

Beyond Contextualization

# The Faith of Fatima: A Case Study of Muslim Followers of Jesus

by *Anna Travis*

**M**y family and I had the privilege of working in an Asian Muslim community for twenty-two years. It was there that we met a wonderful, winsome Muslim woman we call Fatima.<sup>1</sup> This paper tells the story of how Fatima came to know and follow *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah) and led many of her family and friends to know and follow Jesus as well. Watching what God is doing in the life of Fatima to this very day has impacted me deeply.<sup>2</sup> First, before sharing this story, and a bit of my own, I would like to pause and pray for Fatima, her family, and friends.

Please join me:

“O God, we all, with one heart, now bring to you Fatima and friends, as we consider what you are doing in and through them. Protect them, comfort them, strengthen them, and give clear leading to them in all things. Through Jesus we pray, Amen.”

Before telling the story of Fatima and my history with Muslims, I would like to explain how I will be using several terms. The first term is “Christian.” Different individuals and groups use the term Christian in different ways, sometimes as a noun and sometimes as an adjective.

For example, evangelical Christians tend to use the word Christian to refer to someone who is a serious disciple of Jesus or someone who is “born again.” It is not uncommon to hear evangelicals say, “I became a Christian at age twenty-five.” Whether having grown up as a nominal member of a church or not, the term “becoming a Christian” refers to the point in time when the person made a serious commitment to be devoted to Christ.

Others use the term Christian simply to describe individuals’ personal belief system. Whether living the life of serious disciples of Jesus or not, at least in terms of their beliefs, they could be classified as “Christian” (i.e., adhering to church creeds or doctrines).

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Yet others, however, use the term simply to mean one's affiliation or socioreligious identity. In this case, it does not matter what one may personally spiritually believe. What makes a person "Christian" would be factors such as family heritage, ethnic background or church / religious membership or affiliation. *Worldwide, this is the way that the word Christian is most often used.* This is why North African Muslims, for instance, would make the blanket statement, "French are Christians" or how, for example, a national census could conclude that the United States is 70% Christian.

Throughout this paper, I will use the term "Christian" and "Christianity" to refer to people's identity and religious affiliation, not necessarily their personal spiritual beliefs. I will use the term "follower of Jesus" or "Christ-follower" to refer to one's personal spiritual beliefs. Therefore, if Muslims or Jews choose to follow Jesus as risen Savior but do not go through the additional step of "changing religions," I will refer to them as Muslim followers of Jesus, not "Christian Muslims" or Jewish followers of Jesus, not "Christian Jews."

Likewise, when I refer to someone as "Muslim" or part of the Islamic community, I am referring to affiliation and identity, not necessarily that individual's personal beliefs or practices.

### ***My Story: Formative Years Living with Muslims***

We arrived in the country where we hoped to share the good news of the Kingdom of Jesus with Muslims, with a commitment to live at first with a local pre-Jesus-following Muslim family, following the advice of mission linguists Tom and Betty Sue Brewster.<sup>3</sup> We were able to live for several months with two different families, and then moved into a house in a tight-knit Muslim community. Because the houses in the neighborhood were so close to each other, it felt like we were renting a few rooms in a big house, where sound easily traveled, and our neighbors kept a close and loving eye on us.

We ended up staying there for seventeen years. We participated in community life—attending weddings, visiting the sick, and celebrating holidays with our neighbors. We learned the language and made precious friends. But the most impactful thing for me in living for seventeen years in that community was attending funerals.

When a person in our neighborhood would die, all the people on our block would gather around the family. The Muslim leaders from the mosque would come. They would make sure the body was quickly washed and wrapped in white cloth, and

then laid in the middle of the living room, with everyone sitting in a circle around the body. The person from the mosque would always say:

"Hopefully this person's good works are enough to bring him straight to the side of God. We all need to remember—the day of death will come for each of us. One day your body will be wrapped in white cloth and will be laid in the middle of the living room. So, you need to remember Allah every day. Wherever you are, you must think of God. And whatever happens, don't die, unless you die inside Islam."

