

# Islam and Human Rights

*Mission interests in "turning the world upside down" must grasp the significance of Islam, its political-religious system, and its own human rights concerns.*

by David Bentley

**R**obert Qambar Ali, age 44, a Kuwaiti convert to Christ, became the focal point of international concern early this year. His series of trials for apostasy before the Islamic Shi'a court of his home country was well covered by the Arab press while the Kuwaiti government deftly rebuffed global appeals including letters from members of the United States Congress. To the Christians in the West, Robert's death sentence for abandoning Islam is a clear violation of international human and religious rights and raises questions about the reasons for the recently fought war for the defense of Kuwait following the 1990 Iraqi invasion.

In the same week of Robert's sentence of death, similar reports appeared:

Surabaya, Indonesia: Ten churches were torched by mobs of Muslims in broad daylight endangering worshipers gathering for Sunday services.<sup>1</sup>

Cairo, Egypt: A secular magazine exposes the practice of forcing Christian teenage girls to adopt Islam after "arranged" marriages and incidents of rape.<sup>2</sup>

Khartoum, Sudan: Two US reporters for a Baltimore newspaper buy a couple of slave boys who can recall their early life in southern Sudan.<sup>3</sup>

Incidents similar to these occur far too often across the Islamic crescent, stretching from North Africa to South Asia, as multiple cases of religious persecution and intolerance go unreported. This article will be limited to some of the root causes of violations of human and religious rights of non-Muslims within this vast swath of humanity. Muslim persecution of Christians as well as other religious groups, including Muslim sects, can be traced to the Quran, but the *Hadith* i.e., the traditional acts and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, is more inclined to cause relig-

ious discrimination. Modern Islamic Human Rights documents, 1981 and 1990, reveal an attitude attributable to the *Hadith*. This article closes with suggestions for further understanding of ways of making meaningful mission contacts with Muslims.

## Muslim Majority Nations

In the 50 nations of the world where Muslims form the majority population, the perceptions of Christian evangelical activities vary significantly. Generally, however, there is a profound distrust of both the missionary and the government departments who are responsible for allowing the missionaries into their country. Often it is the government of an Asian or Middle East country that faces the brunt of the attack when Muslims begin to persecute Christians.

Contemporary missions are not unlike the events that Paul and Silas faced when they evoked the wrath of the religious leaders in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9). The Jews accused the first Christian apostles in a civil court of "turning the world upside down." The Jewish leaders almost succeeded in bringing the Roman authorities into the fray when the synagogue charged Paul and Silas with making Jesus another king in place of Caesar. Jason was among those who were assessed a fine but later was allowed to go free.

An early important lesson for Christians to understand is that the concept of mosque-state separation is foreign to Islamic law, to the *Shari'a*, which is considered superior to any human laws. Missions to Muslims cannot overlook the importance that all Muslims place in establishing a just political order based upon *Shari'a* in order to maintain a state of purity and readiness for

a wide range of human activities from prayer and eating habits to warfare. A guiding principle of the nearly fifty nations that form the Islamic crescent is that the whole world consists of two houses, *dar al-islam* (house of peace where *Shari'a* is settled) and *dar al-harb*, (house of war where Islamic law is not yet instituted).

The Christian worldview includes some thoughts of freedom, justice, and equality that emerged as a part of the message of the first century church. Although the term "human rights" does not appear in the Bible there are the cries of a minority faith aspiring to be tolerated by the major players in the Roman empire. A few centuries later when Christianity became the official religion, it assumed the power of a majority religion. Along with this power, the medieval church frequently ceased to concern itself with many of the aspects of human rights such as justice for the minorities. Today the orthodox churches in Russia are making the same claims that they represent the established faith of the Russian population and are working through the political system to restrain evangelicals and other voices of dissent.

## Persecution and Treason

An example of a minority which was successful in overcoming persecution to achieve majority status, only to become the persecutors, is reflected in a single word in the Quran. When the first Muslims were a persecuted minority and denied access to the Meccan holy place the word *fitnah* clearly meant 'persecution'. Later, when the Muslims became the dominant majority, *fitnah* would be defined as 'treason' and 'sedition'. The phrase can also be translated as 'subversion' which is an act that is worse than

'killing and slaughtering' according to the Quran.

