

## FOUR RESPONSES TO CONN'S ARTICLE

I - Response of A. W. (North Africa).

The author is quite right in drawing our attention to the "urban" factor in the Arab World. Unfortunately his information in most cases is more than fifteen years out of date. The trend noted is correct, but the numbers cited are too old to arrest attention, eg. Cairo is a megacity today of 12-14 million, Casablanca has 4 million and Algiers at least 3 million people. I agree that the urban centres are the Islamic strongholds where religious leaders and educated middle class congregate. The cities, however, are also the centres of social and political foment.

Reaching the urban dwellers with the Gospel has no "one best way". Making the Scriptures available is obvious. Providing genuine friendship is another. I believe what needs to be done is a combination of "living Christianity that is visible", eg. obvious piety, and reaching in depth into lives and families of decision makers. We must witness to Muslims at our social level. Nationals certainly would be better situated to carry this witness on than foreigners.

Let us not forget that Islamic cultural monopoly is very strong. Some of Conn's comments or questions appear irrelevant to life in the Arab World. Certainly Christians must be present in the city. If possible we must discover some felt need and meet it. At the same time never forget that the state, police and religious systems are there to stamp out any emergence of growing "cross-cultural" Christianity. They will seek to restrict you to some dismal corner where you cannot harm the status quo.

The real issue lies, I believe, at the level of preparation for power encounter and a God-given strategy to achieve it. The other key lies in in-depth discipling of believers. Mildly held convictions will have but minimal impact.

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II - Response of D. A. (Middle East).

I would agree that there is a clinging to their rural locality roots by most urban Arabs. It is the place of origin and their family status there that give them a sense

of identity and worth in the more anonymous society of the cities. But in Middle Eastern cities at the eastern end of the Mediterranean there does seem to be a greater breaking down of the rural life-style, especially among the younger people. Many migrants to the cities do pick up what are considered to be the "sophisticated" urban ways. This is probably not so noticeable among the very poor, but certainly is the case among those who further their education.

1. Therefore, a very definite point of contact in urban evangelism is this sense of change and rootlessness that does characterize many urban young people. They need security and direction and this is a good starting point. I certainly agree that we are in danger of making the mistake of not developing new approaches for the new urban realities. Evangelism in the Middle East is sadly lacking in Media presentations, drama, video and literature in Arabic that speak to the problems of coping with life in the pressures of urban life.

2. The signs of alienation may not be as evident in Muslim cities because of the "family-centered" unit of society but there is alienation in thought and attitudes often with a resultant resentment of restrictions and the pressure of submitting to "family". In the area of counselling and helping young people adjust and deal with the pressures of "freedom" there is much scope for wise Christian witness. The expatriate's role in all these matters should be to work with and through a national church (where it is found) to enable it to be seen as a centre of social and spiritual concern and stability. In some large cities local churches are conducting clinics and social welfare schemes to help where poverty and overcrowding are creating particular problems.

The matter of affluence is one which is not being addressed in any determined way as far as I am aware and the whole question of "materialism" in the Islamic society is one which calls for a careful examination and literature to combat it and point to the true spiritual kingdom.

3 & 4. I am not convinced that Muslims (perhaps as against the supposed preference of Islam) find urban dwelling more in keeping with their culture than rural life. Certainly they are gregarious, family and clan orientated, but many do not like the pressures of big cities or the "corrupting"

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influences of the West that are found there. The strength of Islamic resistance to the Gospel in large cities has much to do with fear of the community-orientated society. But this can also be offset by the sense of being "alone in a crowd" which grips many Muslim people. Long term, consistent loving friendship is an effective key and here again, where a national church exists, we need to work and pray that this love and neighbourliness will be released through its members. Loneliness is a very real thing in any city for people of any religion and perhaps as new families move into urban areas they are more open to love -- but it must be long-term caring love that gives the right later on to share the source of that love, Jesus Christ.

5. While the Christian presence in the Middle East is relatively so small and while the response of the church world-wide to the opportunities in the Muslim heart-lands is still slow we must:

- a. pray the Lord of the harvest to thrust out labourers
- b. pray for spiritual awakening in the national churches
- c. concentrate on centres of population where national expatriate Christians can work together to reach out in loving service and proclamation.

