

# Heart Allegiance and Negotiated Identity

by Eric Adams

*Abdullah decided to follow Jesus as Lord. His wife, father, mother, neighbours and friends were angry with him and treated him as an apostate, threatening to kill him if he continued in this way. Under extreme pressure he fled to a European country to find freedom to live as a Christian.*

**W**e've all heard similar stories. And for the average Western Christian, the ending to this one represents a reasonable solution to a tense situation. What's more, we value what we view as the bottom line: a believer has been given freedom to worship Jesus. Yet associated with this sequence of events are some tragic, often overlooked, consequences:

- The new believer is now perceived as a traitor, having betrayed his faith and people.
- He has been ripped out of his network of family and friends, essentially committing cultural and social suicide in order to follow Jesus.
- The best, culturally informed witness to Jesus has been removed from that Muslim community.
- The wrong messages are being reinforced, namely that becoming a Christian means joining a foreign culture (government) or that foreigners are luring the community's loved ones from the true *Ummah* (Muslim community of faith).
- Sadder still, while the foreign church receiving this believer is delighted to have a "Muslim convert" (and will perhaps even give him the opportunity to share his testimony repeatedly), the "convert" will rarely find wholehearted acceptance in that church. More likely, he will experience the same suspicion and mistrust on the part of the Christian community as Paul did after his conversion on the Damascus road.

Many believers go through this *extraction experience* for the sake of their new faith. A few make a successful transition and establish a new life in a new culture with a new identity. Unfortunately, many more suffer the loss of family, cultural identity and community, an experience that sometimes leaves deep psychological wounds.

Is extraction the only option for new believers from a Muslim culture? Are there ways for new believers to integrate their identity in Christ within their cultural and family identities, even in Muslim societies?

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### *A Three-Tier Model of Identity*

There are models that convince me that extraction does not have to be the only option, and is even unnecessary in many cases. I have seen believers from Muslim backgrounds remain within their communities and retain their cultural identities while giving vibrant testimony to their new found faith in Jesus to those around them.

I recently came across a framework that defines the issues that Muslims struggle with as they come to faith in Christ. This three-tier model of identity is based on the parallel research of Tim Green<sup>1</sup> and Kathryn Kraft.<sup>2</sup> I will give a synopsis of this model, and describe some ways that I have observed it being lived out.

According to Green and Kraft, each person's identity can be viewed on three levels:

- *Core Identity:* This includes a person's heart level beliefs, values and worldview, all of which give meaning and direction to life. Put another way, it encompasses a person's "heart allegiances," where she seeks her worth, where she puts her trust, where she spends her time and resources. These can include family, career, status or wealth; or on a darker side, addictions or other "idols" she serves.
- *Social Identity:* This includes the many roles lived out within the various social circles to which a person belongs. He is a husband, a son, an uncle; he is a soldier, accountant, teacher, carpenter, pilot, student, etc. Each person also fills or is known by informal roles in his community: elder, gossip, good neighbour, confidant, volunteer, delinquent, etc.
- *Collective Identity:* This encompasses the labels given by groups with whom the person is associated. Commonly the person does not have an option not to bear the label. For example one might be Asian, White, British, Muslim, Pashtun, or from a certain class or

segment of society, etc. One can be born into such labels, or receive them at different stages in life, but once received they do not usually change quickly over the course of a lifetime. For example, a Korean born in America who maintains strong ties to a Korean community, or prefers a Korean lifestyle, can be perceived and labelled as Korean all their life despite their American citizenship.

What insights does this model give us for understanding the choices Muslims have when they choose to follow Jesus as Lord?

I recently attended an event that featured a diverse, multinational panel



of people who were all born into a Muslim family and had chosen to follow Jesus. To a person, all of them had shifted their core identity to that of someone who follows Jesus as Lord. They shared how the change in heart allegiance compelled them to seek changes in their social and collective identities. Their stories differed greatly. Some had made tragic choices, while others had successfully negotiated these transitions.

It has become increasingly common for Muslims to be drawn to the Jesus of the Bible, often through a combination of power encounters, truth encounters,<sup>3</sup> and knowing a Christian who lives out the teachings of Jesus in a compelling

way.<sup>4</sup> These experiences often precipitate a crisis of conviction through which such Muslims shift their core allegiance to Jesus and begin to follow him as Lord. Sometimes this is a quick process, other times it takes years to develop the courage and resolve to act on this deep core identity shift.

