

# God's Amazing Diversity in Drawing Muslims to Christ

*How would the mission community respond today if God should ask us to do something strange or even offensive, as He has done throughout biblical history? As familiar as we may be with Scripture, we will never always be able to fully predict how God will work in a given situation. This is definitely the case today as we see God drawing Muslim peoples to Himself in several rather surprising ways.*

by Joshua Massey

Scripture shows that God has never been entirely predictable. In God's passion to crush the serpent's head and redeem mankind, who could have predicted He would eventually wipe out most of humanity to start over with Noah and his family?

Consider Abraham and try to transport yourself back to his time. If we had been present with Abraham and witnessed God's covenant to make his descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky, who of us could have predicted that God would allow Abraham and his descendants to take multiple wives? Polygamy is surely one way to exponentially multiply a man's descendants, but why would God allow it to enter into the line of the promised Messiah? That's not something most Westerners today could have easily predicted.

If we say that the patriarchs' propensity toward polygamy was merely part of God's permissive will, then why would God tell David in 2 Sam. 12:8, "I gave... your master's wives into your arms"?<sup>1</sup> God is disciplining David through Nathan for taking Bathsheba and appears to be saying, "*I gave you so many wives! How then could you do this wicked thing by taking Uriah's wife?*" God gave David more than one wife? This is not something many of us would have expected to hear from God.

## Unlikely Candidates for God's Blessing

Consider Jacob and try to transport yourself to his household for a moment. If you had seen everything Jacob had seen of his sons, including Judah sleeping with his daughter-in-law Tamar (unknowingly of course, he thought she was a prostitute), from which son's line would you have predicted the promised Messiah would come? I would have expected Joseph to be the man, and I believe Jacob expected the same. Judah is *not* the man I would have predicted. But instead, we learn in Matthew 1:3 that the genealogy of Jesus doesn't just trace back to Judah, but to Judah's union with his daughter-in-law Tamar! This is not the line many would have expected God to use.

And we can be pretty sure, according to Gen. 49:5-7, that Jacob had serious doubts about anything good coming of Levi, a son in whose counsel Jacob would not sit. Yet from Levi came Moses, as well as the entire Levitical priesthood.

## Offensive Obedience

Consider how God asked Isaiah to go around preaching naked for three years, as a sign against Egypt and Cush (Isa. 20:2-4). Do you think Christian leaders today might want to distance themselves from an evangelist claiming that God told him to preach naked for three years? Church planting teams to Muslims frequently write-up MOUs (memos of understanding) to give prospective teammates some idea of their approach to ministry. But who among us would blame a team leader for refusing to believe that God would ask his teammate to preach naked to Muslims? "Maybe to ascetic Hindu holy men or to primitive tribals—maybe," some might grant, "but to Muslims?"

Isaiah was not the only prophet who preached naked. Micah did the same, weeping and wailing; he howled like a jackal and moaned like an owl (Mic. 1:8). This is not the kind of behavior I would predict for a prophet. And does it really matter whether Isaiah and Micah preached fully naked or just in their underwear? However far they stripped, it was clearly intended to foreshadow the humiliation and shame peoples would soon experience as recipients of God's judgment. It was a divine object lesson God used to get people's attention.

## Defilement and Pollution

It is not uncommon for peoples of the world to roast food over dried cow or camel dung, especially in areas of the world where firewood is scarce. But it is nowhere common to roast food over dried human excrement. So when God asked the prophet Ezekiel to do this, Ezekiel, understandably, reacted rather strongly (Ez. 4:12-15). He clearly understood that cooking his food in such a way would defile it completely. Of course it would, since God clearly states that this is the very reason he asked Ezekiel to do it, to show the Israelites that they too will eat defiled food among the nations where God will drive them (Ez. 4:13). God asked Ezekiel to *defile* himself to send a message to the Israelites? Surely, it seems, there could have been another way! (Those less familiar with the account may be relieved to know that God, in his mercy, let Ezekiel use cow dung instead.)

So as familiar as we may be with the Scriptures, we will never be able to predict how God will handle a given situation. The Pharisees knew the Scriptures extremely well, but they

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utterly failed to recognize Jesus (John 5:39-40). Peter did recognize Jesus, but almost missed God's clear instruction about ritual purity (Acts 10:14). Why? Because God wanted to do something Peter didn't expect—to lift the ban on unclean foods that Scripture *specifically* forbade. How did God make his unexpected will known to Peter? He spoke directly through the vision of unclean animals and the clear instruction, "Kill and eat" (Acts 10:13). Abstinence from such meat was so deeply ingrained in Peter's mind that God had to give the vision three times, and even then Peter still wondered what it meant (Acts 10:17). Remember, at this time Peter had no other Scripture than the Old Testament, so as far as he could see, God seemed to be asking him to do something completely unbiblical. God also wanted Peter to enter a Gentile's home. This too, Peter believed, was totally against God's law (Acts 10:28).

