

Learning from the “New” Maghrebi Christians

ظاهرة المسيحيين الجدد في دول المغرب العربي

By Rev. Bassam M. Madany

During the second half of the 20th century, Evangelicals spent a great deal of time and energy on the subject of contextualization, especially regarding missions to Muslims. At a Caucus on Missions held near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in July 1985, I read a paper on “*Neo-Evangelical Missiology and the Christian Mission to Islam.*” In my critique of this missiology, I said:

“During the last two decades, some severe criticisms have been levelled at the missionary work which has been undertaken since the days of William Carey. We are told by these critics, for example, that missions among Muslims have been a failure. Most of the missionaries of the past, so the critics say, were not good at ‘cross-cultural communication.’ This happened because missionaries failed to ‘contextualize’ the Christian message.” http://www.unashamedofthegospel.org/rethinking_missions_today.cfm

In order to correct the “mistakes” of the past, some Evangelicals proceeded further in their efforts to contextualize the Gospel among Muslims, guided by **Cultural Anthropology** and secular theories of communications. Without going into the history of the various stages of contextualization, by the time the 21st century had arrived, the latest genre of contextualization, as propounded by the “**Insider Movement**,” has made considerable inroads into various missionary organizations, claiming to offer the ideal and successful approach for the evangelization of Muslims.

The majority of the advocates of the “**Insider Movement**” come from Western Evangelical circles that, unlike the pioneer missionaries of the 19th and early 20th centuries, do not seem to be adequately versed in Islamic languages such as Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, Urdu, or Malay. This is not to belittle their scholarship, but to indicate that their work suffers from a lack of acquaintance with what present-day Muslim intellectuals are writing on religious topics in general, and on the emergence of an indigenous Christian Church in the *Maghreb* (Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco.)

Thanks to the Internet, it has become possible to study materials on this new phenomenon by consulting Arabic-language reformist websites. If we embark on a serious research in this area, we come across a subject that is being discussed in Maghrebi and European circles, namely the “*Phenomenon of the New Maghrebi Christians.*”

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(*Dhahirat al-Masihyyeen al-Judod fi Dual al-Maghreb al-‘Arabi*)

It would be uncharitable, if we ignore or dismiss the testimonies of our *Maghrebi* brothers and sisters in our discussions of missions to Muslims in the 21st century. After all, they are the ones who have made the journey from Islam to Christianity at a great cost. It is only reasonable to listen to the accounts of their conversion, and the way they have expressed their new life in Christ, by joining or organizing, national congregations of *Masihyyeen* (Christians.)

I would like to share my study of this phenomenon, and learn from the “*New Maghrebi Christians*” how they have arrived at a totally different paradigm of missions to Muslims, than the one offered by the “**Insider Movement.**”

It was around four years ago, that I came across the term “*Masihyyoo al-Maghreb*” (*The Christians of North Africa,*) in the Arab media. That indicated the presence of a considerable number of North African Muslims who have embraced the Christian faith. In March 2007, a conference was convened in Zurich, Switzerland, by “*Copts United,*” under the leadership of an Egyptian Christian engineer named *Adli Yousef Abadir*, and chaired by *Dr. Shaker al-Nabulsi*, a Jordanian Muslim intellectual. The theme of the conference was “*The Defense of Minorities and Women.*” The Arabic online daily *Elaph* reported on the proceedings of the conference.

One of the lectures was entitled “*The Christians of the Maghreb under the Rule of Islamists,*” where it must be noted that the *Maghrebi* converts to Christianity were called, “*Masihyyoo al-Maghreb*” and not “*followers of ‘Issa,*” the way the **Insider Movement** likes to refer to converts from Islam. مسيحيو المغرب في حكم الإسلاميين
Another term referred to them as “*Al-Masihyyoon al-Judod*” i.e. the *New Christians* of the *Arab Maghreb*: ظاهرة المسيحيين الجدد في دول المغرب العربي

Here are translated excerpts from that lecture delivered in 2007, at the Zurich Conference:

“**The New Christians’ phenomenon throughout the Arab Maghreb** has come to the attention of the media. For example, the weekly journal, **Jeune Afrique**, devoted three reports on this subject with respect to Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. In March 2005, the French daily **Le Monde** devoted a complete report about this topic. And **Al-Arabiyya TV** channel telecast two reports on the subject that had been recorded in the **Kabyle** district of Algeria.