New believers commonly change their convictions at a core identity level to be consistent with their faith in Jesus, while their social and collective identities remain the same. As a result, they experience great psychological and relational dissonance. This dissonance pushes them to search for resolution.

One option is to hide their new allegiance from friends, family and community. However, failure to acknowledge this shift in core identity usually causes deep internal crisis. This inner turmoil can lead some to deny Jesus and turn away from him, choosing instead to "become Muslim" again.

Another option for those seeking resolution is to reject their social and collective identities. When they remain at home this rejection may manifest itself in various ways. They may call themselves a "Christian," indicating that their allegiance is with a community other than that of their family or close friends. They may stop taking part in community activities (religious or cultural) or start new behaviours (how they worship or dress or eat). Naturally, their family and friends will be confused or concerned for them. Regarded as "infidels," they will suffer social ostracism and persecution

Others who reject their social and collective identities may choose to flee to a community that allows them to maintain their new core identity. This results in the extraction profile illustrated in the story at the beginning of this article. While such a choice can result in deep psychological scarring due to the losses involved, some are able to make a home in this new identity and culture. As noted above,

many find this choice too traumatic and decide to return to their former culture, renounce their faith, and become Muslim again. A few are even able to mature in their new faith in a foreign culture, gain a vision to reach their own people, and then return to their home country to attempt to rebuild bridges to family and friends, while continuing in their faith and identity in Jesus.

Today there is a renewed interest in exploring options for new believers to integrate a core identity of allegiance to Jesus within their existing social and collective identities. What follows are just a few illustrative case studies of how individuals have successfully communicated their new conviction of faith within their existing relational networks.

### ***Negotiating Identity: Some Examples***

Let us consider a few true stories (with names changed due to security concerns) of some difficult but ultimately more satisfying journeys.

#### **A Common Pilgrimage**

*Foreign Christians living in a Muslim community meet Muslims who want to know more about Jesus. Rather than work with these seekers individually, in isolation from their natural networks of family and friendships, the foreigners ask them to draw in their family and friends who might also be interested in knowing about Jesus so they can explore who Jesus is together. Gospel truths are discussed and processed within these natural relational networks and they begin to transform this subset of the community.<sup>5</sup> As the members of this network decide to submit to Jesus and enter the Kingdom of God together, they maintain their pre-existing trust relationships. Even as they have been on their journey toward faith in Jesus, they have already begun to function as a community and to develop a new sense of identity on several levels.<sup>6</sup>*

In this example, seekers share their exploratory journey towards Jesus

**T***here's a renewed interest in exploring how new believers can integrate a core identity of allegiance to Jesus within their existing collective identities.*

together and process their reactions to the claims and person of Jesus as a community. When, as a group, they decide to shift allegiance to Jesus, their relationships and community are retained, but their social identity with each other changes. With trust relationships intact, they follow Jesus together and function, in essence, as an *oikos*, or house-church. Many non-believing friends and family eventually accept them as “followers of Jesus” (largely because of the witness of their lives) and do not reject them as infidels. From the strength of community and demonstration of redeemed relationships among themselves, they attract others from the surrounding Muslim society to also follow Jesus.

When a new believer is encouraged to live out his changed heart within his network of family and friends, the transformation process, while it may seem slow, can be long-lasting and its impact profound, as in the next account.

#### **Salt and Light**

*Rauf, after learning about Jesus and developing a desire to follow him, became friends with several belonging to an Isai Jamaat (fellowship of Jesus' people). The new friends asked him to not seek to leave town, but to return to his family and be “salt and light” to them in order to demonstrate his transformed heart and win them too to faith in Jesus. This he did faithfully. By God's grace, after a few years, first his brother, then his sister, and then his parents also embraced Jesus. They chose to all be baptized at one time, and would meet with other believing families and friendship groups nearby. This community of networked families is able to withstand persecution and even thrive in the midst of it. In fact, their perseverance has become a significant witness to the surrounding Muslim community.<sup>7</sup>*

In this example (in which foreigners played no part), the new believer was encouraged to communicate with family his new allegiance to Jesus through serving them, not through aggressive apologetics. Although he was tempted to flee his situation, he continued within his relational networks and found many opportunities to demonstrate Christ-like living through forgiving, serving, and becoming a better husband/son/brother. By serving them he both gained a hearing and negotiated a new social identity.

Over time networked families and friendship groups of Jesus followers become more and more visible in a culture. The surrounding society recognizes the distinctives of this sub-group and often labels them as something different from a “normal” Muslim (e.g., those “Isa [Jesus] followers,” as in Acts 11:26). Even with this label they are often allowed to co-exist within the larger Muslim community because they have retained a local cultural identity, are known and accepted, and often are even respected as moral and godly people.

