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The Secularization of Muslims: A New Missiological Challenge

by Mark Good, D.Min.

Missiologists and practitioners have written and researched extensively about understanding Islam and effectively incarnating the gospel among Muslims. Many of the resulting methodologies have focused on apologetics, relational evangelism, or contextualization. While these approaches remain important, they increasingly appear incomplete when engaging a specific and growing segment of the Muslim world.

Another worldview is now quietly shaping the outlook of many young adult Muslims. Instead of rejecting religion outright, this perspective subtly transfers the authority to determine how one practices faith from Allah to the individual. It changes not merely what people believe, but how they decide what deserves belief in the first place.

Secularism represents this emerging worldview, but it extends far beyond a political philosophy. Recognizing this distinction matters because many Muslims who have embraced deeply secularized ways of thinking would never describe themselves as "secular." In fact, many would strongly reject the label altogether.[1] Nevertheless, secular values increasingly shape the assumptions that guide their lives, often more than traditional Islamic ones. Understanding this shift has, therefore, become vital to effectively serving a younger generation of Muslims today.

Grasping the Concept of Secularism

The term secularism carries enormous baggage. Many Christians immediately equate it with atheism, moral decline, or the exclusion of religion from public life. Muslims often associate it with colonialism or Western cultural imperialism. In America, people commonly use the term to describe the constitutional separation of church and state or to characterize the political far left.

Yet none of these associations adequately captures the core element behind secularization or addresses the phenomenon Christians increasingly encounter among Muslims. Before discussing secular Muslims, therefore, we need to distinguish secularism from several related but different concepts.

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Until All Have Heard

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? – Romans 10:14

Mark Brink
International Director
Global Initiative:
Reaching Muslim Peoples



As we approach the end of 2026, December will be filled with family and church activities celebrating Christ's birth, with our homes and cities adorned with decorations and lights. But during this Christmas season, will you also remember Muslims?

Christmas provides a wonderful opportunity to show the love of Christ and share the gospel with our Muslim friends. Did you know that Muslims have a story in the Qur'an about the virgin birth of Isa al-Masih, the Arabic name for Jesus the Messiah? Although the Islamic account of Isa's miraculous birth differs from the biblical account, it can provide an opportunity to share the biblical story of Jesus' birth and explain the significance of the names and titles given to Him.

In Islamic culture, names have great significance. In the Bible, the angel Gabriel instructed Mary to name her promised Son Jesus, and an angel of the Lord gave Joseph the same instruction, because He would "save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). The child was also given the prophetic title "Immanuel," fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy approximately 700 years earlier and meaning "God with us" (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23). In Luke 1:32, Gabriel tells Mary that her coming Son will be called the "Son of the Most High," proclaiming His divine identity and declaring that He will receive the throne of David. Finally, the prophet Isaiah gives four titles to the coming Messiah: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace—revealing His deity, character, and mission in this world (Isa. 9:6).

If possible, read the biblical account of Jesus' birth with your Muslim friends and share with them the meaning of His names and titles. As you engage your Muslim neighbors, pray that they will discover the true meaning of Christmas—a Savior who came to redeem us and reconcile us to God.

I pray that you will use this season of celebrating Christ's birth to intentionally engage your Muslim friends and neighbors and invite them to encounter the One they may know only as Isa al-Masih, but whom they can come to know as Savior and Lord.

Muslim Unreached People Group
Hausa in Côte d'Ivoire
Population: 1,392,000 99.9% Muslim

The Hausa originated in "Hausaland," a region spanning parts of present-day Niger and Nigeria. Over the past two to three centuries, Hausa traders and Muslim religious leaders migrated throughout West Africa, including Côte d'Ivoire. Their influence helped to establish Hausa as an important language of trade and to create Muslim communities.