At the end of the funeral, everyone would greet each other before leaving. I would get back to my house just down the block, barely making it into the door, before bursting into tears. "Lord! How are these people going to find Jesus when they hear this over and over again—that they have to stay inside Islam?" I would cry out to God, pour my heart out to God. The sense I got was that somehow the Lord would meet them inside Islam.

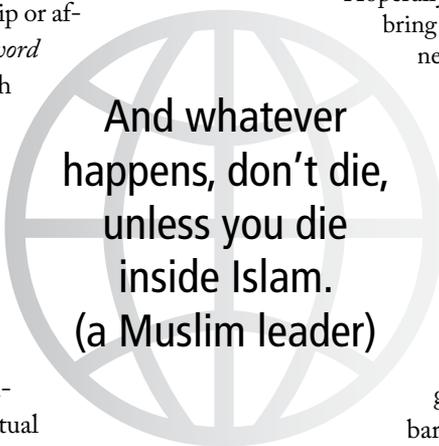
During those years, we and our team were involved in a variety of what we call pre-movement activities that we were convinced would be necessary to see a breakthrough. This included Scripture translation, intercessory prayer, focused time with Muslims, praying for the sick, the founding of NGOs to address community needs, and culturally-appropriate outreach.

Meanwhile those years were also full of listening to our neighbors' points of view. Here are a few examples:

"When you talk about God, please remember that we don't need your religion. We already have a religion, unlike people in other parts of the country who do not yet have a religion." (They were referring to groups they deemed tribal, animists, or who were following folk beliefs.)

"We are happy to receive prayer from you, yes, even if you pray to God through Jesus, peace be upon him. We know that all prayer goes up to God, and God decides which prayers he will answer."

"If we hear you refer to one of the prophets by the wrong name, it affirms our view that what your group believes is incorrect." Note: This came up when I was reading some Old Testament passages with a Muslim friend, using the main translation available at the time. In this translation, "Abraham" is used, whereas Muslims say "Ibrahim." All the more impactful is the name we use for Jesus—is it the foreign-sounding name used by Christians, or is it his familiar Arabic name, Isa? Fortunately, in terms of communication in our country of residence, as in many Arabic-speaking countries, Christians and Muslims alike use the term "Allah" for God.



**And whatever happens, don't die, unless you die inside Islam.  
(a Muslim leader)**

After those long, life-changing years, the time came to move from that neighborhood to another part of our city.

### *Fatima's Story: Following Jesus as a Muslim*

At that time, we were introduced to Fatima. What a privilege to get to know this woman, a practicing Muslim, who was actually following Jesus, and already very familiar with the New Testament. She would share her life with me. I would learn from her. I would share things that it seemed God was putting on my heart for her. We did inner healing together. She would go over the hurts of her childhood. At one point, the power of the Lord was so strong when we were praying together that an evil spirit spontaneously left this godly woman. She exclaimed, "It's gone, it's gone!" Looking back, I am convinced the Lord was empowering her for what he had for her in the years ahead.

When Fatima was young, she, her siblings, parents and grandparents were part of a multi-generational household. Interestingly, her grandfather would often take her aside and say, "Fatima, one day, the truth of Allah will come to Islam." She, at the time, did not know what he could have been talking about.

**The Lord wants to meet you  
right where you are. You can become  
a follower of Jesus just as you are.  
It's not religion that saves;  
it's Jesus who saves us.  
(An Asian pastor)**

When Fatima got a little bit older, she had to quit school to go to work to help her family survive, and she ended up working for foreigners. She married at an early age and continued to work. One of her employers encouraged her to convert to Christianity when she was showing an interest in Jesus. Her husband and her father told her, "No, no, you cannot convert. You have to stop working there." It turned out that she was able to keep that job only when her employer agreed to not let national believers come around to try to influence her to come into Christianity. Still, those seeds had been planted. Later, she worked for another foreign family and began to study the Bible there. By this point, she and her husband had a son. One time that son was very sick in the hospital and Christians came to pray for him. Miraculously he was healed, and soon was discharged from the hospital.

