

# Should Muslims Become “Christians”?

*Issues regarding the identity of Muslim background believers are extremely critical. Our best hope for reaching the vast Muslim populations of the world, with its great variety of Muslim people groups, is to plant flourishing churches of Muslim background believers who remain culturally relevant to Muslim society.*

by Bernard Dutch

**D**uring the Gulf War in 1991, most in the country where I live considered Saddam Hussein a hero. Hearing Saddam praised was common, especially when people mistook me for an Arab. So after entering a shop one day and greeting the shopkeeper with the common Muslim “*Assalaamu alaykum*” (God’s peace be upon you), his tirade against evil Americans and praise for Saddam came as no surprise. But when I purchased my items, he looked at me more closely, then asked, “Where are you from?” Not wanting to embarrass him for having been so kind and open with “one of the enemy,” I replied, “I’m from Wisconsin.” As expected, he crinkled his forehead and asked, “Where is that? I’ve never heard of it.” I replied, “A small place near Canada.” Smiling and evidently satisfied, he bid me farewell as I left his shop.

In my encounter with this Muslim shopkeeper, I downplayed my American identity in favor of my Wisconsin identity to avoid provoking an unnecessary conflict. Consider the much more serious issues facing Muslim background believers: Should they identify themselves as Christians or Muslims? To which community do they belong? Should they feel free to articulate their identity differently in various situations? How will they gain a hearing in their own community?

## Self-Identity: A Multi-faceted Issue

Western Christians tend to place great emphasis on the self-identity of Muslim background believers. Self-identity is a major criteria differentiating several points on the “C1–C6 Spectrum” (as presented by Joshua Massey, John Travis and others in this edition of the IJFM). Some think that a Muslim background believer who continues to identify himself as “Muslim” crosses a line from contextualization to syncretism.

In my experience with Muslim background believers, their self-identity is a multi-faceted issue that defies simple explanation and often frustrates external expectations. As cultural outsiders, we often see the issue in false clarity, imposing simplistic understandings of terms and relationships. We have great expectations for young believers to “take their stand” in a society hostile to the spread of Christianity within its ranks, where the struggle for survival is more intense than we outsiders will ever understand. But for many Muslim background believers, identity is fluid, taking the most appropriate form for the situation. For instance, where Christianity has strong negative connotations, Muslim background believers may avoid a “Christian” label and identify themselves in different ways according to various perspectives and situations.

This is similar to Western Christians who may not want to be put in a “born again” box or want to be seen as “religious fanatics” by unsympathetic acquaintances. We try to distance ourselves of the negative baggage associated with the Jim Bakers, Jimmy Swaggarts, and others who have shamed the name of Christ. We disclaim association with Christian complicity in the historical realities of slavery, colonial exploitation, and paranoid witch-hunts. We, too, adjust elements of our identity to fit our situation.

Others have written about the need for multiple levels of contextualization to reach a broad spectrum of Muslims. Contextual approaches are more likely to be effective among Muslims who are content with Islam, or who face considerable social pressure, than with Muslims disillusioned with Islam. This article seeks to examine several issues of self-identity that face Muslim background believers at higher levels of contextualization. I focus on this because I believe that our best hope for reaching the vast Muslim populations of the world is to plant flourishing churches of Muslim background believers who remain culturally relevant to Muslim society.

To understand the complex issues surrounding the self-identity of Muslim

background believers, we need to take a closer look at Muslim perceptions of Christianity, the identity of the gospel in contextual approaches, and the believers' perception of their own identity. We will then look at historical usage of the term "Christian," options for believer identity in Muslim society today, and how society perceives these various kinds of believers.

