

Contextualizing the Message to Nomadic Pastoralists

It is God's declared purpose that the nomadic peoples of the world be included in His Church in all their authentic diversities. They do not have to become Westernized nor sedentary in order to become His People. What is needed most of all is that missionaries whom the Lord calls to serve Him among nomadic peoples deeply learn how to contextualize His message and plant His Church among them effectively.

by Malcolm J. Hunter

Bedouin with TV antennae sprouting over their tents. Tuaregs giving up their camels to drive around the Sahara in Toyota Land Cruisers—only their enigmatic eyes peering out between their turbans and veils. Maasai warriors in full regalia and flowing mud-plastered hair, hurling sticks at one another and performing their flat footed dances at 3.15 every afternoon for the benefit of camera-toting tourists.

These and a few other weird and wonderful aberrations of the twentieth century are what most people know of pastoral nomadic societies. For every one of these commercialized manifestations there are thousands of authentic herdsmen, women, boys and girls living a very similar existence to that of our well-documented pastoralist predecessors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They are little known, except through the pages of the *National Geographic* and/or a few exotic TV documentaries. They often live in remote and uncongenial places where tourist buses do not run.

We did have occasional glimpses of a few of them in the days leading up to the Gulf war. Camera men looking for a change from high technology war machines in the desert, managed to catch a fleeting view of camels on the horizon, led by a robed figure who could have walked in from the book of Genesis.

For the Christian these nomadic shepherds of the remotest deserts and mountains are not just colorful reminders of the earliest Jewish ancestors of our faith but a striking challenge to that faith. If we understand the command the Lord of the Church gave to His people, we will appreciate that we are responsible for those far away, forgotten nomadic societies and peoples. They are not just a bizarre anachronism in human society which will disappear if we ignore them. Believe it or not, they are the natural descendants and successors of many races who have learned to survive and make a living in some of the worlds most undesirable real estate—not just in Africa but on all five continents.

It is God's declared purpose that they shall be included in His Church in all their authentic diversity. They do not have to become Westernized and sedentary to become His people. God knows perfectly well how to communicate with nomadic

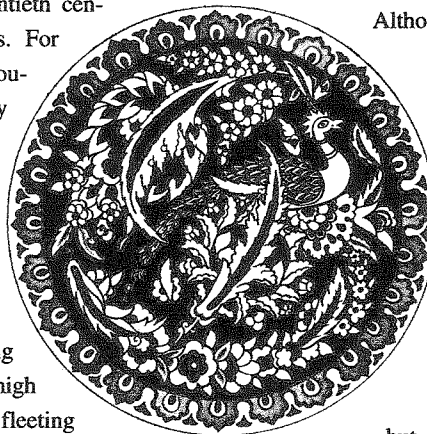
pastoralists. In fact the first humans He ever chose to be His special people were all of that same socio-economic inclination.

The Significance of Nomadic Peoples

Although they may not be numerically very impressive, and it is undeniable that as a proportion of the global population nomads are certainly diminishing, their significance does not depend on their numbers as United Nations statisticians count them,

but on their authentic ethnic identity and their viable, tenacious social systems which God includes as one of those tribes and tongues and nations for whom He has great promises in Christ.

In the eyes of national governments they are frequently regarded as non-productive or socially and economically backward—even an offense to the national image of progress and development. It is true that they do not always respect boundaries or political protocol. Even when taxed severely by seizure of their animals they are not seen as com-



pliantly contributing to the national economy as do land-owning peasants who can be conveniently found and hit with any new levy that is deemed necessary.

In some cases they have earned, and rightly deserve the reputation as being troublemakers and a threat to national security—attacking ‘foreign’ projects and new settlement programs. But usually no consideration is given to the fact that these projects and programs, along with the inevitable overflow of burgeoning populations, are seizing their vital grazing lands upon which their very survival depends.

It's similar to the scenes of the old wars between the farmers and the ranchers of North America in the last century. The herdsmen in nomadic pastoral societies have probably been using that land for centuries—sometimes thousands of years. The land may have appeared to be unoccupied and under utilized but it was reserve grazing

Most regrettable of all has been the general ignorance and neglect on the part of the Christian Church and Missions in their role to find and focus their efforts on the most unreached peoples of the earth.