#### **Faith in the Fire**

Often severe persecution acts as a pressure-cooker, forcing the believer to come to terms with identity issues, as in the following account.

*Aisha told her family of her growing interest in and subsequent trust in Jesus. Her sister also wanted to believe, but her teenage son, during a bout of rebelliousness, reported his own mother to the authorities. Although he thought they would just scold and release her, she was thrown into prison, tortured, beaten, and pressured over many months to recant her faith. She later reported, “God was right beside me, giving me comfort and strength, even when I thought I might die from how they*

*were treating me.” She emerged with her faith deepened, conscious that she had not been alone in the midst of the suffering. Back at home, she now receives grudging respect from her neighbours, who know that she still believes despite the government’s claim that the region remains “100% Muslim.” With this small margin of tolerance, she and her now-believing husband continue to grow spiritually, experiencing God’s continuing help despite the lack of fellowship. They delight in explaining their faith to their neighbours and friends using passages from both the Qur’an and the Bible.<sup>8</sup>*

In this example the believer had to endure intense persecution, yet God’s presence and help in the midst of that suffering validated her faith. This resiliency to harassment and torment that came from the experience of God being with her through her ordeal was a profound witness to her husband and others. The respect she earned not only allowed her to gain a new level of social acceptance within society, but also to continue her witness to draw others into the Kingdom.

### Defending the Hope Within

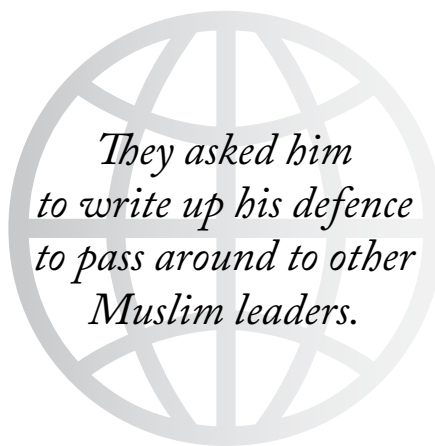
*A few years ago Hassan, a middle-aged leader in his Asian community, was imprisoned for apostasy after a jealous co-worker (eager to disrupt a development project for personal gain) reported him to police as being a follower of Jesus. After months of imprisonment he was brought before a panel of Islamic leaders. He defended his allegiance to Jesus using verses from the Qur’an and the Bible in a way that demonstrated that he still valued his community—and that true Muslims should follow Jesus. At the end of his defence, the leaders concluded: “If you follow Jesus in this way, it is acceptable.” They asked him to write up his defence to pass around to other Muslim leaders.<sup>9</sup>*

In this example the new believer, following months in prison, defended his new faith with apologetic reasoning. Through his defence the religious leaders could understand that he had not rejected his cultural identity by

following Jesus. They saw that he was no longer just a Muslim culturally, but even exhibited characteristics of godliness to which they aspired. They recognized his choice to follow Jesus as permissible within the bounds of their interpretation of religion. Their acceptance of his decision in turn allowed him the space to negotiate an acceptable social identity within his family and community, thus paving the way for others to believe in the same way.

### Collective Identity

In these examples and many others that could be cited, the collective identity (“Muslim” label) remains in place by default. In societies where being “Muslim” is defined more by



one’s identification with a cultural way of life (by virtue of being a citizen of that society) than by a strict and narrow theological (e.g., Islamist) narrative, many committed new followers of Jesus have established a new social identity acceptable to their local Muslim community and remain vibrant witnesses of their newfound allegiance to Jesus. Judgment is often suspended as to whether they are still “Muslim,” (in the sense of still belonging to the society), while their transformed lives earn them a hearing.

Many believers who find themselves in this position greatly prefer this sequence of events. They believe that if they are given the label “Christian” (usually perceived as a negative, even

political, label in Muslim societies), they will forfeit the freedom to share widely the hope within them, and their testimony will be marginalized or rejected outright.<sup>10</sup>

However, because the identity of these groups is distinctive—their allegiance to Jesus forces a divergence away from a traditional Muslim identity, just as Paul’s allegiance to Jesus caused him to increasingly move away from a traditional Jewish identity—over time they are often given new labels by the Muslim community, such as “followers of Jesus.”

