

# Where Muslim Dreams May Lead

Shortly before ISIS struck Paris in November killing 130 people, I committed what must have been utter idolatry in the eyes of its iconoclastic Muslim exterminators. I drove to Bourges, a medieval city in the centre of France, and spent a few hours in St Etienne's Cathedral to let its twenty-two thirteenth-century stained-glass windows tell me the story of my Christian faith in a mighty burst of colours.

At first I stood alone that sunny morning in the ambulatory at the east end of this magnificent Gothic sanctuary, but quickly I found myself engaged in a long and daunting dialogue with a cultured Frenchwoman about the looming demise of our common civilisation to which these windows testified. It was a conversation so troubling that I will remember it for the rest of my life.

She seemed to have appeared from nowhere. "How long, monsieur, before this becomes the next Palmyra?" she asked me softly, referring to ISIS's recent destruction of the Temple of Baal in that ancient Semitic city in Syria, a Unesco World Heritage site just like this church. She went on:

"When will these barbarians be here to raze Chartres cathedral, level our vineyards and smash the vats of Burgundy and Bordeaux? How soon will red wine flow down the street as it did in America during Prohibition, but this time mixed with blood? Will Christians in Europe be enslaved, beheaded or crucified like the Chaldeans in Iraq at this very moment?"

"I was born in Leipzig in Germany, madame," I answered. "My home church was the Thomaskirche where Johann Sebastian Bach is buried. A few years ago, I sat there in the chancel with my feet resting on Bach's tomb. The Thomaner, the boys' choir he headed almost three centuries ago, had just begun the opening chorus of his Christmas Oratorio when I was overcome by a premonition similar to yours. Will the day come when the Muslims will forbid these children to sing, I wondered? Will they rip out the church's two mighty organs? Will they

smelt its bells and replace them with a muezzin? Will they outlaw concerts and art shows? Will they butcher educated women?"

"Will they?" she asked.

"At the time I thought I was being hysterical," I said. "But that was before anybody had ever heard of ISIS. Now I believe it's entirely possible."

"We have much to lose, monsieur," she replied, "not just our lives, but our entire cultural legacy!"

"They have declared an apocalyptic war on us, and they mean it, madame," I reminded her, "but we can still beat them back."

"How, monsieur, under whose leadership? Do you see a new Charles Martel around? Obama is no Charles Martel, neither is François Hollande." Charles Martel was the Frankish leader who defeated the Muslims in 732 AD at the Loire, a few hours' drive from where we were standing.

"You are right, madame, we are ill prepared for this conflict. Yet there is hope that it might become a fatal trap for radical Islam."

On the face of it, the notion that the West is in any way spiritually or philosophically equipped to forestall the end-time that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the ISIS "caliph", has in store for us seemed preposterous at a time when a million Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees were expected in Germany alone in 2015 and hundreds of thousands more elsewhere in the European Union. This is a war of belief systems. How can we face up to religious fanatics whose holy scripture commands them in more than one hundred verses to kill the infidel? How can we oppose them when they welcome death and believe that their deity wants them to destroy this sinful world?

Christianity, the peaceful alternative to Islamic belligerence, has been weakened to the point of absurdity in Europe. In France, it's not that the shrinking flock of Catholics has deserted its shepherds; it is the other way around. There are only 14,000 priests left in that nation of 66 million

to preach, teach and administer the sacraments, one for every 4700 Frenchmen. Where I have my summer home in the Charente region, the local *curé* must serve more than seventy altars. Old ladies lead Christian funeral services because no clergyman is available. Even among those who attend church regularly few know the essentials of their faith. I recently went to a dinner party of practising Catholics, all with university degrees. None of them had even heard of the Nicene Creed.

Across the Rhine, the chancelleries of the 24-million-member Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) appear morosely busy systematising the ontological anarchy imported from the USA. "Gender mainstreaming", a loanword borrowed from American English, has become a chic buzzword for senior EKD clerics. Their synods are often busier accommodating the libidinous preferences of their pastors and laity than with formulating theological bulwarks against the lethal doctrines of the Islamic extremists.

When *ideaSpektrum*, a Christian magazine, asked the leaders of the twenty regional *Landeskirchen* making up the EKD whether they considered Great Commission timely given the mass immigration of Muslims, half did not respond, and just one answered outright, yes, Christ's last words—"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19-20)—were indeed relevant in this context. One high-ranking woman cleric from Düsseldorf opined: "We mustn't deprive them of their beliefs after what they have been through," and Bishop Markus Dröge of Berlin told his synod that his church body would not "pester" these refugees with the Christian message. The Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany stated inanely: "They need humanity, not mission." Meanwhile the highest Protestant cleric in Germany, Lutheran bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm of Bavaria, has joined the board of a new Islamic Centre in Munich. In Leipzig, the congregation of Bach's Thomaskirche has taken the lead in clamouring for the construction of a mosque with four minarets.