Understanding local perceptions of Christianity is crucial to appreciate a Muslim background believer's self-identity. The Muslim society where I live has a long and skewed acquaintance with Christianity. Missionaries targeted animist peoples here for well over a century. The resulting church naturally developed with animistic customs and traditions. I use the term "animist background Christian" to describe this church and its adherents. The religious vocabulary of animist background Christians and Muslims are totally different and mutually offensive. For example, Christian vocabulary for worshiping God sounds, to Muslim ears, like bringing an offering of flowers and fruit before an idol. Animist background Christian religious practice also appears to Muslims as pagan and idolatrous. Burning incense before a crucifix and pictures

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of Jesus look, to Muslim eyes, like idol worship. This animistic flavor in the church and among Christians has created major barriers to reaching Muslims.

In addition to these difficulties, Muslim clerics have preached against Christianity for generations and fostered numerous malicious misconceptions about Christians. To the average Muslim here, "Christian" means someone who worships three gods, believes Jesus is the product of a sexual liaison between God and Mary, drinks wine, eats pork, defiles himself with ritually unclean habits, betrays his cultural heritage, and uses religion to procure assistance from Westerners. This local understanding of the term "Christian" works against the spread of the gospel when it is called "Christianity," and is understandably not a label by which Muslim background believers desire to be identified.

## Historical Considerations

We should remember that the term "Christian" does not come as a God-ordained label for followers of Jesus. The name arose as a local—and probably derisive—name for Jesus' disciples in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Most early believers, at least Jewish believers, preferred to identify themselves as following or belonging to "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:23; 24:14). This was true both before and after the term "Christian" had been coined in Antioch, indicating that the early believers did not quickly accept the label "Christian." In other words, there is no Biblical mandate for followers of Jesus to call themselves "Christian." Accordingly, when the term "Christian" causes serious misunderstanding and creates unnecessary barriers to the gospel, it seems appropriate to discard its use in favor of an identity that will communicate more effectively.

In some parts of the world, it has not been expedient for believers to call themselves "Christian" due to serious misconceptions about the term. Prior to evangelical missionaries arriving in Ethiopia, the Orthodox Church existed for centuries and promoted many non-scriptural practices. As non-orthodox Ethiopians came to faith in Jesus, they knew they could not be identified as "Christian" because that meant Ethiopian Orthodox Christian. So they identified themselves simply as "believers" and have become a huge and vibrant church today. Similarly, Christians among the Hausa, a largely Muslim people group in northern Nigeria, refer to themselves as "*Masu Bi*" (trans. "those who believe").

In a slightly different vein, some Catholics in Ireland, who have come to an evangelical understanding of salvation through faith in Jesus, refuse to identify themselves as Protestants because of its negative connotations. Historically, believers have often adjusted their spiritual communal identity away from the supposed "universal" designations that have negative local connotations.

## Gospel Identity in Contextual Approaches

Most who work in contextualized outreaches to Muslims seek to gain a hearing by starting with things we hold in common. Christianity and Islam share many spiritual disciplines, a similar cosmology, and most all of the same prophets. Much in the Qur'an supports a high view of Jesus and the so called "previous" Scriptures. This common ground is fertile soil for sowing seeds. Thus, a contextualized approach begins from an Islamic context, then bridges across our common ground to Jesus and the "previous" scriptures. The gospel is therefore initially perceived as harmoni-

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ous with—and to some extent supported by—Islamic scripture.

Some may ask, “Isn’t this a deceitful blurring of two religions? Doesn’t this run the risk of deceiving Muslims into becoming Christian without them realizing it?” In my experience, Muslims are not that naive. They all know that anything to do with the Injil (New Testament) is essentially Christian, but this approach provides them an acceptable “window” through which they can investigate the previous scriptures without turning traitor to their society. As Muslims come to faith, they accept baptism when they confess Jesus as Savior and Lord, they acknowledge that salvation is by God’s grace through faith, and believe that the Bible (*Taurat, Zabur, Injil*) is God’s Word. I have yet to meet a Muslim background believer who failed to realize that what he believes is basically Biblical, and in that sense Christian.

We therefore do not hoodwink or manipulate Muslims into believing Biblical truth. We merely present it in a manner they can understand, making palatable to Muslims what they know to be essentially Biblical Christianity.

