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Mission or Invitation: Making it Work

The purpose of this lecture is to present and briefly evaluate the various kinds of missionary activity that has been used. I shall chiefly examine Christian and Islamic methods. Hopefully a summary of methods will give the individual extending the invitation to Islam a clear picture of the available alternatives, to what extent and under what circumstances they are effective, and whether or not they are generally applicable in an Islamic context.

Islam was historically spread by several means. The first was the web of kinship ties. Later Islam was associated with trading ties. Military expansion also became a factor, although provision was made for non-Muslims to live under Islamic jurisdiction without reversion to Islam. For the most part, the principle of no compulsion in religion has been implemented to varying degrees.

1. Christian Missions: An Evaluation

Christianity was first spread as a movement within Judaism. It opposed Jewish collaboration with Rome with a conservative programme recognizing the abiding character of divinely appointed leadership, namely in the figure of Jesus (as). Rome rightly saw this as a threat and forced it underground. It thus spread as an underground, illegal movement using networks such as kinship and trades. True Christianity continued underground when the visible Church became allied with the empire under Constantine. We must therefore differentiate between the propagation of true Christianity and the Church, which are historically opposing institutions.

True Christianity has always remained an underground movement known under various names, such as the Waldensians. Their method of propagation consisted of itinerant preachers who went about the countryside reciting the Bible by memory, generally in the local language, and hiding their identity under the cloak of peddling cloth, jewels, and other notions. At the time of the Reformation they were lured out of the woodwork and either were destroyed or capitulated to the established heresies, that is, the doctrines of the Trinity, the Atonement, and the Church. True Christianity may still exist, but it is not known to.

The Church was an arm of the State for the purpose of controlling the population. It was spread through State patronage and military expansion. The Church established itself in Europe through the sword. Dialogue between religions existed, but was almost uniquely the effect of the political situation in Andalusia. Except where encouraged to dialogue by Muslims, the Church preferred force. Upon conquering Andalusia, the Church set up an extraordinary system of violence and force known as the Inquisition. By this means it terrorized the people it had forced to convert to Christianity and their descendants for many generations. It cannot be over-estimated to what extent the Church establishment enjoys the use of terror.

Colonial activity expanded the methods to parallel the ways in which colonial governments controlled indigenous populations. During this period the Church established the traditional missionary societies. Their methods were 1) translation of the Bible into local languages, publishing and distributing the Bible and tracts; 2) establishing schools ostensibly for education but in fact to alienate indigenous peoples from their own cultures and kin and provide them with the capability of reading and using Church propaganda materials; and 3) providing medical care in order to gain the trust of the indigenous population. This three-pronged approach opened the way for public preaching and the establishment of churches. The real motives for converting to Christianity under colonial domination have largely been social and economic.

In the post-colonial period the Church has participated in post-colonial policy, which is the maintenance of economic dependency and the introduction of a global market. The proliferation of missionizing in the Church is within the wider framework of marketing advertising techniques. The Church has become a commodity serving the interests of neo-colonial policy. It is increasingly an aid agency. This is an extension of the social Gospel, which was the way in which the Church supported the proliferation of an oppressed labour population under industrialization. Church charity stabilizes the power hierarchy and helps to prevent revolts.

In Europe and America it has become a business like any other. This is seen throughout its structure and liturgy, but the clearest evidence of this is its use of advertising music styles that have replaced traditional forms of worship. Traditional worship is outmoded specifically because the Church is an entertainment commodity in competition with other forms of entertainment. It ought to be remembered that multi-media entertainment is a form of control, so that in fact the Church has not changed at heart since the time of Constantine despite its many masks. This then is the context in which missionary activity by the Church needs to be seen.

