

ISFM 2012: Still an Exotic?

# Respecting Context: A Comparison of Indonesia and the Middle East

by *Richard Jameson*

*Editor's note: This is the revised version of a paper presented at the 2012 gathering of the International Society for Frontier Missiology in Chicago, Illinois.*

## *Introduction*

I've finally figured out Indonesian Islam," a Muslim background Arab Christian said to me after several months in Indonesia. "Those first Muslim evangelists came on ships. I think they spent too much time on the deck out in the sun and heat stroke made them a little bit crazy. So when they got to Indonesia they taught a crazy kind of Islam."

By the time my friend arrived, there was already in Indonesia a growing community of believers who continued to identify as Muslims. He would argue constantly with his fellow Christ followers; their on-going identification with their Indonesian Muslim community never made any sense to him. Yet one day this Christian Arab brother said to me, "I love you like a father, but you will never understand me and the struggles I face as a Muslim background believer like Ahmed (a Muslim Christ follower)." The common struggles felt by believers from a Muslim background seemed to trump their differences over identity and mission strategy.

I spent many years in Indonesia as a theological lecturer. More recently I have had increasing involvement with Muslim background believers from the Arab world. The move from the Southeast fringe of the Muslim world to Islam's heartland is helping me understand some distinct differences as well as some commonalities between forms of Islam and the emerging communities of faith in these two regions.

## *Indonesia: Hindu/Buddhist Foundations*

Much of Indonesia was under the control of large Hindu and Buddhist empires for over a thousand years. The last and greatest of these Hindu empires (the Majapahit) reached its peak of influence in the fourteenth century. Many Hindus recognize a supreme deity but continue to honor a myriad of lesser deities. As Islam became the predominant religion from the

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fourteenth century onward, this Hindu thinking seems to have been absorbed into local Islam.

Indonesian Muslims believe in one God (and readily affirm *la ilaha ilallah* “there is no God but God”). And yet, particularly in the rural areas, many still see the need to honor local deities as well—with little sense of inconsistency. For example, Muslim farmers will seek the favor of Dewi Sri (goddess of agriculture) to insure a good harvest, and Muslim fishermen will make offerings to Nyi Roro Kidul, goddess of the south sea. Syncretism of this sort, if it exists in Middle Eastern Islam at all, is certainly much better hidden. In many ways, Arab Muslim culture developed in response to Muhammad’s teaching (to tribes who had taken polytheism to an extreme) concerning the importance of worshiping only one God. So for Arabs, especially Muslims, anything that in any way hints of polytheism is avoided with disgust.

### Worldview

It has been said that all worldviews are built around three couplets: power/fear, honor/shame, and innocence/guilt. Every person and every culture is some blend of all three, but generally one dominates. To illustrate the difference between these worldviews, imagine three people having fun at a crowded beach. They’re out in the water, splashing around in the waves, when suddenly the lifeguard starts blowing his whistle. One person immediately stands up and begins to scan the waves for a shark, backing out of the water as he does. A second person stands up and looks to see why the lifeguard is blowing the whistle. The third person simply pretends not to hear the whistle at all.

The first person represents the power/fear couplet. Upon hearing the whistle his first instinct is to assume danger, and so right away he begins looking for the shark while making his way out of the water. The second person

represents the guilt/innocence couplet. Upon hearing the whistle he immediately looks at the lifeguard to make sure he hadn’t done anything wrong. The third person represents the honor/shame couplet. He ignores the whistle and keeps on swimming, reasoning that if he’s not caught, it’s not wrong.

Although the power/fear and honor/shame couplets are both active in South-east Asia and the Arab world, it seems to me that power/fear tends to predominate in Southeast Asia, whereas honor/shame is much stronger in the Arab world.