## God's Ways are Not Like our Ways

We could go on and on throughout Scripture, showing example after example of how God frequently does what his people never expect. God has never been entirely predictable. In his passion to draw the nations to the Savior, about the only thing we can predict with confidence is that God *will* do things we do not expect! In fact, he may even do things that seem so contrary to our understanding of him that we might rally a list of verses to justify our refusal to accept them as being from him at all. We have no trouble supporting our expectations from Scripture, even as the Pharisees and Judaizers had little trouble supporting theirs from Scripture.

We must never forget that God is God; and his ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8-9; Job 37:5). Therefore, God may absolutely astonish us sometimes (Luke 11:38; Mark 10:32). But then again, he is God! He can do whatever he wants! In reality, our periodic astonishment more likely reflects our shallow capacity to understand God and his ways: "Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?" (Job 11:7).

The above examples are in no way intended to challenge our basic hermeneutic of Scripture, nor to undermine what God has clearly revealed in his Word. My only intent is simply to drive home one point beyond question: God has never been entirely predictable. He frequently surprises us! Sometimes it may even appear he is contradicting what he previously revealed. But God never contradicts himself (Num. 23:19). It only appears that way to us because our understanding is so limited. Whether he asks us to preach naked or roast our food over dried human excrement, we need to accept that God is God. Therefore, we will not always be able to fit his unpredictable ways into our limited understanding without some occasional befuddlement and discomfort.

Has God been doing anything lately in drawing Muslims to Christ that we would not have predicted? Most definitely! God has been drawing Muslims to Christ (John 6:44) in so many different ways that one worker, John Travis, developed a spectrum to describe six very different kinds of Christ-centered communities in the Muslim world today. Before I briefly summarize this *C1-C6 Spectrum* (Travis 1998), we need to understand that the "C" stands for "Christ-centered community." While both healthy and unhealthy examples can be found for each of the six communities, none are necessarily more Christ-centered than the others. Furthermore, C1-C6 are all

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realities, not mere theories or positions. Muslim men and women who at one time only knew Jesus as a prophet of Islam now know him as Savior and Lord in a variety of very different communities.

C1 is a traditional Christian church which either reflects the culture of foreign Christians or that of the minority indigenous national church. Many English-speaking churches in former British colonies are good examples of the prior, while most Coptic churches of Egypt are good examples of the later. In either case, Travis writes, “A huge cultural chasm often exists between the [C1] church and the surrounding Muslim community” (1998:407). C1 churches speak neither the daily language nor the religious terminology of the local Muslim population. C1 believers identify themselves as “Christians.”

C2 is basically the same as C1, except C2 churches use the daily language of the surrounding Muslim population. Like C1, C2 churches avoid Islamic terminology and instead use a distinctively “Christian” vocabulary for religious description. The cultural chasm between C2 believers and the surrounding Muslim community is often still huge. C2 believers identify themselves as “Christians.”

C3 churches are essentially the same as C2, except C3 makes use of local music styles, dress, art and other indigenous cultural elements. C3 makes a clear distinction between practices that are purely “cultural” and those which are “Islamic.” Islamic

forms are rejected. Travis writes, “The aim is to reduce foreignness of the Gospel and the church by contextualizing to biblically permissible cultural forms” (1998:408). C3 believers also identify themselves as “Christians.”

C4 congregations are much like C3 but have also adopted biblically permissible Islamic forms and practices (e.g., praying prostrate, perhaps toward Jerusalem; washing before prayer and before touching the Bible; abstaining from pork, alcohol, or from keeping dogs as pets; using some Islamic terms; wearing some clothing popular among Muslims). To distance themselves from the negative baggage and misperceptions Muslims have about “Christianity,” C4 believers do not call themselves “Christians” but “followers of *Isa* (Jesus).” However, the Muslim community does not generally regard C4 believers as fellow Muslims. From a Muslim’s perspective, “If they were Muslims, they wouldn’t hesitate to call themselves Muslims. And we’d see them at the mosque on Fridays as well!”

C5 is much like C4 with the primary difference being self-identity. Whereas C4 believers identify themselves as “followers of *Isa*,” C5 believers identify themselves as “Muslim followers of Jesus”—much like Messianic Jews calling themselves “Jewish followers of Jesus.” Islamic theology incompatible with the Bible is rejected. Some C5

**The C1–C6 Spectrum**

	<b>C1</b>	<b>C2</b>	<b>C3</b>	<b>C4</b>	<b>C5</b>	<b>C6</b>
<b>Christ-Centered Community Description</b>	A church foreign to the Muslim community in both culture and language	C1 in form but speaking the language used by Muslims, though their religious terminology is distinctively non-Muslim	C2 using non-Islamic cultural elements (e.g., dress, music, diet, arts)	C3 with some Biblically acceptable Islamic practices	C4 with a “Muslim follower of Jesus” self-identity	Secret Believers, may or may not be active members in the religious life of the Muslim community
<b>Self-Identity</b>	“Christian”	“Christian”	“Christian”	“Follower of <i>Isa</i> ”	“Muslim follower of Jesus”	<i>Privately:</i> “Christian,” or “Follower of <i>Isa</i> ,” or “Muslim follower of Jesus”
<b>Muslim Perception</b>	Christian	Christian	Christian	A <i>kind</i> of Christian	A <i>strange kind</i> of Muslim	Muslim

