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Interview of Bob Douglas (Egypt)

Bob Douglas

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HARDING COLLEGE LIVING HISTORY OF MISSIONS

Volume II, No. 10

This is Volume II, No. 10 of the Living History of Missions series. I am Evertt Huffard, visiting professor of missions at Harding College. We have with us Bob Douglas who has spent a number of years in Cairo.

Huffard: Bob, would you tell us something about the beginning of your work on the mission field?

Douglas: My family and I went to North Africa in January of 1961. We first went to Benghazi which is the capital of Cyrenaica which is in the province of Libya. During our time in Libya we hit upon the idea of placing advertisements offering a Bible correspondence course in English in some of the English language newspapers published in Egypt. Through an advertising agency in Cairo we were able to place these ads not only in the Egyptian Gazette, which is a daily English newspaper, but in the chief Arabic language paper. In response to these advertisements we enrolled between 250 and 300 students. Of course, not all of these people pursued the course to its conclusion, but, at least, we had that many who initially started out.

Huffard: Did you have any response to your work while you were in Benghazi?

Douglas: Our work in Benghazi was a double work. We were ministering to a small congregation of American Christians who were there in connection with the oil industry. We were also attempting to do some evangelization among the native Libyians. Not as a direct result of my work but as a result of one of the engineers in Benghazi, one Moslem Libyan boy became a Christian. We were able to attract a few others to our worship services and to conduct studies with several of these, but nothing ever came from it in the way of conversions. We were able to baptize 12 or 15 other foreign people, mostly Americans, though there were a few British people involved.

Huffard: Did you go to Benghazi with the idea of eventually going to Cairo or staying there?

Douglas: No, we first went to Benghazi with the view of staying in Benghazi and hopefully establishing a Libyan congregation.

Huffard: What is the religious background of the people of that area?

Douglas: The country of Libya as far as the national people are concerned is 100% Moslem. This is true of most of North Africa. The Moslem religion is the dominant religion, if not the religion that controls absolutely. In Egypt it is slightly different. There is about a 10% nominally Christian minority, mainly made up of members of the Coptic Orthodox Church. This Christian community would number about three million out of Egypt's thirty plus million.

Huffard: Did you have any type of special training for mission work before you went to the field?

Douglas: No, I really did not have any special training in so far as mission courses or mission seminars. In fact, the reading I had done with regard to the field, private research and so forth was very limited.

Huffard: Tell us something about the cultural and economic background of these countries, especially Cairo since most of your work was there.

Douglas: Well, Egypt is predominately Moslem country. The culture is basically shaped by the influence of Islam which has dominated the country since the eighth century. The language of Egypt and all of North Africa is Arabic. There is always a definite indirect, if not a very direct connection, between religion and government. In fact, the majority of the laws of the land are taken directly from the Koran or are derived from principles set forth in the Koran. Egypt is the most populus of the Arab countries. It is in many ways the most poverty stricken and in some ways it is the most advanced and most sophisticated. Their educational system is generally a good one for that part of the world. Originally the educational system was strongly influenced by the British and the French though in the years following the revolution of 1953 this influence steadily declined and is now virtually gone. They have Arabized the entire school system.

Huffard: Bob, are most of the people literate in Cairo and Egypt?

Douglas: I think you have to distinguish between Egypt and Cairo. Cairo, being a large metropolitan area, has a higher level of literacy and a better economic position or condition than does the countryside or the villages.

Huffard: What would you say were some of the serious challenges that you had to overcome in Egypt?

Douglas: One problem we faced was one rather of our own creation. We were alone there and this was a problem as it obviously left us isolated without the counsel of another party and the encouragement that we needed and the guidance that another family could have given us.

Huffard: You wouldn't recommend then generally that a missionary family go alone?

Douglas: Generally, I would not though I can envision the possibility of a situation where that would have to be.

Huffard: How about your visa and government relationship? Was this any challenge?

Douglas: This was a difficulty. The mission work in Egypt or any sort of church work --and under the heading of church work they would include benevolent, hospital, educational work altogether--all of these things are governed theoretically by the Treaty of Montreaux which was signed in 1932 by the Egyptian government and representatives of Western European governments. This fixed the number of missionaries that could be in the country. Churches that had representatives in the country at that time could continue and new works could not be introduced. Therefore, we could not secure a visa to come in as a missionary. We either had to come as students or as tourists. We chose to come as tourists. A tourist visa is generally granted for a month. It can be extended for two more and then for an additional three for a maximum of six. For more than three years we lived with this condition of extending visas, leaving the country and getting a new visa.

Huffard: In other words you were one of the missionaries that was on an extended tour.

Douglas: Very definitely.

Huffard: Could you say something about the methods?

Douglas: Well, we certainly were not able to do many of the things that can be done in other countries by virtue of not having a resident's permit and the church not being

recognized. Our work was entirely working with individuals very quietly, meeting them where we could, visiting in their homes, talking with them, studying with them in their homes as opportunity would present itself. We did not find any other avenue open to us. We did make some contacts through a correspondence program which strangely enough we were able to carry on.

Huffard: What method did you find to be more successful than others?