### Harmony

Harmony is one of the highest values in many Southeast Asian cultures.<sup>1</sup> For



some Southeast Asian peoples, emotion is something to be controlled and kept hidden. Much can bubble under the surface as long as outward harmony is maintained. As a result, Islam in Indonesia seems to be able to tolerate a tremendous amount of theological heterodoxy as long as everything appears harmonious.

By contrast, Arabs love to argue. The well-known proverb, “Me against my brothers, me and my brothers against my cousins, me and my cousins against the world” rings true for most of my Arab friends. However, in the Arab world, emotions seem to flare up and die down quickly. My wife and I were walking through the market in Damascus

and had to move around a crowd watching two men yell at and push each other. A few minutes later, we walked back through the market and saw the same two men sitting drinking coffee together like the best of friends.

### Language

The Indonesian language tends to reserve one set of terms for the realm of God and another for the created world, often with only very slight differences between them. For example, the Indonesian word *tuan* could be translated ‘sir’ or ‘mister,’ whereas *Tuhan* is used for God alone. *Bapak* is term for a respected senior male while *Bapa* refers more exclusively to God (it is used to translate the Greek *pater* in the New Testament in reference to our Creator). In light of the recent furor over Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT), it is interesting that Indonesian Christians have never used the unique term for one’s biological father ‘ayah’ to refer to God as Father.<sup>2</sup>

In Indonesia, the Muslim and Christian communities both draw their religious vocabulary almost entirely from Arabic. For many Muslims, Arabic is almost a magic language. Healers use Arabic quotes from the Qur’an rinsed off into water to make healing potions. Religious phrases in Arabic can be found in all places where spirits are known to inhabit. Understanding the meaning of the Arabic is much less important than pronouncing it correctly. Many Indonesians tend toward mystical and allegorical interpretations, so when Christ-followers from a Muslim background propose interpretations of Qur’anic texts that differ from orthodox Islamic interpretations, other Indonesian Muslims are often quite open and interested.<sup>3</sup>

In the Arab world, people seem to be proud that they speak the language of God. And Orthodox Islamic interpretations tend to be much more important. Most of my Arab Muslim Background friends will not even entertain an

interpretation of the Qur'an that differs from what might be found in the standard Islamic commentaries.

### *Walled Cities or Open Villages: Sharp Divisions vs. Blurred Edges*

The ancient walled cities of the Arab world stand in stark contrast to the open agricultural villages of Indonesia, providing a fitting metaphor for another distinction between the regions. Like a walled city, my Arab Christian friends tend to accentuate the difference between Christianity and Islam, religious forms and vocabulary forming a defensive barrier by which the religion is protected. In Indonesia the boundaries are sometimes less clear, much like a rural village that just fades into the surrounding rice fields.

A prominent Muslim intellectual in Indonesia married a woman from a Christian ethnic group and was willing to have his wife raise their children as Christians. This man continued to be a highly respected Muslim professor throughout his entire career. It is hard to imagine this happening in most of the Arab world.

The Indonesian national director of a major Christian ministry considered it quite a joke that the government had issued him an identity card that identified his religion as Islam but his profession as an evangelist. In a similar situation, I would expect an Arab Christian to be outraged and demand a new identity card.

A prominent Muslim background Christian runs a theological school in a large city. He has developed a partnership with major Islamic institutions whereby he teaches Christianity in their schools and local Islamic scholars teach Islam in his school.

There are Bible clubs at some of the major Islamic Training Schools in Indonesia in which students gather to study the Bible together. A lecturer at an Indonesian Christian seminary, after being invited to speak to one

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of these clubs, reported to me with amazement how much of the gospel these students had fully understood through their study of the Scriptures.

In reaction to what have been described as “insider movements,” a friend of mine who has spent his entire missionary career in the Arab world wrote a list of nine crucial questions and his answers to each one. As you will see, the answers to these questions are designed to present a sharp contrast between those who would identify themselves as Christians and the surrounding Muslim community.<sup>4</sup>

1. *Is Allah, as identified by Muslims, the same God as YHWH, identified by Jews and Christians from their Scriptures?*

No! The ascribed attributes of Allah and YHWH depart at the level of His covenantal nature and are illuminated in the “names of God” that further manifest His character.

