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July 18, 1994

94-120

TENNESSEE--These scientists are convinced of Creator's work in universe.
TENNESSEE--Age of earth debate began in 1600s, continues today.
TENNESSEE--Scientists says their peers will listen to words of faith.
NEW MEXICO--Still 'hard-wired' to missions, convention historian says of WMU.
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EDITORS' NOTE: At a time of keen interest in science -- with the 25th anniversary of the U.S. moon landing on July 20, 1969, and the mid-July collision of a dying comet's remnants onto the planet Jupiter -- the following three stories deal with scientists who believe in a Creator.

These scientists are convinced
of Creator's work in universe

By Ken Walker

Baptist Press
7/18/94

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--The complexity of life. The order of the universe. The design of the human species. The clouds, the sky and the tree lines.

While debates over creation versus evolution continue nearly 70 years after Tennessee's Scopes monkey trial, some of creationism's supporters come from an unlikely corner: the world of science. The above list provides just some reasons these scientists believe in a Creator.

"When you look at life, it's amazing how human life has developed," said Joe Gatewood, who works on the Human Genome Project at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. "The complexity of what we see today is the reason I believe that I am unique and God does interact with us."

Gatewood took an unusual path to the science laboratory. Within two courses of completing a degree in ministerial studies, he took a theology professor's advice to pursue his interest in science.

After earning a bachelor's degree in biology, he completed a Ph.D. in biophysics at the University of California at Davis. He did a year of post-doctoral work there and two years at Los Alamos before joining the latter's staff.

He teaches some graduate students on a limited basis. But most of his work, funded by the U.S. Department of Energy, involves genome studies. Running through the end of the 1990s, the extensive research project seeks to map all 50,000 to 100,000 human genes' exact locations and uncover other data about genes and chromosomes.

A member of White Rock Baptist Church in Los Alamos, Gatewood's specialty is finding reasons for genetic defects that cause human development to go awry. And the more he studies, the more questions arise.

Ironically, it is not what he sees in science, but what he doesn't see, that convinces him there is a God.

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"One of the key features that points to a Creator is that we have a longing to reach beyond ourselves and find and touch that Creator," said Gatewood. "To me, that was part of the creative process. God put that in us. And I believe that to be real, because of my experiences and things that have happened that are beyond my ability to understand, scientifically."

He recalled the time when he was sitting in his car, eating lunch, when he felt an overpowering impulse to go visit a close friend who lived 35 minutes away. Since the man was likely to be at work, that made no sense.

Unable to shake the feeling, he drove there. When he arrived, he discovered his friend was home, grieving the loss of his mother earlier that day.

"Those kind of experiences have occurred time and time again," Gatewood said. "They convince me there is something that unites us and binds us together. That is the Creator, the one who continues to touch and interact with us."

John Moeller, who worked in the early stages of the space program in the 1960s, credits the order of things in the universe as proof of God's handiwork.

And scientific discoveries are usually facts that have been in front of us all the time, added Moeller, of Knoxville, Tenn.

"If God were to reveal to us everything all at once, we wouldn't have any work to do," said Moeller, who took early retirement last spring from Grumman Aircraft Corp. but expects to return to work soon.

"Every time something is revealed that is considered a breakthrough, it just confirms that God put it together," he said. "All around us there is every type of evidence, whether it be in natural things or the endeavors of man."

Whatever aspect of the universe or the natural order they study, scientists discover three facts, he said:

-- God placed things in order.

-- There are rules humans shouldn't break.

-- If people try to bypass or avoid the rules of creation there are serious consequences.

Moeller attended the University of Florida and earned his mechanical engineering degree from Indiana Technical. He worked in the 1960s on the Mercury and Gemini space programs before joining Grumman, which built the first lunar module used on the moon.

Later he worked on the F-14 (a name familiar to "Top Gun" movie fans) fighter plane, did fusion research at Oak Ridge, Tenn., and was part of a Strategic Defense Initiative project at Los Alamos, N.M. Everywhere he travels he uncovers evidence of the Lord at work.

