

# Living Out an “In Christ” Identity: Research and Reflections Related to Muslims Who Have Come to Faith in Jesus Christ

by David Greenlee

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One day the son of a wealthy South Asian businessman told his father, a Muslim, of his decision to follow Jesus. The son was given six months to recant or be disinherited and die in all but the physical sense of the word. Having made clear his decision, overnight he went from being the heir of a prosperous businessman to cleaning toilets at a Christian orphanage in exchange for food and a place to sleep. The nature of his subsequent experience gave rise to the title of the recently released book *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere In Between?*<sup>2</sup>

Around the same time, and not far from his city, a cluster of villagers came to trust in the one they call *Isa al Masih*, and did so without large-scale rejection by the rest of the town. I asked an acquaintance from that area to tell me what differences the neighbors saw in these followers of *Isa al Masih* as a result of this new faith. “They see that they don’t beat their wives anymore and don’t go to the prostitutes. They provide money so that their children can remain in school. In the markets they offer a fair price, and when selling they don’t cheat with the scales.” And, he emphasized, the other villagers recognize that these changes are related to their relationship to Jesus.

As these brief stories suggest, Muslims who have turned to faith in Jesus Christ form and live out their new identity in diverse ways. Yet within this diversity exists a foundational, unifying reality from God’s perspective. For whatever else we may say, these brothers and sisters—and indeed all of us who believe—have an “in Christ” identity.

What does it mean to be “in Christ?” Paul describes it as being blessed, chosen, and included *in Christ*. We hope *in Christ* and are marked *in Christ* in accord with God’s plan purposed *in Christ* to bring all things in heaven and earth together *under Christ*. We were once far away but now *in Christ Jesus* we are brought near to God, Gentiles together with Israel—sharers in the promise *in Christ* (Ephesians 1:3–14; 2:12, 13).

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## *Identity Expressed*

But how do we live this out in practice? In terms of our witness, finding an appropriate expression of our identity in Christ may either be a door-opener, or a door-closer. Describing a tribal setting in northern Ghana, Dan McVey asked why, after an initial period of significant growth, a movement reached a plateau.

The single greatest obstacle to church growth among the Jijimba (as he called the tribe) has been communicating the concept that one can be a follower of Jesus while maintaining identity as a Jijimba.

Faithfulness in persecution and lived-out, biblical contextualization have won the confidence of many and given hope that the community of believers will grow in numbers beyond the current plateau.<sup>3</sup>

A German researcher notes that the reason only a small number of Turks in Germany have "committed their lives to Jesus Christ" may be that many German Christians lack awareness of "the multicultural character of the Body of Christ," their conventional forms and traditions "creating barriers between Germans and foreigners." In neighboring France, John Leonard observed that

the church must develop an approach that values what the immigrant values even if this is not what the church believes is best for the immigrant.<sup>4</sup>

Mogens Mogensen reports a similar barrier in northern Nigeria, where

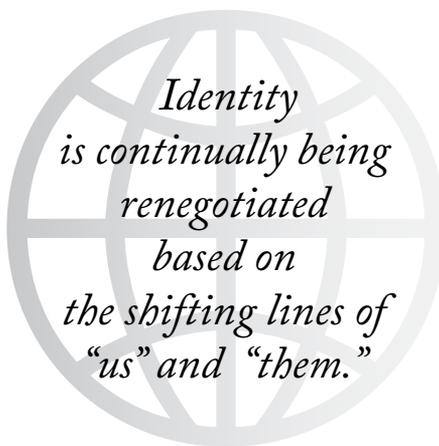
a significant percentage of the Fulbe converts complained that they felt that the Christians did not welcome them in the church during the decision and incorporation phases.<sup>5</sup>

The German study further observes that "conversion to the Christian faith does not end in betrayal of the oriental culture [nor] threaten Turkish identity" but, in fact, holds a high chance for the development of a healthy Turkish or Kurdish identity. This reaffirmed my own finding that a by-product of coming to faith for young Moroccan

men was a heightened, positive sense of national identity.<sup>6</sup>

David Radford's work has gone into depth along these lines. Following independence in 1991,

upwards of 20,000 Kyrgyz embraced the Protestant Christian faith, striking at the heart of Kyrgyz ethnic identity and challenging the normative identity construction 'to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim.' . . . Through a process of reconstructing identity, Kyrgyz Christians are finding continuity between their new religious faith and Kyrgyz traditional values, history, and community, beyond a strictly Muslim framework. They are Christians but still feel deeply 'Kyrgyz' and affirm that identity.<sup>7</sup>



## *Who Am I?*

"Who am I?" may be one of the most basic questions humans ask. If I were to wake up with amnesia, as Lucy did repeatedly in the 2004 movie "50 First Dates," it might be the first question I would ask myself each morning.

