

A "Bazaar" Mission Strategy

by Gene Daniels

Introduction

For most foreign missionaries the bazaar is just one of the many inconveniences in their lives abroad, something that makes them wish for the mall, Walmart, or whatever kind of convenient shopping they were used to back home. And for our brothers and sisters in Christ across the Muslim world, the bazaar is such a normal part of life that it seldom warrants a second thought. In either case, it would be an extremely unusual person for whom a trip to the bazaar brings to mind the Great Commission—but that is exactly what I wish to see happen.

My own "bazaar" imagination was ignited by Richard Foltz in his fascinating book, *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*. His main premise is that:

It is no coincidence that throughout history ideas and technologies have spread along trade routes, and that merchants have been among their prime transmitters... The existence of trade routes and constant commercial activity linking diverse cultures from ancient times meant that religious ideas (like technology and other aspects of culture) could spread easily along trade networks which spanned Eurasia. Indeed, like running water finding open channels, this spread was probably inevitable. (1999: 7-8)

I do not know if he is right in that the spread of religious ideas is *inevitable* along the trade routes, but I am certain that we should seek to tap this human flow for the sake of the gospel in the Muslim world.

The Gospel and Trade

It should not be hard for us to dream and pray that trade and traders would play a major role in spreading the gospel, for it would not be the first time. The ancient Church of the East shaped her mission strategies to fit the trade routes that dominated her world:

[For the Nestorians, the] trade routes provided part of the method of mission as well. For example, a mission team put together to reach the Haphthalite Huns in the 6th century was composed of two merchants, a missionary bishop, and four priests. (Munson 2008)

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Eventually, missionary advance in Asia became so deeply linked with trade that "in the early Asian church, the Syriac word for 'merchant' was used as a metaphor for evangelist" (*ibid*). In fact, one of the greatest triumphs of the gospel in what is now called Central Asia was when a reported 200,000 Kertat Turks were converted through a mission effort that was started by Christian traders (Jenkins 2008: 69). This information is surprising to many because usually when we think of trade routes and religion we think not of Christianity, but of the house of Islam.

Traders and Islam

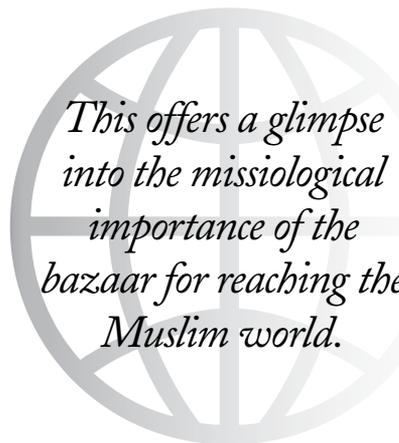
The connection between trade and Islam is well known, and it runs quite deep:

Born in a mercantile milieu, Islam had always been amenable to trade and commerce. Muhammad himself was a successful merchant, as were several of his early companions, and their favorable attitude to trade permeated the new religion from the start. (Karsh 2006: 64)

This association between Muslims and trade was further strengthened as "commerce-oriented peoples joined Islam and introduced new ways of expressing religious piety that were related to trade" (Xinru, 1998:68). In addition, there are common geographic features across many parts of the Islamic world, such as vast wastelands separating population centers, which make long distance trade a necessity. This combination of factors caused Islam to become the controlling civilization of not only trade routes East to West in Asia (*ibid*), but also through large parts of Africa (Trimingham, 1962:25-26) for over a millennium.

However, it is best if we do not think of these Islamic trade routes as primarily "roads," rather they are trade networks, and, more importantly for us, they are social networks, a living fabric that connects people across many of the geographic, cultural, and linguistic distances that make up the Muslim world. Social network theory has been rapidly advancing in the

past decade, and the implications for Christian mission loom large. Some social scientists have gone so far as to say that "the influence of [social] networks on conversion is among the most established findings in the sociology of religion" (Smidle 2005: 757). However, the picture I would paint is slightly different than standard social network theory. Normally people are considered the "nodes," the points of connection between other people. Using social network theory in a slightly different way, I would assert that the bazaars themselves are nodes,



facilitating interaction of thousands of people along the trade routes.