"Scientists look at the sun and say that's a fusion reaction, that perhaps there are stars that have a similar reaction," said Moeller, a member of First Baptist Church of Concord. "But man is not able to duplicate fusion, except in a hydrogen bomb. The steps taken and work done always follow an order of God's universe. That is knowledge and information that somewhere man, in his studies, has to deal with."

The design inherent in all systems, whether human, plant or other forms, is one of several factors cited by the Institute for Creation Research (ICR) as evidence of a Creator.

But the premier argument used by the San Diego, Calif., organization is that evolution could not have occurred. Larry Vardiman, ICR administrative vice president and head of its astrogeophysics department, said evolutionary theory violates the second law of thermodynamics.

"Things do not go from disorder to order without the intervention of a supernatural agent of some type; they go from order to disorder," said Vardiman, who earned a Ph.D. in atmospheric science at Colorado State University.

"Evolutionists get from molecules to simple life forms to more complex to man. That conflicts with the second law, which is accepted by every scientist alive today."

In addition, he said if evolution -- which implies everything happened by chance instead of through a Creator -- was absolute truth, the fossil record would show a continual spectrum for all life forms.

That is not so, he said, particularly in crucial stages. Whether moving from reptiles to birds, fish to mammals or apes to man, there are "all kinds of problems with the transitional forms."

Finally, ICR claims there is strong evidence that the earth was catastrophically modified or changed by a global flood. According to Vardiman, this lines up with the account in Genesis 6-8 of God sending a flood to destroy all living creatures except Noah and his family.

For David Dockery, complex scientific issues can be reduced to a simple statement, "You would have to be a fool to look at life on this planet and believe it just happened," a strong opinion since it comes from the chief of Mississippi's surface geology division of the state office of geology.

"Cosmology people who study the universe have this problem: Why does this thing hold together? Why isn't it just random, expanding vapors of gas?" said Dockery, who completed his Ph.D. in paleontology at Tulane University.

"I think it takes more faith to believe that everything happened by chance than to believe that God created everything. At that point, people have to do a personal search for God."

A member of Pocahontas Baptist Church near Jackson, Miss., he said his upbringing in church has a lot to do with his belief in a Creator. Likewise, those scientists who profess atheism bring their background into their jobs, he said; everyone's life outside their profession influences their personal philosophy.

That is why he sees the issue of believing, or disbelieving, that a Creator shaped the universe as so personal.

"I have to get out of the realm of science to my personal experience," Dockery said. "It's an inner witness of the Holy Spirit. I'm sure of this.

"You don't even have to be a scientist. Just look at the clouds, the sky, the tree line and everything else. It's like Psalm 8:3-4 says, 'when I look at the moon and stars, what is man, that you are mindful of him?' You have to look at that."

At least, believers do.

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Age of earth debate began
in 1600s, continues today

By Ken Walker

Baptist Press
7/18/94

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Do we live on a relatively fresh earth just 6,000 years into its existence? Or an ancient planet that is millions, perhaps billions, of years old?

The argument has raged since 1650, when through his study of biblical genealogies, English Archbishop James Ussher claimed he had uncovered the earth's age. He pinpointed the creation of heaven and earth as occurring the night before Oct. 23, 4004 B.C.

Because evolutionists often identify with those who argue against God's existence, some Christians line up with the "young earth" theory. Others believe phrases in the beginning of Genesis could refer to longer periods of time in the creation story.

The Institute for Creation Research supports the idea of a literal six-day creation (and young earth) to be consistent with its reliance on biblical foundations.

"The primary justification for a literal six-day creation is based on biblical exposition," said Larry Vardiman. "There are a whole host of arguments as to why that's a literal 24-hour day. We recognize that causes a lot of people problems, because of the belief the earth is millions, or billions, of years old."

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Vardiman noted it is possible to be a creationist and not deal with the issue of the earth's age. And he acknowledged there are two factors that favor theories of an older earth -- radioisotope dating techniques and the size of the universe. Because of the speed of light, "older earth" proponents believe it would have taken millions of years for light to reach the earth, he said.

However, the astrophysicist pointed out there are many problems with traditional evolutionary theories that also bring into question "old earth" beliefs.