They are industrious traders and workers involved in commerce, agriculture, livestock, and other occupations. They have a distinctive cultural identity expressed through their language, food, and traditional clothing. Hausa society is traditionally patrilineal, with strong extended-family ties. Women generally carry primary responsibility for children and the household while often participating in small-scale trade.

The Hausa of Côte d'Ivoire are overwhelmingly Muslim. While strongly identifying with Islam, some combine Islamic beliefs with traditional practices involving spirits, charms, and spiritual specialists known as *malams*. Although Christian resources are available in Hausa and French, the official language of Côte d'Ivoire, they remain an unreached people group with relatively few followers of Christ.



Prayer Points:

- Pray that Hausa believers will share God's Word with their families and communities.
- Pray that God would call Christian workers to work among the Hausa people and for the Holy Spirit to prepare their hearts to respond to the gospel.
- Pray that Hausa people would access Christian resources in their language, either through films, Bibles, or online resources that would lead them to the saving knowledge of Jesus.

**Profile adapted from Joshua Project. For more information on the Hausa of Côte d'Ivoire visit: https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12070/IV*

Secularism Differs from Westernization and Globalization

Westernization involves adopting cultural practices that originated in Europe or North America. Clothing styles, music, consumer culture, and political ideals may all reflect Westernization without necessarily producing a secular worldview. A young Moroccan wearing Nike shoes, listening to Taylor Swift, and drinking Starbucks does not automatically embrace a secular worldview. Westernization and secularization often overlap, but the two remain distinct.

Globalization describes the growing interconnectedness of the modern world and creates conditions that allow secular ideas to travel rapidly. Yet globalization itself does not promote an inherently secular worldview. The internet spreads Qur'anic memes and atheist podcasts with equal efficiency, while globalization provides the highway. Secularism represents merely one of the vehicles traveling on it.

Secularism Differs from Nominal Religion

A nominal Muslim identifies with Islam culturally while ignoring many of its teachings or practices. A secularized Muslim, by contrast, assumes that each individual possesses the authority to determine which religious beliefs deserve acceptance. This distinction provides an important key to understanding what may actually be taking place in the minds of those who identify as Muslim but do not necessarily live according to Islamic teachings.

Secularism as a Worldview

A secular worldview no longer places God at the unquestioned center around which life revolves. This does not necessarily mean that God disappears; rather, the individual displaces God from the center. The shift occurs as the self becomes the primary reference point for determining truth, morality, purpose, and meaning. A secular person evaluates religious claims by asking: "Does this fit with my experience?" "Does it seem plausible to me?" "Does it contribute to the life I want to build?" If not, the individual quietly sets the claim aside. The self ultimately becomes the final court of appeal.

Secularism as the Elevation of the Self

A secularized Muslim may appreciate Ramadan for its sense of community while also admiring Jesus' teachings on forgiveness. They may enjoy Sufi poetry while also practicing meditation. Their spirituality may resemble a mosaic assembled according to personal preference rather than religious authority. Religion then functions more as a resource than a ruler.

For many young Muslims, the god they inherited no longer provides a satisfying explanation for the world in which they live. Traditional religious beliefs and practices may appear disconnected from the realities of daily life. As a result, they may drift spiritually—not necessarily toward unbelief, but toward indifference. This indifference can significantly shape our approach to reaching this growing group. Rather than beginning by addressing Islam in general, we may first need to awaken spiritual curiosity. Before answering objections, we often need to help people rediscover the ultimate questions worth asking.

The Forces Driving Muslim Secularization

The defining feature of secularization does not involve Muslims simply abandoning belief in God. Rather, secularized Muslims increasingly assume that individuals possess the authority to determine what Islam should mean for their own lives. They personalize, negotiate, and adapt their faith according to individual preference. The main question shifts from "What has God commanded?" or even "What does my community teach?" to "What makes sense to me?" This transition produces a more individualized Islam, interpreted through personal experience and shaped by personal preference.