Knowing my identity—identity being defined as "the fact of being who or what a person or thing is"<sup>8</sup>—goes beyond the basic data embedded in a passport or birth certificate. It entails a complex and more-or-less changing web of experience, behavior, belief, values, and relationships.

If I desired to understand the identity of someone I meet in Zurich, where I live, how would I go about it? I would likely

explore a variety of themes that link the individual to certain groups while setting him or her apart from others. The questions I raise would at first include less sensitive (or obvious) issues such as nationality. If the person is European, I might ask about employment, if Asian, about family. Depending upon where the individual is from, I might ask about mother tongue as a hint concerning tribe and ethnicity. If I recognize that the person is not native-born Swiss, I might let them know that, like one third of all people in Zurich,<sup>9</sup> I also am a "migrant," an expression of shared identity that has helped to energize many conversations.

Such an interaction illustrates the important point that identity is continually being renegotiated based on the shifting lines of "us" and "them." In some settings I identify myself as American, in others as Swiss. If I say, "I am a migrant," I do so to emphasize an aspect of my identity in order to include an "other." This can be especially significant in times of hardship and trouble, not just to extend the boundaries of "us," but to also define a clear "them." In this way identity is a narrative construct. Different aspects are emphasized by retelling the story differently.<sup>10</sup>

## *What Can Change?*

We can readily change some aspects of our identity, while others, only with difficulty or not at all. When I desire to change aspects of my identity, the society in which I live may tolerate or encourage that change, or it may exert significant pressure to prevent it.

To illustrate, let us (informally) consider a few categories that help mark one's identity. Some identity markers, such as gender, are physically inherited, although there is now significant discussion on just what gender identity actually is. Other markers, such as those related to religion or to economic class, may be considered by some to be inherited, but by others as something we learn or achieve through our effort (or, in Christian thought, by God's

grace). Other markers are attained, such as membership in that distinctive group known as the alumni of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (or wherever you happened to have studied). Below are a few other markers of identity, including how we get them and the difficulty we face in changing them:

- Birth order: inherited, impossible to change
- “First-born” status: inherited, can change by legal action
- Marital status: achieved through specific actions, can change
- Nationality: inherited or achieved, possible to change
- Race: inherited, impossible to change
- Tribe: inherited, but can in part be abandoned or conferred
- Economic class: inherited at first, can be changed but how hard depends on society
- Caste: inherited, for Hindus impossible to change
- Fan of a sporting club: learned, can change

As we consider these markers, do any necessarily preclude a lived out faith in Jesus Christ? Each can certainly be distorted, perverted, and expressed in an ungodly way. But other than caste (which is beyond the scope of our discussion here), none by its nature runs counter to biblical instruction on how a disciple of Jesus should live.

### *Identity and Religious Change*

Let us think a bit more about the question of identity, especially as it relates to the question of those who turn from Islam to faith in Jesus Christ. In this connection I am especially appreciative of the work of colleagues such as Tim Green, Jens Barnett, David Radford, and Kathryn Kraft. They have combined a solid commitment to the Bible with helpful insights from sociology and related fields, and have coupled that with their own research among Muslims who are coming to faith in Christ.<sup>11</sup>

**W**hen we consider identity change, it is legitimate to ask whether “religion” is even an appropriate word to use.

Our underlying presuppositions concerning religion affect how we approach the question of identity change. While presenting this paper at a conference in Kenya, the scholars and students present confirmed with laughter my suggestion that most of them find Western secular thinking a bit strange, and in particular the separation of so-called “spiritual things” from the rest of life. Their views concur with Philip Harland’s observations regarding the gatherings of associations in New Testament times:

... what we as moderns might distinguish as ‘religious’ (sacrificing to the gods) and ‘social’ (meals) were intimately tied together in antiquity.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, as we consider identity change, it is legitimate to ask whether “religion” is even an appropriate word to use. Indeed, it means many different things to many different people, and its use may suggest that things having to do with God (or gods) can actually be categorized separately from other aspects of life.<sup>13</sup> That said, I ask the reader to indulge my use of the word for the time being!