believers remain in the Muslim community for as long as they can to “win Muslims as Muslims” (1 Cor. 9:19–23). In time, however, their deviance from mainstream Islamic theology may lead to their banishment from the Muslim community. But where whole communities of Muslims begin to follow Jesus, the local mosque may transform into a Messianic Mosque for Jesus. Some C5 believers desire to distance themselves from the mosque and Islam, still preferring to maintain their identity as Muslim followers of Jesus. In contrast to C4, Muslims view C5 believers as Muslim, though perhaps “a strange kind of Muslim.” Most Muslims have never met Muslims who “follow Jesus,” so the curiosity that results from their identification often leads to open doors to share their faith in Christ.

### A Surprising Progression

C1 and C2 best describe the majority of churches in the Muslim world today, which isn't too surprising. However, C3–C5 believers represent what I believe to be a surprising progression of God's diversity in drawing Muslims to Christ. I use the term “progression” because the surprises did not start with C5 but with C3. In its day, C3 received plenty of opposition from C1–C2 believers, who insisted, for example, that certain musical instruments are inherently evil and inappropriate for any community of Christ-followers. But in time, C3 became more widely accepted, and in turn laid a foundation for C4. Furthermore, I attribute this progression “to God” (rather than to the contextual experiments of man) based on the firm conviction that no one becomes “Christ-centered” unless God draws them, as Jesus stated so clearly (John 6:44).

Phil Parshall certainly became the vanguard of C4 fellowships in the late 70s, and he endured an extreme amount of opposition from more than a few C1-3 believers who had serious concerns about the integrity of C4 work. But Parshall took the necessary time and actually wrote a book, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* (1980), to build his case for C4. God used Parshall's book, along with several others (McCurry 1979; Parshall 1983; Gilliland 1989; Woodberry 1989), to help some of His workers switch gears in their approach to reaching Muslims. In spite of the opposition that Parshall and other pro-C4 workers endured, early adopters of C4 believed it held tremendous potential for Kingdom advance in the Muslim context—even though it did not come without risks in such uncharted territory.

Ironically, 20 years after Parshall's ground breaking publication of *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism*, C4 is today probably the most common approach used by new missionaries to Muslims. And who could have predicted 20 years ago that God would raise up still another group of messengers who believe God wants to take them beyond C4? C4 surely paved the way for C5, whose major difference is one of identity. Whereas C4 allows any biblically-permissible Islamic form or practice, C5 does not claim to go any further, except in the area of self-definition.

C5 practitioners insist that even as Paul argued tirelessly with Judaizers that Gentiles did not have to convert to Judaism to follow Jesus, Muslims do not have to convert to “Christianity” to follow Jesus. There is no doubt that C5 believers are genuine disciples of Jesus (Acts 15:8, 11), but they do not desire to align themselves with what they perceive as that godless Western institution called “Christianity,” where (from a Muslim perspective) homosexuals enter the clergy, immodest women come to worship in scantily clad summer dresses, and people put the Word of God on the floor right next to their dirty shoes.

C5 workers point out that Jesus commanded us to make disciples, not converts (Mt. 28:19). They argue that when Muslims who are drawn to Jesus commit to obey all his commands, bearing witness that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man and that only his death on the cross can pay the price for man's sin, what does it matter what they call themselves? In reality, much like E. Stanley Jones described “Christ-centeredness” as quite separate from “Christianity” (1925), C5 workers want to convert Muslims to Jesus, not to Christianity. Our mandate is not to “Christianize” the nations with fine-sounding labels of self-identity, but with love for Jesus and obedience to his commands (Mt. 28:20; John 14:15, 21).

On the other hand, opponents of C5 argue, “How could anyone who identifies himself as any kind of Muslim be a genuine follower of Jesus? To call oneself ‘Muslim’ means they adhere to certain Islamic beliefs that flatly contradict Scripture!”

To this objection, C5 practitioners respond, “That sounds like the same argument Judaizers used against Paul since Gentiles were well known by all Jews to be unclean, uncircumcised, and mostly sexually immoral idolaters—all violating clear Biblical teachings. ‘How is it possible,’ Judaizers must have asked Paul, ‘to be both Gentile and a follower of Jesus? The two terms are mutually exclusive!’ And yet we find this phrase, ‘Gentile believers’ twice in the Book of Acts—which must have been quite disturbing to Judaizers, many of whom no doubt loved the Lord Jesus deeply.”

