

The Threat of Islam

By Rev. T. Atkinson

The birth and advance of Islam to the present:

In the 7th century A.D. there arose in Arabia a new religion which shook the world and has continued to shake it ever since. Kenneth Scott Latourette, the great historian of the expansion of Christianity tells us that the real dividing line between the first and second periods of the spread of Christianity is not the year 500 as is usually thought, but the year 622, the year of the hegira, the beginning of the Muslim era.

From that time Islam has proved to be a formidable threat to Christianity. In the first few centuries of Islam Christianity lost a quarter of its territory - a reverse that it had never suffered before nor since. Islam began in the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina through the reaction of Mohammed to the idolatry and degradation of the Arabs of his day. From Arabia Islam spread into Palestine, Asia Minor, and North Africa, a country prominent in Latin Christianity and that gave us the theologians Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasias and Augustine. It spread into Egypt and Syria, where Christianity had been the prevailing religion. Centuries later it spread into Turkey and into central Europe, that part of the world that used to belong to the Soviet empire. It spread through Persia, (Iran) and Afghanistan and into many parts of India. It travelled by trade routes into Indonesia and the Philippines. In modern times it has crossed the great barrier of the Sahara, that impeded its spread for centuries. It is difficult to give statistics, but there are about 900,000,000 people that are Muslims, about one in five of the world's population.

It is not possible in this lecture to trace the expansion and spread of Islam, the means by which it was accomplished and the consequences of that expansion. For centuries Islam and Christianity lived side by side without advance or retreat on either side. Islam also suffered reverses and lost territory, notably in Spain and southern Italy and Sicily. Last century the Ottoman empire collapsed and in recent years there have been losses in Indonesia. Nevertheless, Islam remains perhaps, the most serious threat that Christianity faces in the world today. Islam like Christianity, is a great missionary religion and is advancing.

THE ADVANCE OF ISLAM AT THE PRESENT

1. In recent years and at the present moment Islam is advancing but she is advancing through increase of population rather than through proselytism. For example, before the second World War 7/10th of the peoples who lived around the Mediterranean sea were Europeans. Now, 9/10th of the people living around the Mediterranean sea are Muslims. This population explosion in Arab countries is accompanied by declining European. This year in Italy less people were born than died. Italy has the lowest birthrate in Europe if not the world. This growth of population in Muslim countries is having its effect on Christian Europe through immigration of Muslim people both legally and illegally. This pressure of great numbers of peoples cannot be resisted and this poses a great threat to Christian Europe and to the world.

2. Another threat is exemplified by the building of mosques wherever Muslim people settle. On a recent visit to Turkey which is a secular state since the reforms of Kemal Attaturk I observed that in almost every town and village new mosques were being built and the same thing is happening in Christian Europe. Every where one sees beautiful and majestic mosques and these are undoubtedly a means of advancing the witness and teaching of Mohammed. Western Europe and North America believe in the freedom of religion and some governments even assist minority religions in various ways. Islamic peoples demand their rights to practice their religion openly - a right which is denied to Christians for the most part in their countries.

3. Undoubtedly the major threat is the rise of what is called Islamic fundamentalism and the imposition of the Shirah, Islamic law in countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran. In other countries such as Algeria and Egypt there is a strong movement for the imposition of Islamic law. Recently President Hosni Mubarak was visiting Europe and I heard him say in an interview "Islam stands for moderation, peace and harmony. These so called Islamic fundamentalists are criminals on the fringe and what they do is against Islamic belief and the Qur'an. At the present moment there is a conference in Casablanca, Marocco, of Islamic states, and they are seeking to give a better press to Islam and explain that Islam is moderate and allows for freedom of religion. " But we shall see in the coming years which of the two views prevails.

THE CAUSES OF ISLAMIC MILITANCY

1. There is much disillusionment especially amongst young people in many Islamic countries. There is wide-spread poverty and the consequent economic unrest. No real benefits are coming to these countries and a vacuum is created through the failure of the West to give help - a vacuum easily filled by those who stand for Islamic ideals. President Mubarak appealed recently for help to be given to Yassaf Arafat. The promises of help from the West have not been fulfilled and the whole peace process is in jeopardy. Interestingly, Rabin, the Jewish leader, appealed to America for help for the Palestinians. It is thought that when there is prosperity, the extremes disappear.

2. Muslim peoples, especially the Arabs, suffer from a sense of inferiority and it expresses itself in a hatred of the West, while at the same time there is admiration and desire for the benefits of the West. Christians, for Muslims, are infidels and yet it appears that God blesses them with material prosperity, whereas they, who submit to Allah are not so blessed. Of course God's will is inscrutable and all they do at the present is to console themselves with the memory of the past glories of their history and culture.

