

***The Ethics of Da‘wa and Evangelism:  
Respecting the Other and Freedom of Religion***  
*by Dr. Rick Love*

A Talk given at the World Bank during  
“A Christian and Muslim Dialogue on Creation Care”  
Sponsored by the National Association of Evangelicals  
and the Embassy of Morocco in Washington, D.C.  
June 18-20, 2008

***MY FIRST VISIT TO MOROCCO***

I remember the first time I visited Morocco. It was 25 years ago -- 1983. We were in Casablanca in the second floor of a hotel, when horns started honking, people started shouting and crowds began gathering down on the street below. There was a car wreck so there was a huge traffic jam. We waited to see what would happen. But nobody did anything. As Americans, we are problem solvers. So my friend and I walked down to the street to see what we could do. The cars blocking the traffic were very small so we actually picked up the rear end of the car and moved it over. There it was. Problem solved! Or so we thought. Immediately police came out of nowhere and started yelling at us. We were embarrassed. They had not moved the car because they were still analyzing the wreck. Woops! I have spent the last 25 years studying cross-cultural communication ever since that terrible faux pas!

On a more positive note, I was amazed by *Arab hospitality* in my visit to Morocco! Everywhere we went we were warmly welcomed. We spent a few nights with a family in the Medina in Fez during Ramadan. We also spent a few nights in the Atlas

Mountains in a small village. We in America have *much to learn from you*. I do hope that you feel warmly welcomed and honored during your visit with us.

*I believe Muslim-Christian Dialogue is important.* In fact, this is *the third Muslim-Christian dialogue* I have attended in the last few weeks. I attended a dialogue with nine Egyptian Sheiks at Yale; and with Dr. Leith Anderson, President of the NAE (National Association of Evangelicals) and Prof Joseph Cumming Director of the Yale Reconciliation Program, I attended the Doha, Inter-Faith Dialogue in Qatar.

In addition, I have spent the last number of months *working on the fourth dialogue* I will be attending – the upcoming Common Word Dialogue to be hosted at Yale this July! You have probably heard about the publication of *A Common Word Between Us and You* in October 2007, an open letter to Christian leaders and communities from 138 influential Muslim clerics and scholars from around the world. Among the most influential of the many Christian responses to the *Common Word* was a letter drafted in November 2007 by a group of scholars at Yale Divinity School, headed by Miroslav Volf, professor and director of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture and Joseph Cumming, Director of the Yale Reconciliation Program. *The Yale response was endorsed by more than 300 of the most influential Christian leaders from this country and abroad.*

*“Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to ‘A Common Word Between Us and You’”* stressed that the dual commandment to love God and neighbor had the potential to reorient Muslim-Christian relations away from a “clash of civilizations” to a community of mutual enrichment. We expect approximately 75 high

level Muslim leaders, along with 75 high level Christian leaders to attend this historic dialogue July 24-31<sup>st</sup>!

*I believe in dialogue, because dialogue is the pathway to peace.*

*Jesus Christ (Isa Al Masih) teaches us that “God blesses those who work for peace!”* So when we meet to dialogue and work towards peace, God’s blessing, His *baraka*, rests upon us.

Having said that, I believe we need to think beyond dialogue to practical outcomes. I would like us to think about one *long term goal* – one theme that is emerging in some of the dialogues I have attended.

***LONG TERM GOAL: How can Muslims respectfully bear witness to their faith and Christians respectfully bear witness to their faith and yet live in peace?***

This is one of the many challenges we face at *the Yale Reconciliation Program* where I presently serve. In fact, we are seeking to reframe the Muslim-Christian relationship so it is no longer perceived as a “clash of civilizations.” Instead through dialogue we seek *a “harmony of civilizations” that stresses mutual love, graciously bearing witness to one’s faith, and working towards religious freedom.*

*Sheikh (Ayatollah) Fadlallah* (the Hizballah of Lebanon) has made the following proposal:

In the field of Muslim-Christian relations in the present and future, *we must launch a dialogue about [the issue of evangelism and da‘wa]* so as to bring order to this reality. It is impossible to eliminate it, due to its relationship to firm roots in the depth of faith (so that to renounce it would be to renounce faith itself in tracing its movement and spread). But through dialogue we must *seek to reduce*

*its negative effects*, so that it can be a matter of objective dialogue in the intellectual domain in a process of *friendly competition, not of conflict*.