Fatima's interest in Jesus grew as she saw God heal her son, and she continued even more to diligently read the Bible. While she was working at her employer's home, an Asian pastor came to stay there for a while and noticed that she was reading the Bible on her lunch break.

He said, "Fatima, what is that you're reading?"

"Oh, it's the New Testament."

"What do you think about Jesus?"

"Jesus is wonderful."

The pastor said, "Well, have you become his follower?"

"No, I can't become his follower."

"Why is that?"

"I'm a Muslim, and both my husband and my father have forbidden me to become a Christian and be baptized."

This Asian pastor wisely said, "Fatima, actually the Lord wants to meet you right where you are. You can become a follower of Jesus just as you are. It's not religion that saves; it's Jesus who saves us."

"Really? I didn't understand this! I would love to become his follower."

That day she decided to follow Jesus, and as she tells her story she says,

"Whoosh, the spirit of God entered my heart!"

Fatima shared her experience with her son who had been healed. And she explained to her mother what had happened to her. Now there were three in the family following Jesus together. Two or three friends had also been reading the New Testament, and this small number grew quietly in their faith for a number of years.

When Fatima and I became friends, we prayed together for her husband, her father, and other close friends and family members who often came to mind. When her husband, and then her father decided to follow Jesus, we rejoiced together—the very two men who years earlier had forbidden her to become a Christian, now walked together with her in following Jesus as Muslims.

Ideas of leaving Islam, joining Christianity, no longer calling herself Muslim, attending a local church, singing Christian hymns or songs, meeting on Sundays, celebrating Christmas, removing her head covering in public, eating pork, changing her name, calling Jesus by his foreign name (which the national Christians did, both verbally and in their Bible translation), or labelling a friend or family member an "unbeliever"—never came up. Fatima recognized that what her grandfather had spoken about—that someday the truth of God will come to Islam—had started to become a reality for her.

Fatima began explaining more clearly to friends and acquaintances, as the opportunity arose, what it was like for her to follow Jesus as a Muslim. About this time, we left the country for about three months. When we returned, Fatima had gathered ten people to study the New Testament together every week. She had been asking, "Have you ever read the four holy books?" She found this to be a natural question, since officially Islam claims the *Taurat* (the first five books of the Old Testament, or often viewed as the entire Old Testament), *Zabur* (Psalms), the *Injil* (New Testament), and the *Qur'an* as holy Scripture. The Torah, Psalms and New Testament are referred to as the "previous books." Many would answer that they had enough trouble reading the one—the *Qur'an*—and didn't want to look at the other holy books. Yet, other people did show interest, and now ten were regularly reading together.

### ***An Indigenous, Multiplying Ecclesia is Birthed***

One person in this group of ten we call Yusuf. We had been doing our best to introduce Jesus to Yusuf for a number of years, and he had expressed little interest. However, two years before, Yusuf had become extremely angry over an offense committed by a stranger and was not acting himself. My husband asked Yusuf if he would like prayer, and the Lord worked powerfully such that a demon clearly left Yusuf's life, and he experienced immediate relief from the anger. Other than that experience, he did not appear to be spiritually hungry or open.

Now, when we saw Yusuf after returning from our three months away, he was obviously quite joyous about something. He said, "I've become a follower of Isa the Messiah!" He went on to explain that he had been regularly gathering to read the New Testament, and that he felt like a new person. We asked him, "Is this not the same thing we've been talking about for the last few years?" Yusuf explained, "Yes, yes, the same. But when you were talking about Jesus, I thought you were trying to get me to join your church. My brother left Islam and entered Christianity when he married a Christian woman, and the family hardly speaks to him. No way would I want to join a church."

The humorous thing is that we were not even attending a formal church at the time. Yet Yusuf could not help but assume that as we explained the good news about Jesus, we expected him to leave his religious community and join a different group. Interestingly, Yusuf never performed the formal prayers (most people we knew prayed at least once a day, if not more). Yusuf did not attend the mosque and never fasted.