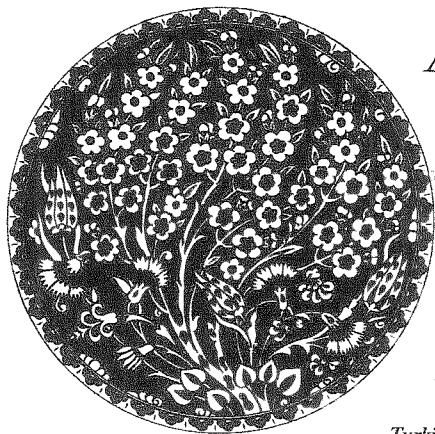
which is vitally important for pastoral nomads. They may only have used it in times of serious drought when more convenient grazing was exhausted, but without access to that reserve land their animals will die.

Little wonder that conflicts arise when the survival of the herd is at stake. Consider that a farmer can plant again in the next rain but the pastoralist is ruined if his animals die. The sad reality of the African situation lies in the fact that the reserve grazing land is usually so marginally productive that in times of drought no crop will be produced anyway. The grass and its root system will have been destroyed so that erosion by wind and what rain does fall will make the disputed land doubly useless—literally no good for grazing nor for cultivation after a few years when the top soil has all been carried away.

Yes, national governments who have nomadic people under their jurisdiction have a problem on their hands. However, this is not so much due to the attitude of the nomads but much more to the inevitable result of the situation prevailing in Africa where the policy-makers in the respective governments will most likely be from settled farming societies. In Asia they are more commonly from technocratic political ideologies. In Australia, Northern Europe and South America only the remnants remain of millions of nomadic people. It is no doubt inevitable that their social dominance would have to yield to technological advances and exploding industrialized populations but unfortunately many have been annihilated by land grabbing programs or the physical and psychological diseases of modern society. Witness the devastating effect of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in recent years on the reindeer herders of Northern Scandinavia.

Even for those who remain in the last named three continents it would appear that some are now preserved by well-meaning sociologists and human rights activists as a sort of primitive human laboratory. They may also serve as a palliative to the conscience of politicians and earnest social thinkers. Capitalists and Communists and African Socialist policies all seem to have been equally ill informed and misguided in their attitude to pastoral nomads. *Most regrettable of all has been the general ignorance and lack of understanding on the part of the Christian Church.* Assuming that the role of Christian missions is to find and focus their efforts on the most unreached peoples on earth then the role has been sadly neglected. There are thousands of zealous missionaries falling over each other to plant churches where there are already more than enough flavors of the ecclesiastical Baskin Robins to please the fancy of anyone interested in ‘taking a lick.’ (For the uninitiated, Baskin Robins is an American ice cream chain that boasts 39 different ice cream flavors.)

Could it be that modern missionaries are more concerned with where they live themselves rather than where the people still unreached happen to live. What else could account for the fact that there are more than 5,000 Protestant missionaries in cities like Nairobi or Manila whereas in Northern Kenya where there are at least seven different pastoral tribal groups you can count the number of missionaries on the feet and hands of 2 normal people. Those seven groups may all look similar to an outsider and live in the same harsh environment but they each have a different language and very different cultures that have kept them divided and often at war for centuries. However, the one thing they all have in common is that after several decades of sincere missionary efforts none of them appears to have anything that can be described as a viable Christian church. There may exist a few individual believers



Among nomads we have made Christianity synonymous with settling down, with church meetings at 10 or 11 o'clock on Sunday mornings—all too often in a special sort of permanent building. But what a travesty of the Church among nomads gathered inside a solid concrete building sitting in rows on wooden benches!

Turkish design on page 19 is a plate from the "Damascus" period circa 1550. The designs on pages 21 and 23 are plates from the "Rhodian" period circa 1600 (originals in the British Museum, London).

but many of those are on the missionary pay roll so they can hardly be counted as indigenous nor likely to win the rest of their people. That will only take place when the non-Christians see that the witness has nothing to gain from his profession or his preaching.

The Fruit of our Best Ministry Efforts

So why is this earnest missionary effort not producing results, namely, an indigenous church among nomads? The answer to that is remarkably simple—so obvious that when it is presented to an average clear thinking Christian he/she asks why is there any question or doubt? It all begins with an understanding of what makes nomadic pastoralists different from other peoples. More precisely it derives from an appreciation of their worldview and value system. In any case, it is relatively easy to understand that the church that is going to be attractive and appropriate for nomadic people is going to be different—radically different in form—from the church which is most effective and normal in sedentary societies.