An examination of true Christian propagation at the present time cannot be done. It is not certain that any true Christians are left. They have either reverted to Islam long ago, or been destroyed by the Church. If there are any, they are propagating within kinship networks in secret. I mention this only because Islam may be reduced to that very case in some areas, and could profit by the knowledge that such a thing was feasible for at least a thousand years of Christian history. The true Christians were

exposed by the ruse of a pretense by the Protestants of making a break with Rome. When they exposed themselves, thinking to gain allies and support, they were either destroyed or forced to accept Roman doctrine. The lesson is to beware of unholy alliances.

The Church makes use of the following methods today. The list may not be comprehensive, but is representative.

A. Publication of Scriptures and tracts.

The publication of Scriptures and tracts has been seen to be most effective during the era before television. Radio did not seem to detract from it. Furthermore, the distribution of Scriptures is important. Religious publications have been most effective when distributed by individuals who do not distribute the material free of charge but take a price for it. Free material has a far lesser effect. In former times the vending of religious materials also provided a means of livelihood for those engaged in it, but this has been reduced by media competition and reliance on social welfare in some areas. Nevertheless, acquiring wholesale Islamic literature and selling it for a profit is a largely untapped alternative that might be used by some. At the same time, the selling of the Qur'an for a profit is not considered Islamic.

B. Educational institutions and aid.

Despite some criticism by proponents of the Church Growth Movement, educational institutions continue to contribute to the growth of the church and to maintaining a certain level of understand of the faith. In Islam, education has largely focused on Muslims. It is doubtful whether providing Muslim education for non-Muslims is anywhere a valid option. The activity relies on colonial and post-colonial dependency.

C. Medical institutions and aid.

Medical institutions are supported by churches in post-colonial situations, which again rely on colonial dependency to be effective. Furthermore, medical practitioners often have Church literature in their waiting rooms. Finally, there has been at times a movement of folk medicine and simple remedies to propagate the Church. There may be areas of usefulness for all three of these methods. Medical institutions run by Muslims in impoverished countries could have an effect on the reversion of the population to Islam. Muslim doctors and dentists have an opportunity of supplying their patients with Islamic literature, and this can be effective.

Finally, alternative medicine can be a means of making contact with a clientele, for those few Muslims capable of engaging in some sort of alternative healing. Not all of these are compatible with Islam, but certainly Arabic remedies as well as other folk remedies are. Additionally, some of the New Age healing arts are not in conflict with Islam and might present an avenue of activity.

D. Famine relief and other forms of charity.

It is undeniable that many of the Church personnel engaged in relief and other forms of charity are truly charitable persons who care about the people they are helping. This is true even when they have the intention of conversion in mind. That intention is generally missing in the event of Muslim charity, largely because Muslim charity is equilateral, and there is rarely a feeling of elitism or dependency. The context of charity is nearly always in the colonial or post-colonial situation, and does not provide the same avenues to the propagation of Islam as it does to the Church.

E. Direct market advertising of all types.

Radio, newspaper, magazines, billboards, television, and internet provide avenues of getting the message of Islam across. Although they are a part of the market-based society, they can be used in presenting Islam as well, as long as unethical features such as appeals to sexuality and violence as well as subliminal messages are avoided.

F. Public lectures.

Public lectures are not as prevalent or effective today as they have been in the past, and are no longer used to the same extent as formerly. However, they continue to be valuable means of getting information across. Public lectures do require preparation and funding, and for this reason are not always sufficiently productive to justify their expense.

A special adaptation of public lectures is the old-fashioned revival. This has its roots in the Methodist awakening and is not that old, going back only to the mid-1700s. This again had a special adaptation in America in the camp meeting. For the most part these means of propagating Christianity are considered outdated. The revival and campmeeting combined hymnsinging and preaching in such a way as to touch the emotions of the participants and convince them to make a commitment to Christian faith and the Church.

G. Entertainment worship in public.

Entertainment worship in the Christian context consists in sketches, plays, music, clowning, and other forms of entertainment, often included directly in the worship event itself. These are conceived to be not only effective means of attracting the “unchurched,” but also of retaining the interest of the youth. This form of activity is a possible resource in an Islamic context. Cultural and esthetic programs can be arranged to attract people. These might include traditional forms of art, drama, and music. In an Islamic milieu, however, it is not possible to bring them into the actual worship situation. The worship events of Ashura do provide avenues to attract the interest of non-Muslims.

