

NEW FAITH, RENEWED IDENTITY: HOW SOME MUSLIMS ARE BECOMING FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

By David Greenlee¹

From the time of Ubaidallah ibn Jahiz, who in Ethiopia became “the first Muslim . . . to discover and embrace the truth” (Maximov 2004) and until recent days, the number of Muslims reported as coming to faith in Jesus Christ was small.² Something, however, has changed. That Muslims in significant numbers today are, in a biblical sense, coming to faith in Jesus Christ is no secret.³

Given this fact, *why* are more and more of our Muslim neighbors running the risks of “apostasy” and turning to faith in Jesus Christ? How do questions of personal and social identity affect this process? In this paper I will briefly address these questions, focusing on representative published research and writing mostly from the Protestant tradition.⁴

LENSES TO CLARIFY OUR VISION

Conversion is a complex phenomenon we will never fully describe. However, as Paul Hiebert often said, “We see in part, but we do see” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Aware of (and intending to avoid) its negative connotations, I will use the word “conversion” following Andrew Walls’ (2004): “the idea of turning...the specifically Christian understanding of the response to God’s saving activity.”

Seven “lenses” can help us reflect on conversion. Like filters that pass only certain colors of light, observing conversion through these lenses draws out aspects lost in the glare of other factors. Valuable as individual images, we should also attempt to recombine them into an enhanced, multi-dimensional whole.

The Psychological Lens

Andreas Maurer (1999; 2006, 106), having studied conversion in South Africa, notes that we should look at humans “holistically as [people] with different needs, all of which play a role in the movement to conversion.” Muslims come to faith in Christ – and Christians turn to Muslim faith – not just for “religious” or intellectual reasons. Various relational, experimental, mystical, and other motives may push or pull them toward change.

Hannes Wiher, drawing on experience in Guinea, observes that “the content of every conscience is close enough to God’s norms in order to be an initial reference point (Romans 2:1–16).” If our message is based on issues irrelevant to the local conscience, Wiher warns, it may cause “misunderstanding in the audience and [represent] a call to accept the culture of the missionary” leading to refusal, or a merely opportunistic, outward change. “Conversion,

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² See, for example, Griffith (2008) concerning the early centuries of Islam and Sharkey (2008, 6, 63) regarding Egypt until the mid 20th century.

³ BBC coverage of Abdul Rahman of Afghanistan (2006), and Lina Joy and “Maria” of Malaysia (Pressly 2006) are typical of this open reporting.

⁴ From the Roman Catholic perspective, see Gaudeul (1999) and, at a popular level, Paolucci and Eid (2007).

which bypasses the indigenous conscience,” he warns, “may lead to superficial conformity or to compartmentalized conformity, that is, syncretism” (2003, 367).

The role of dreams in drawing Muslims to faith in Jesus Christ has been frequently reported. Seppo Syrjänen (1984, 132, 137), is among the few to move beyond phenomenology and consider psychological aspects of how God works in this way. In the search for meaning and identity, many dreams have a role as the culmination of an inner struggle granting license to do that which is otherwise prohibited. Richard Kronk builds on the thought of Carl Jung who “upholds the possibility that some dreams have an outside source both in their content and in the occasion of their occurrence.” Dreams are significant because they are “sources of religious significance for the Muslim . . . [who] relies heavily upon such to define reality, answer ultimate questions and guide his day-to-day activities” (Kronk 1993, 14, 22, 25–26).

These writers complement Jean-Marie Gaudeul’s (1999, 225) who observes that we should not “overlook the fact that the obscure mechanisms of the human psyche are also subject to divine action . . . [God] speaks to us in the kind of language we can understand, and it is not surprising if he uses dreams and visions and healings to people who believe in them.”

The Behavioral Lens

Paul Hiebert often reminded us that conversion must involve all levels of culture, including the outer layer of behavior. There is a danger of deception or misinterpretation, but “transformed behavior is . . . a sign of inner transformation and a testimony to the world of that transformation” (Hiebert 2006, 29).

