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Origins of African American Islam

by Mel Rogers



After the Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans found themselves in a very difficult situation: their essence had been stripped away through generations of slavery and they were trying to regain a sense of belonging and an identity that separated them from White oppression. Some, like Marcus Garvey of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), advocated a return to the African motherland. Others, having been influenced by Garvey's desire to uplift African Americans, took a different approach. Two such movements arose in the early decades of the twentieth century, each with a desire to achieve equality, a focus on cultural history, and a need for land as a sign of power.

The Moorish Science Temple of America

Noble Drew Ali, born Timothy Drew in 1886 in North Carolina, liked Garvey's ideas of regaining an African identity, but he did not want to go to Africa as Garvey did. Rather, he wanted to get back to his African roots while staying in America. He declared that African Americans in heritage are Moorish or Asiatic, and he began a movement known as the Moorish Science Temple of America.

Ali preached a message to his community that was infused with five basic principles: love, truth, peace, freedom,

and justice. Borrowing from Islam, he created scripture for Moorish Americans: The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America. This scripture, however, had little in common with the actual Islamic Quran, as displayed by his notion that he was a prophet to African Americans in the same way that Muhammad had been a prophet to Arabs. This idea was, of course, anathema to orthodox Islam.

Ali's teaching was very influential among African Americans, many of whom had personally felt the pangs of slavery. His primary message was that African Americans must eschew the various identities forced on them by Whites, such as "colored person" or "Negro." Names passed down from slave owners should also be changed to reflect a heritage of dignity and respect. It is in finding this new identity, according to Ali, that African Americans will achieve salvation. This was a welcome message to an entire people group that was trying to find its way in the world.

In addition, Ali sought to elevate the economic status of African Americans. Believing that economic independence was vital, Moorish communities started grocery stores, restaurants, and other small businesses. Economic power was at the forefront of Ali's mind.

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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
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Reaching Muslim Peoples



The Church unconsciously ignores or has not made an effort to reach certain segments of American society with the gospel. Islam would definitely fit into this category. Within the number of Muslims in the United States, the African American Muslim remains the least reached and least understood. I hope that this edition of the *Intercede* will be used by the Holy Spirit to give us some understanding and passion to reach them with the gospel. Black Muslims account for one-fifth of all U.S. Muslims and about half of them are converts to Islam from Christianity. The number of African American Muslims amounts to approximately 800,000 people in the U.S.

The location that has seen the greatest evangelism and growth of Islam among Black Americans is within the U.S. prison system. Many young Black men and women are looking to escape the cycle of incarceration, recidivism, and violence. Islam offers the embrace of a brotherhood or sisterhood, and extends a false hope to this felt need for identity and empowerment. Strong Black Muslim leaders have stepped into a power vacuum and have touted themselves as the saviors of African American pride and prestige.

But what about Jesus? We, as believers in Christ, have more than an ethnic identity or power to offer African American Muslim converts. We have a perfect Savior who suffered at the hands of His persecutors, but He did not revile or fight. He laid down His life for the sins of all mankind. We are to have the same mind as Christ. We must humbly reveal the Father and lead people to the Cross where all injustice is dealt with—not by struggle or violence, but by surrender to the Savior, Jesus Christ. Islam emphasizes law, ritual, and duty but does not offer solutions leading to contentment, peace, and intimacy with God. African American Islam, in its many forms, offers a human solution to an internal spiritual problem that can only find an answer in the Christ of the Cross. We need to humbly change the conversation with African American Muslims from the natural to the supernatural. Only Jesus and the Cross can provide a true sense of identity and purpose to the African American Muslim.

Would you pray this month specifically for African American Muslims? Lord, I pray that you will reveal Christ to African American Muslims and give me the opportunity to be used to reach them in my community.





Muslim World News

Burkina Faso: Five Killed in Three Months

At least 10 more Christians have been killed as a spate of attacks on churches continues in northern Burkina Faso. The 10, who died in two attacks on May 12-13, include another Catholic priest, Siméon Yampa.

On May 13, a procession of four Catholics was attacked while they returned a statue of Mary to their church in Singa, reported *Fides*. The armed men let children go before killing four adults and destroying the statue.

A day earlier, between 20-30 armed men stormed a Catholic church in the same region and opened fire on the worshippers. Six people were killed, among them 34-year-old Fr. Siméon Yampa. Before they left, the attackers burned down the church, shops, and a health center, *Fides* reported.

