

# Context is Critical:

## A Response to Phil Parshall's "Going Too Far"

Dean S. Gilliland

The "Islampur" study was part of a larger research project designed to compare and test various models for evangelizing Muslims. The particular report Phil Parshall refers to did not endorse or condemn but provided case studies in different situations for whatever light they might shed on approaches to Muslims in various communities.

Phil Parshall's article mentions the "Islampur" case. More needs to be said in fairness to the research. The researcher himself concluded the data presentation with careful words: "Whether in fact a person can be an authentic follower of Jesus and still remain within the fold of Islam raises strong opinions and emotions on many sides.... It is, of course, possible that those who endorse radical contextualization of the gospel within Islam are wrong." He also wrote, however, that after looking at the entire report, "It does seem that there has been a real work of God among the (name withheld) Muslims."

Little is known from Phil's article about the internal problems caused by leaders who took these followers of Jesus in two directions, causing, finally, a near abandonment of the teaching that should have been continuing. In the background are many painful factors which added to the burden of these simple people who say they believe in and follow Jesus. At one point, the names of key believers in the movement were turned over to the government. Despite internal and external problems, these clusters of followers were able to testify honestly and without coaching to what Jesus, the Bible, the power of the gospel, and other Jesus-people mean to them.

While the context and contextualization are what this case is all about, too often conclusions about what is right or wrong are generalized without attention to a particular case. A practicable and fitting approach in one place will probably not be appropriate somewhere else. For example, the case behind Parshall's example does not fit the research's second case, which was done in Nigeria.

Some 45 million Muslims live in Nigeria. The big difference with "Islampur" is that Nigeria also has 45–50 million people who call themselves Christians. There is no way that Muslims who convert to Jesus Christ in Nigeria would ever call themselves Muslims.

In fact, it was a rather well-known esoteric model of evangelizing Muslims in northern Nigeria that attracted the re-



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search in the first place. The ministry was not integrated with the churches and was supposedly producing believers who were suffering intensely for their faith. Evangelical churches had come to disown the movement because of the secrecy and clandestine style of the leaders. The movement has now collapsed, even though it had received a lot of private publicity and support outside of Nigeria.

Therefore, the Nigeria situation is *totally different* from the one in "Islampur." In Nigeria the churches are almost apostolic in their boldness before and among Muslims. Form contextualization (except in the far north) is seen as a kind of imitation of the Muslim way and therefore is looked upon as neither necessary nor desirable. Christian-Muslim confrontation saturates the life of Nigerian people—socially, politically, and religiously.

The Parshall article discusses the appropriateness of an approach in a particular Asian context. The size and strength comparison between Muslims and Christians in "Islampur" is like the elephant to the fly, as it were.

Obviously, this little flock that has turned to follow Jesus—with members who pray to Jesus for forgiveness, who believe that Jesus died for them, and who say he is the only Savior—has to be taken very seriously. Even though they call themselves Muslims, they are not like other Muslims.

The words of Jesus are poignant and sobering: I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock,

one shepherd (John 10:16)." I have mentioned the need for the passage of time because, like any other movement, this one is in process. In the meantime, we should never forget that the Holy Spirit does not abandon his Word or his people. While conversations about the dangers of syncretism are well-intended, God goes on doing his work through his Holy Spirit, to bless and honor truth and to remove his blessing from error.

I recall discussions I had with African pastors about the implications of the Apostle Paul baptizing the Philippian jailer and his family immediately, coming as they did straight out of "paganism." It was an emotional and a highly charged situation, with no church except, perhaps, some women of Lydia's household who had also been baptized quickly and privately. Then, after a confrontation with the police, Paul left them for Thessalonica (Acts 16). How much hope would there seem to have been for isolated converts in a place like Philippi? Still, the church developed there.

I am not saying the situation in "Islampur" is the same as in Philippi, but the Holy Spirit is still at work in poorly informed, sometimes misguided believers. Beyond any human comprehension, the Spirit faithfully guides those who seek the truth. The Good Shepherd said, "I know my own and my own know me" (John 10:14). The church has always been a mystery (Eph 3:3,9), but it is God's Church, and in the end God will make the judgment.

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## Study Questions

1. On what can new gatherings of believers base their trust to avoid syncretism?
2. Can an effective strategy for planting an indigenous church among Muslims be easily transferred to another people group?



# Going Far Enough

## Taking Some Tips From The Historical Record

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of Guatemala, Ralph D. Winter was called to be a Professor of Missions at the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary. Ten years later he and his wife, Roberta, founded a mission society called the Frontier Mission Fellowship (FMF) in Pasadena, California. This in turn spawned the U.S. Center for World Mission and the William Carey International University, both of which serve other missions working at the frontiers of mission. He is the General Director of the Frontier Mission Fellowship. See expanded biographical sketch at the end of the book.

**T**hose of us responding to Phil Parshall's excellent analysis "Going Too Far" are not mainly disagreeing with him but enthusiastically accepting his invitation to bring these things out into open discussion. Time may show us all to be wrong in one way or another. My contribution has been made much less demanding due to the excellent responses already given by Travis and Gilliland. I certainly endorse all five of Parshall's "Guidelines."

I add these words because I feel we need to take seriously the wealth of experiences and events during over 1,000 years since Muhammed's death, and we need to realize the most important result of all this may be a better understanding of the New Testament!

In the first place, that 1,000+ year dynamic record involves deep and almost constant heresy within the very Christian tradition of which we are so often proud. I have already described some of the powerful political and cultural factors in the rise of both Christianity and Islam, in Chapter 33 (The Kingdom Strikes Back). There has always been a lot of disturbing debate about the best way to believe. Early Christian theologians have struggled to define at different times Arian, Athanasian, Monophysite, Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim theologies, etc., as heretical without singling out any one of them as "non-Christian."

What needs to be very clear in the present discussion is the fact that in recent history Christians and Muslims have each developed highly sensitive and extensively prejudicial attitudes toward each other, especially since the Crusades. This especially makes it very hard to peel away layers of prejudice and think objectively.

It is incredible how political configurations can warp our sensitivities. True blue American democracy worked closely with Russian Communist Allies when it was necessary to put down the Nazi juggernaut. Once that threat was removed we returned to American/Soviet conflict again. Conflict and polarization in former Yugoslavia is just as great between Croatian and Serb (both Christian) as it is between either of them and the Bosnian Muslims, and objectivity is virtually impossible.

Thus, my first point is that our attitudes in this discussion must take into account the possible warping of our perspective resulting from historical events. Semi-barbarian Christians from Western Europe committed awful atrocities