

## MAKING SENSE OF CONTEXTUALIZATION: A GUIDE ON SETTING PARAMETERS FOR CHURCH PLANTERS

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### 1 Introduction

The continued discussion between “accommodationists” and “rejectionists”<sup>2</sup> involved in church planting<sup>3</sup> in the Muslim world is exhausting. This discussion is not confined to academia and journals. In fact, as I encounter church planting teams from various geographical areas of Dar Al-Islam and from varying denominational backgrounds and sending agencies, it is the topic of conversation among practitioners both green and veteran. And it seems most hold fairly strong opinions on the topic. Because of the amount of heat these discussions tend to produce, the thought of

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<sup>2</sup> These two terms will be used throughout this article. Rejectionists are those who view Islam as a religion only and have an entirely negative opinion of it. Accommodationists are those who view Islam as a culture or civilization with some redeemable forms (though a spectrum certainly exists). This terminology was developed by Duane Alexander Miller in a rudimentary form in ‘Reappropriation: An Accommodationist Hermeneutic of Islamic Christianity’ in *St. Francis Magazine* 5:3 (June 2009) and he expands upon his “two stream hypothesis” in an unpublished article entitled, ‘The Two Stream Hypothesis in Islamic Christianity: Accommodationists and Rejectionists.’ From my perspective, his terminology is much clearer than many of the ambiguous terms often used and misused in the missiological community (i.e. C5, Extractionist, Insider, Contextual, etc).

<sup>3</sup> One might ask, “What is a church?” or “What do you mean by church planting?” Unfortunately my opinions of exactly what a church is and is not are beyond the scope of this article and, though some of them will come out in the body of this article, for the most part we will have to be content with a quite simplistic working definition. Namely, a church is a group of people who view themselves as a community committed to following Jesus as revealed in the Bible.

joining in and having my thoughts picked apart by those entrenched on either side is not appealing at all. Yet, however hesitantly, I am submitting these thoughts. This is primarily at the insistence of fellow co-laborers who have convinced me that the way in which I set parameters could help others in processing through the differing philosophies of ministry that are being discussed both in missiological literature and around the kitchen table of practitioners worldwide.

In this article, I will first make an attempt to identify exactly what the issues are. That is, by what categories do we evaluate the health of a Muslim background congregation? After proposing the categories, I will go on to offer suggestions as to what some standards of evaluation in these categories should be. Further, I intend to deal with the often inflammatory question of Muslim background congregations' views on the Qur'an/Muhammad<sup>4</sup> and the question of whether or not a congregation who claims to belong to Jesus as revealed in the Bible can retain an Islamic identity and remain healthy. The final section, rather than being a typical conclusion or summary will deal with suggestions on how both accommodationists and rejectionists might apply this information.

## **2 The Problem(s)**

Currently, our family's service to the Kingdom carries us throughout the Muslim world. As a result we are forced to continually evaluate various ministries as we consider partnerships. One of the key questions in our determining whether or not to partner with a church planting team is, what are they trying to plant? We must

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<sup>4</sup> The questions of "Who is Muhammad?" and "What is the Qur'an?" are really one in the same. To affirm that Muhammad received revelation from God is to affirm the revelation (Qur'an) has a divine origin. Or to affirm the Qur'an as having a divine origin is to affirm the messenger (Muhammad) as one who speaks on God's behalf (a prophet).

consider different aspects of the hoped for fruit. Different church structures (traditional, cell or house) and types of leadership (majority rule, plurality of elders or single leader) exist as well as varying doctrinal distinctives (Reformed, charismatic, etc) and, of course, varying degrees of contextualization in many areas of life and worship (clothing, language, liturgy, identity, etc).