“**Jeune Afrique** estimated that the number of people who have embraced Christianity in Tunisia was around 500, belonging to three churches. A report on the website of “*Al-Islam al-Yawm*” prepared by *Lidriess el-Kenbouri*, and dated 23 April 2005, estimated the number of European evangelists in Morocco was around 800, and that quite often, their evangelistic efforts were successful. The report further added that around 1,000 Moroccans had left Islam during 2004. The magazine “*Al-Majalla,*” in its No. 1394 issue, claimed that the number of **New Christians** in Morocco was around 7,000; perhaps the exact number may have been as high as 30,000.

“The report that appeared in the French daily **Le Monde** claimed that during 1992, between 4,000 and 6,000 Algerians embraced Christianity in the Kabyle region of Algeria. By now, their numbers may be in the tens of thousands. However, the authorities are mum about this subject, as an Algerian government official put it; ‘the number of those who embraced Christianity is a **state secret.**’”

“When we enquired from those who had come over to the Christian faith to learn about the factors that led to their conversion, they mentioned several factors, among them was ‘**The violence of the fundamentalist Islamist movements.**’ A Christian evangelist working in Algeria reported: ‘**These terrible events shocked people greatly. It proved that Islam was capable of unleashing all that terror, and those horrific massacres! Even children were not spared during the uprising of the Islamists! Women were raped! Many people**

began to ask: Where is Allah? Some Algerians committed suicide! Others lost their minds; others became atheists, and still others chose the Messiah!”

“Quite often, the ‘**New Christians**’ testified to the fact that **what they discovered in their new faith was love; it formed another factor in their conversion.** These are some of their words: ‘**We found out that in Christianity, God is love.**’ ‘**God loves all people.**’ ‘**What attracted us to Christianity is its teaching that God is love.**”

It is quite evident that the testimonies of these new *Maghrebi* Christians are extremely important. The Christian message came to them through various means, but it struck them as **a word of a loving God in search for His lost sheep.** They embraced the Messiah who died on the cross, and rose again for their justification. Notwithstanding all the difficulties they faced, they clung to the Biblical *Injil* that had brought them peace with God, and the gift of eternal life.

The link to this Arabic-language report is: <http://www.elaph.com/ElaphWeb/ElaphWriter/2007/4/225336.htm>

Almost two years after the Zurich Conference that dealt with the plight of *Maghrebi* Christians should the Islamists succeed in taking over the reigns of government, **مسيحيوالمغرب في حكم الإسلاميين**, I read the following report posted on 22 January, 2009, on the Arabic-language *Aafaq (Horizons) website*. It detailed the news of young Algerians who have converted to Christianity because they had become disaffected with Islam. Here are excerpts from the report datelined Algiers:



This photo of a worship service accompanied the Aafaq report

“Some *Amazigh* websites have disclosed that many Algerian young people have left Islam and adopted Christianity. They confessed that they did so due to the ugliness of the crimes perpetrated by the *Salafist ‘Da’wa and Combat Movement’* against civilians. They were tremendously disappointed and disenchanted with Islam, claiming that it was responsible for nurturing these *Jihadists* who have been terrorizing and murdering innocent people.

“The website noted that the spread of Christianity in Algeria has even reached areas that were entirely under the influence of the *Islamists*, such as in eastern Algeria. Furthermore, the Christian expansion in the country was not due exclusively to missionary organizations, as certain Islamic groups claim. **The reason is to be found in Islam itself.** It has been associated in the minds of the youth with *Irhab*, assassinations, and crimes against innocent people. They remember that many of the crimes were committed during the 1990s, and occurred in distant villages of Algeria when young women were abducted, taken to the

mountains as “captives,” gang-raped, and then killed by having their throats slit. Such horrific scenes took place in Algeria over several years and resulted in the very word “*Islamic*” becoming synonymous with *Irhab!*

“The report added that in Islam a woman is regarded as an enemy that must be fought with all means. She must be punished for the simplest mistake, while men go unpunished when they commit similar misdeeds. Thus, a woman is held responsible for the simplest act, and is liable to be put to death, since she is by nature a “*Shaytana*” i.e. a female Satan. This seriously misguided and misogynist view of women causes young men to worry about their own sisters, and be anxious about their future daughters as well.

“It went on to explain that the *Irhabis* who committed those awful crimes against women held to a view of Islam that took for granted that discrimination between the sexes is normal. They believed in the notion that the bed is the sole reason for a woman’s existence. In northern Algeria alone, 5,000 women were raped. This *Amazigh* source regards these radicals as ‘*Allah’s guards on earth*’ who refuse to act as civilized human beings.”