2. *Is Mohammad a Prophet?*

No! My response to any other person claiming to be such since the time frame of the Apostolic era, with the Canon of Scripture established soon thereafter, would be the same. “Prophets,” are those who received revelation from God, and their message remains trans-cultural and is not time limited.

3. *Is the Qur'an a book to be considered as part of “Holy Scripture,” which includes both the Old and New Testaments?*

No! It cannot be considered as delivered from heaven directly from God. The progress of divine written revelation as defined by Scripture is fully complete with the Old and New Testament canons established.

4. *Is the Isa of the Qur'an the same as the Jesus of the Injil (Gospel) acknowledged by Muslims as a “Holy Book”?*

No! Some, but certainly not all, references to Jesus in the Qur'an are accurate. “The final—book closed—identification of Jesus' in Islam falls far short of identifying both who He is or what He accomplished.

5. *Is Ishmael equally a recipient of “the divine promise” so clearly given to Isaac from Abraham?*

No! Scripture remains clear concerning the unique role of Isaac as related to the Messiah and the future Kingdom of God. Ishmael is honored as an elder son of Abraham by a cultural promise of great significance.

6. *Is the Kingdom of God, as spoken of in Scripture, able to expand its boundaries to include Muslims seeking God and acknowledging Jesus as a Prophet?*

No. Kingdom citizenship comes by “spiritual birth.” Spiritual birth comes by arriving at the conclusion that the Jesus of the Bible is the one to be received as both Lord and Savior.

7. *Do “mosques” (jamaat) qualify as “church” in New Testament terms?*

No! As a place of worship both the forms of worship and their meaning are not adequate. As a place of “fellowship” they only satisfy the generic meaning of the word and do not rise to “body life” concepts associated with biblical community definition. They certainly do not fit the universal concept of “Church” as the “body of Christ.”

8. *Can baptism be relegated to non-essential for true Muslim followers of Jesus?*

No! Baptism is a clear cultural marker not to be ignored. It identifies the follower of Jesus with His death, burial and resurrection

and it identifies the follower with the universal “Body of Christ.” It is a declaration of one’s cultural allegiance to Jesus as Lord and Savior and the Kingdom of God as our primary citizenship.

9. *Can Messianic Fellowships of Jewish believers be equated with Jesus Muslim fellowships?*

No, the experience of the Jew who accepts the Old Testament as we have is entirely different than the Muslim seeker who considers the Old and New Testaments as corrupted.

Many from Southeast Asia would ask a different set of questions, all based on the same themes, but that blur the differences.

1. *Is there enough truth about Allah as identified by Muslims to use this truth as a starting point in leading a Muslim to a full knowledge of the God of the Bible?*

Yes! All of the 99 beautiful names of Allah, at least conceptually, are found in the Old and New Testaments. Although the understanding of these names may differ, there is enough similarity to engage in rich and fruitful dialogue with our Muslim friends and neighbors about the nature and character of God.

2. *Can a growing disciple of Christ have a positive and respectful attitude towards Mohammad?*

Yes! We have seen many Muslims come into the kingdom who have lowered Mohammad from his exalted position within their religion of birth while keeping a positive respectful attitude towards him.

3. *Can a growing disciple of Christ maintain a positive and respectful attitude towards the Qur’an?*

Yes! Many have come to Christ by following the road signs found within the Qur’an. These signs have pointed people to the Bible and to the Jesus revealed therein.

Muslims who come to Christ through this route tend to maintain a high respect for the truth found in the Qur’an.

4. *Is there enough truth about Isa in the Qur’an for it to serve as a point of departure in leading Muslims to the fuller knowledge of Jesus as revealed in the Bible?*

Yes! The Qur’an contains an amazing amount of true information about Jesus. This information has proven to be a wonderful starting point in reaching Muslims with the gospel.