Yet there is a flip side to this historical drama which is on a scale of the barbarian invasions of Europe which brought down the Roman Empire. The difference is that while the mainline Protestant denominations of Europe often seem theologically

hollowed out, and the Roman Catholic Church is wrestling with its own, ostensibly insuperable divisions in Europe, Islam might be in worse trouble. Under-reported by the secular media, a global phenomenon is under way: Muslims are converting to various Christian denominations in droves in every part of the world, but especially in Germany. In fairness, reporters must not be blamed for not getting a handle on this story, because it cannot be quantified, for nobody keeps statistics. It can only be told on the basis of a wide array of occurrences, all of which are verifiable.

Professor Thomas Schirrmacher, chairman of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, told me of a Roman Catholic archbishop he knows who baptises an average of fifty Muslims every month. "A great number of Catholic priests do the same but without fanfare," said Rev. Albrecht

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Hauser, a retired Lutheran missionary and Islam specialist in Stuttgart. "They don't like to make it public, fearing that ISIS might use it as a pretence to persecute Catholics in Asia and Africa even more." More and more EKD pastors, ignoring their denominational leaders' antagonism to mission and their preference for inter-faith dialogue, quietly baptise former Muslims virtually every week. "You see these immigrants in many Sunday services. They listen attentively to the sermons, take notes, study the Bible and eventually present themselves to the pastor asking to enrol in cate-

chism classes," said Schirrmacher's wife, Christine, a noted scholar of Islam.

Churches not affiliated with the EKD often attract refugees even more easily. Baptist Pastor Mark A. Bachmann, an American, estimates that at least 2000 became Christians during his twenty-three-year ministry in Nuremberg. In the independent Lutheran Church of the Trinity in Berlin, Pastor Gottfried Martens baptises ten or more former Muslims on most Sundays. Six hundred converts from Iran and Afghanistan make up two-thirds of this thriving parish in a city ranking among the most secular in Europe. Martens's Sunday services often last more than two hours, as it takes a long time for this large number of ex-Muslims to kneel down at the altar rail and receive the sacrament and blessing while the rest of the congregation of dark-skinned worshippers lustily chant sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Lutheran hymns they have learned in Berlin. "Former Muslims are particularly attracted to these hymns and our high liturgy,"

explained Pastor Martens, “because they establish an intimacy with God they had not known in their previous faith.”

On a much smaller scale, Sister Rosemarie Götz, a Protestant deaconess, started a tiny evangelical congregation of fifteen in the predominantly Muslim district of Neukölln a few years ago; it soon swelled to nearly 150, almost entirely ex-Muslim. Close by, Rev. Sadegh Seperi, a Presbyterian minister, estimates that he has already baptised more than 500.

Leipzig’s independent Lutheran church, also called Trinity, instituted German-language courses for immigrants a few years ago, using Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible as a textbook. Next, the students asked to be instructed in the Christian faith and to be baptised. Now between ten and twenty new catechumens sign up for catechism classes every week, according to Rev. Hugo Gevers, a missionary from South Africa. “The amazing thing is that these converts are now doing ministry among the children of unchurched German slum dwellers here in Leipzig,” he said.

“Is this a mass movement? No,” cautioned Professor Schirmmacher. “But it is significant,” his wife Christine added.

“It seems all the more significant as this is part of a global phenomenon,” I explained to the French lady in Bourges Cathedral after telling her about the conversions in Germany.

“It doesn’t happen here in France,” she said. “Or does it?”

“It does, madame, but this is even more difficult to research because converts are in greater danger here than in Germany. They risk their lives when their change of faith becomes known in the violent Muslim ghettos on the outskirts of Paris, Marseilles or Lyon. When I am in Paris, I try to take taxis driven by dark-skinned women. They make wonderful interview partners. Many have told me that they have become Catholics or Protestants without telling their parents. They might even attend Friday prayers with them in their mosques but then go to church on the following Sunday.”

“But this is anecdotal,” she interjected.

“Yes, it is anecdotal,” I allowed. “But how else does one explore a religious reality in a country that keeps no statistics about such matters? All we can go by are compilations of anecdotes—but many, many anecdotes.”

“You are right, there’s hope” she replied, “and let’s not forget the moving spectacle of 300,000 young Parisians taking to the streets last year in protest against our government’s decision to legalise same-sex marriage.”

The most difficult part of this tale of two faiths in Europe is to relate what prompts thousands of Muslims on every continent to risk being murdered or executed as apostates by changing their religion. It is particularly difficult for me as a confessional Lutheran. We are a hard-nosed bunch. We don’t like to dabble in supernatural phenomena. We need to be “convicted by Holy Scriptures and plain reason”, to paraphrase Martin Luther’s “Here I stand” speech before the Imperial Diet of Worms in 1521. We don’t “do dreams”, as the Americans say. But now I must discuss Muslim dreams here, and leave it to my readers to question my state of mind.