To the change agent, the bazaars are an important feature in the human geography of the trade route because they are where people interact and *exchange ideas*. Buyers come to the bazaar and chat the gossip of their village, while in exchange traders tell news from distant cities and political events in other countries. It is at the bazaar that both new ideas and new people are introduced into these large social networks. Cultural geographers call this kind of movement of ideas across space, but through a particular segment of the population, "hierarchical diffusion" (Fouberg, de Blij and Murphy 2009: 30-31). The implications are clear: if the gospel were intentionally interjected into this key part of Muslim social life it would likely follow well-known patterns of diffusion and somewhat naturally move into the communities that are interconnected with the bazaar, both far and near. This

offers a glimpse into the missiological importance of the bazaar for reaching the Muslim world. Therefore, I propose that we should be looking for practical means by which we can penetrate these commercial/social networks for the sake of the gospel.

As I attempt to address this task, I should begin by saying that "we" are not likely the ones who will penetrate these social networks. Very few Western missionaries today are deeply acculturated enough to be able to effectively use the trade routes as a vehicle for the gospel. This means we need to think in terms of being "mission catalysts." A catalyst is something or someone that enables a process to occur, or speeds up one that was inevitable. Given enough time, local Muslim background believers (MBBs) would probably reach out to the Muslim traders working in the bazaars, but fear, nationalism, or lack of vision could easily push that off into the distant future. Therefore, if we are thinking as mission catalysts we will ask, "How might we encourage, or speed up the emergence of this kind of ministry?" One way might be to do some reshaping of our own framework of mission on the frontiers.

A New "UPG": The "Bazaari"

In 1974 Ralph Winter opened a new era of world mission when he challenged the world mission community to rethink the contour of its calling, moving us from geopolitically shaped mission to a missiology in which the contours of ethnicity are much more important, hence the Unreached People Group (UPG) concept. This different way of constructing the mission frontier struck many ears as a bit strange at first, but eventually the wisdom of it won out and Dr. Winter's idea launched many thousands of missionaries, myself included. Thus a new movement was born.

In a similar way, foreign missionaries can help local churches in the Muslim world, particularly MBB churches, to imagine the bazaar as a distinct, frontier

mission field and the “bazaari” as the “UPG” that lives there. We can encourage national believers to be just as intentional about planting the gospel in the bazaars of their city as were the missionaries who ventured out inspired by Winter. If local congregations came to think of long-distance Muslim traders as a strategic mission field, it would place the first step into frontier missions within the grasp of even the poorest local church, and without financial assistance from the West.

I realize this is a significant deviation from the normal understanding of the UPG concept, an idea that has always been focused through the lens of ethnicity. Nevertheless, we should remember that ethnicity is only one facet of the complex social world people inhabit. Allen Tippett reminded us that, “humans are individuals, but always *individuals in a context* . . . [and] they ever live in so many *sets of relationships*” (1987:19). In the case of the Muslim bazaari, regardless of their ethnic identity, the bazaars are one of the main contexts of their lives, and the people with whom they trade are often significant relationships. Furthermore, it is this particular context that happens to be very accessible to Christian witness. In many cases, the bazaar is far more accessible than any other entry point to their world.

A few years ago I did an ethnographic research project on cross-border traders in Central Asia. At one point, I stumbled across a very large section of a bazaar that sold only cloth. That in and of itself is nothing unusual, but the intriguing part was that almost 100% of these cloth merchants were from one particular city in a nearby country. Not only that, this particular city is virtually closed to outsiders, since the government does not grant permission for any foreigner to reside in that city. Yet here I found myself surrounded by Muslim men from that “closed” city, bazaari who spoke a language that many of the MBBs in my city knew. What an opportunity for cross-cultural mission, literally waiting on the doorstep of the local church!

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Another reason to seriously consider the bazaar as a mission field is the access it opens to the Muslim woman. In some Muslim contexts it is one of the few points in the public sphere that a woman can go about freely, and research has shown that one of the factors that influences conversion of Muslim women is their access to public space (Reisacher 2005:120). If the local church were to take advantage of this public space, they might find much greater access to Muslim women for both evangelism and discipleship.

