

Why Muslims Follow Jesus

The results of a survey of converts from Islam.
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"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," Charles Dickens said about the time leading up to the French Revolution in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The same could be said today of Christian witness to Muslims, who belong to a bitterly divided community undergoing a revolution.

The anti-Christian part of the Islamic resurgence certainly qualifies as the "worst of times." It burst onto the world scene with the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and into everyone's living room on September 11, 2001, leaving victims and sometimes churches in its wake.

In the eyes of those who long for Muslims to know Jesus as they do, the unprecedented trickles—and in a few cases, floods—of Muslims who have chosen to follow Christ in previously evangelistically arid lands undoubtedly constitute the "best of times." In the late 1960s, there was a major turning to Christ among the Javanese in Indonesia, following a conflict between Muslims and communists. We have seen similar movements in North Africa and South Asia, along with smaller ones elsewhere.

In fact, and perhaps counterintuitively, the number of new Christians each year outstrips the number of new Muslims, even though the annual growth rate is higher for Muslims (1.81 percent) than for Christians (1.23 percent). Over the last century, Christians have grown at a slower rate than have Muslims, with Muslims increasing from 12 percent to 21 percent of the global population during that time. But this is hardly surprising. Christianity has more total followers than Islam. More people need to become Christians annually simply to remain at roughly a third of the world population. Muslims are increasing in sub-Saharan Africa and among African Americans by conversion, but elsewhere the growth is mostly by birth or immigration. The major growth for Protestants, especially evangelicals and Pentecostals, has been by conversion.

So what attracts Muslims to follow Jesus? Between 1991 and 2007, about 750 Muslims who have decided to follow Christ filled out an extensive questionnaire on that basic question. The respondents—from 30 countries and 50 ethnic groups—represent every major region of the Muslim world. (Copies of the questionnaire are available from dudley@fuller.edu.) The participants ranked the relative importance of different influences and whether they occurred before, at the time of, or after their decision to follow Christ. While the survey, prepared at Fuller Theological Seminary's School of Intercultural Studies, does not claim scientific precision, it provides a glimpse into some of the key means the Spirit of God is using to open Muslim hearts to the gospel.

Seeing a lived faith

First, we can look at the experiences that most influenced Muslims. For example, respondents ranked the *lifestyle of Christians* as the most important influence in their decision to follow Christ. A North African former Sufi mystic noted with approval that there was no gap between the moral profession and the practice of Christians he saw. An Egyptian contrasted the love of a Christian group at an American university with the unloving

treatment of Muslim students and faculty he encountered at a university in Medina. An Omani woman explained that Christians treat women as equals. Others noted loving Christian marriages. Some poor people said the expatriate Christian workers they knew had adopted, contrary to their expectations, a simple lifestyle, wearing local clothes and observing local customs of not eating pork, drinking alcohol, or touching those of the opposite sex. A Moroccan was even welcomed by his former Christian in-laws after he underwent a difficult divorce.

Many Muslims who faced violence at the hands of other Muslims did not see it in the Christians they knew (regrettably, of course, Christians have been guilty of interethnic strife elsewhere). Muslim-on-Muslim violence has led to considerable disillusionment for many Muslims, from those who survived the 1971 war between the Bengalis of East Pakistan and the Pathans, Sindis, and Punjabis of West Pakistan, to Arab and Berber tensions in North Africa, and to Arab herdsmen fighting black African farmers in Darfur.

The next most important influence was the *power of God in answered prayers and healing*. Like most of the factors that former Muslims list, experiences of God's supernatural intervention often increase *after* Muslims decide to follow Christ.

In North Africa, Muslim neighbors asked Christians to pray for a very sick daughter who then was healed. In Senegal, a Muslim *marabout* (spiritual leader) referred a patient to Christians when he was not able to bring healing. In Pakistan, after a pilgrimage to Mecca did not cure a disabled Shiite girl, she was healed following Christian prayer.

Closely related was the finding that some noted *deliverance from demonic power* as another reason they were attracted to Jesus. After all, he is the healing prophet in the Qur'an and has power over demons in the Gospels. In northern Nigeria, a *malam* (what some might call a witchdoctor) used sorcery against a man who was considering following Jesus. The seeker became insane, and his extended family left him. But then he prayed that Christ would free him, and he was healed.

It helps to note that a third of the 750-person sample were folk Muslims, with a characteristic concern for power and blessings. It is also worth noting that the Jesus portrayed in the Qur'an is a prophet who heals lepers and the blind and raises the dead. Not surprisingly, many Muslims find him attractive. Of course, power and blessings do not constitute the final word for Muslims. The Bible also offers a theology of suffering, and many Muslims who follow Christ find that their faith is strengthened through trials.

