

# The role of dreams and visions in the apostolate to Muslims and its application in cross-cultural ministry

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Dreams and visions occur and are taken seriously in almost every culture. They play a significant role in biblical and Islamic revelation. They are noteworthy in later Christian and Muslim history, although they have suffered some devaluation in later Western thinking. This essay explores the history of these phenomena.

Recent years have seen an upsurge in the number of Muslims following Christ, often as the result of dreams and visions. This is a widespread experience.

There is some discussion as to why God might use such a means, despite its apparent shortcomings. The world-view change required by Western missionaries to accommodate this method is outlined. Some practical steps are given to help cross-cultural workers cooperate with God in this remarkable mode of evangelism amongst Muslims.

## CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction   | 2  |
| Definitions of dreams and visions                          | 2  |
| Dreams and visions in the ancient world and other cultures | 2  |
| Dreams and visions in the Bible                            | 3  |
| Dreams and visions throughout Christian history            | 4  |
| Dreams and visions in ancient Islam                        | 5  |
| Dreams and visions in later Islam                          | 6  |
| Salvific dreams and visions in modern Islam                | 7  |
| The widespread nature of this phenomenon                   | 7  |
| The shortcomings of dreams and visions                     | 8  |
| Why might God use this method?                             | 8  |
| A change in world-view is needed                           | 9  |
| Could we use this approach in evangelism?                  | 10 |
| Are missionaries still needed?                             | 11 |
| Conclusion   | 11 |
| Bibliography   | 12 |

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<sup>1</sup> This is a pseudonym – the author works in an Arab country.

## Introduction

This article assumes that anthropological insights can be used in the task of reaching people for Christ. It implies that factors such as ethnographic research, cultural analysis and creative application may be appropriate means in the work of God's kingdom. It is the aim of this essay to use an anthropological approach to discuss the role of dreams and visions in the apostolate to Muslims. Such an approach will impact our view of reality and belief systems as well as our cultural practices. We will consider such issues as the appraisal of dreams and visions in various cultures and in the Bible, how dreams might be interpreted according to the cultural context, and the world-view changes required for cross-cultural workers to consider dreams as an evangelistic opportunity.

## Definitions of dreams and visions

A dream is "a series of perceptions or images experienced during sleep."<sup>2</sup> Some societies believe that a person's soul never sleeps, so that while the body is sleeping, the soul departs to have adventures of its own.<sup>3</sup> A vision is "a supernatural visual manifestation, which may also involve the aural, that serves as a divine revelation of something otherwise secret."<sup>4</sup> Visions differ from dreams in that subjects report they were awake and conscious.

## Dreams and visions in the ancient world and other cultures

Dreams and visions are reported in almost every culture and religious tradition. In the Ancient Near East dreams were recognised to convey messages from the gods<sup>5</sup>. Many Greeks held the same view. Apart from Aristotle and Democritus, all the main Greek thinkers and writers placed great credence in dreams. Plato took them very seriously, and Socrates chose to spend the last day of his life writing poetry as a result of a dream. Hippocrates, the famous physician, suggested dreams as one of the most important diagnostic tools. The dramatists Aeschylus and Sophocles based many of their works on dreams.<sup>6</sup> The 'Ghost Dance' nativistic movements among American Indian tribes were precipitated when individuals experienced visions.<sup>7</sup> Wagner claims that the early missionaries' inability to tap into this forfeited a valuable evangelistic opportunity.<sup>8</sup> Last century many Australian aboriginals responded to the gospel because of dreams, believing it to be a message from the ancient Dreamtime.<sup>9</sup> In Europe, the psychologist Sigmund Freud described his work *The Interpretation of Dreams* as "the most valuable of all the discoveries it has been my good fortune to make."<sup>10</sup> The recent dominance of

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<sup>2</sup> "Dream" in .Myers, 293. Sleep is a universal phenomenon, recorded from the earliest times (Gen.2.21).

<sup>3</sup> Kraft (1996), 204. This explains why it was sometimes considered dangerous to wake a person who was sleep-walking or obviously dreaming.