Most religions accept some change, or conversion,<sup>14</sup> into the religion, and most also resist change away from it. Andreas Maurer noted that “conversion” is toward us, while “apostasy” is towards “them,” whoever the “them” might be.<sup>15</sup> While most Protestant Christians are not happy at the prospect of others turning away from the faith—whether in an intentional, clearly-marked act or by a slow progression we might call “backsliding”—such change is more or less tolerated. Meanwhile, most Muslims deny the possibility of conversion away from Islam, and many respond forcefully should it actually happen.<sup>16</sup>

What is it that Muslims object to changing when the theme of “conversion” comes up?

First, it is important to note that significant differences exist in the way Islam is lived out by different individuals and communities, with differences as well in their resistance to change and conversion. Such differences might be counter-intuitive. For example, I have observed a high tolerance for a broadly secular lifestyle of a young Muslim man in Europe, but a near violent response when he announced he had become a Christian. Meanwhile, a rather conservative father in the Middle East or Southeast Asia may give quiet assent to such a change, provided at least that no public dishonor is brought on the family.

Thus, conversion and the formation of a new identity need to be seen in reference to the prior identity of the individual and his or her community. Questions driving the response of opposition to conversion and faith might include the following core issues (stated briefly here):

*Theological truth.* In recent years we have heard of many cases in Pakistan involving charges of blasphemy.<sup>17</sup> While such abusive court cases too frequently stem from personal disputes, they point to a central concern for theological purity. Evelyn Reisacher, reporting on her research among women of North African origin, observed that women are more concerned with social relationships and less concerned with theology than are men.<sup>18</sup>

*Salvation.* Is some opposition raised because of a sense that the apostate is abandoning his hope of salvation? For some, that may be indeed the case. Yet Andreas Maurer, writing about conversions in South Africa both to and from Islam and the Christian faith, indicates that Muslims who turned to faith in Christ were more likely to refer to hope and assurance, while converts to Islam were likely to refer to it as being more “practical” and reasonable than Christianity, and not in terms of salvation.<sup>19</sup>

*An issue of honor.* Is conversion seen primarily as a shameful rejection of tradition, as something that brings dishonor on the family? Such would be the case described by Sabatina James, born in Pakistan but raised in Austria. Her conversion, coupled with rejection of an arranged marriage, has led to a decade of hounding and opposition from her family.<sup>20</sup>

*Loss of family.* Related to the issue of dishonor is the sense of loss of family. In a discussion with the leader of the Islamic community in a large South American city in the early 1990s, we first spoke of inter-faith issues of theology. But eventually, as trust grew between us, he described the marriage of the young adults of his community to Catholic-background neighbors. His pain was not expressed in religious terms or in reference to a loss of salvation but in a phrase any parent could understand, "We are losing our children."

*Economic loss.* Demetrius and the silversmiths of Ephesus seemed primarily concerned with their loss of income (Acts 19:25), not the fine points of Paul's preaching. In recent years, evangelical believers among the Saraguro tribe of Ecuador (and in certain Mexican villages) have refused to participate in traditional festivals. Perceived as a challenge not only to the religious system but also to the interwoven structures of politics and economy, the angry response to this refusal has all too often been violence against the new Protestants.<sup>21</sup> In the case of conversion to and from Islam, my experience is that economic issues most often involve questions of alleged or actual financial gain as an inducement to conversion, or conversely are used to draw the convert back to his roots.

### *Features of Identity*

When we speak of identity, we need to consider in whose terms the identity is being described. Is my identity what society, or my family, calls me? Or is it how I identify myself? Or, and this is

of the greatest eternal importance, is my identity primarily based on what God says about me?

One of the helpful contributions from researchers Tim Green and Kathryn Kraft is their work exploring three layers of identity:<sup>22</sup>

- my core identity—"who am I in my inner self?"
- my social identity—"who am I in relation to my group or groups?"
- our collective identity—"what is my group's identity in the eyes of the world?"

Using these layers as categories of description is helpful, although, as Kraft wrote to me recently, they should not



be treated as if identity were a monolithic thing with multiple components. Instead, identity can be viewed from a variety of angles in which those components play different roles. With that caveat in mind, these categories help us understand the different ways converts from one religion to another go about shaping their new identity, an identity that in a sense is also shaped for them.

