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Muslims,  
MAGIC  
AND THE  
Kingdom  
of God  
Rick Love

Muslims, Magic  
and the  
Kingdom of God

Church Planting among Folk Muslims

Rick has given us not only a great book on missions, not only a great book on church planting, but an in-depth look at kingdom theology in action. I recommend it to all those who want to finish the Great Commission of Jesus.

*Bill Jackson, Vineyard Pastor, author of **The Quest for the Radical Middle: A History of the Vineyard***

Unlike many recent books which feature ungrounded formulas or pleasant clichés, *Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God* will equip the reflective, application-oriented soldier of the Cross. These chapters are deeply grounded in the Word of God. Biblical theology and years of experience in the “trenches,” plus unusual communication skills, combine to give us a book that is not merely a good read, but also a realistic manual for battling Satan and his forces. Love is giving us tools that, once applied, will contribute significantly towards the deliverance of tens of thousands of Muslims from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God’s Son.

*Dr. Greg Livingstone, founder of Frontiers, author of **Planting Churches in Muslim Cities: A Team Approach***

Rick Love provides many compelling suggestions in this volume. He blends the insights gained from field experience with the expertise of a biblical scholar. His analysis of the cultural setting of the Scriptures is accurate and often superior to the explanations of biblical scholars who often ignore the animistic phenomena or do not know how to explain them because of their Western orientation. This book can help struggling missionaries gain breakthroughs in ministering to people still afflicted by the tenacious grip of evil spirits.

*Dr. Clinton Arnold, Professor of New Testament and Literature, Talbot School of Theology, author of **Ephesians: Power and Magic** and **Three Crucial Questions on Spiritual Warfare***

In this volume, Dr. Love shows both compassion for Muslims and the ability to think and work within their context to present the life-giving message of Jesus Christ. The book is analytically superb, practically focused, based both on Scripture and experience, and demonstrates the love of Christ. No witness to Muslims can be very effective without dealing with this important area.

*Dr. Charles Kraft, Professor of Anthropology, Fuller Theological Seminary, author of **Christianity in Culture**, **Christianity with Power** and **Defeating Dark Angels***

Rick Love’s book has come right out of the trenches of frontline evangelism among Muslims. A “must-read” for all of those going to the Muslim world.

*Don McCurry, founder and CEO of Ministries to Muslims, noted author*

# Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God

Church Planting among Folk Muslims

**Rick Love**



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Pasadena, California

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*I dedicate this book to  
God's Ambassadors throughout the world who,  
like the one who sent them,  
have laid down their lives  
that Muslims may experience,  
deliverance, forgiveness, and love  
through the Messiah.*



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## Preface

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This book reflects a long pilgrimage. It emerged from my D. Min. studies and also includes numerous insights from my Ph.D. studies. But this book is not about academics. It's about people deeply loved by God and greatly in need of a Savior. It's about a people I love and a people I have served for over twenty years.

I have gained much insight into Muslims through my studies and in my ministry. But I have learned even more from my co-workers among Muslims – men and women of whom the world is not worthy (Heb 11:38). Their profound insights, sacrificial lifestyles and thrilling stories of the outbreaking of God's love among Muslims make me proud to be within their ranks.

Throughout this book I have made liberal use of Arabic pseudonyms to avoid unnecessary problems for my friends and co-workers and to reinforce that the principles I'm emphasizing have application throughout the world of folk Islam. For example, I am referring to the people group I served as the "Baahithiin." which means "the searching ones." When such a pseudonym is first used, it is accompanied by an asterisk and explicitly identified as a pseudonym.

*Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God* is a community project. Many people have made their mark on my thinking and deserve a special recognition. Many thanks to Darrell Dorr, Bob Blincoe, Meg Crossman, Greg Livingstone, Bill Jackson, Jim Reapsome, Phil Parshall, Don McCurry, and Clinton Arnold for reading and editing this work. Special thanks belongs to Chuck Kraft, who originally encouraged me to publish my studies on folk Islam.

I am also grateful for the hard work of Jeleta Eckheart. She more than anyone helped turn my scholarly work into a readable book. If there is even one ounce of literary gold in this book, it's because she quarried it out of me.

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## Introduction

# Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God

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*The felt need for power is so great among folk Muslims that their entire worldview is seen through the spectacles of power.*

–J. Dudley Woodberry

### Showman or Shaman?

The word “magic” conjures up different images for different people. To most Westerners, magic entertains. The magician is a showman—a specialist at illusion. Trickery and sleight-of-hand hold crowds spellbound.