<sup>4</sup> "Vision" in .Myers, 1041

<sup>5</sup> See the dream of King Keret in the Ugaritic texts : Pritchard, 143

<sup>6</sup> Kelsey, 71

<sup>7</sup> Hiebert, 389

<sup>8</sup> "Rejection was the result when the Indian religious dynamic of receiving revelations through visions and dreams was opposed despite numerous biblical precedents." Wagner, 234

<sup>9</sup> Gill, 14

<sup>10</sup> He continued: "Insight such as this falls to one's lot but once in a lifetime." Freud , xxxiii

empirical scientism in the West has pushed dreams and visions into an obscurity not previously sanctioned elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> The anthropologist Murdock, however, lists ‘dream interpretation’ as a phenomenon which occurs “in every culture known to history or ethnography.”<sup>12</sup>

## Dreams and visions in the Bible

Dreams and visions are sprinkled liberally from Genesis to Revelation, being mentioned over 200 times. They occur in nearly half of the books of the Bible. The contrast between dreams and visions in the Bible is not always clear– they were sometimes mentioned together (Num.12.6; Joel 2:28). One commentator puts any ambiguity down to sources: “In the E narratives of Genesis dreams are a regular means of such communication, in contrast to the more direct appearances of Yahweh in the J stories.”<sup>13</sup> Sometimes a vision might occur in the context of a deep sleep (Gen.15: 12-17; Dan.8:18), leaving uncertain the state of consciousness of the person involved. In the book of Revelation, John describes himself as being “in the Spirit” (Rev.1:10), but he later calls it ‘a vision’ (Rev.9:17).

Dreams were generally understood to contain messages from God (Job.33:14-18). They were experienced by all kinds of people, young (1.Sam 3) and old (Acts 2: 7), kings (1.Kg.3:5), prophets (Isa.1:1) and a carpenter (Mt.1:20).

The dreams of Gentiles were also recorded: Pharaoh (Gen.41:1-24), his jailed employees (Gen: 40:5-23); the Babylonian king (Dan.4:2-25), enemy soldiers attacking Israel (Jud.7:13-15) and Pilate’s wife (Mt.27:19). In the Joseph and Daniel narratives, oneirocriticism played a key role, although both men claimed divine assistance in dream interpretation (Gen.41:8, Dan.2.2).

Visions in the Bible have been classified into five types: throne visions (e.g. Isa.6; Rev.4:2-11); reality visions, earthly or heavenly (e.g. Amos 8:1-3; Exek.40-48); symbol visions (Amos 7:7-9; Ezek.37:1-14); allegory visions (e.g. Dan.8:1-14; Rev.12); and composite visions (e.g. Dan.7; Rev.17).<sup>14</sup> Each of these responded to a specific need in the context in which they occurred.

A guide was often needed to interpret the vision (Dan.7:16). The angelophanies of the infancy narratives (Mt.1:20-25; 2:13-15; Lk.1:8-21, 26-38; 2:8-15) and epiphanies of the resurrected Christ (Mt.28:17-20) differed from visions in their emphasis on the message of the speaker. “For visions, the important element is the combination of the cognitive and imaginative processes ... they invite those who hear them described or who read them to enter into the experience being recounted and to participate in it.”<sup>15</sup>

The anthropologist E.T.Hall suggests that dreams are a form of thinking, providing a legitimate counter-balance to the cognitive style that dominates the scientific West. He contrasts “the linear world of logic and the integrative world of dreams.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Dreams have not been totally ignored by science. The US Navy established a dream laboratory in San Diego to discover the effect of dream deprivation on the ability for seamen to give or follow orders. Kelsey, 46