Migration and Diaspora

Living as a religious minority in the West can reshape one's religious identity. First-generation immigrants often preserve the religious practices and social norms of their homeland. Faith can represent more than religious commitment; it can also provide a means of preserving culture and identity.

The second generation experiences a very different reality. Raised within secular democracies while remaining connected to Muslim families, they constantly negotiate competing values and attempt to balance ideals of autonomy and personal freedom with expectations from family and community.

Research has shown that second-generation Muslims often begin distinguishing between "Islam" and "their parents' culture."[2] They may feel less inclined to follow once-accepted customs, viewing them as merely ethnic or traditional rather than essential to Islam. Making this distinction can represent a significant step toward a more individualized expression of religion.

Globalization and Digital Media

Perhaps no force has transformed Muslim societies more dramatically than globalization. Previous generations learned about Islam primarily through parents and neighborhood mosques. Today's young Muslims encounter a vastly different informational universe.

The internet provides immediate access to competing interpretations of Islam and, in the process,

The Secularization of Muslims

Illustration created with ChatGPT



decentralizes traditional religious authority. Instead of consulting one *imam*, a young Muslim may compare dozens of scholars on YouTube, read Reddit discussions, watch debates between Muslims and atheists, and consume Western entertainment—all in a single afternoon. Many young Muslims may come to trust online voices more than local religious authorities. Cyber-*imams* and influencers now compete alongside traditional scholars for religious credibility.

One young Moroccan summarized this transformation pointedly: "Without the Internet, I would be a Muslim."[3] Whether or not such statements represent the majority, they reveal the unprecedented role digital technology now plays in religious deconstruction.

Education and Critical Thinking

Higher education can also contribute to secularization. Universities encourage analytical thinking and open discussion of competing claims. Students who have never encountered serious questions about Islamic history or theology suddenly confront a diversity of ideas and perspectives. Evaluating Islam from outside the framework in which they were raised can weaken previously unquestioned childhood assumptions.

Economic Aspirations and Modern Success

Economic conditions can also contribute to secularization. Younger Muslims may begin associating longed-for prosperity and personal freedom with the secular West. As career goals and aspirations for material success gain importance, religious practice may gradually assume a secondary role. As one worker observed, "Success is the ideal and idol of the age."

What Changes in a Secularized Muslim?

Secularization can produce several observable changes. First, religion may take on a more cultural rather than comprehensive role. A secular outlook allows someone to continue celebrating Eid, fasting during Ramadan, or identifying publicly as "Muslim" while rarely praying or following traditional religious obligations.

Second, individuals may increasingly internalize authority over matters of faith. Rather than asking whether a religious practice is required or acceptable, they may ask whether it feels personally meaningful.

Third, individuals may become increasingly selective about which practices or beliefs they retain, modify, or discard according to their own judgment. One person may reject daily prayer while embracing Islamic ethics. Another may drink alcohol while insisting on *halal* food. These combinations might appear contradictory, yet they make sense within a secular framework centered on personal autonomy.

Many younger Muslims reject what they describe as the "Islam of their parents." They may dismiss local customs or folk traditions as cultural aberrations that obscure authentic Islam.[4] Although the pursuit of a "pure" Islam may appear religious, secular influences can also fuel the search. Individuals increasingly assume responsibility for determining what constitutes authentic Islam rather than allowing others to determine how they should interpret it. The result resembles what French Muslim philosopher Abdennour Bidar calls "Self-Islam"[5]—not necessarily less religious, but certainly more individualized.

: A New Missiological Challenge

Missiological Implications

Recognizing these influences and patterns helps us better understand how to pray for and engage Muslims influenced by secularism. Arguments designed primarily to refute Islamic doctrine may fail to address the deeper questions secularized Muslims actually ask. Their struggle often centers less on defending Muhammad and more on constructing identity, relevance, and purpose in a globalized society.