Within the “pale of Islam” exists a mystical group, the Sufis, who practice an Islam of a very different kind. While many strict orthodox Muslims regard them as heretics, most Muslims accept Sufis as members of the Muslim community because of this group’s values and deeply held spiritual beliefs. Jesus followers who continue to retain a collective “Muslim” identity of some kind may, like the Sufis, one day be able to maintain a cultural position within the pale of Islam, even as their new *collective identity* is tied to the person of Jesus.

### Developing a Stable Collective Identity

Research based on surveys, discussions and interviews from a 2007 consultation on fruitful practices for work among Muslims<sup>11</sup> has discerned an interesting pattern. In places where hostility to the gospel and persecution of believers is most intense, believers choose to gather as small house churches of 4–30 members. Even as they establish a social identity with like-minded followers of Jesus, they stay small in number to avoid much of the attention of those who would persecute them.

However, as these small house groups begin to multiply and network together, they gain both strength in numbers and a more pronounced identity as a community. Once they reach a critical

mass where they are too large to ignore or intimidate by persecution, they take on a more visible corporate presence, negotiating a new collective identity within society.

This collective identity is forged in part by their efforts to be salt and light at the community level, doing good in the society around them and demonstrating that they are exemplary citizens, fathers, mothers, children and families. They use community events such as weddings, festivals and funerals as opportunities for witness. They challenge unjust laws in the courts and press for the rights of the oppressed. In several countries new believers have sparked debates as to whether their traditional cultural identity requires that a citizen be Muslim.

In short, these emerging faith communities are negotiating new labels, as necessary, for their collective identity within their societies, resulting in increasing acceptance and roles of influence within these societies.

### *A Biblical Pattern*

We can observe a similar pattern in the New Testament book of Acts. The early church was small, caught between the Jewish and Roman cultures. Because they were fully committed to Jesus as Lord they found that they could no longer fully identify with either culture. A small group of Jesus' followers and disciples saw the power of this wholehearted allegiance to draw family, friends and eventually many thousands into their community. As these diverse communities banded together, they began to be recognized as a distinct group, and were labelled "the Way" or derided as "little Christs," or *Christians*. These fellowships of faith became established in the Roman Empire and, through their obedience of faith, God used them to take the gospel to other cultures, repeating this pattern over and over again throughout redemptive history until this day.

**I**f we can empower them through the Word and trust that God can reveal the wise path to them, God can transform their cultures and societies.

After his conversion on the Damascus road, the Apostle Paul, former zealous persecutor of the followers of Jesus in his day, was shunned and mistrusted by the small community of Christians; in fact, we lose sight of Paul for fourteen years. While Paul was living in Tarsus, Barnabas was used by the Holy Spirit to seek him out and draw him into active work—taking the gospel to the Gentiles. Because of Barnabas (the "son of encouragement"), the world was changed.

Similarly, we need to be like Barnabas on behalf of those in the Muslim world whose heart allegiance belongs to Jesus. We need to understand how to help these believers negotiate their new allegiance within their social and collective identities in healthy, effective ways. If we can learn to support them to do this successfully—not prescribing or directing how they should do this, but empowering them through the Word and by our trust that God can reveal the wise path to them—God can work through them to transform their cultures and societies, and the world will again be changed. **IJFM**

### *Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup> Tim Green, "Conversion and Identity," in David Greenlee, ed., *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Something in Between?* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Katherine Kraft, based on a presentation at the "Bridging the Divide" consultation at Houghton College (Houghton, New York, June 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Charles H. Kraft, "Contextualization in Three Crucial Dimensions," in *Appropriate Christianity*, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005) Chapter 7.

<sup>4</sup> J. Dudley Woodberry, Russell G. Shubin and G. Marks, "Why Muslims follow Jesus: the results of a recent survey of converts from Islam," *Christianity Today*, October 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Andrea and Leith Gray, "Paradigms and Praxis: Part I—Social Networks and Fruitfulness in Church Planting," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 26:1, pp. 19–28.

<sup>6</sup> This case study is from personal communication.

<sup>7</sup> Based on description by Mohit Gupta, *Servants in the Crucible: Findings from a Global Study on Persecution and the Implications for Sending Agencies and Sending Churches* (soon to be published manuscript, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> A case study from personal experience.

<sup>9</sup> This case study is from personal communication.

<sup>10</sup> John Travis and J. Dudley Woodberry, "When God's Kingdom Grows Like Yeast," *Mission Frontiers*, July–August 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Eric and Laura Adams, "The Gathering of Reproducing Fellowships," in *From Seed to Fruit*, J. Dudley Woodberry, ed., 2nd edition, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2011) Chapter 11.