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Kraft (1979), 87

<sup>13</sup> P.J.Budd “Dreams” in Brown, 512

<sup>14</sup> “Vision” in .Myers, 1041

<sup>15</sup> “Vision” in .Myers, 1041

<sup>16</sup> Hall, 9

The Biblical writers were aware of the potential of deception via dreams and visions. Dreams were illusive (Ps.73:2), and could be falsely asserted (Jer.23:25-32). Visions could be fabricated (Jer.14:14). Dreamers who misled the people were to be slain (Dt 13:1-5). Nightmares and terrible visions could be a horrifying punishment from God (Job.7:14). These were good reasons for dreams and visions not to be sought. But more pitiable were the times when the visions stopped (1.Sam.3:1; Lam.2:9). This was an indicator that Yahweh had withdrawn from His people. The return of dreams and visions would be a mark of the messianic age (Joel.2:28; Acts.2:17). The many references to visions in the book of Acts bore this out.

## **Dreams and visions throughout Christian history**

It might be expected that dreams and visions would have ceased when the canon of scripture closed. After all, the revelation appeared to be complete (Rev.22.18). This does not appear to be the case. Kelsey claims that “until the year 1200, there were no Christian writers or philosophers who ignored or underestimated the importance of dreams and visions.”<sup>17</sup> He compiles an impressive list. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a work considered for inclusion in the canon of New Testament scripture, described various dreams. Polycarp of Smyrna on his way to Rome had dreamt that he would be killed there, a forewarning subsequently borne out. Justin Martyr, a student of Plato living in Rome, regarded dreams very positively. The Gallic Irenaeus spoke of the dream as “a means for him to maintain a proper contact with God.”<sup>18</sup> Origen established the school at Alexandria, attracting students from all over the known world. He believed that all intelligent people saw dreams as a possible method of divine revelation, and wrote of the precedent in the biblical record. Clement concurred. Tertullian of Carthage in his book *The Anima* wrote: “Is it not known to all the people that the dream is the most usual way that God reveals himself to man?” He observed rapid eye movement in sleeping children, a discovery only recently confirmed by scientists. An account of the martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas mentioned a dream that foretold their death and prepared them for it. In 312 A.D., the emperor Constantine saw a vision with the letters *chi* and *rho*. That night Christ appeared to him in a dream, carrying this symbol. His conversion resulted.<sup>19</sup> Amongst the Eastern Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa wrote a book on humanity with a significant part of it dealing with dreams, and Gregory Nazianzus credited dreams as the source of most of his inspiration. Ambrose once visited the emperor stating that he had been ordered to do so through a dream. The secular scholar Jerome was converted to Christianity through a dream. Athanasius wrote of God’s use of dreams as a means of communication in *The Life of St Anthony*. Gregory Thaumaturge received the inspiration for the earliest Trinitarian creed by means of a dream. *The Travels of Marco Polo* records a remarkable story of deliverance in Baghdad during the reign of last Abbasid caliph al-Musta’sim. The Christian community was told use their faith to move a designated mountain, according to Mt.17.20, or convert to Islam, or be killed. In a dream, the bishop was instructed by God to find a certain humble shoemaker. This man prayed, as the caliph had ordered, and Polo reports: “the earth at the same time trembled in a wonderful and

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<sup>17</sup> Kelsey, 76

<sup>18</sup> Kelsey, 73

<sup>19</sup> Kelsey, 72-76

alarming manner.”<sup>20</sup> The high regard of dreams by early Christians, both simple and scholarly, and chronologically and geographically widespread causes Kelsey to conclude: “When we regard our dreams seriously, ... we are not separating ourselves from Christian tradition, but rather we are immersing ourselves in it.”<sup>21</sup>

Although prefigured in the work of Gregory the Great, the demise of dreams in Christian theology was most strongly promoted by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. He believed that God was located outside of human time-space, and could break through by various means. However this can only be experienced in supernatural ways and not by sense perceptions: moreover reason cannot describe or explain it. It seems to be totally locked up as mystical knowledge. One is reminded of the vision described by Paul (1.Cor.12:2-4). The Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura* pushed dreams and visions to the side, however Luther’s colleague Karlstadt continued to teach about their value.<sup>22</sup> The mystic Muntzer posited them as legitimate form of revelation.<sup>23</sup> He was later executed as a heretic.<sup>24</sup>