Another kind of magic captures instead of captivates. This kind of magic holds crowds spirit-bound, not spellbound. It is based on delusion, not illusion, and centers on a shaman, not a showman.

The shaman is a “spirit practitioner” or the proverbial “witch doctor.” Whether he’s called a *marabout* (as in North Africa) or a *dukun* (as in Indonesia), through his relationship with demons he taps into supernatural power from the Evil One. The shaman knows the right rituals and precise prayers to manipulate spirits to lend help or bring harm.<sup>1</sup>

Superstition obviously plays its part in this magical worldview. There is a psychological aspect to magic, but there is also a Satanic component. Those who fear demons may be excessively affected by their magical worldview, but Scripture makes clear that real demons do seek to control people. The powers of darkness stand behind magical practice.

Hans Betz, a specialist in magic in New Testament times, explains the role of the magician:

He knew the code words needed to communicate with the gods, the demons, and the dead. He could tap, regulate, and manipulate the invisible energies. ... [T]he magician served as a power and communications expert, crisis manager, miracle healer and inflicter of damages and all-purpose therapist and agent of worried, troubled, and troublesome souls (Betz 1992:xlvii).

Two points in Betz's definition show the contrast between magic and the Christian faith. Whereas Christianity emphasizes a *relationship* with God and *submission* to His will, magic focuses on the importance of *ritual* and *manipulation*. While Christians pray to God, magicians command the gods (demons). Magicians are not too concerned about having a personal relationship with God, loving others or understanding truth. Their major focus is pragmatic, utilitarian and self-centered. They want to manipulate the powers for their own interests.

### Muslims, Modernity and Magic

More than a billion people daily confess, "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His apostle." These words summarize the essence of a Muslim's faith. Our effort here is to describe practically how to reach these people who know so little of the love and power of Christ, concentrating on approaches to that large segment of the Muslim world known as folk Muslims—those who are doctrinally Muslim but practically animist. Folk Muslims confess Allah but worship spirits and are more concerned with magic than with Muhammad. *Of the world's one billion Muslims, more than three-fourths are folk Muslims.*<sup>2</sup>

Because folk Islam blends animism with Islam, it is considered idolatrous by orthodox Muslims. Just as Western evangelical Christians grieve over the materialism and hedonism negatively impacting Christianity, so do orthodox Muslims grieve over magic practices infiltrating Islam. Evangelical Christians and orthodox

Muslims share a common belief that the one true, almighty God deserves our complete devotion and submission. Anything less is idolatrous, unworthy of His transcendent majesty.

In our focus on reaching folk Muslims, we must consider both animistic concerns and Islamic beliefs in order to develop an effective outreach among them. It is vital to understand and deal with the spirit realm issues of animism,<sup>3</sup> but reaching folk Muslims demands different strategies than reaching other animists since they see themselves as Muslims who, when challenged about their faith, respond like fervent fundamentalists, zealously confessing their creed and defending their faith. Though animistic in practice, folk Muslims maintain a strong emotional attachment to Islamic beliefs.

A friend describes working with folk Muslims in Southeast Asia.

Early in our experience with [this people group], my wife sought to share Jesus with our next-door neighbor lady who had become a good friend. Knowing that [this people] are interested in the lives of the prophets, my wife read stories from the Gospels of Jesus calming the storm, healing the sick and revealing the secrets of men's thoughts. Our neighbor's response was, "That was interesting, but my own father does those things all the time!"

After further questioning the lady, my wife discovered that her father, the village *imam* [the leader of the mosque], was known for his ability to access "Allah's power" in order to heal the sick, find lost people and possessions, and demonstrate other supernatural skills.

Our friend therefore was not impressed to hear about the miracles of Christ performed 2,000 years ago! It was then we realized that our Western Bible college education had not prepared us to demonstrate the power of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Some might object that we live in an urban world with half the world's population in cities, making folk Islam a relic of the past. "Modernity is in. Magic is out."

Clearly, urbanization is impacting Muslims. The United Prayer Track of the AD 2000 and Beyond Movement has given priority attention to the 100 least evangelized cities in the world, known as the "100 gateway cities." Massive Muslim cities like Cairo (population of 15 million), Istanbul (10 million), Tehran (7.5 million), Karachi (9.5 million), Dhaka (9 million), and Jakarta (11.5 million) claim strategic

economic, political, and spiritual prominence in their respective nations. In fact, 51 of the 100 “gateway cities” are Muslim. Thus, Muslim mission is predominately urban mission. Commitment to Muslims means commitment to cities. Commitment to cities means commitment to Muslims.

