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A WORD ABOUT ARTICLES AND AUTHORS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE. Dr. Shenk, at present Director of the Overseas Department of the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, served many years among Muslims in Africa. We thank him for permission to print his article. The article on Ramadan is reprinted with permission from "Mindanao Update." As for the article on the Rabita, it is based on an informative letter and other materials which Mr Shaf Shafir, its President, kindly sent in answer to a request from the Editor.

THE UMMA AND THE CHURCH: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

by David W. Shenk

"Why don't Christians follow the way of Jesus?" a Muslim asked. I was dining with a close friend, a Muslim, in the Blue Nile Restaurant in Washington, D.C., when he leaned close and asked that disturbing question.

He continued slowly, pensively, "When I read the Gospel, I am overjoyed. The life and teachings of Jesus are wonderful, wonderful, really, truly wonderful. But, please show me Christians who are willing to follow in the sunna (way) of Jesus."

We sipped our cardamom spiced tea in reflective silence and then he continued. "I have met a few, very few people who try to follow Jesus. But they follow him only in their private lives. Consequently your American society has become very evil. It seems to me that you Christians really do not believe that the sunna of Jesus is practical. That makes me very sad."

Theological and Practical Problems

Both the Muslim Umma and the Christian Church are communities of God-fearing believers. Both believe they have received from God a mission in the world. In meeting one another, we experience commonality and pain. In fact, Islam is a profound challenge to Christian perceptions and commitment to be the people of God. There are several reasons for this:

(1) Islam is a post-Christian movement of God-fearing people. Within the New Testament, God-fearing Gentiles were recognized with appreciation as people who had moved closer to the truth than their polytheistic contemporaries (Acts 10:34-36). These pre-Christian God-fearers were exceptionally receptive to Christian faith. Islam, on the other hand, presents a theological problem which has no precedent in the New Testament, a monotheistic faith which is post Christian, and which was birthed in a Christianized environment.

In Islam we see the etchings of aspects of Christian faith. Islam is a form of Arian Christianity, but unlike Arianism, Islam has flourished outside the modifying discipline and witness of Christian experience and Biblical revelation. Therefore, although Arianism within the Church finally withered into oblivion, Islam has thrived as a movement outside the bounds of churchly discipline.

(2) Islam began as the quest of a people for inclusion in the people

of God. Islam seeks to embrace and be embraced by all God-fearers. It began as a quest by the Arab people for inclusion, and now invites all people to participate in the blessing of that inclusion.

In the seventh century, Arabia was largely encircled by Christian peoples. The advanced Christianized cultures--Ethiopian, Egyptian, and Syrian--on the Arabian periphery had the Bible in their native languages. The pagan, nomadic Arabs were living in ignorance (*jahiliyya*), an ignorance perpetuated through exclusion from the community of the people of the book. For nascent Islam, the Arabic book (Qur'an) and Arabian Prophet were the good news that the Arab peoples are now also included. The *da'wah* (invitation) of Islam is the good news that all other peoples are also invited to enjoy inclusion in the community of peace, the people of God. The inclusiveness of the invitation, as well as the detestation for all forms of exclusivism, is revealed in the Muslim conviction that everyone everywhere is born a Muslim. The success of Islamic mission is therefore not statistically measurable. All are born Muslim: Islamic mission is to invite people to affirm the reality of inclusion.

(3) Islam's most rapid missionary expansion has been through the Islamization of Christianized societies. Within one century of its birth, Islam had gained control of half of the Christianized world. In all Christianized societies ruled by Muslim governments, there has been a steady flow of converts from the Church to Islam. Political techniques such as the *dhimmi* (protected) status for the church, or the application of forms of the law of apostasy to Muslims who would convert to Christianity have combined to ensure that the net flow of conversions always favored Islam. In all countries ruled by Muslim governments, contracting Christian communities in relationship to Islam have been the norm. Islam confronts the Church with church growth in reverse.