If I were to give my talk a title it would be:

***The Ethics of Da ‘wa and Evangelism:  
Respect for the Other and Freedom of Religion***

*Some of you may be thinking: Rick ... don't bring this up*. Let's just focus on creation. This is too hot a topic. I am speaking as a visionary. I am speaking about the future! I want to plant seeds about this issue in the present that will lead to future peace. I realize this is a hot topic, but I do so for *three reasons*:

1. This topic is *already emerging*. It is a part of public discourse in dialogues I have been attending.
2. I believe that *Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* – strongly affirmed by the National Association of Evangelicals must be upheld: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”
3. *I believe there are wise and noble Muslim leaders and wise and noble Christian leaders who can debate skillfully, listen carefully, and learn humbly ... while working towards peace.*

Here are examples of how the topic of da ‘wa and evangelism are emerging.

***Last March Pope Benedict baptized Magdi Allam***, a prominent convert from Islam, on Easter. This caused quite a stir among Muslims and Christians. ***Prof. Dr. Aref Ali Nayed***, who at that time was the director of the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center in Amman, Jordan, criticized "the Vatican's deliberate and provocative act of baptizing Allam on such a special occasion and in such a spectacular way." "It is sad that the intimate and personal act of a religious conversion is made into a triumphalist tool for scoring points," Nayed said in a written statement.

I don't know the Pope's intentions, but I can certainly understand Aref Nayed's comments, and I tend to agree with him.

Aref was not just concerned about the baptizing of a convert per se, but rather to the choice of this particular man – of all of the countless converts who might have been chosen – to be personally baptized by the Pope. As we both know, ***the world contains many thousands of converts from Christianity to Islam and many thousands of converts from Islam to Christianity***. Magdi Allam was not just any convert, however. He has published many bitter polemics against Islam. He was a high profile critic of Islam.

Thus, According to ***HRH Prof. Dr. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal*** of Jordan: "The issue of the Pope Baptizing Magdi Allam is not an issue of religious liberty: it is an issue of demonizing Muslims."

At the Doha Inter-Faith Conference recently: ***Prof. Dr. Ahmed Tayyeb, President of Al-Azhar University***: "In response to the Pope's baptism of Allam: 1000 Christians a month convert to Islam and attend Al Azhar University but we don't celebrate them." In fact, ***Dr Tayyeb brought up this topic in his opening keynote address*** at Doha. He set

forth his concerns very frankly, pointing out the ways in which he *feels Christians act unethically in their evangelistic methods*. In the very next session Prof Joseph Cumming, Director of the Yale Reconciliation Program, thanked Dr. Tayyeb for his frankness about this important topic and pointed out that genuine love must be expressed through respect for what is sacred to others and also through commitment to religious freedom. According to Cummings, when we do da'wa or evangelism in ways which are *disrespectful* of others or their beliefs, or when we *deny religious freedom* to others, then *we fall short of that love*. He suggested that if we could uphold these two principles – of respect and freedom – then we might find a sound basis for a common ethics of *da'wa*, and evangelism.

Last month I had the privilege of meeting with *nine Egyptian Sheiks and two Syrian Muftis*. In both meetings, we discussed the importance of *da'wa* for Muslims and evangelization for Christians. Both the Egyptians and the Syrians agreed that we must bear witness to our faiths, yet live in peace. One of the Egyptian Sheiks said, *“You must share your faith! But just don't attack Islam!”*<sup>1</sup>

In light of the following statements, at least *two important principles* are emerging regarding ways we can bear witness respectfully:

1. Da'wa and evangelism should focus primarily on a positive presentation of what one believes, not on negative attacks on the other's faith.
2. Converts should not be held up as public “trophy” to humiliate the other faith community.

---

<sup>1</sup>According to a recent Gallup poll the majority of Muslims in the world believe that the West does not respect them. When asked what they admire least about the West, Muslims said, “hatred or degradation of Islam and Muslims.” (Esposito and Mogahed 2007:61).

