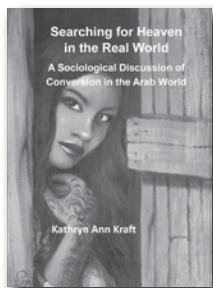


Book Reviews

Searching for Heaven in a Real World: A Sociological Discussion of Conversion in the Arab World,
by Katherine Ann Kraft (Regnum Studies of Mission,
Regnum Books International: Oxford, England, 2012)

—Reviewed by Brad Gill

Editor's note: Kraft's book was published in November 2012. It is appearing in the Summer 2012 issue due to production delays here at IJFM. We apologize for any inconvenience.



The last decade has seen a crescendo of studies on the nature of conversion, especially as it relates to Muslims who turn to Jesus.¹ Katherine Kraft's *Searching for Heaven in a Real World: A Sociological Discussion of Conversion in the Arab World* adds one more voice to this discussion. Using the tools and methods of sociology

she explores the particular struggle of conversion in the countries of Lebanon and Egypt. Her analysis of over 30 individual narratives offers a more discerning look at the issues of identity faced by those who must negotiate the historic boundary that divides Muslim and Christian.

Kraft examines the contested and emotionally-laden term "conversion" in her first chapter. The academic paradigms of sociology, and all its technical jargon, cannot rescue her from employing the term "convert" as a term of designation for those within her study.

The phraseology of how to refer to [those in this study] is problematic. I have chosen thus far to use the most controversial of terms, convert, to refer to the group of people that has been the focus of this research, because of its basic definition of being a break with something about one's past, a turning. I have used this term with the awareness that many readers of this book may deeply dislike it, but I recognize that there is no label that will please all groups. It remains that convert is the most theoretically descriptive word to use (p. 97).

She realizes that underneath the term convert is a broad range of meanings, and her objective is to reveal the deeper nuances of meaning and identity that emerge when Muslims embrace the Christian faith in an Islamic context. On page after page, she offers conversion narratives that blend the rational and the relational, the emotional and intellectual, the passive and the active. Some converts think it requires a complete break with Islam, while for others it

could never mean a total break with their Islamic context. Amidst the diversity Kraft locates general tendencies that many have long suspected to be the case, for example the observation that "most converts gave up on Islam long before considering an alternative faith." She balances the diversities and similarities of these narratives, seeing patterns in how they reject the old and embrace the new. Those in ministry among Muslims may find these narratives familiar, but it's Kraft's sociology that brings a new order to the range of meanings in conversion.

Kraft spends an early chapter on her methodology ("The Perfect Researcher"), and anyone serving cross-culturally could learn much from her approach. This is one of the first studies to make public what has been a very sensitive and security-ridden subject (she withholds names except for the countries of Lebanon and Egypt). The reader can see how her qualitative and "open-ended narrative interview" style fits such a context. She recognizes the position of power she has as a Westerner, and the greater degree of access granted her as a woman. Her approach requires reflexivity, collaboration and the trust of her interviewees if she as an "outsider" is going to hear clear voices on such a difficult personal subject. Her approach is a warm and refreshing escape from the more cerebral Islamic-Christian apologetics that typically surround our discussion of conversion. The value of her "co-producing fieldwork" and "collaborative advocacy" is not confined to research but would benefit anyone serving in the Muslim world.

Each section of the book is organized around a "piece of heaven" that these converts are searching for when they turn to Christ. Chapters 3 and 4 develop the world they are coming from, that is, the mindset and values that have rooted them in an Islamic setting. Chapters 5 and 6 deal more with the expectations of the convert, "the preexisting image of Christianity that they bring into conversion, the community they are looking for, and the identity they are seeking to develop" (p. 16). Kraft spends a lot of her book illustrating how these personal dreams of following Christ are negotiated, tempered, disappointed, adjusted and reformulated. It's a dizzying variety of personal narratives around very common dreams and expectations. They're "searching for heaven in a real world," a world in which they must negotiate a new identify for themselves, with their spouse, with their family and in their community.

Faces kept coming to mind as I read. I was forced again and again to reconsider the journey of Muslims I had known who had turned to Jesus. Kraft was able to capture how they sifted and sorted their place in an Islamic context quite distant from her sample. Whether a convert chooses to remain inside or to face the painful realities of expulsion, Kraft helps us appreciate that each and every one is working

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unceasingly to fashion a new identity; there's nothing automatic about it. Obtaining a piece of heaven is tough in their real world. She forced me to recall the nervous energy of those young believers I had known who had to carefully navigate the straits between two historic monotheisms.

Kraft handles her tools of sociology with refreshing deftness. The reader is almost unaware of how academic departments of sociology might mock such an innocent study of evangelical conversion. She's gone where angels fear to tread, but in so doing, she's been able to bring a new vantage point for understanding the complexity of *religious identity* (or "socio-religious" identity). I first heard Kraft present these perspectives at a consultation this past summer. It immediately became evident how helpful her sociological applications were to a wide spectrum of contexts across the Muslim world. While Kraft's book operates within the sociology of religion, she gets her points across without any of us gagging on technical jargon.