5. *Are the descendants of Ishmael recipients of some unique promises from God?*

Yes! Apart from the promise of covenantal blessing for all peoples,



which is only through Jesus, all of the promises to Isaac are echoed with similar promises to Ishmael. Isaiah 60 and other passages make it clear that these promises are still in effect as far as Ishmael’s descendants are concerned.

6. *Is the Kingdom of God, as spoken of in Scripture, able to expand its boundaries to include Muslims who through repentance put their faith in Jesus as their crucified and resurrected Lord?*

Yes! Our heavenly Father accepts people from every tribe, nation, people, language, and religion who put their faith in Jesus who died for their sins.

7. *Can a true follower of Christ worship God anywhere as long as his heart is right?*

Yes! As Jesus told the Samaritan woman, it’s not the *place* of worship that matters; God is seeking worshipers who will worship him in Spirit and truth... Worship and fellowship are not dependent upon the building in which they occur; they are dependent solely upon the hearts of those gathering in the name of Jesus as members of his body.

8. *Should followers of Christ from a Muslim background be free to baptize in such a way that baptism does not communicate betrayal of one’s people?*

Yes! If given the opportunity, those from a Muslim background are very creative in developing baptismal forms that communicate the biblical meaning of baptism without unnecessarily insulting their families or their cultures.

9. *Are there striking parallels between the Muslim and Jewish communities that have given rise to similar expressions of faith from within both communities?*

Yes! Uncompromising monotheism, holistic integration of religion into every aspect of life,<sup>5</sup> salvation by works, rejection of atonement through Christ, rejection of Christian interpretation of their “book,” are just a few of the parallels.

### **Perceptions concerning Christianity**

Southeast Asia and the Middle East have had very different histories vis-à-vis Christianity. In the Arab world, Christianity pre-dated Islam. In the Middle East and Egypt, the descendants of historic Christianity are still considered “people of the book.” They are looked down on as those who have not, yet, realized that Islam has replaced Christianity, yet they are respected in their dhimmi status as people of the book.

Western Christianity continues to be associated with the Crusades. Western colonialism, Western uncritical support for Israel, and the more recent US intervention in Arab politics and nations are considered contemporary examples of the crusader spirit.

Southeast Asia, on the other hand, lacks the perspective of an historic Christianity that predates Islam. Much of western Indonesia had embraced Islam before Christianity was introduced through Dutch colonialism. Historically, Christian missionary effort in Indonesia focused on tribals and, apart from the Batak people of Sumatera, on the eastern portion of the archipelago. The Dutch, in order to protect their economic interests, severely limited Christian mission to Muslim peoples.

At the same time, Islamic identity became fused with ethnic identity as a hedge against Dutch influence. As a result, all aspects of religious life—even those practices rooted in ancient animism or Hinduism—were redefined as being part of the local Islamic expression of faith.

The history of Dutch colonialism is seen in much the same way Arabs view the Crusades. The Dutch brought large numbers of Chinese to Indonesia to manage their economic interests. Even today, Chinese control much of the Indonesian economy. The rapidly growing Indonesian Chinese church—considered foreign and Western by most Indonesian Muslims—has deepened the resentment towards Western Christianity. Globalization, the Internet, and Hollywood have created an additional negative stereotype of western Christianity as essentially violent and immoral in the minds of many Muslims. Thus in the Arab world and Indonesia alike, a deep resentment towards Western Christianity continues.

For the most part, Indonesia lacks the kind of indigenous expression of Christian faith present in the Arab

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world. As a result, the contextual expressions of faith found among Muslim background believers in Indonesia exhibit remarkable diversity. Several years ago an Indonesian Muslim background believer encountered Syrian Orthodoxy during a visit to the Middle East. He resonated so deeply with this particular tradition that he began planting Syrian Orthodox churches as a contextual expression of Christian faith for believers from a Muslim background; indeed, virtually every contextual expression found anywhere in the literature exists somewhere in Indonesia, and many of these approaches are bearing fruit.