During the (Islamic) month of fasting, when our other male neighbors would congregate outside for the countdown of the last few minutes till it was time to break the fast and have a smoke, Yusuf would chuckle and light up a cigarette right in front of them. Yet the importance of religious identity for this utterly nominal Muslim was enough to keep him from deciding to follow Jesus. Yusuf explained to us, "When you prayed with me and the evil spirit left me, I knew Jesus is the Way. But I couldn't make the decision to follow Jesus until I saw the example of Fatima's life."

As this group shared their new life with others, other groups started forming.<sup>4</sup> They would choose a passage of the New Testament, sometimes reading it out loud two and three times. They would discuss how to apply what they read, pray for each other, and eat a snack. Later they started pooling small contributions voluntarily to help needy people in the neighborhood.

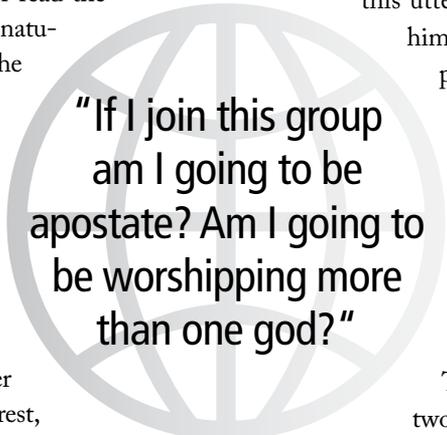
As others were hearing about these groups, they would often ask two questions. First, "If I join this group, am I going to be apostate?" (That is, must I leave Islam and become a Christian?) Second, "If I join this group, am I going to be worshipping more than one God?"

The members of the groups would answer,

"No and no. God, who caused us to be born inside the community of Islam, gives us peace and the desire to stay, so we can remain connected to our families, and explain this new life. We are not leaving to join a different religion. And we know there is only one God. We believe in the one true God, and in Jesus the Messiah whom he has sent to us."

That seemed to be enough to address their concerns, such that a good number of new people were joining or forming new groups.

When people were sick, people from the group would pray. Sometimes a person was healed; other times healing did not come. One time, one of the early followers of Jesus said to those around his death bed, "Jesus is here to pick me up." This started happening more often when someone was dying. Several hours before death, the person would say, "Jesus is here to pick me up." Their understanding is that it is as if a cord the size of a single piece of hair divided into seven is stretched over a deep chasm, and Jesus is the one who takes them across, safely to the side of God. How could they ever do this on their own? They explain that they need Jesus.



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Another group formed a little bit outside the city. The man who was inviting his family and friends to read the New Testament told Fatima a story from his childhood. “Back in the day, my father told me, ‘One day, someone will talk about the truth of Allah coming into Islam. You must listen.’” He had not heard Fatima’s story about her grandfather repeatedly saying a similar thing. I wonder how many Muslims in the world have heard something like this from the Spirit of God.

It must be said that the organic nature of this work of God has not come about without deliberate choices at key junctures. I will share a handful of examples.

One time a mosque leader from a town several hours away got wind that his mosque members were over at a neighbor’s house regularly reading the New Testament. He marched over to the house and with anger, declared the meeting to be “forbidden.” The group texted Fatima to ask her to make a visit, sooner rather than later. She went to the town with two or three friends to get to know this mosque leader. With humor and humility, she thanked him for his concern, and asked for his prayers and blessing. She explained that his mosque members would remain faithful attenders and would cause him no trouble. They were simply studying the very books that Islam instructed them to study (*Taurat, Zabur, Injil* and *Qur’an*), and of course she knew he would agree and support the idea. By the grace of God, the problem was solved.

Another time, a neighbor asked one of the members of a newer group what on earth they were doing in those meetings. Why was there not the usual chanting of the first *surah* of the *Qur’an*? After talking together, this group decided to invite any neighbor to join at any time, and to chant the first *surah* together at the beginning of each meeting. Praise God, the contents of that portion of the *Qur’an*<sup>5</sup> are easily interpreted to be in line with the Bible, so their conscience before God was clear.