Despite this, people have continued to experience dreams and visions which positively impacted their Christian walk. The Wesleyan revival evidenced an outbreak of such phenomena, where people saw images of judgement, the crucified Christ, and even the Trinity. One historian notes: “the majority of these cases occurred in those not habitually subject to special mystical experiences.”<sup>25</sup> The nineteenth century Baptist preacher A.J.Gordon had a dream in which Christ visited his church.<sup>26</sup> This affected his life and ministry profoundly. He wrote: “It was a vision of the deepest reality. Apparently we are most awake to God when we are asleep to the world.”<sup>27</sup> The slave trader John Newton left the work of human trafficking and became an Anglican clergyman as a result of a dream. The mystic St Therese of Lisieux received great peace and assurance as she dreamed in her sick-bed prior to her death.<sup>28</sup>

## Dreams and visions in ancient Islam

Just as other cultures experienced the phenomenon of dreams and visions, so did early Islam. Mohammed’s earliest revelations came to him in dreams: the visions began about five years later.<sup>29</sup> These visions or prophecies continued for about 25 years until his death, providing the content which has been collected into the Qur’an. Surprisingly the Qur’an itself contains few references to dreams and visions – they are mostly found in the Joseph story (Quran.12:36)<sup>30</sup>. The prophetic traditions, the *hadith*, contain more details about dreams than the Qur’an. Mohammed related many of his own dreams. They

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<sup>20</sup> Otis, 166

<sup>21</sup> Kelsey, 74

<sup>22</sup> Rupp, 122

<sup>23</sup> Rupp, 326

<sup>24</sup> Ozment, 97

<sup>25</sup> Rack, 434

<sup>26</sup> Gordon, 101

<sup>27</sup> Kelsey, 11

<sup>28</sup> Kelsey, 13

<sup>29</sup> Lings, 43

<sup>30</sup> References to the Qur’an in this essay have this format, Qur’an.12:36 where 12 is the number of the chapter, and 36 is the number of the verse. They are taken from Yusuf Ali’s translation found on *Alim CD-ROM*

included details of future events that would impact his life, concerning his wife<sup>31</sup>, friends<sup>32</sup>, traitors<sup>33</sup>, military victories<sup>34</sup>, and epidemics<sup>35</sup>. He called good dreams “one of the forty-six parts of prophetism”.<sup>36</sup> Good dreams were seen as coming from God and should be told to others. Bad dreams were from Satan and should be kept to oneself. Spitting on the left and seeking refuge in God would negate the effect of bad dreams.<sup>37</sup> The prophet himself could be seen in other people’s dreams, and Satan could not imitate his shape.<sup>38</sup> He encouraged his companions to tell him their dreams so he could interpret them.<sup>39</sup> The worst lie, Mohammed said, was to untruthfully claim having had a dream.<sup>40</sup>

## Dreams and visions in later Islam

Dreams and visions have played a key role in later Islam, particularly in the mystical movement of Sufism. The relating and interpreting of dreams and visions provide a way of Sufi guides to gauge the progress of initiates through the seven-fold path.<sup>41</sup> The types of dreams reported will enable the *sheikh* to determine when a novice has passed to the next stage. Even a vision of God Himself is possible for a Sufi adept. It should be challenged, and, if false, it will vanish. Sufi saints were also believed to have appeared after their death in the dreams of their followers, greatly adding to the saint’s prestige.<sup>42</sup>

The interpretation of dreams was listed as one of Ghazali’s “acceptable” types of scientific study.<sup>43</sup> This gave them an essential *imprimatur*. “The importance of dreams and visions in the whole scheme of the Sufi path can hardly be overstressed; the literature of Sufism and the hagiographa in particular are full of them, and their significance in the life of individuals and society.”<sup>44</sup>

In popular folk Islam, dreams still have a place. If a person is afflicted by *jinn*, a practitioner may sleep with part of the person’s clothing and in the morning declare the answer that came to him in a dream.<sup>45</sup>

Recent international politics have also felt their impact. Former president Idi Amin justified the expulsion of Asians from Uganda on the basis of a dream involving the prophet Mohammed.<sup>46</sup> Saddam Hussein claimed a similar oneiric visitation to help him position missiles during the Gulf War.<sup>47</sup> Dreams continue to exert a noteworthy influence on Islamic life and thinking.