Also on May 12, suspected militants shot a Catholic priest in Dolbel, in western Niger. He survived the attack with gunshot wounds to one hand and leg. The attacks came two weeks after armed gunmen raided a Protestant church in Sirgadji village in the northeastern province of Soum, as reported by *World Watch Monitor*.

World Watch Monitor has since learned that the attack in Sirgadji was not the first against a church in Burkina Faso. Since February, two other pastors lost their lives in attacks. Elie Zoré, 48, leader of the Assemblies of God Church of Bouloutou, near the main town of Arbinda in the far north, in the province of Soun, was killed on April 23, 2019.

Arbinda has become symbolic of the nascent Islamist insurgency in Burkina Faso. In March 2019, more than 60 people died in violence that erupted following the killing of a prominent local Muslim cleric, as reported by *France 24*.

The violence involved the two main ethnic groups: the

Fulani (accused of having ties with terrorist groups, including Ansar ul Islam—a homegrown group that emerged in 2016) and the Kourouumba.

Some 30 people died in the inter-communal clashes in the town while another 32 people were killed in terrorist attacks. Since then, Islamist militants have taken over a number of villages and towns in the area. It was against this backdrop that Elie Zoré was killed. He leaves a widow and six children.

On February 19, Pastor Jean Sawadogo, 54, from the local church of Tasmakatt, was killed on the road between Tasmakatt and Gorom-Gorom. Meanwhile, the whereabouts of two priests missing between Burkina Faso and neighboring Niger remains unknown. Fr. Joël Yougbaré, a parish priest of Djibo, went missing March 17. In Niger, an Italian missionary, Fr. Pierluigi Maccalli of the Society for African Missions, was kidnapped on September 17, 2018, from his parish near Makalondi.

Michel Ouédraogo is president of the Assemblies of God, the largest evangelical denomination in Burkina Faso and the most affected by the Islamist violence so far. The Assemblies of God in Burkina Faso has more than 4,000 churches and 5,000 pastors across the country. He acknowledged the Church is facing difficult times, but called on Christians for restraint: “Vengeance has never been the best option. For instance, the God we serve is Love. He invites us to love our neighbor,” he told *World Watch Monitor*. Before calling on the global Church to pray for the Church in Africa, Ouédraogo said, “May God also touch and change the hearts of those who hide behind an ideology in order to kill their neighbors.” —*World Watch Monitor*

Origins of African American Nationalism

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Ali established the first Moorish Science Temple in 1913 in Newark, New Jersey. The movement spread and was eventually headquartered in Chicago, where it, although fledgling compared to its beginnings, still exists today. Two of its early members, W. D. Fard and Elijah Muhammad, had a profound impact on the African American community as the twentieth century progressed.

The Nation of Islam

In the summer of 1930, a door-to-door salesman appeared in “Paradise Valley,” a predominantly African American community in Detroit. W. D. Fard came with goods and stories from faraway lands. Before long, the community was mesmerized by his words. The ethnicity of Fard remains a mystery, but he claimed to have hailed from Mecca and captivated his audiences with stories of their true identity. As Noble Ali had taught them, they were not Negroes, but Asiatics. Now, according to Fard, they were members of the lost tribe of Shabazz, having been forced from their home city of Mecca through the slave trade.

This new teaching was met with great receptivity in Paradise Valley. Unlike the conciliatory approach of Ali, Fard taught that the White race would meet its doom in a final conflict between African Americans and Whites in the battle of Armageddon. The only way for the former to be victorious was to revert to the religion of their ancestors: Islam. The teaching of Fard vehemently opposed Christianity, the Bible, and the White race. Over time, he began to present himself as a Christ-like figure, displacing the former Christ that Christianity had given to African Americans.

Why was this teaching embraced so readily by the people of Detroit, many of whom had been faithful churchgoers? There were several factors that made Fard’s message palatable in the minds of his hearers. First, this was the time of the Great Migration (1915-1930) in which African Americans left their property, businesses, and at times even their families in the South to travel countless miles and settle in northern industrial cities such as New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Detroit. Though the majority of these Southerners were actually skilled laborers with fairly high rates of literacy, they entered a system with no upward mobility and in many cases were forced to take and to keep jobs that Caucasians did not want. In addition to economic hardship, the African Americans from the South were not assimilated into the mainstream culture, unlike the European immigrants who had gone before them. To add to this, many northern churches were not welcoming to southern migrants. In the end, the

Great Migration was a dismal failure that left many African Americans in permanent poverty in northern ghettos.

