Section 2
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

a man of
PASSIONATE REFLECTION
Since God has used Jerald Whitehouse in a significant way in the current movement of Muslims to faith in Christ, I would like to offer an overview of that movement. First, I shall look briefly at why it is the fullness of time for Muslims, then how God is working through current events.

Why It Is the Fullness of Time

“When the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his Son … to redeem them that were under the law” (Gal 4:4-5).

A herald of the fullness of time for Christ’s coming was the tragedy of Herod’s killing of the children below the age of two—what the Church calls “the slaughter of the innocents.” In an analogous way we might say the slaughter of the innocents on September 11, 2001, was a herald of the fullness of time for Christ’s coming to the Muslim world—an event my wife and I first saw in a miniature picture on our computer a block from the Taliban recruiting center in Peshawar, Pakistan.

Four of the factors involved in the fullness of time for our Lord’s coming in the first century were: (1) the schoolhouse of Judaism which provided the
knowledge of God and his will; (2) the global political/military dominance of Rome which made travel around the Mediterranean world possible; (3) the global culture of Hellenism which provided the common language of Greek and the Scriptures that were thus accessible through the Septuagint; and (4) disillusionment with the Greco-Roman religions.

Similar factors are involved in the fullness of time for our Lord’s coming to the Muslim world in the twenty-first century through his Body the Church. First, Islam, although an A.D. religion, borrowed heavily from Judaism in its view of God and his will and understood God to be the One God that the Jews worship (Qur’an 29:46). Second, with the political/military dominance of the United States, travel throughout much of the world is possible. Third, globalization and the media have led to increased communication. Fourth, Muslims have become disillusioned with the type of Islam that has come to the fore.

The reactions of Judaism to the first-century globalization of Rome and Hellenic culture was diverse but included the Pharisees’ return to the Torah with its Law. Some Pharisees like Nicodemus were peaceful; others like Saul on the road to Damascus were militant. Some like the Zealots were terrorists. These diverse reactions created both obstacles and receptivity to the original proclamation of the gospel and the expansion of the Church. Yet the Church spread rapidly.

Muslims today have had similar diverse reactions to the globalization of American and Western culture. These have included the Islamists’ return to the Qur’an with its resultant law, which borrowed heavily from rabbinic law. Some Islamists are peaceful, others militant. These diverse reactions are creating both obstacles and receptivity to the proclamation of the gospel and the expansion of the Church. But, as we shall see, the Church is expanding as never before in the Muslim World.

The Hand of God in Current Events

Avery Willis Jr. has noted how the hand of God worked through the glove of circumstances in Indonesia in the late 1960s to draw thousands of Indonesians to faith in Christ (Willis 1977). A different mix of circumstances can be identified through which God is working in the Muslim world today. This is not to say that God causes the tragedies associated with many of these circumstances but that he works within them to draw people to himself.
The Rise of Militant Political Islam

God's hand working through political transitions became evident in Indonesia in the turmoil following an abortive Communist coup attempt in 1965. Muslims then began to massacre Communists or suspected Communists while Christians continued their ministry of care for the needy. When the government mandated that all must choose one of five officially recognized religions, many chose Christianity partly in reaction to Muslim atrocities. Over 2 million are reported to have chosen Christianity in the late 1960s.

The Iranian revolution led by the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 led to the imposition of a Shi'ite form of Islamic law (Shari'a) on the population, resulting in the closing of the United Bible Societies office. However, more Bibles were sold despite the new restrictions, and more Muslims came to Christian churches for instruction than ever before. Then a pattern became evident. Years of secularization under the Shah had led to the loss of traditional values—family, moral, and religious. The reactions involved a return to Islam; but when a strict form was imposed on the population, they reacted. When friendly Christians were present many Muslims became more receptive to the gospel. Then persecution followed. A number of prominent Christian leaders were killed.

A similar pattern was discerned in Pakistan when Zia al-Haq came to power in a military coup. He tried to introduce a Sunni form of Shari’a. The result was an even greater increase in the sale of Bibles than in Iran plus an increased enrollment in Bible correspondence courses. For an analysis of that process see Larson 1998. The civilian government of Nawas Sharif also tried to Islamize the government with a resultant disillusionment with Islam among many Muslims.

The pattern was even more pronounced in Afghanistan where civil war between ethnic Mujahideen groups led to Taliban control of 90 percent of the country. The enforcement of the strictest from of Sunni Islamic law led to a great reaction among many Afghan Muslims and a greater interest in the gospel.

In Sudan the northern Arab Muslims have tried to Islamize the non-Arab south. This has led to repeated civil wars since 1955 up until a recent fragile peace accord. Although this has not led to massive conversions from Islam, it has been a factor in the large numbers of southerners adopting Christianity rather than Islam.

Events since 9/11 have, for the most part, exacerbated the tensions within Islam and between Muslims and non-Muslims. The result has been greater
opposition to the gospel by some Muslims and greater disillusionment with Islam by others and a consequent greater openness to Christian faith.

**Natural Catastrophes and Poverty**

Occasions for the Church to express mercy have been provided by the expansion of the Sahara Desert and by periodic flooding in Bangladesh. In the former countries cups of cold water were given in Christ’s name; in the latter cups were bailed out in his name.