They ask thee [Muhammad] concerning fighting in the prohibited month. Say: "Fighting therein is a grave (offense); But graver is it in the sight of God to prevent access to the path of Allah to deny Him, to prevent access to the Sacred Mosque, and drive out its members. Subversion (fitnah) is greater than killing. (2:217)<sup>4</sup>

Christianity evolved into "Christianity" over three to four centuries while Islam took only Muhammad's lifetime, between 609 to 632 AD, to evolve from a persecuted handful in Mecca to the persecuting majority led by a "commander of the faithful" in the last ten years in Medina. The primary advocates of human rights, who naturally include voices for religious rights, are found among the non-orthodox minorities and "liberal" Muslims. They, like Christian evangelists, face an aroused Islam that has been inappropriately named "fundamentalists". The word itself sprang out of the early twentieth century conflicts within Protestantism when the "Fundamentalists" refused to accept the liberal view of the place of Christian Scriptures. Muslims today believe that the Quran is the uncreated word of God, thus making the overwhelmingly majority of Muslims fundamentalists. The term here refers to a fringe group who would replace any opposition, Islamic or non-Islamic, secular or religious, with their narrow view of applying Islamic law, *Shari'a*, up to and including the use of violence and terrorism.

Taslina Nasrin is a Bangladeshi author who had a death sentence pronounced against her by an Islamic fundamentalist court in 1994. She lives outside of her native Bangladesh and publicly upbraids those who have charged her with blasphemy and sedition. The following is part of the Harvard University address she gave on April 28, 1996, when she referred to "fundamentalist" conflict..."[that] is basically between irrational blind faith and the

modern rational, logical mind...." She added,

The fundamentalists want to replace democracy with theocracy and to impose old theocratic laws instead of modern secular laws on the members of their own society, not on other distant powerful states which they consider their enemies.<sup>5</sup>

Isma'il al-Farouki is another dissonant voice from within the Islamic community who was a victim of a US inner city murder ten years ago. Rather than accuse a disparate group within Islam as a cause of the human rights violations, as did Taslima with the fundamentalists, he saw the impact of Western imperialism on Islam as the culprit.

When politics get so intermingled with Christian mission, what sort of situation would you expect if total religious freedom were allowed? Give us the assurance that political involvement in mission will cease, and that power politics will no longer intrude, then the principles of religious freedom would be approved by every sensible Muslim on earth. We Muslims are at the receiving end of the line injustice. We haven't emerged yet from two centuries of colonizations.<sup>6</sup>

### Secularists, Christian Alliances

Are these secularists such as the Bangladesh Taslima ready to defend men and women who are caught between the religious and civil authorities on the issues facing minority Christians, women, evangelism, and rights of converts? The evidence of this once happening comes from Turkey where the leftist lawyers guilds helped the Turkish believers who were under attack by the government and the entrenched Muslim leadership. At this time, Christian workers do have a common ally with the usually Western thinking secularists that desire to see Islam open up to a broader idea of human rights. The governments of the Muslim majority areas are a possible ally also, but red flags appear all over the place when Christian missions, secularists, women, and civil governments are seen colluding with each other. However, these groups all face the common enemy

of Islamic militant fundamentalism today.

A wider community exists which is also interested in religious freedom for all. This community exists apart from the secularists and officials of national governments but often they are found in these two entities. They hold an affinity with Christian missionaries about human rights that are universal when it comes to an understanding of human worth as expressed in the Universal Human Rights Declaration. "*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.*"<sup>7</sup> To the secularists these "rights and freedoms" are often described as "inherent" and "inalienable", but for those within the Hebraic-Christian tradition the declaration of human rights created as we are in the "image of God" is more than an adequate definition. Muslims reject this Genesis precept as it violates their concepts of monotheism wherein God has no partners.

### Islamic Human Rights

The Muslim majority nations, however, have come up with their own Declarations of Human Rights which in the end support Islam but insist that there are some principles that the framers felt were "universal" that are beyond laws and codes that men have established.

The 1981 Islamic Declaration of Human Rights Preamble, as is the case with other human rights documents, is a statement of principles without any force of statutory law. It begins by setting forth an Islamic order (Article g) in our obligation to establish an Islamic order:

(1) where all human beings shall be equal and none shall enjoy a privilege or suffer a disadvantage or discrimination by reason of race, color, sex, origin or language.<sup>8</sup>

The omission of any reference to religious equality in this Preamble is partially balanced by Article III (c) which reads:

No person shall be denied the opportunity to work or be discriminated

against in any manner or exposed to greater physical risk by reason of religious belief, color, race, origin, sex, or language.

Three other articles of this Universal Islamic Human Rights Declaration touch upon religion. The applicable sections are quoted below:

X (a) The quranic principle "There is no compulsion in religion"(2:256) shall govern the religious rights of non-Muslim minorities. (b) In a Muslim country, religious minorities shall have the choice to be governed in respect of the civil and personal matters by Islamic Law or by their own laws.

XII Right to Freedom of Belief, Thought and Speech

(a) Every person has the right to express his thoughts and beliefs so long as he remains within the limits prescribed by Law. No one, however, is entitled to disseminate falsehood or to circulate reports which may outrage public decency, or to indulge in slander, innuendo or to cast defamatory aspersions on other persons, (e) No one shall hold in contempt or ridicule the religious beliefs of others or incite public hostility against them; respect for the religious feelings of others is obligatory on all Muslims.

