

Church Planting Among Folk Muslims

More than 3/4 of the Muslim world are Folk Muslims. Church planting among them must be based upon the theology of the kingdom of God that involve power, truth and cultural encounters.

by Richard D. Love

“Mr. Uka, why do you give offerings to the ancestor spirits? Why don’t you just cast them out?” I asked. “Oh no!” he replied, “you don’t cast them out. They are your ancestors. You have to respect them!” (Love 1992:153). Welcome to the world of Folk Islam!

Mr. Uka, a Sundanese Muslim from Indonesia, illustrates the beliefs of people whom missiologists call Folk Muslims. Folk Muslims or Folk Islam will vary from culture to culture and country to country, but the underlying animistic belief system and orientation to life pervades the entire Muslim world.

Whereas Formal Islam advocates a comprehensive, legalistic code of ritual and laws, Folk Islam’s domain is spirits, demons, blessing, cursing, healing and sorcery. The chart on the following page summarizes some of the major differences between the two types of Islam (Love 1992:41).

Although the practices of Folk Islam contradict many aspects of Formal Islam, those who practice Folk Islam rarely see themselves as being syncretistic. They still view themselves as being genuine Muslims. From their perspective there is no conflict between their popular religion and its more orthodox variety.

The result should be a clash... the surprising truth is that there is relatively little dissonance between the two domains. Official and popular expressions of Islam tend to live easily with one another. Indeed, both views may operate in veiled partnership within any one single Muslim... The lack of such obvious dissonance is, perhaps, the main reason why Western investigators, including Christian missionaries, have often failed to recog-

nize the existence of the Folk-Islamic world (Musk 1989:224).

Phil Parshall estimates that “perhaps 70 percent of all Muslims in the world are influenced by a system we could properly term folk Islam” (Parshall 1983:16). Don McCurry believes that possibly 85 percent of the Muslim world is animistic (McCurry 1980). Therefore, if we are serious about reaching over 700 million Folk Muslims, we must develop an approach that addresses their unique concerns.

Because Folk Islam is a blend of animism and Islam, we must deal with both animistic concerns and Islamic beliefs. It is crucial that we understand and deal with the spirit realm issues of animism (see Burnett 1988; Van Rhee- nen 1991 and Steyne 1989 for excellent summaries of animism). However, Folk Muslims demand different strategies than animists, because they see themselves as Muslims. If they are challenged about their faith, they respond like fervent fundamentalists! They zealously confess their creed and defend their faith. Though animistic in practice, Folk Muslims still hold a strong emotional attachment to Islamic beliefs.

In this article I would like to describe a three-dimensional approach to church planting among Folk Muslims that we developed in Indonesia. An effective church planting ministry among Folk Muslims demands power encounter, truth encounter and cultural encounter. Based on the kingdom of God, we confront the powers of darkness through exorcism and healing (power encounter), preach the good news that Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (truth encounter), and express the reality

of the kingdom through culturally relevant rituals (cultural encounter).

Power Encounter

Although once the exclusive domain of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity, the issue of power encounter is now a major concern of the broader evangelical world, *Wrestling With Dark Angels* 1990. Timothy Warner of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; Neil Anderson of Talbot Theological Seminary; Philip Steyne of Columbia Biblical Seminary, and Charles Kraft of Fuller Theological Seminary have all written on the subject (Warner 1991; Anderson 1990; Steyne 1989; Kraft 1989). An entire issue of the *International Journal of Frontier Missions* dealt with this theme as well (Vol. 10, No. 4, Oct. 1993).

Power encounter is also a “hot” subject in Muslim ministry. Arthur Glasser, Bill Musk; Paul Hiebert, J. Dudley Woodberry, Phil Parshall and Vivienne Stacey have all shown the relevance of power encounter for reaching Muslims (Glasser 1979; Musk 1989; Hiebert 1989; Woodberry 1990; Parshall 1983; Stacey 1989). Therefore, we need not repeat the basic principles and the obvious, especially in a short article. However, a few comments and practical suggestions will prove helpful.

Spirit realm issues aren’t always obvious to the Westerner. More than a few missionaries have ministered to a people without any awareness of how important and pervasive spirit realm concerns are to their target people. Many Sundanese appear to be modern urbanites — dressing in blue jeans, eating at Pizza Hut, watching Western movies, and enjoying Western amenities.

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Yet these same people offer blood sacrifices to appease the spirits when they build their modern plazas (Love 1992, I:80). Urbanites can still be animists.