However, the urban world does not exclude the magical world. Folk Islam is not just found among uneducated rural peasants or nomadic Bedouins; it is also part of city life. The urban realities of rock-and-roll music, high-tech lifestyles, college education, traffic jams, pollution and swelling populations do not preclude the magical practices of Muslims. Witch doctors thrive in the asphalt jungle.

Most research acknowledges that magic is more pervasive in the village than in the city. Villagers practice magic more frequently and more publicly than their wealthier urban counterparts. As one missionary shared with me, “magic among the rich and educated is practiced more privately, so it’s harder to evaluate how pervasive it is.” Since educated urbanites are more Westernized, they are not as apt to admit publicly their real beliefs and practices about the spirit realm – not wanting to sound superstitious or unsophisticated to interviewers from the West.

Yet the vast majority of Muslim cities still reflect a strong rural orientation to life. Many people live in the city but still think like villagers. In fact, this is one of the distinctives of cities in “developing nations.” As the urban sociologist John Palen points out,

Cities in the developing world are among the largest and fastest growing in the world. Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that the growth of cities and a high level of urbanization are not the same thing. In the Western world the two things happened at the same time, but it is quite possible to find extremely large cities in overwhelmingly rural countries. ... A number of extremely large cities does not necessarily indicate an urban nation (Palen 1987:9).

J. Clyde Mitchell indicates that magic and animism is typical of cities in developing nations. Describing urban Africa, he writes:

It is difficult to secure accurate information on the degree to which African work-seekers make use of charms in their search for employment. Of 35 men who visited a doctor in Harare, 15 of them sought treatment primarily for a straightforward medical complaint such as a headache, constipation, or something similar. Of the remaining 20, no less than 10 sought charms to help them to secure employment or stay in it. The remaining 10 were seeking advice about sexual virility, love potions, gambling charms, or straightforward anti-witchcraft medicine (Friedl and Chrisman 1975:380).

I once discussed place spirits with a Baahithiin Muslim, an educated, young married man who would be considered “modern” or “urban” in his thinking. When I asked him if there are spirits in objects like trees, he replied, “I believe there are all kinds of spirits. But we are not supposed to focus our attention on them. We should not spend all our time worrying about them.” Then in the next breath he began telling a story about a tree that couldn’t be cut down because the spirits were too powerful.

This man is typical of urban folk Muslims who cling to their animistic beliefs—Muslim but fearful of spirits. According to numerous studies, magic is an integral and pervasive reality in Third World cities.<sup>5</sup> A modern, urban veneer should not blind us to the unseen realities affecting Muslim beliefs and values. Though more prevalent in rural settings, folk Islam is also alive and well in the city.

Cities can become cauldrons of animistic knowledge when the need for strong supernatural safety nets pushes Muslim urbanites toward animism and magic. For example, anthropologist Robert Wessing studied Sundanese culture in Indonesia and learned that “the best place to get an amulet to ward off children’s diseases was the main mosque in Bandung [the capital of West Java with over two million people]” (Wessing 1978:14-15). Furthermore, the urban phenomenon of blood sacrifice is practiced at the highest levels of Indonesia’s government. A reporter for *New Yorker* magazine, Raymond Bonner, makes these observations about this practice.

In 1983, before construction of a modern international airport for Jakarta could begin, Indonesian Muslims and French Christians (the French had the construction contract) offered up prayers during a

ceremony in which the heads of five water buffalo were buried. In earlier times, a young girl or boy was sacrificed before land was disturbed—a gift to the spirits living on the land (Bonner 1988:3).

My own experience among the Baahithiin reveals a similar pattern. I found that the Baahithiin have a ceremony in which they offer a blood sacrifice to appease an evil god when they move or construct a new building. Originally, they slaughtered a large animal and buried its head at the spot where the person wanted to move. To this day most Baahithiin continue this ritual, but with the sacrifice of a smaller animal instead.

While it may be debated how many Baahithiin admit belief in this evil god, their widespread behavior confirms the belief. When asked if many people still believed in this god, a Baahithiin friend told me, “I think sacrifices were offered up for all of the major buildings in our regional capital. I’m sure [one of the newest and nicest shopping centers in this regional capital] had one. ... The brand new television station in the regional capital televised its sacrificial ceremony.”

Since most Western missionaries come from a materialistic-oriented culture which relegates the supernatural to other-worldly concerns, when faced with the realities of the spirit realm they often either ignore the issues or offer naturalistic solutions to what are perceived by folk Muslims as supernaturally-caused problems—so opportunities for ministry are lost.