The website ended its comments on the alienation of Algerian youth by stating “*that as long as Islam is unable to get out of its closed circle, and evolve according to the requirements of a civil society that is open to love, tolerance, and coexistence with others; it will continue to alienate more young people.*”

In the Providence of God it has transpired that the despicable actions of the *Irhabis* in the bloody and dark decade of the 1990s have contributed to more than 20,000 Algerians converting to the Christian faith.

Reporting on the same topic of conversions to Christianity that are taking place in Algeria, on 24 April, 2009, the *Aafaq* website posted an article, with this headline:

Religious Leaders in Algeria Are Demanding the Punishment of the Apostates.

رجال الدين في الجزائر يطالبون بمعاينة المرتدين عن الإسلام

Here is my translation of the news item:

“An Algerian policeman and his daughter have made a public confession that they have embraced Christianity. The policeman’s announcement precipitated a tremendous amount of discussion and argument in Algeria, causing the religious authorities to demand that the police department dismiss him from his position since his actions proved him to be an **Apostate, a Murtad.**

“The policemen declared to the Algerian newspaper *al-Nahar* that his previous life as a Muslim was filled with anxieties and the absence of peace of mind. He added that the radical Islamist movements that had massacred women and children caused him to become fearful of Islam which he held responsible for the bloodshed. His life was caught up in a deep struggle that eventually led him to embrace Christianity, انتهى باعتناقه المسيحية, that according to him, ‘has given me peace of mind.’

“As to the daughter of the policeman, she explained that the reason she embraced Christianity *اعتنقت المسيحية* من جهتها قالت ابنة الشرطي أنها اعتنقت المسيحية was due to her feeling that Islam

treated women as maids and concubines, only to be sexually exploited by men. Muslim men regard women only from a physical point of view. Now, having embraced Christianity, she began to feel as a dignified human being. Her decision was final, and she didn't regret it at all.

“The Algerian religious authority reacted swiftly by declaring that *Irtidad* (Apostasy) is tantamount to becoming a *Kafir* (Unbeliever,) and thus becomes subject to capital punishment unless an apostate repents by returning to Islam. It is estimated that there are around 10,000 Christians, most of whom live in the Kabyle district of *Tizi Ouzou*. Some unofficial sources claim that the number of Christians in Algeria is more than 100,000; they are to be found all over the country, especially in the west of Algeria around *Oran* and *Mostaganem*, most of these converts are young men and women. They claim that the reason that prompted them to embrace Christianity was Islam's responsibility for murder, terror, and rape, as perpetrated by the Islamist groups who, in 1992 started their Jihad against civilians with the hope of getting closer to Allah!”

It is noteworthy that both the policeman and his daughter openly confessed that they had embraced Christianity, using the Arabic word *al-Masihyya* المسيحية and not another Arabic term such as the Qur'anic “*Nasraniyya*.” The word *Masihyya* is used by Arabic-speaking Christians throughout the Middle East. To embrace Christianity and publicly announce it is a courageous act of the “*New Maghrebi Christians!*”

Finally, I would like to refer to an article by a reformist Algerian intellectual that was posted on 7 July, 2009, on the daily online *Al-Awan (Kairos)* website. He unmasked the hypocrisy of the Islamic propaganda machine that seeks to paint a rosy picture of the human rights conditions in the “*Lands Governed by the Sharia*.” He began, with tongue in cheek, to quote a paragraph written in a flowery Arabic style that sang the praises of the superlative tolerance and magnanimity shown to the various religious and ethnic minorities living within *Daru'l Islam*. Then he proceeded to list certain actions taken by Muslim governments that contradicted the empty claims enumerated in the propaganda piece. I must confess that I was fascinated with his sarcasm and wit which comes through especially forcefully in Arabic!

Here are excerpts from the article.

“We are a tolerant people. With us, there is no ‘compulsion in religion.’ We don’t punish apostates, or force them to return to Islam. Buddhists living among us are free to build their temples. As to our Christian brothers and Jewish cousins, they have all the freedom to build their houses of worship without any hindrance. [Among us] you are as free to change religion as you are to change your shirt. There is true freedom in Daru’l Islam. A Copt is a citizen, and not a dhimmi. A Shi’ite enjoys the same privileges as a Sunni in a Sunni majority land; the same thing obtains for a Sunni living in a Shi’ite majority country. The Ahmadis 1 and the Bahais 2 are well-treated. In fact, all religions are properly treated in our Arab-Muslim world. May Allah protect us from the evil designs and calumnies of the West who are very jealous on account of our blessings, the blessings of justice, peace, and Islam.”

“Now, anyone who takes seriously such propaganda, [referring to the words of the paragraph above] is a fool for believing such lies! The meetings that take place, and the funds that are spent to present Islam as a tolerant religion, are nothing but smoke-screens.

