



## “But This is a Free Country”

*by Dr. Nik Ripken*

Aisha was a nineteen-year-old single woman from an Islamic country. Though her parents were fairly conservative, they believed in education and a daughter’s right to advanced degrees. When she was informed that her wealthy family had arranged for her to attend university in America, she was frightened at first. She had heard about the depravity of the West most of her life. The thought of being in a pagan, Christian country was disconcerting, but somehow exciting at the same time.

The sights, smells, and sounds of America were beyond sensory overload at first. She survived by spending time with other Muslim women, increasing her commitment to prayer, and communicating frequently with family back home. She stood out on the university campus due to her conservative style of clothing.

After a few months she realized that she was beginning to like her adopted home and the university setting. At first, this attraction troubled her. Still, she reveled in the environment of open, intellectual discussion. Though most were not as wealthy as her family back home, she became more and more comfortable with the western single women in her widening circle of friends at the university. She was uncomfortable with the open sexuality and the availability of alcohol, but she enjoyed the relaxed way that university women dressed and she appreciated their ability to discuss life issues with others her age – and often with men present! She began to sense that the Christian West was more than the drugs, sex, crime, and abortion that she had heard about her entire life. Aisha began to question those stereotypes that had always characterized the West in her country’s press and mindset.

Curious by nature, and wanting to spread her wings further, she began quietly to visit various churches in her city, sometimes going with one or two of her Muslim friends. Even though their parents were continents away, they could not help but look over their shoulders as they entered this forbidden territory, nervously giggling as they entered the church. Unlike her Muslim girlfriends, Aisha found herself returning again and again, even after her friends tired of going once the novelty wore off.

Single women believers in the church, who were also at the university, befriended her, inviting Aisha to come earlier for Bible Study and other events tailored for students. The more she attended these small groups the deeper her soul was stirred, the more questions she asked, and the more she doubted what she had believed before coming to America. Excited with Aisha’s search for spiritual truth, these committed believers took her to the pastor for university students. He and, eventually, the senior pastor began to counsel her and they led her to pray a prayer of faith in Jesus. She trustingly followed pastoral advice in announcing her new faith the next Sunday before the larger church family to loud praise and applause. Soon she allowed these adult men of the church to touch her as they lowered her into the waters of baptism. Though she sometimes felt like a highly prized specimen in a public zoo, she loved and appreciated her new church family and the attention they lavished on her. She was mentioned by name from the pulpit, and seeing her photo on the church membership board made her smile with gratitude. There was even an article about her conversion on the church’s website. Her faith was prized and celebrated by the church.

None of this went unnoticed by her Muslim classmates, both men and women. While many of the other women lauded her courage, they were quick to caution her about her extreme behavior. Though not overly surprised, she was hurt by the veiled threats from her male Muslim friends. Phone calls increased from her family. She found it harder and harder to evade the increasingly invasive questions that they were asking. More and more she found herself talking to her father after brief moments on the phone with her mother and sisters. He began to insist that she return to her country for the holidays and in between school semesters. She struggled to find ways to remain in the States. She shared her unease with her church family and they began to pray publicly for her as she became more isolated from her family and other Muslim students on campus.

Then one day she disappeared.

Her church and believing friends searched for her. Her Muslim friends would not answer their questions. Her professors did not know where she had gone. All that the

school officials could or would share was that Aisha had withdrawn from the university.

More than a year later some of Aisha's believing friends in America discovered what had happened to her when she was able to send them an e-mail from her home country. Her older brother had suddenly arrived in the United States to force her to return home. On behalf of her family, surrounded by other Muslim students, he had demanded that she sever her ties with her Christian friends, stop going to the church, and return to her Islamic faith. They isolated her on campus, were always with her in public, and relieved her of her cell phone. When she resisted renouncing her faith and her Christian friends, her brother escorted her to the airport and flew with her to their home country.

Shortly after arriving home, at the age of twenty-one, Aisha was married to a sixty-three-year-old conservative Muslim businessman who was a friend of her father. She became his second wife and disappeared into his home. In a brief moment of not being monitored, she had e-mailed her friends in America asking them to stop trying to contact her since there was nothing they could do. She was now a Muslim wife of a Muslim man.

When this terrible news was shared within the broader church family, one gracious woman was heard to cry, "But this cannot be true. This cannot happen. This is a free country."