Until the church of the area and the church world-wide rises to the present opportunities in the Muslim world and catches the vision and challenge of making disciples throughout the Middle East and North Africa the great "potential for evangelistic fruit in the Middle East" will remain simply that.

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### III - Response of C. C. (England and the Middle East).

1. The statistics (pages 18 - 20) need to be brought up to date.
2. I would suggest that there needs to be some definition of the area being considered, and some recognition of the differences between different countries in the region. The opening paragraph speaks about "Middle Eastern Cities", and reference is made elsewhere to Cairo, Amman and Isfahan.

The analysis of the failure of the church in North Africa, however, hardly applies to Egypt, and applies mainly to the countries we now know as Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. I sense that missions are beginning to realize that they cannot think about Muslim Evangelism in Egypt in the same terms in which they have thought of it in North Africa.

3. "Will we find it more difficult to evangelize cities in the Middle East?". In documents of this kind there is always the danger that we think and speak as if evangelism in the Middle East depends on us (i.e. on western missionaries). Seen from the viewpoint of the 12 million Christians all over the Middle East, some kinds of strategy papers sound as if they have been written in a missiological ivory tower in the West. I am all for hard thinking about mission strategies! But, I fear that our plans may have little content until and unless the indigenous Christians of these countries -- many of whom live in the teeming cities of the Middle East -- are drawn into the discussion.

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IV - Response of W. E. (North Africa):

I agree with Dr. Conn in most aspects of his analysis of the present situation in North Africa. There is certainly one strong "primate city" in each one of the countries. I question, however, his statement number two under "Comparisons and Characteristics", i.e., that most cities other than the one primate city are small by Western standards. In Morocco, I am sure that there are at least half a dozen cities having more than 100,000 people. And three of these have over 500,000. They would not seem small according to Western standards. His statements concerning migration, concerning grouping according to origin or occupation, and concerning the maintenance of world ties are very much on target.

I would like to make several comments on his questions, and suggestions concerning application of this analysis in regard to evangelism in the Middle East today. First, I disagree with the quotation from Dr. Ray Bakke suggesting that some of the reasons for the failure of the church in North Africa were that "they refused to develop new approaches for the new urban realities" and that "the

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church developed a desert, escapist, monastic life for their church rather than an urban lifestyle and theology".

In an important study of the problem of the disappearance of church in North Africa, L. R. Holme states that:

The churches of North Africa...fell because they were the churches of a party and not of a people; they appealed to the civilized Romans alone and not to the Barbarian Moors. Circumstances forced them to assume a hostile and uncompromising attitude towards the form of Christianity adopted by the Moors, and their life was bound up with that of the Roman domination in the province." (Holme 1898:253)

The "Moors" in this quote refer obviously to the Berber tribes of North Africa. Those tribes at that period, as today, were primarily mountainous rural people, not concentrated in urban centers. The urban centers of that period were primarily Roman cities, the cities in fact where the Christian Church flourished. The Church certainly failed in developing new approaches to effectively reach and retain the loyalty of the Berber people. But this failure was not a failure to develop new urban strategies.

I agree with his intimation in point two in this section that there is a need for greater research to find the felt needs in urban centers in the Arab-Muslim world of today to which the Gospel may respond. I would not agree, however, that the problems of anonymity and alienation are not among those felt needs. It is true, to some degree, that the maintenance of strong ties with rural roots and, in most cases, some degree of integration into a homogeneous group in the city may minimize the effect of anonymity and alienation. My experience is, however, that frustration and dissatisfaction with traditional Muslim forms and restrictions causes a high degree of alienation in many of the younger generation North Africans.

Finally, I would like to comment on his question of what kind of city offers the greatest potential for evangelistic fruit in the Middle East. It appears to me that this would largely depend on the level of resistance to, or acceptance of, the Gospel. High resistance will mean more success in the megacities where the convert can more easily escape his immediate family and homogeneous surroundings and be lost in the megalopolis crowd. A more highly receptive attitude

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to the Gospel would mean greater success in smaller cities and towns where there is a much greater likelihood of a people's movement beginning.