In chapters 3 and 4, Kraft introduces what she believes are the two most influential socio-religious concepts that shape how Muslims map out their new identity in Christ. *Tawhid* (unity) and *Ummah* (religious community) are distinct yet complimentary Islamic notions that shape converts' views of where they are from and where they are going in their conversion experience. Their Islamic experience establishes certain expectations that then shape how they approach their new identity with the community of Christ (read 'church'). They can idealize a "perfect community" (*ummah*) that integrates their lives in "perfect unity" (*tawhid*) as new followers of Christ. This is where Kraft begins to introduce *cultural* notions that hide silently in the mind of a new convert, worldview notions that map their expectations, notions that are not immediately eliminated as new identities are formed in Christ. This cultural (religious) lag may be hard to admit for those of us with an evangelical sense of "new creation," that the old ways must completely pass away; yet, Kraft's more objective sociological approach frees her to honestly "call a spade a spade," to isolate those cultural and religious notions that indeed do get dragged along in conversion.

Kraft includes other cultural notions from the Arab world in her study (i.e., kinship/blood relations, honor/shame, *dhimmitude*/minority and gender/sexuality). She maintains that family, tribe and society are the primary audience of these converts, and she skillfully incorporates the insights

of social anthropology so that we can appreciate how culture influences their conversion experience. As an example, she states that

While indeed many factors are at play in addition to honor, honor is nonetheless of key importance. This may be more true for converts than for other citizens, since they want to present a good image of who they are in their new identity. Pierre Bourdieu reflected that an honor-based sentiment is mostly found in societies where relationships with others take precedence over relationship with oneself. While this may not be true about converts, most of them are eager that they at least continue to demonstrate respect for the community, both for their own reputation and for the good of the community (p. 85).

At times I felt she was dealing with these themes too quickly and without any real anthropological depth. But, admittedly, there's already an abundance of anthropological studies on the Arab world, and specifically on negotiating identity,² but almost nothing on this subject of conversion. Enter Kraft, whose work is able to synthesize cultural insights around conversion. Her social models, like Goffman's treatment of ambivalence and stigma, or Durkheim's classic study of anomie, provide a new catalyst for cultural themes. Admittedly, she's woven her study around the interpersonal, the social dynamic. She expects you'll need to go elsewhere if you demand a comprehensive study of the worldview and culture of these Arab converts.

Her final chapter on "Perfect Identity" is the prime objective of her entire study, that "actually, all of the issues discussed thus far are part of the complicated processes of identity negotiation." Her entire book has made it very clear "that religious identity is not one single concept," and it's in this concluding chapter that she introduces new conceptual categories for understanding how identity is organized in the life of a convert. She basically divides identity into three dimensions, namely, the *core*, the *social* and the *collective*. Each new believer will move between these three dimensions as they try to walk with integrity, but it's the latter, the collective, which receives much of her focus. This collective sense of belonging is where she believes *tawhid* and *ummah* play such a vital role, but she's careful to suggest that "religious affiliation is not the same as collective identity." Her sample makes it clear that religion "does not mean the same thing to everyone affiliated with the same religion." It could mean "a sense of the divine, beliefs, ritual, community involvement, family, and atti-

tude towards co-religionists in the rest of the world.” Her research captures this individualized parsing of religion as each convert brokers a new sense of belonging.

And she doesn’t ignore the present influence of globalization in how converts shuffle core, social and collective identity. It’s getting tougher and tougher to hold to stable and singular identities as pluralism increases across these Islamic societies. She deploys a theory (symbolic interactionism) that provides “a model for how someone can simultaneously hold and maintain more than one identity, especially in a globalized context where people are balancing more and more roles at a given time.” But she admits that this theory hits the wall with Islam, for it “rarely assumes that different roles might exclude each other, or be in direct conflict with each other.” Conversion in the Islamic world seems to defy theory. In the end, Kraft expects converts to share that modern tendency to “want to individually choose their collective identity and how they will individually associate to it.”

Kraft ventures further in organizing all her data. She doesn’t leave us with a fragmented array of different conversion narratives. She offers three additional strategies that converts use to weld an identity in the interface between Muslim and Christian. Using recent insights from immigrant studies, she moves us beyond the idea that a convert is simply assimilating new aspects of another religious world. She likes the concept of “adhesion” and the way it pictures a new believer gluing different aspects of the old and new around a newfound faith. I won’t steal her thunder, because I want you to buy the book, so I’ll leave any further description to her.

Suffice it to say, this final analysis will be helpful for any and every religious and cultural context, not just a Muslim one. Having watched Kraft interact with Muslim background believers, I’m convinced that Kraft offers a new framework in which believers from very difficult religious contexts can begin to discuss how to authentically walk “in Christ.” And she’s given us a spectacular tool for opening up fruitful discussion among those with hardened opinions concerning “insider movements” and how new believers handle their religious context. This is a “must read” in frontier missiology.

Endnotes

¹ See David Greenlee’s edited compendium of contributions from across the Muslim world on this subject of conversion, *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way: Journeys of Faith* (Authentic Books, 2005).