"One of the strongest arguments we give is: The evidence is not there for the (volutionary) transitional forms, from one species to another," he said. "There is really no response to that, because the data isn't there. (Evolutionists) just say, 'Well, we haven't found it yet.'"

However, David Dockery of the Mississippi Office of Geology said following Archbishop Ussher's theory "is not good science."

"With 'in the beginning' in Genesis, I don't think it's a date-able thing," said Dockery, who grew up in a Southern Baptist church. "It allows me as a geologist to say the earth is millions of years old and is not at odds with anything in the Bible."

Dockery said while he disagrees with those who support the idea of a 6,000-year-old earth, he would not belittle anyone for their beliefs. But whoever tries to prove that scientifically is not standing on solid ground, he said.

Biophysicist Joe Gatewood agrees with Dockery, saying he finds the Genesis creation story a beautiful way of describing the process of evolution. Since 2 Peter 3:8 compares a thousand years to one day in God's sight, Gatewood said he doesn't think the Lord can be constrained to a six-day interval of time as we understand it.

In addition, the Los Alamos National Laboratory staffer detects an irony in the debate over the earth's age, saying Christians who profess to live by faith are usually the ones demanding specific answers.

"The Christian community feels a certain need to make things concrete and try to eliminate the ability to doubt," Gatewood said. "To me, that isn't a life of faith. It's a life of being dogmatic, where you limit the possibilities.

"There's so much of this I don't understand and I'm continuing to study and have things revealed to me. When you acknowledge that, you open yourself up to a lot, and people don't like to be that honest," Gatewood said. "I think we have a lot of oversimplification and it's based in insecurity."

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Scientists says their peers
will listen to words of faith

By Ken Walker

Baptist Press
7/18/94

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--While Christian scientists say it would be far-fetched to label their peers' interest in matters of faith a "revival," they are surprisingly open to discussions of the Lord.

"I see Scripture related in more seminars than I used to," said Joe Gatewood of the Los Alamos National Laboratory. "Every one I give has a Scripture of some sort and no one has a problem with that."

One reason for this openness to spiritual topics is the long list of unsolved scientific problems that experts thought would be answered years ago, he said.

Gatewood, a member of White Rock Baptist Church in Los Alamos, said he often will describe reaching his wits' end and stopping to reflect and spend time in worship. Then the answer comes, he said.

"I'm not ridiculed for saying that," he commented. "People are willing to acknowledge that we need that moment of inspiration. I think that's well-received."

However, sharing one's faith requires a spirit of humility and honesty; he said prideful believers who walk in acting like they know all the answers don't get too far with scientists.

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Nor can Christians use faith-community jargon like "washed in the blood" and expect a culture that no longer automatically knows those terms to accept them, Gatewood said.

"As long as we're willing to adapt the ways we communicate about God, I think we can be effective. But if we expect people to accept our language and mode of relating to him, I don't think we will be."

In more than 30 years in the scientific world, John Moeller has had numerous opportunities to tell others about his beliefs, although much of it has occurred quietly.

"I never felt I had to defend God, I just share the gospel and take it from there," he said. "Sometimes, you have to hope they come to the Lord later. I think there is a movement toward faith; I've seen evidence of it."

Some of the proof came during Southern Baptist lay renewal events. Moeller, a member of First Baptist Church of Concord, Tenn., has been active in the movement for many years. When he talks at renewal weekends about science lining up with God's creation, many doctors, scientists and engineers tell him, "I had never thought about it that way before."

The Institute for Creation Research (ICR) also has seen former atheists adopt its point of view, such as the winner of a Lenin Prize for Outstanding Young Scientist in the old Soviet Union who now directs an ICR organization in Moscow.

Dmitri Kouznetsov has Ph.D.'s in several fields. He became a creationist after hearing Duane Gish debate an evolutionist 10 years ago, said ICR administrative vice president and astrogeophysicist Larry Vardiman. There are more than 100 scientists with a Ph.D. in the former Soviet Union who became creationists, he said, and many of those also have become Christians.

"That has happened in various countries around the world," he said. "But it is a minority. What it takes is a whole change in world view to be able to make that happen. There are individuals who are strongly impacted by (Dr. Gish's) arguments."