Second, as African Americans competed with European immigrants for jobs, tensions swelled throughout the 1920s. Many Whites reacted strongly to the influx of African Americans in the industrial cities. The Detroit Chapter of the Ku Klux Klan grew from a membership of 3,000 in 1921 to 22,000 just a year and a half later. With this kind of force, Klansmen were able to openly terrorize African Americans and, in order to solidify their influence, even entered the mayoral race in 1924. Tensions were exacerbated when the stock market crashed in 1929 and the Great Depression began, resulting in even fewer employment opportunities.

Third, Marcus Garvey, who had been at the helm of the first extensive mass movement among African Americans through the Universal Negro Improvement Association, was sent into exile in 1927. Noble Drew Ali, though having encouraged harmonious race relations, was arrested and jailed amid growing tensions between Whites and African Americans in 1929. Once released, he mysteriously died. These circumstances left a leadership void in the African American landscape. These men had started something, but who would be next? For these reasons, many African Americans in Detroit in 1930 were ready to embrace teachings of W. D. Fard.

One such enthusiast of this new teaching was Elijah Muhammad. Born Elijah Poole in 1897, he was the son of a Baptist preacher. He, like many other African Americans, left the South during the Great Migration. Having settled in Detroit, he experienced the racism and the joblessness that were common during that period. One evening, in a packed UNIA hall, he readily embraced Fard’s message. He came to see this mysterious man from Mecca as a sort of Mahdi, that is, a guided one who would restore the lost tribe of the Shabazz and usher in the final judgment of the White race.

Another facet of this movement that made some traditional Muslims uncomfortable was the notion that Africans are the superior race. Fard shared “hidden truth” with Elijah Muhammad: African Americans and Whites descended from two different gods. Africans were in their nature righteous and divine, while Whites were blue-eyed devils. Elijah extrapolated these views by saying that the White race was created through a process of inbreeding among the tribe by matching recessive genes. Eventually, a new, inferior White race was created. This was a powerful message for African Americans woven in the culture of White supremacy.

In American Islam

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This movement, initially called the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in the Wilderness of North America, shortened its name to the Nation of Islam (NOI). The word nation is important here, as the NOI is both a socio-religious and political movement. Within the NOI, African Americans discovered a means of recapturing personal identity through a standard of performance that was strict, clean, and economically viable.

After Fard's mysterious disappearance in 1934, Elijah Muhammad led the movement and took the title of Chief Minister of Islam. Under his authoritarian leadership, he established an extensive hierarchy with ministers, supreme captains, captains, and lieutenants. All new membership applications went through him, and, once accepted, the new convert dropped his or her "slave" or last name and replaced it with an "X," denoting the African ancestry that had been decimated by slavery.

Elijah Muhammad, who later took the title Messenger of Allah, taught that young African Americans were not rascals, but children of God. Malcolm X, the most famous member of the NOI, saw within this movement a chance to realize his own self-worth and lift himself out of a lifestyle of drugs and promiscuity. Having witnessed the torching of his house as a six-year-old by Ku Klux Klan members, Malcolm X was ripe for the message of African American liberation preached by Elijah Muhammad. In 1947, at the age of 22 and while serving a prison sentence, he became a fervid member of the NOI. After his release from prison in 1952, Malcolm X propagated the ideas of the NOI. He was instrumental in the conversion of many prominent African Americans to Islam, including boxer Cassius Clay, who became Muhammad Ali. This would not prove to be a lifelong call for Malcolm X. His disenchantment with the NOI and his revered leader, Elijah Muhammad, began in the early 1960s. The NOI expected members to adhere to strict dress codes and dietary restrictions, and to avoid such habits as oversleeping. In light of these strict lifestyle guidelines, it came as a shock to Malcolm X and others that Elijah Muhammad had fathered children with multiple women. Further, Muhammad denied that he was the father and expelled these women from the organization.