(4) Muslims believe that Islam is the primal, middle, and final religion of mankind, given as a mercy for all people. It is the faith of Adam, Abraham, and Muhammad: in fact all true prophets are Muslims. All necessary truth is succinctly summarized in the Qur'an, which is the criterion of all truth. God-fearers weep with joy when hearing the Qur'an recited. From an Islamic perspective, the fundamental test as to whether one is a person of faith is one's personal response to the Qur'an and belief in the Prophet of Islam. In relationship to professed believers in God, the foremost question in the mind of Muslims is this: "What do you believe concerning the Qur'an and the Prophet?" A lack of commitment to the Prophet and the Book suggests that one's professed faith commitment is not genuine, and the dialogue is subsequently often broken. (Qur'an 84:20-25)

(5) The Islamic commitment to *tauhid* (the unity of God) profoundly affects the Muslim commitment to community. Belief in the unity of God is pragmatically reflected in the unity and harmony of the community which lives under the law of God. According to Ali Shariati, belief in *tauhid* is commitment to the exorcism of all aspects of disequilibrium. All forms of disharmony are *shirk*, that is the

adding of associates to divinity. The Umma is commanded by God to protect the community of faith from shirk. The community must be protected from all forms of disharmony, including the destabilization which can occur through unregulated religious pluralism, or the dichotomization of life into secular and spiritual realms. Tauhid is the experience and expression of personal and social integration and harmony under the revealed will of God. Within the framework of tauhid, church growth which in any sense seems to threaten the integrity of the Umma, the "Dar al Islam," is normally perceived as contributory to disharmony: it is a form of shirk.

How should the Church respond theologically to the Islamic world view, as briefly outlined above. It is tempting to side step the issues. It is interesting that contemporary church growth writings are heavily oriented towards communication theory and anthropology, with a parallel dearth of theological reflection. At the Colorado Springs Consultation on Muslim Evangelization (1978) only one of the thirteen foundational papers attempted an in-depth probe of the theological issues. Seven of the papers related to cultural dynamics. The underlying assumption seemed to be that the fundamental objection of Islam to the Gospel is western culture, that if the Gospel gets clothed in appropriate cultural forms, the theological objections will be easily surmounted. Is this really the case? It is noteworthy that at Colorado Springs all of the case studies came from marginally Islamized peoples. There was no serious reflection on how to share the Gospel with devout Muslims living under orthodox Muslim governments.

#### A Question from the Umma to the Church

Could it be that we hesitate to accept theological or community engagement with Islam, because we are embarrassed by the questions which the Umma addresses to the Church? Yet if we would listen, we might discover that through the questions which Islam addresses to us, our own perceptions of the Gospel will be purified, and in the purification process the Gospel itself will become more attractive and life changing for Christians, and hopefully also for our Muslim friends.

There are a number of disturbing questions which the Umma presents to the church. I shall comment on one of these which has already been alluded to in the introductory conversation: "Why don't you follow Jesus?" Said another way, "Why don't you who believe in Jesus commit yourself to the Kingdom of God as lived and practiced by Jesus?"

Many Muslims suspect that we really don't believe in the practicality of Jesus. "How can anyone love his enemy?" I have often been asked. I have frequently gone to mosques in East Africa and listened to the sermons. It is surprising how often Muslim preachers proclaim Islam as the practical faith in contrast to Christianity which is far too idealistic. Thus the question, "Why don't you follow Jesus?" is also a form of Muslim witness. It is often a form of invitation to follow Muhammad the pragmatic prophet.

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Nevertheless, there is more to the question than a subtle invitation to accept Islam. The question also reflects the Muslim commitment to tauhid, (the unity of every dimension of life under the rule of God). Muslims who know Christians are often disturbed at the easy manner in which many western Christians violate tauhid by cosily dividing life into secular and sacred, public and private, temporal and spiritual.

However, Jesus also commanded tauhid: in fact from a Biblical perspective he is the perfect revelation of tauhid. He is the breakthrough into history of cosmic harmony. From a Muslim perspective, cosmic harmony has been marvelously revealed in the Qur'an, whereas the Biblical witness is that the eternal Word is revealed in Jesus himself. The divergence between the Book (Qur'anic guidance) and the Person (Jesus, the Redeemer) is the issue which drives a theological and practical wedge between Islam and Christianity. This divergence propels Islam toward a nomistic organization of society (i.e. based on religious law), whereas the Christian is more pneumatically oriented. In Islam there is tremendous concern about submitting to codified guidance, whereas in the Christian experience one is called to live in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Islamic perplexity concerning Christian life and commitment, however, is not necessarily contingent on the different views of the essence of revealed harmony. Rather the Umma asks why we so often fail to commit ourselves to the One whom we profess as Lord. Jesus, as the dramatic breakthrough of the Kingdom of God, announced at the beginning of his ministry that he has come to preach good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, release for the oppressed (Luke 4:16-21). In his life, Jesus revealed that this radically new Kingdom order is effectuated through redemptive suffering love, supremely revealed in his crucifixion and resurrection. Cosmic harmony is, in Jesus' life, the total commitment to love, even one's enemies. But one cannot live that way without suffering. That is the issue.