Paul utilized a similar approach in Athens. After noting their altar to “an Unknown God,” Paul pronounced, “Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23 NIV). He then proceeded to use quotes from their pagan poets (including a hymn to Zeus) as stepping-stones to the Gospel. In other words, Paul built a bridge for the Gospel with redeemable elements of Athenian paganism. This did not win the entire crowd or obviate theological hurdles, but it opened the way for several to come to faith in Christ (Acts 17:34).

### **Believers’ Perception of Faith and Community**

When a Muslim comes to faith in Christ as his savior, he knows he is making a religious change. In my experience, Muslim background believers do not perceive themselves as Muslim reformers following a “purified Islam.” However, a true Islamic perspective would hold that the religion revealed by all prophets (e.g., Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad) was originally the same, but later changed by Jews and Christians. From this viewpoint, some Muslim background believers could possibly consider that they are returning to the “true Islam” as revealed through Jesus. But even in this case it would be understood that this “true Islam” is what real Christians believe.

Muslim background believers continue to see themselves as members of Muslim society. They keep their Islamic names, avoid consuming pork and wine, and do not (publicly at least) malign the Qur’an or Muhammad. They feel comfortable with the familiar rhythms and flow of life in Muslim society, and continue to meet social obligations to Muslim friends and relatives.

Muslim background believers do not see themselves as having become animist background Christians, and do not make highly visible links to the animist background Christian community. However, they do realize that animist background Christian believers are their brothers in Christ. They do not feel the same bond with people in the church who are Christian in name only, or with Christian sects who deny the essentials of the faith. So the fraternal bond between Muslim background believers and animist background Christians is therefore one of faith, not of community.

Debate on the unity of faith and community has troubled the church for centuries. The early church wrestled through the religious and communal identity of Gentile background believers. Judaizers wanted Gentiles believers to make

a complete break from their pagan traditions by embracing Judaism along with Jesus, and they no doubt insisted on circumcision along with the entire Law of Moses. This all must have seemed to have clear Biblical support. The Jerusalem Council discussed the matter at great length. Finally, James articulated their decision of the early church, “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19ff). Gentile believers were not required to join the Jewish community, attend synagogue services, become circumcised, change their names, or maintain the ritual cleanliness prescribed by the Law.

After two thousand years and a Protestant ethos that emphasizes theology over community, it is easy to think in only theological terms and completely overlook the massive communal identity issues being addressed in the Jerusalem Council decision. Believers from a Muslim background are in a similar situation to that of early Gentile believers. I also believe that we should not make it difficult for the Muslims who are turning to God. Following the example of our early church fathers, we should not impose unnecessary changes to the cultural identity of Muslim background believers.

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## Problems Associated with a “Christian” Identity

Muslim background believers face many problems identifying themselves as “Christian.” In my region of the world, this is understood to mean animist background Christian. As noted above, they feel no affinity to the animist background Christian community. From their perspective, becoming a “Christian” is to betray one’s family and community by following the polytheistic path of animism. With such an understanding of the term, who can blame the Muslim community for ostracizing a “Christian” and his family from the life of the community? The “Christian” child will have no playmates, and his marriage will be almost impossible to arrange. A “Christian” identity actually communicates the very antithesis of what it means to be a Christ-follower.

In addition to suffering social ostracism, a “Christian” identity precludes the Muslim background believer from gaining a hearing in his own community. A mature believer—and effective evangelist—sadly told me how he ruined his chances of reaching his family for Christ because, as a new believer, he shared the gospel using animist background Christian language and identity. Twenty years later they are still offended.