In addition, while it was held that Malcolm X would be Muhammad's successor, jealousy sprang from within the NOI leadership and the smooth orator was kept from the limelight for three months. Shortly after that, Malcolm X embarked on a life-changing *hajj* trip to Mecca. During this time he saw Muslims of all races, including White people,

gathered to worship. Filled with shame, he observed the incongruity of separatist NOI doctrines with the inclusiveness of worldwide Islam.

In 1964, Malcolm X broke with this assemblage and started the Muslim Mosque, Inc. Less than one year later, while speaking at his newly formed political group, the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), he was shot and killed by an unidentified assailant, an act which cost the world one of the most compelling political and religious leaders of the twentieth century.

A decade later, Elijah Muhammad died, which caused a great stir among NOI members. Because of his status as the Messenger of Allah, some people believed that he would never succumb to a physical death. In 1975, Wallace Muhammad, Elijah's son, took the reins of the organization, which, at this time, boasted 1 million members.

Tremendous changes took place within the organization under Wallace, who, like Malcolm X, struggled with some of the basic doctrines of the Nation. Just months into his tenure, Wallace began to publicly decry the doctrine of African superiority. He declared that Whites were to be considered fully human and even welcomed them to join the ranks of the Nation. He also de-emphasized political aspects of the organization, desiring instead to highlight the spiritual aspects of being a Muslim. Along with this, Wallace brought the NOI, which he renamed The World Community of Al-Islam in the West (WCIW) and later the Muslim American Society, to a more grounded orthodoxy.

Not wanting to go in the inclusive direction of Wallace, Louis Farrakhan revived the earlier tenets of the Nation of Islam in 1978. Farrakhan desired to keep the organization rooted in the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, with all of its racist, separatist, and heretical overtones. Most of his followers were new converts, as the majority of the original Nation hitched their wagon to Wallace's horse.

Many people within the traditional Muslim community have had cause for hope concerning the practice and polity of the NOI. However, in 1990, Farrakhan publicly declared the *shahada*, proclaiming that there is only one God and Muhammad is his messenger. In doing this, he was explicitly excluding Elijah or Fard from any divine status. In a further move away from separatist ideals, Farrakhan and Warith Deen Muhammad met on Labor Day weekend 2000, with the goal of ending twenty-five years of conflict. Here, he

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Origins of African American Islam

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again publicly declared the *shahada* and brought the NOI's observance of Friday prayers and Ramadan more in line with orthodox Islam.

Though the NOI today incorporates a membership that is a fraction of its burgeoning numbers of the 1970s (currently about 20,000 by some estimates), one should not underestimate the influence of Farrakhan and his followers. In the midst of the Los Angeles riots of 1992, leaders from the Crips and the Bloods met together in a mosque at the behest of Imam Brother Aziz, Louis Farrakhan's representative. In a historic act, these rival gangs, who just days before had been killing each other in the streets, signed a truce, thus solidifying the notion that the only national leader whom most Crips and Bloods seem to take seriously is Louis Farrakhan.

Indeed, today's NOI has played a tremendous role in keeping drug dealers off inner-city streets, providing a safety net for men and women fresh out of prison, and starting schools in areas where other educational options were subpar. All of this contributes to the appeal of Islam among African Americans. Robert Dannin states on page 12 of his book *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*: "Every [African American] youth grows up in proximity to some notion of Islam."

In addition to the two mentioned African American Islamic movements above, several other less influential movements dotted the United States landscape in the twentieth century. Other such movements included the Ahmadiyyas, the Hanafi Madhabs, the Darul Islam Movement, and Allah's Nation of Five Percenters.

Islam Among African Americans Today

"There ain't no place for me in Christianity," Robert said, as he leaned against the front door of the Islamic Center in a Midwest American city. This sixty-something-year-old man, dressed in his loose-fitting button-down shirt and jeans with a cane at his side, had a jovial spirit. He was the kind of man you would want standing at the door to greet individuals entering for Friday prayers. A recent stroke left him limping and somewhat slow with his words, but his mind was sharp. His mouth was upturned in a steady smile, while his eyes revealed years of hardship.

He grew up in St. Louis and, as a child, attended church regularly. There was a problem though. He remembers looking through his Sunday School books and only seeing white faces. He had a longing for a faith that was for him, for his people. In contrast, he recalls seeing young African American men walking tall in neatly pressed suits throughout the

streets of his neighborhood, calling others to join the fold of the NOI. Robert admired these men and would think to himself, "Man, I want to be a Muslim!" And this he did. Years later, while reading the Quran in a prison cell, this former churchgoer committed himself to Islam.