These Jesus followers find it necessary from time to time, often in the first year of their new life, to resist accusations that they have become Christians, that they are reading a forbidden holy book, that they are leaving Islam, or the like. They remind anyone daring to complain in this way that their families are Muslim, and they are too. They continue to fast during *Ramadan*, they celebrate Muslim holidays (not Christian ones), they continue to attend Muslim functions as much as they always have (not Christian ones, especially not Christian mission conferences), they continue to keep their Muslim personal names, diet and dress standards, and most important of all, they call themselves Muslims. At the same time, they remind each other that any person who follows Jesus is their brother or sister. No speaking ill of Christians is allowed (although this is the norm in their communities, given common views of unkind treatment of less fortunate

Muslims by very well-to-do Christian employers and business owners). Fatima even told us one time that she views Jews who follow Jesus as her brothers and sisters! (The negative view of Muslims toward Jews in this part of the world cannot be overstated, although no one we know has ever personally met a Jewish person.)

With all the gracious continuing of so many aspects of Muslim life as they follow Jesus, there is at least one common practice that Fatima and friends are fanatical about eradicating: the practice of looking to spiritual powers outside of their devotion to God through Jesus. Though not all Muslim Jesus followers we know of have been involved with occult practitioners before they decided to follow Jesus, many have. Though their Muslim religious leaders remind them that it is forbidden, often out of their desire or desperation, many visit mystical people who pronounce curses toward enemies, infuse objects with protective powers, and sell recipes for financial success or physical healing. This is where devotion to Jesus is most tested. This is where the enemy of our souls puts most of his efforts. One woman who decided to follow Jesus, along with most of her extended family, could not bring herself to give up certain charms, amulets, and occult practices. She saw these as giving hope for achieving financial relief. One of her uncles made his living as an occult practitioner, and he seemed to have great sway over the opinions of the rest of the family. Fatima would plead with this woman. We all prayed for her. We compiled a list of Scriptures showing the dire consequences of these practices. To no avail. She fell away. I feel the grief even as I write this. On the other hand, those Muslims who follow Jesus and find freedom from these practices experience a tangible and contagious joy and peace.

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Not only has it been important to navigate life as Jesus followers as questions arise among fellow Muslims, they must also navigate issues that come up with Christians. For example, a number of years after we had already moved away from Fatima’s location, a group of field workers decided they would like to incorporate what God was doing through Fatima and

friends into their ministry, hoping to help it expand more quickly. She listened politely, thanked them for their offer, and explained that what they planned to do would not naturally fit with her people. Over the years she has had to stand against some well-meaning takeovers. Yet she does not stand alone, but stands with a group of tested friends who make decisions together after ample discussion and prayer. She summarizes it by saying, “We are not agents of foreigners; God is sending us to our people to keep explaining what we are experiencing, until they understand.”

Sometimes a comment arises with others we meet outside Fatima’s circle:

“If we had known it was possible to follow Jesus and stay in our religious community, we would have done that when we discovered Christ, but we didn’t know there was any other option, so we left Islam and changed our religious identity.”

I honor any person who has paid the high price of leaving community, or who has been thrown out of the extended family for the sake of Jesus. I believe God is calling many of these brothers and sisters to be involved in extending the kingdom from where they now find themselves—inside Christianity. For others, God may call them to return to their religious community of birth, to one degree or another. One friend of ours was distinctly led by the Lord to return to his Muslim identity several years after he had left Islam. He approached each family member to ask to be received back. He explained that he would return only under the condition that they would allow him to continue to follow Jesus. They heartily agreed, by the grace of God. He says about his experience, “I have come home.”