3. Islamic militancy is aided by the present state of Christendom. Muslims find it difficult to distinguish between Christians and non-Christians. Our countries are thought to be Christian yet they see on films, TV. and in magazines the corruption and decadence of the West. These things contrast unfavourably with the high moral standards of Muslims. Of course, Muslims who live in the West begin to understand the distinction between Christians and non-Christians but this poses for them another dilemma. This is the statement of one such Muslim. "Why can't Christians follow the way of Jesus? When I read the gospels I am overjoyed. The life and teachings of Jesus are wonderful, really, truly wonderful. But please show me Christians who are willing to follow in the way (sunna) of Jesus. I have met a few, a very few people who try to

follow Jesus. But they follow him only in their private lives. Consequently, your society has become very evil. It seems to me that you Christians really do not believe that the way of Jesus is practical. That makes me very sad." (Quote from the book "The Muslim Umma and the growth of the Church.")

4. Another cause is the memory of the Crusades. There is much debate amongst us about the Crusades. They were partly religious and partly part of the expansion of the Teutonic peoples. Islamic history records the destruction, rape, slavery and slaughter of the Crusaders who came against them in the name of Christ. We too, think of the Islamic wars of expansion in much the same way but Islam was much more moderate on the whole. They treated subject nations with tolerance. Christians were made second class citizens and were made to pay taxes and many nominal Christians became Muslims to avoid these things. In some countries conversion to Islam was discouraged to prevent loss of revenues.

5. The defense and aid given to Israel encourages Islamic fundamentalism. The West, Christian nations, have treated Jews badly in contrast to Islam which throughout history has been very tolerant of the Jews. There are Jews living in many Arab countries in complete safety. As a result of the holocaust the West suffers a bad conscience and in accordance with the Balfour act of the British government a homeland for the Jews in Palestine was established against the wishes of the Arab nations and there is now the great problem of the Palestinian question and who knows what the ultimate result will be.

6. Finally, Muslim militancy is a reaction to the colonization of their countries in recent years. They are humiliated by the memory and now that they are free and have oil wealth at their disposal they wish to exert their superiority as believers in the one true great religion.

THE APPEAL AND CHALLENGE OF ISLAM

We must look now at the appeal of Islam. We must understand it in order to meet its challenge. Islam is not merely a religion but rather a complete way of life. According to Muslims it is not one religion amongst many, but the only religion. The Qur'an says, "the true religion with God is Islam." (Sura 317).

Adam was the first Muslim and other messengers with the message of God followed - Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. The message was the same, submission to God. Islam means submission. But over the years the message became distorted (Islam charges the Jews and perhaps Christians with distorting the message.) In Islam and through the Qur'an and Mohammed the final and ultimate expression has been given for all time. The essential tenets of Islam are called the five pillars of wisdom and these are five mandatory obligations placed upon every Muslim believer.

The first of these is the Shahada, the confession or witness. This is the shortest and most repeated creed in the world. "There is no God but God (Allah) and Mohammed is the apostle (messenger or prophet) of God. To recite it before a judge or two public witnesses is the means of entering into the Islamic community. It is repeated at the birth of every Muslim child, it is whispered into the ear at death. It is chanted at funerals. It is a battle cry and it is repeated incessantly in prayers.

The second is Salat, prayer. A Muslim washes himself in a set way before praying, before coming before a holy God. He then prays a prayer of preparation or intention before he begins. He prays on a mat or a clean floor and there are set cycles of prayers and he prays five times a day with others if possible, towards Mecca. Many times we have heard at dawn the cry from the minaret, "Sleep is good but prayer is better". Rise to prayer and then God is great, Allah akbar followed by the Shahada.

The third is Zakat, alms giving. Alms giving is really a compulsory payment, not charity. A kind of tax on possessions. In Islam possessions or property belongs to all to be used by all. It is a sin to think of your possessions as belonging only to you. Free will offerings are given over and above the Zakat.

The fourth is Sawm, fasting. This is performed especially in Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar year. During the day no food or drink is taken. It is forbidden to swallow one's spittle. The fast is broken when it is impossible to distinguish between a white and black thread of cotton and later in the evening a sumptuous meal is eaten. In Ramadan, the gates of heaven are open and those of hell closed. All minor sins are forgiven if the fast is observed aright. At the end of Ramadan there is a great celebration (Id- ul- fitr) an expression of thanksgiving on the part of the community and of its utter dependence upon God for every blessing and an expression too, of the Muslim's deep desire for forgiveness.