Douglas: Again, the only one that was really successful was one of individual contact and simply taking the Bible and reasoning with them concerning the truths set forth in it and helping them to come to a fuller knowledge of scripture which of course they were exceedingly ignorant of.

Huffard: From your experiences did you make some mistakes that you might suggest would be helpful to avoid for anyone going into this particular field?

Douglas: I think I made a mistake in staying on a tourist visa. If I had to do it over again, with these limited possibilities, I would go as a student. I further made a mistake in not giving more attention to language study. I think we may have made some mistakes in terms of using just a little bit too much American money in the work we did though we did not pay national Christians to preach nor did we pay rent on a meeting place or anything of this kind.

Huffard: There seems to be a great deal of misunderstanding about the Arab people in general. Will you describe the Arab in Cairo?

Douglas: The people of Cairo, and I think of all Egypt, are a very gracious, very hospitable, very warm-hearted people. We found our lives deeply enriched by being permitted to meet and know them. They, of course, are deeply tied to their customs and the traditions of their past. Many of those that we met were definitely interested in listening and would raise legitimate questions regarding the things that they might be taught. They were gracious in receiving us and never, in fact, demonstrated any hostility even when they would disagree with what we might say. They would simply and conveniently no longer be available for us to visit with.

Huffard: You didn't notice anybody trying to stab you in the back?

Douglas: No, not at all.

Huffard: How long has it been since you've been in Cairo?

Douglas: We left Cairo about five and a half years ago.

Huffard: What is there now as far as the church is concerned?

Douglas: Well, we wish we had fuller information than we do. We know definitely that there is one congregation meeting made up of about 25 people. They are meeting in downtown Cairo in a building that was built and actually belongs to the Swiss Reformed Church. There is the possibility, and, I believe the reality, of another congregation in another section of the city which would be smaller in number and would be meeting in the apartment of one of the Christians.

Huffard: Why the absence of information? You said you didn't have much information.

Douglas: The problem is rooted in the politics of the area in the Arab-Israeli conflict and American involvement in that. It is difficult for the average Egyptian to receive

mail or communication of any kind from outside of Egypt, especially from the West. Consequently, we have not written them as we did not want to disturb them and they very prudently have not communicated with us.

Huffard: What would you say is the political situation? Is it conducive to church work or church growth? What would you say about it?

Douglas: I think the present political situation is not conducive to rapid church growth. However, for the national Christians they have many opportunities before them. They can readily proclaim their message to anyone they meet. Egypt is a unique country in that today--I say today, up to five years ago at least--there were dozens, if not hundreds, of small meetings going on every night in homes and apartments throughout the city. There was a great hungering on the part of the people for more information about God. This is the nominally Christian segment of the population. If our brethren are willing to really launch out and exploit all of these opportunities, there is no reason why they can't grow. A foreign worker could be very detrimental to their efforts.

Huffard: In what way?

Douglas: He would call undue attention to them, I believe. He would make it possible for those who opposed the work to say, "Look, this is a foreign institution and there must be some sort of duplicity involved here. Someone is spying." Whereas, if it is a group of national Egyptian Christians meeting with no foreign worker with them, no outside communication, with no foreign money, it obviously is a national church and does not pose the threat of foreign intervention.

Huffard: Do they have a preacher in Cairo?

Douglas: One of the earlier converts has continued to preach for the church in Cairo. His name is Francis FaHen.

Huffard: Who supports him?

Douglas: He is a school teacher in the secondary school system and supports himself by teaching.

Huffard: Would you advise in order that he could put his full time in preaching for some American congregation to take up his support?

Douglas: Definitely not. For an American congregation to take up his support would be destructive of the work. It would rob the church in Cairo of its initiative, and it would again open the possibility of the allegation of spying as the CIA has on occasion used a religious front as a cover for espionage activities. The Arab governments are exceedingly wary of this.

Huffard: Do you think that this can contribute to the growth of the church?

Douglas: I really believe it can. As I look back on our work in Egypt, I find more satisfaction in it than in most anything I have ever done. I think it is a work that has been carried on the soundest possible basis and again not so much because of our training in that direction but just the fact that circumstances forced things to be that way.

Huffard: What is your general thinking about American money supporting national preachers?

Douglas: I am very much opposed to it. I assume there could be situations where it might be helpful but my general reaction is no. Absolutely no.

Huffard: You mentioned that you didn't have much language training before going? Did you study the language after you got there?

Douglas: We studied the language only very irregularly. A very good language program is available in the American university at Cairo. We elected, however, to study with a private tutor which we did, but we did not persist in it with the kind of seriousness needed to really be proficient.

Huffard: How long do you think that it would take an individual to be able to handle the Arabic language if he spent full time in the study of it?

Douglas: I really don't know. I have wondered. I have wished for two years that I could simply devote to language. I don't think that would make the man proficient. I think he could get along.

Huffard: You mean from your present point or having started with two years?

Douglas: I wish right now that I could start in and spend simply two years with Arabic and full time and then taper off the amount of hours per week.

Huffard: It depends on the language as to the amount of time that an individual ought to plan in the study of the language, right?

Douglas: I think so.