Where I live, Muslim society is broad and inclusive of many different faiths and practices. Muslim youth join communist parties and espouse atheistic dogma, but are still considered Muslims. Some Muslims never stop to pray except for Friday noon prayers. Others only pray on Islamic holidays. Mainstream Muslims belong to a bewildering number of mystical sects. Sufi *pirs* (holy men) lead groups of disciples through many unorthodox practices in their quest for a mystical experience of God—some of which are animistic and some even erotic. Of course, there are orthodox, bearded Muslims with prayer caps, and modest women covered from head to toe. Surely there is room for Muslim background believers underneath this broad umbrella of Muslim society.

## Looking at the Various Options

1. *Animist background Christian.* This option generally results in social ostracism, and therefore can not establish a local witness relevant to Muslim society.
2. *Christian with Muslim culture.* Some groups have taken a “Christian” identity and retained much of their Muslim culture, such as language, dress, names, etc. However, few are able to establish a witness in their home areas. Most receive outside funding to engage in witness away from their home areas, and they are seeing some Muslims come to Christ. It is yet to be seen whether or not this outreach can result in fellowships led by local believers who remain positively engaged in their community.
3. *Neither Christian nor Muslim.* Some set themselves out to be followers of Jesus—outside Islam and outside animist background Christianity. This is a difficult identity for young believers to take, as there is no supporting community and no such legal category. The government only recognizes major religious communities (i.e., Christian, Muslim, Tribal Animist, etc.), so an individual cannot just create a new legally recognized religious community known as “followers of Jesus.”

4. *Jesus Muslims.* A few believers try to identify themselves as a new sect of “Jesus Muslims.” Some find this a viable identity, but most are not deeply involved in their communities. Muslims generally regard it as a disguise for Christianity, albeit a more palatable form of Christian than the animist background form.
5. *Mystical Muslims (Sufi).* Some believers have come from mystical Sufi backgrounds. The Sufi tradition is quite popular where I live. Adherents come to a *pir* (holy man) expecting him to be their mediator before God. The *pir* will dispense special wisdom or power to help the person cope with life’s problems. Sufi brotherhoods are outside of orthodox Islam, but accepted as part of Muslim society. Believers from these traditions have perhaps the easiest job determining their identity. They say they belong to a special Sufi brotherhood called “The Way”. Their specific teaching and path of salvation involves Jesus as their mediator before God. This identity is only an option for those with Sufi leanings—those whom society will recognize as Sufi-type people. Believers from mainstream traditions will not take this identity, as the trappings of a Sufi brotherhood would be problematic for them.
6. *Muslims with non-mainstream beliefs and practices.* Where I live, most Muslim background believers keep a general Muslim identity, but incorporate several non-mainstream practices in prayer, celebration of Muslim holidays, and Scripture reading. Like believers in the West who are effective in sharing their faith, they tailor their identity according to the openness of their audience. People who ask questions in a belligerent or ridiculing manner are usually shown a mainstream, God-fearing Muslim identity with few differences. This avoids wasting precious opportunities to bear witness on people not ready to hear (Matt. 7:6). If accused of apostasy, a believer can often deflect charges by pointing to the positive changes in his life. Those who inquire more sincerely are usually shown a distinctive identity that melds Muslim elements with a disclosure of faith in Jesus. The more an inquirer progresses towards faith in Jesus, the more he/she is shown an identity that deviates from mainstream Islam. There are no hard and fast rules for this matter, but this practice of testing motives and responding accordingly is an integral part of behavior in the culture at large.
7. *Full Muslims.* Some Muslim background believers tried to remove any trace of difference between themselves and an orthodox Muslim identity. They advocated full Ramadan fasting, recitation of the Qur’an in corporate worship, and confession of Muhammad as prophet. One even made plans for an off-season pilgrimage to Mecca. They were trying to take the identity of highly religious Muslims—more religious than they had before coming to faith in Jesus. Other believers opposed these steps, as they believed this was syncretistic and undermined any effective witness. After all, if believers are totally the same as orthodox Muslims, they have nothing about which to bear witness. This identity, like the animist background Christian identity, makes no progress toward establishing a local witness relevant to Muslim society.