Interestingly, at the same time that secularization weakens authority within Islam by encouraging individual autonomy, effective Christian witness must move in the opposite direction—toward authentic Christian community. Many secularized Muslims have gained freedom from religious structures while simultaneously losing a deep sense of belonging. Authentic Christ-centered community, therefore, offers a response to one of secularization's greatest unintended consequences: the loss of meaningful community. Such communities provide places where people can doubt and disagree while experiencing love and acceptance without pressure. Teams serving in Muslim contexts should cultivate communities where belonging provides the context for expressing doubt and where the fog of indifference can begin to dissipate.

Responding to the Challenge of Reaching Secularized Muslims

The rise of secularization among Muslims presents the Church with a significant challenge. On the one hand, some traditional barriers to gospel engagement may have weakened. On the other hand, this void does not necessarily translate into greater openness to Christ. Secularization can replace religious certainty with spiritual apathy or relativism.

As the number of secularized Muslims increases, Christians increasingly encounter people whose primary questions have shifted from the theological to the existential. Rather than asking whether the Bible has been corrupted or how one can possibly believe in three gods, they may instead ask questions about purpose, belonging, and meaning.

Listening Before Speaking

One of the strongest themes emerging from interviews with Christians who interact daily with secularized Muslims involves the importance of avoiding assumptions.

Stephanie,[6] living on the Arabian Peninsula, observed that many Muslims carefully present different versions of themselves depending on their audience. She explained: "I make fewer assumptions about the locals I meet. I no longer assume that they are practicing, even if they wear the hijab or say the 'right' things initially. Most people wear masks and present different versions of themselves depending on who they are engaging with. Ask lots of questions and don't assume you understand their worldview."

Similarly, Kayla, serving in Kazakhstan, noted that three very different kinds of Muslims—a conservative believer, an atheist, and a cultural Muslim—may all sit together in the same café. These observations highlight how outward religious identity no longer reliably predicts inward belief. Careful listening, therefore, becomes an essential tool. Good questions are usually more effective than good arguments.

Moving from Declaration to Discovery

Traditional Muslim ministry built around apologetics may remain important when engaging committed Muslims. However, many secularized Muslims simply have little interest in theological debate.

Joseph, serving in Indonesia, observed: "Most Indonesians are moderate. Reference to the Qur'an and Muhammad is often unnecessary. We rely more on personal testimony and stories of Jesus. There is usually curiosity but little interest in debate." Likewise, Heather, living in Comoros, explained that many people remain socially Muslim while feeling personally dissatisfied with Islam. Rather than focusing on apologetics, her team emphasizes God's nearness through Jesus Christ.

These experiences suggest that discovery-centered evangelism creates opportunities for people to encounter Christ for themselves through reading Scripture, sharing community life, and developing genuine relationships. Leading toward discovery seeks not merely to transfer information but to awaken spiritual curiosity.

Overcoming the Obstacle of Indifference

Indifference represents one of the greatest challenges for contemporary missions. Unlike religious opposition, indifference lacks urgency. It does not actively reject Christ; it simply sees no compelling reason to look in His direction. Postmodern secularism can replace questions about ultimate reality with questions about personal fulfillment. As long as life appears comfortable, people may see little need to pursue deeper truth. Dialogue, therefore, may need to begin by awakening questions rather than answering objections.

Jesus consistently challenged complacency. His words disrupted false assumptions and exposed shaky securities. Ministry among secularized Muslims should seek to gently disturb the illusion that individuals can ultimately determine meaning and identity for themselves.

Inviting Seekers into Christian Community

Secularism's emphasis on individualization can produce deep loneliness. Muslims who leave traditional religious structures frequently experience isolation from both family and community. They may have broken away from a previous identity without yet finding a community to which they genuinely belong.

This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Christ followers. Our approaches must resist responding to individualized Islam with individualized Christianity. Instead, Christian communities should seek to become places where seekers receive a welcome long before they believe, where people value rather than fear questions, and where they offer unconditional belonging. Hospitality and patient listening, therefore, play a vital role.

