Barriers and Bridges  
by [Warren Larson](https://warrenlarson.wordpress.com/author/warrenlarson/)

The following is from a series of blogposts on <https://warrenlarson.wordpress.com> from May - August 2012

On the morning of 9-11, I was teaching a course on Islam at Columbia International University, and during the break heard the tragic news.  A few faculty members gathered in a conference center where a small television had been set up, and we saw the towers fall.  Regular chapel was cancelled and a senior colleague was called upon to give some comfort and direction.  He said, “Our nation has been humbled and we have suffered attacks on the highest levels of our financial and government institutions.  The greatest symbols of our power and glory have toppled; we need to pray and trust God.”

 On May 2, one year ago, my article, “Do not Gloat over Osama bin Laden’s Death” was published in [*Christianity Today*](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/mayweb-only/osama-donotgloat.html).  Quoting the Scripture that says not to “gloat when your enemy falls” (Proverbs 24:7), I said that rather than playing bagpipes, dancing in the streets, and singing Amazing Grace near Ground Zero, we should be praying for Muslims.  Although we can be thankful bin Laden is no longer around to threaten us, we must demonstrate spiritual concern for the countless Muslims still alive, many of whom are open to hearing the good news.

[](https://warrenlarson.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/road-in-america1.jpg)To help the church see how needy Muslims are, I have a message entitled, “Five Muslims by the side of the road,” likening all of them to the man Jesus talked about who was left wounded and bleeding, while religious folks passed him by.  They include a destitute woman (more than ½ billion Muslim women constitute the largest block of unreached peoples), a folk Muslim–75% of Muslims in our world do daily battle with spirits where the world view involves charms, amulets, curses, blessings and the evil eye.  There is of course the ordinary one next door, but the last Muslim is a radical, and it is mostly because of him that the church is confused and struggling.

There are many barriers that keep Muslims away: theological (Muslims struggle with certain concepts, like the incarnation and Son of God issue), social (family and society work together to prevent anyone from leaving Islam), political (Muslims see Christians as allies of Israel in the plight of Palestinians), historical (unhappy Muslim-Christian conflicts in the past, like the Crusades, have not been forgotten) and economic (sixty percent of the world’s poor are Muslims).  We may not be able to do much about these obstacles, but there are barriers we can do something about, and I believe they are bigger than they were prior to September 11, 2001.

The first barrier is fear.  Not long ago an evangelical pastor I know had a young Muslim man in traditional dress visit his church on a Sunday morning. After taking notes through the sermon, the Muslim approached the pastor at the end of the service to argue. In response, the pastor tried to give biblical answers, but wasn’t prepared for it and felt threatened, mostly because the Muslim kept one hand in his pocket; it was assumed he had a weapon. Others in the church felt the same because of the intense dialog.  He left, saying “You’re all are a bunch of hypocrites and I’m not coming back!”  One deacon suggested bringing guns to church for protection.

After this unpleasant incident, the pastor called for a meeting of other pastors in his denomination to discuss how to respond to such situations, and the Zwemer Center was invited.  Our staff encouraged them to learn all they could about Islam through seminars/courses, seek out Muslim friendships, and most of all to begin praying for Muslims.  The pastors listened politely, but seemed unconvinced.  It was like a gigantic struggle between fear and faith and fear won out.

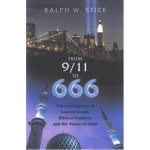
Such sentiments appear to be widespread, especially among evangelicals.  In a poll taken by the [Pew Forum](http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=32604) in September of 2004, twenty-nine percent of evangelicals held a “favorable” view of Islam while forty-six percent an “unfavorable” view.  Pew said:  “more than half of white evangelicals who attend church at least once a week have an unfavorable impression of Islam.”

Then, in 2007, Pew noted an increase in negative views by evangelicals toward Muslims and Islam, dropping five points between 2004 and 2007. This same survey said that while Catholic and mainline Protestant views toward Muslims/Islam became somewhat more positive, evangelical views declined: By 2007, twenty-four percent have favorable views in contrast to Catholics (48% favorable) and mainline Protestants (fifty-one percent favorable).