Opponents of C5 contend, “But to remain a Gentile follower of Jesus is different than remaining a Muslim follower of Jesus since being Gentile is an issue of ethnicity, not adherence to a false religion.” To this C5 practitioners respond, “Tell that to Peter, who, though he could not point at a cohesive body of religious literature describing ‘Gentilism,’ nor an order of priests claiming to represent the offices of ‘Gentilism,’ believed he would be ritually polluted upon entering the home of Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile (Acts 10:28). Peter knew Cornelius was a God-fearer, a ‘proselyte of the gate,’<sup>2</sup> not a typical idolatrous Gentile. Still, Jews like Peter refused to enter such a man’s home lest they be defiled. If the proximity of God-fearing Gentiles was thought to ritually pollute a Jewish follower of Jesus, being Gentile was certainly much more than ethnicity for it included serious implications of religious consequence, deeply ingrained in the psyche of every Jew and Judaizer who objected to the inclusion of Gentiles in the church without them first fully converting to Judaism, i.e., becoming ‘a proselyte of righteousness.’”<sup>3</sup> Judaizers, of course, backed their arguments with abundant Scripture. Fortunately for us Gentiles, men like Paul and Barnabas could, at least initially, see God’s purposes much further than Peter and James, who later recognized God’s stamp on the Gentile movement after God went to unusual lengths to convince them (Acts 10).

## Deceit and “Muslim” Identity

Every pro-C5 worker I know sees a huge difference between someone from a Christian background assuming a C5 identity and someone from a Muslim background becoming a C5 believer. In fact, one pro-C5 team I know has a countrywide policy disallowing anyone from a Christian background from becoming C5; their identity can go no further than C4. If someone from a Christian background goes around calling himself Muslim, all they will do (according to popular C5 opinion) is either look like a total phony, or mislead Muslims into thinking they converted to Islam. So when I use the term “C5 believer,” I am always referring to those who were raised Muslim by a Muslim family. This distinction becomes even more significant when considering the question of deceit in a C5 approach.

While pro-C1–C4 workers may assert that following Jesus requires one to cease identifying themselves as “Muslim,” pro-C5 workers believe that identity is a matter of both theology and culture. For example, C5 Muslim followers of Jesus see themselves as far more “Muslim” than “Christian,” even though they disagree with the common Muslim belief that the Bible is corrupt and that Jesus was not crucified. How can they possibly see themselves as more Muslim than Christian in spite of these theological differences?

To answer this question, we must first ask, “Whom do they see as ‘Christian’?” In parts of the world where significant numbers of C5 believers exist today, they are mostly looking at C1–C2 believers. When C5 believers compare themselves to C1–C2 Christians, they say, “I don’t pray like a Christian, unwashed in a pew with my shoes on; I pray like a Muslim. I don’t dress like a Christian, with Western pants and collared shirts; I dress like a Muslim. I don’t talk like a Christian, with all their strange terms to describe God and his prophets; I talk like a Muslim. I don’t eat like a Christian, consuming uh... you know<sup>4</sup> and *haram* meats (i.e., meat not butchered in the “kosher” way); I prefer *halal* meats, like a Muslim. I don’t have a Christian name, like John, Tom or Paul; I have a Muslim name.” Thus, C5 believers are being

entirely honest when they identify themselves as “Muslim” followers of Jesus.

## C6 Secret Believers

While “C6” accurately describes a certain Christ-centered community of secret believers, it does not fit well on this spectrum in other respects, particularly in the area of contextualization and self-definition. Throughout C1 to C5, we can see a progression in contextual “friendliness” with a Muslim’s culture, Islamic forms, and even Muslim identity. But any sense of contextual progression ends at C5, for the defining factor of C6 is whether or not a believer’s faith in Jesus is made public. Privately, C6 believers surely practice a wide range of self-definition, and if we ask them how they think their fellow Muslim countrymen would best be reached with the Gospel, we would surely hear a variety of replies all along the C1–C5 spectrum.

## Christian Response to God’s Diversity

I see two common responses to God’s unpredictable diversity in drawing Muslims to himself.

1. *Accuse brothers up the spectrum of compromise, syncretism and heresy.* We should never gloss over the genuine concerns of brothers who sense sig-

nificant dangers in a pro-C4 or C5 approach. But some, instead of praying for the protection and fruitful labors of those involved in C4–C5, judge them as having crossed from contextualization into syncretism. Still others spread their dogmatic opinions of heresy to engage in what we could well call “missiological gossip.” To be fair, they do not see it as gossip at all, but as alerting God’s people to the sloppy doctrine of compromising saints.

I am not referring here to differences on the non-negotiables of the Gospel. Missiological gossip occurs when we elevate disputable matters to such an extent as to condemn our brothers of wrong doing in matters where Christ has given us freedom. Satan’s ancient strategy to divide and conquer is ever-present among missionaries to Muslims who accuse their Christ-centered brothers of watering down the requirements of the Gospel to make it more palatable for Muslim acceptance. They assume they know full well how God draws Muslims to Jesus, and as far as they are concerned, it does not include a C4 or C5 approach. They have forgotten that God is not always predictable. In God’s passion to reach the nations, he may actually surprise us sometimes.