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<sup>31</sup> Sahih el-Bukhari Hadith 9.139 from *Alim* (the source of all the Hadith references)

<sup>32</sup> el-Bukhari 9.146

<sup>33</sup> el-Bukhari 9.158

<sup>34</sup> el-Bukhari 9.164

<sup>35</sup> el-Bukhari 9.162

<sup>36</sup> el-Bukhari 9.118

<sup>37</sup> el-Bukhari 9.114,115

<sup>38</sup> el-Bukhari 9.123 Dreams have been a way of claiming authorisation for a practice which might be otherwise suspect. All of the fifteenth century Sufi masters claimed that Mohammed had appeared to them in dream and commanded them to start a new Method or *tariqa*. Trimmingham, 190

<sup>39</sup> el-Bukhari 9.171

<sup>40</sup> el-Bukhari 9.167

<sup>41</sup> Trimmingham, 158

<sup>42</sup> Trimmingham), 225

<sup>43</sup> Levy, 505

<sup>44</sup> Trimmingham, 190

<sup>45</sup> Musk, 41

<sup>46</sup> Walji and Strong, 7

<sup>47</sup> Robinson, 252



## Salvific dreams and visions in modern Islam

It is of note, then, that there have been widespread reports by Muslims of dreams and visions which have brought them to Christ. In 1868 a group of Shazli mystics in Damascus met to meditate and pray. On one occasion, they awoke from sleep simultaneously and all recounted a dream concerning Jesus. The message spread, and soon a reported 25,000 Shazlis were requesting baptism.<sup>48</sup> In the early 1990's, twenty-four *mullahs* scattered throughout the north of Bulgaria experienced dreams and visions of Jesus, telling them to proclaim repentance and forgiveness in his name from their mosques. They did so, and reportedly many thousands of former Muslims turned to him.<sup>49</sup>

It is not only with men in prominent positions that this phenomenon occurs. In a night vision, a crippled 19 year old Pakistani girl, Gulshan Esther, was healed by a bright figure in a long robe, with the words: "I am Jesus Son of Mary, to whom you have been praying, and I am standing in front of you."<sup>50</sup>

The 'figure in white' or 'bright figure' is a common element in such dreams and visions. It also seems to appear at other times. Unable to initiate religious conversations due to local sensitivities during the Gulf War, some American soldiers stationed in Saudi Arabia were praying as they walked the streets. Several Muslim boys came up to them and asked: "Who is the man in white who walks with you whenever you walk around our city?" The soldiers were amazed at this question, but replied: "It must be Jesus."<sup>51</sup>

Some people do not see Jesus in their dream, but they may respond to other details that eventually lead them to faith. Gulshan Esther was also directed in a dream to search out a man in a town ten miles away. She later obtained a Bible from him.<sup>52</sup> Reading *The Pilgrim's Progress*, an Iranian Muslim was amazed to find a picture in the book identical to one in his dreams.<sup>53</sup> A young Muslim had a vivid dream involving a man he did not know at the corner of two streets in his own city. On awaking, he felt compelled to go that location, and he saw the man from his dream. He introduced himself and the man replied: "I'm the bishop of the Christian church. I think God has sent you to me so I can tell you how much God loves you. Let's go and talk somewhere." Through this encounter the young man became a Christian.<sup>54</sup>

## The widespread nature of this phenomenon

Accounts from places as far apart as Berlin,<sup>55</sup> Turkey,<sup>56</sup> and Algeria<sup>57</sup> and Bangladesh<sup>58</sup> suggest that this is a geographically widespread cross-cultural occurrence.