H. Targeted entertainment worship.

Especially popular music is used by the Church as a propagandist tool. Recordings can be used at home, while traveling, and in other situations. This is also an appropriate means of spreading Islam. The use of recordings, cds and cassettes, for the recitation of the Qur'an, du'a, and even other material of a more cultural significance is appropriate. Such materials can be sold or given to interested people. Although we cannot call the recitation of the Qur'an or some du'a entertainment, it can functionally replace popular entertainment. There is a growing industry in Muslim circles of mimicking Western popular music within an Islamic context. The addition of a rock beat to Sufi music for example, is one of the major ways Islam is being defeated. Modern Christianity is more a feeling than a belief. Such music introduces that feeling into a person directly, by-passing the rational process. This should be combated with the recitation of Qur'an and du'a material.

I. Political lobbying, political control, political coups, and terrorist acts.

Christians will admit to using only the first of these four methods, although it is clear that the others have a long history as well. Since there is no compulsion in Islam, political coups and terrorist acts should never be associated with Islam. They are essentially Roman in character, and thus have more to do with the Church than the mosque. It is appropriate for Muslims to use democratic means toward Islamic goals. Even political lobbying and block voting might be used more effectively than they have been in the past.

J. Cafes and discos.

In recent times Christians have used cafes and discos for evangelistic purposes, inviting people, especially young people, off the streets to enter a congenial environment and have religious discussions with other young people. There is a limited possibility of that kind of thing in urban areas where the Muslim population is high. A small group of young people could invite people on the street in early evening, when young people are moving about, and sit with them for discussion over tea. An agreement could be made with the Muslim owner of a café to allow them a table for making that kind of contact. Three young men working together might be able to make an impression.

K. Personal evangelism projects: training, one on one methods, partner methods, public solicitation.

Evangelical Christian churches are very active in missionizing seminar training programs with a continual development of methods, mostly based on marketing culture. Among the most long-standing of these are the following. The one-on-one method is for each individual to make a goal of converting one specific person, and concentrating on contact with that one person until he achieves success or until it seems best to try another. Each one win won programs are often set up in churches to last over a season or even a year. The partner method is especially known among Jehovah's witnesses, who go

from door to door in pairs. However, there are other groups doing this, some of them doing nothing else but this. Public solicitation or street witnessing is also popular in urban centers. All of these methods can be applied in an Islamic context. Research has shown, however, that they are not as effective in producing conversions as might be expected. Especially the two-by-two, door-to-door approach has been shown to be more effective in affirming the commitment of the missionaries themselves than in gaining converts. That does not mean that the partner approach need be discarded.

L. Charismatic healing.

Some Christian churches attract crowds of people who hope to be healed. The healing process takes place under continuous, highly charged emotional music, speaking in tongues (ecstatic, meaningless utterance), ecstatic behaviour such as dancing and falling on the floor. The excitement of the event draws a crowd always in the hope of seeing a miracle. Islam has also used such methods, specifically through Sufi groups approaching Western societies through the Ottoman expansion. It is effective with Westerners for some unknown reason, perhaps because of the aversion to reason so prevalent in Western religion. Some Muslims might consider to what extent Islamic healing practices might open avenues to make fruitful contacts. A full-blown charismatic approach, however, would merely be a capitulation to a popular trend in Christianity rather than the spread of Islam.

M. Church planting techniques, public marketing visibility, cell groups.

For several decades much Christian missionizing has been influenced by the Church Growth Movement begun by Donald McGavrin and fostered by Fuller Seminary. The basic idea is to apply marketing strategy to church growth in a systematic way. Variations on this theme are many, but perhaps the most pervasive result of the movement is the establishment of cell groups. The congregation is divided into small groups living in the same area who meet in homes perhaps once a week for charismatic prayer, fellowship and possibly some Bible study. The results have been mixed. In some areas the growth has been phenomenal, in others dismal. The reason is the same as for the marketing of any product. Some of the features of marketing might be applied to Islam, but the basic philosophy behind it is not appropriate to Islam.