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Twenty-six-year-old Fatima, though a single woman, had led scores of Muslim women to the Lord in a hot and dusty border city in Central Asia. This was territory controlled by the Taliban. Fatima was highly educated, articulate in four languages, and employed by the United Nations. She lived under multiple death threats as she was both a believer in Jesus and fought for the rights of Muslim women who had been sexually abused by the Taliban in their refugee camps. Against the advice of her spiritual mentors, she allowed herself to be extracted by the U.N. because of religious and cultural persecution. She was relocated to a large mid-western city in the United States. She was helped to find a job through two large Christian agencies where she helped resettle women and their families from her country who were also refugees. As in her country, she did this with professionalism, and she consistently shared her faith with those she was serving. Soon the leadership of the two Christian agencies required her to attend a high-level meeting. There she was informed by her Christian supervisors that she was not allowed to share her faith in America with her own people because, as they said, "Faith in America is a private matter."

She graciously refused to be silenced in the United States anymore than she had been in her Taliban-infested home

environment. As the pressure increased on her to curb her witness, both by Islamic leaders and her Christian colleagues, a meeting was arranged by her employers with leaders in the Islamic community in order to find common ground in addressing Fatima's embarrassing insistence on witnessing. A wise, well-known, and educated Imam was flown in for the meeting to represent Islamic concerns. His poise, polish, and articulate speech impressed the Christian religious leaders. Graciously, but firmly, he insisted that this believer from Islamic background keep her faith out of the public arena, using arguments based upon sensible religious practices and the religious pluralism of America. After the meeting was adjourned, the Imam lingered to have a final word with Fatima. In passing he whispered to her, "This meeting was for show, for public relations. If you insist on continuing to convert Muslims to become Christians, we will get you. Forget the laws of this country, we will get you. And we know where your family lives back in Central Asia."

Smiling to the waiting Christian leaders, he exited the room. Immediately, Fatima recounted this conversation to her supervisors. They were incredulous that she thought that this distinguished Islamic scholar would say something as uncivilized as this. "After all," they said, "this is America. Such things do not happen here."

Fatima lamented, "This is supposed to be a free country. It is harder sharing my faith here than it was in my home country! There I was only persecuted by Islam."

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Abdi loved everything American, even the food. A deeply conservative first-born son in an Islamic family, he was determined to try everything that was off limits in his country now that he was a college student in the America. Like most college students Abdi was "attracted to the forbidden." He had a forbidden checklist in his mind that he was "ticking off" systematically. Within his first two years in the States he had accomplished his "wish list." He had 1) eaten pork, 2) had sex, 3) drunk alcohol, and 4) become a Christian.

While his first three forbidden fruit activities were transient in nature, he found that his "Christian" experience grew into something much deeper. In the experimental stage he admits that he was willing to be treated like a trophy publicly in the church. He prayed a "repeat after me" prayer of salvation, joined the church as instructed, and received baptism in a public setting. Yet this forbidden act caught his heart and would not let him go. He found the Bible a rich source of truth. He began to dream about what he was reading. One night he heard the voice of Jesus speak to him, calling him to a real commitment of faith. He began to question his spiritual foolishness and the manner in which he had dabbled in the Christian religion. He was now ready for a real relationship with Jesus.

But it was too late. At least it was too late for real faith to be expressed in his borrowed country.

His family had kept close tabs on their prodigal son through like-faith family members in the United States. There was little concern as they allowed their son his brief flings as he experienced the forbidden. Experimenting for a small period of time with drugs, alcohol, sex, and bacon were allowable, but now he was becoming serious about his infatuation with the forbidden Christian religion. It was no longer an attraction to the forbidden for him, but it was becoming a life-altering change.

Abdi disappeared from church and school. His uncle, older brother on his father's side of the family, was waiting for him one day as he came from class. Given less than an hour to pack, Abdi was escorted to the airport and he flew home with his uncle. Having shamed his family, Abdi now lives with this fundamentalist uncle and he is closely watched even though his environment is devoid of non-Muslims. If he is found ever practicing the Christian faith again, he will be beaten, removed from his home, and disinherited.

His church family in America is aghast that such a "kidnapping" could occur in the United States and that nothing can be done about it. His fellow believers hope that Abdi is mature enough in his relationship with Jesus to survive being isolated and watched within his hostile, family environment.

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The mission leaders of the church called in tears. Against the advice of mission strategists, they had begun an ESL ministry for Muslim immigrants on their church property. Soon multiple families were attending and some were expressing interest in a personal relationship with Jesus. From all appearances, the new ministry was a complete success. For six months the ministry flourished.