Although church growth in Bangladesh was helped by the 1971 civil war with West Pakistan, disastrous floods have given non-governmental relief and development agencies (NGOs) opportunities to serve through self-help ministries like fish and vegetable farming. Where ministries to human need have been part of a holistic concern for people, the growth of believers of Muslim background (BMBs) has been seen.

The tribal strife in the Sahel with the breakdown of irrigation systems has led to the expansion of the Sahara Desert. Christian NGOs have sought to provide nutrition and wells; while Muslim agencies have tended to serve only Muslims or those who would convert. As elsewhere, Christian NGOs that have consciously engaged in holistic ministries have seen modest church growth among Muslims in some places where there were no known converts before.

**Migrations**

Migrations of people can be a result of refugees fleeing civil strife, urbanization, or immigrants seeking a better way of life. With some fifty conflicts raging at all times in the 1990s, there were many refugees. Iranians fleeing the Khomeini revolution were more receptive to the gospel whether in Turkey, Spain, or the United States. Afghan refugees from the civil war in their homeland came to Pakistan, Europe, and North America where there was greater freedom. Numbers of these have come to faith in Christ.

A study of Muslim conversions to Christ in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon showed that a majority of the individuals had recently moved to the city (Matheny 1981). They were open to new ideas and needed friends and help. Previously they had their support systems, and there was an inertia to change while relatives were watching to see that they did not dishonor the clan. When they arrived in the city they needed help and friends, did not have the extended family watching them, and were open to new ideas—hence the
gospel. If they did not turn to Christ, after a time they became secularized or, what the study did not show, disillusioned with modernity. Then many turned to Islamic fundamentalism by choice. Much of the Muslim world is rapidly becoming urbanized—hence the potential for greater evangelism.

Other Muslims like the Algerians and Moroccans migrated to European countries like France for a better way of life. The 1.5 generation, born in North Africa but raised in France, has often felt like people without a country. Groups such as L’Ami, led by 1.5 generation immigrant BMBs and French believers, have made them feel welcome and demonstrated how Christ can break down ethnic barriers, and many have accepted the Christ.

**A Need for Healing and Blessing**

Perhaps two-thirds of Muslims are involved in popular Muslim piety (sometimes called folk Islam)—a blending of the formal Islam of the Qur’an and Orthodox tradition with pre-Islamic animistic beliefs and practices. These range from traditional African tribal religion to Javanese mysticism. People in popular Islam are primarily concerned with existential problems like healing for their children, guidance for decisions, and protection from a world that is perceived to be dominated by evil spirits and forces. They would feel the need of a savior from fear more than a savior from sin. Previously non-Pentecostal evangelicals were ill prepared to deal with these issues. Increasingly as evangelicals too have been open to being channels of God’s power for healing or of his grace to carry believers through suffering, they have found Muslims receptive. A majority of Muslims who accept Christ as Lord previously practiced forms of popular piety rather than the more Orthodox/Orthoprax forms. In Southeast Asia, church planters are finding that Muslims and BMBs want deep inner healing of their emotions from such feelings as anger, and this is leading to the growth of the church.

**Ethnic and Cultural Resurgence**

The Bengalis of East Pakistan in 1971 rebelled against the dominance of the ethnic groups of West Pakistan and created Bangladesh. They also rejected Christianity as Western and rejected the Bengali Bible which used more Hindu terms than Muslim terms and even used different names for Bible characters than Muslims used for the same people. When the New Testament was translated using Muslim-friendly Bengali terms and was labeled the *Injil Sharif* (their name for it), it became the best-selling book
in the country. What attracted Muslims to Christ was learning that the *Injil Sharif* identified him as the mediator between God and humans, but it was easier for them to follow him when they learned that they could use the forms of worship with which they were familiar. Aside from references to Muhammad and Mecca the religious vocabulary of the Qur’an and the five required forms of worship have all been used by Jews and/or Christians before the start of Islam (see Woodberry 1989:282-312). Thousands of Muslims began to follow Christ staying within the Muslim community but meeting together regularly for Bible study, worship, and prayer.

For a variety of reasons other BMBs in a different, African context joined the existing churches and did not want to use the same forms for worship that they had used as Muslims. The North Africa Mission (now Arab World Ministries) used to pray for a national church in each North African country by the year 2000, but there was little response. One ethnic group, the Kabyle Berbers, felt suppressed by the Arab Muslim majority, and their traditions indicated that they were once Christians. These influences have made it easier for thousands of them to follow Christ in the last fifteen years.

In another country nearby with no known Christians a few years ago and two ethnic groups fighting each other on the streets, I was privileged to worship secretly with new believers from both groups. An old man confessed that he had never imagined that he would eat and worship with members of the other ethnic group, or for that matter with Americans, but we were one because of Christ. Ethnic, cultural, and religious tensions have increased since 9/11, but Christ is still the one who has broken down the dividing wall.

As we note how the hand of God is drawing Muslims to himself, the challenge for us is to see how our hands can cooperate with his.

**Works Cited**


