

# Going Too Far?

Phil Parshall

**R**ecently I was speaking to a group of young people who are highly motivated about Muslim evangelism. They excitedly told me of a missionary who had shared a “new” *modus operandi* for winning the Sons of Ishmael to Christ. This strategy centers around the Christian evangelist declaring himself to be a Muslim. He then participates in the *salat* or official Islamic prayers within the mosque. The missionary illustrated the concept by mentioning two Asian Christians who have recently undergone legal procedures to officially become Muslims. This was done to become a Muslim to Muslims in order to win Muslims to Christ.

Actually taking on a Muslim identity and praying in the mosque is not a new strategy. But legally becoming a Muslim definitely moves the missionary enterprise into uncharted territory. I address this issue with a sense of deep concern.

## Contextualization Continuum

John Travis (a pseudonym) a long-term missionary among Muslims in Asia, has put us in his debt by formulating a simple categorization for stages of contextualization within Islamic outreach. He defines his six C’s as “Cross-Cultural Church-Planting Spectrums.” (see pages 658-9)

Some years ago, a well-known professor of Islam alluded to my belief that Muslim converts could and should remain in the mosque following conversion. Quickly I corrected him, stating that I have never held that position, either in my speaking or writing. My book *Beyond the Mosque* deals extensively with the issue of why, when and how a convert must disassociate himself or herself from the mosque (though not from Muslim community *per se*).

I do, however, make room for a transitional period wherein the new believer, while maturing in his adopted faith, slowly pulls back from mosque attendance. Too sudden of a departure may spark intense antagonism and subsequent alienation. See 2 Kings 5 for an interesting insight on how Elisha responded to the new convert, Naaman, who brought up the subject of his ongoing presence in the heathen temple of Rimmon.

The diagram on the next page helps place in linear perspective the C1 to C5 categories. I submit that C1 starts at low contextualization and works up incrementally to C4 at the high end. All within this sector is legitimate, provided it is constantly cross-referenced and subordinated to biblical truth.



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six books on Christian ministry among Muslims. He has a D.Miss. from Fuller Theological Seminary and fellowships from Harvard and Yale University.

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## The Great Divide

C5 can be placed anywhere along the syncretism spectrum, depending on how each issue is presented to and understood by the Muslim community. Personally, I can only put conversion (or reconversion) to official Islam as high syncretism, regardless of motivation.

When, in 1975, our team of missionaries commenced a C4 strategy (highly contextualized, but believers are no longer seen as Muslims by the Muslim community) in an Asian Muslim country, we faced considerable opposition. One long term Christian worker in an Islamic land told me basically, "You are on a dangerous slide. Next you will be denying the cross." Well, 23 years later, we are still at C4 and still preaching the cross. And the Lord has greatly honored our efforts in that country.

But now I am the one to protest the "slide," not by our team, but by others who are ministering in various parts of the Muslim world. This slide is incremental and can be insidiously deceptive, especially when led by people of highest motivation. Now, it seems to me, we need to bring these issues before our theologians, missiologists, and administrators. Let us critique them before we suddenly find that we have arrived at a point which is indisputably sub-Christian.

### A Ministry Experiment

We do have help. In a very limited and remote geographical area in Asia, a C5 experiment ("Messianic Muslims" who follow Isa (Jesus) the Messiah and are accepted by Muslims as Muslims) has been ongoing for many years. This ministry provides us with a pretty solid baseline for evaluation, even though it has experienced significant personnel changes over the years.

Recently, researchers visited Islampur\* to examine the C5 movement there. Researchers found that this movement numbers in the thousands.

On one hand, the findings are very encouraging. Nearly all of the key people inter-

viewed indicated a very strong value on reading the New Testament and meeting regularly for Christian worship. Most would say that Allah loves and forgives them because Jesus died for them. They pray to Jesus for forgiveness. Virtually all believe that Jesus is the only Savior, and is able to save people from evil spirits.

On the other hand, nearly all say there are four heavenly books, i.e., Torah, Zabur, Injil, and Qur'an (This is standard Muslim belief, i.e., Law, Prophets, Gospels, and Qur'an) of which the Qur'an is the greatest. Nearly half continue to go to the traditional mosque on Friday where they participate in the standard Islamic prayers which affirm Muhammad as a prophet of God. And nearly half do not affirm the Trinity.

### Contextualization or syncretism?

What do we have here? Contextualization or syncretism? Is this a model to follow or avoid? Certainly there is an openness and potential here that is expansive and exciting. But whereas a C5 advocate is happy to keep it all within an Islamic religious environment, I am not.

### Can the Mosque be Redeemed?

The mosque is pregnant with Islamic theology. There, Muhammad is affirmed as a prophet of God and the divinity of Christ is consistently denied. Uniquely Muslim prayers (*salat*) are ritually performed as in no other religion. These prayers are as sacramental to Muslims as is partaking of the Lord's Supper for Christians. How would we feel if a Muslim attended (or even joined) our evangelical church and partook of communion... all with a view to becoming an "insider?" This accomplished, he then begins to promote Islam and actually win our parishioners over to his religious persuasion.