Then, it seemingly died overnight.

Church leaders went to the homes of those they had fed, taught, and befriended. For the first time, they were not allowed to enter their homes. At the door they were told, "Please stay away. Our Islamic elders did not like that we were coming to the church. They sent for a fundamentalist cleric from the north. He told us that if we continued meeting with you we would be harmed. He also threatened our families back in our home country. Please stay away from us. We cannot be seen with you anymore."

The phone call, received from leaders in this godly church, was painful as the ministry leaders sought ways to resurrect a flourishing ministry that had suddenly died.

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These abbreviated interviews introduce some of the challenges that Islam brings to the church even, or especially, in what is considered to be a western, Christian church environment. The interviews highlight two crucial and common fallacies.

The first fallacy suggests that it is easier to witness and worship God in open, free, and democratic countries. Christians often assume that the work of witness will be simpler, less demanding, and ultimately more productive in settings where there is openness and freedom. But that hope is not necessarily true. In fact, followers of Jesus are as free to share their faith in Christ with people in any "closed country" as they are free to share Christ in any "open country." Ultimately, political environment has little to do with a believer's freedom to witness and practice his or her faith. Believers in Jesus have been universally commanded by God to share the gospel as they go among the nations or people groups – or as they stay at home. The freedom to share one's faith is inherent within the command from the throne of God. God would not have commanded something that we are unable or not free to accomplish. The question is not: "Are we free to share our faith?" The question is: "Are we willing to suffer and endure the consequences of exercising that God-given freedom? Are we willing to be obedient no matter where we happen to be?"

How we respond to our freedom to witness is a test of our obedience. Whether or not we are willing to act on that freedom – and suffer – is a test of our courage.

Frankly, there are no borders on the planet that are closed to a godly, freely exercised, witness. Governments cannot legislate witness away, mosques cannot kill it, and witness freely given in obedience cannot be eliminated by principalities or powers.

The second commonly-held fallacy is that it is somehow easier to win converts from other major, non-Christian religions once people are living in a free, western Christian country. Again, that is simply not true. We should not be surprised to realize that the control that Satan and sin have over a person, a family, a religious entity, or a people group does not end merely by someone boarding a plane or a ship and disembarking in an airport or arriving on the shores of a politically free or so-called Christian country.

Evil does not surrender its adherents simply due to geographical location.

What does change, perhaps, is their access to Jesus that these people might now have. What seldom changes, though, is Satan's hold on them or his desire to use them destructively within the heart of Christendom. Sometimes Christians tend to believe that simply because these Muslims are now currently residing in a free country,

where there is freedom of religion and a democratic government, they now can freely change their religious affiliation with impunity. Nothing could be further from the truth. Satan recognizes no borders in his attempt to keep his adherents enslaved and he does not cease in his efforts to punish them if they stray from the fold.

Candidly, the church can expect that, short of imprisonment, torture, and death, Muslims who convert to faith in Christ in the United States will experience every persecution common to converts from Islam who remain in their home countries and culture. They will be beaten by their families and placed under house arrest. Believing men will lose their education and jobs and will be sent to their home countries under close male supervision. They will be disinherited if they continue in their faith. One of the common “solutions” for young women who believe in Christ is to be shipped home and married to a conservative Muslim man many decades her senior.

“Short of imprisonment, torture, and death” is a bit of a misnomer as we can seldom track what happens to new converts when they are forcibly repatriated.

This article is a clarion call to the western church. The goal is not to call the church to claim her western democratic rights. Such claims are counter-productive for the church. Claiming to live in a free country where there is freedom of religion – and, then, claiming the right to reach the nations in her midst within church buildings and property-centered ministries – does nothing to address the matter of persecution. It is foolish to believe that persecution, or Satan’s hold over his adherents, ceases simply because of a change of address. It is naïve also to assume that Muslims in the United States who seek after Christ will experience Him through the same venues and avenues of the faith-making process as those who grow up in the church.

If, indeed, evil’s hold and the reality of persecution follow adherents to Islam to western, Christian countries and cities, what advice can be offered? As Muslims seek Jesus, what is wise advice in how to think and what to do as western believers partner with the Holy Spirit?