Views on structures, leadership and doctrinal distinctives are easy enough to determine. Reformed means Reformed and house church network means house church network. However, when it comes to contextualization, it is notable that virtually no one uses terminology in the same way. To some “C5” means cross-cultural church planters praying in the mosque, and to others it means trying to win people to Jesus with the Qur’an. Neither of these is what Travis intended when he developed the C-scale.<sup>5</sup> The same can be said of the terms “insider,” “extractionist,” etc. Adding to the difficulty is the tendency of a few to look down upon those whose philosophy of ministry differs from their own - and even fewer who use language that can seem to demonize their brethren.

The aforementioned factors have worked in a synergistic fashion to nudge some in the world of Muslim ministry to avoid wearing any particular badge and refraining from being forthcoming with their views on the whole subject. This has caused me no small amount of grief when trying to figure out exactly where a church planting team falls in terms of contextualization. As a result I have developed some principles in determining whether or not a church planting team is working toward healthy church or unhealthy syncretism.<sup>6</sup> My hope is that in applying this method

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<sup>5</sup> See Travis, John, ‘The C1 to C6 Spectrum’ in *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* 34:4 (October 1998) and Travis, John, ‘Messianic Muslim Follower of Isa: A Closer Look at C5 Believers and Congregations’ in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17:1 (Spring 2000).

<sup>6</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss rejectionist parameters, it does seem worthy to note that I am equally concerned with avoiding an extractionist philosophy of ministry.

with those involved in the current debate (whether as defenders of a position or simply as observers), both sides will reconsider the standard by which they judge their methodology and the methodology of other church planting teams.

### **3 Where are we going?**

First, it is significant to note that we do not evaluate a church planting team based upon where one of their infant churches is right now. Certainly evaluating the current situation is important to understanding in which areas discipleship should be focused. However, in determining whether or not a team is trying to plant a healthy church or an overly syncretistic church, it is more important to find out where the team envisions the church going. For example, the Apostle Paul would probably prefer we did not judge his church planting team based on the behavior of the Corinthian church just before he wrote his first letter to them in which he dealt with the corporate affirmation of adultery, issues of division and even gluttony in the presence of hungry brothers and sisters. Rather, it seems better to judge his team's service based upon where they were attempting to lead the church at Corinth. The same could be said of all of his team's church plants – as none was perfect. In applying this concept, we might consider not stopping at asking whether or not a congregation baptizes, but adding a follow-up question such as: "What do you think about this?" or, "What do you think the ideal situation would be?" The second answer lets us know where the church planting team is attempting to lead the new believers.

I mention this at the outset of this article because in reading the discussions on both sides, it seems we are assuming what the local church is like right now is what it will always be. This is not a good assumption. Rather, we all know that a *new* believer's theology and practice will change with time. In the same manner, the theology and praxis of groups of young believers will change over

time. This change may be healthy or unhealthy. So the question is, “Where are they going?”

## 4 The Criteria

### 4.1 Need for criteria

Understanding that we are evaluating what the church planting team is praying the end community be like, the next question is: “What are the criteria by which we evaluate?” Abdul Asad<sup>7</sup> has argued that the goal should be a downward shift in the C-scale. So, a church that begins as a C5 community is not in danger of becoming unhealthy as long as it is making progress to C4. But a content C5 congregation being influenced by the planting team that is content with C5 is not a good situation. I appreciate Abdul Asad bringing up the question of “Where are we going?” Yet the C-scale is, for the most part, misunderstood and highly inflammatory in Muslim ministry circles.<sup>8</sup> Different people have differing understandings of what C4 and C5 really are.<sup>9</sup> Due to this, it seems wise

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<sup>7</sup> See Abdul Asad, ‘Rethinking the Insider Movement Debate: Global Historical Insights’ in *St. Francis Magazine* 5:4 (August 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Abdul Asad actually seems to misunderstand the scale himself when he makes distinctions between C4 and C5 with regard to theology and praxis. The only difference between C4 and C5, according to Travis, is identity. Are they a strange kind of Christian or a strange kind of Muslim? This was my initial understanding of his C-scale (see footnote 5 above) upon reading it and was confirmed in a conversation with Travis in 2008. This non-uniform use of language is one of the major issues in the whole contextualization discussion. With terminology that is almost universally applied in an inconsistent manner, we must drop some of the misunderstood terminology and be clear in articulating what we are attempting to plant.