“The facts gleaned from the Islamic world don’t reveal an idealistic and tolerant Islam. How can a genuine spirit of citizenship prosper in the Muslim world, where the Sharia mandates not only discrimination against non-Muslims, but their ultimate elimination?

“Any keen observer of the condition of human rights in the Muslim world is able to dismantle meaningless discourse that seeks to present to the world an idealistic Islam. Such an observer cannot but take note of the total lack of individual freedoms and human rights in all those countries where their laws are based on Sharia, and not on human reason.

“It is necessary to dismantle the very structures of Islamist discourse based, as we know, on purely verbal formulations and vapid eloquence. Doing so would reveal the true nature of that miserable and imagined “*glorious Islamic past*,” a past that the Islamists are trying to resurrect, which can only mean that entire Muslim societies will continue to remain underdeveloped!

“Let us observe realistically the present state of affairs in the Arab-Islamic world so that we may not be duped by the empty claims of the Islamists. Where is that vaunted justice when a young Algerian woman is brought to trial, simply because she chose to embrace Christianity in a country with a constitution that guarantees freedom of belief? The Algerian Government claims that there is a widespread evangelization movement taking place in the country. But what exactly is the problem with that? Should the State be responsible for the conscience of its people and their inner convictions? Why do we forbid others to engage in activities which we allow ourselves? What’s the difference between “*da’wa*” and “*tabshir*” (evangelism?) And can there be harmony between the Sharia as the basis of legislations and the principle of religious freedom?

“In the final analysis, it is only when we adopt a secular outlook as the basis of our laws that we can arrive at a just solution to the problem of religious, ethnic, and racial minorities who are at present ‘submerged’ in the sea of an intolerant Muslim majority throughout the Arab world.”

This information gleaned from Arabic-language sources on the phenomenon of the “*New Maghrebi Christians*,” is extremely important. Western Christians are being told by some “missionologists,” that Muslims converting to the Lord Jesus Christ, need not call themselves “*Masihyyeen*,” nor stop their former Islamic practices such as attending the Friday services at the mosque, or fasting during *Ramadan*. This novel “missionary” theory is being offered as a “quick fix” to solve the problem of the paucity of fruits in missions to Muslims.

I risk being regarded as an extremely judgmental person when I describe **the Insider’s missiology as a purely Western construct**, that manifests a radical discontinuity with the missiology of the great missionaries of the past, from *St Francis of Assisi* and *Raymond Lull* in the Middle Ages, down to the days of the pioneers of the 19th and 20th centuries such as *Henry Jessup*, *Cornelius Van Dyck*, *Eli Smith*, *Samuel Zwemer*, and *J. W. Sweetman*. As an Eastern Christian who spent most of my life bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to the

followers of Islam, **I find it ironic that the Insider Movement, while intending to be “culturally sensitive”, becomes in the final analysis a rather imperialistic, even hegemonic effort. Yet, this attempt to sell a new genre of missionary theory is being implicitly rejected by those brave New Maghrebi Christians. Both they and those who report about them in the Arab press, use the term “Masihyyeen,” as a testimony to their solidarity with other Arabic-speaking Christians, and as full members of the “One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church,” in the words of the Nicene Creed.**

It is my fervent hope that we pay more attention to the Biblical directives on missions, at the very time when they are being undermined by the advocates of the **Insider Movement**. We should never forget that notwithstanding the Jewish and Gentile outright rejection of the gospel of the cross, Paul did not hesitate to proclaim it. ***“For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but for us who are being saved, it is the power of God, (dunamis Theou estin.)”*** (I Corinthians 1:18) The **basis** of our salvation is the person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ; and its **instrumental means** is the *kerygma*, i.e., the ***Word of the Cross***, whether it is formally preached by a minister of the Gospel, or given as a *marturia* (testimony) by a Christian.

Paul expanded on this basic missionary doctrine in verse 21: ***“For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know Him, it pleased God, through the foolishness of the preached message (kerygmatos) to save those who believe.”***

Indeed, I cannot hide my joy when I hear news about the rebirth of the Christian Church in North Africa. I praise God for the boldness of these new ***Maghrebi Christians*** who are not ashamed of the Cross of their Savior, but place its symbol in the humble meeting rooms where they worship Him. They show in a concrete manner that they are ***“unashamed of the Injeel,”*** since it is the power of God that they had experienced in their own lives when He enabled them to leave Islam, and join the great company of the ***Masihyyeen*** (Christians). He will also preserve them should the Islamist forces manage to take over the lands of the ***Maghreb***.