When asked why he converted to Islam, the answer was clear: Robert never had felt like he was "in" with Whites. He was always an outsider. Earlier in his life, he was a part of Alcoholics Anonymous. He quit, however, because the program only works if one is in community with the other participants. He couldn't get the other, mostly White, participants to keep him accountable. Now, as a YMCA volunteer, he has never been invited out by his White coworkers for a meal or to their home, while he sees them getting together with each other all the time. In his words, "White people just wanna be separate."

Robert's experience differed from Elijah Muhammad who had faced overt racism at the hands of the KKK during the 1920s. Robert had struggled with racism his whole life. He felt that White people always kept him at arm's length. But then he found his place with a group that welcomed him "in." At the local mosque that day there were Africans, African Americans, Asians, Arabs, and even a few Whites. Robert seemed comfortable in his Sunni Islamic surroundings. With much of the sectarian movements of the last century waning and many new converts coming in under the auspices of traditional Islam, Robert motioned to the others in the mosque and said, "We're all the same." Now, as a Muslim, Robert felt that he had gone back to his roots. "Most of the Africans that came over in slavery were Muslims," he said. He felt he had found his faith, for his people.

Despite the challenges, Robert and people like him are not beyond the reach of the gospel. Though many African Americans have converted to Islam, there are those who are still attracted to the unencumbered gospel message of hope, redemption, and justice. Carl Ellis, Jr. aptly notes in his book *Free at Last?: The Gospel in the African-American Experience*, "While African American Muslims have an Islamic veneer rationally, they have an intuitive Christian core." Indeed, it was this Christian faith that helped generations of African Americans endure slavery and even led some to resist oppression. Many have remained connected to a Christian community, as their relatives are still committed followers of Christ. Their worldview, to a large degree, is still Christian. This is good news for one who desires to share the love of Jesus with African Americans who have converted to Islam.



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Friday, November 1, 2019. Please pray for

...cessation of war in Yemen. Of Yemen's population of 29 million, 99.6% are Muslim.
...Ali, a Sudanese Christian from a Muslim background. Tortured by Sudanese authorities, Ali fled to a neighboring country. Ali's request: "Ask the Lord to use my testimony to draw other Muslims to Christ."
...believers in Kazakhstan. To obtain registration, churches are required to provide the names and addresses of at least 50 members, an impossibility for small congregations. Of Kazakhstan's population of 18 million, 52% are Muslim.

Friday, November 8, 2019. Please pray for

...a Global Initiative team member who is teaching an equipping class in Nagaland, India during November 11-15.
...church planters in the Indonesian island of Java. Of Java's population of 141 million, 90% are Muslim.
...strong participation in the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church on Sunday, November 10.

Friday, November 15, 2019. Please pray for

...protection for new believers from Muslim backgrounds in Saudi Arabia. In line with *sharia* law, it is a capital offense for a Muslim to convert to Christianity in Saudi Arabia. Of Saudi's population of 34 million, 92% are Muslim.
...the Mandinka Muslim people group of Gambia. The Mandinka make up 42% of Gambia's population of 2.3 million.
...new Christians from Muslim backgrounds in Somalia. The Al-Shabaab Islamist terror group has repeatedly targeted Somali converts from Islam. Of Somalia's population of 15 million, 99.6% are Muslim.