As an appendix, I would add that one of the greatest obstacles to effective evangelism in North Africa today, whether in the megacities or the smaller cities and towns, is effective penetration of the social and cultural barriers by Western evangelists. Most of the megacities will have their modern area where Westerners can circulate relatively inconspicuously. Outside of those areas of the larger cities, however, expatriates are very noticeable. It is difficult for them to establish relationships conducive to sharing the Gospel without becoming so high-profile that action is taken by Muslim authorities to silence the witness.

As long as that climate of opposition remains, I find it more fruitful to bring an interested seeker outside his immediate family and home surroundings to a part of the city where he is not known, or to a neighboring town or city if he is from a relatively small place. This permits him to get a grounding in the Gospel without his contact with the expatriate arousing the kind of opposition which would force him to break off the contact.

#### References Cited

- Holme, L. R.  
1898 The Extinction of the Christian Churches in North Africa. Reprint Ed, NY: Burt Franklin, 1969

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#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

by the Editor

I shall attempt to sum up and tie together this exchange of views by some concluding remarks and observations.

There is no doubt but that the Arab world countries are among the most urbanized in the world. Even though the statistics and some of the information in the lead article may need updating, the trends noted are there and the

issues are basically the same. Middle Eastern cities are bigger than ever. No longer can the Middle Eastern city be considered small in comparison to the West. The erosion of ties with rural origins is becoming a factor today, and rootlessness and social alienation are seen especially among the young, the second generation of migrants to the city.

One question that bears further comment concerns the supposed preference of Islam for urban society. A recent book by sociologist Ernest Gellner, which I have started to read, may help us here. Gellner distinguishes two social traditions in Islam (Gellner 1981:35ff). The one, which he calls the central tradition, does indeed have a special affinity for urban society. This is the tradition of orthodox Islam which is rooted in the Law, the Shariah, and the scholarly class who apply it.

Alongside the central tradition however there is another tradition which, while it does not seem to be exclusively rural (esp. today with the growth of urbanization), has nevertheless had strong rural ties. This tradition has a different approach to social organization (called "segmentary" by sociologists); its roots are in the tribe and the strong, charismatic leader, the marabout or saint. According to Gellner, Islamic society has tended to oscillate between these two traditions. Thus, while the special affinity of Islam for urban society would seem to be confirmed, it is evidently not the whole story. To adequately meet the urban challenge in the Middle East, we will therefore need to take both traditions into account.

One respondent took exception to two of the reasons given for the extinction of the church in North Africa, especially the argument that the church failed to develop new approaches to meet the new urban realities. It strikes me that Gellner's distinction between the two social traditions is relevant to this question. The dominant Catholic church, Latin in culture and implicated in Roman colonialism, was basically urban (the "central tradition"), while Donatism, the preferred church of the non-latinized Berbers who opposed the Roman colonial system, was essentially rural. It is surely more than coincidental that to this day, the Berber areas are the main centers of segmentary society (and of opposition to the "central tradition").

It is clear then that more was involved than a failure to develop new urban approaches. If the above analysis is correct, it boils down to a refusal to break out of the colonial structure and accept other cultural traditions as valid expressions of the church (see Schoen 1979:4-7, 11, 15). All this has important implications for the mission and the church today.

Finally, a word needs to be said about where the existing Christian community of the Middle East fits into the picture. Noting that they are not mentioned in the lead article, one respondent warns that unless they are a full partner to the discussion, any plans to reach Middle Eastern cities will have little content. I agree, although I do not see that they have been excluded here. The subject is simply too vast to cover everything in one brief article. For example, there would need to be a discussion of the sensitive issue of the problem created by the linguistic and social barriers which exist between them and the majority community. However the Christians may view them, they are clearly a significant hindrance to cross-cultural evangelism. This subject is important enough for an article by itself.

To conclude, although this exchange of views may not go far enough to satisfy many of us, it is hoped that it will serve as a catalyst to stimulate further reflection and research, and hopefully spark other articles on particular aspects of the subject.

#### References Cited

Gellner, Ernest

1981 Muslim Society. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schoen, Ulrich

1979 "The Death of a Church: Remarks on the Presumed Reasons for the Disappearance of the 'First Church' in North West Africa." Theological Review (N.E.S.T.) 2 (April '79):3-20

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