### *Divergent Paths to Christ*

Islam portrays itself as the perfect, logical religion. Over a billion people are locked into this religious system. As many missiologists have observed, the following four factors are eroding the monolithic hegemony of the Islamic religion; I will touch on each one briefly.

#### **Muslim-on-Muslim Violence**

Wherever Muslims have been killing Muslims, a segment of the Muslim population has grown unhappy with Islam. Muslims have bombed mosques in Iraq. Muslims have attacked Muslim funeral services in Pakistan. Muslims are currently engaged in a tragic civil war in Syria. As a result, a portion of the population begins to think, “If this is Islam, I don’t want to have anything to do with it.”

#### **Arab Oppression of Ethnic Minorities**

A specialized form of Muslim-on-Muslim violence has been seen in ethnic oppression by Muslim majority governments. On March 16, 1988 Saddam Hussein ordered his military

to attack the Kurdish town of Halabja with poison gas. Perhaps as many as 5000 people died immediately and thousands more later died of their injuries. The Kurdish people have been oppressed by Muslim governments in surrounding countries as well. Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria have all oppressed their Kurdish minority populations. Among a segment of the population, this has resulted in hatred towards Islam and openness to the gospel. Oppression of ethnic minorities in North Africa has resulted in similar openness to the gospel.

#### **Fundamentalist Resurgence in a Secularized Muslim Society**

When Islamic fundamentalism was imposed on people who had grown accustomed to the liberal secular policies of the Shah of Iran, a significant segment of the population became disenchanted with Islam. This provided an opportunity for the gospel that has resulted in tens of thousands of Iranians coming to Christ.

#### **Personal Issues**

Rashid was raised in a very conservative Islamic home. As a boy he would often ask his imam questions about aspects of Islamic theology that troubled him and consistently the answer would be the same—one should not ask such questions. Eventually Rashid became so frustrated with Islam that he became a secular Muslim.

Rahmat was naturally left-handed. As a small child, his parents would tie his left hand behind his back so that he would not use his “unclean” hand in inappropriate ways. This left Rahmat feeling that his religion made him a second-class citizen.

Relationships are a major factor for both men and women, but especially women. The intolerance of the Muslim community when one of its members

converts or falls in love with a Christian can lead to a growing dissatisfaction with one's religion of birth.

Discontentment with Islam often leaves people with a spiritual void. Many are longing for something to fill the hole left behind when they found Islam inadequate to meet their needs. At such times some encounter Jesus. Sometimes it is through dreams, visions, or some miraculous event; other times it is through the Scriptures and friendship with true followers of Christ. Tens of thousands of these marginalized and discontented Muslims, in both the Arab world and Southeast Asia, have converted to Christianity in the last thirty years.

### Christ-centered Interpretation of the Qur'an (a Fifth Path)

In Southeast Asia,<sup>6</sup> however, we are seeing a growing number of people come to Christ *through* elements of Islam rather than in reaction *against* Islam. This fifth path to Christ primarily occurs among those open to non-traditional interpretations of the Qur'an. Sometimes through their own reading of the Qur'an or sometimes through the testimonies of other followers of Christ, these Muslims have discovered the testimony about Jesus within the Qur'an. The message they have received through Mohammed has directed them to read and study the New Testament (*Injil*). This in turn has led these Muslims to a personal encounter with the living Jesus.

Some from this community of faith in Christ have retained their Muslim identity. Rather than converting to Christianity, these believers consider themselves to be Muslim followers of Christ. They recognize themselves to be a different kind of Muslim. While their core identity is now found in Christ, their collective identity is still found within the broader Muslim community. Because of the way they dress and talk, and their continued respect for the pillars of Islam and for the school of Islamic jurisprudence common in their part of the world, they have retained their Muslim identity within their communities.