2. *Accuse brothers down the spectrum of obstructing the flow of the Gospel with a culturally insensitive and extractionist approach.* Pride can easily develop in those who are early adopters of God’s unpredictable ways, as if they are on the cutting edge of a movement of God due to some personal ability of their own. Many fall into a trap of believing the approach God has called them to is the approach for everyone: “If everyone does not get on board,” it is believed, “they will unwittingly contribute to actually hindering the very purposes of God and thereby prevent

Muslim souls from drawing near to Christ.” This trap is especially easy to fall into when brothers down the spectrum are stridently dogmatic and condemning of the freedoms they exercise in disputable matters. In their eagerness to, as Paul writes in Rom. 14:16, “not allow what they consider good to be spoken of as evil,” they become overly zealous to prove their point and actually offend their brothers whose conscience simply has not yet permitted them such freedom.

Paul offers some incredibly specific instruction on such issues, “So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God” (Rom. 14:22). One wonders if Paul’s seasoned advice throughout Romans 14 isn’t rooted in some pretty hard lessons he himself learned when dealing with the Judaizers. The intensity of his debate with these brothers is clearly seen years earlier in his rather harsh comments about Judaizers, “As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” (Gal. 5:12). So if we find ourselves agitated and perhaps even upset at dogmatic Christians who condemn our freedoms to reach Muslims, let us remember that the Apostle Paul wrestled with similar issues. He and Barnabas had already had several “sharp disputes” with Jewish Christians who traveled all the way from Judea just to teach Gentile believers in Antioch of their need to be circumcised and become Jews before they could follow Jesus (Acts 15:2). When Paul and Barnabas visited the Jerusalem council to settle the matter, the Scriptures state that after “much discussion”—this was no quick and easy matter on which they could reach immediate agreement—Peter finally stood up and reminded everyone how God surprised him with the sheet lowered from heaven with the unclean animals God commanded him to eat (Acts 15:7; 10:13). Peter then recounted God’s instruction to enter the home of Cornelius, a Gentile God-fearer, even though this was a blatant violation of Jewish law (Acts 10:28). James then adds his powerful words which have no doubt provided inspiration to every believer called to contextualize, “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19).

While the issues and the spectrums may change throughout history, Christians have always engaged in such condemnation of brothers for exercising their freedom in Christ. Similarly, pride continues to induce other Christians to look down on those whose conscience does not allow them such freedom. I believe both responses fall far short of Christ’s command to love one another as he has loved us. Furthermore, both responses seem to ignore Paul’s instruction to not pass judgment on one another in disputable matters, nor judge another man’s servant for “to his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand for the Lord is able to make him stand” (Rom. 14:4). There is however a better way, a third response to God’s amazing diversity in drawing Muslims to Christ, which I believe Peter and James modeled for us at the Jerusalem council.

*If we do not accept God's diversity in drawing Muslims to the Savior, blessing and praying for those who do not exactly share our philosophy of ministry, we will be playing right into Satan's age old scheme to divide and conquer.*

3. *Accept God's diversity in drawing Muslims to Christ, blessing and praying for those who do not share our philosophy of ministry.* We can be confident that many Judaizers loved the Lord Jesus deeply (Acts 21:20), but wouldn't it have been better if they could have acknowledged God's diversity in drawing Gentiles to Christ and then responded to contextualizers like Paul in an entirely different manner? Imagine the Judaizers writing the following letter to Paul:

*Paul, as much as your approach seems to contradict what we know from Scripture in the Law, we acknowledge that there is great freedom in Christ and that he has in fact fulfilled all the requirements of the Law in our behalf. It follows then that Gentiles don't have to actually convert to Judaism to receive the blessing promised to our forefathers; rather, they need to convert to Jesus the Messiah. And you, brother Paul, are doing a great work among them. We believe God has anointed you for this work and will be praying for God's blessing and protection upon you, to guard your heart and mind through some very challenging issues ahead. It is great to see the Hellenist believers supporting your efforts and we too wish you well.*

*Still, many of us just don't have the cultural flexibility you have Paul. We love the cherished traditions of our fathers; and frankly, many of us just don't feel comfortable in Gentile surroundings—especially during meals! Yes, yes, we know God has made all things clean. We heard about the vision Peter had with the sheet from heaven and the visit to Cornelius. Wow! Does nothing stay the same? Anyway, some of us frankly feel nauseous around non-Kosher meats; it's something we know we need to work through.*

*Meanwhile, we believe God will make the most of our cultural rigidity, for there are millions of Jews who still haven't believed in Jesus the Messiah. And while we worship Him at the Temple and in the synagogues, we trust that God will give us ample opportunity to share our faith with unbelieving Jews.*

*So let the Gentiles worship Jesus as Gentiles who have been grafted into Abraham's line by faith, and we will worship Jesus as God has revealed to our forefathers—not because it is the right or best way, or even because it is more comfortable for us, but because we long to see more of our people enter God's Kingdom. God bless you brother Paul. We'll be praying for you, daily.*

With all the accusations of compromise and syncretism on the one side, and accusations of “making it hard for Muslims to enter the Kingdom” on the other, there is one critical point we must not overlook. It will certainly help resolve some of the tensions.