<sup>9</sup> This may also vary according to one’s organizational policies. I recently visited with an American brother who holds two degrees in missiology and serves with a decidedly “non-C5” organization. Upon describing a particular movement in the Islamic world to him, he commented it was wonderful. I asked him where it fell on the C-scale. His response was, “Definitely C4.” Yet when describing the

to clearly state where it is we are praying a congregation goes. My proposal is that exploring ideals in the areas of narrative beliefs, doctrinal beliefs, virtue and ritual practices would provide a better picture of what a team is attempting to accomplish.

While I have made four categories for the sake of evaluation, it is notable that each of these categories affects the other categories. Among Evangelicals in the West, I often hear the phrase “orthodoxy begets orthopraxy”. This is true, but this truth does not preclude orthopraxy begetting orthodoxy. What I mean here is that all four areas (narrative belief, doctrinal belief, virtue and ritual) affect one another. Due to my upbringing in a very secular society that tends to compartmentalize various aspects of life (and thus different aspects of faith), it has taken me living among Muslims in a Near Eastern context to understand this. Yet it is true. Both Eastern Orthodox Christians and Muslims are quite aware that while doctrinal belief affects behavior and ritual, ritual also informs belief. This is why I think it necessary to evaluate all four aspects, rather than simply doctrinal beliefs, when considering overall health.

#### **4.2 Narrative**

Narrative (historical events) is what our faith is based upon: what Jesus did, how he behaved, with whom he spoke, what he said, how he died, his empty tomb. This is what is meant by narrative – history, the very human stuff. And these things are absolutely foundational to our entire faith – this narrative drives everything else. To state it in the negative: if our narrative is inaccurate, then our faith is futile.<sup>10</sup> With this in mind, it is clear that the narrative upon which a congregation bases its beliefs, practices and life in general is absolutely foundational to evaluating a congregation.

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same movement to John Travis in 2008, he claimed it was “an excellent example of a biblical C5 movement.”

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:17

Since inconsistency in the Gospel Narrative causes everything else to fall apart, this is an area of primary importance and we must set some standard for it and be diligent in evaluating this area.

Fortunately, inconsistency in the Gospel Narrative does not seem to be an issue among either accommodationists or rejectionists. In fact, it seems that even the most accommodationistic teams stay quite true to the Gospel Narrative by reappropriating Islamic literature to aid those they are ministering to in coming to accept the Gospel Story.<sup>11</sup> Although this is not an issue with church planting teams on either end of the spectrum, it remains important to establish standards. (The effects of Liberal Protestantism in the West should be enough to encourage us to safeguard against the skewing and twisting of the Gospel Narrative.) An excellent standard would be the Apostles' Creed. It is primarily narrative, universally affirmed, brief and ancient. Regardless of whether a congregation is rejectionist or accommodationist, if they cannot affirm the Apostles' Creed, further teaching is in order.<sup>12</sup> And, if a team is not willing to lead a congregation toward affirming such a basic confession of the Gospel Narrative, significant concerns should be raised regarding exactly upon what a congregation they are planting will base their entire faith.

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<sup>11</sup> This can also occur even when the church planting team has a rejectionist philosophy of ministry. In one instance I was introduced to a group of indigenous leaders by a rejectionist church planting team. The team spoke the national trade language but not Arabic (the heart language of the people). As I asked questions in Arabic, it became clear that most of the indigenous brothers and sisters developed and used a highly accommodationistic method of proclaiming the Gospel Narrative. Yet they did not desire the expatriate team to know this. Perhaps they were C4 to their local community while presenting themselves as C3 to the expatriate team!

<sup>12</sup> We must bear in mind that affirmation of the Apostles' Creed is not what is required to "be saved" or "enter the Kingdom." It is, however a good standard as the goal for a congregation to affirm.