These divergent paths to Jesus have led to very different kinds of Christ followers from a Muslim background. In the Arab world, nearly all such believers have converted to Christianity. The same would be true for many in Southeast Asia. However, in parts of Indonesia especially, there is a growing phenomenon of "In Christ" Muslims (or Muslim Christ Followers).<sup>7</sup> Some striking similarities exist between these two groups, which I will briefly note below.

### Commonalities between the Two Muslim-background Believing Communities

As men and women have come to Jesus along these two divergent paths, I have observed similarities among them. For



example, believers from both groups are whole-heartedly committed to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of their lives. Both groups are committed to the Scriptures and use the New Testament as their primary book for discipleship. Both evidence the fruit of the Spirit in their daily lives. In both groups, the Holy Spirit is confirming their radical message about Jesus through signs and wonders. Both show evidence of being full of the Spirit and wisdom, and are committed to seeing their people freed from the spiritual bondage experienced in Satan's kingdom. Many from both groups would identify themselves as being culturally Muslim. And both have a primary identification with all true followers of Christ from all nations and languages.

### Differences between the Two Muslim-background Believing Communities

Despite these similarities, there are some marked differences between the two communities. For the most part, Muslim background converts to Christianity have come to Christ in spite of, or in reaction against, Islam. "In Christ" Muslims have come to Christ through what they perceive to be the testimony of the Qur'an. Some of the differences these two disparate routes to Christ have produced are as follows.<sup>8</sup>

*Religious Identification*—Muslim background converts tend to identify with the broader community of people who call themselves "Christian" and would readily think of themselves by this name. On the other hand, "In Christ" Muslims retain the worldwide Islamic community as their broader religious community, not Christendom. They would identify themselves as Muslims. Many don't like the term "Muslim background" since to them it seems to imply that they quit being Muslims when they became followers of Christ. Within their communities they seem to be viewed as a new sect of Islam.

*Interpretation of the Qur'an*—Converts to Christianity believe that the traditional Islamic interpretation of Qur'anic verses concerning the person and work of Christ is the only appropriate interpretation. This interpretation consistently contradicts the message of the New Testament. Thus converts tend to see minimal common ground between the Qur'an and the New Testament. On the other hand, "In Christ" Muslims believe that Yunus 10:94 teaches that the books that came before the Qur'an should provide the primary lens through which to interpret the Qur'an.<sup>9</sup> And when the Bible becomes the lens through which the Qur'an is evaluated and interpreted, a radically different understanding of its teaching emerges. Thus "In Christ" Muslims find considerable common ground between the New Testament and the Qur'an.

*Deception or Signposts*—Converts to Christianity feel deceived by Islam. The entire religion is thought to be deceptive and controlled by the father of lies<sup>10</sup> (Surah 3:54). They want to rescue their people from this deception. For them, Islam is like a burning building—people need to be rescued from the fire before they perish. By contrast, Muslim followers of Christ are grieved that their people can't see in the Qur'an the signposts that point to Jesus and the Gospels. They recognize that Islamic traditions have masked these signposts and are committed to helping other Muslims discover and follow these signposts to Jesus.

*Humor or Honor*—While converts to Christianity may be offended when non-Muslims criticize Islam, among themselves they feel free to joke about Muhammad, the Qur'an, and other aspects of their former faith. For them, the Islamic confession of faith is blasphemous and could never be said by a true follower of Christ. By contrast, Muslim followers of Christ maintain a respect for Mohammed and the Qur'an, having come to Christ through what they understood to be its testimony. Some may even confess that there is no God but God and that Mohammed is a messenger from God because, from their perspective, God sent Mohammed to them as a messenger to direct them to Jesus. In actual practice, however, Mohammed fades into insignificance as Jesus assumes his rightful place in their lives as King of kings and Lord of lords.