Western Christianity, especially, has developed neat theological escape hatches. For multitudes of Christians, the Kingdom life applies only to private life: it is not applicable to public life. We have developed a dual citizenship theology. We dichotomize life into spiritual and secular. Jesus is Lord of the spiritual, but not of the secular.

The Islamic question is really a plea, an invitation to Christians to take tauhid seriously, to really reflect the Kingdom of God in every area of life. I recently heard Dr. Ala' Eddin Kharafa speaking to an assembly of Christian church leaders. Dr. Kharafa is Director of the Muslim World League of North America and the representative of the League to the United Nations. He pointed out that an absolutely foundational commitment of the League is the transcendence of the Umma over nationalism. He assured us that there is only one Muslim nation. All nationalisms which segment the unity of the nation of Islam are aberrations of the Reality of Islam.

The nation state is a recent phenomenon for Muslims. It is a residual consequence of western imperial intrusions into the nation of Islam and the overthrow of the caliphate during the Turkish revolution (1924). In spite of the blessings of independence, there is deep disquiet among many Muslims because the nation state represents a fractured Umma. Dr. Kharafa pointed out that for the Muslim any national allegiance which supersedes loyalty and commitment to the total community of faith is wrong. The Shiite theologian, Dr. Ali Shariati, refers to nationalistic division in the Umma as shirk, or idolatry. Tauhid is harmony; it is the participation in fraternal commitment to one another; it is participation in the "Dar al-Salaam" (Region of Peace) which is not fractured by nationalism.

Biblical faith also teaches that national loyalties dare not supersede loyalty to the Kingdom of God: when the two conflict, the follower of Jesus has only one option, that is the Jesus way. Justice, peace, righteousness, the cause of the dispossessed and poor, the urgent invitation to participate in a redeemed and joyous relationship with God and the believing community are aspects of the kaleidoscope of Kingdom living. Jesus dramatically proclaimed the transnational nature of the kingdom of God by calling his disciples to seek the Kingdom rather than those things which the nations seek. (Luke 12:30) And on the night of his arrest he said, "My Kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight..." (John 18:36)

The Islamic plea to take tauhid seriously should rekindle within Christians a sincere commitment to live and give witness to the fact that God's intention is "to bring all things in Heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." (Ephesians 1:10) The Church in mission is called by God to be an authentic sign that God's intention for the cosmos has already broken into history.

#### An Invitation from the Church to the Umma

Although both the Christians and Muslims should ideally perceive of the Kingdom of God as tauhid, there is a significant divergence in their respective perceptions of the nature of mission, community, and the Kingdom of God. For the sake of simplicity let me suggest that this divergence is revealed in the Hijra versus the Cross.

The Hijra is the flight from suffering in Mecca to the triumph of Medina. While Muhammad was still in Mecca, the Medinans invited him to become statesman of their city. The Hijra is his acceptance of this invitation. In Mecca, Muhammad was a persecuted, lonely prophet, but in Medina he became both prophet and statesman. In Mecca the Umma was incomplete: it possessed no symbols of power. In Medina all the mechanisms of political, economic, cultural, and religious power were brought under the rule of God through the statesmanship of the prophet. In Mecca the prophet was victimized by his enemies, but in Medina he was triumphant over his enemies; military victory over the enemies of the Muslims became a sign of the favor of the Lord upon the Umma.