### 4.3 Virtue

Paul dealt with extensive behavioral issues with the congregation at Corinth. We should expect to do the same. In determining a minimal standard for Muslim background congregations, we would do well to consider Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount". It is one of the most beautiful and challenging teachings on Kingdom life in the Bible. In it Jesus calls his people not only to purity in behavior, but to purity in heart and intention as well. To have eyes and ears that see and hear in the world as Jesus did is the goal of the congregation that is following hard after God. The reason the Sermon on the Mount serves as an excellent standard is due to its understandability to the congregation from a Muslim background (cultural nearness) and its counter-cultural message within that same society.<sup>13</sup> And we should have serious concerns about a church planting team that will not affirm obedience to Christ's commands in the Sermon on the Mount as a goal for behavior among the congregations they are planting.

Yet as we seek to evaluate the behavioral standards of a church planting team by the Sermon on the Mount, we would also do well to keep in mind our own failures and those failures our sending congregations have had and continue to have in the West. If those in an Islamic context who come into the Kingdom practicing polygamy or spousal abuse challenge us, we need only to look at the divorce rate (serial monogamy) and spousal abuse statistics among Christians in the West for a gentle reminder that all congregations struggle in living out their faith. But regardless of the particular sin, the goal remains the same – transformed lives fully obedient to God and repentance when we fail to live out Jesus' standard.

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<sup>13</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into how and why the Sermon on the Mount is at once understandable and challenging to those from a Muslim background. Nevertheless, almost anyone who has read through it with a Muslim will affirm both its cultural nearness and its radical message to Islamic society.



#### 4.4 Doctrine

There is no doubt that doctrine (correct intellectual belief) is the major concern rejectionists have with accommodationists. A brief note here concerning how Christianity has been contextualized in the West may assist in understanding why this is such a significant discussion among Western Christians working in Dar Al-Islam. While multiple factors exist, our Greco-Roman heritage, the Reformation and the Enlightenment are probably the most significant contributors to our focus on doctrine in the West. Because of the aforementioned philosophical and intellectual influences, *our civilization as a whole* is enamored with philosophy and correct thought and, thus, correct intellectual belief.

This concern within our society has driven what questions we ask in general in day-to-day life. Specific to this discussion, it has driven what questions we ask of God and the Bible. Our questions tend to be concerned not simply with behavior (i.e. obeying God), but with *understanding* the behavior as well (i.e. *why* God requires us to do such and such). This emphasis is not bad at all. In fact it has many strengths. Yet we must be aware that our contextualization of Christianity focuses on correct doctrine, and that sometimes it is at the expense of virtue, ritual and narrative.<sup>14</sup> In the case of the Western believer, congregation or church planting team that does focus on doctrine to the neglect of the other areas of faith, we would do well to repent of worshipping God with our minds *only*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Contrast this with Eastern Orthodoxy (much closer geographically, culturally and liturgically to Islam than Western Evangelicalism) which emphasizes liturgy over doctrine. For an excellent primer on Eastern Orthodoxy see Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> The issues over which we break fellowship in the Western Evangelical tradition are evidence of this.

We tend to form new congregations, denominations, etc due to disagreements over doctrine, not virtue.

Having some understanding of why the question of correct doctrine is so significant to this discussion, we must confess that not all beliefs are of equal importance. Some beliefs are essential to the Faith, others are distinctive to a particular expression of Christianity and others are simply guesses, assumptions, traditions and opinions. In understanding where a church planting team envisions the new congregation going, I would propose we stick to the essentials. But what standard should we use? Because the Nicene Creed at once covers the essentials, is brief, ancient and ecumenical, it makes for an excellent standard.<sup>16</sup> And again, the question is not whether or not the congregation currently affirms it. Rather, “Is the doctrinal goal that they affirm it and are they being instructed to do so?”