Observed behavior in itself attracts others to faith in Christ. Khalil and Bilici, unusual as Muslim researchers writing about conversion *away* from Islam, make reference to only one attractive factor of the new faith (along with several negatives), a factor that has to do with Christian behavior (2007, 118). They quote a Christian priest who never observed a Muslim “who confessed that he accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour” because of theological arguments. Instead, “it is always through a small deed of brotherly love done by a Christian that the heart of a Muslim is moved.”

Participation is a third part of the behavioral aspect of conversion. Mary McVicker observes that “while physical and cognitive experiences of Jesus tend to differ according to social, economic, or educational backgrounds of the women, behavioral experience is a significant aspect for most Muslim women growing in relationship to God.” Her point has to do with moving beyond the logical, cognitive level in order to communicate with Asian Muslim women who “taste *behavioral experience* that impacts their journey of coming to faith” (McVicker 2006, 133–34).

The Sociological Lens

The sociological lens is broad, and helps us consider groups such as migrants. Hasan Abdulahugli finds that those most open to the Gospel in Central Asia are “those who have tasted hard economic conditions in traditional villages and have moved to the city, away from the social pressures of family, neighbors, and the mosque and into the freedom and love of Christian communities located in urban areas” (Abdulahugli 2006, 162).

Mogens Mogensen (2007) found “a pattern that links the conversion of immigrants to Christianity closely to their integration into the Danish society.” Perhaps a negative confirmation of this, Gabriël Jansen, reporting only a handful of Moroccan believers in Christ in the Netherlands, finds that “integration [into Dutch churches] . . . has turned out to be a disappointment for many...” (Jansen 2000, 133).

Evelyne Reisacher (2006) describes important gender differences between North Africans in France. Women’s social status, limitations on freedom, and the impact of rejection by family set them apart from men in coming to and growing in faith in Christ. Further, the women she interviewed perceived that, once having come to faith, women are more resilient and likely to persevere than are men.

Robert L. Montgomery observes that “the religions that have spread often seem to have offered a resource to leaders or to people as a whole in resisting threats to continued existence” (1991, 50) while conversion is less likely when no advantage is perceived. Complementing this thesis, Robert Hefner found that “With Christianity [Javanese Muslim youth of the 1960s] declared their independence from a village social order that, in their eyes, had brought their families pain and humiliation” (Hefner 1993, 116). Conversely, as a researcher from the Caucasus wrote about “not-yet-believing” youth in his country, their “minds have been blinded to understand the true personality and work of Christ because this knowledge has been limited and distorted over the years and the person of Jesus Christ still remains as [the] ‘God of Russians.’”

Andrew Bush (2009, 149) reports that although there are close friendships between Christian and Muslim students at a Palestinian territories university, these relationships are “hindered by the perception of the Muslim community that Christians in the West hate Palestinians . . . [and] Palestinian Christians become guilty by association.” In comparison, Anthony Greenham notes that political instability played only a contributory role in the conversion accounts of Palestinians, and even that in only a minority of cases he analyzed. “For most of the Palestinians, political instability may be too common a factor in their lives to suggest itself as an avenue for the transforming encounter of conversion” (2004, 190-91).

Finally, under the sociological lens we consider group conversions and movements. Lowell DeJong describes the need for patience, avoiding pressure to quickly plant a church that almost certainly will be marked by the messenger’s culture rather than leading to a culturally imbedded church (DeJong 2006, 217, 224–28). This may help avoid problems Mogensen found in a related setting where, “Almost all the [approximately 500] Fulbe converts still had a strong identity as Fulbe and as Christian Fulbe, but the majority of them had serious problems being accepted by their Fulbe community.” He concludes that this is evidently because “the primary method of evangelism used among this tribe has been ‘extraction evangelism’” (Mogensen 2000, 273, 275).

In a tribal setting in West Africa, Dan McVey (2006, 208-13) asked why, after an initial period of significant growth, a movement reached a plateau. “The single greatest obstacle to church growth among the Jijimba,” he found, was in clearly “communicating the concept that one can be a follower of Jesus while maintaining identity as a Jijimba.”

