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## WHO SAID

### it is too hard?

**Grace Munro, Editor**

A high proportion of least evangelised peoples are Muslims<sup>1</sup>. Other significant groups are Buddhists, high-caste Hindus, and Atheists. Why are these groups to a great extent untouched by the message of life in Jesus? I can think of some reasons, and would love to hear readers' thoughts.

First, a previous mission generation focused primarily on animist groups, such as the Dani of Papua, Enga and Min of Papua New Guinea, Lahu of Thailand, tribal groups in Bangladesh, India and Zambia – names familiar to many *Vision* readers. Animists were generally responsive. The 1900s saw thousands turn to Jesus. There was much less mission work among today's unreached, who may be less responsive than the animist groups.

Second, for today's unreached groups, religion is often integral to ethnic and/or national identity. To be Khmer (Cambodia) or Thai is to be Buddhist. To be Bengali (Bangladesh), with some exceptions, is to be Muslim. In religious terms, the Islam of a group in sub-Saharan Africa is mixed with animism, but culturally Islam is a strong aspect of their self-defined identity.

Third, the religions of today's unreached are structured and there is a consistency of belief and practice globally. Sunni Muslims differ from Shiite Muslims and Bengali from Indonesian Muslims. The Islam of sub-Saharan Africa, merged with African Religions, differs from the Islam of Kazakhstan, merged with traditional Kazakh beliefs. But all share allegiance to the one God whom they address using the Arabic term for the high God, Allah. They honour the prophet





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Mohammed and observe Muslim festivals and obligations. Similarly, in the Buddhist world there are differences but also consistencies. Animist groups shared common features, but most would not have known of other animists. There was no organised structure. Muslims and Buddhists, in contrast, have a strong sense of being part of something global.

A fourth feature is that most people in these groups see Christianity as foreign and alien; some see it as offensive and destructive. This is in contrast with animist groups who, after initial suspicion and in some cases violence, accepted missionaries. There are several factors behind the Muslim and Buddhist concern about Christianity and Christians.

For Muslims, the Crusades and then the European colonial domination remain a strong and influential memory, though we in the west may see them as long-gone history. The Western invasion of Muslim countries, Afghanistan and Iraq, has done nothing to reverse their views about Christians. Such actions also do not endear westerners to the Buddhist world which promotes non-violence.

While accusations that Christian mission destroys cultures have been grossly exaggerated, sometimes cultures have been undervalued and unnecessarily disrupted. In attempting to keep new believers from temptation, some missionaries encouraged believers to withdraw from cultural and community networks. The result was that the community perceived Christianity to be foreign, and believers to be westernised and possibly to have betrayed their own culture and community. There are strong parallels with the Acts account of Jewish believers thinking that Gentiles had to become Jewish in order to be Christ-followers.

Interestingly, even when missionaries did not encourage believers to withdraw, some did so anyway. Sometimes this happened when they were given paid work by missionaries, drawing them away from home. Sometimes the shift was philosophical. It was hard for them to distinguish between the missionaries' culture and the gospel. Wanting to follow Jesus in the "right" way and having only missionaries as examples, new believers readily adopted the culture of the missionaries along with the gospel.

Fifth, to today's unreached groups, "Christian" and "Western" are seen as interchangeable terms, and aspects of westernism can be very offensive. For dedicated Muslims, the frequent semi-nudity and explicit sexuality of western films, the drunkenness of western tourists, and our eating of pork all make what they perceive to be "Christianity" offensive.

A sixth feature of these unreached is that many of them live in countries where gospel proclamation is restricted. Visas to do "mission" work in such countries are not available. Missionaries cannot preach to hundreds or thousands of people as they did with animist groups.

To add to the complexity, the groups often live in countries which receive considerable media attention in Australia, much of it negative and sensationalised. Media reports of an isolated half-day riot in Jakarta read as if the whole country is a constant melting pot of violence. Our lack of knowledge about the size, diversity and geography means that we may not realise that tensions





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in Papua barely hit the headlines in Sulawesi, and on Sumatra people barely know of a Bali bombing.

So, yes, to a great extent today's unreached groups remain unreached because they are hard to reach. But does that mean that it is *too* hard?

Perhaps the best test of our view is to assess our response to the personal challenge of mission to Muslims, high-caste Hindus and Buddhists. Would you be willing to live in Bangladesh in order to reach the Bengali? Would you happily wave your son or daughter off as they go to Kazakhstan? And, here's the crunch for many, how would you respond if your children asked you how you felt about them taking your grandchildren to live in Indonesia? Is that just too hard altogether?

Let us not pretend that reaching today's unreached is easy. It usually means living in settings where there are few others who share our culture and faith. Sometimes it means being under the scrutiny of government and religious leaders, with the potential for thoughtless actions or words to result in loss of visas. In addition, it may well be that there are greater risks in terms of health and safety than we experience in Australia.

Let me highlight some relevant issues – and, again, I invite readers' input.

First, we should not allow media reports or public sentiment to deceive us. The majority of Muslim people are not terrorists and are as opposed to terrorism as are other people. Global Interaction staff living and working among both Muslim and Buddhist people find them to be welcoming, encouraging and, in times of civil unrest, protective.

Second, we do not have to go to Indonesia or Bangladesh to serve Indonesians or Bangladeshis. Workers are needed in those countries, but there are opportunities to work with people right here. However, let us not use that as an excuse to stay in Australia if God is calling us elsewhere!