Sensing the trend, six years ago, I wrote an article in [Christianity Today](http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/2006/june/29.38.html)that addressed the negative post 9/11 literature on Islam in an article entitled, “Unveiling the Truth about Islam: Too Many Christians Miss the Mark.” This is part of what I said in the review of several books that came out soon after the horrendous event that rocked our nation:

“Unfortunately, too many of these evangelical polemics are historically inaccurate, theologically misinformed, and missiologically misguided. Apparently, a lot of us simply dislike Muslims (usually without knowing any). When we critique Islam, we need to be fair and accurate. Those of us who make Muslim-Christian comparisons must do so from a position of informed engagement, as those who have worked with Muslims. When we review historical tensions between the two faiths, we must apply rigorous historical analysis, when we write about Islam; we must remember that love is the greatest apologetic.”

One book reviewed gave readers the impression that “a real Muslim is by definition a violent one,” and the tendency is once again to define Islam by its most radical expression, rather than by seeking to have a balanced understanding that encompasses the wide variety of Muslims.

*[](https://warrenlarson.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/from-911-to-666.jpg)*Another book with the title, from 9/11 to 666: The Convergence of Current Events, Biblical Prophecy and the Vision of Islam presumes that the antichrist will be a Muslim. Dates were even set for the Beast’s appearance and describe in dramatic detail what life will be like in the United States under the tyranny of Islam. Such presumptuous statements damage Muslim-Christian relations to the extent that people take them seriously.  I also said,

“We Christians must discuss irreconcilable differences with Muslims, but we should also recognize similarities, bridges, and common themes. There is a place for “unveiling” Islam, provided we do it with sensitivity, understanding, and careful research.”

No doubt Muslims do violent things in the name of Islam.  Radicalized Muslims, some of whom were born and bred in the West continue to carry out hateful acts.  It is true that radical Muslims are targeting Christians. Boko Haram, an extremist group in Nigeria, is burning down Christian churches and Coptic churches are going up in flames in Egypt.  The suffering of Christians in Southern Sudan and the case against an Iranian pastor are true.  The media, including some Christian media, focus on this, as they have sought to warn America about radical Islam; but the media have not always given a balanced picture of ordinary Muslims. While media sources cannot be blamed for informing people about radical religion, their focus on terrorism in Islam perpetuates the generalization that all Muslims are untrustworthy, unpatriotic and dangerous.  Some of the coverage is alarmist and many Christians seem paranoid.

There is also fear of Muslim growth.  In Canada, several years ago I saw a sign outside a mosque in Toronto that said: “Everyone welcome and no one told he is a sinner.”  [The Ottawa Citizen](http://www.ottawacitizen.com/news/Special+report/1913408/story.html)(8/31/09) told how Muslims have increased.  Over a period of three decades in Canada’s capitol, they grew from 4,000 to 65,000 (one-hundred and twenty-eight percent increase) and this makes most Canadians nervous.  In Europe (fifteen million Muslims), it’s not only the growth, but lack of integration that is worrisome.  When said integration isn’t working, it means Muslims don’t fit. Two years ago, when I was teaching a course just outside Stuttgart, Chancellor Merkel said multiculturalism “has utterly failed.”  What she evidently meant was that millions of Muslims have not integrated well into society.  She’s right.  In France there are other divisive issues, like the veil, and Muslims do not feel at home there either.

Besides, there is fear of an Islamic takeover, of Shari’ah Law, and that Western governments are too soft on Islam.  A news letter received from workers in a major American city received just before Easter put it this way: “Around the world the agenda of Islam marches on—to bring the whole earth under submission to Allah.  Muslim leaders act like the victory is inevitable—and all the while, we in the West are meekly conceding to their many demands. Let us lay hold of the promise that, the one who died for us, rose for us, who daily empowers us, soon coming for us—he alone is the one through whom we are able to have overwhelming victory.”  Another newsletter from one who describes herself as “a student of Islam” and of the Bible, says: “… the Holy Spirit has showed me several times … that the Antichrist will be Islamic.”

Could it be that this is what many want to hear?  They want to hear how evil Islam is, how badly Muslim women are treated, and that Islam has a global agenda.  One group, “Operation save America,” held a procession outside a mosque in Charlotte, NC.  They railed against abortion and homosexuality, but included Muslims in their tirade: “Jesus hates Muslims.”  A Muslim inside the mosque said: “We also love Jesus and if he were here he wouldn’t say he hates us.” We want to preserve our values, our cultures, our “kingdoms” and let the Muslims go to hell.  Many of Islam’s fiercest critics have no interest in repentance and no desire to see Muslims rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light.  We need to be reminded that that God wants to save Muslims, not kill them: “He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9).