*Method of Evangelism*—Both converts to Christianity and Muslim followers of Christ are committed to evangelizing their own people. For both, the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers and signs and wonders play a significant role leading others into a personal relationship with Jesus. However, converts tend to prefer a polemic approach to evangelism. Before they came to Christ, they grew indifferent to or sometimes

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opposed to Islam. Thus for converts, initial evangelism is often geared toward revealing all that is bad within their former religion. Once a person agrees that Islam is bad or inadequate, they will be open to the Gospel. By contrast, Muslim Christ followers use the Qur'an in conjunction with prayer, meeting social needs, and personal testimony when engaging in evangelism. For them the Bible has become the standard for interpreting the Qur'an and the filter through which they determine what is from God and what is not. As a result they have come to a new understanding of what the Qur'an and Islamic traditions teach about Jesus. The common ground that they find between the Bible and the Qur'an provides the bridge for their outreach to their communities.

*Religious Vocabulary*—Converts to Christianity tend to prefer Christian vocabulary. They have embraced the standard translations of the Scriptures used by the Christian communities in their regions. Often they oppose the idea of having more than one translation in their language. This community is often the most vocal in speaking against Muslim Idiom Translations. When speaking of Jesus, some do not want to use Isa, the name found in the Qur'an. In a few cases converts will take a "Christian" name at baptism to replace their "Muslim" name. By contrast, Muslim followers of Christ continue to use exclusively Islamic religious vocabulary and names. They are strong advocates for some of the newer translations of the Scripture that preserve the vocabulary from their Islamic background and attempt to interpret for the reader difficult theological concepts such as "Son of God."<sup>11</sup>

*Pillars of Islam*—Converts to Christianity consider the forms of Islam to be

a source of bondage, one from which they have been set free. One friend of mine related that after twenty years as a Christian he was invited to join some Muslim followers of Christ in their prayers at the mosque. Immediately he felt the oppressive heaviness of legalism on his shoulders. By contrast, some Muslim followers of Christ find the prayers and fasting within Islam to be a joyous response to the love of God poured out for their sakes through Christ. For some, these religious forms allow them to continue to identify with their communities and a platform from which to share the good news about Jesus. For others who rarely practiced the pillars of Islam before coming to Christ—or come from communities where they are rarely practiced—their ethnicity and on-going engagement with the community is enough for them to retain a "Muslim" social identity and maintain the natural relationships along which the gospel flows.

*Attitudes towards One another*—Finally, converts to Christianity have often paid a high price to follow Christ. Their decision to convert to Christianity has often meant interrogations, torture, social ostracism, imprisonment, loss of family, and sometimes loss of country. For many converts, only fear would motivate one to maintain one's identity within Islam. These converts feel that Muslim followers of Christ are compromising their faith and "pretending" to be Muslims in order to avoid persecution. On the other hand, Muslim followers of Christ find converts to Christianity very difficult to understand. They ask, "Why would one turn one's back on one's culture, people and religion to become a Christian?" For them, converts to Christianity have burned their bridges and lost their most natural means for reaching their own people with the gospel.

## Conclusion

The Arab world and Southeast Asia provide dramatically different contexts for ministry. The former might be characterized by expansive deserts dotted with small oases of vegetation, the latter by lush jungles and lavish agriculture—brown versus green. Patrick Johnstone lists Indonesia as having more Muslim background believers than any other country in the world.<sup>12</sup> On the island of Java in particular, tens of thousands of Muslims have come to Christ through a myriad of different evangelistic approaches. The fertility of the spiritual soil in Indonesia has produced a bountiful and varied crop. While the vast majority of Muslim background followers in Christ can be found scattered throughout Indonesian churches, the phenomenon of “In Christ” Muslims is growing particularly among the traditionally resistant Muslim peoples of the country. Indeed, divergent contexts have given birth to very different types of followers of Christ from a Muslim background.

