

Emerging Missiological Themes in MBB Conversion Factors

by Warrick Farah

Qaasid's¹ mother often reminded him that it was the Christians who "saved him from death" when he was treated as an infant at a Western-run medical clinic for a life-threatening illness. Growing up in a conservative Muslim society that lacks any indigenous church, Qaasid learned weekly at primary school that Christians were among those who had turned away from God. This deeply troubled Qaasid, "*How could people who did such great things for me be so misguided?*"

One day Qaasid happened across a Christian radio broadcast in his dialect, and he was hooked. He prayed and asked God for a Bible, but in his heart he believed he would have to travel to a Western country to learn more about Jesus. Surprisingly, not too long after his prayer, he was able to buy a Bible from a boy who, ironically, was selling them on the street near his home! The rarity of this experience twenty years ago in his country (he never saw that boy again), unheard of even today, led Qaasid to believe that God had destined him to become a follower of Christ.

Qaasid eventually met a foreign Kingdom worker living in his country who could answer his many questions. Qaasid's story doesn't end there, and he has grown in his faith since then. But as he did with Qaasid, God is indeed using many factors to draw Muslims around the world to faith in the Messiah.

The Growth of MBB Conversion Studies in Evangelical Missiology

David Greenlee (see article this issue, pp. 5–12) was among the first to do major missiological research into Muslim Background Believer (MBB) conversions² (Greenlee 1996).³ Since then, many have followed suit and many of their contributions can be found in two very helpful edited books on MBB conversions (Greenlee 2006b, 2013). Today, many others including myself, are writing theses and dissertations on conversions in their Islamic contexts. In 2014, David Garrison will be releasing a book in which he asked 1,000 MBBs around the world "What did God use to draw you to faith in the Messiah?"⁴ Research into conversion factors is extremely helpful for missiology, because

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as the axiom goes, “How we conceive of conversion determines how we do evangelism” (Peace 1999, 286). The “consequences” of conversion, another important aspect of conversion, have also recently been researched by Kathryn Kraft (2012), Duane Miller (2013), Tim Green (2012), and Roy Oksnevad (2012).

However, even though no two conversions are the same, it appears to me that MBBs throughout Asia and Africa tend to follow a similar pattern⁵ as they come to Christ. While it is anthropologically messy to compare contexts, it does in fact seem that different contexts are yielding similar results. Do we need more research into MBB conversion factors⁶ (cf. Miller 2012)? Or are we nearing a “saturation” point in conversion factor research, where we are not learning too much from new data?

This article is my attempt to offer a synthesis of the emerging missiological contours in MBB conversions. The various factors that influence Muslims to embrace Christ can be grouped into categories or themes. I believe we may be closer to forming a theory of MBB conversions from the extant literature on the subject. However, these eight themes (which are *not* ranked in order of prominence) are only preliminary suggestions and will need to be examined in various settings.

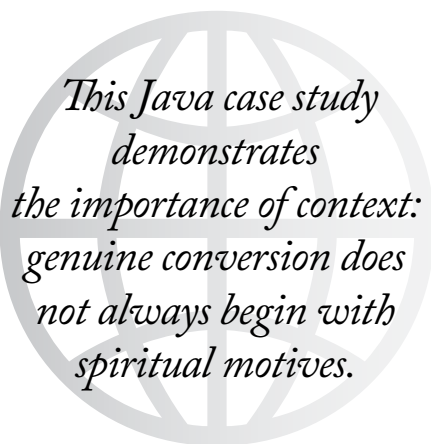
1. Conversion is a Contextual Process

Conversion and regeneration are two sides of the same coin (Stott 2008, 169). While united, the two are easily and often confused. There are three reasons the distinction between regeneration and conversion is necessary: (1) regeneration is God’s act, whereas conversion is man’s response, (2) regeneration is unconscious, whereas conversion is normally conscious, (3) regeneration is an instantaneous and complete work of God, whereas conversion is more a process than an event (168–71).

James Engle notes that although conversion can be regarded as sudden, unconscious, or gradual, gradual conversion is the most common form of conversion for those in unreached, non-Christian areas who come to Christ. Conversion

may climax in what appears to be sudden conversion, but the act of turning or decision is secondary to the process itself. (1990)

The idea that conversion is only an event (i.e., “one-step decisionism” (Conn 1979, 101)) is deeply embedded in the evangelical mind, and is a result of a “punctiliar” emphasis on conversion from the “revivals” in Protestantism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Smith 2010, 1–20). Although rare, point-in-time conversion experiences are



more common in Christian societies than in non-Christian societies where one could have a “revival” experience (Lutz 2007).