It is true that some Muslims talk about a “takeover” and think Islam will dominate the world.  Muslims are getting into schools and demand freedom for dress codes and dietary laws, when at the same time either denying or restricting worship of minorities where Islam has a majority.  Evangelicals therefore must be prepared to take on political Islam with political arguments.   An American friend was in the UK, dialoging with Islamic clerics, mostly in universities.  I quote what he wrote to me: “As the team of Muslims with whom I had worked with all week was traveling to the airport, they were holding forth with gusto on the need to establish Muslim rule and Shari’ah Law in England– that was the only hope for England as they were expounding. I weighed in with strong and forth right counter arguments. Eventually there were several minutes of silence, and then the chap who had been expounding the most vehemently in the need for Shari’ah in England observed, ‘If we are honest, we all know that we agree with Dr. S.  That is why we are flying to Canada tonight and not to Pakistan which is our home land. We love the freedoms of Canada and detest the restrictions of Pakistan. In fact in Pakistan I would be put in prison if I practiced there the freedoms that I so love in Canada.'”

Dr. S. went on to say that that our strongest defense against political Islam is to boldly bear witness we who are followers of Christ and committed to the freedoms God himself gives to us and that we are deeply committed to the separation of church and state because that is Biblical.  “If we cherish those freedoms,” he said, “we need to engage Islam in forthright dialogue and encounter on these issues.”

In talking about bridges, I am using the term more broadly than just commonalities between Muslims and Christians.  These are principles for work among Muslims.  The first bridge is courage and perseverance:  One of my heroes is Samuel Zwemer, and for seven years, I directed an organization named after him.  Though he personally saw very few Muslims come to faith, he was probably the greatest missionary America ever sent to the Islamic world.  He went out to the heart of the Muslim world in 1888.  His zeal, gifts and perseverance launched a modern missionary movement to Muslims. Of him, the great historian, Kenneth LaTourette, said no one is more deserving of the title, “Apostle to Islam.”  He was an evangelist, a prolific author, a compelling public speaker, and a talented professor.  He went everywhere teaching and preaching to Muslims the need of a Savior; to Christians, the need to reach Muslims for Christ. [](https://warrenlarson.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/samuel-zwemer-photo.jpg)The thirteenth child in a family of fifteen, by the age of five, he could read English and Dutch and later learned German in school.  Driven by an intense and somewhat nervous personality, he maintained a flurry of activity all his life: witnessing to Muslims, speaking, writing in the cause of mission to Islam, recruiting workers, and raising money to support missions.  In the end he would travel to the bastions of Islam—India, the Middle East, China and the Balkans.  Linguistically, he was brilliant and mastered Arabic, but acknowledged it was a challenge, especially the pronunciation.  He said the guttural sound belong to the desert and undoubtedly was borrowed from the camel, groaning under the weight of his load.

When two young daughters died from dysentery in 1904, he and his wife wrote on their tombstone: “Worthy is the Lamb to receive riches.”  News from the Arab world shows there is much concern for the tiny nation of Bahrain, where a Shi’ite majority feels bludgeoned by a Sunni monarchy and ultra-conservative Muslims next door in Saudi Arabia. Surely God will use the labor of Samuel Zwemer in Bahrain for the furtherance of gospel among suffering Shi’ites.

In 1912, Zwemer and his family moved to Cairo to direct the Nile Mission Press in printing and distributing Christian literature in Arabic.  He felt Al-Azhar University was the intellectual and theological stronghold of Islam and nothing deterred him from spreading the good news, usually through distributing Bibles, and other Christian literature—some of which he himself had written in Arabic.  He said: “No agency can penetrate Islam so deeply, abide so persistently, witness so daringly, and influence as irresistibly as the printed page.”

It was his habit each year in Cairo to take trainees to Al-Azhar University to meet the president.  Once, while in the president’s office, he asked the president to look out the window: “Do you see the stars?”  The president replied that it was a bright day in Cairo.  With his arm around him, Zwemer said: “My friend, once the Son appears, all lesser lights disappear.”  What he meant, of course, is that with Jesus there is no need of Muhammad.