Kraft notes that some reject their past entirely. This process leads many to depression and anxiety. Ziya Meral, reporting on the experience of twenty-eight former Muslims, says that

when alienation and anomy [sic] is internalized by the individual, along with the knowledge that his own

[family] has turned against him, and that his society, government and security forces will not protect him, a lifelong struggle with depression, loneliness, fear and anxiety can result. All the converts interviewed for this report spoke of their anxieties and deep sense of loneliness.<sup>23</sup>

Others try to cling to the past identity.

The most successful, Kraft argues, are those who find a way to merge the two identities, to keep the good and not deny their past. This is illustrated in Radford's description of Kyrgyz Christians quoted above.

But let us move on. What other features are important in our understanding of identity?

First, *identities can shift.* Those of us who are dual nationals easily switch between passports, depending upon which national border we are crossing. "Border crossing" decisions become more complicated, though, when these borders reflect our inner being and values. Some years ago in Southeast Asia my friends and I went on a bird-watching tour with a guide whose birth name, James, had officially been changed to Hassan. Why the shift? Conversion, at least in a formal sense, was the only way he could marry the girl he loved. Yet, as we told him on our walk through the forest, his behavior in our presence was more "James" than "Hassan."

Mark R. J. Faulkner explored the shifting that regularly occurs between multiple layers of identity among the Boni of Kenya, a traditionally animist tribe now converted to Islam. Such analysis is "messy," he says, and evades the application of distinct boundaries that outside observers might desire to apply.<sup>24</sup> The collective memory of the Boni remains strong and, as demonstrated in Faulkner's ethnography, those memories are revived and applied both in times of crisis and in the traditional domains of daily life (e.g., men in the hunting fields, women around the homestead). Meanwhile, Islamic religious practices are

applied where they are advantageous. Faulkner's study is helpful in that it reminds us that conversion involves transformation at multiple levels, both in the individual and in society. Outsiders may observe only surface change (perhaps in some ritual behavior), but not recognize the absence of deep change.

Second, *identities are highlighted in times of crisis and rites of passage*. Jews and Muslims were outraged at the July 2012 German court ruling banning circumcision, a court interpretation of "the rights of a child" deemed an affront to Jewish and Muslim identity. Television interviews with the secular-minded judges and lawyers involved displayed a combination of ignorance and arrogance on their part vis-à-vis this millennia-old marker of religious and ethnic identity. Expectations surrounding marriage and burial further highlight questions of identity, both in terms of how one perceives one's own core and social identity and how they are perceived by one's family and, to a lesser extent, the wider society.

Third, the questions of identity so difficult for parents are greatly *magnified in the lives of their children*. In most Muslim-dominated countries, Muslim young people who become believers in Jesus Christ will not likely be able to change the religion category on their identity papers. And no matter how they refer to themselves or are labeled by the government, what about their children? Jens Barnett describes the dilemma of Awal, a Middle Eastern man who has been faithfully following Christ for over twenty years, enduring imprisonment and gaining the respect of Christian pastors who know him.

My concern is for our kids. No one is doing anything for them and they are having an identity crisis . . . I call them *MBBKs*, "Muslim Background Believer Kids."

A while ago my daughter asked me, "Dad, what am I really? Am I a Muslim or a Christian?" . . . I said, "You're a Muslim that follows Christ. Our Muslim identity is written on our identity

## *The questions of identity so difficult for parents are greatly magnified in the lives of their children.*

[cards], it's our extended family, our heritage, our people—but we follow Christ as a family. Although it has made life difficult for us, I will never regret my decision to follow Christ. . ."

But, that is so hard for them. My daughter—who is now a teenager, you know—asked me, "Dad, what is going to happen to me? Will I ever get married?" It's a very difficult time. They need to find their own way. . .

We are not Christians . . . We are Muslims. It is among Muslims we find acceptance and belonging . . . We have experienced so much love from Muslim society and so much rejection from Christians. Our children have felt this and it is hard for them to understand.

I no longer care what Christians think. I care what Muslims think. However, even if our president asked me, "What is Christ to you?" I would tell him my faith. I will not compromise Christ, ever—but I am not a Christian . . .<sup>25</sup>

Lest this brief, personal excerpt be misinterpreted, note that Awal has made known to his extended family that he is a Christian<sup>26</sup> and, as Barnett has told me, has spoken out against "insider movements." Knowing that makes his words even more poignant as a reflection on the sensitive, at times painful, issue of identity as worked out in families such as his.