The Hijra represents the great theological divide between Islam and Christianity. It is a theological movement in the opposite direction from that chosen by Jesus of Nazareth six centuries earlier. The Hijra is the affirmation that the will of God is invulnerable to the devices of evil men. It is a profound denial of the way of the Cross in God's dealings with man. Jesus, similarly to Muhammad, was also offered the handles of political and economic power by the Galilean Zealots. They also desired to make him captain of their incipient Umma, a community dedicated to the establishment of freedom and the rule of God through political power. But Jesus explicitly and deliberately rejected the statesmanship road to establishing the rule of God. On the contrary, he thereafter "set His face" to go to Jerusalem, where he met the Cross. he chose to lay down his life in an act of total vulnerability, rather than save his life through political or military means. The Cross is the ultimate sign of God's total redemptive vulnerability. God establishes His rule through redemptive love.

The Cross versus the Hijra. This is the fundamental theological impasse between Islam and Christianity. The impasse is so profound, that Islam is tempted, and frequently explicitly yields to the temptation, of denying the crucifixion of Christ. The denial of the crucifixion is not based on historical criteria, but rather on theological necessity. Jesus is the Messiah, Islam affirms. If he is the Messiah, then he certainly could not be crucified by evil men. With agony etched across his face, a dear Muslim friend recently said, "I just can't accept that Jesus died on the Cross. He is too good a man for that. It seems to me that the Cross suggests weakness, vulnerability by God. I cannot, I just cannot believe that God would permit the Messiah to suffer in that way."

The Hijra versus the Cross are fundamental theological divergencies which explicitly and implicitly inform the manner in which the Muslim Umma and the Christian Church perceive of themselves and their respective mission in the world. A few examples will suffice. The Umma suffers from incompleteness until it possesses the mechanisms of political power. The Church, although it may try to influence political processes, usually feels uncomfortable actually possessing political structures. The Umma attempts to reform society through the application of Islamic law, the Sharia. The Church attempts to transform society from within by being a leaven and a light to the society. The Umma considers righteous suffering to be abnormal, a situation which needs to be rectified. The Church perceives of suffering love as being fundamentally central to the manner in which God redeems the nations. The Church is truest to its calling when it gives of itself in suffering love.

We must repent of the temptation to become "Islamized Christians". The two communities are established on different theological foundations, the Hijra versus the Cross. And the respective approaches to a wide variety of human problems and issues are informed by these fundamentally different starting off points: human rights, religion

and state, ministries to the poor and dispossessed, human and economic development, secularization, religious propagation, conversion, organization of society, attitudes towards enemies of the community, progress and change, approaches to mission, and even marriage and family.

#### A Bridge

Nevertheless, buried deep within the mind of Islam there is a sign of possible implicit theological commonality with the Christian Church. It is the sign of sacrifice. The sign is developed in the tradition: it is not developed in the Qur'an. Muslims believe that God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, but that before the actual slaying of the lad, God intervened and provided a ram for a substitutionary sacrifice. (In Islamic tradition the lad was Ishmael, but in the Bible the lad was Isaac. Yet sacrifice is present in both accounts.) Both Islam and Christianity agree that a son of Abraham was saved by the sacrifice of a ram. In fact, Islam traces the embryonic origin of its distinctive peoplehood to this event, for the traditions add that, not only was Ishmael saved by the sacrifice of the ram, but Abraham and Ishmael cleansed the sacred Ka'ba in Mecca and established the true worship of Allah there.

Every year Muslims celebrate this salvation event in the feast of Id al-Kabir on the tenth of Dhu'l-Hijjah. This is the pilgrimage when hundreds of thousands of Muslims from nations everywhere come to Mecca to celebrate their common peoplehood under the Law of God. At the climax of the pilgrimage millions of Muslim families around the world slay an animal and feast together, celebrating the salvation of the son of Abraham from death through the salvation of a ram. The slaying of the animal is a celebration of a son saved from death and the beginnings of the formation of Islamic peoplehood, long before the Hijra, at the time of Abraham himself.

The sign of sacrifice is never developed in Islam. The theological meaning, as Christians perceive it, lies dormant. The sign is a mystery, a mystery which the Gospel could tremendously enrich. The Christian question, the theological question, the Gospel invitation to Islam, is to consider whether in that ram which was sacrificed in place of the son of Abraham, there is not a sign of the deep mystery of God's redemptive sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Jesus the Christ, who gave himself on the Cross for the salvation of the world, the creation of a new redeemed community: it is love which is also expressed in ministry and witness by the Church in mission, the suffering body of Christ ministering in His name.