Although direct and even blunt at times, his friendliness usually enabled him to talk to Muslims without antagonizing them.  His desire to engage Muslims through the world of ideas enabled him to confront the intellectual strongholds of Islam.  And he wrote over fifty books in English to stir up and motivate Christians; in 1911 he founded the “Moslem World” and continued to edit it for the next thirty-six years.  The Quarterly was designed to give information on matters of Islamic lore at an academic level but also as a forum of Christian witness among Muslims.  As long as he was editor, the magazine was evangelical and missional, but today is neither.

Not wanting to just study Islam, he grappled with practical issues and referred to the work as the “glory of the impossible.” At a North American conference he chose the text: “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at thy word, I will let down the nets.”  He went on to say that the time would come when so many Muslims will come to Christ that the boats (churches) will not be able to hold them.  Moved, his audience asked what they could do, and Samuel Zwemer said, “Pray.” Thus was born the Fellowship of Faith for Muslims in Toronto.

For Zwemer, Islam was a “spiritual problem.” He loved Muslims and appreciated the insights of Muslim thinkers, like Al-Ghazali (the greatest Muslim theologian and philosopher, who died in AD 1111), but felt Islam was a system that denied the gospel.  The prevalence of amulets all over the Muslim world was a strong indication of Satan’s work.  He felt the task of reaching Muslims was not a phrase to be bandied about easily; rather it was a deep life-purpose, a work of faith, a labor of love, and a patience of hope.”  He determined never to play down the truths of the gospel–the mystery of the incarnation, the necessity of the atonement and the glory of the cross.

Yet, unlike Karl Pfander, he was not a polemicist, and did not debate Muslims publicly.  His goal was not to beat up on Islam.  He felt Muslims should be contacted on a personal, friendly basis, not confrontation and he believed points of contact do exist and that every Muslim heart has been prepared by the Holy Spirit.  Samuel Zwemer has been proven right: Recent research shows that most Muslims who embrace Jesus do so because of the love and friendship of a Christ follower.[](https://warrenlarson.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/reading-quran-good.jpg)Surprisingly, Samuel Zwemer said the Qur’an left room for dialog, that is, he felt the Qur’an could be used as a bridge.  He believed a loving but bold presentation of the surpassing grandeur and beauty of Jesus would never alienate the Muslim heart and said workers should always press home the question: “What do you think of Christ?”  When he died on April 2, 1952, a grieving colleague spoke for millions: “A missionary prince has fallen in our midst.”  He had persevered for the Glory of the Impossible and what we see today is a result of what Zwemer worked for.  God is making the impossible come true.

The second bridge is love and friendship: A missionary friend was comparing responses to a couple of petitions currently going around Christian circles. One had to do with correct translation of scripture on a website called, “Biblical missiology” and the other called “the radical love campaign.”  At last count, the call for correct theology had garnered over eleven thousand signatures, whereas the latter only four hundred and thirty-one, although it was hoped they would have one hundred thousand by March/12.  He said this is very said because it’s easy for us to criticize each other in standing up for the truth, but difficult to love Muslims.

Few of us seem willing and able to form friendships with Muslims or to get to know what Islam is all about.  In a survey conducted by Pew Forum in September of 2007, the analysis of a questionnaire brought forth an interesting statistic: Fifty-eight percent of Americans “know little to nothing about Islam’s practices. Interestingly enough, this number represents little change since September 11, 2001.

[](https://warrenlarson.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/reading-quran-good1.jpg)We fear people we do not know, and when it comes to Muslims, people who are most fearful are usually those who have never met a Muslim and instead rely on media, current events, or other sources for their understanding of Muslims.  Folks tend to demonize others they do not know, but when they have Muslim friends, sit with them, and talk with them, they realize Muslims are some of the nicest people in the world.

Pew found a major factor identified as affecting one’s attitude was whether or not they actually knew a Muslim.  While age, education, and knowledge of Islam were also identified as key factors in shaping one’s view of Muslims, those who knew a Muslim held the most favorable view of Muslim-Americans (seventy-four percent).  Hence, there is not so much a clash of civilization as there is a clash of stereotypes and a clash of ignorance.