The overall experience of Muslims, however, is that conversion is a gradual process that takes place over many years (Haney 2010, 68; Larson 1996a; Teeter 1990, 307–08). Gordon Smith notes that Muslim conversions to Christ

do not tend to rest or pivot on a decision or a particular act of acceptance. Rather, it has been well documented that these conversions are slow and incremental. (2010, 84)

Qaasid cannot point to the moment of his conversion, but he knows he is a disciple of the Messiah. Thus, conversion is

a process that transpires over months or years. The sometimes apparently sudden decision to “follow Christ” is only one essential step in this process.

Yet the context where conversion happens plays a key role. Two million Muslims in Java converted to Christianity in the 1960s (Willis 1977). Initially, this began as a protest against tribal and village Muslim leaders in the aftermath of a massacre of communists by fellow Muslims; many of the converts had communist family members who had been killed by Muslims. “What had begun as an act of political rebellion... eventually took on a deeper meaning” (Hefner 1993, 117). These converts were further drawn into conversion by an experiential, personal encounter with Christ through prayer and Bible study that “had no precedent in the traditional village religion” (1993, 116).

Furthermore, when these converts professed faith officially, they did so without understanding the fuller consequences of their decision. “Public profession of the faith had inspired an interior rationalization quite unlike anything that would have occurred on a purely individual basis” (Hefner 1993, 120). Eventually the converts came to realize that many of “their local traditions [were] incompatible with their new Christian faith” (1993, 122).

Finally, the “social psychology” of the Javanese context in the 1970s had finally cleared away the perception that Christianity was a foreign (Dutch) religion thus making conversion more possible on a wider scale. The Javanese were, to some extent, “able to establish a free space in which conversion would not immediately result in severe social stigmatization” (1993, 120). In the conversion process, political motivations and social stigmas concerning religious identity are important contextual factors. This Java case study demonstrates the importance of context: genuine conversion does not always begin with spiritual or intellectual motives.

2. The Prominence of the Affective Dimension

The affective dimension of worldview is usually more prominent in MBB conversions than the cognitive.⁷ It is a subjective experience, often meeting a felt need, and often in the form of the supernatural such as a dream,⁸ a tangible answer to prayer, a miracle, a healing, or an overwhelming feeling of the presence of Jesus. Factors in the affective dimension are more frequent in MBB conversions than those in a cognitive/intellectual search for truth. Interest in Christ is sparked by affective experiences, and understanding seems to come later in the process.

Early one-dimensional evangelical models of conversion tended to be overly cognitive (cf. Tippett 1977; Hesselgrave 1990, 617–73). Engel and Sogaard revised the “Engel Scale” to include the affective dimension (Sogaard 2000), noting that conversion is not just about correct beliefs but also about positive feelings and attitudes towards Christ.⁹ The most comprehensive model that describes the process of conversion, especially for Muslims, is found in Reinhold Strähler’s article *A Matrix for Measuring Steps in the Process of Conversion* (2007; also in *Longing for Community*, Greenlee 2013).

Strähler has classified four *types of processes* involved in conversion for MBBs. Notice that cognitive or belief issues are less prominent at the beginning of the processes for types two, three, and four. The four types are (1) *intellectual*—cognitive issues are extremely high and the convert studies and compares various religious options; (2) *affectional*—characterized by personal relationships and emotional elements; (3) *mystical*—characterized by a passive convert who is “surprised by God,” usually in the form of the supernatural; and (4) *solution seeking*—asking Jesus for help with spiritual or practical problems (2010, 84–100).

David Fraser suggested that MBBs tend to be less rational or intellectual in their conversion experiences, so that

MBBs appear to bond themselves to Christ in a patron-client relationship as they initially begin to understand his lordship.

understanding of the fundamentals of the gospel is an event that comes after they have confronted Christ and decided he is indeed Supreme Lord. All they know at the point of conversion is that Jesus is powerful enough to deal with their problems. (1979)

During his childhood years, Yehia remembers an older American Christian woman who made sure he got to school safely each morning. She later befriended his family and helped out during several times of need. Yehia loved her like a mother. Later in life when he became very disillusioned with Islam while studying to become an Imam, he remembered this Christian woman. Additional positive experiences with Christians led him to investigate the Bible and eventually begin to follow Christ. Like most MBBs, Yehia’s conversion was a long process with many contributing factors in the affective dimension.