Even C4 is open to a Muslim charge of deceit. But I disagree and see it as a proper

level of indigenization. We have not become a "fifth column" within the mosque, seeking to undermine its precepts and practices. C5, to me, seems to do just that and open us to the charge of unethical and sub-Christian activity.

In my former country of ministry, our team had an agreement that none of us would go into a mosque and engage in the Islamic prayers. One of our group, however, wanted to secretly "experiment" with saying the *salat*. One Friday he traveled to a remote village and became friendly with the Muslims there. Harry\* expressed his desire to learn how to perform the rituals and forms of the prayers.

The Muslim leaders were quite excited to see that a foreigner wanted to learn about Islam. They gave Harry the necessary instruction. At 1 p.m. our missionary was found in the front row of the mosque going through all the bowing and prostrations of the *salat*. No matter that he was silently praying to Jesus. No one knew.

After worship, the Muslim villagers all came up to Harry and congratulated him on becoming a Muslim. Embarrassed, Harry explained that he was a follower of *Isa* (Jesus) and that he just wanted to learn about Islam. Immediately, upon hearing these words, the crowd became very angry.

Harry was accused of destroying the sanctity of the mosque. Someone yelled that he should be killed. A riot was about to break out.

The local imam sought to pacify the crowd by admitting that he had mistakenly taught the foreigner how to do the prayers. He asked forgiveness from his fellow Muslims. It was then decided that Harry should leave that village immediately and never return.

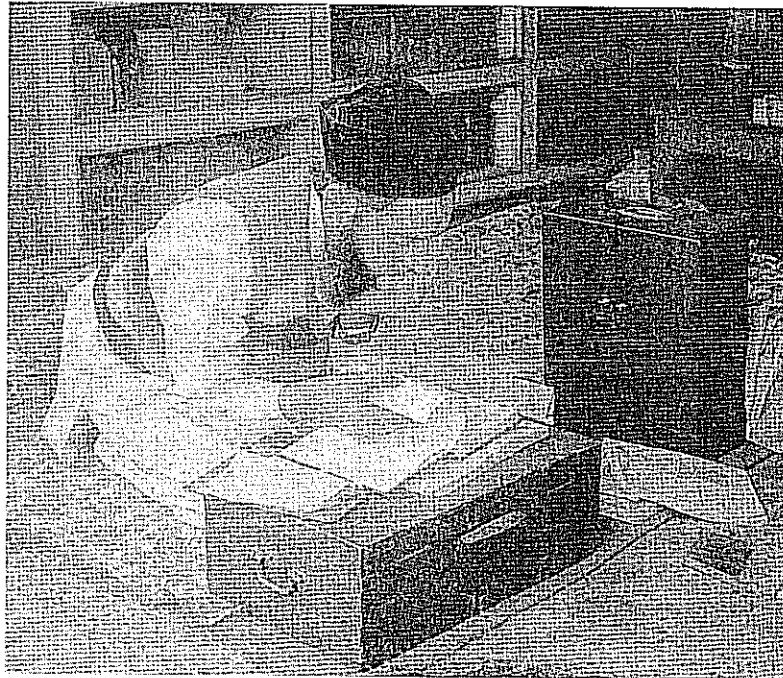
Another experience relates to Bob,\* a very intelligent, productive, and spiritually oriented missionary to Muslims. We met to-

gether at a conference and exchanged letters and at least one cassette tape over several years. My great concern was that he openly and dogmatically affirmed Muhammad as a prophet of God. To me, Bob had crossed the line into syncretism. Perhaps his motives were pure, but this progression of identification with Muslims had gone much too far. Today Bob is out of the ministry and is divorced from his wife.

### Guidelines

In 1979, I wrote the following guidelines to help us avoid syncretism while engaged in Muslim evangelism. Nineteen years later, I reaffirm (and reemphasize) these principles.

1. We must be acquainted with biblical teaching on the subject of syncretism. New Testament passages on the uniqueness of Christ should be carefully observed.
2. Islam as a religion and culture must be studied in depth.
3. An open approach is desired. Careful experimentation in contextualization need not lead to syncretism as long as one is aware of all the dangers.
4. Contextualization needs constant monitoring and analysis. What are the people really thinking? What does the contextualized communication convey?



What do specific forms trigger in the mind of the new convert? Is there progress in the grasp of biblical truth? Are the people becoming demonstrably more spiritual?

5. Cross-cultural communicators must beware of presenting a gospel which has been syncretized with Western culture. The accretions to Christianity that have built up over the centuries as a result of the West's being the hub of Christianity should be avoided as far as possible.

### Conclusion

No, I am not maligning the motivation of godly missionaries who are practicing and promoting C5 as an appropriate strategy to win Muslims to Christ. Several of these Christian workers are my friends. They long to see a breakthrough in Muslim evangelism. Their personal integrity is unquestioned.