[](https://warrenlarson.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/veil_varies_iran.jpg)One friend understands all too well that for the most part Muslim women can only be reached through the efforts of Christian women.  She estimates that Muslim women standing side-by-side would encircle the globe eleven times, whereas the line of Christian women trying to reach them would only stretch eighty-three miles.  Her point is that more Christian women need to come forward who will reach out to Muslim women, otherwise they will never be won for Christ. We tend to either stare when we see a veiled woman or look the other way and Muslim women say it bothers them that few Americans look them in the eye.  So this sister has started a campaign, called: “Say Hello.” She says God brought Muslims to the West so we need to smile, look friendly, and just say hello.

The third bridge is prayer and faith: After 9-11, we should have taken seriously what Jesus said about prayer.  There are roughly four times when he turned to his disciples and commanded them to pray for something and the first time (Mt. 5:44; Lk. 6:88) was “Pray for those who persecute you.”  Perhaps even greater things would be happening among Muslims if over the past eleven years, evangelicals had prayed harder for those who persecuted them on 9-11?  We do regularly pray for the troops who work in Islamic settings, and so we should, but we need to pray for Muslims and those who work with them.

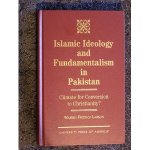
Faith means a belief that Muslims need the gospel more than anything else; it is faith in the power of the gospel.  Zwemer’s association with the SVM (Student Volunteer Movement) and zeal to reach Muslims one hundred years ago is noteworthy.  A professor of mine, Paul Pierson said the SVM, organized in 1888, had a great motto: “The evangelization of the world in our generation,” but he said it began stumbling for two reasons: “a desire to tackle the problems of Western society coupled with doubts about the validity of world evangelization.”  By 1940 “it had ceased to be a factor in student’s religious life and in the promotion of mission in the churches.”  It was finally disbanded in 1969.  Of course we need to think about race, abortion, Darfur, homosexuality and Aids, but we also need to think of how much Muslims need Christ.

We get excited when Arabs chant for democracy, but even if it comes, the same hopelessness remains because Islam cannot grant salvation from sin and cannot give genuine hope. Every morning, after reading my Bible on the tread mill and working out, I open the curtains, lie down on my bed and pray.  There are two street lamps across the street and they remind me to look to the Light and walk in the light of God’s word. Occasionally, light also shines through, but I know it has no light of its own.  Muslims make much of the moon because tradition says Muhammad touched down there on his night journey and allegedly gave the call to prayer.

Islam can be likened to the moon, beautiful in a sense, but in the end, dark, empty and lifeless.  A friend tells about leaving his old Bible behind in Afghanistan, but that later, he was able to return and find it.  When the Taliban took over they had shot at it, but since Afghans (and many other Muslims read from right to left, the bullet went through the back, all the way through the New Testament.  This is precisely what Muslims do with our Bible.  They accept quite a bit from the Old Testament, but they deny the very heart of the gospel.  In one very brief sentence the Qur’an denies the cross: “They killed him not” (Qur’an 4: 157).

Moreover, faith is needed to believe Muslims are coming to Jesus and that many more will come in days and years to come. In North Africa, Berber Muslims are already responding as never before.  A story was widely circulated of a certain village in Algeria where everyone dreamed of Jesus one night, and the next morning all believed in him.  This is home to the great Christian church fathers, like Augustine and Tertullian, so they should believe, but another reason is due to cruelty by fellow-Muslims. In the end they felt they had nothing left in Islam to hang on to.

In Bangladesh, where not too many years ago, an American medical doctor by the name of Vigo Olsen, decided to produce a Bible translation that communicates with Muslims, using Allah (Muslim name for God), and “Isa” (Muslim name for Jesus), rather than Hindu terms.  That undoubtedly helped Bengali Muslims understand, but is certainly not the only factor.  Another reason was because of Muslim-on-Muslim violence in 1971 as West Pakistani Punjabi military personnel turned on defenseless East Pakistani Bengalis in burning, looting, raping and killing.

[](https://warrenlarson.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/my-book.jpg)In Pakistan, my dissertation Islamic Ideology and Fundamentalism in Pakistan: Climate for Conversion to Christianity? found evidence that Muslims are coming to faith in Pakistan because of what the Taliban and others are doing in the name of religion.  A veteran missionary, back from Pakistan not long ago, confirmed this in private correspondence.  He said: “It would take a book to tell of other experiences that happened every day … the Taliban are driving people to look beyond Islam … an elderly [man] with a long white beard said, ‘I have read the teachings of Jesus when someone hits you on the cheek, turn the other cheek!’” The worker told of an imam who preaches Jesus from the mosque where he serves.  We hope and pray this will be true more and more.  This is the hand of God in the glove of human circumstances.