How should we respond in the West? Should we choose sides? Should we line up behind one community or the other? Should we defend those with whom we most agree and attack those with whom we tend to disagree? Or can we come together as the body of Christ, rejoicing in all that the Lord is doing to draw Muslims to Himself? Can we recognize that our God is amazingly creative in the ways that he calls Muslims to saving faith in Christ? Can we walk along side these Muslim background brothers and sisters from across the contextual spectrum, encouraging them in their faith and calling them to greater faithfulness and obedience as we ourselves work towards the same in our own lives? I pray that we can. **IJFM**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Southeast Asia includes hundreds of different cultures, many of which share similar traits. Harmony is a particularly strong value for those native to the island of

Java (about one-half of Indonesia’s population). Ethnic groups in parts of Sumatera and the Malay Peninsula would not value it as highly.

<sup>2</sup> To be fair, it appears that the term *bapa* has evolved over time to become a term primarily used for God in contemporary Indonesian. Older translations of the Bible use the three terms, *bapa*, *bapak*, and *ayah* interchangeably to refer to one’s biological father. Only *Bapa*, however, is used for God.

<sup>3</sup> Irrespective of the recent Pew research that showed that only 24% of Southeast Asian Muslims regard Sufis as Muslims, Indonesian colleagues often mention Sufi mysticism as a key influence, especially with regard to interpretations. Muslims study medieval Sufi-influenced commentaries in their religious schools. Sufi teachings have led some religious scholars to positively consider the deity of Christ. Some ethnographers have also used the influence of Sufi mysticism to explain how traditional religious beliefs could be integrated into “normative” Islam in Indonesia.

<sup>4</sup> *The Role of the Academy in Missiological Formation*, Dr. J. Raymond Tallman, March 11, 2010, Academic Convocation, Golden Gate Theological Seminary

<sup>5</sup> This is particularly true for practicing Jews and Muslims.

<sup>6</sup> This phenomenon is not unique to Southeast Asia. It is being observed throughout the Muslim world, predominantly but not exclusively in areas where Arabic is not the first language of the local population.

<sup>7</sup> It is hard to know how to refer to these brothers. Do we emphasize their core identity or their collective identity? In this paper I sometimes refer to them as “In Christ” Muslims, emphasizing their core identity. In other places I emphasize their collective identity and refer to them as Muslim Christ Followers. The two terms are somewhat interchangeable in that they emphasize different aspects on the same group of growing disciples.

<sup>8</sup> In order to illustrate the differences between these two groups I run the risk of stereotyping individuals. I am presenting general profiles for the two groups. However, any given individual may not fit the profile for his group on one or more of these items.

<sup>9</sup> “If thou wert in doubt as to what We have revealed unto thee, then ask those who have been reading the Book from before thee: the Truth hath indeed come to thee from thy Lord: so be in nowise of those in doubt.” (Yusuf Ali Translation)

<sup>10</sup> The following Qur’anic verse is often quoted: “But they (the Jews) were deceptive, and Allah was deceptive, for Allah is the best of deceivers” (*Wamakaroo wamakara Allahu waAllahu khayru al-makireena!*) S. 3:54. This does not seem to be orthodox Islamic interpretation of this verse, however. I’ve never seen a Muslim translate this verse in this way. Yusuf Ali translates the same verse “And (the unbelievers) plotted and planned, and Allah too planned, and the best of planners is Allah.”

<sup>11</sup> This is currently one of the most controversial aspects of these movements. Muslim background followers of Christ are coming to their theological consultants and saying, “The way this is currently literally translated it means to us in our language that the Father God engaged in sex with a mother god and produced a child god. Is that what is intended?” When the theological consultant says, “No,” the local believers are asking, “So then what does it mean?” They are then pleading for a meaning-based paraphrase instead of a literal translation this phrase.

<sup>12</sup> Johnstone, Patrick, *The Future of the Global Church: History, Trends and Possibilities* (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2011), p. 78.