



CONTEXTUALIZATION

AMONG MUSLIMS, HINDUS, AND BUDDHISTS:

A FOCUS ON

“Insider Movements”



John and Anna Travis

The following is excerpted by permission of the authors. A larger version of this article is found in chapter 23 of *Appropriate Christianity* (William Carey Library Publishers, 2005).

Much has been written over the past 25 years on the application of contextualization in ministry among Muslims. In 1998 I (John) wrote an article for the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* in which I presented a model for comparing six different types of *ekklesia* or congregations (which I refer to as “Christ-centered communities”) found in the Muslim world today (Travis 1998). These six types of Christ-centered communities are differentiated in terms of three

factors: language, cultural forms, and religious identity. This model, referred to as the C1-C6 spectrum (or continuum), has generated much discussion, especially around the issue of

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fellowships of “Muslim followers of Jesus” (the C5 position on the scale).

Parshall (1998), an advocate of contextualization, feels that C5 crosses the line and falls into dangerous syncretism. In subsequent writings many of Parshall’s concerns have been addressed (see Massey 2000, Gilliland 1998, Winter 1999, Travis 1998 and 2000). *Yet in spite of concerns that some may have on this issue, the fact remains that in a number of countries today, there are groups of Muslims who have genuinely come to faith in Jesus Christ, yet have remained legally and socio-religiously within the local Muslim community...*

We will not be contending that C5 is the best or only thing God is doing in the Muslim world today; indeed God is bringing Muslims to Himself in a great diversity of ways, some of which we may only understand in eternity. What we will argue, however, is that one way God is moving at this point in salvation history, is by sovereignly drawing Muslims to Himself, revolutionizing them spiritually, yet calling them to remain as salt and light in the religious community of their birth

In recent years we have had the privilege of meeting a number of C5 Muslims, and although our religious backgrounds and forms of worship are quite different, we have experienced sweet fellowship in Isa the Messiah. There is no question in our minds that these C5 Muslims are born-again members of the Kingdom of God, called to live out the Gospel inside the religious borders of their birth. As we have continued to see the limits of C4 in our context, and as our burden for lost Muslims only grows heavier, we have become convinced that a C5 expression of faith could actually be viable for our precious Muslim neighbors and probably large blocs of the Muslim world. We ourselves, being “Christian-background-believers,” maintain a C4 lifestyle, but we believe God has called us to help “birth a C5 movement” in our context

We have attended many Muslim funerals. We grieve every time we see another Muslim friend buried, having passed into eternity without salvation in Christ. As we have seen the resistance toward

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changing religions and the huge gap between the Muslim and Christian communities, we feel that fighting the religion-changing battle is the wrong battle. We have little hope in our lifetime to believe for a major enough cultural, political and religious change to occur in our context such that Muslims would become open to entering Christianity on a wide scale.

But we do have great hope, as great as the promises of God, to believe that an “insider movement” could get off the ground – that vast numbers could discover that salvation in Isa the Messiah is waiting for every Muslim who will believe. We sense the desire of Jesus Himself to take the “yeast” of His Gospel to the inner chambers of Muslim communities, calling men, women and children to walk with Him as Lord and Savior, remaining vital members of their families and Muslim communities.

Theoretical and Theological Issues Regarding C5 Movements

... Our intent is not to prove if C5 *can* happen, as case studies already indicate that it *is* happening. Rather, we hope to help build a framework from which to understand this phenomenon and to answer some of the questions which have arisen such as: From a Biblical perspective, can a person be truly saved and continue to be a Muslim? Doesn't a follower of Christ need to identify himself as a Christian and officially join the Christian faith? Can a Muslim follower of Christ retain all Muslim practices, in particular praying in the mosque toward Mecca and continuing to repeat the Muslim creed? This section will be framed around ten premises [elaborated in the full version of this article].