3. The Silent Witness of Love and Integrity

Although this is clearly related to the affective dimension theme, I believe the compassion and love from Kingdom workers to Muslims is significant enough to warrant inclusion. The godly lifestyle of Christians and the experience of genuine love significantly and positively change Muslims’ attitudes towards Christ and Biblical faith. This is perhaps true in every context, but even more so for Muslims. The lingering effects of the Crusades coupled with the war on terror create the lasting impression that “Christians” are imperialists who wish to destroy Muslims. Kingdom workers simply living lives of integrity and compassion among Muslims have done much to dispel this harmful misconception.

In Dudley Woodberry’s massive global survey of MBB conversions, the lifestyle of Christians was the most important

factor facilitating conversion (Woodberry 2006). Like the stories of Qaasid and Yehia, I have not personally found a MBB who did not have a positive interaction with “Christianity” and Christian believers somewhere in the past.

4. A Patron-Client View of the Gospel

Like Yehia, Hanaan grew up very disillusioned with the hypocritical lifestyles of some fundamentalist Muslims she knew. One night a man in a brilliant white robe holding a staff appeared in her dream and told her that she was correct to doubt Islam. The next morning she described this event to her loving and devout Muslim father, who told her the person from her dream was Isa al Masih. Eagerly she went to the Qur’an and read everything she could about Jesus, who continued to show up in dreams for many years at key moments in her life.

According to her testimony, Hanaan joined herself to Jesus long before she met another Christ follower who studied the Bible with her for the first time. Like Hanaan, MBBs appear to bond themselves to Christ in a patron-client relationship as they initially begin to understand his lordship and even the atonement.

A biblical, missiological view of conversion must take into account the social context of the first century Mediterranean world (Asia and Africa are much closer to this worldview today than is the West). Relationships were conceptualized around the concept of “patronage,” where “they saw their gods as patrons and benefactors and their own conduct as clients” (Crook 2004, 254).

In this hierarchical society, where the status of the person you follow and

to whom you give allegiance is very important, the position of Isa becomes the focus of reconsideration. (Edwards 2013, 84)

MBBs relate to Christ in ways that are difficult for Westerners to understand, but make sense in their worldview. Yet this understanding of salvation is commonly found in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Christ is our ultimate Patron (the Divine Lord), we must be found “in him” and part of the new people of God.

5. Conversion in Layers of Identity

Rebecca Lewis argues that we should

free people groups from the counterproductive burden of socioreligious conversion and the constraints of affiliation with the term ‘Christianity’ and with various religious institutions and traditions of Christendom. (2007, 76)

Georges Houssney disagrees,

You cannot claim to be a follower of Christ and deny being a Christian. This would be dishonest, confusing and not true. To follow Christ is to be a Christian. (2011)

This debate concerning socioreligious identity often seems to be more based around semantics and one’s view of “Islam” than actual biblical exegesis and theology.

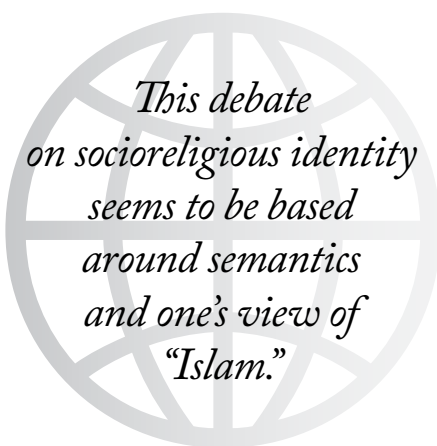
Muslims who consider embracing biblical faith and MBBs themselves often feel torn between the ill-defined, binary categories of “Muslim” and “Christian.” In light of this struggle, the sociological theories of identity put forth by Kathryn Kraft,¹⁰ Jens Barnett, and Tim Green in *Longing for Community* (Greenlee 2013) have the potential to significantly reduce the polarization of views in the current debates. (These theories are summarized in Greenlee’s article in this issue). Identity is far more complex and dynamic than is unfortunately portrayed by many evangelicals on all sides of the issues. Layers of identity abound for people in every culture,

and belonging to multiple traditions is a reality in today’s globalized world.