I was talking recently to Mr. Dindin about place spirits. He is a young, educated, married man who would be considered very “modern” or “urban” in his thinking. I pointed to a large tree in our community and asked him if there were any spirits in the tree. He said, “Budiman [the author’s Indonesian name], I believe there are all kinds of spirits. But we are not supposed to focus our attention on them. We should not spend all our time worrying about them.” Then, only a minute after saying this, he told me a story about a tree that couldn’t be cut down because the spirits were too powerful (Love 1992, I:72-73).

One of evangelicalism’s most prominent practical Islamicists, Phil Parshall, confesses:

In some senses, I have learned more in this short time about grassroots Islam than I did in my first eighteen years... Amazingly, one can be surrounded by certain dynamic situations and still be quite unaware of what is happening. This is particularly true if one seeks to understand Islam from a Western perspective—which is what I sought to do during my early years as a missionary (Parshall 1983:13).

It is crucial to understand spirit realm beliefs. It is, first of all, essential for our own protection. Timothy Warner documents numerous instances of physical and spiritual attack on missionaries that coincide with the author’s personal experience (Warner 1991:77-97). Curses and sorcery should not be taken lightly. This is real war!

Secondly, ministry fruitfulness depends on it. It is very hard to be relevant to our target people if we don’t know the issues they struggle with. It is very difficult to bring deliverance if we don’t understand their bondages.

Consequently, we have trained our Sundanese believers to deal with these issues by helping them understand and experience the kingdom of God in their lives (Matt. 12:28; Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20). For “the kingdom of God is a macro-theological model, central to the Scriptures and relevant to the Sundanese. This enables us both to contextualize our message as well as adequately address the spirit realm” (Love 1992, I:185). Musk sums it up well:

Formal Islam	Folk Islam
Cognitive, truth-oriented	Heart-felt emotional
Legalistic	Mystical
Ultimate issues of life, origins, heaven, hell, purpose.	Everyday concerns of health, guidance, success, prosperity.
The Al .Qu’ran and sacred traditions	Supernatural power, spiritual revelation
Institutional	Inspirational
Supplicative	Manipulative

Our look at popular Islam pushes the issue of kingdom-power very much to the forefront... People are sick and in need of healing; by magic or by Christ? People require help in a world of hostile, occult ‘beings’; by alliance with evil spirits, or with the Holy Spirit... For too long, it would seem, in Christian witness among Muslims, there has been no power encounter because there have been no power bearers (Musk 1989:252).

Truth Encounter

Power encounter alone, however, is insufficient. Folk Muslims need truth encounter as well. Like many Folk Muslims, the Sundanese perceive the Gospel of forgiveness through Christ as generally irrelevant. But if you tell them, “Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil,” you have an immediate audience. This “Satanward dimension” of the Gospel is relevant to Folk Muslims because they are preoccupied with the

issues of power and protection.

The “Godward dimension” of Scripture is usually given preeminence in western evangelical theology. Our personal relationship with God is stressed; forgiveness and fellowship are the focus. This emphasis is sound, it is biblical, yet it is incomplete.

There is a Satanward dimension to Scripture as well. Jesus not only came to save us from our sins, but also to destroy the works of the devil.

Through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection we have been saved from the kingdom of darkness. Jesus has defeated Satan and ushered in the kingdom of God on earth.

An objective reading of the New Testament highlights the importance of the Satanward view of salvation. First of all, spirit powers are mentioned in almost every book of the New Testament. Moreover, the Satanward view is a primary theme in

some books (e.g., Mark, Ephesians, Colossians).

Secondly, the earliest confessions of faith (which summarize the essence or core of the Christian faith) frequently mention Christ’s victory over the forces of darkness. Heinrich Schlier notes that spirit powers are mentioned in the early church’s “sermon paradigms, formalized *kerygma*, primitive professions of faith, and hymns and Eucharistic prayers... from the earliest age, the Church’s preaching and professions of faith contained references to what we call ‘principalities and powers’” (Schlier 1966:7-8). According to Oscar Cullmann, “the express mention of the victory of Christ over the demons, powers and authorities belongs to all the earliest confessions up to the year 150” (Cullmann 1949:24).

Thirdly, while the Satanward view of the Gospel is presently down-

played among Evangelicals, this hasn't always been the case. This theme has played an important role in church history and historical theology. Gustaf Aulen describes this Satanward view of the Gospel as the classical view of the atonement, the dominant view of the atonement for the first thousand years of Christian history: "Its central theme is the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ—*Christus Victor*— fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the 'tyrants' under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself" (Aulen 1986, 4).