### **Not All Muslims are the Same**

There are many different kinds of Muslims, each positioned on their own spectrum of how near and dear Islam is to their hearts. Many Muslim countries may well contain all of the groups listed below, and many Muslim people groups will contain individual members who share a greater sense of affinity and belonging to some of these groups than they do to the mainstream of their own ethnolinguistic people.

*Nominal Muslims:* These are Muslims in name only, who only go to the mosque on *eid* (a major Islamic holiday) once or twice a year.

*Westernized Muslims:* These Muslims, often urban youth, are infatuated with Western culture and MTV. Their parents have provided well for them financially and strive to get them into good universities. They dance at discos and smoke cigarettes with their buddies. Many are eager to learn English and live abroad. Serving God is not usually a big priority to them. Some are disappointed with their religious leaders who, they believe, are living in the past and not taking advantage of all that modernity offers.

*Liberal Muslims:* These are open-minded Muslims who are not intimidated by conservative Islamic fundamentalists. They are often well-educated and financially well off. One such Muslim friend of mine in Asia is a professor of English literature. Because his father, who passed away years earlier, called himself a “Christian Muslim,” this professor's heart has always quite soft to the mention of Jesus' name. When his wife was admitted to a Catholic hospital, he took the opportunity to go into the chapel and pray to Jesus for her healing. As he genuflected before the cross, two bearded Muslim clergymen were passing by the doorway. One shouted in stern disapproval, “What are you doing?” He stood up quietly, walked over to the Muslim leaders, looked them straight in the eye and boldly demanded, “Tell me! Where in the Qur'an does it say I can't pray to Jesus?! Tell me! Where?” They walked away and never bothered him again.

*Conservative Muslims:* This devout group needs no explanation.

*Ultra-Orthodox Muslims:* Islamic reformists movements, like the *Wahhabis* (often called “The Protestants of Islam”), frown on what has become of Islam throughout much of the world today: a mix of Qur’anic observance with superstitions, sacred shrines, richly ornamented tombs, divination, omens, and excessive reverence of Muhammad.

*Modern Muslims:* These have successfully integrated Western technology with Islamic devotion and are proud to be part of a global Islamic community.

*Mystical Muslims:* Sufis and other folk Muslims, who, according to Wahhabis and conservative Muslims, are desperately in need of serious reform.

*Atheistic Muslims:* In some parts of Central Asia and other former communist lands, Islamic identity has been almost completely stripped away. They know they should call themselves “Muslim,” but that’s about it. One missionary to Kazakhs described them as never having seen a mosque or Qur’an in their entire life. Needless to say, this is a very different situation from most others in the Muslim world.

*Rice Muslims:* Some poor animistic tribes of sub-Saharan Africa or low Hindu castes of South Asia convert to Islam for material benefit or economic convenience.

**Muslim Attitudes About Islam**

This list is by no means exhaustive, but no matter how many kinds of Muslims we list, I believe they will all fit into one of three following categories when examining their attitude toward Islam.

1. *Muslims Disillusioned with Islam.* Iranian Muslims are a great example. Many saw what Khomeini did to their country under the banner of Islam and said, “If this is Islam, we want nothing to do it!” When a Persian in the West was asked what her religion was, she said with conviction, “I have no religion!” She, and many like her, are so disillusioned with Islam they do not even want to be publicly identified as Muslim.
2. *Muslims Ambivalent about Islam.* These Muslims are ignorant and apathetic about Islam. They don’t know much about Islam, and they really don’t care.
3. *Muslims Content with Islam.* These Muslims love Islam. They believe with all their heart that Islam is the only true path to God. When they look at Christianity, they see countries with the highest divorce rate in the world, where selfish ambition and materialism are at their zenith, where sexual immorality and homosexuality are accepted as commonplace, and whose economic appetites led to the colonization and exploitation of their people and national resources. They are impressed with the person of Jesus, but totally unimpressed with Christianity.

Each of these three “Muslim attitudes about Islam” (“M”) has high and low ends on the spectrum. High contentment (M9) could represent devout Muslims as well as propagators of Islam. Low contentment (M7) could represent liberal Muslims who may not be too impressed with, and perhaps even embarrassed by, the dogmatism of many Islamic leaders. Nonetheless, they are very proud to be Muslim. Most communistic and rice Muslims would probably fall somewhere on the ambivalence portion of the spectrum (M4–M6), while westernized Muslims are often found between low ambivalence and low contentment (M6–M7).

**The M1-M9 Spectrum: Muslim Attitudes About Islam**

M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9
Muslims Disillusioned with Islam			Muslims Ambivalent about Islam			Muslims Content with Islam		
Iranians			Kazakhs			Arabs, South Asians, Indonesians <sup>5</sup>		
High Dis.	Low Dis.		High Amb.	Low Amb.		Low Contentment	High Contentment	

**Different Approaches Required**

Which approach will be most effective with Muslims who are perfectly content with Islam? I believe C5 offers great promise. C4 is excellent too, but it isn’t hard to understand why Muslims who are content with Islam would much prefer to learn about Jesus from a “fellow Muslim” than they would from a non-Muslim (i.e., C1–C4). For a Muslim to enter the home of a “Christian” to learn about religious matters is akin to treason. But to enter a fellow Muslim’s home—even though a Muslim following Jesus may seem rather unusual—is much less likely to worry watchful neighbors. In fact, they may even go themselves to see what this study of the *Taurat*, *Zabur*, and *Injil* (the Bible) is all about!