As the research seems to show, identity is multidimensional, the titles “Christian” and “Muslim” mean various things to different audiences, and new MBBs, especially in unreached contexts, inevitably need time and space for their identities to transition. Dissatisfaction with and rejection of “creedal” Islam precedes most MBB conversions, but many of these same MBBs remain in “cultural” Islam.¹¹

6. The Congruence of Cultural Values

Continuing with the sociological discussion of conversion, some missiologists



argue that a paradigm shift is happening in church planting and evangelism strategies (Gray and Gray 2010a). Previous strategies argued for an *aggregate* (or “attractational”) model of church planting, where new believers/seekers who do not previously know each other are gathered together in fellowship. In contrast, the *social network*¹² (or “transformational”) model seeks to implant the gospel into a group of people who have previously formed social relationships, and thus not try to introduce unknown believers to one another. “The ‘church’ meets when the normal social network gathers” (Gray and Gray 2010b, 278).

This idea of spreading the gospel through social networks is very similar

to the “homogeneous unit principle” (HUP) posited by Donald McGavran, who famously stated that “People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers” (1990 [1970], 163). Arguing against this as a strategy for mission, René Padilla declared that the HUP is not only counter to the example of Jesus and the apostles who intentionally worked with an aggregate model, but also fails to take the ministry of reconciliation seriously and has “no biblical foundation” (1982, 29).

However, since research shows that

facilitating the movement of the gospel through natural social networks [contra *the aggregate model*] seems to be correlated with planting more churches, (Gray et al. 2010, 94)

it seems best to think of *social network theory* as a provisional, temporary strategy until there are more robust forms of church that reach the biblical goal of the so-called “Ephesian moment” (Walls 2002), where people of different caste, race, gender, etc., who have little in common except Jesus are reconciled together in fellowship through him. In any case, a key theme in factors that influence conversion is the congruence of cultural values between the MBB and the values of the witnessing community.¹³

7. The Differing Female Experience

Unfortunately, most studies on conversion haven’t considered the importance of gender (Gooren 2007, 348). It does appear, however, that there are in fact significant differences. North African women MBBs in Evelyne Reisacher’s research felt that gender-related issues in the Muslim world created more barriers to conversion for women than men, but they also felt their faith was more resilient than male MBBs because of the price women paid to follow Jesus (2006, 110–13). Women are more concerned about how their conversion will affect their social

relationships, particularly with males in their immediate families. A positive factor influencing conversion was the honor Jesus gave to women. “Women were attracted to Jesus because they were touched by the way he dealt with women in the Gospels” (2006, 113).

Similarly, Miriam Adeney notes that Muslim women come to faith for many of the same reasons as men, but it is the “awareness of Jesus’ affirmation of women” that strongly influences women (2005, 287).¹⁴ Adeney also notes the significance of familial social relationships in conversion. In a study of South Asian Muslim women who were coming to faith, Mary McVicker found that while theology is important, “participation and experience are essential” (2006, 136). Strähler found that female MBBs in Kenya were shaped more by affective elements than were the males (2010, 67).

Thus, female conversions are strongly influenced by an awareness of Jesus’ treatment of women in the gospels, include greater degrees of practical and experiential factors, and are complicated by the role of males in their immediate families. Hanaan’s father, a devout Muslim and loving man, eventually became convinced that Jesus was revealing himself to Hanaan. He gave her the intellectual freedom she felt she needed to investigate further, although he never followed Christ himself. As with other female MBBs, Hanaan’s experience would be dramatically different had her father persecuted her curiosity of Jesus, rather than fostered it.

8. The Beauty of the Written and Resurrected Word

The hearing or study of the gospel in the Bible and a desire for an intimate relationship with God in Christ is central in MBB conversions. MBBs are fascinated by the beauty of Jesus’ personality and the cross. Once I watched the JESUS Film with a Muslim seeker. Afterward, when I asked for his thoughts, he replied, “Well, Jesus is everything.”

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Anthony Greenham’s study of Palestinian MBBs found that although conversion is influenced through various means, “the person of Jesus is always central” (2004, 227). Commenting on the centrality of Christ in conversion, Abraham Durán also speaks of attraction to the “beauty of Jesus” as a key evangelistic factor (2006, 274). In John Marie Gaudeul’s study of MBB testimonies, the most prominent factor was attraction to Jesus (1999).