First and foremost, we need to realize that what has changed the most for these souls for whom Jesus died is their access to Christ and His people. This is an awesome opportunity for the Holy Spirit to partner with God’s people through His church. But let us be wise. Many Muslims who come to the United States become more, not less, committed to Islam after coming to the West. Many of the Islamic terrorists and suicide bombers in the western world are third generation immigrants. Political and economic disenfranchisement coupled with perceived racism tends to lead significant numbers of Muslims in the West to become more fundamentalist and conservative

in their practice of Islam. Living in a western country that they perceive as being anti-Muslim, and anti-Islamic, with the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan in the background, contributes to more, not less, fundamentalism within western borders. It may, in fact, be that their access to the gospel has improved, but the bars around their souls may actually tighten. For those Muslims seeking Jesus, the community pressure often becomes ever more hostile and results in even more overt persecution.

Additional advice to the western church would include the following:

### *Do Often*

- Intentionally welcome Muslims into your midst. Overcome the stereotype that Muslims are the enemy. Lostness is the enemy.
- Reach Muslim immigrants in the western world as though they were still in their home countries! Become a wide-eyed realist by accepting the fact that Satan may hold more tightly to those whom he has a greater chance of losing. Pray in their neighborhoods, and around schools and homes and places of business. Shop where Muslims shop. Learn about their countries of origin and become conversant in the current events from their home countries. Ask often concerning family members remaining in their country of origin. Be a respectful learner of culture.
- Implement families reaching families, seeking to reach the leaders of the family and Muslim community. Make every effort to share meals, break bread, in the homes of Muslims. Make them welcome in your home. Let them have a clear look into Christian homes. Be sure always to include single adults in your outreach to Muslim families. Many Muslims in the United States admit that they are lonely in our midst.
- Learn all that you can about Islam. Make it a habit to take gifts to their homes, especially during Islamic holidays.
- Prepare converts from Islam for the biblical reality of persecution. Persecution is not geographically specific. Persecution is absolutely normal for those who become the first believers in Jesus from their family and religion wherever they might live.
- The church can demonstrate her love for the nations in her midst by learning their language and culture. ESL is often seen as a tool, the “open sesame” for helping new immigrants entering the United States to get jobs and aiding their children in school. The real “open sesame” for sharing one’s faith, even in the United States, is to pay the price to learn whatever heart languages are spoken in the homes of Muslims.

There is no short cut. Lose the attitude that says, "You are in America now, speak English." Agree to teach your Muslim friends English and American culture – and then ask them to teach you their language and culture.

- Understand that young Muslims are often attracted to the forbidden. They are often "low hanging fruit." Work through this, doing everything that you can to use these young seekers as an open door into their extended families. Be careful not to circumvent Muslim parents in the sharing of your faith. Be wise and bold in your witness to those with status within Islamic communities.
- Within your own church, be careful in publicizing ministries to Muslims. Choose team members carefully. Treat what you talk about publicly as if it were originating in Somalia, Turkey, or Afghanistan. Take care not to treat any Muslim converts as public trophies. Win families and social units without publicity or fanfare.
- Learn ways to gather converting families in small house groups and establish house churches. Work toward all the functions of the church to be practiced within their emerging, believing community. Model a form of "church" that is exportable back to their homeland. From day one, attempt to place a DNA within Muslims who are coming to Jesus a desire to return to their home country with the gospel. From the beginning, help them develop worship patterns that express their own culture and that are exportable back to their home countries.
- Be seen as a believer who loves only One God and His Bible. From the beginning, be known as a holy and moral person. Express genuine love for your body of Christ while avoiding church property-based ministries.
- Make yourself aware of the many tools available for sharing your faith within Islamic settings. Be always ready to listen to their stories for hours, discerning how God is already at work in their lives. Expect a hunger for spiritual truth. Expect dreams and visions to play a large role in their faith-making process. Become increasingly comfortable with, and confident in, your own Holy Book, being ready and able to share appropriate Bible stories in response to life situations and questions asked. Do this by knowing your Bible. Understand that many of those in your midst may be functionally illiterate.
- Bathe yourself in prayer. Prepare for spiritual warfare. Go in two's for strength and accountability.

Muslims are coming to our country and neighborhoods in unprecedented numbers. Often they fear the corrupt influences of the West and are isolated and lonely. They can be made to feel like they are "a lion in a den of Daniels." Think about it: our "Jerusalem" is their "uttermost parts of the earth." A loving witness, incarnated in their language and culture and centered in homes, will partner with the Holy Spirit. This kind of witness will allow Muslims residing in the West to have a clear choice in regard to Jesus.

May God teach us as we share the gospel with Muslims in the West so that they may hear, understand, believe, be baptized in their family settings, start churches in their homes, and export their faith appropriately back to their home countries.

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