[](https://warrenlarson.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/ten-muslims.jpg)In Iran, we need to look through the eyes of faith, not just see the country as the greatest danger to world peace.  I have two books on my shelf that tell the story, quantifying conversion, even as recent as forty years ago.  One is Ten Muslims Meet Christ; the other is [Ten Thousand Muslims Meet Christ](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/july-august/the-other-iranian-revolution.html?start=1)(it could be ten times that many).  Iranian Church leaders say the best missionary was Ayatollah Khomeini because of his harsh, rigid and cruel ways.  They say he showed us what Islam is like and drove Muslims away from it.  A recent Christianity Today article, “The Other Iranian Revolution” talks about how Iranian Muslims are embracing the Messiah.

Finally, in Syria, despite the tragedy of so many horrible deaths, workers speak of unprecedented opportunities to witness as refugees stream across the border into Turkey and Lebanon. One wrote that ten thousand have heard the Good News in the last few months.  They stated that for a long time Syrians have been complacent to the gospel but now it seems God is drawing them in the midst of tragedy and suffering.

The fourth bridge is suffering and forgiveness: A former Muslim I knew, and refer to as “Paul,” suffered martyrdom in Afghanistan. Blinded in infancy when a local doctor prescribed the wrong medicine, he memorized the entire Qur’an (four-fifths the New Testament) in Arabic (not his mother tongue) by age fourteen and was subsequently invited to an annual, Qur’anic recitation contest in Saudi Arabia, where he won first prize.  But since only Saudis had historically achieved such distinction, that year two were awarded first prize: Paul and a Saudi citizen!

In 1964 he enrolled at the Blind Institute in Kabul.  A keen mind and unusual linguistic ability took him rapidly through classes at the Institute and Paul then applied to Kabul University where he completed a degree in law.  While taking Braille at the Blind School he studied English and begun listening to the Lutheran Radio Station, Voice of the Gospel from Addis Ababa.

One day Paul asked Betty Wilson what Christians meant by the substitutionary death of Christ and added that he had accepted Jesus while listening to the radio programs. Mrs. Wilson asked if he was aware this could result in execution since Islamic Law called for death to apostates.  He said, “I have calculated the cost and am ready to die for Christ, since he has already died for me.” He was also spiritually nurtured by Pioneer Christian missionary, the late J. Christy Wilson, Jr., pastor of the international church in Kabul before it was bulldozed to the ground in 1973.  Despite warnings from various sources that if anyone destroyed the building they would answer to God, Muslims appeared at the gate.  Having heard about an “underground church,” but not understanding the English idiom, Afghan police dug down twelve feet to find it.

On that day the Government of Muhammad Zahir Shah was overthrown in a coup and intense suffering followed: Kabul was virtually destroyed; millions of refugees fled; a communist government was installed; the Taliban seized power and decades of war have ensued.  One Afghan refugee told Wilson: “Ever since our Government destroyed that Christian Church, God has been judging us.”

Yet in the midst of opposition, Paul helped translate the New Testament into Dari (Afghan Persian), his mother tongue.  Finally, to avoid persecution he fled to Pakistan in 1985 and had a fruitful ministry among Afghan believing refugees, but others as well.  When he was in exile I invited him to my city of service in Southwest Pakistan where he spoke boldly and brilliantly to Muslims about Jesus.  Then, on March 23, 1988 he was “tricked” (God makes no mistakes) into returning to Afghanistan, kidnapped, tortured and killed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a warlord.

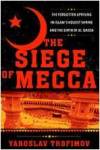
His tongue was reportedly cut out before being shot because he refused to stop speaking for his Lord.  Others too have given their lives and God uses this for his glory.  Christians in Islamic contexts are often persecuted.  Throughout history suffering has been part of Christian witness and vital to the growth of the church.  Dietrich Bonheoffer said that “when Christ calls a man he bids him come and die.” Josef Tson put it this way: “When the ambassador of Christ speaks the truth in love, and meets death with joy, a strange miracle occurs: the eyes of unbelievers are opened, they are enabled to see the truth about God” The grave speaks louder than life itself.