Not a Method

It is important to avoid thinking about ministry in the bazaar as a new evangelistic *method*, which would diminish its chief value, that of seeing a new frontier mission field just waiting to be engaged. Re-conceptualizing the bazaar as a strategically important mission field is an example of what Lewis and Goldmann have called “proximate sending.” They argue that young churches on *our* frontiers need to send out their own cross-cultural workers, in particular to the UPGs that are “proximate” to them, meaning those who are near in various dimensions such as “geography, linguistics, culture, socio-economics, worldview, lifestyle, standard of living, etc” (2007). This is exactly what we are doing when we perceive the bazaar as a new frontier mission field, *not for ourselves*, but for the Muslim background Church.

When Ralph Winter called attention to the “Business as Mission” (BAM) movement as a new missiological frontier (2005: 111) most people seemed to hear this as a strategy for foreign missionaries. But what about the local church? Local believers in Muslim lands (both MBB and CBB) could easily apply the same thinking since at its core BAM is simply a call for believers to see their vocation in business as an expression of their service

to God and integrate their skills and experience in business with the task of world mission (Tunehag, McGee and Plummer 2004).

Contextualized Mission Strategy

Another benefit of this model that we must not overlook is that it encourages the development of contextualized mission strategies. That process will probably look something like as follows. The first step in that direction will be the same as in any other frontier mission thrust: we must encourage the local church to establish a presence on this new field—in the bazaars—and see what God will do. MBBs (and perhaps other local Christians) could begin by simply being deliberate in their witness whenever they are shopping at the bazaars. From there it is only a small step for some of these evangelists to find other ways to spend more time with some of the bazaari whom they meet. Think of this as “creative access” on the local level. Some believers may feel called to seek employment in the bazaars, others to start a micro-business such as the wandering food vendors that all Asian bazaars have, anything that would put them in regular, natural contact with the cross-border traders. Once the vision is cast and the field is engaged, I have no doubt that local believers will generate a whole orchard of fruitful ideas that we foreigners would never have imagined.

At this point, cross-cultural ministry is within the grasp of even the poorest local churches. We have circumvented one of the thorniest issues that confronts us whenever we think about young churches engaging in cross-cultural mission—funding. It is not just that focusing near-by makes the concept cheap to implement, but rather that it is built to take advantage of a completely different kind of capital, one that local believers may already have—social capital. Research in the

bazaars of Central Asia has shown that relational, or social, capital is one of the most significant factors in business success there and often allows the bazaar to overcome a lack of financial capital (Nasritdinov and O'Connor 2006:133). Therefore, by locating the leading edge of "cross-cultural mission frontier" near the young MBB church we eliminate at least a few of the significant financial issues that obstruct their involvement in mission by capitalizing on one of their indigenous strengths. Doing this could also produce two side benefits: it might encourage them to reflect on their culture and existing resources for missional possibilities, as well as discourage them from looking to us as potential financial patrons for new ministry opportunities.

Eventually we should expect that some of the original bazaar evangelists will sense a call that takes them farther, and most likely that will be to the home city or region of their new friends in the bazaar. This may well demand a much more complicated mission strategy because of crossing political boundaries and dealing with more involved economic issues. However, because of the gradual and progressing nature of their mission engagement until now, by the time this happens the fledgling missionary will likely be a part of the bazaar's social network. This connection will provide a solid point from which to move forward and suggest many different options for them to continue their ministry further afield. Also, their experience in the slightly cross-cultural setting of the bazaar will have been fine training, allowing them to test and refine their approach to evangelism and discipleship with people of a slightly different culture while still close to home. In addition, the bazaar can be a proving ground so that the local church can see if these new missionaries are both faithful, and capable of dealing with the larger problems they will face as they pursue geographically distant mission.

One example of this, still in its infancy, comes from a small city

near the border between two large countries. On one side of the border there is a network of MBB house churches. On the other side live the same Muslim UPG, but there are very few believers. The MBB couple who started and lead the house church network have long believed that their people could be effective witness in the neighboring country, but they lacked the means to "send" them. After years of frustration trying to raise money through their foreign missionary friends for this, they began to consider the resources resident in their network.



One of the sisters in this network is a successful trader in the city's small bazaar. She has also been an effective and faithful evangelist over the years. When a new cross-border trade agreement was signed between the two countries, making short-term business travel easier, the visionary leaders of this network decided to approach this sister with an idea. If she would be willing to spend a few days per month buying at the huge wholesale bazaar just across the border, the network of house churches would support her travel expenses. All they asked was that she carry a few Bibles as she went and did whatever came natural to her.