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## THE CHRISTIAN, FASTING AND RAMADAN

by Ken Stickney (I)  
and Brian Lawrence (II)

[With Ramadan approaching, we are pleased to reprint the following reflections with permission from "Mindanao Update." Part I (MU Sept. '86) is based on a Bible Study the author led for his team members just prior to their first experience of living in a Muslim community during Ramadan. Part II is extracted from a reply that appeared in a subsequent issue (MU March '87). The authors, who minister in the Philippines, would welcome replys.]

### I - What can we say about fasting?

First let's look at what fasting should NOT be, in Matthew 6:16-18. All of us can find examples of the hypocrites of verse 16. We see flagrant misuse by our neighbors of their spiritual exercise, sometimes just to flaunt it and point out how much better their religion is.

And then in Luke 18:10 & 12, we have the boasting man. Have we encountered such people among our friends who follow the practice of fasting?

Next, let us look at whether fasting applies to us today. In Mark 2:18-20 we have a statement by Jesus that we interpret to mean that when He, Jesus, is no longer in the world there will be times of fasting for his followers. And a second example is of the elders of the Church in Antioch (Acts 13:1-3) fasting and praying at the time Barnabas and Paul were called and commissioned. Paul also wrote of his many experiences during his life of service in II Corinthians 6:3-10, and one of them is fasting...voluntary hunger. It is interesting to note Paul's stated reason in verse 3, "We put no stumbling block in anyone's path". Isn't this our very reason for cultural adaptation as well?

Now that we can say that fasting does apply for us today, and that it may be a way to remove discredit from our ministry, I'm still bothered. I hear too much "fasting is for our health" from both Christians and non-Christians. In the States it is recommended that one drink water while fasting to help purify the body of waste products. What does purifying waste products from ourselves have to do with fasting as a spiritual exercise? There is no mention of drinking water during fasting in the Bible, and where water is mentioned it is to say they did not drink (see Esther 4:16).

Coupled with this thought of healthful fasting, I'm extremely both-

ered by Zechariah 7:5. Here God is asking his people who have been fasting at regular times, "Was it really for me that you fasted?" In thinking about this in relation to my response to Ramadan, I was taken up short. If I fast will it really be for God?

So what does God want our fasting to be like? First he wants it to be for Him, and not flaunted in front of others. And then there are some broader applications listed in Isaiah 58:6-7 and Zechariah 7:9-10.

Loose chains of injustice, remove peoples' burdens, free oppressed people, share our food with hungry, provide shelter and clothing to needy, not to turn away from our family....

Administer true justice, show mercy and compassion to one another, do not oppress widows, orphans, strangers, or poor, do not think evil of each other.

These are quite heavy texts which are really to be normal activities for us as followers of Jesus. If these are abnormal actions for us we have bigger problems. During fasting it is a good time to stop and think through our daily walk and see if we really believe that we are living good news. Also, while fasting we need to make sure that we don't burden down others and inconvenience them, which is so easy to do if we aren't feeling good.

Before we go on, let's continue reading in Isaiah 58 to verses 8 & 9. Isn't this just what we want to happen in and around us? We will have light (please interpret this as God shows you). There will be healing in our hurting places. People around us will know that we are righteous people and that will be our reputation. And God's glory will protect us. Also, our cries of help will be heard and answered and we will know that God is here with us. This does sound terribly "charismatic" but how we need the continuing touch of God!

Now we need to do something practical with all this information. I want to challenge us with Daniel's action seen in the book of Daniel chapter 9. In verse 2 it says that he understood the promise God made to Jeremiah, and then he turned to God in prayer and petition, in fasting and in sackcloth and ashes. Just what promises has God made to us through His Word about our present situations? What about the results of His Word going out, the people of every group in heaven, our own needs for the Spirit filling and enriching us, team unity, housing, safety, guidance...? We have many promises which we too can make the topic of our fasting.

In verses 5 and 6 we see Daniel make corporate and historic confession. Daniel was a righteous man, but he put himself in the problems of God's people. Can't we do the same for our history, for our larger group? Are we really one body with each other, with the Church in the city and country in which we minister, as well as with the church world-wide, which on the whole hasn't been a very good witness in history or even now.