David Maranz studied dozens of conversion experiences of Muslims born in 33 countries and concluded that all but two included references to the importance of the Bible. He concludes, “In most, the role of the Bible or some passages of Scripture were central to conversion. How could it be otherwise?” (2006, 61). Fruitful Practices research similarly notes that “Fruitful teams use a variety of creative means to communicate Scripture... It is their primary means of sharing the gospel” (Adams, Allen, and Fish 2009, 79). James Bultema’s research in Turkey was similar: “The written Word of God surpasses other causes of conversion to Christ” (2010, 28).

Implications for Research and Ministry

The last decade of ministry to Muslims has been very exciting. David Garrison reports that more than 86 percent of all the Muslim movements to Christ in the history of Islam have occurred in the last 12 years (2013). However, the fraction of MBBs around the world in the House of Islam is still very small. It could be that the firstfruits who are embracing biblical faith are more of the “fringe” people of Muslim societies, and thus the researchable conversion factors may not represent the mass movements of

Muslims into the kingdom that we are all hoping and praying for. Therefore, each of these themes will need continued contextual research for their validity in future Jesus movements among Muslims.

In any case, one of the reasons for the interest in discovering factors that facilitate conversion is because there is an easily discernible correlation between them and mission praxis. Here are some implications for Kingdom workers in frontier settings:

1. *Conversion is a Contextual Process.* Kingdom workers are only one expendable step in the process of conversion. This should promote both humility and anticipation. God is at work long before we “show up,” but he does use us.
2. *The Prominence of the Affective Dimension.* Without denying the essential need for truth encounters, we need to prayerfully depend on the Holy Spirit to impact the Muslim heart in whatever way our friends need most. Apologetics and rational persuasion have their place, but are not as prominent with Muslim seekers as divine interventions in their lives. Praying for and with Muslims in the name of Jesus seems to be quite impactful.
3. *The Silent Witness of Love and Integrity.* Live and love like Jesus. Enough said.
4. *A Patron-Client View of the Gospel.* There is only one gospel, but it is always expressed in only one of its various forms (Keller 2008). The legal, moral guilt presentation of the gospel, while definitely biblical, has been over-emphasized by Westerners in Muslim lands. Can we begin to use the Patron-Client form? Through faith, we are joined

with the glorious Messiah in his life, death, and resurrection. He gets our loyalty (praise, glory, and honor) and we get his life in us, removing our shame and defilement. Could this be the form of the gospel that is most relevant to Muslims?

5. *Conversion in Layers of Identity.* There are twin errors I see being made in mission praxis when it comes to the identity issue. The first error is to ask Muslims who are considering embracing biblical faith to identify as “Christians.” The other error is to insist that MBBs continue to call themselves “Muslims.” Both errors over-assume the role of the Kingdom worker in local theologizing. And both errors also point MBBs to socioreligious identity, when we should instead be making sure MBBs are grounded in the Christ of the Bible.
6. *The Congruence of Cultural Values.* Contextualization is not a dirty word. It is inevitable, and we need to work hard at it. But even more so, MBBs need to contextualize as they share the gospel through their social networks. We have much to learn from MBB local theologizing.
7. *The Differing Female Experience.* In ministry to Muslim women, we should tell the specific stories of Jesus’ treatment of women in the Gospels, pray with them and for their needs, and pay attention to their relationships with males in their families.
8. *The Beauty of the Written and Resurrected Word.* Above all else, effective mission among Muslims means pointing them to Jesus and the Bible.

Summary

The recent growth of conversion factor studies reflects the exciting fact that Muslims are embracing biblical faith more so now than any time in history. The broad themes of these factors facilitating conversion have important

implications for Kingdom witness that are relevant for diverse settings. The future of conversion research can investigate these themes more closely, as we continue to learn from precious MBBs like Hanaan, Qaasid, and Yehia. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ As with other informants of my personal research included in this article, their names have been changed to protect their identities.

² I define biblical “conversion” as the phenomenon by which people are spiritually transformed by God as they repent from sin, believe in the gospel, and follow Christ as their ultimate allegiance in community with other believers, demonstrating their new life with Jesus by a radical change in their life’s direction. Even though conversion is a “dirty word” in missions (because it is associated with colonialism, extraction, culture change, and force), “we have not found any single term that conveys the richness of meaning carried by the ten letters of *conversion*” (Greenlee 2006b, 6). Furthermore, conversion is used without reservation in the literature of psychology and the social sciences. I recognize the prevalent secular usage of the word conversion, and use “embracing biblical faith” when appropriate.