Vardiman said Philip Johnson's 1991 book, "Darwin on Trial," has had a strong influence in the creation versus evolution debate because of his credibility in academic circles.

In his book, the University of California law professor makes a strong case for the view that evolutionists protect their theories with the same kind of fundamentalist rigor they accuse Christians of adopting. Vardiman agrees with the hypothesis.

"What you have to understand is that many people who are impacted by this whole view are reluctant to let it be known because they lose credibility," he said. "In many cases they can lose jobs, funding and be ridiculed. Many times there is more impact on people than we are aware of."

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Still 'hard-wired' to missions,
convention historian says of WMU By Susan Doyle

Baptist Press
7/18/94

GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--Hard-wiring Woman's Missionary Union to the Southern Baptist Convention would be impossible because the organization is hard-wired to something greater, according to a convention historian and author.

"Anyone who has the idea of hard-wiring WMU to any structure has to realize that you are already hard-wired to a task," said Jesse Fletcher as he addressed the more than 1,200 men and women attending WMU Week at Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center July 17.

Fletcher, chancellor and former president of Hardin-Simmons University, is author of "The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History," due to be released in September by Broadman & Holman of the Baptist Sunday School Board.

Fletcher borrowed a metaphor used by former Southern Baptist Convention President Adrian Rogers who last year said WMU should be "hard-wired" to the convention.

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"You were hard-wired conceptually to the task of mission support long before the SBC came into existence," Fletcher said as he recalled the Baptist women who organized and committed themselves to the support of early Baptist missionaries such as Adoniram Judson and William Carey.

Even though WMU was established and continues to operate as an auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention and not as an agency directly controlled or funded by the convention, WMU has been faithful to its purpose, Fletcher said. In writing the SBC history, he noted WMU has made significant contributions to the convention and has been critical to what God has done through it.

"Your independence has never been the kind that has caused you to look away from your missionary commitment," Fletcher said.

The history of the SBC shows WMU's willingness to cooperate with the convention, he said, listing several examples:

- participation on the Inter-Agency Council. The council, made up of the executive from each convention entity, coordinates the work of those entities.

- participation on the SBC Executive Committee. "You stepped onto the Executive Committee not because you wanted a strategic place but because you were doing strategic things," he said.

- conforming to the convention's policy of requiring program statements from its agencies. The program statements define the work of each entity within the convention.

"But the thing that we respect the most is that you haven't come down off the wall," he said.

Fletcher compared WMU to the prophet Nehemiah who devoted himself to rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. Nehemiah didn't allow distractions or temptations to cause him to "come down off the wall," Fletcher said.

Noting WMU has never come down off the wall of mission support, Fletcher credited the 106-year-old organization for its contributions to the convention.

"You've stayed with it in ways that have caused an interwoven effect of WMU and the Southern Baptist Convention that none of those (early leaders) had any right to dream of," he said.

Fletcher listed some ways WMU and its leaders were involved in the early days of the convention:

- saving both mission boards from indebtedness.
- beginning an offering for Ministerial Relief and Annuity.
- encouraging the establishment of the Sunday School Board.
- encouraging local churches to have a worldwide missions vision.

"You've brought up our children to believe that God has a place for all of us in his missions task," he said.

Stories of SBC missions heroes are directly tied to WMU's faithfulness, he continued.

"I have found myself writing about WMU over and over again," he said, referring to the missionary biographies he has written about people such as Bill Wallace of China, Wimpy Harper of Africa and former FMB executive Baker James Cauthen.

Even though WMU has refused to allow distractions to take the organization from its primary commitment to mission support, it hasn't ignored God's call to areas such as mission action, Fletcher said.

"You've reached out and been willing to help us face our own social shortcomings," he said as he remembered WMU's contribution to the civil rights movement.

But as Fletcher praised WMU's commitment in the past, he also applauded its decisions of the present.

"Currently you are hard-wired to the task of mission support," he said.

"Recently I reread your statement of last year in which you reaffirmed your commitment to the task of missions and mission support. It's a clear statement of your commitment to stay on the wall."

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Fletcher referred to the vision statement and core values adopted by the WMU executive board in January 1993.

He urged the organization to not waiver in its work.