Finally, Daniel turns everything over to God, and in verses 17-19, calls out for God to hear him, to see His people's needy, and in fact impossible, situation, and to act for His glory and honor.

O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake. O my God do not delay because...your people bear your Name.

When I was preparing this study I was convicted of many things I was letting slide. Spiritual conferences were approaching for me to attend and I was not praying about them or even about preparing myself. How much I am lacking in Daniel's dependence on God!

So, what is our response to Ramadan? I'm tired of fasting having been robbed from the Church, as well as discarded by us. We need to make fasting a part of our worship and service. but let us not be hypocrites. It is so easy for us to put on an act only for others. So IF, and I mean IF, we choose to fast during Ramadhan, let's do it because we are needy and we want to see God act for His glory. Let's do it only for God.

II - Assuming that we will fast, it does not necessarily follow that that fasting will take the form of the Muslim Fast of Ramadan. Nowhere does Scripture suggest that we are to fast from sunup to sun-down for one month. Although a Christian may choose to do this because of his associations with Muslims while living in a Muslim community, it is clearly not obligatory on us. We are free to choose the times of our fasting or not fasting. ...

One possible form of fasting was suggested to me in the book, Too Hard For God? by Charles Marsh. He mentions that an Algerian Muslim woman, newly converted to Christ, wanted to fast but did not want to observe the Fast of Ramadan. Continuing the Ramadan Fast, to Algerians, had the connotation that one was really still a Muslim and tied to the system of works righteousness. She decided to fast one day a week. She first prepared food for her family. Then she spent the day praying for her friends and neighbors. God brought neighbors to her home during the day and she prayed for each one after they left.

Following her idea, I began last Ramadan to fast one day a month. spending extended time, on these days, in prayer and reflections. I am still learning. One thing I learned was that if I continued a normal day's activity of running around town while fasting, I would become irritable, suffer severe headaches, and have difficulty praying. My wife began to dread when I would say, "I'm going to fast tomorrow." I had made the mistake spoken against in Isaiah 58:3b-4.

Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.

I have learned that by avoiding errands and duties outside the house on my days of fasting, I am much better able to spend extra time in prayer, and avoid becoming irritable. It is not too hard to stay at home one day a month for fasting. ...

I found that my decision led to many opportunities to witness to my Muslim friends. I was asked multiple times each day of Ramadan, "Are you fasting?" When I had the opportunity, I responded something like, "Fasting for followers of Jesus is different than for Muslims. For us fasting is not obligatory. We fast on any day or month, but we don't let others know when we are fasting. We don't have to fast so that God will forgive our sins. Our sins are already forgiven through faith in Isa Masih and we know for sure that we will go to heaven when we die. We fast to pray and worship God." This sometimes led to profitable questions and discussions. It also served to remove any stumbling block in their minds that our faith is inferior because we don't fast.

Is fasting worth it? Certainly it is worthwhile to spend extra time with our Lord. I am still learning about fasting. I share my experience, not because I expect it to be normative for others, but to encourage further reflection and action on the subject.

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#### THE RABITA -- FIFTEEN YEARS OLD IN 1987

"Rabita" is an Arabic word meaning "tie" or "link," that which joins together. The "Rabita" we are speaking of represents the "bond of fellowship" which ties together believers in Christ. It is the name taken by Christians converted out of Islam, scattered over Western Europe, who have joined together to form a support network for Christians of Muslim background. Most are North Africans but all believers of Muslim background are welcomed, whatever their nationality. Arabic and French are the principal languages of communication but other languages are also used as needed.

The Rabita was founded in response to a need. For years, North African Christians have been living in Europe and their numbers are growing. These include immigrant workers, university and Bible school students, and a few in exile for their faith. Some are serving the Lord full-time. Many of these have been spiritually isolated, especially the recent arrivals, and many have had difficulty integrating into local churches. Because of isolation from Christians of like cultural background and separation from family, many of these suffer severe loneliness.

To meet this need, a young Moroccan Christian conceived the idea of periodically bringing these Christians together for fellowship. A retreat was organized for the summer of 1972 at Aix-en-Provence in

southern France. This was the first of the annual reunions.