In addition, we Westerners fail to learn about spirit-realm issues because it is hard for us to take the stance of humble, hungry learners. I found the more I questioned my informants with neutral questions, the more they opened up to me and shared freely. But I had to dig to understand them, questioning numerous informants from various angles and framing my questions so as not to prejudice them in their answers. I asked with genuine interest, “What do Baahithiin believe about charms?” This approach elicited a truer response than, “Do the Baahithiin *still* believe in charms?” Or worse, “Baahithiin don’t believe in magic, do they?” When I told my informants stories about spirits

and magic that I had encountered, demonstrating that I believed in the supernatural, they were even more apt to share openly with me.

Phil Parshall, one of Evangelicalism's most prominent practical Islamicists, confessed regarding folk Islamic issues in 1983:

In some senses, I have learned more in this short time [his last few years of ministry] about grassroots Islam than I did in my first 18 years. ... Amazingly, one can be surrounded by certain dynamic situations and still be quite unaware of what is happening. This is particularly true if one seeks to understand Islam from a Western perspective—which is what I sought to do during my early years as a missionary (Parshall 1983:13).

I recently heard of a similar situation. In an enormous Middle Eastern city, a church planter with a Pentecostal background—who believes in these kind of things—assured his mentor that the people he was working with did not practice magic. When his mentor asked a national coworker about folk Islam, he replied, “It’s everywhere!”

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### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the distinctives of folk Islam in your area? How does Islam clash with animism in your area, and how does Islam readily accommodate animism in your area? To what extent do Muslim leaders in your community bemoan or accept the influence of animism?
2. To what extent has your cultural background, education and training, and personal experience prepared you to address the felt needs of folk Muslims? Where do you think you need the most “remedial” education or equipping?
3. How can you take the stance of a “humble, hungry learner” regarding the spirit realm? What are 2-3 neutral, open-ended questions you could ask cultural informants to help you learn more about the spiritual worldview of the people you serve?

*It will help you to better digest what you're reading if you take the time to reflect on and discuss such questions after each chapter. Also, I would value a glimpse of what you're thinking! I invite you (either now or later) to share with me (r\_d\_love@hotmail.com) some of your answers to these questions. You may have some good things to teach me.*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Clinton Arnold, who has written three scholarly works on magic in the New Testament, defines magic as follows: “Magic was based on the belief in the supernatural powers which could be harnessed and used by appropriating the correct technique. Magic can therefore be defined as a method of manipulating supernatural powers to accomplish certain tasks with guaranteed results. Magicians would not seek the will of the deity in a matter, but would invoke the deity to do precisely as they stated” (1993:580).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to admit that there are also millions of folk Christians in the world – those who confess Christ with their lips but who worship other gods or spirits.

<sup>3</sup> See Burnett 1988; Van Rheenen 1991 and Steyne 1989 for excellent summaries of animism.

<sup>4</sup> Excerpted from an unpublished critique of this manuscript in August 1996.

<sup>5</sup> See Gmelch and Zenner 1988:78; du Toit 1980; Moody 1977, Ortiz 1988 and Hard 1989 for further documentation.

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## Chapter 1

# A Contextualized Approach to Church Planting among Folk Muslims

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*It is possible to establish Muslim-convert churches ... through a team, even where missionary visas are not available. ... Establishing viable congregations with their own national leadership among Muslims ... is a do-able task.*

–Greg Livingstone

The Baahithiin. One of the largest unreached people groups in my land of missionary service. I sat and prayed about the daunting task of reaching this massive people group. Then it dawned on me. There was no single approach or emphasis that would make us successful. There was no silver bullet. We would need every missiological insight and approach available to be fruitful in our church-planting efforts. This book describes that quest.

Our team developed a three-dimensional approach to reaching folk Muslims. This model involves church planting, contextualization and kingdom theology.

Personally I find **church planting** to be the most biblical and strategic way to fulfill the Great Commission, while **contextualization** is God's approach to cross-cultural communication and **kingdom theology** is crucial to all ministry—and is especially relevant to folk Muslims. The planting of contextualized churches rooted in kingdom theology is the most effective way to reach folk Muslims.<sup>1</sup>

Our team had the privilege of testing this thesis by planting a church among the Muslim Baahithiin. A commitment to kingdom theology and biblical contextualization doesn't make the work of church planting easy; however, it will make it possible. Kingdom

theology and biblical contextualization offer no panacea. In fact, a true understanding of both is a call to spiritual warfare and sacrifice. If the parables of the kingdom teach us anything, they teach us that we are in a war against the world, the flesh and the devil. In addition, learning a language, adapting to a new customs and seeking to incarnate truth in a new culture demand blood, sweat and tears. Well, at least sweat and tears!