In 1968 my wife Carol and I went to Pakistan and spent the next twenty-three years in an ancient city with a current population of over four hundred thousand.  Although there is still no church building in this city, there are some Jesus followers.  We had two sons in Pakistan, one of whom was born very near to where Osama bin Laden was killed.

We were not prepared for what lay ahead: We had never met a Muslim (there weren’t any up there in northern Canada at the time that we knew of) and never taken a course on Islam.  We had intended on going to India, but after our visa was denied, ended up in Pakistan.  However, we were both from good farming stock and knew the value of hard work without a lot of luxury.   Most important, we had learned in a small Canadian Bible College to feed ourselves on the Word.  Over time we found the words of Amy Carmichael to be true: “You need a good sense of humor and a poor sense of smell.”

At first I operated a reading room for Muslims who would come in for discussion and some of them I signed up to take a Bible correspondence course run by another organization. But in order to do more careful follow up, we decided to start our own Bible correspondence school, still going under Pakistani national leadership.  Through this media, hundreds of Muslims throughout the country took courses designed to progressively take students to the next level.  The goal was to help them first see their need of salvation through Christ and then grow in him.  Some wrote from afar, saying they had come to faith by studying the Bible.  Locally, some also believed, and with those fellowshipped on a regular basis.  We studied the Bible together, prayed together on our knees, and every day memorized one [](https://warrenlarson.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/iranian-hostages-1979.jpg)verse in Urdu.

On November 20th, 1979, our family experienced an attack that shows the importance of forgiving those who harm you. 1979 has been called the “Watershed of fundamentalist Islam”: Islamic militants in Iran took over the United States Embassy in Tehran and held American hostages for four hundred and forty-four days. The Soviet Union moved into Kabul with all their military might and occupied Afghanistan for years. From then on Islamism accelerated across the Muslim world.

[](https://warrenlarson.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/seige-of-mecca.jpg)Listening to the BBC (British Broadcasting Company) on that morning in November, we heard that the Grand Mosque in Mecca had been seized by unknown gunmen. It was during the annual pilgrimage as a million Muslims milled around the black-robed Ka’aba. Not overly concerned, I drove down town for some early-morning shopping, and was greeted by those who recognized my old, green Land Rover. But shortly after returning home, a friend came by to warn us of angry processions in the city.  The announcement made by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran that this was the work of Americans and Jews spread rapidly throughout our city.

At the time, we were living in a duplex with an American family but had a missionary couple from Canada as guests in our home. They had stayed over the night before as workers in the area had spent the previous day in prayer.  Hearing the sound of a mob, we quickly closed the doors, and put the women and children in a back room. (Our own sons were at boarding school in the north of Pakistan.)

Gathered in an inside room, we listened as our Land Rovers were assaulted and the doors of our house were pounded with bricks. Soon the attackers broke in on the other side of the duplex and continued their rampage inside. We knew they would soon gain access to the entire building and concluded we might as well go out and face them. The door between the apartments was stuck, and when I forced it open, the attackers fled. We followed them out and saw there was about two hundred college students, some of whom I knew personally.

Realizing we were no match against so many, I took a different approach. Holding my arms in the air, I said in Urdu: “Hey guys; I’m Canadian.” They responded that there was no difference, set our vehicles on fire, and destroyed whatever they could. As black smoke billowed upward, a kind neighbor called the cops. Police came in with sirens blaring, and since Martial Law was in effect, so did military personnel. Some were arrested and jailed. Four hundred miles away in Islamabad, the American Embassy was burned to the ground, and two lives were lost.

[](https://warrenlarson.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/juhayman.jpg)Three days later, the truth came out that seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca had been carried out by over three hundred Muslim radicals, mostly from Saudi Arabia. They had been followers of a man called Juhayman who claimed to be the “Mahdi” (Messiah). With the help of French sharp shooters the rebels were eventually flushed out and those who survived the bloody battle were promptly executed.

When we forgave the attackers, as Christ taught us to do, some neighbors embraced me and said: “Mr. Larson, now we understand the difference: You have forgiven your enemies but we tend not to forgive those who unjustly harm us.” It took years for our family to get over this incident, because every time we heard a joyous wedding party, it reminded us of the attack. Yet, after that experience we had a greater burden for Muslims, and after that experience, we saw much more fruit. God used our suffering and willingness to forgive for his glory.