### Additional Factors

Several additional social factors affect the way Muslim background believers identify themselves to others. Testing a questioner’s motives and responding accordingly (as mentioned above) also governs openness to animist background Christians, many of

whom are deeply critical and suspicious of Muslim background believers. Around this type of Christian, Muslim background believers may disclose their faith, but not emphasize the essential unity of their faiths. Some animist background Christians are thrilled with the emerging fellowships of Muslim background believers, so relationships in this context can be open and cordial.

Another factor influencing a believer’s identity is his social status relative to the person with whom he is interacting. If the believer comes from a higher stratum of society, then he is more free to share the distinctives of his faith. Higher social standing provides greater importance to one’s views, and insulates them from trouble-making attempts of social subordinates. If the believer is of lower status, he generally keeps a lower profile around people of high position.

Whatever the audience and circumstance, believers should not deny Christ and his work on the cross (Mark 8:38, Heb. 10:39). Denial of Christ may happen due to fear of persecution or death, which we consider a weakness of faith. However, a strategy that denies Christ in order to maintain a Muslim identity crosses the line into syncretism. New believers need help to work through what constitutes a denial of Christ in their context.

For most believers where I live, this means not affirming Muhammad as their prophet, and not participating in the sacrifice of an animal for *eid*. Habitual mosque prayers are considered inappropriate for believers, but time is given for a new believer to accept this position. Occasional mosque or *eid* prayers are deemed acceptable as a sign of belonging to Muslim society.

My experience suggests that rules imposed by outsiders are not likely to be followed. Believers need to work through the Scriptures and apply them to their own situation. Outsiders can and need to help in this process, but cannot do it for local believers. The most effective prevention against syncretism is found in a good understanding of Scriptures. Proper discipleship of new believers is, therefore, far more basic, and in that sense far more important, than the degree of contextualization used in the approach.

### Societal Perceptions

Muslim background believers are perceived as different from mainstream Muslims. Where believers have given bold witness, they are commonly perceived to be Christians—though not as negative as animist background Christians. Physical beatings and being cut off from government assistance often results.

Where believers take the identity of a Muslim with non-mainstream beliefs and practices (option 6 above), they are often suspected of being Christian, but still perceived as more similar to Muslims than animist background Christians. Oppression in these cases is usually mild or non-existent, unless the community spots any telltale signs of apostasy to animist background Christianity—taking a Christian name,

drinking wine, eating pork, maligning the Qur'an and Muhammad, and not attending the Muslim festivals.

When a believer's life changes for the better, local perceptions of him also improve. Muslims hold in high regard any person who believes in one God, prays, reads the Scripture, is sensitive to the needs of others, and lives an honest life—regardless of their religious affiliation. A friend of mine from Europe—well known as one of those rare Christians who lives out the above life—was recently with some Muslim friends who joked about arranging his marriage. When he questioned whether it would be acceptable for a Christian man to marry a Muslim woman, they laughed and said, “No problem! You are a good man and believe almost the same as us!”

We have seen fellowships of Muslim background believers remain in their communities for years without significant difficulty. Their low profile provides time for maturity to develop, and for quiet growth to gradually spread through their community. A few such fellowships tried later to take on a more Christian identity, joined a church denomination, and put up a public signboard. Community opposition mounted swiftly, an angry mob broke down the signboard, and leaders were intimidated. Subsequently, oppressive scrutiny was imposed on the fellowship, causing the believers to avoid meeting together for three years. Witness to the community was completely curtailed.

The “flash points” that galvanize community opposition to Muslim background believers seem to be their visible adoption of animist background Christian practice. These include erecting a church building (especially one with a signboard), adopting “Christian” names, legally changing one's religion by affidavit, eating foods that defile, and disrespecting the Qur'an and Muhammad. However, if believers avoid these affronts and live increasingly transformed lives, they are able to gain both the respect of and a hearing in their own community.