The following seven passages in the New Testament best summarize the Satanward view of the Gospel. While a solid exegesis of each passage would be preferable, due to limitations of space at this point we can only list them:

The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the Devil (1 Jn 3:8).

You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil; for God was with Him (Acts 10:38).

For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:12-14).

When he had disarmed the rulers and authorities, he made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through him (Col. 2:15). Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil (Heb. 2:14).

He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to

come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet (Eph. 1:20-22).

Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him (1 Peter 3:21-22)

We have developed a Sundanese tract that uses a modified "Bridge to Life" approach, borrowed from the Navigators. It is based on the theology of the

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kingdom of God, summarized in the following eight points:

1. God is the king of the universe (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 103:19).
2. Men and women were created and blessed to rule the earth as God's representatives (Gen. 1:26-28).
3. But Adam and Eve disobeyed God and so were expelled from the kingdom of God (Gen. 3:22-24; Gal. 5:19-21).
4. Because of sin Satan now rules the earth (1 John 5:19; 2 Cor. 4:4; John 12:31; 14:30; Eph. 2:2).
5. Consequently, we have become enslaved by Satan and are now under the wrath of God (1 John 5:19; Eph. 2:1-3; John 3:36).
6. Our sin separates us from God and His kingdom (Isa. 64:6; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:19-21).
7. But God still loves us and sent Jesus Christ to defeat the devil and to deliver us from the kingdom of darkness and save us from the wrath of God (1 John 3:8; Heb. 2:14; Col. 1:13-14; Col. 2:15; Eph. 1:20-21; 1 Pet. 3:22).
8. If men and women want to enter into the kingdom of God, they must

repent and believe in Christ (Acts 2:38; 26:18; John 1:12). We have used the kingdom of God as an organizing and integrating theological paradigm from which to contextualize the Gospel to Muslims. Kallas' view on the life of Christ is to the point.

If we see the work of Jesus as the defeat of Satan and the destruction of Satan's grip on this world, then suddenly the life, work, death, resurrection of Jesus assume an impressive unity. He begins the fight with Satan in the exorcisms and healings... and then Himself shatters death as the ultimate weapon of Satan, thus completely destroying the power of Satan. The life of Jesus thus seen is a cohesive, closely knit, ascending battle which reaches its climax in the resurrection (Kallas 1961:86).

Cultural Encounter

It is not enough to engage in truth encounter and power encounter. We must also work with the emerging church to develop rituals — what I call a cultural encounter. The word ritual can be defined very broadly to range from the etiquette of daily greetings to the solemnity of sacred ceremonies. We are particularly concerned about the role of ritual in religious settings.

Cultural encounter is an important dimension of church planting for a number of reasons. First of all, religious ritual serves numerous social functions. These functions are crucial to the preservation of culture and give individuals a sense of group identity. Religious rituals reinforce the social order, and produce a feeling of solidarity between its members (Hiebert 1983:375-376).

Secondly, ritual is central to a Folk Muslim's worldview. It is at the heart of religious behavior. "Ritual articulates the formula for eliciting help from the spirit world... Through ritual, that is, right ritual, man seeks to tap into a power

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source” (Steyne 1989:96). “Rituals provide traditionally approved ways by which people are able to *influence* the powers which they believe control their lives” (Burnett 1989:104). Therefore, the rituals of our target people need to be Christianized so that the reality of the kingdom of God can be expressed through these indigenous cultural forms.

Anthropologists note numerous types of religious rituals. However, the three broad categories suggested by Burnett provide us with the most helpful analytical model for church planters (Burnett 1988:93-106). *Life-cycle rituals* refer to rites of passage, transition rituals which mark the important stages of life such as birth, circumcision, marriage and death. *Calendar rituals*, by contrast, are not related to stages of life but rather to points on the calendar, such as Muhammad’s birth or Ramadan. *Crisis rituals* are usually precipitated by unforeseen events (sickness, accidents, curses, droughts, unexpected death) and are carried out in order to ameliorate problems, restore health, harmony and/or balance in life.