Jesus consistently created such spaces. Crowds, sympathizers, seekers, and disciples all occupied different places within His ministry, yet all found room to draw near. Healthy Christian community, therefore, offers one of the gospel's most compelling apologetics.

Recognizing a Strategic Opportunity

While secularization presents significant challenges, it also offers one of the most remarkable opportunities of the present generation. In some pockets of Muslim societies, inherited religious authority continues to weaken. At the same time, the internet, education, migration, and globalization have dramatically expanded access to information. These developments do not automatically lead to Christian faith. Many people move instead toward atheism, New Age spirituality, or personalized forms of religion. Yet these changes can create unprecedented openness to reconsidering long-held assumptions. As Tariq Ramadan predicted, developments among Western Muslims increasingly influence the wider Muslim world.[7] Through digital communication and global media, secular influences now circulate easily across boundaries. Global workers, therefore, find themselves ministering during a period of profound transition. Those who understand both Islam and secularization will be better equipped to engage the emerging generation of Muslims.

Conclusion

The secularization of Muslims involves much more than declining religious observance. At its heart, a deeper transformation changes how individuals understand authority, construct identity, and pursue meaning. This transformation reshapes both the way Muslims understand Islam and the way Christians communicate the gospel. Christians must, therefore, resist viewing secularized Muslims simply as less religious versions of traditional Muslims. Their distinct worldview calls for fresh approaches characterized by careful listening, relational witness, discovery-centered evangelism, authentic Christian community, and patient discipleship.

The present moment offers not merely a challenge, but a remarkable opportunity. As old certainties dissolve, many Muslims are asking new questions. If we can respond with humility, faithful presence, and confidence in the gospel, we may find that the encroaching secular influence has unexpectedly prepared many hearts to hear again the invitation of Jesus: "Come, follow me."

Prayer Points

- Pray that the Holy Spirit will give wisdom and divine insight to believers around the world who engage with secularized Muslims, guiding them in the questions they ask and in their conversations.
- Pray that secularized Muslims will experience a spiritual awakening that breaks through complacency and apathy, turning their attention toward the deeper questions of purpose, meaning, and belonging that lie beneath the surface.
- Pray for the mental and emotional well-being of secularized Muslims as they carry the weight of determining truth and finding their destiny and purpose.

Bibliography

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[2] Nadia Fadil, "Recalling the 'Islam of the Parents': Liberal and Secular Muslims Redefining the Contours of Religious Authenticity," *Identities* 24, no. 1 (2017): 82–99.

[3] Lena Richter, *Swimming against the Current: A Comparative Perspective on Leaving Islam in Morocco and the Moroccan Diaspora in Belgium* (Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean [IEMed], 2020), 7.

[4] Prema A. Kurien, "'Culture-Free' Religion: New Second-Generation Muslims and Christians," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 36, no. 1 (2021): 105–122.

[5] Abdennour Bidar, *Self Islam: Histoire d'un Islam personnel* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), 57.

[6] The names of individuals quoted in this article have been changed to protect their identities.

[7] Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 225.



Jumaa Prayer Fellowship

International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

Sunday, November 1
and throughout the month of November

Friday, November 6, 2026. Pray for…

…new converts from Islam in Ethiopia who face rejection, violence, and persecution because of their faith. Ask God to strengthen them to remain steadfast in Christ.

…Global Initiative's training of workers in Liberia during the first three weeks of November. Ask God to equip the Liberian church to reach Muslims and fulfill the Great Commission.

…students who recently completed a Global Initiative training in South Asia to apply what they have learned and train others. Ask the Holy Spirit to anoint the students and give churches throughout the region a vision for reaching Muslims.

Friday, November 13, 2026. Pray for…

…a Christian ministry in Orissa, India, that provides food, water, and relief to predominantly Muslim communities devastated by recent flooding. Pray that these acts of compassion will open doors for the gospel.