Both Southern Baptists and the world are in the midst of turbulent times, he said.

"In Southern Baptist life, who doesn't know of the rocks and reefs that have rocked our convention? If we are to right our ship, we need the ballast, the single devotion, the commitment you have demonstrated," Fletcher said.

"We (the SBC) need you like never before."

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Bangladesh's political crisis
prompts strikes and prayers

By Don Martin

Baptist Press
7/18/94

DHAKA, Bangladesh (BP)--Christians in Bangladesh will lie low and pray July 29 when Muslim militants lead a protest march on Dhaka, the national capital.

"It's time to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves," said a Southern Baptist representative who asked not to be identified in a July 14 telephone interview. "Most (Christians) plan to be very careful about where they go and if at all possible will stay indoors."

The latest Islamic show of force is directed at a government crippled by a four-month-old parliamentary crisis. The parliament is deadlocked over plans for the handling of general elections scheduled for 1996.

Opposition groups in parliament have demanded the government form a "caretaker administration" prior to the general election to ensure fair polling. The government, however, has asserted Bangladesh's constitution has no provision for such an arrangement.

Muslim militants are taking advantage of the national leadership vacuum by pressing their own demands. These include:

- the execution of Taslima Nasrin, a writer accused of making anti-Islamic statements.

- the call for a national blasphemy law that would punish those found guilty of criticizing Islam.

- the establishment of an Islamic state.

- abolishing foreign nongovernment organizations (or NGOs) working in development programs in the country, including Christian relief groups.

Muslim militants aren't waiting for the July 29th march to protest in the streets of Dhaka. More than 4,000 attempted to march to the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka July 14 to protest what they called the United States' support of Nasrin, the writer accused of blaspheming Islam. Police halted the marches five miles from the embassy but allowed a small group of marchers to proceed to the embassy and submit a memorandum to U.S. officials.

Muslim radicals also have offered a reward of \$5,000 to anyone who kills the 32-year-old author, who first enraged them in 1993 with her book, "Lajja" (Shame), which told of the suffering of Bangladesh's minority Hindus during religious riots in 1992.

Christians have responded to the crisis and the pending July 29th protests with calls for prayer. Churches throughout the country are scheduling special times for prayer and sending out urgent appeals for worldwide prayer.

"Prayer is the critical thing our brothers and sisters around the world can do for us," explained the Southern Baptist representative.

One church in Dhaka now holds an all-night prayer meeting every month, he reported. The dusk-to-dawn vigil focuses on asking God to resolve the situation in such a way that the Bangladesh church will grow in strength.

Although the climate seems increasingly hostile to the growth of Christianity in Bangladesh, Christians recognize the opportunities this crisis can provide, he said.

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"This kind of situation didn't catch God off-guard," he said. "He was aware of it before it happened ... and he's aware of what needs to be done.

"There's an openness right now by many to explore the gospel of Jesus Christ. These are actually really good days for us. We feel a little tension, but ... we feel a little bit excited at the way God is going to work this out."

The current crisis also has created a sense of urgency about the way Christians approach their ministries.

"These days have underscored the need to do the very best we can to help local Christian leaders assume full responsibility for the work in the event NGOs are asked to leave the county," the representative said.

It's very unlikely NGOs will be asked to leave anytime soon, he stressed, since the Muslim militants' demands represent a minority of the population. While the Islamic radicals have taken advantage of the crisis, most observers question the extent of their political base.

The militants are well-organized, however, and have enjoyed success in recent months. A June 30th strike led by militants called for the death of Nasrin following her comment in a Dhaka newspaper that the Koran, Islam's holy book, should be "revised thoroughly." Nasrin, who is Muslim, has said she was misquoted.

The June strike shut down the capital and several other cities. In Dhaka alone, more than 5,000 policemen and soldiers patrolled the streets in efforts to maintain peace. Nationwide more than 300 people were reported injured in clashes between pro- and anti-fundamentalist groups.

"The strike was successful in keeping most people off the streets, but that was because the majority of the people want to avoid violence," the Southern Baptist representative said. "You can't use that type of success to measure the popularity of a particular party or religious movement here.