The Folk Islamic beliefs and practices, which make up our target peoples’ rituals, must be replaced through the process described by Paul Hiebert as “critical contextualization” (Hiebert 1985:171-192). There are three elements in the process of contextualization: adoption, transformation, and rejection. Some aspects of culture are neutral and thus can be adopted. Other cultural practices are forbidden in Scripture and must be rejected. There exists a third category of behavioral patterns that can and should be transformed by using the old forms, but by giving them new meaning (Gilliland 1989).

A simple example of cultural encounter from a Sundanese life-cycle ritual illustrates how the theology of the kingdom relates to the Folk Muslim. Spirit realm concerns and Islamic beliefs were major components in the develop-

ment of the following ritual.

Mr. and Mrs. Orlando, members of a Sundanese church called Cai Kahuripan (which means ‘Living Water’), recently moved to a new neighborhood. So they wanted to put on a *hajjat* [communal meal] to pray for protection from the forces of darkness and ask for blessing from God.

Over thirty-five people (twenty-five of these Sundanese Muslims) squeezed into the Orlando’s little home. Twenty of these gathered in the front room where the ceremony was held (all men), ten women gathered in the back room and a handful of late-comers sat outside. Mr. Orlando opened the ceremony in traditional Sundanese fashion with an Arabic greeting. Next, he thanked the guests for coming to his *hajjat* and especially honored the leaders of the community. He then asked for forgiveness. “I ask for your pardon because my house is too small, the food isn’t that good and I can’t speak Sundanese very well.” After that he quoted the Pancasila [Indonesia’s governmental philosophy]. First of all he mentioned the fact that all Indonesians believe in the oneness of God. Secondly, he pointed out that Pancasila gives Indonesians freedom of religion. He then closed his short speech by asking those people who confess a different religion than he does to merely witness the ceremony.

Next, the leader of Cai Kahuripan, Mr. Pono, clad in the traditional holy man attire (a white long-sleeved shirt and a black *peci* hat) gave a similar Arabic greeting. He proceeded to quote the Al Quran and Sundanese proverbs as examples of his theme: We can receive protection and blessing from Allah because he is a loving God. Cai Kahuripan next sang two songs, both of which emphasized love. The first song was from Psalm 103. The second song was taken from the love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. These songs were in Sundanese, using their five note (pentatonic) scale as well as the Sundanese auto harp, the *kecapi*.

Mr. Pono then read a confession taken from numerous verses in the Bible:

‘I confess that there is one God. There is no God but Allah. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. Also, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. However, this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent Isa Almasih [the Arabic term for Jesus the Messiah] to die for our sins. So, this is eternal life, that we might know the only true God and Isa Almasih whom he has sent.’

Next, Mr. Pono used the Lord’s prayer as a basis to pray for protection and God’s blessing. However, instead of beginning with the word “Father” (which is very offensive to Muslims), he prayed to God, “who loves us like a father loves his children.” Because Mr. Pono was sensitive in his choice of words, the whole gathering repeatedly echoed “Amen” at the end of each petition. The gap between Christian and Muslim was bridged, at least for the moment, and without compromising theologically.

Then, the traditional rice cone was placed in the middle of the gathering and Mr. Orlando cut off the top and gave it to the oldest man present. After that the rest of the food was brought out and everyone feasted. Besides a lot of joking around, many people commented on the songs. The Scripture songs, put to a blend of traditional and pop Sundanese music, touched the hearts of the people. People talked into the evening and Mr. Pono had ample opportunity to draw near to this new network of people, as well as share some from Scripture (May 1991) (Love 1992, I:189, 190).

Summary

Church planting among Folk Muslims demands a three-dimensional model, involving power encounter, truth encounter, and cultural encounter. Based on the biblical paradigm of the kingdom of God, we confront the powers of darkness through exorcism and healing (power encounter), we preach the good news that Jesus came to destroy

the works of the devil (truth encounter) and express the reality of the kingdom through culturally-relevant rituals (cultural encounter). This points the way to successfully plant the Church of Jesus Christ among Folk Muslims.

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This book combines a description of folk Islam, biblical perspectives, and strategies for church planting among Muslims. In his theory on Muslim evangelism, Love tackles the major issues of encountering spiritual powers, contextualization, and leadership development. Teachers of Islamic subjects and practitioners in Muslim countries enthusiastically welcome this book. [Get A Copy.](#) [Amazon.](#)

E CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHURCH PLANTER

- Passion for the Lost
- Kingdom Mentality
- A Visionary
- Love for People, Willingness to sacrifice and Family Support
- Servant Heart, Hard Worker, Integrity and Humility.

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