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<sup>48</sup> Robinson, 249

<sup>49</sup> Robinson, 247

<sup>50</sup> Esther, 60

<sup>51</sup> Claydon, 23

<sup>52</sup> Esther, 75

<sup>53</sup> Miller, 79

<sup>54</sup> Claydon, 64

<sup>55</sup> Otis, 159

<sup>56</sup> Musk, 243

<sup>57</sup> Robinson, 248

<sup>58</sup> Australian Baptist Witness, April 5, 2004 p.2

The percentages of converts from Islam reporting dreams and visions are considerable. One commentator calls it “a large percentage”.<sup>59</sup> Otis refers to “at least 35 percent of all recent Turkish converts”.<sup>60</sup> In a ten year survey of some 600 Muslim background believers from over 35 countries, Woodberry and Shubin reported that “over one-fourth of those surveyed state quite emphatically that dreams and visions were key in drawing them to Christ and sustaining them through difficult times.”<sup>61</sup> One third of attendees at a Central Asian Women’s conference in 1996 claimed to have come to faith in Christ through dreams.<sup>62</sup>

## **The shortcomings of dreams and visions**

There are some good reasons to disregard dreams and visions. They are very subjective, and not independently verifiable. Both Aquinas and Descartes subscribed to physiological origins of dreams, claiming that certain kinds of food or too much food caused bad dreams, which had no intrinsic meaning.<sup>63</sup> Musk describes it well: “To Western thought, ‘dream’ connotes reverie rather than reality, imagination rather than objective truth, fancy rather than fact, misty vagueness rather than stark understanding.”<sup>64</sup>

It is not only the questionable form but also the surreal content that can cause us to dismiss them. “We frequently have a compelling interest not to take a dream seriously, and by its very grotesqueness or exaggeration a dream may lend itself to such an ignoring of its message.”<sup>65</sup> As a medium of communication, dreams and visions do not appear to be either very clear or very reliable.

## **Why might God use such a method?**

There are a variety of reasons why God might use such a problematic method as dreams and visions to draw people to Himself today.

Firstly there is the creative nature of God, who uses a variety of means. Islam, in stark contrast to the West, affords dreams and visions a high credibility. What can be dismissed as mere fantasy or a temporary chemical imbalance in one culture it taken quite seriously as a divine visitation in another. “God’s communication with humanity is depicted in the Bible as coming to humans in familiar, expected ways. (though the message itself was often unexpected. To people who believed that he would speak to them through dreams and visions, he spoke through dreams and visions.”<sup>66</sup> True theology, writes Gilliland, is “using the thought, values, and categories of truth which are authentic to that place and time.”<sup>67</sup>

Secondly, Islam has previously demonstrated a relative lack of response to the gospel. One quarter of the earth’s population subscribes to this highly resistant creed.

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<sup>59</sup> Cate, 233

<sup>60</sup> Otis, 159

<sup>61</sup> Woodberry & Shubin, 6

<sup>62</sup> Robinson, 254

<sup>63</sup> Kelsey, 30

<sup>64</sup> Musk (1988), 163

<sup>65</sup> Horney, 178

<sup>66</sup> Kraft (1979), 214

<sup>67</sup> Gilliland, 11



Compared with people groups in sub-Saharan Africa and South America, the fruit of ministry amongst Muslims has been meagre. Social and cultural factors militate against easy Christian access. The rate of literacy in the Muslim world is generally low, so printed resources have little impact. Poor infrastructure, repressive government censorship and general poverty have often restricted access by outside electronic mass media and other forms of outreach into Muslim countries. Where local Christian communities live close by, their witness has usually been muted by centuries of *dhimmi* status and fear of persecution. All of these factors combine to make ministry to Muslims difficult. At the same time, the resources the church expends on Muslim outreach is disproportionately low. Only 6% of cross-cultural missionaries<sup>68</sup> are sent to the Muslim world, which represents about 70% of the world's most unreached peoples. A pitiful 0.01% of money raised for Christian work goes to the unevangelised world.<sup>69</sup>

Thirdly, previous contact between Christianity and Islam has revealed some flaws. The well-crafted polemics and apologetics of the nineteenth century missionaries to India and the Middle East did not sway either the *ulema* or the masses. Dean Gilliland pointed out: "We don't do evangelism simply by trying to win the minds of Muslims. We have got a history from the very beginning of the Muslim-Christian theological encounter to prove that that just does not work."<sup>70</sup> Muslim people are highly relational. It is significant that most salvific dreams and visions reported a person who spoke to them, rather than simply information being passed on.