N. Defamation of Islam, the Qur'an, and the Prophet (as)

Defamation of Islam is done through publications, videos, and internet websites. It is equally possible to engage in the same activity in regard to Christianity. A good deal has been published showing that the Qur'an is false, and in the same vein that the Bible is false, both using essentially the same methods and arguments. The method appears to be a dead-end. There is a special danger in Islam for engaging in it. First of all, good manners are important to Islam and these tend to prevent such activity. Secondly, defamation of the Bible is a tricky subject. The Bible we have today is essentially the same as during the time of the Prophet (as). So whatever is said about it in the Qur'an is essentially true today. Criticism of the Bible has to be carefully evaluated in the light of the Qur'an. The same goes for relations to the

followers of the Book. Given that, negative approaches are doubly difficult.

O. Interfaith dialogue

Interfaith dialogue is used by Christians at times as a means of converting Muslims to Christianity. This hidden agenda is not particularly successful, and is too expensive for the small returns. Interfaith dialogue is mainly useful in sharing direct and correct information between faiths and diffusing hostility.

P. Community cooperation

Christian churches, as they have become more and more separated from the State, have made use of other means of gaining a hold on society, and among these have been participation in nearly every kind of community project that exists, not just charities. This secular visibility of the Church has not generally produced returns in conversions, but has in a small way enhanced the profile of the Church among secularized people. If Islamic agencies copied this example, the returns would be the same.

Q. Youth excursions and sport.

Aside from the use of rock music, churches try to attract and keep the attention of young people through the use of non-religious activities. These include camping, scouting, sport clubs and other interest groups. These methods have been effective among Christians in keeping their young people in the Church. In some cases they also attract other young people. However, they can be expensive, and they require a good deal of continued planning and effort. In an Islamic context, it appears that there would be great possibilities in creating and maintaining martial art groups that have a strongly Islamic character, that include du'a, Qur'anic recitation, and the concept of the practice of the martial art as a zikr and as a means of becoming a part of the army of the Mahdi (as). This does not require a great deal of funding, but it does require intense commitment and high degree of skill.

R. Infiltration.

A common means of reaching Muslims with Christianity is infiltration. Various types are used. One is sending people to Muslim countries to work in secular jobs, but with the mandate of actually trying to convert people to Christianity on the sly. Such people are trained specifically for the task, both in their own theology, in Islamic practice, and in methods of working in secret. Another method is pretending to convert to Islam, in order to gain influence over Muslims and undermine their beliefs and practices. A good deal of both types of infiltration are presently going on, especially the former.

From an Islamic (as well as Christian view) there is an obvious moral problem with these approaches, but for some the ends justify the means. Infiltration is not recommended for practical reasons as well, as it generally results in ugly situations. Muslims are generally too welcoming of converts. Those who revert to Islam should expect people to question them intimately on their beliefs and practices. I know of a person claiming to be Muslim and actually working and teaching in Islamic institutions, while still

confessing belief in the Trinity.

In sum, it should be said that, generally speaking, the adoption of Christian methods of missionizing, despite the fact that an enormous amount of research, funding, and effort have been invested in them, would be misguided. This is not to say that a few tips on reaching people cannot be gleaned from the mass. In general, however, the goals and means of Christianity are so intertwined as to prevent an application to Islam. We have little to learn from Christians. The main usefulness in knowing how Christians work is in diffusing their influence, not in propagating Islam. The best place to find methods of da'wa (as opposed to missionizing) are in Islamic sources.

2. The Need for an Islamic Model of Da'wa

Islamic da'wa or invitation to Islam is inherently distinct from the ways in which the Church has been propagated. No force is acceptable in the propagation of Islam. It must be noted that there is a historical parallel in Islam to the historical development of true Christianity and by contrast the Church. The Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates correspond to the Church in relation to true Christianity, and actually persecuted Islam.