### Low Profile Ministry in Hostile Societies

In societies hostile to the Church, the self-identity of believers is no trivial matter of little consequence. High profile approaches involve taking a public stand, facing strong opposition, suffering persecution, and displaying strong spiritual vitality under duress. Such courage attracts people to Christ. Even amidst such boldness, cultural sensitivity is crucially important. Little is gained by needlessly provoking public opposition. Publicly maligning the Qur'an and Muhammad are rarely helpful approaches for reaching Muslims.

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tleness and respect, . . .”  
(1 Peter 3:15, 16)*

In Acts 19, we see that Paul had an extremely effective ministry in Ephesus for over two years. Local silversmiths, who made and sold small replicas of Artemis, the patron goddess of Ephesus, were fearful of losing customers. They instigated a riot against Paul because he was leading many astray and claiming that “man-made gods are no gods at all” (Acts 19:26). Note that Paul’s reported claim was not against the goddess herself, whose image was a meteor that had fallen from the sky (v.35). In defusing the situation, the city clerk argued, “You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples *nor blasphemed our goddess*” (v.37, emphasis added). Some might expect Paul would have spoken out publicly against such idolatry, but he apparently avoided making public attacks on the city’s goddess. Even during his high profile ministry in Ephesus, accompanied by exorcisms and healings, Paul was sensitive to local culture and sentiment, choosing his battles carefully.

Low profile approaches involve remaining in society; identifying those who are open; appropriately arousing people’s interest; and wooing them toward Christ. Low profile does not mean huddling in fear and failing to give any sort of witness. It means giving sensitive witness appropriate to a situation, all in the context of maintaining relationships in one’s family and community.

*“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, ...so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders...” (1 Thess. 4:11-12).*

In the Muslim society where I work, maintaining good relationships is perhaps the strongest factor influencing a person’s behavior and is unabashedly valued more than truth, honesty or wealth. Those who treat social responsibilities lightly communicate disdain to others around them.

Paul was not the only Apostle who advanced the Kingdom with sensitivity to and respect for the sentiments of pagan peoples. Peter advocated a similar approach,

*“Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.” (1 Peter 2:17)*

*“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect....” (1 Peter 3:15, 16)*

Effective low profile ministry occurs as the transformed life of a believer abides in community. When positive change is lived out for all to see, respect is earned and questions are asked. These are the priceless opportunities to penetrate a hostile society with gospel truth! Such a personal witness spreads easily to others because it values people and relationships.

Modern missions, on the other hand, tend to be unreasonably biased toward high profile approaches when its participants know nothing of spilling their blood for

Jesus. We read biographies of high profile missionaries that transformed cultures, and of spiritual giants that overcame astounding obstacles. We read stories about the impact of the martyrs’ witness, and are filled with wistful notions about taking bold stands ourselves. Then we expect young believers to make a bold and public witness, facing consequences that we have never known. Somehow we miss the fact that most ministry is low profile: lay people living out Christ’s life in the daily gaze of everyday people. This slow, steady growth ministry is an effective way for the gospel to penetrate a hostile society, and enables the church to build a local foundation.

Twenty years ago in the country where I work, Muslim background believers were so few they could almost be numbered with the fingers on two hands. Then a low profile, contextualized ministry was begun by several organizations. Numbers began to increase. Muslim background believers stayed in their communities and witnessed to others. Given the low profile and lack of centralized statistics, no one is certain of the number of Muslim background believers today. But even conservative estimates put the number in excess of ten thousand. These are true believers from Muslim backgrounds who continue to live in their communities, and work through the issues of identity much as I have described. Some have taken higher profiles and won people to Christ—along with significant persecution. Most took low profiles and are quietly winning friends and relatives to believe in Jesus.

It seems God only equips some believers to take high profiles. We should not try

to fit everyone into this pattern. Believers should have the freedom to respond to God's leading regarding the profile they should take. Let us thank God for those whom He leads into high profile ministry; we need these people who make a wide impact for the gospel. Thank God also for those whom He leads into low profile ministry, "common" believers with the extraordinary task of bringing Christ into the daily life of their community. And thank God for those whose profile falls somewhere in between.