XIII Right of Freedom of Religion: Every person has the right to freedom of conscience and worship in accordance with his religious beliefs.

XIV Right of Free Association: (a) Every person is entitled to participate individually and collectively in the religious, social, cultural and political life of his community.

Despite the fact that this document purports to be a human rights declaration that comes closer to a statement defending Muslim orthodoxy, Muslims recognize the need to respond to the questions posed by human rights theories. It should be noted that most serious restrictions are placed on those who could be charged with denigrating the Law, i.e., *Shari'a*. Any man or woman who chooses to leave Islam can be accused of slander. He or she may not rely on the usual interpretations of freedom of worship, association, and conscience. All of these freedoms are permissible only under the tenets of Islam which are unavailable to minorities and

non-Muslims. The next stage for Muslims is to see the folly of denying to others what they do dearly claim for themselves. This is most apparent in cases where non-Muslims embrace Islam freely but the reverse is opposed in solidly Islamic regions.

### Evangelism Attacked as Slandering

The 1981 and a later 1990 Declaration prepared for Islamic Foreign Ministers Conference were eager to protect the favored status of Muslims when they used very transparent language to warn that those adults who volunteer to leave Islam will be held accountable for slander or corrupting societies.<sup>9</sup> Evangelism in Muslim societies adeptly falls under the rubric of "slandering and corrupting" a nation's cultural, i.e., Islamic heritage. The task of Christian mission to Muslims is to convince the "authorities" that Christians are in favor of a national state where human rights for all its citizens are upheld. This follows the principle found in the United Nations sponsored human rights documents that call for unconditional religious freedom for all adults which the secular Muslim accepts as an inherently human decision and the Christian accepts as part of the *imago deo* precepts found in the creation account.

In most past history, Christianity has seen its adherents freely convert to Islam from the beginning of the Muslim conquests of the seventh century to the present day. Modern Western societies, as reflected in the language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UDHR, expect that the converse would also be accepted: that Muslims may leave their faith without threats of persecution and death.

The whole modern issue of Human Rights arose out of the ashes of World War II when the United Nations adopted as a preamble to the membership of the world body the UDHR. Today, Muslim majority nations are in the forefront of tacitly avoiding selective ten-

ets of this unsigned document which they find objectionable. The problems started from the beginning of the U.N., when Saudi Arabia led an assault on the UDHR in 1948. The original attack was generally directed toward the Western terminology of the Preamble and specifically toward the Eighteenth Article:

Article 18 Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.<sup>10</sup>

The UDHR asserts that the source of its authority is located in such criteria as 'inherent dignity' and "inalienable rights", and goes on to thoughtfully register a list of rights that are definitely human and universal.

### The Central Message of Jesus

Islam has endured under various political and social conditions for 1,417 years of the Hegira calendar which places Muslims as recent successors of a long "medieval" period. Increasingly in their modern periods, Muslim nations are adopting Western styles of government with elections, parliaments, and constitutions. The fact will remain that Muslims will continue to have a difficult time of accepting the distinctive Christian message of salvation, the unity of God and the non-negotiables of our faith: Jesus Christ's incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection. Converts to Christ will continue to be the pariahs of societies and it may take a couple of generations before they will eventually be accepted as full citizens in states that live under the dream of an uncontested Islamic "house of peace".

The convert, or apostate, under the strictest interpretation of the *Hadith*, (not the Quran) would be forced to renounce any faith but the religion of Islam. The penalty for leaving Islam is death and this penalty is authorized

by the readings of the *Hadith*, "Whoever changes his religion, kill him."<sup>11</sup> The Quran is clear that armed rebellion should be punished by death but defers to the life hereafter the exact nature of punishment for anyone who apostasizes from Islam.

Christian responses to any religious-political system that openly persecutes and criminalizes converts and others should remember that discrimination is usually directed against non-orthodox Muslims. Until the convert or any Muslim takes a strong stand to reverse the trends against his or her religious freedom, there is little an outside mediator can do. When believers in Christ are ready to openly challenge the authorities on their free choice, at that time the body of Christ should rally to give unequivocal moral support.

Isolation, intimidation and violations of human and religious rights are always unacceptable! There is a place for serious advocacy in behalf of those who suffer and this can be done from the safety of our democratic homelands. Prisoners, as well as other persecuted individuals, sometimes can be contacted directly with letters, e-mail and personal contacts. Zwemer Institute is among several groups that monitor religious rights practices throughout the Islamic world. Letters to heads of governments and to foreign embassies may be useful in making appeals for those who are openly asking for help or in extreme cases where life is threatened.