There is of course the vital work of God's Spirit and His timing which is essential in convicting men in any society and bringing them to repentance. Only then can they receive His forgiveness and become new creatures in Christ Jesus. After that a Christian Church can begin to emerge. Missionaries can and do pray earnestly for this to happen but at the same time they must try to make their communication of the Gospel as relevant as possible as well as prepare the ground for a good harvest.

This challenge is particularly important in communicating with nomadic pastoralists. Of all people in the world they are probably the most God-conscious but also culturally the most remote from the Western Church. How difficult it is for a modern missionary from the Western Church to make a meaningful presentation of the Gospel to a target audience whose chief characteristic is that they do not and cannot belong to any particular place on earth! How can missionaries from the West make the Gospel message as appropriate and attractive as possible to people who are pilgrims, who are constantly travelling and on the move, who are not interested in building programs or education, nor interested in the standard fare of most 'successful' churches in the West?

The Fallacy of the Western Approach

Frequently, when Christian missionaries do get to them and begin to witness we usually do so by building a nice mission station, as well as living among them in splendid demonstrations of Western technology. Although these mission stations are usually located in remote and difficult places, however as the missionary begins his little outpost of civilization in a remote corner of the world, in a short time he usually ends up with a fair-sized village of very permanent and immovable buildings. He usually has to have a fence around it, sometimes complete with clever gates that can only be opened by people who can read English and operate a combination lock.

Inside the fence will be found various manifestations of the resident missionaries' interests and hobbies. One usually is a garden of sorts, guest rooms, schoolhouse for home schooling the children, workshop and generator house for the 'electrified' missionary to operate his water pump but often also his VCR and TV. If it is a traditional sort of mission station it will have a clinic building, probably some in-patient facilities, a nurse's residence, a school building and even an "orphanage" for the local children.

As it usually goes, the missionary will have a small city established in the heart of a desert with the hard working missionary becoming the *ex-officio* mayor of this new community. He will begin by taking responsibility for providing water and medical care for the community. Soon, however, he will find that he cannot escape getting into food distribution during famine times. After relief work usually comes assistance in small garden projects, implying well drilling and pumps, sometimes even setting up grinding mills and workshops plus their source of power—an electric generator.

To be sure, nobody ever planned to get so bogged down in establishing and running an "African community" but each step into new technology such as water pumps, wind mills and irrigation is another anchor into the ground. Inevitably what transpires is the missionary

It is remarkable how God has shown His ability to establish one of the striking models of the Christian Church adapted to the needs of pastoral nomads among the Wo'odabe of Niger—one of the wildest sections of the great nomadic people groups of West Africa.

finds himself surrounded with the most helpless, hopeless and also the laziest members of the pastoralist society.

Though the missionary does not want to assume a paternal responsibility for all these unfortunate drop-outs from nomadic society, nevertheless, his very dependable presence and Christian compassion leave him little choice. In famine years his dependent community may number several hundreds or even thousands—the missionary will of course try to keep a steadfast and serene Christian witness but unfortunately what shows up all too often is more likely an overworked and frustrated white man and woman. Whether or not this worst case scenario ever develops, it is unavoidable that the missionary will inevitably plant his church among the most helpless and least respected members of the pastoral society. The track record of churches established on or around mission stations anywhere is usually pretty discouraging—among nomadic people it is particularly ineffective. We have made Christianity synonymous with settling down and meeting at 10 or 11 o'clock on a Sunday morning—all too often in a special sort of building. What a travesty of the church among nomads is this type of meeting—most sadly of all—gathered inside a solid concrete building sitting in rows on wooden benches.

The Church Seen as People—Not Real Estate

In a fresh new way we must understand that the Church of the Lord Jesus is people not a place, that relationships not any particular piece of real estate is what is truly essential. I'm afraid that it is our Western materialism which has made our faith a static place of religious business. Nomadic people may not have anything else on earth but they will have their cattle and their extended family relationships. I believe that when the Church is properly planted and contextualized among them and takes off they will have much to teach the Western purveyors of packaged programs of Christianity.