Fourth, and this is linked to the previous concern, whatever identity is worked out at the social and collective level, *the impact at the core level may be complex and painful*. Sufyan Baig, who writes from personal experience, expresses the loneliness and longings of believers who face rejection, not just by the *ummah*, but also by the church:

Muslim background believers endure struggles including fear of physical danger, the grief of rejection from the *ummah*, feelings of isolation and loneliness, and feelings of shame and guilt as they realize the struggles of their family to

explain their actions. In addition, they often struggle to find sufficient support and understanding in the Christian community. For the Christian community to be able to nurture and care for Muslim converts, it is essential that it grasps the depth of struggles common in the stories of Muslim background believers.<sup>27</sup>

Fifth, Barnett<sup>28</sup> reminds us that we need to *consider the narrative nature of identity formation*, and not treat it in a merely paradigmatic manner, as if we were conducting an autopsy on a dead body. That is, we are talking about people, individuals with real stories. While it can be helpful to gain some common understanding of factors affecting conversion and how people live out that faith, people can only truly be understood through their ongoing story, or narrative. Barnett suggests that this should also affect how we go about witness and making disciples. Conversion, discipleship, and identity formation are not just a matter of facts, but of observing, learning, and even copying others.

And this points to a final and foundational observation: our *identity must be built on God's perspective*. This is not to deny the importance of our own self-understanding, or even what others say about us, but what God says about us is more important than the labels derived from various human understandings of who we are.

### *Working it Out*

Muslims who come to faith in Jesus Christ will work through a number of issues as they live out that faith, such as whether to participate in festivals and fasts; how to find fellowship and express the Body of Christ; and how to handle both the legal (identity documents) and informal questions of religious identity, first for oneself and eventually for one's children.

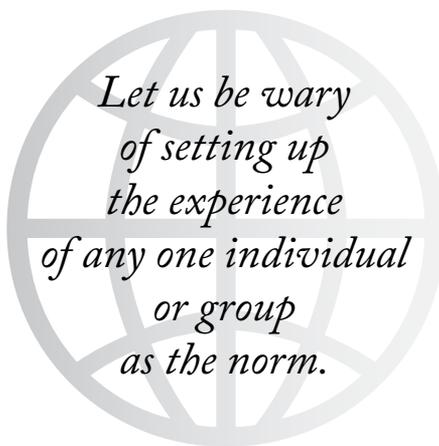
As we consider identity in the light of these and other life-application questions, there are other issues that we who are concerned outsiders especially need to consider.

First, I would suggest that we differentiate between what I call “contextualized approaches” and what Paul Hiebert first referred to as “critical contextualization.” The former is something that well-informed, well-intentioned outsiders—some call them “inbetweeners”—should do in terms of ministry, living and communicating in ways that are appropriate to the setting. The latter, however, occurs only when the local church and its leaders engage in the process of evaluation, biblical reflection, and response.<sup>29</sup> While “inbetweeners” have a significant contribution to make in contextualization and questions of identity, they can easily place too much—or too little—emphasis on particular matters or misunderstand certain elements of society and culture in need of transformation or the personal issues that believers are going through.

Second, we must approach these issues, and those with whom we disagree, with humility. We should also try to discern the filters we use to observe the world and interpret the Bible, something we might not be able to do without asking others to help us see what those filters are.

Third, we should recognize and profit from differences in perspective. In my own research on conversion, I have often seen a difference between the insights of missionaries (whatever their national origin) and those of Muslims who have come to faith in Jesus Christ, even when describing the same group or individuals. Tomas Sundnes Drønen’s narrative of the mid-1900s conversion of the Dii tribe of Cameroon illustrates this well. For example, while Norwegian missionary journals of the time focused on baptisms and schools, they never touched on the factors that most deeply touched most of Drønen’s informants who “constantly” spoke of the missionaries’ charity and “firm stand against the oppressors.”<sup>30</sup>

Fourth, let us be wary of setting up the experience of any one individual or group as the norm to which all should adhere. Just because some Muslims (or Hindus, Buddhists, or secular Europeans) have come to and live out faith in Jesus in a certain way does not mean that this is the standard by which all should be measured. While believers have a core “in Christ” identity, big differences in perspective and in how identity is practiced at the social and collective levels certainly exist. Among my acquaintances are those who reject terms such as “Muslim background believer” declaring, “We are not Muslim anything, we are Christians!” Others continue to refer to themselves as Muslims, *not* in the sense of



allegiance to Islam or Muhammad, but in terms of ethnicity, family, and social relationships. Many others naturally fall somewhere in between. And all of them—indeed, all of us—may be better understood through a narrative approach to identity, especially those who do not appreciate being “labeled” or pegged to some arbitrary scale as if they can be described on a single-dimensional spectrum.