The Cultural Lens

McVey's comment leads us into consideration of the cultural lens and with it, the question of how questions of identity – individual and group – affect the process of conversion.⁵ Lewis Rambo notes that, “The more consonant the cultural systems [of messenger and receiver] the more likely it is that conversion will transpire. The more dissonant, the less likely it is that conversion will occur” (Rambo 1993, 42).

A recent study confirms this point, noting that the reason only a small number of Turks in Germany have “committed their lives to Jesus Christ” may be many Christians’ lack of awareness of “the multicultural character of the Body of Christ,” their conventional forms and traditions “creating barriers between Germans and foreigners.” Further to this, John Leonard (2006, 292) observed in France, that since “immigrants from the same population [choose] different strategies in acculturation, we can not take the example of any one group and make it normative for the entire population. The church must develop an approach that values what the immigrant values even if this is not what the church believes is best for the immigrant.” Mogensen (2000, 270) reports a similar barrier in northern Nigeria where “a significant percentage of the Fulbe converts complained that they felt that the Christians did not welcome them in the church during the decision and incorporation phases.”

The German study further observes that “conversion to the Christian faith does not end in betrayal of the oriental culture [nor] threaten Turkish identity” but, in fact, it holds a high chance for the development of a healthy Turkish or Kurdish identity. This reaffirmed my own finding that a byproduct of coming to faith in Christ among young Moroccan men was a heightened, positive sense of national identity (Greenlee 1996, 125–27).

This question of identity has been increasingly explored in recent research. “Does one have to go through Christianity to enter God’s family?” asks Rebecca Lewis (2009). Far from suggesting religious inclusivism, she along with others such as John Travis (2008) are exploring ways that believers in Christ may remain completely faithful to Jesus and to the Bible, yet without unnecessarily rejecting (or giving the perception of rejecting) their families and culture.⁶

Approaching the subject from the perspective of history of religions, cultural anthropology, and Christian theology, Jonas Adelin Jørgensen studied followers of Jesus in Dhaka and Chennai who have not openly become part of the existing churches. Jørgensen supports the authenticity of the faith of these groups, for whom Jesus Christ is central, arguing that “the practice of the *imandars* (faithful to Jesus) and *bhaktas* (devotees of Christ) could be viewed as new and creative manifestations of Christianity in a global age.” He concludes that “the resemblance with the larger Christian tradition and community ensures Christian identity. At the same time, the differences enlarge our understanding of what actual and lived Christian life and Christian theology might include in globalized Christianity” (Jørgensen 2008a. See also Jørgensen 2008b and Jeyaraj 2009).

Kathryn Kraft explored the question of identity among Middle Eastern Muslims who had become followers of Jesus including many who encountered difficulties in integrating into

⁵ “Identity” could of course be fruitfully considered through other lenses, such as psychology.

⁶ The *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* frequently explores this “identity” question with regard to Buddhists and Hindus, as well as Muslims, who have come to faith in Jesus Christ. See especially Vol. 24, focused on “insider movements,” available at <www.ijfm.org/archives.htm>.

and being identified with the existing churches. She notes that “for most Muslims, leaving Islam cannot even be conceived of as a possibility. While choosing to follow Christ involves for most . . . consciously rejecting the Muslim creed, they do not want this to entail rejecting their strong cultural heritage, which is identified as Islamic. The biggest challenge they face in developing a new identity is determining how to continue to be culturally Muslim while following a Christian faith” (Kraft and Atallah 2008).