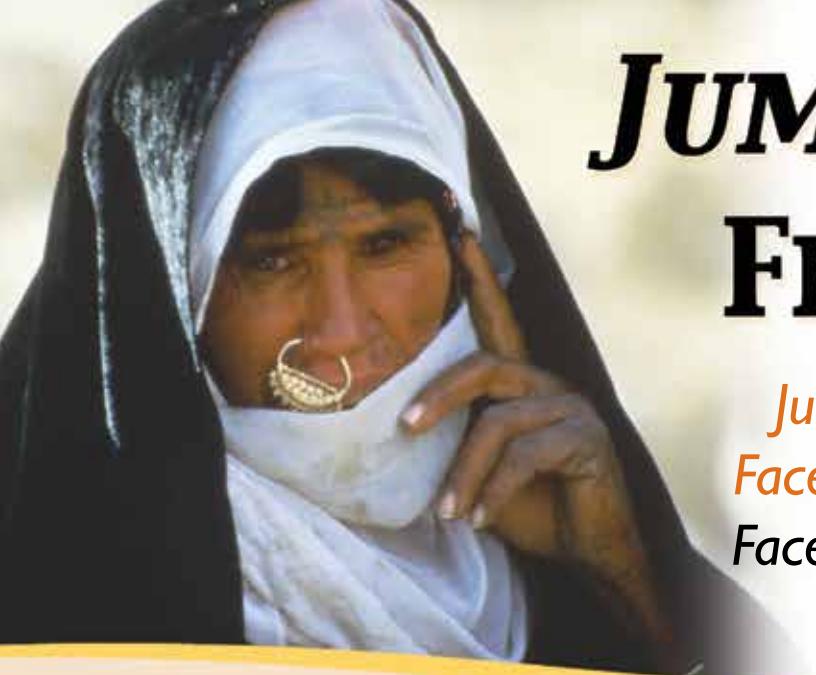
Friday, November 22, 2019. Please pray for

...the Islamic Republic of Iran. More and more Muslims are coming to the Lord Jesus and the church is flourishing, despite the hostility of hard line authorities. Of Iran's population of 83 million, 98% are Muslim.
...the Maldives Islands, where a citizen can be jailed for simply having a Bible in their home.
...the effectiveness of a Bible app created so the Kurdish people can download Scriptures in their own language.

Friday, November 29, 2019. Please pray for

...the 16 "Centers of Hope" across Syria. Christian workers are providing food and shelter for new believers from both Christian and Muslim backgrounds.
...Emir and Rahim, two former Muslims in Chad who have recently professed Christ as Savior.
...reconstruction efforts in Christian towns of Iraq. Over 70% of the infrastructure and buildings in Christian towns were damaged or destroyed during the "IS" occupation.

I urge, then, first of all that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone. – 1 Timothy 2:1, NIV



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Friday, December 6, 2019. Please pray for

...the ministry of Al-Massira (Arabic for “The Path”) courses. Al-Massira is a resource for presenting the Christian faith to those from non-Western backgrounds.

...Samir, a young Saudi Muslim man who is studying in Bahrain. Samir is reading and learning from the Word of the God. Pray that the Holy Spirit will draw him to receive Jesus as Savior.

...Christians in northern Nigeria who continue to suffer attacks by Boko Haram Islamist militants.

Friday, December 13, 2019. Please pray for

...an Arab-American Learning Center in a city in the U.S. Hundreds of Muslims attend the center on a weekly basis. In addition to ESL classes and provisions to meet physical needs, everyone receives a Bible and hears a gospel presentation.

...the ministry of Assad, a convert from Islam in Iran. He states, “My life changed when I met Christ.” In the past eight months Assad has distributed 250 Bibles and 600 DVDs of *The Life of Christ* in schools and hospitals in Iran.

...church planting teams among India’s Muslim people groups. Of India’s 1.35 billion citizens, 190 million are Muslims.

Friday, December 20, 2019. Please pray for

...believers in Eritrea. A recent government directed raid on a church in the city of Keren resulted in the arrest of several Christians, including women and children. Of Eritrea’s population of 3.3 million, 45% are Muslim.

...Heydar, a convert from Islam in Turkey. A government employee “turned him in” whereupon Heydar was imprisoned and beaten: “Not only have I been freed, but the Muslim man who turned me in has now become a follower of Jesus.”

...a “ministry center” in the country of Tajikistan involved in sharing the gospel and discipling disabled believers who are mostly from a Muslim background. Of Tajikistan’s population of 9 million, 96% are Muslims.

Friday, December 27, 2019. Please pray for

...a faithful ministry team in a strongly Muslim area of Central Asia. They have been encouraged after five Muslims recently accepted Christ. They are now praying for another group of 18 Muslims who are truly seeking to know the truth.

...a new children’s club ministry among the Muslim Rohingya and local Muslim Bengali families in the south of Bangladesh. Of Bangladesh’s population of 162 million, 87% are Muslim.

...wisdom and Holy Spirit refreshing for ministries helping thousands of neglected, fatherless children in Mauritania. Divorce and polygamy are “normal” parts of life. Of Mauritania’s population of 4.5 million, 99.5% are Muslim.

**All personal names used herein are pseudonyms.*

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