The basic goals of the Rabita in reference to Christians of Muslim background are: 1) To introduce them to other such Christians and promote fellowship with one another; 2) To promote their spiritual growth through discipling, counselling, teaching and prayer; 3) To train them in outreach, counselling and church ministries; 4) To encourage them to minister to their own people; 5) To provide social and material help to those in need; 6) To mobilize and strengthen Christians, churches and fellowships in North Africa; 7) To challenge European Christians and churches to minister to North Africans. Rabita members are encouraged to integrate into local Christian communities.

#### Rabita Activities

The principal activity of the Rabita is the annual reunion held near the end of August, the traditional vacation month in Europe. Following that first meeting in Aix, they were held at the European Bible Institute, just outside Paris, until 1976, and since then at a conference center in Viviers (Ardeche) in south central France. For years, the reunion was held only on week-ends, but in 1986 it ran an entire week, with people attending a part or all of the period as their work permitted. Participants come from every part of Europe--France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Belgium, Sweden, Finland and England--as well as from North Africa. Each year the number of those who attend grows. In 1986, a total of 150, including children, were in attendance, with a maximum of 126 present at any one time.

Occasional get-togethers, inspired by the annual reunions, have also been organized on the regional or local level in such places as Marseille, Lyon, Grenoble, Bordeaux in France. and in Brussels, Belgium. Not everyone is able to attend the annual reunion for one reason or another so the regional meetings help to meet their needs.

Originally, the annual reunions were planned with the needs of the North African Christians living in Europe in mind, but increasingly Christians are coming from North Africa itself. For many of these, it is the only time during the year when they can receive spiritual food--some are only permitted to leave their country once every two years. For these reasons, they often come a week or two early or stay a week or two longer, and of course need hospitality. There is a real solidarity between the North African Christians in Europe and those living in North Africa.

The Rabita has proved to be a great blessing to many. The experience of fellowship and oneness with others of Islamic background, of different nationalities and languages, is a demonstration of the power of the Lord. Times of prayer and Bible study together, and the sharing of testimonies also bring spiritual enrichment. Then there are times of relaxation when friendships are formed. Many maintain these friendships during the year by correspondence. One such friendship resulted in a Christian marriage! Children have also been

dedicated to the Lord. Some have been challenged by, and reawakened to, the spiritual needs in their home countries. Financial aid has been given to a number of people in need--Bible school students, the family of a Christian imprisoned 6 months for his faith, a Christian who lost his home and business by fire, and another who was a refugee for his faith and without a place to live or a job.

#### Membership and Leadership

The Rabita is not a church but a fellowship. Although any Christian who desires to witness among Muslims may attend meetings, membership is reserved for those from a Muslim background. Most members are North African. About 200 names, both families and individuals, are on the mailing list. The Rabita Committee has six members, all North Africans. Among these there are some gifted Bible teachers who sincerely desire that their people be grounded in the Word of God.

For many years Shaf Shafir, founder and president of the Rabita, had difficulty finding stable Christians of Muslim cultural background who were able and willing to assume leadership responsibilities. He had to go to colleagues and Christian friends, none of whom were of Muslim background, to find someone willing to serve on the committee. He writes that the year 1985 was a turning point. "I felt I was carrying the burden alone. At that point, I prayed that God would solve our problems and give us a new vision and more supporters, both moral and financial. I also prayed that the Lord would dissolve the present committee and establish another one without hurting anyone's feelings. Otherwise, if He saw fit, that that year would be the last Rabita conference. I would just have to accept it."

It was not that there were no capable leaders. He speaks of three North Africans in particular who he had approached several times about serving on the committee, but who had always declined. At the beginning of the '85 reunion, however, these three approached him saying they were now willing to help. He writes: "I could hardly wait for them to finish because it had taken 14 years for other North Africans to see the need in the same way I had seen it. During the course of that conference, the old committee members resigned, on their own, and the new committee took up the burden. They are very sincere, hard-working, and willing to sacrifice a lot for the sake of the Lord. Each of them is already involved in an established Christian ministry."

#### Challenges and Solutions

One of the biggest challenges the Rabita Committee faces every year turns on finances; the problem is also rooted in the social situation and in cultural mores as well. Some who attend the annual reunions are well able to pay their way. Often, however, those who could benefit the most are the least able to pay, for various reasons, and request financial help. Bible School students, for example, generally need help, while those coming out of North Africa are severely restricted in the amount of money they can take out.