Although the expenses related to 50 km of travel and entry permits are quite small, they are enough to make the trip unprofitable for such a small scale business. However, the travel subsidy was something the churches could collectively afford with ease. This farsighted approach has produced two delightful outcomes.

It has enabled a MBB evangelist to continue her combination of witness and business, but now in an even more unreached area. And, secondly, it allowed a small network of relatively poor young churches to intentionally participate in the Great Commission.

This is the way people who think in concrete reality, rather than abstract theory, develop new mission strategy—in the rough and tumble of real frontier evangelism. A year of this kind of ministry will do more for mission development among young MBB churches than a whole month of seminars taught by foreign experts! This is a way for them to develop a contextualized missiology that fits their socioeconomic setting rather than trying to force-fit themselves into the models that have worked for their foreign missionary friends.

Conclusion

From the very beginning of the Church, trade and traders have been involved in the spread of the gospel in Asia:

In the Acts of the Apostles (2:9) it is stated that Iranian Jews from Parthia, Media, Elam and Mesopotamia were witness to the miracle of the Pentecost. Since Christianity arose within the Jewish world, it is only natural that its eastward spread from Palestine would have been facilitated first and foremost through existing contacts across the Jewish diaspora. Since these contacts were to a large degree commercial in nature, it can safely be said that Christianity's first link with the Silk Road was via the Babylonian Jews... (Foltz: 2001)

As we have seen, the trade routes have historically played an important role in the transmission of the gospel, therefore, it is reasonable for us to expect more of the same today. By encouraging MBBs to think of the bazaars as their mission frontier we are placing significant, strategic mission power within the grasp of fledgling local churches. It does not require large amounts of foreign funding for these brothers and sisters to visit the local bazaar; they already do so for their regular shopping. If only they would do so with an eternal purpose in

mind! To engage this mission field the local church needs very little foreign help, exposure to the vision and perhaps some coaching in areas where their ministry skills might be weak—such as cross-cultural awareness or other particulars relating to the people group to which the bazaari belong. This is a strategic niche that we foreign missionaries can easily fill, and by so doing empower the local church to fulfill her destiny.

While walking around the cloth bazaar mentioned previously, I distinctly remember thinking, “Would to God that some of these bazaari could encounter some of the hundreds of MBBs in this city! If only they could experience a vibrant witness from one of them, something would happen.” However, it is likely that those same bazaari already have had common business dealings with MBBs. The question is, Were any of them intentional for the sake of the gospel? If this were to happen, I am quite certain that eventually some of them would come to follow Jesus as Lord. Furthermore, since they would have heard the gospel in the context of their normal life in the bazaar, they would likely follow this pattern in spreading the message further. If some of the traders in the bazaar are truly touched by the Holy Spirit and disciplined by local MBBs, we have every reason to believe that they will take their new beliefs home with them, and eventually to whatever other cities they might visit. This is what Roland Allen called “the spontaneous expansion of the church” (1949).

Original Ending

To some this may be unrealistic, even a pipe dream. But then again, thirty years ago the thought that there could be multitudes of Muslim background believers was no more than a dream—today it is a reality. What might God do in the next thirty?

Postscript

Right before this issue of *IJFM* went to press, I received encouraging news from a MBB that suggests that this hunch, this “bazaar” idea, may not be a pipe dream after all. He reports:

It does not require large amounts of foreign funding for these brothers and sisters to visit the bazaar; they already do so for their regular shopping.

The first believers were university students and worked in businesses, they were higher status people. So when they came to believe they did not want to tell anyone about Jesus because of the risk. But now simple people in the bazaars have come to believe and they are telling everyone. More people have come to faith in three years because of the bazaari [lit. “those who trade the goods in the bazaars”] than in the preceding ten years from the higher status believers. You could say that the gospel started in my country’s hotels and universities and grew very slowly. Now it is being talked about in the bazaars and it is growing fast.

What might God do in the bustling bazaars of the Muslim world? In some places, at least, it looks like we won’t have to wait thirty years to find out. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Technically, the bazaari are not a people group, but rather what Winter and Koch called a *sociopeople*, “a relatively small association of peers who have an affinity for one another based on a shared interest, activity or occupation.” (see “Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge” in the 4th edition of the *Perspectives* reader, p. 535.) However, the familiarity and simplicity of the UPG concept makes it a better vehicle for disseminating the idea among field missionaries and the local people with whom they work.

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