At this point, rejectionists might say, ‘Well, that does it! There is no way those “Muslim followers of Jesus” will ever affirm that Jesus is “begotten of the Father”’. This reaction is a failure to see that an actual pilgrimage occurs. It is doubtful the thief on the cross could have articulated the Nicene Creed – he was a *new* brother. We must walk with our brothers and sisters not only prior to their entering the Kingdom but in the early stages of the congregation’s formation as well. And, just as we do prior to a Muslim entering the Kingdom, we must continue to affirm that which is correct doctrine and use wisdom in discerning which errors to address first and how to address them.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For a fuller consideration of Nicene Christianity as a contextual form in the Islamic World, see Abu Daoud, ‘Mission and Sacrament Part III: A Paleo-Orthodox Approach to Contextualization in the Muslim World’, *St. Francis Magazine* 5:2 (April 2009).

<sup>17</sup> It seems the Apostle Paul was gentle “like a nursing mother” at times and at other times he was quite bold in rebuking. We would do well to follow Paul’s example in being sensitive to the leading of the Spirit when determining whether we strongly rebuke or gently encourage as we walk with our new brethren.

In any case, “Muslim believers” do exist all over the Islamic world, and they are living proof that it is possible for our brethren within Islamic society to affirm the Nicene Creed. In fact, when we are not so hurried that we try to pick green fruit and instead wait on the Spirit’s timing, they are often quite open to understanding it *in its context*. What I mean here is that the congregation may very well say, “We prefer not to use some of the Nicene terminology because it has negative connotations in our society and brings up negative imagery in our minds, but we certainly affirm it in its context.” And this is our desire – that they are not only sensitive to their own situation (culture, language, etc), but also grasp the situation of others.<sup>18</sup> Yet this is a process and we cannot expect a new congregation to come to this conclusion upon conversion in all instances. Even the Thessalonian congregation held beliefs that ran contrary to the Nicene Creed.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, some accommodationists might say, “Well that is not good. That creed is not the Bible and we should leave it up to the local congregation to determine their creed or statement of beliefs.”<sup>20</sup> The issue here is just the same. One who says this fails to realize these are *new* brothers and sisters. While we do not require them to have it all together to enter the Kingdom, they do need to grow. And we must ask if God’s Spirit is really at work in these dear people if He is not leading them to the same minimal doctrinal affirmation He has led the rest of His people for centu-

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<sup>18</sup> And not simply the particular questions being asked at Nicea, but also the language used to articulate the answers. For example, “begotten of the Father” or “only begotten of the Father” certainly carries a significantly different concept in Latin or Greek in the fourth century than it does in Arabic or Urdu or Mandarin in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This awareness in a congregation indicates a great deal of maturity in thought.

<sup>19</sup> 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2

<sup>20</sup> Those who hold to such a view might consider that Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Nestorianism, Oriental Orthodoxy, Western Protestantism, Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses and even Branch Davidians claim to be consistent with the Bible and some have quite different creedal statements.

ries<sup>21</sup> - again, not that they would even use it in their worship, but that they would come to the place where they could affirm it in its context. If a team is uncomfortable with teaching beliefs as ancient and as accepted among God's people as those of the Nicene Creed, we should have some serious concerns about what kind of congregations they envision planting.

#### **4.5 Rituals**

Baptism and communion are the two universally accepted rituals among God's people, baptism being the initiation ritual and communion being the ritual indicating continued fellowship and good standing among the brethren. There is no wisdom here in bickering over terminology. If a congregation wants to reappropriate a word identified with ritual purity practices in their context (i.e. *al-ghusl al-'adhiim*), so be it. If they want to transliterate baptism as we have in English, so be it. The point is that they are practicing the ritual that identifies them with Jesus and his people.

