

## The Anatomy of Conversion

Sometimes a book frames an entire subject for us. David Greenlee and his team of editors have done so with their new book, *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah or Somewhere in Between?* (William Carey Library, 2013). The twenty articles in this book are a sampling of the contributions from 60 participants in the 2010 Second Coming to Faith Consultation (CTFC2),<sup>1</sup> a forum that focuses on the issues of conversion and belonging on the frontier between Muslim and Christian worlds. Along with Greenlee's book, the articles in this issue offer new insights and models on the subject of conversion that we think are quite applicable to the borderlands between any two religious worlds.

Quite honestly, our journal is reticent to use the word "conversion" because of all that this term can insinuate. Writing back in the 70s, the eminent mission historian Stephen Neill articulated his own reticence:

For years I have been looking for a word which will take the place of the now very unpopular word 'conversion,' and have not found it. I am well aware of all the possible objections to the word. . . . There are countless ways of saying Yes to Christ which fall short of the surrender that leads to salvation. It seems to me that the time has come when we ought to be done with circumlocutions and not be ashamed to say exactly what we mean.<sup>2</sup>

I'll also push through my reluctance and use the term, but we're dependent on a multi-disciplinary approach like we find in Greenlee's book to help us discover "exactly what we mean."

In this volume, Greenlee has shifted the discussion towards the subject of identity and how a new believer must *negotiate his identity in Christ* across that tortured zone between Muslim *Ummah* and Christian church. His book helps our thinking progress beyond older categories by addressing the more subtle and complicated nuances of identity and belonging.<sup>3</sup> Both the articles in his book and those in this issue of the journal offer three new lenses on the human dimensions of identity formation evident in the conversion narratives across the Muslim world.

*Identity is multi-layered.* We've known that the social forces of urbanization and globalization are increasingly intersecting the more inclusive categories of family, clan and tribe and are creating multiple identities in any one individual. In our modern world, individual identity is not just one, but many. Greenlee has included the recent insights of Tim Green and Kathryn Kraft on the different dimensions of identity

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that operate in a young believer who has "come to faith."<sup>4</sup> Identity is worked out personally (the inner self), socially (relations and roles), and collectively (group belonging) in what is a three-tiered model. Adams, Farah and Greenlee each approach identity from this perspective in this issue.

*Identity is dialogical.* We're gradually admitting that Muslims who turn to Christ must mediate between two conflicting religious traditions in a longer and more sustained inner conversation. Jen Barnett's contribution in Greenlee's volume is the finest explanation I have seen on this "dialogue within the self between many identifications, roles and belongings."<sup>5</sup> A "coming to faith" introduces one into a tension that may require strategies of suppression, indcision, synthesis or innovation for its resolution.<sup>6</sup> This hybrid tension is certainly evident in the autobiography of Lamin Sanneh (p. 38).<sup>7</sup> These narratives force us to confront the uncomfortable notion of "dual-belonging," which is an increasing reality in our globalized world. This duality violates the mindset that sees all religions as irreducible, comprehensive and bounded collectivities.<sup>8</sup> But

conversion narratives indicate long inner conversations that negotiate the duality of "Muslim" and "Christian" worlds.

*Identity is constructed.* Greenlee's entire volume is witness to the great variety of ways that persons construct their newfound identity in Christ, but Farah's article in this issue also suggests we're getting closer to understanding the common features in conversion narratives across the Muslim world (p. 13). However, one phenomenon is absent in Greenlee's volume, and we want to introduce it in Ben Naja's case study of a movement to Christ among Muslims in Eastern Africa (p. 27). It's when identity in Christ is constructed corporately over time, as "Muslim followers of Christ" come to faith and together define their identity on the frontier of *ummah* and church. Naja's groundbreaking research is encouraging and will stimulate reflection on how God is moving in the Muslim world today.<sup>9</sup>

The factors surrounding conversion, identity and belonging are getting ever more complex in a globalized world, and the increasing diaspora of unreached peoples has delivered this complexity right to our doorstep. This year's ISFM

gathering on "Global Peoples" (Dallas/Plano, September 18-19, 2013) promises to continue this very discussion on identity in transnational communities. I hope you'll be part of the conversation.

In Him,



Brad Gill  
Editor, *IJFM*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Greenlee's first volume, *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way* (Authentic Media, 2006), published the addresses of his first Coming to Faith Consultation.

<sup>2</sup> *Church Growth Bulletin*, May 1971, Vol VII, No 5.

<sup>3</sup> John Travis' C-Scale was originally a one-dimensional categorization of different contextualized church expressions in Muslim settings and was not intended to completely answer the question of identity.

<sup>4</sup> Kraft's book was reviewed in *IJFM* 29:2, April-June 2012, pp. 102-4.

<sup>5</sup> Barnett doesn't feel the popular "Kingdom Circles Model" captures the dialogical nature of identity formation (Greenlee, p. 25).

<sup>6</sup> Green (p. 56f) and Barnett (pp. 30-32) in Greenlee, *Longing for Community*.

<sup>7</sup> A full outline of this new autobiography was reviewed in *IJFM* 29:4, pp. 148-50.

<sup>8</sup> Kang San Tan articulates this in the Buddhist world in *IJFM* 29:1, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Also see this research at [missionfrontiers.org](http://missionfrontiers.org), July 1, 2013.

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The *IJFM* is published in the name of the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, a fellowship of younger leaders committed to the purposes of the twin consultations of Edinburgh 1980: *The World Consultation on Frontier Missions* and *The International Student Consultation on Frontier Missions*. As an expression of the ongoing concerns of Edinburgh 1980, the *IJFM* seeks to:

- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate "A Church for Every People."

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, "to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the *IJFM* (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the *IJFM* for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.