The fifth is Hajj, this is the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Every Muslim is expected to make this pilgrimage at least once in life. There are usually 3,000,000 pilgrims every year in the city of Mecca. Only Muslims can enter within the city gates, non-Muslims will be punished by death. This pilgrimage emphasizes the community and is the supreme means of obtaining the forgiveness of sins. The pilgrimage shows (1) the debt of the whole community to God, (2) the amazing uniformity of belief and (3) an annual dedication to God.

As we contemplate these things one thing becomes abundantly clear and that is that in Islam the essential spirit or feeling is that of community. Muslims are members of one brotherhood, a worldwide community of believers who work together for the glory of God. This sense of community (Ummah) has certain expressions amongst Muslims. It gives them a keen sense of responsibility to the community and a fear of leaving it. To apostatize, e.g. become a Christian, is a direct challenge to the very essence of Islam and is unthinkable and incomprehensible. The idea of unity is so emphasized that the identity of the individual is of secondary importance, perhaps not even to be considered. Muslims rarely consider themselves as having individual responsibility.

This is the challenge of Islam. Fortunately there is inconsistency and not many live up to the ideal in all things but nevertheless its strength and challenge lies in its formidable sense of community.

Islam challenges us in the following ways:

1. It has a simple creed, easy to grasp. It gives every Muslim a sense of identity and unity and gives meaning and a goal to life.
2. Islam is on the march - growing , militant and confident. Can western Christian civilization stand up to it?
3. Christians throughout the centuries apart from some notable exceptions have been afraid of Islam. Few are the missionaries who have had the courage to confront it and to give their lives for the conversion to Christ of its followers. The church lost its nerve. It considered missionary work amongst them too difficult or too dangerous.

Islam challenges us too on account of some certain weaknesses at the present time.

1. Intellectuals in Arab countries and in other Muslim states are not convinced that Islam can stand up to the modern world. Many think it must be modified and brought up to date. Others have abandoned it. Such people can be approached by Christians sympathetically.
2. Islamic law, when enforced, as in Iran, often produces a reaction. It is a burden too grievous to be born and opportunities are afforded to Christians to show a better way.
3. Islam and especially the Qur'an has never been examined by its own people critically. It is thought blasphemous even to consider it. But underlying this is a sense of insecurity and fear.

MISSIONARY CHALLENGES

Our study is in no way an academic one but rather to stir us up to a missionary response. In conclusion I wish to make certain observations.

1. Reformed Christians with their doctrine of the sovereignty of God - God's rule over the whole of life are the Christians par excellence to challenge Islam.
2. The immigration of the Islamic peoples into our countries must not be considered as a threat. It is not a cause of resentment for us who are Christians but rather a supreme opportunity for evangelism given to us by God. In the past when the barbarians descended upon Europe, the church saw this as a great opportunity for the conversion of these peoples to Christ and they were brought to Christ. We too, have a similar opportunity.
3. Islam seems formidable - a monolithic structure. But we have seen other such structures collapse in recent years. Communism as a system has collapsed and this can happen also to Islam.
4. There is need for a fresh missionary enterprise.
 - a. Islam needs to be challenged afresh intellectually. Thomas Aquinas did this in his day with his great book "Summa contra gentiles" written to defend Christianity against Islam. We must challenge Muslims to examine critically their own sources.
 - b. We must have love and compassion for these people. In the Qur'an Christians are described as the "people of the book". We can show them that we share many of their ideals - their concern for justice, for family life and high moral standards. We must befriend them and speak to them of Jesus.

c. There must be especially prayer. It is here that the battle will be won. We have promises in the Bible for the conversion of nations who are now Islamic e.g. Isaiah 19: 23-33.

d. We need zeal for Christ. The young Henry Martyn scholar of Cambridge University and missionary to India and Persia and translator of the Scriptures into Urdu, Arabic and Persian, was once in Shiraz, Persia; he had a few months to live. He was in discussion with certain Muslim teachers and one of them said to him, "Prince Abbas Mirza has killed so many Christians (he was referring to Russians) that Christ from the third heaven took hold of the skirts of Mohammed and entreated him to desist." At this blasphemy, Henry Martin was cut to the quick and rose up clearly distressed and distraught. The audience looked at him with astonishment and asked him what was the matter. He replied, "I could not endure existence if Jesus was not glorified. It would be hell to me if He were to be always thus dishonoured."

The trouble is we can endure it. The awful thing is that the church of Jesus Christ has too long endured it. Is it nothing to us that the name of Jesus is thus dishonoured? Is it nothing to us that millions follow the prophet Mohammed? And yet we believe that "There is one God and one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus." This truth needs to be shouted upon the housetops and brought to the descendants of Ishmael. Let us pray with Abraham, "Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee." and let us give ourselves to the proclamation of the Gospel with faith and courage and zeal that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess Him Lord of glory now.