The third biggest influence listed by respondents was *dissatisfaction with the type of Islam they had experienced*. They expressed unhappiness with the Qur'an, which they perceive as emphasizing God's punishment more than his love (although the Qur'an says he loves those who love him [3:31]). As for Islam's requirement that liturgical prayer should be in Arabic, a Javanese man asked, "Doesn't an all-knowing God know Indonesian?" Others criticized folk Islam's use of amulets and praying at the graves of dead saints.

Some respondents decried Islamic militancy and the imposition of Islamic law, which they said is not able to transform hearts and society. This disillusionment is broad in the Muslim world. Many Iranians became interested in the gospel after the Khomeini revolution of 1979 brought in rule by clergy. Pakistanis became more receptive after President Zia ul-Haq (1977-1988) tried to implement Islamic law. And Afghans became more open after Islamist Taliban conquest and rule (1994-2001).

As with Paul and Cornelius in Acts, visions and dreams played a role in the conversion of many. More than one in four respondents, 27 percent, noted dreams and visions before their decision for Christ, 40 percent at the time of conversion, and 45 percent afterward. Many Muslims view dreams as links between the seen and unseen worlds, and pre-conversion visions and dreams often lead Muslims to consult a Christian or the Bible. Frequently a person in the vision, understood to be Jesus, radiates light or wears white (one respondent, though, said Jesus appeared in green, a color sometimes associated with Islamic holy persons). An Algerian woman had a vision that her Muslim grandmother came into her room and said, "Jesus is not dead; he is here." In Israel, an Arab dreamed that his deceased father said, "Follow the pastor. He will show you the right way." Other dreams and visions occurred later and provided encouragement during persecution. A Turkish woman in jail because of her conversion had a vision that she would be released, and she was. A vision of thousands of believers in the streets proclaiming their faith encouraged a young man in North Africa to persevere.

The message is the medium

The gospel message, especially its assurance of salvation and forgiveness, is also a significant attraction to Muslims. The Qur'an states that "those who repent and believe, and work righteousness ... will enter paradise" (19:60). Yet it also states that God forgives whom he wills and punishes whom he wills (2:284), so Muslims do not have certainty of salvation. One Indonesian woman spoke of her fear, based on a tradition attributed to Muhammad, that the bridge over hell to paradise is as thin as a hair. An Egyptian said he was attracted to Christian faith because it preaches that people can be sure of their acceptance by God.

Next in attraction for Muslims is the *spiritual truth in the Bible*. The Qur'an attests that the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel (commonly understood as the New Testament) are from God. Even though Muslims are generally taught that these writings became corrupted, they often find them compelling reading and discover truth that they conclude must be from God. The Bible helped one Egyptian understand "the true character of God." The Sermon on the Mount helped convince a Lebanese Muslim that he should follow the one who taught and exemplified these values.

Respondents were also attracted by the Bible's teaching about *the love of God*. In the Qur'an, although God loves those who love him, his love is conditional. He does not love those who reject faith (3:31-32). There is nothing in the Qur'an like, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10), or, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

A West African was surprised by God's love for all people, even enemies. Likewise, although the Qur'an denies that God is a father (37:152), many Muslims find this a comforting concept. Particularly attractive to Muslims is the *love expressed through the life and teachings of Jesus*. The Qur'an already calls him faultless (19:19). Many Muslims are attracted to him by his depiction in the Qur'an and then go to the Gospels to find out more. A Saudi was first drawn to him at a Christmas Eve service in Germany—even before he knew German. Like many, an Iranian Shiite was attracted to Christ before he was attracted to Christianity. A North African Sufi found Jesus' portrayal as the Good Shepherd particularly meaningful. When Christ's love transforms committed Christians into a loving community, many Muslims listed *a desire to join such a fellowship* as next in importance.

Subconscious influences

For the most part, respondents did not say that political or economic circumstances influenced their decisions. But it's hard not to notice that Iranians, Pakistanis, Afghans, Bangladeshis, and Algerians became more responsive after enduring Muslim political turmoil or attempts to impose Islamic law. Christian relief and development agencies try hard to guard against spiritually misusing their position as providers of desperately needed goods and services. But natural disasters in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Sahel region inevitably put Muslims in contact with Christians trying to follow Jesus. It is no surprise that some of these Muslims also choose to follow Christ.

Yet while it is the "best of times" for Christian witness to Muslims, it remains also the "worst of times." In many places, apostasy is tantamount to rejecting family, religion, culture, ethnicity, and nationality. Thus, many Muslim converts face persecution from family, police, or militants. Two friends were unable to fill out the questionnaire—one because he was apparently poisoned by his own family, the other because the government imprisoned him and later his tongue was cut out by a warlord so that he could no longer say the name of Jesus.

But Muslim converts to Christ know that such persecution can, in a mysterious way, be part of the best of times. Jesus, in fact, said it was a blessing. That's because with or without persecution, Muslims are discovering an experiential truth unknown to them before. As a Zambian Muslim exclaimed, "God loves me just as I am."

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