- *Premise 1:* For Muslims, culture, politics and religion are nearly inseparable, making changing religions a total break with society.
- *Premise 2:* Salvation is by grace alone through relationship / allegiance to Jesus Christ. Changing religions is not a prerequisite for nor a guarantee of salvation.
- *Premise 3:* Jesus' primary concern was the estab-

lishment of the Kingdom of God, not the founding of a new religion.

- *Premise 4:* The very term “Christian” is often misleading – not all called Christian are in Christ and not all in Christ are called Christian.
- *Premise 5:* Often gaps exist between what people actually believe and what their religion or group officially teaches.
- *Premise 6:* Some Islamic beliefs and practices are in keeping with the Word of God; some are not.
- *Premise 7:* Salvation involves a process. Often the exact point of transfer from the Kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of light is not known.
- *Premise 8:* A follower of Christ needs to be set free by Jesus from spiritual bondages in order to thrive in his/her life with Him.
- *Premise 9:* Due to the lack of Church structure and organization, C5 movements must have an exceptionally high reliance on the Spirit and the Word as their primary source of instruction.
- *Premise 10:* A contextual theology can only properly be developed through a dynamic interaction of actual ministry experience, the specific leading of the Spirit and the study of the Word of God.

We feel that fighting the religion-changing battle is the wrong battle.

A Look Beyond the Islamic Milieu

... An amazing book has just been republished by William Carey Library – *Churchless Christianity* (Hoefler 2001). The author, while formerly teaching at a seminary in India, began hearing stories of Hindus who in fact were worshipping and following Jesus in the privacy of their own homes. Knowing that there are many Hindus who have high regard for Jesus as a teacher, he set out to determine if indeed they had accepted Him as Lord and Savior or only as an enlightened guru. His quest became the basis of a doctoral dissertation in which he interviewed 80 such Hindu and Muslim families in the area of Madras, India.

“The Church Emerges from the Inside”

A missionary couple working in Asia report, “In 1990 we were sent out into the field as church planters. But over the last year we have observed that when the gospel is sown on fertile soil within already established social groupings – like a circle of close neighbor friends, or the multi-generations of

an extended household – the church emerges from the inside. It is not so much that we are planting a church but that we are planting the gospel, and as the gospel seed grows, the church or churches form to the shape of existing networks.” 🌐

Hoefler found that that a large number of these families, which have never been baptized or joined churches, indeed have a true relationship with Christ and pray and study His Word fervently. Hoefler says

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that most want baptism, but have never seen a baptism which is not one in the same with becoming an official member of a particular

church. His conclusion after a very extensive process of interviews and statistical analysis is that in Madras there are 200,000 Hindus and Muslims who worship Jesus – an amount equal to the total number of Christians in that city!

It is instructive to note that 200 years ago, William Carey referred to Hindu followers of Jesus as “Christian Hindoos.” Apparently this was due to the strong linkage in the minds of the Indians (and presumably William Carey) between being Hindu and being Indian (etymologically the word India comes from Hindia, the land of the Hindus). Rather than Hinduism being close to monotheistic faiths, it is just the opposite: adherents can worship any number of gods and goddesses. It appears that this openness allows room to exclusively worship the God of the Bible as the one true God (note the words of Joshua in Joshua 24:14-15).

In the early 1900s, Indian evangelist Sadhu Sundar Singh ran into hidden groups of Jesus followers among Hindus. As he preached the Gospel in Benares, his listeners told him of a Hindu holy man who had been preaching the same message. Singh spent the night at the man’s home and heard his claim that his Hindu order had been founded long ago by the apostle Thomas, and now had up to 40,000 members. Singh later observed their services (including worship, prayer, baptism and communion) which were held in places which looked exactly like Hindu shrines and temples, minus the idols. “When Sundar tried to persuade them that they should openly declare themselves as Christians, they assured him that they were doing a more effective work as secret disciples, accepted as ordinary sadhus, but drawing men’s minds toward the true faith in readiness for the day when open discipleship became possible” (Davey 1950:80).