#### ***Four Areas of Discontinuity***

No matter what our social, cultural, or religious background, new believers face a constellation of issues that must be worked through as the “in Christ” identity emerges. This process will reflect

varying levels of continuity and discontinuity<sup>31</sup> between our “before Christ” and “in Christ” behavior and belief.

In many areas of our lives, most of us exhibit a great deal of continuity with the past. Coming to faith in Christ may have had little impact on the way we wash our hands, select what to eat, or our passion for our country’s athletes during the Olympics. At a deeper level, the new Kyrgyz Christians described by Radford have intentionally worked through areas in their history and values to foster continuity between their Kyrgyz and Christian identities, something I like to describe in terms of congruence of values.<sup>32</sup>

Depending on who I was and how I lived before knowing Jesus, being “in Christ” may correspond to a significant change in how I treat my spouse, children, and parents and the way I go about my work or fill out a tax form. (Of course, many who do not follow Jesus treat their families with love and handle their financial matters with integrity.)

Whatever we conclude about such issues (and whatever levels of continuity we may consider appropriate in various areas of our lives), there are four key areas in which I believe we need to experience major discontinuity between our “before Christ” identity and our transformed “in Christ” identity, areas which I believe underlie the other transformations that will take place.

- First and central to these four areas is *our understanding of and faith in Jesus Christ* (John 20:31). Whatever else we know or practice, eternal life is promised exclusively to those believing in him. The question of believing, or not believing, is the core discontinuity between those who are “in Christ” and those who are not.

Space limitations preclude our exploring this further, but we need to keep it clearly in mind and give it priority above any insights we may gain from social sciences. Through God’s gracious call and our response in faith, a transformation takes place

that brings us into his family. We are justified by his grace; we are heirs, having the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:7). Because we believe and are “in Christ” we are no longer aliens but fellow citizens with God’s people, members of God’s household, part of that holy temple he is building (Ephesians 2:19–22), the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27), with a mutual responsibility of service (Galatians 5:13) and fellowship (Hebrews 10:25).

Related to this core issue are three other areas of discontinuity.

- *Acceptance of the Bible* as God’s uniquely inspired, sufficient, and authoritative Word. While there is some truth in other books, whether scientific or religious, philosophical or practical, being “in Christ” involves a lived-out recognition of the Bible as uniquely inspired by God.
- *Grace rather than legalism.* Before coming to faith in Christ, some of us worked hard to please God. Having come to faith, some of us still think we can get a bit more divine favor by our actions. We should live godly lives; we should do good deeds and seek to please God. Yet we fulfill God’s commands, not because we are driven to win his approval, but as a result of receiving his grace.
- *Allegiance and submission to God alone.* For some, issues of spiritual allegiance and power are overt and obvious. For others, the world and the devil exercise more subtle control. A fourth key area of discontinuity involves renunciation and victory over the Evil One and rejection of the world, with intentional submission to the loving power of God.

## Conclusion

The question of identity is complex and patterns of faith expression not simple to describe. While identity is multi-dimensional and not adequately captured on single-dimensional scales or simple grids, it can be helpfully viewed in

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terms of core, social, and collective layers. Approaching identity in terms of dialogue or multiple narratives helps us see its personal and changing nature.

Our identity is centered on being “in Christ.” The object of our belief is not a set of facts, but a person, Jesus Christ. As E. Stanley Jones is reported to have said, “In conversion you are not attached primarily to an order, nor to an institution, nor a movement, nor a set of beliefs, nor a code of action—you are attached primarily to a Person, and secondarily to these other things.”

No matter what our religious background or social setting, working out what it means to be “in Christ” takes on many forms. Not surprisingly then, the churches of Algeria appear quite different from *jamaats* of Isa-followers in South Asian villages. What *should* be consistent among followers of Jesus is not conformity to rules and customs but, in every aspect or layer of identity, a lived out “in Christness” as described in Galatians 5:22–26.

In the present climate of missiological discussion, I observe two dangers, both of which are illustrated in the experience of the early church at Antioch. The gospel had been proclaimed and people were coming to faith in Christ. Barnabas came and found “signs of the grace of God.” He then sent for Saul and together they taught the new believers, helping them grow in grace and knowledge (Acts 11:19–30).

