although styles of spirituality differ between religions, Muslims are able to discern spiritual authenticity in Christians. The church may not understand how Muslims interpret aspects of typical Christian worship like wearing shoes into the place of worship, handling the Bible carelessly, or praying without prostration (see Bauer 2008:99-101). They may be unwilling to develop a model for worship with Muslim visitors in mind. The church may expect converts to experience a rapid, punctiliar conversion process that overlooks the true magnitude of life change that is involved.

Relational Factors

Third, there is often a lack of an established relationship between the church and the receptors. The ease of building good relationships between a local church and a local mosque varies a great deal. In the West moderate Muslims welcome dialogue and fellowship in the wake of 9/11. The problem is that even where such relationships are easy to establish Christians often do not seek them.

Conclusion

Perhaps the best way to end a reflection on receptivity and resistance to the gospel among Muslims is with a modified version of the parable of the sower.

The sower had always wanted to sow in all of his fields but he had become accustomed to sowing mostly in one part of his farm. He had worked hard in his favorite fields and they yielded good harvests. When he realized that the Lord of the harvest wanted to reap a harvest from all of his fields, the sower began to give special attention to the fields that he had partially ignored.
Works Cited