For many nomadic pastoralists, cultivation of the land is the last desperate resort, referred to by some as "digging in the dirt". Traditionally it has been the work of slaves or of the lowest class people in the eyes of true nomads. It is not hard to see what effect our Christian presentation has when it is associated with cultivation or agriculture of any sort. Yet this is the most common approach used by well meaning development workers and missionaries, "let's help them by teaching them to cultivate and plant" Yes, you may find some willing to accept the help offered but these are usually from the lowest classes—the former slaves now more respectfully referred to as servant classes. Again this sort of association of Christianity with those of lowest esteem is unlikely to make a very positive impression on the decision makers and leaders in their related linguistic groups.

Plenty of examples abound of missionaries laboring on year after year to introduce dry season agriculture, or small garden projects, to traditionally nomadic pastoral people. After 5 or 10 years they discover that all they have harvested is a sad collection of social misfits and failures. In one noble effort run by a succession of earnest single male missionaries the small garden project gathered an amazing assortment of reject Muslim wives and out-of-work prostitutes. It is not difficult to imagine what credibility this sort of project gave to the Christian message in the larger surrounding society.

So where is the remarkably simple answer to the question as to why our best missionary efforts are not producing the desired results? Plainly stated it is that we have spent so much time and money building solid and settled demonstrations of Western missionary lifestyles that we have created major obstacles to an effective Christian witness to nomadic pastoral societies and peoples.

It is often thought that such people are inevitably resistant to the Gospel. Regrettably, it is more likely that our missionary proclamation of the Gospel is resistant to understand and adapt to the nomadic worldview and value system. Every time we build another permanent center or institution such as a hospital or an agricultural project we give the impression that Christianity is really only for settled people. When the question of building a permanent type of church structure for nomads is presented to the average Christian layman he or she can usually see the implications immediately—yet how often do missionaries do that in practice. Even men of great experience who begin by determining they will hold their Christian meetings under a tree, in the shade of a grass thatched shelter or even in an open sided tent frequently end up building a permanent structure anyway.

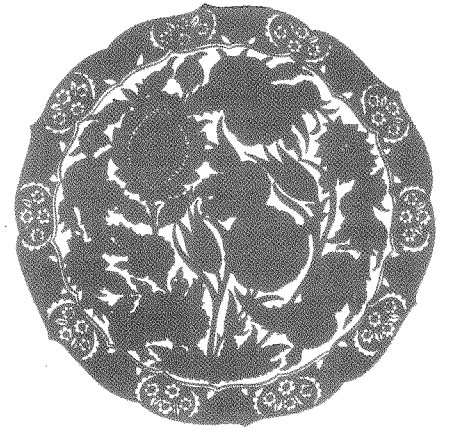
When such is investigated the rationale given is that this was what the new nomadic Christians asked for and really wanted. However, if that is all the nomads have ever seen then this well no doubt be true but it certainly does not mean it is necessarily a good thing to do. There are some amazing examples of church buildings in Northern Kenya where different Western denominations seem to be vying to outdo each other in impressive stone and cement structures. The pressure to compete to give the best impression on the professing new Christians may be part of the motivation. However, the impression on the main body of traditional pastoral nomads whether Muslim, Buddhist or Animist will be very different. In so many words they will think and say “Just another foreign thing that missionaries and their followers do—nothing to do with our way of life.”

Oh that we might learn the value and meaning of the tabernacle in the wilderness which God designed for His people. The temple in Jerusalem was the best that man could do. All that great edifice seemed to do was attract the covetous attention of neighboring armies who happened to be passing by. No doubt there are some obvious lessons to be learned here!

Who are the Nomads?

We have now come to the other part of the equation which church leaders, laymen and missionaries are interested in. They ask, if they ask anything at all, how many nomadic peoples are there and where are they located? What are they like?

The first answer to these questions has to be—that all depends on how you define and categorize them. It should already be clear from the preceding discussion that there are many forms of nomadic pastoralists. There are very few pure nomads who do not have some natural boundaries or patterns to their movements, or for whom some in their societies practice a bit of agriculture. Agro-pastoralism has become so much the norm that it is virtually impossible to define nomads as those who do not cultivate. But the flip side is also true: It is also incorrect to say that their use of agriculture shows that nomadic pastoralism is dying out.