Another Muslim friend of ours who follows Jesus described what it was like when his Christian friend first explained the kingdom of God—forgiveness of sins, freedom from demons, eternal life, peace, power to do God’s will, the experience of the nearness of God, comfort in suffering. It was like a beautiful garden, and he eagerly made his way to enter. Then his friend described the extra-biblical Christological creeds he would need to agree to, and it made him feel like the ticket to get into this beautiful place now had a price of ten million dollars. As we heard his story, we wondered, is that God’s requirement? If it is, then yes, we have to pay the price. Yet, if it is not God’s requirement, should we continue to require it? Our friend became convinced as he read the Bible that God does not require him to embrace the interpretations delineated in certain Christian creeds. We greatly respect this brother’s expression of faith in Jesus. We contemplate the risk of setting aside the requirement of such creeds. So far, we feel that the far greater risk is to insist on them, and possibly push away from Jesus someone who would otherwise embrace him.

We count it a great privilege to see God calling people to follow Jesus while remaining Muslims. And it is also a great privilege to see God calling national Christians to further open the way for this possibility in their spheres of influence. One Asian church leader in the area where we worked attended a consultation on work among Muslims. During the consultation, several national Christians from the denomination he led were describing their work with Muslims—they were sharing the good news of Jesus, yet definitively not insisting on a change in religious identity. As is the custom, after the presentation of these accounts, the denominational leader was on the program to address the consultation and end in prayer. As he rose to his feet, a hush came over the room. He declared,

“As you carry out your ministries, if God wants to send his Spirit to blow through the mosques of our country such that many decide to follow Jesus, I say to you all today, *our denomination will not need to count them.*”

It seemed that the Spirit of God blew through that place that day, and God was pleased that a trusted national Christian leader would be willing, for the sake of Jesus, to let go of the standard practice of counting “fruit” and measuring ministry success.

Groups of national Christian leaders in denominations and other organizations have lent their support for efforts to produce Scripture translations for various Muslim populations. They continue to use their standard church translations, since they reflect the common terminology and phraseology of their communities. Yet they are welcoming additional translations that reflect the common terminology and phraseology of other communities who have never had the chance to hear the Jesus accounts in their own heart dialect.

**If God wants to send his Spirit  
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not need to count them.***

Some may question the validity of the idea of Muslims following Jesus from inside Islam, pointing to outsiders as having insisted on it. Yet, is it not so, that the idea of having to leave Islam to follow Jesus has been insisted upon by outsiders as well, and that this endeavor to encourage Muslims to change religious identity has continued for over a millennium? Whether the option for Muslims to follow Jesus while retaining the religious identity of their birth is an idea from the outside or from inside, there is one thing that is clear: it is not the

magnet that will attract Muslims to Jesus. It is only a way to remove a barrier, to lift a requirement that may not be required, to offer a fighting chance to Muslims who are strongly predisposed against leaving their people to join the other group. However, once this requirement is removed, could it be that God will use the sacrificial love of Jesus followers, miracles, answered prayer of Jesus followers, the labor by Jesus followers to produce appropriate Scripture translations, and the magnetic reality of Jesus himself, to draw as many Muslims as possible into this new life?<sup>6</sup>

## Following Jesus while retaining the religious identity of their birth is not the magnet that will attract Muslims to Jesus. It is only a way to remove a barrier.

### *A Biblically Based Grassroots Theology Emerges*

As we had the privilege of watching God work in the life of Fatima and friends, we started jotting down the sayings we were hearing as followers of Jesus explained their new life . . .

“We have discovered Isa the Messiah, the long-forgotten savior of Islam.”

“We embrace and read all the holy books of Islam.”

“Jesus, our divine Lord, is above us, below us, behind us, in front of us, on either side of us. We can feel his presence.”

“When we die, Jesus picks us up and takes us to the side of God.”

“We look down and not up.” I didn’t understand this at first. They explained, “The Lord encourages us to look down to recognize those who are less fortunate than we are, and inspires us to help them in some way, instead of always looking up to those who are more fortunate than we are, longing to be like them, or to be connected in some way, so that we could rise up to their level. We look down, and not up.”

“We pray, and also we put out effort.”