It has often been an agonizing struggle trying to meet these needs. As Shafir expresses it: "You see, in our culture, you do not invite people and then ask them to pay when they arrive. This is a rather normal occidental procedure but in North Africa it is not so. Hospitality plays a large part in their lives and in fact it is their way of life. I have sometimes tried to impose the western method but it can certainly create some uncomfortable situations. For instance, trying to encourage those who can to contribute as much as possible, while at the same time encouraging those who cannot afford their stay to not worry about it. Those who cannot pay are embarrassed or do not show up..." The situation is complicated by the fact that some other organizations, which are doctrinally inclusive and do not work among Muslims, are competing with the Rabita by inviting these people to their conferences; they even offer to pay their way! This is tempting, of course, but those who have gone have often confessed later that they regretted going as the meetings were not helpful in their situation.

Finally, after the 1985 reunion, the new committee decided that a change was necessary. They approached a number of Christian organizations, asking financial aid for the annual reunion. A number of organizations responded enthusiastically and generously, while some groups did not contribute except through individual members. The committee acknowledged feeling rather disappointed at the response of some missions to which they were the closest. They felt that, despite missionary talk about a need for national leadership, the response reveals a reluctance to recognize and support those who do exercise leadership. There may be a problem of nationals mistrusting nationals, but national leaders are asking, "Do the missionaries trust us first?" In any case, they are thanking God that in 1986 for the first time they were able to hold the reunion on a free-will offering basis. After fifteen years, the Rabita is still alive and growing; it continues to meet a real need in the North African Christian community, and shows promise of more good things to come.

For more information or to make a contribution, write:  
The Rabita, c/o E.R.B. 249 Av de Montolivet, 13012 Marseille, FRANCE

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#### BOOK REVIEW

Lyman E. Reed. Preparing Missionaries for Intercultural Communication: A Bicultural Approach. William Carey Library (1705 N. Sierra Bonita Ave., Pasadena, Ca 91104), 1985. \$6.95.  
Reviewer: E.A.M.

The author, who has served as a missionary in Thailand and is presently a professor of mission, is concerned that missionaries be adequately prepared for the task so as to avoid unnecessary drop-outs. It is the writer's conviction that biblical and theological

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training are essential, but that cultural anthropology and a knowledge of cross-cultural communication are also needed. The opening chapter explains the reasons for this need. The book goes on to cover various needs and their implication for the missionary task.

Chapter 2, on "The Need for the Missionary to Understand the World," develops an understanding of the terms culture, cultural patterns, variance, and such terms as ethnocentrism. These issues are related to effective intercultural communication and to avoiding misunderstandings.

The next issue is "The Need to Understand the Social Structures" (ch. 3). As in the previous section, the terms and meaning of social structures are explained first, followed by a treatment of their missiological implications. The status and role of the various people in the social structure may guide you in planning your evangelistic strategy or give insight into their resistance or receptivity to the gospel.

Chapter 4, on "The Need for Adequate Language Learning," views language as an integral part of learning the culture and of bonding with the people. This is followed by chapters on cultural shock and ways of coping with it (ch 5) and on understanding the worldview of other peoples (ch 6).

I found chapter 7, on "The Need to Understand the Dynamics of Cultural Change," a helpful presentation of the process of conversion. The missionary's role involves being an agent of change. It is therefore necessary to consider the significance of conversion and its implications in a cross-cultural context. There is a helpful discussion of conversion as a process in relation to the Engel Scale (see What's Gone Wrong With the Harvest? by James Engel & H. Wilbert Norton, Zondervan, 1975) This chapter can be read profitably by itself if you have not found time to read the whole book.

There is one chapter with practical suggestions on becoming bicultural and gaining a cross-cultural exposure. This is followed by a chapter on the Biblical and theological dimensions of cross-cultural ministry (ch 9) and a final chapter of conclusions (ch 10).

This book is a valuable contribution to a part of missionary preparation that is sometimes neglected: it can help workers to be more sensitive to the needs of others, better communicators, less ethnocentric and more appreciative of national believers.

Pouch KeyCode = MIDER9996

Miss Angela PURSEY  
subscr. good thru: 90

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