Third, if we have an active concern for the unjust distribution of the world's resources, then unjust distribution applies as much to the gospel as to social and physical resources. 1.6 billion people<sup>1</sup> are yet to hear the gospel. Only 4% of Christian workers go to serve these people, whereas 80% serve Christian groups. 16% serve groups who have ample opportunities to hear the gospel, such as non-believers in Australia.

Fourth, many people sacrifice their own agendas and even their own health and well-being for causes much less worthy than introducing people to Jesus. Journalists, footballers, jockeys and racing car drivers take huge risks regularly, and for what purpose? How can we believe that sharing our faith is less important than those things?

Fifth, Jesus' call for us to go into all the world and make disciples still applies. He died for today's unreached as well as for us. Thankfully, with his call comes his irrevocable promise to be with us, even to the ends of the earth.





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Sixth, the vision God gives us in Revelation is of members of every people group and every language worshipping him. When we think about the flaws we all have, it is remarkable that he has chosen us to join him in achieving this. For the sake of God's glory, nothing is more important.

<sup>1</sup> Barrett, David & Johnson, Todd, *World Christian Trends*, William Carey Library, 2001.





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# DO THEY WANT

## to hear?

Clearly, some Muslims do not want to hear anything from Christians. One only has to read a few internet sites to find that some Muslims are very satisfied with Islam. Their writings evidence a passion and evangelistic zeal. These Muslims are not looking for other options. They do not want to learn more about Jesus than what they read in the Koran. Then there are Muslims who not only don't want to know about Jesus; they do all they can to stop others from learning of him. Extremists in this group see all non-Muslims as the enemy, the infidel.

But are these groups typical of all Muslims? Are there Muslims who welcome the gospel? How do Muslims feel when we talk of Jesus? There will be no single response across all Muslims, but experience shows that many are happy to hear of Jesus, if approached with warmth and respect.

An even more interesting question: how do Muslims feel when we keep silent about Jesus? For at least two reasons, it does not make sense to them when Jesus-followers keep silent about him.

First, many people do not share our western cultural cringe about talking of religion. I well remember three decades ago being in hospital in Zambia, and being surprised and, yes, I confess it, a little embarrassed, when religion, faith and Jesus were frequent topics of conversation between patients, staff and visitors. My cultural cringe was showing badly. Zambians discussed religion openly. Similarly, for many Muslims our hesitation in talking about religion is confusing. Discussion of beliefs is not segregated into some private area, such as in church, but is part of everyday life.

Many of us would suffer a severe cultural cringe if we had to kneel and pray on a train, or in an airport, the street or other public places, not just once a day, but five times, as is the Muslim custom. For a huge number of people around the world, religion is not a private and individualistic affair, but it is public and communal.

Second, for many groups, spirituality overtly impacts and permeates life to an extent we do not grasp from our western secular perspective. For these groups there is no separation of sacred





and secular, spiritual and physical. For animists, even the timing and method of gardening are spiritual choices. For Buddhists, the selection of food is spiritually determined. For Muslims, the direction the bathroom faces and the way you wash your hands are spiritual acts. Things we tend to segregate into sacred or secular, spiritual or physical, are an integrated unity. There is nothing that is not spiritual. Hence when George Bush, Tony Blair and John Howard, all professing Christians, invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, many Muslims readily saw this to be an expression of their faith.

For these reasons, and probably more, Muslims and other people groups can find it very confusing when people who claim to be followers of Jesus do not speak about their faith.

After the tsunami of Boxing Day 2004, Mark went to Indonesia to help. Mark had served with Global Interaction in Papua (Irian Jaya) and is now on the Australia-based team. He knows the Indonesian language. When he arrived in Aceh, the leaders of the group advised that team members should be very wary of talking about the gospel. Rightly, the leaders knew that some helpers would see this horrendous circumstance as an opportunity to present the gospel. They also knew that without knowledge of the language and culture and without sensitivity to the situation, some people could take unfair advantage of those already in deep distress. They knew that inappropriate gospel sharing could turn people away from Jesus, and/or jeopardise government permits. So the team members were advised to severely limit any talk of Christianity.

Mark, however, discovered that Indonesian Muslims found it confusing when he and others who were working for a Christian group kept silent about God and their faith in him. They found it odd that they did not see these Christians praying together, when Muslims, or at least some of them, continued to pray publicly five times a day, wherever they were, even in their desperate plight.

It wasn't long before Mark began ignoring the advice he had received. He listened to Indonesian Muslims tell of their pain and their faith perspective. He responded sensitively to their questions and prayed with those who asked him to do so. He did not try to push anyone toward conversion, and did not learn the long-term outcome of those conversations. But, Mark is confident that the Spirit continues to work amidst those people.

Mark's experience is replicated by many believers who live and work among Muslims around the world. Our Western perception might be that Muslims do not want to hear about Jesus. But believers who live with integrity, openness and sensitivity among Muslim people find that many of their new friends are keen to learn more of Jesus about whom they have read in the Koran and whose love is often mirrored in the life, words, actions and reactions of his followers.

There are certainly Muslims who don't want to hear the gospel and who will even openly oppose expatriate and local believers. But many, many more want to hear and some will take remarkable risks in order to hear the story of Jesus.

They are anxious to hear. Are we willing to live among them and tell them of Jesus?