### Questions and Problems

When high contextualization and low profile ministry are considered, several questions arise.

1. *How does this fit with the need to give verbal witness as mentioned in Matthew 10:32-33 and especially Romans 10:10, "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved"?* This matter to confess Jesus as Lord came at a time when it was treason to confess anyone other than Caesar as lord. Thus, the argument goes, Muslim background believers need to make a strong verbal confession even if it leads to their social ostracism or martyrdom.

Verbal confession is an important biblical mandate for personal growth, but to whom is it given? Is it given to anyone on any occasion? Certainly a believer confesses Christ as Lord at his baptism, in the local congregation, and in the presence of other believers. I encourage verbal witness to unbelievers whenever appropriate opportunities are created. But reckless or disrespectful witness in a hostile context is not to be encouraged. I doubt many early Christians walked up to Centurions on the street and provokingly declared, "Jesus is Lord, not Caesar!" No, most

chose low profile ways to witness as well as low profile places to meet. Their transformed lives created many opportunities to share their faith. If caught, many were uncompromising in their faith and refused to deny Christ. I have similar hopes for Muslim background believers: transformed lives creating opportunities to witness, and firm resolve never to deny Christ.

2. *Does not this approach run counter to the believer's call to suffer for Christ? (Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet 2:21, 4:13)* There is no easy answer. Should we encourage new believers to find ways to suffer? Do we ourselves seek ways to encounter suffering for Jesus? I think all Muslim background believers will experience some suffering, and should learn to see how God uses suffering for His purposes. But there is surely little merit in suffering for insensitive and disrespectful witness, particularly if it is performed to satisfy ill-informed outsiders' notions of "proper" witness. Whether under the oppressive communist regimes of Mao in China, or the sinister plots of Nero to exterminate all Christians who would not bow to him as a god, or the persecution by a Muslim majority, low profile witness should be motivated by a strategic concern to see the church established in a hostile society—not by a desire to avoid suffering. If a believer embraces the difficulties that come with low profile witness, he will learn that God is faithful to provide all our needs, eroding the fear that can paralyze faith and witness.
3. *How and when do Muslim background believers become part of the worldwide body of Christ?* This is a challenge for any church of believers from a particular socio-ethnic group. But it is a particularly acute problem for Muslim background believers who wish to distance themselves from the animist background Christian community. I do not expect Muslim background believers to worship with animist background Christians in the same local fellowship. Why should I? In Western countries we consider many options when selecting a local fellowship in which to worship. We often look for churches of people with similar socio-economic class or ethnic background who share our views of "proper" worship style, preaching style, sermon length, and so on. I expect and encourage Muslim background believers to exercise similar freedom.

Still, we have high hopes for Muslim background believers to fellowship with others.

Where I work, we see friendships forming between Muslim background believers and animist background Christians. For instance, in our organization, we remain convinced that members from both backgrounds must attend staff conferences together. We see organizations from both backgrounds conferring with one another on common issues. A good example of this is the regular conference of Bible correspondence schools where believers from both backgrounds share strategy and discuss common challenges. As the Muslim background church organizes and grows in confidence, I foresee them working with the animist background Church in joint ministry opportunities. Representatives of the Muslim background church in my country relate to national church leaders in other countries through an association fostered by our sending agency. In this way, they gain a sense of belonging to the worldwide church.

4. *Can believers flourish and grow without a distinct identity and community?* This is a profound question without a simple answer. When a community of believers is small and weak, it is difficult to meet together regularly and meaningfully. Individual

believers then have difficulty retaining their passion for Christ. I have seen many believers fall out of fellowship and then lose all signs of spiritual life.

Many believers are concerned about their children: When will they have opportunity to have believing peers? Can they keep their faith without such friends? These are not problems associated with Muslim identity per se, but with small churches struggling to survive in a hostile society.