How do these followers of Jesus find this new identity? Kraft summarizes that while they

. . . generally recognize and feel a sense of commonality with each other, they approach their identity negotiation in a variety of ways. Some reject everything about their past and choose to become fully “Christian.” These are the individuals who are most likely to break off relations with their former communities. Others consider their faith and their ethnicity to be completely separate and consider themselves to be both Muslim and followers of Christ; some of these sought to be socially indistinguishable from their Muslim neighbours. If pressed, most participants admitted to being Muslim in culture, and Christian in creed, although the historical animosity between the world’s two largest religions would preclude them from ever calling themselves “Muslim Christians.” The participants who demonstrated the greatest degree of comfort with a well-developed identity were those who had successfully adhered a Christian religious identity onto a pre-existing Muslim ethnic identity. Nonetheless, each participant worked through this process in his/her own way, usually using careful analysis and critique of his/her own beliefs and circumstances. They expressed a great deal of identity frustration but also agency to negotiate a new identity for themselves. (Kraft 2007, 204)

The Spiritual Warfare Lens

The spiritual warfare lens (Ephesians 6:12) is especially relevant where “folk Islam” with its various mystical and at times occult practices is prevalent (Love 2000).

Interested in issues of power, a Norwegian researcher considered Indonesians who had come to faith in Jesus Christ. His findings point to the role of miracles in providing clear answers to genuine needs. They often serve as punctual events in the process of conversion, revealing the divine will and demonstrating the superior power of Jesus Christ over the spirit world. Although his research focus was on issues of power, he found that “assurance of salvation remains the most significant reason for the conversions, even among those informants who fervently exalt the power aspects of the Gospel.”

The Human Communicator Lens

The process of conversion is intimately linked with divinely-enabled human witness (Acts 1:8). Reinhold Straehler (2005, 103-104) reminds us that “Holistic ministries or non-verbal ministries alone will not communicate to the Muslim that an alternative world-view is possible for him or her” since “there needs to be some verbal communication or communication via media (audio, visual or print).” As Gabriël Jansen observed (2000, 80), among Moroccans who had come to faith in Amsterdam “the most prominent shared factor [in witness] appears to be the continued personal friendly contact with one or more individual Christians, and most often with a living, loving Christian group.”

The role of media and the methods of our witness vary and should not be seen in isolation from other factors in the process of conversion (Greenham 2004, 193). However, as Tobias Rink observes, “The way in which the gospel is communicated, from the convert’s viewpoint, is as meaningful as the content of the presentation” (Rink 2006, 126). It may also affect the ability of the new believers to become fruitful witnesses themselves, especially where issues of literacy and orality are involved (Greenlee 2003, 27; Gupta 2004, 17).

The Lens of God’s Divine Role

Christian conversion is initiated and enabled by God (2 Corinthians 5:18, Titus 3:3-7). All of the other factors I have discussed are the ways and means by which he draws us to himself. I limit my comments here to two factors.

Numerous studies refer to the importance of Bible study in the process of conversion. Not all who read the Bible come to faith in Jesus Christ, however, for those who do, personal Bible reading, Bible correspondence courses, observing Luke’s Gospel in the form of the *Jesus* film, and chronological Bible storying are reported in many studies as significant factors in the process of conversion (see, for example, Greenham 2004, Greenlee 1996, Gupta 2004, McVicker 2006).

Finally, Abraham Durán (2006, 274) speaks of the “beauty of Jesus.” We must follow Jesus’ own example, “a gradual approach that will lead people to discern the truth and beauty of Jesus’ personality, teachings, and life motivating them to be his followers.” Or, in the words of Jean-Marie Gaudeul, “The formulas of faith only begin to make sense, either suddenly or little by little, when Jesus has been recognized as one who loves us and saves us” (Gaudeul 1999, 52–53).

SUMMARY FACTORS

How is God at work in drawing Muslims to faith in Jesus Christ through these diverse circumstances? Each person is unique; God’s grace is creative. Those Muslims who now follow Jesus came to and live out their faith in many different ways. Prediction and prescription are to be avoided. However, three summary factors are independently referred to by several researchers (Greenham 2004, 193; Gupta 2004, 13; Smith 2006, 287–88; Syrjänen 1984, 171–72). Muslims who have come to faith in Jesus Christ usually have:

- Encountered the truth of God’s Word;
- Received a touch of God’s love through his people; and
- Seen a sign of God’s power.

God’s mercy is deep; his love is wide. The Gospel is good news—for *all* people! To God be all the glory!

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