In modern times, however, the comparison breaks down. Islam is an agenda of personal loyalty to the divinely appointed authority on earth, primarily the prophet (as) and then his duly appointed progeny, and the politico-religious system that naturally arises from such loyalty. It is propagated through one general means: the imitation of the prophet (as) and the twelve holy Imams (as). When it has been attached to a State, that State is always conceived to be governed by the Imam, to whom all functionaries are accountable.

Both Christianity and Islam have seen a legitimate role for military conquest as a means of propagation of the faith. This has been far more prevalent in Christianity than in Islam. Islam has been more widely spread through trade routes. Trade routes have also had a role to play in the spread of Christianity, so that it would be inaccurate to say that Christianity is imitating Islam in its recent attachment to business methods.

There is a weakness in relying on marketing process alone for the propagation of faith. First of all, such a dependency implies that the faith will become vulnerable to the fluctuations of the market. The survival of the faith will then be tied to the survival of the market. Marketing techniques may be useful, but they must be subsidiary. The Church is more fragile than Islam in this area, first because of its growing dependency on the market, and second because of its inherent susceptibility to the market mentality as corporate, hierarchical institutions.

The reliance of Islam on Medieval trade routes played a definite part in the post-medieval weakening of Islam. As formerly flourishing trade routes lost their importance, Islam lost its importance along with them. This should be a warning to modern Muslims who consider that the faith must be marketed,

budgeted, and administered in ways similar to other Western institutions. At the same time it should be a warning the Christians, who have so intimately tied their faith to Western and Western-advocating institutions, that they are likely to suffer even greater losses than did Islam at a time when the economic institutions in the world make radical changes.

Modern Islamic means of propagation are many. Satellite television and internet websites support Islamic publishing, educational institutions, and Islamic centers. Public debate has been used for a long time, and more recently videotapes make such events even more attractive. Most of these activities serve the Muslim community itself rather than reaching others to a great extent.

3. A Proposal for a Da'wa Model

A simple, grassroots means of action is the best in the long term. Islam, with its simpler structure, is better able to make use of this than is the Church, which is cluttered with the necessity of clerical institutions. A search among Islamic traditions for a model to build upon reveals that the Persian rawza appears to have great possibilities. This is a tradition of women's groups meeting generally on Saturdays for a recitation relating to Imam Hussain (as), other speeches, refreshments and informal social events. The character of the tradition has changed with time, taking on different functions in different periods of Persian history, but always maintaining its cultural importance. Models for da'wa within an effective, sustainable, and economical framework can be worked out on the basis of this tradition. More than one model should be used, so that the tradition can apply to various needs.

Informal circles can be formed and maintained at a modest level. These can be not only women's groups, but men's groups and youth groups. They can meet not only on Saturdays as in the rawza tradition, but rather at convenient weekly times. They should have a regular time for meeting, a specific program and goal, and regular members. Each member should try to invite non-muslims to come to the meetings, so that there are always visitors present. These visitors can observe the programme, ask questions, receive information and literature, and enjoy the informal social gathering.

3.1 How to organize a Da'wa group

- 1 Choose six to ten members living in the same area, and a host or hostess.
- 2 Fix a regular time and place for the meeting, generally the home of the host or hostess, or other venue.
- 3 Decide on a programme.
- 4 Set regulations as needed, such as limiting refreshments. It might be best to make a rule that the host or hostess must not provide anything other than tea. Otherwise, it can become an inordinate burden on one person.

3.2 A Model Programme for a Da'wa group

1 Informal conversation and getting acquainted with the visitors (five to fifteen minutes).

2 Opening of the program by the host, hostess or someone appointed. They could say for example: "Now we are going to have our traditional recitation from the Qur'an."