Most accommodationists I have interacted with have no problem with this. These two rituals are their goal as well. I can however think of two who have expressed to me they see no need to impose such a custom on our brethren. When asked why, they reply that it is not necessary and the brethren do not want to be baptized. Again, this is a failure to understand that people are on a pilgrimage and growing in their faith. This is a rite instituted by our Lord, which was applied to Jew and Gentile alike throughout Acts and, to my knowledge, has not been abrogated. We should earnestly pray for, walk with and gently instruct our brothers and sisters as they come to understand the significance of these two rituals. This is why church planting teams exist – to walk with the

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<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, contrary to some of the individualistic missiological theories emanating from Western Evangelicalism, the New Testament model is interdependence. Local congregations within the Universal Church should learn from and be taught by one another regardless of their background.

brethren as they take those initial steps towards maturity. Due to the centrality of both baptism and communion to our common Faith, we should have serious concerns about a church planting team that does not envision a congregation that baptizes and participates in communion.

To those who would be critical of the lack of understanding some new congregations demonstrate with regard to baptism and communion, we would do well to remember that many of our “mature” congregations are full of baptized people who take communion on a regular basis but live like hell. Is it a greater sin to misunderstand the two rituals the Lord instituted because of immaturity or to eat and drink judgment upon oneself? Again, the question is not whether they have it all together – they do not. Rather, the question is where is the congregation headed?

## **5 Muhammad and the Qur’an**

First, I do not consider Muhammad to be a prophet of God or the Qur’an to be the Word of God. Second, I do highly respect Muhammad for several reasons and I do think he worked hard to bring his people to a place of unity and to the worship of God. His striving in this is commendable, but it does not make him a prophet of God in the biblical sense. Further, I have serious concerns about the three church planters I have met who affirm Muhammad as a prophet of God and the Qur’an as God’s Word. To balance this strong statement, I would like to add that those same serious concerns exist with regard to the many church planters I have met who believe pointing out the negative aspects of Muhammad (denigrating him) and attempting to discredit the Qur’an are essential to an effective witness.

With those clarifications out of the way, I do not understand the problem some seem to have with a Muslim who comes to faith in Jesus as the Way to God, affirms the Gospel Narrative and whose

life is transforming but still holds Muhammad in high esteem. I have met several such young brothers and have found their zeal for God and spreading the Gospel to be quite refreshing. One example may suffice here: When asking one younger brother (three years in the Faith) from an Arab Muslim background about his thoughts on Muhammad, he expressed to me that he sees Muhammad as a kind of prophet who pointed to Jesus. When asked about his views of Jesus, he said Jesus is divine and the Savior; that Jesus died and rose again and is the only path to God. When asked about the Qur'an, he said it is the Word of God.<sup>22</sup> When asked about the Bible, he said it is the Word of God. When asked how he reconciled the differences in the two, he said there are no differences, that those "differences" are just traditions the religious leaders use to control people; that he now interprets the Qur'an, not through the traditions, but through the Bible.<sup>23</sup> When asked if he reads the

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<sup>22</sup> In my experience, this is the exception. Most accommodationist brethren I have interacted with affirm the Qur'an as significant and containing truth *inasmuch as it is consistent with the Bible*. But few have called it the "Word of God."

<sup>23</sup> While I personally do not agree with this statement and view the Old Testament as quite different from the Qur'an, I do not find this method of reappropriation altogether inconsistent with the method of reappropriation the New Testament authors used when handling the Old Testament, non-canonical Jewish literature, pagan poets and even pagan "prophets." And while I realize this is a sensitive issue within Evangelicalism, the similarity in methodology cannot be denied. However, this should not pose a threat. Rather, it is precisely because I believe the New Testament, being inspired by God Himself, generously reappropriates from inspired Old Testament authors and uninspired pagan authors, that I am quite comfortable with our brethren reappropriating texts and concepts from the Qur'an. For a more detailed discussion on the methods Accommodationists use in reappropriating Islamic texts, I highly recommend Duane Alexander Miller, 'Reappropriation: An Accommodationist Hermeneutic of Islamic Christianity' in *St. Francis Magazine* 5:3 (June 2009). In addition to categorizing the methods employed by our brethren, Miller also compares this form of reappropriation to the early Roman Christians' apologetic that allegiance to Christ actually made one a better citizen of Rome. Both his categorization of methodology and his comparison are genius.