Also, when the Muslim seeker after God comes home with some literature about Jesus, it is C5 literature, often printed by well-respected Muslim publishers, not by suspi-

cious-looking Christian organizations. Therefore, such literature does not need to be hidden under a mattress. Instead, it can be freely shared with family and friends.

Because the C5 believer was raised a Muslim in a Muslim family, he is worlds apart from the peculiar foreigner claiming to be “Muslim.” The C5 believer really talks like a Muslim, observes proper respect for holy books like a Muslim, washes before prayer, and eats food like a Muslim. The dietary habits of C5 believers allow Muslim guests to be at ease during meal times. In non-Muslim homes, by contrast, Muslims often need to create polite excuses to leave before meals lest they be confronted with the uncomfortable situation of being served *haram* (forbidden) foods.

The doors God has opened for C5 workers was certainly seen by one North American brother in Asia who fasted and prayed six months that God would lead him to a Muslim background believer gifted in sharing the *Injil* (Good News). After finding Rashid in a C3 work and training him in C5, John sent Rashid out to reach Muslims as a Muslim. In less than two years, Rashid started 10 fellowships—they are not called “churches.” God is using C4 in amazing ways too, and Phil Parshall has done an excellent job describing this (1980, 1983, 2000).

Which approach will be most effective with Muslims who are totally disillusioned with Islam? It will not be a pro-C4 or C5 approach! Muslims disillusioned with Islam want out! These Muslims are ripe for conversion to “Christianity” and want to be “extracted” from their Muslim communities. C1–C3 churches should, therefore, be most suitable to reach them, depending on their language and cultural preference. Ask any Persian Muslim background believer at an Iranian Christian Fellowship what he or she thinks about C4 contextualization, and you will probably get a confused look followed by the question, “Why in the world would anyone want to do that?” Iranians have experienced a very fanatical expression of Shi’ite Islam and as far as they are concerned, no Islamic forms or elements are worth retaining. To do so, from their perspective, seems rather foolish when so many Persian Muslims are trying to distance themselves from Islam.

What about Muslims who are ambivalent about Islam? What approach is best for them? Few from this group tend to come to faith in Christ because their ambivalence about Islam is often rooted in ambivalence about spiritual matters. The contented and disillusioned groups may therefore prove to be much more fertile soil for sowing God’s Word. Nonetheless, ambivalence toward Islam means they might be reached by any community of believers along the C1–C5 spectrum.

So with all the accusations of compromise and heresy up the spectrum, and accusations of hindering the flow of the gospel down the spectrum, we may be overlooking the fact that not all Muslims are the same. It should therefore come as no surprise that God is raising up many different kinds of workers who use many different approaches to reach many different kinds of Muslims. If we do not accept God’s diversity in drawing Muslims to the Savior, blessing and praying for those who do not exactly share our philosophy of ministry, we will, I believe, be playing right into Satan’s age old scheme to divide and conquer.

Denying God’s matchless diversity in drawing Muslims to Jesus damages the cause of Christ in far greater ways than merely wounding our brothers with accusations which discredit their missiological methods or theological scruples. Denial can dam-

age trust between brothers called to reach the same people. Those who do not trust each other do not generally pray together. Like a cancer, distrust can be quite contagious among coworkers. Rather than rejoice at what God is doing in so many different ways and learning from each other, we avoid sharing valuable information with those who might disapprove—to save ourselves from tiresome controversy.

I know brothers who do not feel free to share some thrilling developments in their C5 work with C3 brothers laboring among the very same people group. Because these C3 brothers have judged the C5 work as having “gone too far,” they cannot rejoice that Muslims are being reached with the Gospel and in turn spreading the Good News far and wide.

Ground-breaking works like this can be seriously jeopardized by dogmatic C3 brothers who feel it is their duty to alert the saints of what they perceive as heresy or syncretism. Add to this the issue of physical danger such news could cause responsive Muslim participants and their families, and one can begin to see the escalating cost of denying God’s diversity in drawing Muslims to himself. Surely, not all C3 believers are so dogmatic. Numerous C3–C4 workers rejoice with great pleasure over how God is blessing this C5 work, but the vigilance in security that must be taken to keep this news from our more dogmatic brothers can be uncomfortably challenging.

## Conclusion

When you hear a brother engaging in missiological gossip, discrediting another for his or her approach either up or down the C1–C5 spectrum, kindly stop him, and help him see that not all Muslims are the same. For that reason, God

does not call all his messengers to reach Muslims in the same way. As dangerous or extractionist or unsettling as an approach may seem, God will use a variety of Christ-centered approaches to reach a variety of Muslim peoples.