Recently, we met a man doing outreach among Buddhists, among whom there is an extremely high fusion of culture and religion. To my surprise he had taken the C1-C6 continuum and adapted it to a Buddhist context. Though it appears impossible for the Gospel to thrive inside Buddhism, might there not be millions of Buddhists who are nominal believers and who are only Buddhist due to birth and nationality? As Kraft has stated (1996:212-213),

once this principle of true spiritual allegiance versus formal religion is grasped, “we begin to discover exciting possibilities for working within, say, Jewish or Islamic or Hindu or Buddhist or animistic cultures to reach people who will be culturally Jewish or Muslim or Hindu or animist to the end of their days but Christian in their faith allegiance”. (Note: in his book Kraft defines *Christian* with a capital “C” as follower of Christ verses *christian* with a small “c” referring to the religious institution).

What is all of this leading to? Is there not blatant idolatry in traditional Hinduism? Yes, but not among those Hindu followers of Christ described by Hoefler and Davey. Is there not a denial by most Muslims that Jesus died on the cross? Yes, but not by those Muslims we have known who have put their faith in Christ. Is it not true that Jews teach the Messiah is yet to come? Yes, but thousands of Jews go to Messianic



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Who I am becoming matters as much as what I am doing...

I left for Mali, West Africa as a missionary with great intercultural communication theory. But theory was like an unsharpened machete: I found I needed the experience of interacting with people from cultures and social structures different than my own. Mali became my laboratory, and I began to imagine a preparation process that encompassed both theory *and* practice.

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synagogues and believe, as did thousands of Jews in the first century, that Yeshua is indeed the long-awaited Son of David.

We are tentatively coming to the conviction that God is doing a new thing to reach these remaining nations (*ta ethne*) dominated by mega-faiths. If Bosch had it right that faith in Christ wasn't meant to be a religion, could it be that we are witnessing some of the first fruits of vast movements where Jesus is causing the Gospel to break out of "Christianity"? Where those who know Jesus remain as a sweet fragrance inside the religion of their birth, and eventually the number of born-again adherents grows so large that a reform movement from inside that religion is birthed?

The process may be theologically messy, but we see no alternative. If we view both culture and religion as a person's own skin, we can look beyond it to the millions of human hearts longing for God yet longing to remain in community with their own people. This is in no way universalism (the belief that in the end all will be saved). Rather, this is a call to take much more seriously Christ's final words to go into all the world – Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian – and make disciples of all nations. 🌐

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Seeking to Nurture "Gospel Movements"

The ethos of one new mission agency includes an emphasis on "insider movements" or "Gospel movements" (instead of "church-planting movements") among unreached Muslim peoples. The founders here explain why.

- The term "Church Planting" implies inventing a new structure. No matter how contextualized the "church" may be, it is still a new structure that is foreign to the people group. Church-planting work of various levels of contextualization is necessary in some contexts. However, our primary desire is for the spontaneous spread of culturally relevant Gospel movements through *pre-existing networks*. We believe that the extended family unit is the primary and foremost biblical model of *ecclesia*.
- Our aim is to be *catalytic agents* in the spawning of new movements. We do not have a prescribed methodology. We focus on facilitating the induc-

tive learning of the scriptures that will enable indigenous believers to define their own convictions in their daily living. Using the scriptures as the primary and foremost authority, we trust in the self-correcting power of God's Word that is lived out through obedience and the work of the Holy Spirit to lead the indigenous believers.

- Catalyzing a Gospel movement should not end after one iteration. Within any growing indigenous movement, there should be apostles ready to break out into new territories and peoples. These apostles will primarily be responsible in taking the gospel to other unreached Muslims. We, as "incoming catalytic agents", should constantly look to spot these apostles and encourage them to develop their own missiology and its corresponding structures to carry out their responsibilities most effectively. In this sense, true gospel movement does not separate "church planting" effort from "mission planting" work. 🌐