"We've walked these paths before and we're not really afraid. I guess the reason for that is we're finding a new confidence in the Lord. He's not going to leave his people unprotected.

"That doesn't mean there's not a cost to be counted. It simply means in counting the cost, God's going to do what's right for his people."

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EDITORS' NOTE: Don Martin of Baptist Press' foreign bureau wrote the following three stories after visiting areas in China where the Hui people live. The Hui will be the focus of next year's Day of Prayer and Fasting for World Evangelization in which Southern Baptists participate.

Hui people lost in shadow
of China's Han culture

By Don Martin

Baptist Press
7/18/94

XIAN, China (BP)--With only minutes to spare, two backpacking tourists pushed through a crowded station in Xian, China, to catch a train leaving for Beijing.

They rushed onto the station platform and ran toward their assigned car. Their sprint ended abruptly with only yards to go.

A crowd of China's Hui (pronounced "Whey") minority blocked their way as they pressed toward a small, robed man wearing a glittering green-and-gold turban.

Frantically, the backpackers tried to squeeze through the crowd, but failed as the mob tightened ranks around the robed man and soon hoisted him into the door of the backpackers' assigned car.

The man, an Islamic imam (spiritual leader) for the Hui, had led hundreds of his people to the train station to bless seven men beginning the "hajj," the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia every Muslim is commanded to make at least once.

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As the imam spoke and stretched out his arms as a sign of blessing, his followers pushed even closer to him, squeezing the top-heavy tourists against the train. Some enthusiasts broke into chants. Others waved brightly colored flags. Small scuffles broke out as people jockeyed for position. Police shouted for calm; train officials gave up on their schedule and waited.

After more speeches, chants and blessings, the imam finished. His assistants lowered him to the platform and the backpackers seized the chance to scurry onto the train.

As they settled into their seats, they probably remembered only a mob that nearly caused them to miss their train -- without realizing they had actually witnessed the growing force of Islam in China.

They wouldn't be the first to overlook Muslim groups in China, a country associated in Western minds with Confucianism, Buddhism and now atheistic communism. Christians historically have focused their attention on the Han Chinese, who account for more than 90 percent of China's 1.2 billion people.

Since Han culture dominates the nation, Christians have reasoned -- incorrectly -- that outreach methods geared to the Han also would apply to minority groups, explained John, a Christian researcher who has focused on the Hui. (Because of sensitivities in his work, he asked that his real name not be used.)

China's 1982 census estimated about 7 million Hui live in the nation. But many researchers now place the total at 9 million -- and some as high as 20 million. That makes the Hui the largest Muslim group in China.

The Hui trace their origins to the Tang imperial dynasty (A.D. 618-907), when Arab and Persian traders settled in China and married Han women. After generations of intermarriage, physical and linguistic distinctions between the two groups all but disappeared.

"Many scholars said these (Chinese) Muslims were just absorbed into the greater Chinese society," John said. "But that's a limited view, because inside that Chinese fabric is Islam, and this world view is quite strong. Even today when most people consider China, they see a nation of one race -- the Han Chinese."

But the focus is changing.

"Many have begun to recognize that China's Islamic nationalities are Muslim first and Chinese second," he said. "When you listen to many of the Hui, you realize their hearts are in the Middle East ... I don't mean that the majority of the Hui are devoted Muslims. The average Hui on the street may well have a marginal understanding of the Islamic faith, but the Hui's social network and its attachment to the mosque's leadership is critical."

Such insight is key to reaching the Hui for Christ, John concluded.

"I saw the same thing in the Middle East," he said. "When I lived there, I realized respect for Islam and its teachings is essential for opening a dialogue. Only then can a person share the gospel. Any discussion, with an average Muslim or an imam, must start with a spirit of love and mutual respect."

In fact, the Hui's Muslim identity has been a unifying thread that has held this diverse nationality together. For centuries the Hui have struggled for existence in a society dominated by the Han Chinese.

Today, the Hui share a land with the Han, but not a path. Just like the backpackers and pilgrims who rolled out of Xian on the same train, one group looks toward Beijing -- and the other toward Mecca.

The Hui who remained on the station platform in Xian hold a similar view. A few watched the train pull away and saw its military-style attendants salute the crowd from the compartment of the train.