Huffard: In going, what was your greatest problem in securing support?

Douglas: Well, I had a very unique situation. I didn't really have a problem in securing support as I had preached for a congregation in Lawton, Oklahoma for about four years and then approached them with the view of their providing our support. They provided our total support. A church in Oklahoma City where my wife had grown up provided our working fund. Thus, all of our support actually came out of about two congregations.

Huffard: What would you advise the students in preparing to go to the mission field as they would look into countries with political problems such as the one that you went to? What advice would you give them to go around these countries or try to make some approach to them?

Douglas: I think the basic question has to be the receptivity of the people involved. As I can envision many countries where there is considerable political unrest and even an unfavorable attitude toward Americans and yet where great segments of the population are receptive to the gospel. I don't think a student should discount a country simply because there is political turmoil. Looking back over the past decade or so, political turmoil has boiled up in a number of places that people earlier assumed very stable. I think the student should go with the awareness that such is a possibility in most any place in the world and that if such develops it can work to the advantage of the work he is going to do and he should go with an attitude of flexibility and mobility so that if things become unbearable in one country he should not return to the States but should move to another location nearby and go on.

Huffard: You mentioned the possibility of being designated as a spy and so on. Were there times that you were somewhat afraid while you were in Cairo?

Douglas: I don't believe we were ever really afraid. We always lived with an awareness that there was the possibility that our every move was being watched, our mail was being censored, our telephone was tapped. In some cases, these things were actually true; in other cases, they probably were imaginary. You came to live with this sort of weight on you that could tend to stifle the personality. We always felt as we left Egypt to secure a new visa that we had been let out of a tightly closed box and could breathe fresh air again. Part of this may have been due to the thinking, to the mentality of the Egyptian people because they think very much in this way. After awhile it becomes a little infectious.

Huffard: Why did you finally leave Egypt?

Douglas: We finally left because the Egyptian government in checking records of our stay realized that we had been there for more than three years on repeated tourists visas and this was compounded further by the fact that earlier we had applied for a resident's permit and this had been turned down. I am sure they went back through their files. They noted an application for a resident's permit; they noted its rejection; they noted our prolonged stay and they concluded that "This fellow is just using this device and we have already told him we don't want him permanently in the country so we will cancel his tourist visa and give him a limited time to leave."

Huffard: Would you recommend any student to make any plans to go to Egypt as a missionary?

Douglas: Yes, I think Egypt holds some marvelous possibilities. My recommendation would be for a student to go to Egypt to either Cairo or Alexandria, enroll in one of the universities. Some of the programs in the universities are carried on entirely in English, like in the Department of English, English Literature. Or even study Arabic at the American university. Cairo has the School of Oriental Studies which is a fine language school but it involves a study of Islam and Moslem culture and so forth. I believe this would be not only a good way to go but good training for the work. I think the person would have to have a great deal of patience and realize that approaching Egypt on this basis he is not going to make any sudden startling gain in the number of converts but that good will come from it.

Huffard: What advice would you give such a student in preparing to meet the religion of Islam?

Douglas: That's really a hard question to answer. I am not deeply settled in my own mind about the approach to that. I think first of all even here in this country, he can do a great deal of reading and study to understand Islam and its deep roots in the total culture of the people. I more and more am inclined to feel that the approach to make in the areas of the authority of the Koran and the place of Mohammed as a prophet and the deity of Jesus and so forth is simply to preach Christ, to preach his death and his burial and his resurrection and this is a demonstration of God's love and grace and not really directly confront these other problem areas and argue them. I never have seen anything good gained by that approach.

Huffard: Could you give us something of an idea of the challenge that the religion of Islam is presently to the church?

Douglas: Well, the Moslem religion represents the second largest religious block in all the world, the first being the Roman Catholic faith. The Moslem religion is a very

vibrant and living religion in many areas of the world. There are some reports that its spread in Black Africa is going on at a phenomenal pace. On the other hand, I have heard statistics that would tend to somewhat discount that. It certainly is a faith that holds the deep allegiance of multitudes of people and in many areas Islam is making a concerted effort to win converts. In the Arab states as far as an instrument reaching out to new converts, it is not. The population is either totally Moslem or if there is a Christian minority, it is recognized that these people are Christian and while they are rather detested there is no effort to proselyte.

Huffard: I do understand there is a Mosk in Nashville, Tennessee. We do have it here in the States.

Douglas: Right. There is a very fine Islamic splinter in Washington, D. C.

Huffard: Bob, is there any summary statement that you would like to make about Cairo, the mission work that has been done there, the future that we might expect as far as the church is concerned?

Douglas: It could only be in the form of a hope and that is that these brethren have now been totally isolated as far as any full time foreign worker for more than half a decade. They have never had foreign money to rely upon. From the outset the initiative for meeting and worship and evangelization has basically been theirs. If they have stood the test for five and a half years on their own, I believe that they will continue. I only hope that they will hold the word in due regard and continue to search it diligently and respect it and that somehow they will find the faith and the courage to really be the evangelistic people that God wants them to be.

Huffard: Thank you very much for this contribution to Harding College's Living History of Missions series.