…Spirit-led conversations for Christians welcoming Muslims into their homes during the holiday season to lovingly share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

…Believers from Muslim Backgrounds in the BMB Writers and Creatives Network as they share their testimonies and disciple others. Ask God to use their writing to encourage converts from Islam and equip the Church to effectively pray and reach out to Muslims.

Friday, November 20, 2026. Pray for…

…students around the world studying through Global Initiative's Online Training Institute (OTI). Ask God to use this training to equip believers to effectively reach Muslims.

…Kuwaitis and students from other Gulf nations studying where the gospel is openly proclaimed, that they may come to Christ and return home as bold witnesses and help establish Bible-believing churches.

…a church in Albania that is purchasing a three-story building in a densely populated Muslim community. Ask God to use this church and outreach center to bring many Muslims to Christ. Albania has a population of 3 million, of which 50% are Muslim.

Friday, November 27, 2026. Pray for…

…front-line workers as they share the gospel with Muslim people in the Maldives, one of the world's most restricted Muslim nations. Ask God to protect and strengthen them against spiritual opposition.

…political and religious disillusionment in Iran to turn Muslims toward Christ in increasing numbers. Pray for freedom from oppression and for the Church to persevere and grow amid persecution.

…justice and relief from devastating poverty in Yemen, for freedom for persecuted Christians, and for God to raise up courageous leaders to strengthen and disciple secret believers. Yemen is 99% Muslim.



Jumaa Prayer Fellowship

Download the *Jumaa* Prayer Fellowship App
subsplash.com/jumaaprayer/app
for multi-lingual access to the weekly prayer requests
and other resources in a secure environment.

Friday, December 4, 2026. Pray for…

…Muslims in Turkey, that they may find their identity and hope in Christ. Ask God to strengthen believers amid persecution and bring peace and reconciliation among ethnic and religious communities.

…a Christian family serving in a predominantly Muslim area of South Asia as they evangelize, disciple believers, and develop house fellowships. Ask God to deepen their knowledge of His Word and empower their ministry through the Holy Spirit.

…Arabs and Jewish people in Israel and the Palestinian territories to find reconciliation through the Prince of Peace. Pray for Palestinian Christians to faithfully live out the gospel despite hardships so that people would come to know Jesus.

Friday, December 11, 2026. Pray for…

…a courageous and bold faith among persecuted believers in Sudan so that they can share Jesus with Muslims. Amid economic hardship and extremist violence, pray for God's protection over the most vulnerable.

…those widowed and orphaned due to conflicts around the world including Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Ask God to protect, provide for, comfort, and sustain them in their loss.

…the Nigerian government to cease empowering radical Islamic militants and the proliferation of terroristic acts against Christians. In 2025, 72% of Christians killed worldwide were Nigerians.

Friday, December 18, 2026. Pray for…

…believers in Kyrgyzstan who are facing increasing opposition to be strengthened in their faith. Ask God to give them discernment, courage, and perseverance as they share the love of Christ. Kyrgyzstan is 90-91% Muslim.

…the Pakistani government to effectively implement and support the recently approved National Commission for Minority Rights Bill that intends to bring meaningful protection to religious minorities.

…God's protection over churches in Syria threatened by hostile mobs and Islamist groups. Ask God to strengthen displaced, captured, and persecuted Syrian Christians through the presence and power of Christ.

Friday, December 25, 2026. Pray for…

…Asha, a Muslim Background Believer in India, who recently completed three months of ministry training. Ask the Holy Spirit to empower her to boldly share the gospel with Muslims in a region with significant persecution.

…the widespread distribution and use of the first complete Bible in Moroccan Arabic. Ask God to use His Word in the language of everyday life to draw many people in Morocco to Christ. One reader described the translation with these words, "God speaks to me like my friend."

…those who have recently completed Global Initiative trainings around the world. Ask the Holy Spirit to empower them as they return to their ministries to share Jesus with Muslims.

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