3 Recitation of the Qur'an (Not more than ten minutes). This can be done in Arabic and English, or just in English if there is no one present who can read the Qur'an in Arabic. In that case, it might be appropriate for the members of the group to consider improving their knowledge of Islam. This is the most delicate moment of the meeting, since it is the only formal one. Especially with some visitors it must be kept very brief.

4 An informal presentation. If any of the members have read material in the intervening time since the last session, they might be invited to spend a few minutes summarizing what they have read and giving their opinion of it. This both educates and informs on one hand, and stimulates the others to focus on improving themselves. Not more than ten minutes for each presentation and not more than three presentations should be had. Selections from this book itself would be most useful for such purposes.

5 Raising of issues for discussion. Especially if there are visitors, they may have questions they would like to bring up. Even if there are not scholars present, often people feel more comfortable asking questions in an informal forum anyway. Generally such questions can be handled quite well by any Muslim. If the questions are too difficult, this merely provides an opportunity for providing the visitor with reading material. The visitor can then be invited back to tell what s/he thinks of what s/he has read. Refreshments should be brought out during this time, tea by the host or hostess and anything else that anyone might have brought along. The meeting should "degenerate" into an informal social gathering. Point five should be reached in under an hour, and people should feel free to start leaving within an hour and a half.

4. How to Invite People to a Da'wa Circle

The purpose of the Da'wa Circle is to invite people to Islam through an informal social gathering. Even if no visitors are present, as may often happen, the meeting is still useful. It provides a social medium for Muslims to meet each other. It provides a stimulus for the study of the Qur'an and Islamic literature. It can help to improve every member's knowledge and practice of Islam. But finally, it is an open avenue for people to enter Islam. Therefore the atmosphere should be friendly and relaxed. Questions should not be answered in an aggressive or polemic way. Knowledge should be shared, but so informally that it feels completely comfortable.

In the same way, the invitation should be spontaneous and informal. People can be invited to a social get together without emphasizing its religious character. It is just a group of friends who get together

once a week for tea and discussion. This means that any person a member comes in contact with is a potential visitor to the group. They can be invited in a purely social sense.

If the group begins to be so large that there are more than ten members regularly present as well as visitors, the group should be split into two groups of six members each. The intention is that the groups will proliferate. If there are less than six members in a group, it may also become a burden. A meeting really must have at least three people present to be viable, and if the group has only four members, pressure for attendance will too great to keep the group going without effort. The goal of each group should be to grow and split. Care should be taken that as groups split Muslims of some experience are always taken along in each one. It is not advisable for a group to start with five or six people who have only embraced Islam within the last month.

Finally, each group should be ready to experiment with the programme to suit its own needs. Other things can be incorporated, and the points given above can be reduced in importance. There should always be at least a brief reading from the Qur'an, however, and the opportunity for people to ask questions in an informal setting. The secrets of keeping the matter going are 1) commitment of at least one person in the group, and 2) a format that is simple enough not to require preparation.

Although it is perfectly appropriate to establish single-sex groups, the culturally determined separation of sexes in Muslim communities is not acceptable to non-Muslims. Such separation is associated with an appalling lack of civilization, especially on the part of secluded women. I have met scores of women who have been put off Islam because they were relegated into a back room with women whose only interests were make-up and hair-dyeing. Women who were interested in discussing religion, politics and economics would simply not put up with the affront.

No matter what means of da'wa are chosen, the establishment of such informally organized groups is absolutely essential. Muslim communities are not capable of absorbing Western converts. Although Islam is singularly free of racism, Muslim communities are all the more corroded by national and cultural clashes. They are simply unable to assimilate outsiders to whatever cultural and national heritage is dominant in a particular mosque. Furthermore, it would be a betrayal of Islam for them to do so. Small groups for informal Islamic devotion can be foundations for establishing indigenous Muslim communities and can even function as permanent spiritual centers. Any Muslim who has the illusion that the presently existing national and cultural communities can serve the needs of the indigenous Muslim community is in store for a rude awakening. Englishmen and Americans might revert to Islam, but they are not about to become second-class Pakistanis or Iranians.

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