Ethics of Da 'wa and Evangelism is an important topic for future dialogue and action. *I could envision an ongoing working group* of Muslim and Christian leaders who are trusted by the wider Muslim and Christian communities, and who can move the discussion forward in the direction of a *consensus document* on "The Ethics of Da'wa and Evangelism: Respect for the Other and Freedom of Religion."

I am sure some of you may be stirred by this topic. Others think it impossible to make progress in this area. But I disagree. As I said earlier, *I believe there are wise and noble Muslim leaders and wise and noble Christian leaders who can debate skillfully, listen carefully and learn humbly -- while working towards peace.*

I want to close with a story that describes such men. This story comes from Nigeria, where a Christian pastor named James, and a Muslim Imam named Ashafa, *founded the Interfaith Mediation Centre to bring about reconciliation and peace in Kaduna, Nigeria.*

*Pastor James was born in Kaduna... As a teenager James joined the Christian Association of Nigeria, and at 27 became general secretary of the Youth Wing. When fighting between Christians and Muslims reached Kaduna in 1987, James became the head of a Christian militia. James used Scriptures to justify the violence.*

*At age 32 a fight broke out between Christians and Muslims over control of a market. The Christians were outnumbered, and 20 of them were killed. James passed out and when he woke up he found that his right arm had been sliced off with a machete.*

*Imam Ashafa comes from a long line of Muslim scholars. In 1987 when religious violence hit Kaduna, Ashafa, like James, became a militia leader. He says, "We planted the seed of genocide, and we used the scripture to do that. As a leader you create a scenario where this is the only interpretation. But Ashafa's mentor, a Sufi hermit, tried to warn the young man away from violence.*

*In 1992, Christian militiamen stabbed the hermit to death and threw his body down a well. Ashafa's only mission became revenge: he was going to kill Pastor James. Then, one Friday during a sermon, Ashafa's imam told the story of when the Prophet Muhammad had gone to preach at Ta'if, a town about 70 miles*

*southeast of Mecca. Bleeding after being stoned and cast out of town, Muhammad was visited by an angel who asked if he'd like those who mistreated him to be destroyed. Muhammad said no. 'The imam was talking directly to me,' Ashafa said. During the sermon, he began to cry. Next time he met James, he'd forgiven him entirely. To prove it, he went to visit James's sick mother in the hospital.*

*Slowly the pastor and imam began to work together but James was leery. 'Ashafa carries the psychological mark. I carry the physical and psychological mark,' he said... At a Christian conference in Nigeria... a fellow pastor pulled James aside and said, in almost the same words as the Sufi hermit, 'You can't preach Jesus with hate in your heart.' James said 'That was my real turning point. I came back totally deprogrammed.*

*For more than a decade now, James and Ashafa have traveled to Nigerian cities and to other countries where Christians and Muslims are fighting. They tell their stories of how they manipulated religious texts to get young people into the streets to shed blood. Both still adhere strictly to the scripture; they just read it more deeply and emphasize different verses."*

*Sadly, the imam is frequently accused of being a sellout because he associates with Christians. He identifies himself very much as a fundamentalist and sees himself as one who emulates Muhammad. Although he and Pastor James don't discuss it, he also proselytizes among Christians. 'I want James to die as a Muslim, and he wants me to die as a Christian. My Islam is proselytizing. It's about bringing the whole world to Islam.'*

*Such missionary zeal drives both men, infusing their struggle to rise above their history of conflict . . . Pastor James still believes strongly in absolute and exclusive salvation mandated by the gospel: 'Jesus said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life.' He still challenges Christians to rely on the strict and literal word, and he's still uncompromising on fundamental issues of Christianity.<sup>2</sup>*

Please note: both Pastor James and Imam Ashafa engaged in dialogue and respectful

witness! In a conflict zone, the Muslim carried out da 'wa, while the Christian

evangelized – and yet they remained friends and worked together for peace.

May God raise up many Muslims who are like Imam Ashafa and many Christians who are like Pastor James!

---

<sup>2</sup> This is a summary with some direct quotes from The Atlantic, March 2008, "God's Country," by Eliza Griswold, pages 40-55. The same story is found in "Warriors and Brothers" from Peacemakers in Action (Little 2007).