Imagine what would have happened if, instead of Barnabas, someone else from the Jerusalem group had been sent, someone who deeply loved God, trusted in Jesus the Messiah, and awaited a turning of the Gentiles to faith (as discussed by Chris Wright<sup>33</sup> with regard to Isaiah 66:18–21), but who also held a legalistic approach (in the Jewish sense) to living out this faith.

Imagine, on the other hand, the danger if Barnabas—a Levite and by no means a theological novice—had simply left them on their own to figure out their theology for themselves, with no guidance from what God had already revealed to the apostles in Jerusalem and to Saul.

For Paul, making disciples included a “deep concern for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:28), a concern that they not fall prey to the savage wolves that were sure to arise among them (Acts 20:29). As God grants us the privilege of joining in the commission to “make disciples” (Matthew 28:18–20) we should share Paul’s concern. At the same time, we run the risk of improperly imposing our culture and experience-rooted expressions of faith on new believers, rather than allowing them to develop their own. As Edwin Zehner has helped me to see,<sup>34</sup> the risk of syncretism exists in tension with the risk of an inadequately inculturated church and expression of the gospel.

Jean-Marie Gaudeul has observed that

As we discover the many ways in which Christ, “lifted up from the earth, draws everyone to himself” (John 12:32), we are struck by the extraordinary variety of the ways in which people, finding new faith in him, discover their new identity: they are changed and yet the same. And we know that this diversity is only a small part of God’s infinite skill in leading us to his house where Unity will combine with the fulfillment of each person’s originality.<sup>35</sup>

We celebrate our diversity, but remember that it is not of an undefined variety. Our identity—whatever its outward expression—is given, grounded and deeply rooted in Christ that we might be “to the praise of his glory,” living carefully and wisely as children of light (Ephesians 1: 12–14; 5:15–16). **IJFM**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Jens Barnett, Kathryn Kraft, Tim Green, and Bob Fish for suggestions incorporated in this version.

<sup>2</sup> In his chapter in this book he describes the experience he and other Indians have faced as they work out their identity and look for community as followers of Jesus. Sufyan Baig, "The *Ummah* and Christian Community," in David Greenlee, ed., *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013), pp. 69–78.

<sup>3</sup> Dan McVey, "Hindrances to Evangelistic Growth among Muslim Background Believer Churches of the 'Jijimba' People of West Africa." In *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way*, ed. David Greenlee (Waynesboro: Authentic, 2006), pp. 199–214.

<sup>4</sup> John Leonard, "Oasis: An Ethnography of a Muslim Convert Group in France." PhD diss., (Deerfield: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2006), p. 292.

<sup>5</sup> Mogens S. Mogensén, "Contextual Communication of the Gospel to Pastoral *Fulbe* in Northern Nigeria." Ph.D. diss., (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 2000) p. 270; available at <http://www.intercultural.dk/index.php?mainid=51&subid=571>.

<sup>6</sup> David H. Greenlee, "Christian Conversion from Islam: Social, Cultural, Communication, and Supernatural Factors in the Process of Conversion and Faithful Church Participation." PhD diss., (Deerfield: Trinity International University, 1996), pp. 125–27.

<sup>7</sup> David Radford, "The Challenge of 'Coming to Faith' in Central Asia: Reconstructing Ethnic Identity Introduction," *Musafir: A Bulletin of Intercultural Studies*, 6:2 (December 2012), p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Oxford Dictionaries, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/identity>.

<sup>9</sup> See [http://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/content/prd/de/index/statistik/in\\_kuerze.html](http://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/content/prd/de/index/statistik/in_kuerze.html).

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Jens Barnett for these thoughts in response to a draft of this paper.