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But th attendants' perfunctory show of order was lost on most of the Hui, who had turned to follow their imam back to the mosque.

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(BP) photos (two horizontal) relating to this story and the two below were mailed July 13 to state Baptist newspapers by Richmond bureau of Baptist Press. Outlines available on SBCNet News Room.

Hui people symbolize
Islam's rise in China

By Don Martin

Baptist Press
7/18/94

XIAN, China (BP)--"Nothing compares to going to Mecca," exclaims Ma Lin, a retired taxi driver in his late 60s and member of China's Hui people.

"The day I was married, the birth of my children -- these things are nothing compared to going to Mecca" on a "hajj," said Ma of the pilgrimage to Islam's holy city every adult Muslim who is able must attempt at least once.

Ma (not his real name) learned officials in Beijing, China's capital, had tapped him to make the journey less than 48 hours before his scheduled departur . Chinese Muslims often wait five, 10, even 20 years before receiving government approval for their trip. When clearance comes, whole families break into a whirlwind of celebrations, shopping and special meals.

The day before his departure, Ma's home had the electric feel of an American kitchen on Thanksgiving day. One grand meal after another kept the house filled with the pungent smells of rich spices. Every room in the two-story house, built around an open-air courtyard, had trays of fruit, steamed breads and sweets.

Almost oblivious to the festivities, Ma moved about with the air of a monarch and the enthusiasm of an excited child. When friends dropped by to congratulate him and wish him a safe journey, he held court, patiently reciting details of his preparations and what he planned to do in Mecca.

The next day, Ma joined the other six departing pilgrims for prayer at Xian's Great Mosque, built in A.D. 742. The service was led by the Hui (pronounced "Whey") imam, a leader of the mosque. The mosque was expanded to its current size during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), making it one of the oldest and largest in China.

Although Ma carried a round-trip ticket that brings him back to his family in Xian, in many ways his trip to the Middle East is a return home. The Chinese character for Hui can mean 'return,' explains another imam in Xian.

"People used to refer to us as the 'Hui Hui,' which can mean double return," the imam adds. "China is a temporary place, and one day we will return to the Middle East."

This is not an isolated opinion. Most Hui have never been to the Middle East but they and other Chinese Muslims share their forefathers' beliefs that Arabia is their true homeland.

"They yearn not merely to migrate to a land of safety but to return to Arabia as the only way to physical and spiritual redemption," writes one scholar.

In 1979 China allowed 19 people to travel to Mecca as part of a state-sponsored trip. This year more than 6,000 Chinese Muslims, most paying their own way, will go on the hajj. The pilgrimage can take 30 to 40 days and costs upwards of \$4,000, a sum equal to several years' wages in China.

Between 4 percent and 5 percent of China's people are Muslims, which means China's Islamic population outnumbers traditional Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Libya and Iraq.

The largest of these Muslim groups in China is the Hui, and th y wield considerable political clout. China has placed some restrictions on Islamic freedom in its outer regions. But it is "keenly aware of the importance foreign Islamic governments place on China's treatment of its Muslim minorities as an issu influencing lucrative trade and military agreements," notes Dru Gladney, associate professor of Asian studies at the University of Hawaii.

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China's commerce with its Middle Eastern trading partners has grown more important following the rise in tensions with many of its Western trading partners in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising, Gladney explains.

The Chinese government also hears the new Muslim voices emerging from across its northern borders in central Asia. The newly independent states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan all share a religious heritage with China's Muslims, who are concentrated mainly in the north and northwest.

Trade between China's northern regions and many of these new nations feeds into China's markets. But the attraction of Central Asia's new independence to China's Muslims has not been overlooked by Beijing. China watchers have noted the wealth of coverage China's state-run media gives to news of unrest in Central Asia. Fighting on the Tajik-Afghan border was covered in great detail, carrying an unmistakable message from the government: Independence offers chaos and war, but loyalty to Beijing assures security and prosperity.

But the resurgence of Muslim identity continues, as it has for years. Since the late 1970s, the Chinese government has watched Islamic conservatism rise among the Hui in China's northwest Muslim communities, Gladney reports in his book, "Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic."