“If we need a way out of a situation, and it seems impossible, we need to get up in the middle of the night when everything is quiet to pray. We sense the presence of Jesus, and somehow, he communicates with us and shows us a way out.”

“When we decide to follow Jesus, we will read a portion of the New Testament each evening. All family members are free to join, but we don’t pressure anyone. Eventually,

when most of the members of the household are joining us in nightly reading, we can start to talk about our new life with people outside the family.”

“We look forward to the (Islamic) month of fasting. Normally, we would fast in order to have our sins forgiven. Now, for us it is a time of solidarity with our community, and a time to get closer to God.”

“When we eat together, we remember the sacrifice of Jesus for us.”

“Our job is to live out our life with God through Jesus, explaining our experience, so that our family members and friends will understand what God has done for them in Jesus. They will become understanders.” It was so interesting for us to note that they don’t call each other “believers,” nor call others “unbelievers.” The label “unbeliever” (or *kafir*) is used to describe rebellious people who do not believe in God. They see fellow Muslims, not as unbelievers, but as those who do believe in God, and who are yet to understand what God has done for them in Jesus.

And they say, “The New Testament is the mountain top of all the holy books. The holy books must be read through the lens of the New Testament.”<sup>7</sup>

In the midst of many examples of Muslims who remain in the religious community of their birth as they follow Jesus, I offer this case study for our consideration. My hope is that some of the details of this narrative will help us better understand how new ways of following Jesus are being forged by Jesus followers like Fatima and friends. Different from most models of the past where people have assumed that a religious identity change is necessary, these Jesus followers are not making this shift in outward identity. I believe they are endeavoring to be in the world but not of it,<sup>8</sup> that is, they are in the world religion of their birth, but not of it.<sup>9</sup> They are going beyond religion and living in the kingdom of God. **IJFM**



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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Due to the sensitive nature of this account, I will not mention locations, dates, or the actual names of anyone in the narrative.
- <sup>2</sup> We no longer live in the country where this narrative takes place, but we were able to visit Fatima recently.
- <sup>3</sup> Tom and Elizabeth Brewster recommended that cross-cultural Christian workers begin their time on the field living in the home of a local family in order to understand and “bond” with that culture and community. Thomas and Elizabeth Brewster, “Bonding and the Missionary Task,” *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, eds. Ralph Winter and Steve Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981).
- <sup>4</sup> In the unpublished paper “In the Footsteps of Bible Women,” my field colleague Elisa Park describes how certain women in India, China, and Korea in the nineteenth century came to faith as they served as helpers for female field workers. These bold women carried the gospel through family networks, did grassroots pastoral ministry, and often were used by God to see the first waves of the gospel build momentum in new areas. Her paper deals with women in non-Islamic contexts in the past, and how similar dynamics are at work in the lives of some of the women in the accounts described here.
- <sup>5</sup> “In the name of God, the gracious, the merciful. Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds, the most gracious, the most merciful, master of the Day of Judgment. It is You we worship, and to You we call for help. Guide us to the straight path, the path of those You have blessed, not of those against whom there is anger, nor of those who are misguided.”
- <sup>6</sup> For other accounts of Muslims, like Fatima, who follow Jesus and have seen ecclesia or fellowships develop, see the references below marked with an asterisk (\*).
- <sup>7</sup> For other examples of groups of new followers of Jesus developing theologies that are both biblical and culturally relevant to particular socio-religious communities, see the references below marked with a plus sign (+).
- <sup>8</sup> John 17:15–18.
- <sup>9</sup> Anna Travis, “In the World but Not of It: Insider Movements and Freedom from the Demonic,” *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities*, eds. Harvey Talman and John Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), pp. 521.

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# Response

## A Response to Anna Travis

by *Darren Duerksen*

I'm so glad to be able to respond to Anna's paper and presentation. She introduces us to Fatima, her journey, and those that have journeyed with her into faith in Jesus. There are numerous things I'd love to comment on, but I'll focus on three.