² For an excellent study of how identity and culture interact in a Muslim context, I’d recommend Lawrence Rosen’s *Bargaining for Reality: The Construction of Social Relations in a Muslim Community* (University of Chicago, 1984).

The Necessity of Field Research

—by Bradford Greer, PhD

Editor’s Note: In the paragraphs that follow, Bradford Greer builds and expands upon his review (IJFM 28:4) of Doug Coleman’s PhD dissertation (A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives), and especially Coleman’s response to that review (IJFM 29:1). Readers would do well to read Greer’s comments with this earlier interaction in mind.

Doug Coleman’s response to my review of his dissertation (IJFM 29:1) appears to validate my fundamental concern that he carried into his research certain assumptions of which he was, and apparently, remains incognizant.

I find the assumption that one can enter into a meaningful missiological-theological discourse about the theological positions of insiders when only working from articles—and not from data derived from interaction with actual believing communities)—problematic. Theology is supposed to be done in context. It is all too tempting to be Platonic in one’s approach to doing theology. At such a vantage point it is easy to develop an intricate, well-crafted, theological system. Coleman has done an excellent job in doing this, crafting a well-thought through theological position with intricate nuances. However, what the church has seen over and over again is that well-crafted systems of theological thought do not necessarily transfer well into real contexts.

This is why I initially was surprised at Coleman’s lack of interaction with hermeneutics in his dissertation. Whether Coleman realizes it or not, he reads and interprets Scripture from his cultural vantage point, not the cultural vantage point of insiders. Therefore, his analysis is not a dialogical engagement with insiders in how they contextualize their theology because he has not interacted with them. Thus, his analysis is more of an internal dialogue with those believers who share his contextual experiences of the world.

Coleman feels that his life experiences as a missionary qualify him to engage in the discussion; however, this is a flawed assumption. Field research fills in the gaps of one’s experiences because one’s experiences are often filtered through one’s own cultural grid. Field research provides data that enables researchers to challenge or validate their assumptions and perspectives. Without field research, missiological analysis often yields to circular reasoning or “motivated reasoning.” Motivated reasoning is crafting an argument to support a viewpoint to which one has a prior commitment. Thus, Coleman’s analysis is potentially ideological rather than missiological.

Without field research, missiological analysis often yields to circular reasoning or “motivated reasoning,” rather than providing informative missiological analysis.

Coleman’s lack of engagement with hermeneutics and the impact of culture and context on theologizing reinforces my assertion that he adopts a naive realistic epistemological approach to his theologizing. He may, as he asserts, take a critical realistic approach to culture, but this critical realism doesn’t seem to have crossed over and impacted his approach to theologizing.

With regard to essentialism, Coleman asserts that in his ten years on the field he noticed diversity among Muslims with regard to beliefs and practices, and the meaning of those practices. However, it appears that he has failed to recognize the significance of this diversity. I too failed to recognize this for many years. This is where one’s essentialist assumptions impact perspective and theologizing. In the West, South, and East, we see a remarkable diversity in beliefs and practices and the meaning of these practices among those who identify themselves as Christian. If believers in Jesus can remain as yeast within traditionally non-evangelical socio-religious communities, such as Roman Catholic or liberal Protestant, then why can Muslim insiders not remain as yeast within their socio-religious communities as followers of Jesus? And if they potentially can remain within their socio-religious communities, then how do they remain? In what religious practices do insiders actually participate? What do they believe about these practices? How do they view these practices in the light of Scripture? These questions are left unanswered because Coleman’s analysis is based upon articles and not upon the actual beliefs and practices of a community of insiders.

Therefore, when Coleman asserts in his dissertation and in his response that Muslims and insider believers are likely praying to another god if they pray at a mosque, this is because his essentialist view of Islam has already defined to whom they are praying and pre-ascribed meaning to their praying. Muslims and insider believing communities apparently cannot have a different understanding of God than his essentialist understanding of Islam has ascribed to them. Now, this does not mean that Coleman is inaccurate in his perception. He may well be right. However, the IMP articles assert otherwise. The conundrum that I as a missiologist face is that I cannot know if Coleman is right without actual data collected from insider communities. This is why field research is an integral component of missiological analysis. The way I see it, with his dissertation and this response, the discussion is reduced down to his

viewpoint over against the viewpoint of the IMP articles. This doesn’t appear to me to advance the discussion.

This leaves me where I began before I read his dissertation or his response. I remain ill informed as to what actually is happening within insider movements and as to what they actually believe. Dr. Coleman’s theologizing was good; yet, it was non-contextual. Therefore, I see it as circular reasoning. It appears that he ended in his thinking where he began because he did not interact with any additional cultural contexts. Field experience does not qualify as field research. Field experience can strengthen one’s field research, but it does not qualify as a substitute.

Please allow me to clarify my position. I am not an insider proponent. I did not write any of the articles that Coleman analyzed in his dissertation. Unlike Dr. Coleman, I am open to insider ideas because the missiological theory behind them makes insider activity appear viable and there *appears* to be theological justification for such activity as long as it remains within given biblical boundaries. I cannot know any of this for sure without actual data from the field. Thus, I am simply a missiologist in search of solid information that helps the discussion move forward. **IJFM**