Where I live the spiritual battle is not so much for individual Muslims coming to faith in Jesus; it is for Muslim background believers forming themselves into local fellowships. I have heard similar comments from colleagues working with Muslims elsewhere in the world. Believers in the church have a collective strength for spiritual victory that individuals do not (Matt 16:18). I believe Satan knows this and opposes the formation of the church at every opportunity. This spiritual opposition confirms to me that forming local fellowships of Muslim background believers is the right strategy. The Apostle Paul wrote, “I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me” (1 Cor. 16:8, 9). Similarly, opposition can strengthen our sense of urgency and God’s guidance. We must persist in prayer for breakthroughs in establishing the church among believers of Muslim backgrounds. We must continually encourage and teach them about the crucial role of the local church in God’s plan for His Kingdom.

### Why These Issues Really Matter

There is more at stake here than correctly splitting missiological hairs; the eternal destiny of millions of Muslims hangs in the balance. Are we serious about giving the 850 million Muslims in the world a chance to hear the gospel in a manner that they can understand and accept? Missionaries from Christians lands will never be numerous and effective enough to win the Muslim world ourselves. The task is far too great. We need more witnesses who are located throughout Muslim society.

If we insist or suggest that Muslim background believers boldly identify themselves as “Christian,” the usual result is expulsion from their society. They go from accepted insider to social pariah. The tragedy of this is not so much the personal suffering of that, but that an opportunity to penetrate Muslim society with the gospel is lost. Outsiders lack the social respect and interdependence needed for the church to take root. Our goal in outreach needs to be the establishment of a local witness relevant to Muslim society.

The majority of Muslims in the world seem fairly content with Islam—especially when compared with the “Christianity” they see portrayed in Western media. I believe that these Muslim masses will never be reached by evangelism that results in converts being extracted and expelled from their society. We will never see significant numbers come to Christ through outsiders making forays into Muslim society to abduct a few responsive people. To reach significant numbers of Muslims, we need growing numbers of vibrant, Biblically based churches that remain in and relevant to Muslim society. The Muslim world will only be reached through indigenous church planting movements that explode far beyond what outsiders can direct or fund.

### Concluding Vision

The identity of Muslim background believers is a crucial and complex issue. Outsider expectations are often based on a poor understanding of the issues involved and unrealistic aspirations for young believers. Identity is fluid and takes different forms in different contexts. Believers need the freedom to work out how high a profile God is calling them to take in their community. Muslim background believers struggling to establish the church in their locality need significant prayer support to accomplish this humanly impossible task.

Perhaps these identity issues are temporary concerns, until the resulting Muslim background church grows bigger and stronger. Where I work, the Muslim background church is growing, but it has not yet attained adequate size to earn its own identity and presence in the community which can openly draw interested Muslims. The day will come when this church becomes large enough to have its own identity within Muslim society, and some of these earlier concerns will likely fade into insignificance.

In my vision for the people group in which I work, I foresee the gospel deeply penetrating Muslim society. Most believers will increasingly share with relatives and neighbors through sensitive low-profile witness and transformed lives. Upon this foundation, ever increasing numbers of people will come to faith in Jesus without being ostracized from Muslim society. With increasing numbers I foresee a growing number of believers engaging in high-profile witness that will challenge society’s basic assumptions about Islam. This will not be regulated or inspired by outsiders, but will be the result of the Holy Spirit working to

expand the Church in the Muslim world.

I believe that in this way the Muslim background church will eventually grow so large and have such a powerful vitality that Muslim society will no longer be able to contain it. The early church could not be contained within Judaism; similarly the Muslim background church will eventually break out from Muslim society to form its own distinct community. When this happens, God will be seen triumphantly extending His reign among precious Muslim peoples everywhere. Concerns about the early believers retaining a Muslim identity will be a thing of history as we behold the greatness of God's kingdom fully established among them.

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