### **A change in world-view is needed**

Trained as Western missionaries often are in thinking that evangelism is the transmission of statements about human sin and Christ's death<sup>71</sup>, it could require a huge adjustment to refocus on a new way of reaching out to the house of Islam. Musk suggests that the problem lies with our worldview: "The fact that the New Testament begins with a genealogy and a dream is lost on most missionaries to Muslims... Western values such as individualism, rationalism and naturalism have tended to determine the approach in mission."<sup>72</sup> He asks rhetorically: "Does the Western categorisation of thought prevail, declaiming such a channel [as dreams] as inappropriate for the proclamation of truth?"<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps it only requires some time for the message to sink in to new workers. *EMQ* editor Jim Reapsome has noted: "*Experienced* missionaries among Muslims know that many conversions come not from winning theological arguments but from God's intervention through dreams and healings."<sup>74</sup> (italics mine). Western-trained cross-cultural evangelists may have totally absorbed the 'scientific' viewpoint that dismisses such phenomena. Clearly some change is needed.

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<sup>68</sup> Guthrie (2002), 35

<sup>69</sup> Barrett and Johnson, 25

<sup>70</sup> quoted in Guthrie (1993), 26

<sup>71</sup> "Western Christian faith tends to be cognitively oriented. Evangelism often becomes a matter of communicating propositional truths. Intellectual assent to such truths is taken to equal 'conversion', whereas the New Testament emphasis appears to be far more holistic, expecting conversion to issue from a proclamation in miraculous act as well as word. The resulting 'converts' are ordinary people whose lives have been totally transformed." Musk (1989), 260

<sup>72</sup> Musk (1989), 260

<sup>73</sup> Musk (1989), 270

<sup>74</sup> quoted in Guthrie (1993), 26

Kelsey suggests that we need to adjust our mind-set to include a more compelling belief in spiritual reality. This new worldview would assert the following:

- 1) God is always present, not only in the physical world, but also in the spiritual world, which constantly breaks through into our consciousness via the dream and the vision
- 2) God gives directions to those who are open to them
- 3) We can directly confront and experience this spiritual world
- 4) God is much more anxious to communicate with us than we are to listen.<sup>75</sup>

### **Could we use this approach in evangelism?**

The popular book *Experiencing God* outlines some general principles for ministry. They include the recognition that God takes the initiative in mission, and that He invites us to join Him where He is already working.<sup>76</sup> It is incumbent, then, on those involved in cross-cultural ministry to ascertain how God is calling Muslim men and women to Himself, including the use of dreams and visions.

Having recognised our possible cultural bias against such phenomena, we can now consider how to use dreams and visions in outreach to the house of Islam.

Firstly, we can pray that Muslims would have dreams and visions about Christ. The sending of dreams and visions is a sovereign act of God. They cannot be manufactured by human effort, but they can be requested from God. We can also pray that Muslims would remember their dreams. It has been estimated that 95% of dreams are forgotten within five minutes of waking.<sup>77</sup>

Secondly, we could mention dreams and visions in private and group conversations and in communications with Muslims (radio broadcasts, films, video and audio cassettes, testimonies, tracts, websites<sup>78</sup>, TV and newspaper advertisements, etc.). If dreams and visions are openly on our agenda, Muslims are more likely to talk to us about them.