Qur'an on a regular basis, he said he reads it only to evangelize others, but that his time was better spent in the Bible.

Another encouraging aspect of these brothers' testimonies is seeing how they have progressed and that they are open to changing their views as God turns on the proverbial lights. During the conversation above, our brother actually began his explanation with, "Where I am at right now is that I see Muhammad..." This is healthy. He is obviously struggling with Muhammad's role in all of this and is certainly better off in his views than living by the teaching of Muhammad (the Law without Christ) in order to obtain Paradise. And he continues to grow, as we all should. Glory to God! And while it would not be good for the church planting team that led him to faith to declare to him that Muhammad was a prophet and the Qur'an has the same status as the Bible, it would also be destructive for them to encourage an attitude of hatred and disdain for Muhammad that keeps him from being an effective witness to his family.<sup>24</sup>

## 6 Identity

Those familiar with the current debate over contextual ministry will quickly notice the criteria do not involve Muslim identity. While the question of self and community identity is a crucial struggle that must occur as a Muslim background congregation comes to faith in Jesus and matures, leeway should be given. The entire discussion really hinges on something that has not, to my knowledge, been fleshed out in missiological literature. Namely,

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<sup>24</sup> A common emotion among new believers from an Islamic background is to feel betrayed by their community and Muhammad in particular. If these emotions are not tempered, but instead catalyzed by ill-informed Christians who only understand the Western perspective of Muhammad, the young believers run the risk of publicly denigrating Muhammad and completely losing their witness due to emotional outbursts against a person (which is a sin) rather than Gospel proclamation.

the question of whether Islam is a religion<sup>25</sup> only or if it is a society/culture/civilization. If it is a religion only, we must seek to supplant it. If religion is only one component of the civilization of Islam, we must seek to redeem it.<sup>26</sup>

After a few years of poring over literature and interacting with Muslims (both religious leaders and laypersons), my opinion is that Islam is much more than a religion.<sup>27</sup> It is a society and culture, possibly even a civilization unto itself.<sup>28</sup> If my assumption is correct, it seems we should not be too intent on dragging people away from their heritage. Instead we should be intent on seeing the Kingdom come within the society.

In explaining this concept, I often use myself as an example. Prior to coming to faith in Jesus, I was culturally an American. I am still an American. Yet in America abortion is legal, immodest clothing is common and fornication is accepted. What do I do? Theoretically I could say that because of my faith in Jesus and membership in God's Kingdom, I am no longer an American as so much of America's culture runs contrary to the Kingdom. Of course this attitude would kill my witness among *most* Americans. Instead, I simply do not participate. Those things the American government and society permit, even encourage, which run contrary to the Kingdom of God are off limits for me. Does this make me a bad American? Some say it does, but I would argue it makes me a better one. So, I choose to proudly identify myself as an

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<sup>25</sup> Religion is a notoriously difficult word to define. Since this article is directed to a primarily Western audience, I am using it in the very Western sense of: a set of beliefs concerning God (or gods).

<sup>26</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>27</sup> While his method of "dealing" with Islamic civilization differs from mine, the prominent secular political scientist Samuel Huntington came to the same conclusion with regard to classifying Islam as a civilization in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, New York: Touchstone, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> Arguments for this are beyond the scope of this article, but it is my hope that missiologists will begin to address this topic in the near future.



American and explain why my greater allegiance to Christ has made me a better citizen of the United States. Certainly I am not shy about refraining from participation in certain aspects of American life, but I still identify myself as an American.

Another identity I carry is that of postmodern. I am very open to hearing others' perspectives, yet due to my allegiance to God's Kingdom I no longer accept the proposition that objective truth does not exist and that "your path gets you to the same place as my path." Would some say that I am no longer postmodern? Perhaps, but I would, in a sense, fight for that part of my identity as well.