"This rising radical, even fundamentalist, emphasis upon Islamic purity in Hui communities has caused concern" among government officials, he writes.

Muslim groups, including the Hui, have openly challenged Beijing on several occasions. Outbreaks of Muslim unrest occurred in 1986, 1988, 1989 and 1990. In October 1993, government troops stormed a mosque in Xining and ended a five-week standoff with Muslim protesters.

The October incident left at least nine people dead and many injured in a series of protests by the Hui. Reports from the area said the Hui were angry over a book that portrayed a Muslim Chinese man praying next to a pig. The protests had started out as authorized, peaceful demonstrations, but the size of the gatherings grew into the thousands and began to disrupt order in Xining. These actions are believed to be the largest crackdown on a popular uprising since the crushing of the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

The Chinese government finds itself forced into a delicate balancing act. The government not only needs to treat Muslims with care because of watchful eyes from the Middle East, but also can't forget that China's Muslims live on top of much of the country's oil and mineral reserves. These natural resources are a vital key to the continued growth of China's economy.

Christian researchers are quick to point out that Hui communities are far from being considered hotbeds of Islamic revolutionaries. But the Hui nevertheless are increasingly bowing to Mecca, not Beijing.

In recent years the desire among Muslim youths to learn Arabic has grown steadily throughout China.

"When you know Arabic, you can read the Koran, and one day you will need to know Arabic to go to Mecca," explains an imam.

Throughout China, local and foreign funds have created a boom in mosque construction and reconstruction. During China's Cultural Revolution most mosques in China were closed or destroyed. But despite such destruction, new building has produced more mosques in China than there were before 1949, the year the Communist Party came to power.

Muslim funds from outside China also support distribution of the Koran, Islam's holy book. Saudi Arabia, one of the leading producers of copies of the Koran, reportedly not only links parts of its trade with China to the funding of development projects in Muslim communities, but also secures channels for Koran distribution.

Christians once considered the Hui a fringe people who would easily unravel from the Han society. But the Hui's underlying Islamic strands have stymied past outreach and evangelism efforts. Now those strands are becoming more and more visible.

"Who knows how many Hui generations have come and gone in the midst of Christians who overlooked or undervalued them?" laments one Christian observer.

"I know that's not God's will. We need help now so that not another generation will go by without an effective witness among them."

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China's isolated countryside
open to Baptist medical teams

By Don Martin

Baptist Press
7/18/94

HONG KONG (BP)--The door to China's isolated countryside is open to Southern Baptist medical teams, but none has entered.

It's now common for foreigners to live in major cities of China, but still rare for them to live and work in rural areas, where more than 75 percent of the Chinese people live.

Cooperative Services International (CSI), the Southern Baptist aid organization, has opportunities to place five four-member medical teams in such areas, but so far has been unable to fill the positions.

Immediate openings exist for medical teams in rural locations in Henan province and medical personnel for training programs at a university and hospital in Xian, the capital of neighboring Shaanxi province.

CSI workers are particularly excited about the opportunities for the rural work because of possible contact with one of China's Muslim minority people groups, the Hui (pronounced "Whey").

While they can be found in almost every major city in China, more than 80 percent of the Hui -- who number at least 9 million -- live in rural areas.

"At present, medical work is one of the few doors into that group in China," a CSI administrator said. "It's a fantastic opportunity to work with a very difficult-to-reach people."

Plans call for sending the medical teams to China each summer and fall to work from two to four weeks.

"We needed to have teams working this summer, but that didn't work out," the CSI administrator said. "But we still have hope for the fall. The value of this work is sure to have a long-term impact with the hospitals, clinics and the Hui people.

"We're now also planning to place long-term medical personnel in these areas," he added. "If possible, we want to maintain a constant medical presence."

The teams will train Chinese medical workers in provincial capitals and in rural clinics. CSI wants to channel specialists in a number of medical fields to the provincial hospitals while providing other teams for rural clinics, where they will work with Chinese paramedics on primary-care skills.

People interested in more information about the CSI medical teams may call Alvinia Michalec in CSI's Richmond, Va., office at 1-800-999-3113, a toll-free number.

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