We must all be on our guard! For if God is anything like he has been throughout history, he will surprise us occasionally. May we all heed Paul's instruction to not judge our brothers on disputable matters for to his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand for the Lord is able to make him stand (Rom. 14). Instead, "rejoice with those who rejoice" (Rom. 12:15) and "make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (Rom. 14:19).

When you meet workers who have been called to a different point on the C1-C5 spectrum than you, encourage them. Pray for God's protection and blessing upon them, acknowledging that God will use them to reach Muslims that you will not likely reach, "for God is not willing that any should perish" (2 Pet 3:9).

## End Notes

1. All biblical quotations are from the *New International Version*, except where indicated otherwise.
2. *Proselyte of the Gate*, a well-wisher of Judaism who worshipped the God of Abraham but did not want to submit to the entire Mosaic Law, requiring, among other things, circumcision, strict dietary habits, and complete obedience to Sabbath restrictions. They were seen as "half-converts" to Judaism, and therefore could not actually call themselves "Jewish."
3. *Proselyte of Righteousness*, a circumcised Gentile who has fully converted to Judaism by complete submission to the Mosaic Law. Only these Gentile proselytes were allowed to identify themselves as "Jewish."
4. Many Muslims have been taught from childhood that to even say the word "pig" or "pork" defiles one's mouth. Because of this, its sight or smell in a non-Muslim kitchen is enough to make

many Muslim background believers nauseous.

5. The peoples suggested as representatives of these attitudes are not intended to be strictly interpreted; they are attempts to discern popular patterns among Muslim peoples at the macro-level. At the micro-level, however, we could surely find numerous Arab and South Asian Muslims who are disillusioned with or ambivalent about Islam. Still, even most non-practicing Arab and South Asian Muslims share a deep pride in Islam. They will defend it before non-Muslims, even though they may complain about it amongst themselves.

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# Should Muslims Become “Christians”?

*Issues regarding the identity of Muslim background believers are extremely critical. Our best hope for reaching the vast Muslim populations of the world, with its great variety of Muslim people groups, is to plant flourishing churches of Muslim background believers who remain culturally relevant to Muslim society.*

by Bernard Dutch

**D**uring the Gulf War in 1991, most in the country where I live considered Saddam Hussein a hero. Hearing Saddam praised was common, especially when people mistook me for an Arab. So after entering a shop one day and greeting the shopkeeper with the common Muslim “*Assalaamu alaykum*” (God’s peace be upon you), his tirade against evil Americans and praise for Saddam came as no surprise. But when I purchased my items, he looked at me more closely, then asked, “Where are you from?” Not wanting to embarrass him for having been so kind and open with “one of the enemy,” I replied, “I’m from Wisconsin.” As expected, he crinkled his forehead and asked, “Where is that? I’ve never heard of it.” I replied, “A small place near Canada.” Smiling and evidently satisfied, he bid me farewell as I left his shop.

In my encounter with this Muslim shopkeeper, I downplayed my American identity in favor of my Wisconsin identity to avoid provoking an unnecessary conflict. Consider the much more serious issues facing Muslim background believers: Should they identify themselves as Christians or Muslims? To which community do they belong? Should they feel free to articulate their identity differently in various situations? How will they gain a hearing in their own community?

## Self-Identity: A Multi-faceted Issue

Western Christians tend to place great emphasis on the self-identity of Muslim background believers. Self-identity is a major criteria differentiating several points on the “C1–C6 Spectrum” (as presented by Joshua Massey, John Travis and others in this edition of the IJFM). Some think that a Muslim background believer who continues to identify himself as “Muslim” crosses a line from contextualization to syncretism.

In my experience with Muslim background believers, their self-identity is a multi-faceted issue that defies simple explanation and often frustrates external expectations. As cultural outsiders, we often see the issue in false clarity, imposing simplistic understandings of terms and relationships. We have great expectations for young believers to “take their stand” in a society hostile to the spread of Christianity within its ranks, where the struggle for survival is more intense than we outsiders will ever understand. But for many Muslim background believers, identity is fluid, taking the most appropriate form for the situation. For instance, where Christianity has strong negative connotations, Muslim background believers may avoid a “Christian” label and identify themselves in different ways according to various perspectives and situations.

This is similar to Western Christians who may not want to be put in a “born again” box or want to be seen as “religious fanatics” by unsympathetic acquaintances. We try to distance ourselves of the negative baggage associated with the Jim Bakers, Jimmy Swaggarts, and others who have shamed the name of Christ. We disclaim association with Christian complicity in the historical realities of slavery, colonial exploitation, and paranoid witch-hunts. We, too, adjust elements of our identity to fit our situation.

Others have written about the need for multiple levels of contextualization to reach a broad spectrum of Muslims. Contextual approaches are more likely to be effective among Muslims who are content with Islam, or who face considerable social pressure, than with Muslims disillusioned with Islam. This article seeks to examine several issues of self-identity that face Muslim background believers at higher levels of contextualization. I focus on this because I believe that our best hope for reaching the vast Muslim populations of the world is to plant flourishing churches of Muslim background believers who remain culturally relevant to Muslim society.

To understand the complex issues surrounding the self-identity of Muslim