### **Contextualization: A Modern Missiological Theory or an Ancient Biblical Model?**

What is contextualization, really? Several definitions vie for our attention. Fundamentally, contextualization concerns itself with how the *text* (of Scripture) relates to the *context* of a people group.

Since contextualization is a modern missiological buzzword, many people assume it is a modern theory. Not so. Although the term is modern, the concept and principles are as old as the Bible. A brief look at two doctrines, the inspiration of Scripture and the incarnation, will make this clear.

Evangelicals believe that the Bible is the word of God in the words of humankind. Because Scripture is divine, it is authoritative. We have a message from heaven that must be obeyed. Because Scripture is also human, written in words understood by humankind, we can examine how God has “contextualized” his transcultural truth in the languages and cultures of humankind.

Scripture is what Charles Kraft calls “receptor-oriented.” In crossing the gap between God and God’s creatures, God does not merely build a bridge halfway across, requiring humans to span the gulf from the other side. Rather, God employs our culture’s principles of communication in language we can understand. God is revealed in a receptor-oriented fashion (1988:169).

To illustrate how God communicates to different contexts, we note that God used the Near Eastern literary forms of law, covenant and poetry in the Old Testament. These were the common literary

forms of the day. In the New Testament God employed the genres of history, epistle and apocalypse—all having clear parallels with first-century literature. In each case, God adopted and transformed common literary forms to reveal God's truth to God's people.

In contrast to refined, classical literary Greek, the New Testament authors (under the guidance of the Holy Spirit) wrote in *koine*, or common Greek, the language of the street. God's primary concern was to communicate, to make plain the meaning of the good news. Accordingly, God adopted the heart language of the people to reveal God's purposes.

Perhaps the most striking example is the fact that God employed the Hebrew word *elohim* and the Greek word *theos* to describe himself. Originally, *elohim* (an Old Testament term for God) was the name of the high god in the Canaanite pantheon. The New Testament word for God, *theos*, originally referred to the high god in the Greek pantheon. God used these imperfect terms and transformed them to fit his purposes and reveal his truth (Kittle 1968; see also Gilliland 1989:36ff).

What lesson do we learn from God's contextualization of his message? In the words of pastor-theologian John Stott:

The overriding reason why we should take other people's cultures seriously is that God has taken ours seriously. God is the supreme communicator. And his Word has come to us in an extremely particularized form. Whether spoken or written, it was addressed to particular people in particular cultures using the particular thought-forms, syntax, and vocabulary with which they were familiar (Coote and Stott 1980: vii-viii).

The ultimate argument for the necessity and priority of contextualization, however, is the incarnation. The incarnation is not just theologically *descriptive* of what God has done in Christ. It is theologically *prescriptive* of what we must do to imitate Christ. As the *Willowbank Report on the Gospel and Culture* affirms, the incarnation is the "most spectacular instance of cultural identification in the history of mankind, since by his incarnation the Son became a first-century Galilean Jew" (Stott 1980:323).

The incarnation demonstrates God's unabashed and sacrificial commitment to contextualization. In the Old Testament, God

revealed himself historically through his deeds and propositionally through his words. This revelation was sufficient for a saving, personal knowledge of God (which a cursory reading of the Psalms makes clear). But this propositional revelation was foundational and preparatory. Ultimately, the infinite, almighty, sovereign God chose to reveal himself personally. He became flesh in order to show how God relates to a fallen, hurting world of sinners (Jn 1:18; 14:8-9). The incarnation demonstrates how a supra-cultural God relates to a culture-bound humanity.

Jesus' commission, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (Jn 20:21), indicates we are to model our ministry after that of Christ. Moreover, Paul makes a clear connection between our lives and ministries and the incarnation: "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant" (Phil 2:5-7). While this has many implications, it clearly mandates that we are to be contextualizers of the gospel. We are to be incarnational in our approach to ministry: culturally sensitive communicators with a culturally relevant message.

The Bible not only proclaims God's *message* of salvation but also portrays God's *method* of communicating. The Bible is God's method book on contextualization.

### Why Church Planting?

Nowhere in the New Testament do we find the command to plant churches. However, a cursory reading of the book of Acts indicates that the early church, and especially Paul the apostle, understood the command to "make disciples of all nations" in terms of church planting. In the New Testament, there were no disciples apart from believing communities; there was no evangelism without church growth (1 Jn 1:3).