There have always been examples of this mixed form of agriculture with the nomadic way of life—what has been described as a harvest from digging in the dirt linked with a harvest on the hoof. There are even examples of tribes who were once farmers moving down to lowland country where cattle raising and grazing was more appropriate turning them more and more to nomadic pastoralism.

So let us address the basic question as to what sort of people can be classified as nomads. We need to understand that there are as many variations of nomadism as there are reasons why people adopt this way of life. The simplest and probably most ancient expression of this socio-economic cultural system are the hunter-gatherers. Many societies still exist in the least developed parts of the world, especially in Indonesia, South America and more remote parts of Africa. Australian Aborigines, the Bushmen of the Kalahari desert and Pygmies of Central Africa are some of the better known survivors of what was once probably the dominant lifestyle on earth.

There are many specialist skills and trades which are practised by people in Third World societies which result in them moving widely without any fixed abode, e.g., blacksmiths, leather work-

ers, tinkers and tent-makers. There are even some societies in India where the women serve as prostitutes as they move with their men folk doing seasonal manual and agricultural work. These can be differentiated from migrant workers who have a house or piece of property to which they will return periodically.

There are of course other well known nomadic societies in Europe—the Gypsies or Romanies. The tenacity with which most of these maintain their traditional way of life in spite of every effort by Western government and local authorities to restrict their movements and so to induce them to be 'socially responsible citizens' and settle down is quite remarkable.

It is all the more remarkable that God has shown His ability to work among even these most sophisticated nomads by moving powerfully through the Gypsy societies of the West in recent years. In 1988 it was reckoned that there were 5,000 Evangelical believers in England and 50,000 in all of Europe from the Romany societies. Most of these had been won by fellow Gypsy believers and were eagerly spreading their new faith to all the Gypsy communities they could find. Yes, they often do appear rather unconventional to traditional Western churches but this is clearly a genuinely indigenous Christian community reproducing itself within an unconventional culture and society.

At the other end of the spectrum is another exciting expression of the indigenous nomadic church springing up among the Wo'odabe of Niger. The Wo'odabe are usually considered to be one of the wildest sections of the great nomadic people groups of West Africa—the Fulani. The Wo'odabe are renowned for their wide ranging nom-

adism, their immorality and public promiscuity and their practise of witchcraft and supernatural medicine. They frequently are thought of as the last society in Africa who would be interested in Christianity. Yet amazingly this is the very group which God has chosen to break into during the last five years to establish one of the striking models of the Christian Church adapted to the needs of pastoral nomads.

There is no mission or missionary who can claim the credit for planting the church among the Wo'odabe. There were quite a few who played their part when God needed them to give teaching and encouragement but it was not the result of anybody's clever strategy due to someone's missiologically correct approach. God did it in His own time through a real conviction of sin that came upon two brothers living out in the bush. Like all the other pastoralists in Niger they lost most of their animals in a series of successive droughts of the last 15 years. Yet this is presumably what God used to get their attention and bring them down to a town where there were plenty of missionaries.

They came looking for this man called Jesus who could forgive their sin. God used two single ladies outside a post office to tell them how to find Him. Yes, there are lots more chapters in that story but now there are dozens of families swept into the Kingdom as the gospel spread naturally and supernaturally along extended kinship lines. They have no permanent building, just a well to which they keep coming back. They pray and read the Scriptures every morning wherever they are and travel far and wide to local markets sharing their faith under the shade of a tree or grass shelter.

This is the Church for nomadic pastoralists. Whole clans and kin groups are being drawn into the family of God as they are and wherever they are. Indeed may this be the recurrent theme, may the miracle of salvation and redemption in Jesus Christ, the Great Herdmans-Shepherd of all redeemed souls, occur throughout all the Nomadic peoples throughout the whole earth!

Dr. Malcolm Hunter and his wife Jean recently left Ethiopia where they began their missionary work in 1963. They have served with SIM in East and West Africa and as consultant for ministry to Nomadic Peoples, in Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, Niger, Benin and Burkina Faso. In the last two years Malcolm has made survey visits to Nepal, Tibet, Northern Pakistan, Western China. Plans are in the making to visit Mongolia. The Hunters will continue to seek the Lord and His work on how best to serve His purposes for the unreached Nomadic Peoples of the World.

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