Apart from these types of public advocacy, prayers can be offered on behalf of kings, heads of states, parliaments, and other government agencies who are often on the first line of defense against terrorism and radical Islamic political-religious movements. Christians should be ready to commend those individuals and governments who take a courageous stand against those who violate the relig-

ious rights of Muslims and Christians alike.

#### National Churches and Converts

Suggestions for possible outcomes for those directly involved in missionary activity under adverse conditions are as follows:

1) The cross-cultural missionary's "no entry" in a passport when trouble arises may be the severest abuse that an expatriate receives. But it is the national churches and the individual members, converts and others, without the security of "Roman citizenship" who will face the crowds and the wrath of local and higher government officials.

(2) The new follower of Christ who has peacefully left Islam, (an equal to Jason of Thessalonica) truly represents high risk ventures. The Lord selects specific men and women to be part of the divine, spiritual drama that is still unfolding throughout the Muslim-majority nations. This drama is better understood as a conflict in the heavens that begs Christians not to dwell at length upon present earthly circumstances, but to look to our God to finish the work of calling sinners from all the peoples of the world.

(3) Christians who have been well prepared to work with Muslims know that the message of the Cross could turn the world upside down. Missions should prepare the new churches and believers to pray for the day of persecution that their faith remains true. Radio broadcasts and other materials beamed toward Muslim audiences may openly proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord when men and women will be set free.

In conclusion, historic precedence promising mass response to Christian faith from Islam are meager. It's more likely that more individuals will come to Christ when they are able to see that their rights as believers and human beings are adequately protected by their host nations. The contest that the new

Christians face will be intense as they leave a very secure environment where their nations are supposedly ruled by "God's Law," the *Shari'a*. Western missions to Muslims can point out how much this rule of God is manipulated by man. However, the greater challenge will be to help new converts develop their own confidence in following and serving Christ who is the King over all the nations of the earth!

#### End Notes

1. *Compass Direct Flash News*, Santa Ana, CA. June 20, 1996, p.1.
2. *Rose Al-Youssef*, Number 3549, Cairo, Egypt, June 17, 1996
3. *The State*, Columbia, SC, June 18, 1996, p.A-4
4. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran, Translation and Commentary* Cambridge, MA, 1946, p.85.
5. Nasrin, Taslima, *On Islamic Fundamentalism, The Humanist*, April 28, 1996, p.24.
6. Al-Faruqi, Isma'il, *Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah*, International Institute of Islamic Thought, Herndon, VA, p.92.
7. *Life in all its Fullness—The Word of God & Human Rights*, American Bible Society, 1992, p. 65.
8. Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights, 1981. in C. G. Weeramantry, *Islamic Jurisprudence—An International Perspective*, St. Martin's Press, NY, 1988, Appendix B, 176f.
9. Mayer, Elizabeth Ann, "Islam & Human Rights—Tradition and Politics", West View Press, 1991.
10. op. cit., *Life*
11. *Hadith from al-Bukhari* (9c) from *Ibn Abbas from Ali*. This statement contradicts all other statements on apostasy by *al-Bukhari*. Rafiq Zakaria *Muhammad and the Quran*, pp. 86-7.

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of their faith as Muslims, are realities that we all should seek after. They also prove the great mission fact that God has not left Himself without witness in the Muslim world. And do we need to know that!

In this issue we will take a good look at another reason for our mission neglect—the Muslim women. Make sure to assimilate the thought provoking article by Fran Love concerning this neglected factor—a strategy that by and large has neglected the “rare and beautiful treasures” of evangelizing Muslim women and planting churches that include them.

Last but not least, we need to explore a possible “justified reason” for the large number of unreached Muslims. Both past and current mission history indicate that *Muslim missions has been very hard*. One mission agency that focuses all its efforts on church planting among Muslims advertises for mission recruits as follows:

WANTED:

MISSIONARIES TO MUSLIMS

Bitter cold, scorching heat, long hours. Sickness almost certain. Possible imprisonment, Safe return not guaranteed. Honor and recognition from peers doubtful. Eternal rewards. Interested parties apply.

What makes Muslim missions so difficult? Although by no means impossible, we will have to conclude that these are no easy mission fields, both for evangelism as well as for church planting. Again there are no easy answers. But one thing will certainly help: We need to learn to evangelize and plant the church of Jesus Christ *in hostile environments where we can expect mild to intense persecution*. We seriously need to read Joshua Massey’s article on planting the church underground in hostile Muslim contexts along with David Bentley’s article on human rights in the Muslim world. Planting the church underground, by means of home-based fellowships, following the New Testament model of house churches, gives us

another great tool to evangelize the neglected unreached peoples and plant the church among them in obedience to our Lord’s commission. May we use “all available means and at the earliest possible time” so that in the Muslim world “every person will have the oppor-

tunity to hear, understand and receive the Good News.”

*Hans M. Weerstra,  
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