Soon after I joined United Press International (UPI) as religious affairs editor fifteen years ago, I was confronted with a fact that Nabeel Qureshi, a US physician of Pakistani ancestry, himself a noted convert to Christianity, would later describe thus: “Dreams are the only means by which the average Muslim expects to hear directly from God.” One of my first UPI stories I received from the leader of a conservative Presbyterian denomination in Pakistan who had started a Bible school at the Afghan border at the time when the Taliban were still in power in Kabul.

Suddenly there appeared imams of mosques in Afghanistan, which was still run by the Taliban then. Having travelled for hundreds of kilometres, they now asked to be catechised because they wanted to turn their congregations into de facto Christian churches. Like Lutherans, Calvinists are wary of supernatural events. But when I asked this Pakistani Presbyterian what had prompted these imams to come to his Bible school, he said: “Dreams! Christ had appeared to them in their sleep and instructed them to come here to hear the truth.”

Next I heard of similar episodes from a Lutheran theologian in Egypt whom imams visited through his back door in the middle of the night for the same purposes; I heard it from a Catholic missionary who had worked in Algeria; and from a Baptist whose surprise visitors told him that Christ had appeared to them in their tents in Saudi Arabia. An Anglican priest spoke of hundreds of Persian women attending secret Bible studies in Tehran following dreams. Pastor Gottfried Martens in Berlin estimated that at least two-thirds of his Persian and Afghan converts had followed the instructions of a “figure of light” identifying himself as the Jesus of the Christian Bible and not the “Isa” of the Koran. Sister Rosemarie, the Berlin deaconess, reported the same.

In the US state of Colorado, Pastor George Naeem, a physician and former Coptic priest from Egypt, is conducting Bible study classes and theology courses in Arabic via short-wave radio and

the internet with thousands of students on every continent. “Virtually all came following dreams,” he reported, saying his own denomination, the conservative Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, was very unhappy with him saying this. “They think this is unbiblical. But then how unbiblical is it to report that large numbers of Muslims are being sent on the Damascus Road [Acts 9]?”

Thomas Schirrmacher, the theologian and sociologist of religion from Bonn, said tongue-in-cheek that the pattern of all these conversions suggested that God upheld Lutheran rules: “God sticks to Reformation doctrine, which says that faith comes by receiving the Word through Scripture and preaching. In these dreams, Jesus never engages in hocus-pocus, but simply sends these people to where the Word is faithfully proclaimed.”

I have lost contact with the French lady I met while delighting in the beauty of the stained-glass windows in St Étienne’s Cathedral in Bourges. Were we to meet again, I would love to tell her the *sequitur* of my tale of conversions: Weeks after bidding farewell to her, I spoke with my friend Michael Stollwerk, who as the senior Lutheran preacher of the joint Catholic-Protestant Cathedral of Wetzlar, north of Frankfurt, filled this huge sanctuary to capacity thanks to his witty sermons. We talked about the meaning of these strange Muslim dreams and their implications for the whole church of Christ around the world.

“Have I ever told you what happened to me after a service when I was still at the Cathedral?” he asked.

“Tell me!”

“I stood at the exit, still vested, bidding worshippers goodbye, when a veiled woman approached me. I fumbled through a slit in my robe for my wallet, thinking she was a beggar. ‘No, no,’ she said. ‘I only have a question: Are you the imam here?’ I answered: ‘Well, in a way I am—I am the pastor.’ She went on: ‘In that case you are the right man. God commanded me in a dream to go to the big church on the market square and ask the imam for the truth.’”

“So what did you do, Michael?”

“I taught her the catechism and baptised her

several months later, as I have baptised many other Muslims in my ministry.”

“So what do you make of your church leaders’ refusal to apply the Great Commission to these immigrants?” I wanted to know.

“God sends these Muslims to us. Those leaders do not follow his will. They are disobedient to the Holy Spirit. This is very grave.”

Michael Stollwerk and I then discussed this in the light of Luther’s concept of the *ecclesia abscondita*, the one true church hidden under the debris of clerical foibles and denominational divisions.

“The *ecclesia abscondita* is emerging,” he said. “It manifests itself in two ways: For one thing there are these dreams, which know no confessional boundaries. Muslims are being sent to Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, to Copts, Anglicans, Lutherans, Baptists and Calvinists, all of whom have one thing in common: They are bound by Scripture, not by the zeitgeist. For another thing, the *ecclesia abscondita* becomes visible in its unity in martyrdom: ISIS makes no distinctions between Chaldeans, Latin-rite Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans or evangelicals. They all must suffer for their faith in Christ.”

“You are no longer at the Cathedral, Michael. Are you still in touch with Muslims?”

“Oh yes, part of my present ministry is to teach compulsory religion classes at a trade school.

Catholic pupils go to the Catholic teacher’s class. The Protestants come to mine. The Muslims could take a course in secular ethics instead. But they all prefer to come to me. I have ten of them in my class. They are my best students.”

“And what do you say to them?”

“I tell them: ‘Now listen! I am a Lutheran pastor, and I am here to convert you.’ They answer: ‘That’s fine. But we’ll try to convert you!’”

“And what do you say to that?”

“Be my guest.”

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