First, Anna gives us the gift of an honest story. It gives us a snapshot of how many people were attracted to what Anna calls the "magnetic reality of Jesus," and how their lives were changed as a result. It takes us into the heart of a Muslim community and shows us how Jesus entered into and is transforming the community from within. And, Anna also gifts us by sharing the challenges that they've faced and things she would do differently. What stands out to me is the reminder that, though God can and does work through planned, strategic programs, his most profound work often comes from unexpected places, through imperfect persons and communities, and in ways we're not looking for. Were we walking with Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, we may have questioned his choice of rough, imperfect Galilean men and women to be the ones to help launch a mass movement. Perhaps some might have said the same about Fatima, a Muslim woman. Anna reminds us that God's work sometimes looks a little unpredictable. Maybe even a little unorthodox.

### Anna gives us the gift of an honest story—a snapshot of how people were attracted to what she calls the magnetic reality of Jesus.

This leads me to a second reflection. If some of us were honest, we might confess that we're not always comfortable with disorganization, unpredictability, or things that seem to us a bit unorthodox. When Anna tells us that one Christ-following Muslim decided from his own reading of the Bible that God did not require him to embrace the interpretations of Christian creeds, it could raise red flags for many. Don't the creeds help keep Christ-followers from error? We get uncomfortable. Anna acknowledges this when she says that she and others with her are aware of and "contemplate the risk of setting aside such creeds." But, she says, there is also a risk in insisting on them and "possibly pushing away from Jesus someone who would otherwise embrace him." I think of the reality that, in the history of the Christian church there have been religious groups who were Christian in their beginnings, rejected certain creedal statements, broke away from Christian churches, and now no longer prioritize Christ and the Bible. In response,

Christians have often watched for anything that could be heresy, policed it, and even punished it. And while the deviation of some groups from God's intent no doubt has hurt the witness of the gospel, we could argue that Christian efforts to safeguard, and punish what they saw as heresy has often damaged the witness of the gospel just as much, if not more.

What Anna models for us here is a posture that I think we in the West greatly need. That is, we need to stop assuming we're in control of the gospel and God's movements. We need to relinquish power, even if it makes us uncomfortable. Even if it means things look to us a little chaotic. And, yes, even if it means that someone or a group goes in a way we do not agree with.

As an example of this kind of posture, Anna shares about the mission leader who, when hearing about what was happening among Muslims said that if God calls people to Jesus through the mosques of his country, his denomination would not need to count them. This is actually quite a profound statement. Counting can be a way of exerting power. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the British colonial administration conducted regular censuses. One of their unstated reasons was that knowing numbers, communities, concentrations of religions and groups, helped them to more easily control their colony. They knew that it was easier to manage and manipulate a colony if they could count it and quantify it. For a Western or Western-shaped Christian institution to forego counting new believers signals an important move—that they will not seek to quantify and manage or control what is happening. This is perhaps something we as Christians who are involved in cross-cultural ministry need more of.

Lastly, I'm so glad that Anna emphasizes the importance of prayer, and the miraculous. Time and again, we are reminded of the importance of praying for, and with, people, and of the ways in which God brings miraculous change in peoples' lives, whether it is an inner healing, a physical healing, or release from demonic oppression.

Perhaps one question that I would offer the discussion regards how in religionization relates to what some call primal or folk religions. Fatima and her community make a clear distinction between proper faith and inappropriate, occult-like practices. This reflects the orthodox Muslim view, as Anna points out, and also seems to resonate with some biblical teachings.

But it seems to me that, in some primal or folk religious contexts, some of these practices may be more central to their religious tradition and community. I am not an expert on folk or primal religions, but I wonder how Christ-followers in those contexts, who embrace an in religionization approach, would evaluate these. Would they agree with calling the practices "occult"? How would they respond to the idea that these practices and their traditions facilitate demons, and the demonic? We are mainly discussing the so-called world religions, but it would be interesting and helpful at some point to engage indigenous and folk religious traditions as well. Perhaps at the next conference. **IJFM**