But, yes, I am apprehensive. Where does all this lead us? In that earlier mentioned conference, one young Muslim convert came up to me and said he had followed the lead

## The C1 to C6 Spectrum

*John Travis\**

### A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of "Christ-centered Communities" ("C") found in the Muslim Context

The C1-C6 Spectrum compares and contrasts types of "Christ-centered communities (groups of believers in Christ) found in the Muslim world. The six types in the spectrum are differentiated by language, culture, worship forms, degree of freedom to worship with others, and religious identity. All worship Jesus as Lord and core elements of the gospel are the same from group to group. The spectrum attempts to address the enormous diversity which exists throughout the Muslim world in terms of ethnicity, history, traditions, language, culture, and in some cases, theology.

The diversity means that myriad approaches are needed to successfully share the gospel and plant Christ-centered communities among the world's 1 billion followers of Islam. The purpose of the spectrum is to assist church planters and Muslim background believers to ascertain which type of Christ-centered communities may draw the most people from the target group to Christ and best fit in a given context. All of these six types are presently found in some part of the Muslim world.

#### ***C1—Traditional Church Using Outsider\*\* Language***

May be Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant. Some predate Islam. Thousands of C1 churches are found in Muslim lands today. Many reflect Western culture. A huge cultural chasm often exists between the church and the surrounding Muslim community. Some Muslim background believers may be found in C1 churches. C1 believers call themselves "Christians."

#### ***C2—Traditional Church Using Insider\*\* Language***

Essentially the same as C1 except for language. Though insider language is used, religious vocabulary is probably non-Islamic (distinctively "Christian"). The cultural gap between Muslims and C2 is still large. Often more Muslim background believers are found in C2 than C1. The majority of churches located in the Muslim world today are C1 or C2. C2 believers call themselves "Christians."

#### ***C3—Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Religiously Neutral Insider Cultural Forms***

Religiously neutral forms may include folk music, ethnic dress, artwork, etc. Islamic elements (where present) are "filtered out" so as to use purely "cultural" forms. The aim is to reduce foreignness of the gospel and the church by contextualizing to biblically permissible cultural forms. May meet in a church building or more religiously neutral location. C3 congregations are comprised of a majority of Muslim background believers. C3 believers call themselves "Christians."

of the missionary speaker. He went in the local mosque and told the imam that he is a Muslim and wanted to learn more of Islam. His secret goal was to build a relationship with the imam. I asked Abdul\* how he felt about what he did. With a look of pain and sadness, he replied that he felt very badly about it and would not do it again.

Before C5 people broadly propagate this strategy to young, impressionable minds who are excited about the "new" and "un-tried," I urge them to more fully consider

both the Islamic charge of deception as well as the long-term consequences of their actions. I am convinced that C5 missionaries are on very shaky theological and missiological ground.

Let's bring the subject out in the open and dialogue together.

#### ***C4—Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Biblically Permissible Cultural and Islamic Forms***

Similar to C3, however, biblically permissible Islamic forms and practices are also utilized (e.g. praying with raised hands, keeping the fast, avoiding pork, alcohol, and dogs as pets, using Islamic terms, dress, etc.). C1 and C2 forms avoided. Meetings not held in church buildings. C4 communities comprised almost entirely of Muslim background believers. C4 believers, though highly contextualized, are usually not seen as Muslim by the Muslim community. C4 believers identify themselves as "followers of Isa the Messiah" (or something similar).

#### ***C5—Christ-centered Communities of "Messianic Muslims" Who Have Accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior***

C5 believers remain legally and socially within the community of Islam. Somewhat similar to the Messianic Jewish movement, aspects of Islamic theology which are incompatible with the Bible are rejected, or reinterpreted if possible. Participation in corporate Islamic worship varies from person to person and group to group. C5 believers meet regularly with other C5 believers and share their faith with unsaved Muslims. Unsaved Muslims may see C5 believers as theologically deviant and may eventually expel them from the community of Islam. Where entire villages accept Christ, C5 may result in "Messianic mosques." C5 believers are viewed as Muslims by the Muslim community and refer to themselves as Muslims who follow Isa the Messiah.

#### ***C6—Small Christ-centered Communities of Secret/Underground Believers***

Similar to persecuted believers suffering under totalitarian regimes. Due to fear, isolation, or threat of extreme governmental/community legal action or retaliation (including capital punishment), C6 believers worship Christ secretly (individually or perhaps infrequently in small clusters). Many come to Christ through dreams, visions, miracles, radio broadcasts, tracts, Christian witness while abroad, or reading the Bible on their own initiative. C6 (as opposed to C5) believers are usually silent about their faith. C6 is not ideal; God desires his people to witness and have regular fellowship (Heb 10:25). Nonetheless C6 believers are part of our family in Christ. Though God may call some to a life of suffering, imprisonment, or martyrdom, He may be pleased to have some worship Him in secret, at least for a time. C6 believers are perceived as Muslims by the Muslim community and identify themselves as Muslims.

\* A pseudonym.

\*\* "Insider" pertains to the local Muslim population; "outsider" pertains to the local non-Muslim population.

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