Thirdly, taking an *emic* stance, we could point out that dreams and visions are given for Muslims to gain knowledge and understanding. In Islamic tradition, there is a continuing expectation of dreams as revelatory. Abu Haraira, a companion of the prophet, reported the following *hadith*: 'I heard Allah's Apostle saying, "Nothing is left of the prophetism except *Al-Mubashshirat*." They asked, "What are *Al-Mubashshirat*?" He replied, "The true good dreams (that conveys glad tidings)."<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, the Arabic term commonly used by Muslims for Christian missionaries today is *mubashshir*, literally 'one who brings good news'. Dreams by Muslims involving Jesus can be interpreted as *al-mubashshiraat* which Mohammed foretold.

Fourthly, we can refer to the prophetic precedent for dreams about Jesus. Mohammed himself reported seeing Jesus: "While sleeping near the Ka'ba last night, I saw in my dream a man of brown color, the best one can see amongst brown color, and his hair was long that it fell between his shoulders. His hair was lank and water was

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<sup>75</sup> Kelsey, 69

<sup>76</sup> Blackaby & King, 69, 77

<sup>77</sup> Kelsey, 45

<sup>78</sup> The website *isaalmasih.net* already does this. An Islamic website *alinaam.org.za* has the testimony of an African pastor's wife who became a Muslim as the result of a dream. The flow goes both ways!

<sup>79</sup> el-Bukhari 9.119

dribbling from his head and he was placing his hands on the shoulders of two men while circumambulating the Kaba. I asked, 'Who is this?' They replied, 'This is Jesus, son of Mary.'<sup>80</sup> For a Muslim to dream about Jesus, then, is not a sign of weak devotion or unfaithfulness to Islam. On the contrary, it is a part of the *sunnah*, or practice of the prophet. Mohammed is presented in the Qur'an as "a beautiful pattern of conduct" for Muslims to follow (Quran.33.21).

Fifthly, we can be prepared to speak to those who have experienced such dreams. Musk asks: "How many Muslim equivalents of a Pharaoh or a Babylonian monarch have woken with a dream pounding in their minds? And where are the Josephs and Daniels of today to affirm and interpret God's word to them?"<sup>81</sup>

### **Are missionaries still needed?**

If God can initiate contact with Muslims by Himself through dreams and visions, is there still a role for cross-cultural missionaries? It is important to note that God's sovereign use of dreams and visions does not negate the need for people to be involved in face-to-face mission to Muslims. The US director of the mission Frontiers is clear about this: "We can talk about miracles, but there is no substitute for the apostolic method that Christ directed. That is, a person with his voice should tell the gospel message. In the end, people who have had dreams and miracles still need a human being."<sup>82</sup> Iranian bishop Dehqani-Tafti testified to this: "Most of the Muslims I know who have followed Christ have done so because of the sacrificial life and sustained love of some Christian friend. You cannot bring the Muslim to Christ unless you love him personally."<sup>83</sup>

The gospel has been incarnational from the beginning (Jn.1:14). God entered our world physically in human form, and He continues to send His ambassadors into the Muslim world to proclaim His glory (Jn.20:21). If these ambassadors are in tune with God's use of dreams and visions, they will be more effective in carrying on His work.

### **Conclusion**

Too often in Christian mission, workers have developed a novel evangelistic approach and then asked God to bless it. Generally it is a method adapted from their own culture, or one that has been found to 'work' in another culture.

God's use of salvific dreams and visions among Muslims provides a new opportunity for people to join Him in something He is already doing. As they study their own Christian scriptures and history, as well as Islamic traditions and history, cross-cultural workers can observe the validity of this methodology. They can then enter with confidence into the thought-world of Muslims to explain the mystery of Christ to them.

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<sup>80</sup> el-Bukhari 4.649

<sup>81</sup> Musk (1989), 270

<sup>82</sup> Bob Blincoe, quoted in Guthrie (2002), 43

<sup>83</sup> Dehqani-Tafti, 79

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**CD-ROM**

*Alim CD-ROM* (ISL software, Release 4.5, 1996)

**ABBREVIATIONS**

*EMQ* – *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*