<sup>11</sup> See David Radford, "Fuzzy Thinking and the Conversion Process," pp. 1–10; Kathryn Kraft, "Relationships, Emotion, Doctrine, Intellect—and All That Follows," pp. 11–18; Jens Barnett, "Refusing to Choose: Multiple Belonging among Arab Followers of Christ," pp. 19–28, and "Living a Pun: Cultural Hybridity among Arab Followers of Christ," pp. 29–40; and Tim Green, "Conversion in the Light of Identity Theories," pp. 41–52, and "Identity Choices at the Border Zone,"

pp. 53–66, in Greenlee, *Longing for Community*. See also Kathryn Ann Kraft, *Searching for Heaven in the Real World: A Sociological Discussion of Conversion in the Arab World*, Regnum Studies in Mission, (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2012), and Tim Green, "Identity Issues for Ex-Muslim Christians, With Particular Reference to Marriage," *St. Francis Magazine* 8, 4 (Aug. 2012), available at <http://www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/SFMAugust2012-3.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> See William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> I use this term from the perspective described by sociologist Kathryn Kraft. While "aware of the sensitivities in many circles of the term 'conversion,' I use it throughout this paper, in recognition of its academic meaning, to refer to people who have broken with or weakened their loyalty to former beliefs and developed an allegiance to Christ." Kraft, "Relationships, Emotion, Doctrine, Intellect," footnote 28.

<sup>15</sup> Andreas Maurer, "In Search of a New Life," in Greenlee, *Straight Path*, pp. 103–04.

<sup>16</sup> For a scholarly analysis of this topic, see Paul Marshall and Nina Shea, *Silenced: How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes are Choking Freedom Worldwide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> See Marshall and Shea, *Silenced*, for documentation.

<sup>18</sup> Evelyne Reisacher, "North African Women and Conversion: Specifics of Female Faith and Experience," in Greenlee, *Straight Path*, pp. 121–22.

<sup>19</sup> Andreas Maurer, "In Search of a New Life," in Greenlee, *Straight Path*, pp. 103–04.

<sup>20</sup> See <http://sabatinajames.com/> and Sabatina James, *Sterben sollst du für dein Glück: Gefangen zwischen zwei Welten* (Munich: Knaur, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Tom Stiles, "Almost Heaven: The Fiesta Cargo System Among the Saraguro Quichua in Ecuador and Implications for Contextualizing in the Evangelical Church," Ph.D. diss., (Deerfield: Trinity International University, 1996). See also Bettina E. Schmidt, "Fiestas Patronales in the Ecuadorian Andes," *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 2006; 23; 54, <http://trn.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/23/1/54.pdf> and Deann Alford, "Mob Expels 80 Christians: Growing Number of Evangelicals Threatens

Liquor Profits," Oct. 17, 2005, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/november/6.22.html>.

<sup>22</sup> See Kraft, "Relationships, Emotion, Doctrine, Intellect" and *Searching for Heaven*, and Green, "Conversion in the Light of Identity Theories" and "Identity Issues."

<sup>23</sup> Ziya Meral, *No Place to Call Home* (Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 2008) p. 68, available at <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=report&id=94&search=>.

<sup>24</sup> Mark R. J. Faulkner, *Overtly Muslim, Covertly Boni: Competing Calls of Religious Allegiance on the Kenyan Coast*, Studies of Religion in Africa, Supplements to the Journal of Religion in Africa, vol. 29, (Leiden and Boston: Brill) p. 251.

<sup>25</sup> Barnett, "Refusing to Choose," pp. 23–25.

<sup>26</sup> Barnett, "Living a Pun," p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> Baig, "Ummah and Christian Community," p. 73.

<sup>28</sup> Barnett, "Narrative, Identity and Discipleship."

<sup>29</sup> Paul Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11,3 (July 1987), pp. 104–12.

<sup>30</sup> Tomas Sundnes Drønen, *Communitarianism and Conversion in Northern Cameroon: The Dii People and Norwegian Missionaries, 1934–1960*, Studies in Christian Mission Series, Vol. 37 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 106–07.

<sup>31</sup> By "discontinuity" I refer to changes that are more or less like the light on my desk: although the change is not actually instantaneous, there is a clear difference between the light being on or off. By "continuity" I do not mean that everything stays the same, but that change, to the extent it occurs, is more like the gradual change as dawn turns to daylight.

<sup>32</sup> David Greenlee, *One Cross, One Way, Many Journeys: Thinking Again about Conversion*, (Tyrone, GA, USA: Authentic, 2007) pp. 51–65.

<sup>33</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity 2006), p. 517.

<sup>34</sup> Edwin Zehner, "Beyond Anti-syncretism: Gospel, Context, and Authority in the New Testament and in Thai Conversions to Christianity," in Brian M. Howell and Edwin Zehner, eds., *Power and Identity in the Global Church: Six Contemporary Cases* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009), p. 173.

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Marie Gaudéul, "Mission: Imitation of Christ," in Greenlee, *Longing for Community*, pp. 145–58.