In order to properly understand conversion, it must be studied and analyzed from a variety of disciplines and perspectives (Rink 2007). Greenlee and Love suggest seven lenses through which conversion must be viewed: psychology, behavior, sociology, culture, spiritual warfare, the human communicator, and God’s role. “None of these lenses gives us the full picture, but each highlights aspects filtered out or overlooked when we study conversion from other perspectives alone” (2006, 37). The various factors contributing to conversion can be analyzed through this multidisciplinary perspective, which is why missiology is perhaps the most well-rounded discipline to study conversion.

³ Other major works that preceded Greenlee were Willis (1977) and Syrjänen (1984). See also Larson (1996b).

⁴ See Garrison (2014). A distinctive of his book is that all of the 1,000 and more interviews are derived from movements of at least 1,000 baptisms and/or 100 church plants among—a Muslim people over a decade’s time.

⁵ Scot McKnight notes that while all conversions go through the extremely valuable, theoretical framework model proposed by Rambo (1993), conversions of people from

common backgrounds fall into “similar patterns” even as no two conversions are identical (McKnight and Ondrey 2008). “Conversions from similar contexts into the same group take on a rhetoric of their own. In other words, patterns can be found that provide insight” (2008, 232).

⁶ I use the term “factor” in its broadest meaning. Factors can be internal or external, supernatural or cultural, social or psychological. Other studies differ between “factors” (external forces) and “motivations” (internal reasons) (Strähler 2009; Maurer 1999). Reinhold Strähler notes that “in a way one can say that the *reasons* are the main motives for conversion, while *factors* are the influences that, in one way or another, encourage or push the person on his/her journey to Christ” (Strähler 2010, 66, *emphasis mine*). For the purposes of this article, reasons and motives will be a subset of the various kinds of factors that influence conversion.

⁷ According to Paul Hiebert, at the heart of conversion must be a worldview transformation. There are three dimensions of worldview: (1) cognitive, (2) affective, and (3) evaluative. Consequently, conversion should involve a change in beliefs, feelings, and judgments. “There must be some minimum knowledge of Jesus and a desire to follow him. These must lead to a decision to follow him. Conversion is not simply holding an orthodox knowledge of Christ, or a love of him, but choosing to follow him” (2006, 29).

⁸ The influence of dreams in MBB conversions to Christ has been well-documented, with many popular level books being published such as *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?* (Doyle 2012). Tom Doyle postulates that “about one out of every three Muslim-background believers has had a dream or vision prior to their salvation experience” (2012, 127), although he does not cite the study he refers to. Dreams may be more spiritually significant for (non-Western) Muslims because their worldview is more attune to the supernatural world than the Western worldview (Musk 1988; cf. K. 2005). Greenlee notes that dreams tend to occur at the introductory stage of the conversion process, not at a later stage of confirmation or validation of the decision to convert (1996, 129). Anthony Greenham found that dreams among Palestinian converts did occur, but were not perceived to be significant factors by the MBBs who had them (2004, 174). It might be possible that MBBs’ dreams may be more significant to Western Christians than they are to MBBs themselves. Nevertheless,

dreams are an important psychological and supernatural factor to consider in research. Doyle concludes, "Dreams alone aren't enough. No one goes to sleep a Muslim and wakes up a Christian. Jesus' personal appearances are an incredible work, but he still uses godly people to share the gospel that brings salvation" (2012, 241).

⁹ Paul Hiebert was a pioneer in introducing the importance of the affective dimension. See Hiebert (1986).

¹⁰ See also *Searching for Heaven in a Real World: A Sociological Discussion of Conversion in the Arab World* (Kraft 2012).

¹¹ This section was adapted from my review of "Longing for Community" in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, July 2013.

¹² The social network theory should not be confused with "social networking" in cyberspace.

¹³ Greenlee's "Theory of Congruence of Cultural Values," reads, in part, that "[a]n individual tends to be drawn to Christianity by elements in the Christian faith and in the nature of the sources of witness that are congruent with that individual's personal values" (2006a, 55).

¹⁴ In a study of apostasy done by Muslims, the low status of women in Islam was a major factor influencing conversion out of Islam (Khalil and Bilici 2007).

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