Yet another aspect of my identity is that of a redneck.<sup>29</sup> After coming into the Kingdom I still have a love for the outdoors, value hard blue-collar work, big trucks and cheap beer. Yet I no longer get drunk or consider racism acceptable. Would some rednecks say I have sold out? Sure, but "them's fightin' words!" And I certainly would take offense to someone trying to take away my redneck heritage. I most certainly am a redneck, but a redeemed one. The key in belonging to these groups is a willingness to allow the Kingdom to supersede any philosophy, attitude or behavior present within the community that is in opposition to God's Kingdom. In short, identity in God's Kingdom trumps all other affiliations.

This applies to Islamic civilization as well. Islam is much more than some religion invented by Muhammad. The Ummah (Community) consists not just of religion, but also of politics, family, tribe and business. Turning one's back on Islam has significant implications within the community outside of just the religious aspect. Religion is only one part of the whole. We often fail to real-

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<sup>29</sup> This is an American cultural word, originally referring to farm workers whose necks were often sun burnt (and hence red). They are from the South of the US (where it tends to be sunnier and hotter than the northern areas), and are often times stereotyped by outsiders as being connected to cultural relics and activities such as country music, trucks, cussing, smoking, drunkenness, illiteracy, and racism.

ize that one who “leaves Islam” the religion has *ipso facto* turned his back on the other components of the Ummah as well.<sup>30</sup>

Several church planters with whom I have interacted in the Muslim world who are witnessing movements bear testimony that the congregations refuse to be identified as “Christian” due to the negative political connotations. Further, the brothers and sisters feel strongly they should hold fast to their heritage while discarding anything contrary to God’s Kingdom as revealed in the Bible. Thus, they consider themselves Muslims (submitted ones) but go even further than this in evangelizing by pointing out that those “Muslims” who do not follow Jesus are not truly submitted to God. One of these movements is in the heart of Dar Al-Islam<sup>31</sup> and our brethren have borne the brunt of intense persecution for their beliefs, yet they continue to consider themselves more submitted to God than their persecutors!

The significant question that has to be dealt with is not whether one can be identified with the Kingdom of God and with Islam at the same time. Just as it is in my case of being an American, a postmodern, a redneck and a member of God’s Kingdom, the real question is which identity is the trump card. If the congregation is submitted more to the Qur’an than to the kingship and teachings of Jesus (in the Bible), this is not healthy and the community is not Christ-centered. But this is not typically the case among accom-

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<sup>30</sup> In addition to the inseparability of the different aspects of the Ummah, we would do well to remember that the roots of Islam are Christianity and Judaism. Each of the five pillars (including the form of ritual worship Muslims utilize) has Judaic and/or Christian roots. See J. Dudley Woodberry ‘Contextualization Among Muslims Reusing Common Pillars’ in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 13:4 (Oct-Dec 1996). This combined with the pagan and tribal influences upon Muhammad would seem to lead to the conclusion that Islam could be considered not another religion altogether, but a horribly syncretized form of Christianity.

<sup>31</sup> Exact location withheld due to security concerns.

modationist congregations.<sup>32</sup> Most recognize Jesus as King and themselves as his subjects as a first priority.

## 7 Application

Hopefully this article has already caused significant reflection by accommodationists and rejectionists alike. Again, the purpose was to share how I go about determining whether a church planting team that is under consideration for partnership is working toward healthy church or unhealthy syncretism. I do realize that most serving in Dar Al-Islam do not have to consider this question on a regular basis. However, regardless of how much interaction we have with other teams, we do need to continually reflect upon how we are going about planting churches and whether or not our methodology should be tweaked a bit. Further, we also need to keep our attitudes toward others who are working in an Islamic context in check - even if their methodology differs from our own. Beyond this, my hope is that some who are just entering the difficult and fascinating world of Muslim ministry are reading this article as well. For you, I hope this will help you as you process through the vast amount of literature and opinions out there and prayerfully decide, in community, what philosophy of ministry God is moving you toward. I do think that some rather direct suggestions and questions for consideration addressed to both rejectionists and accommodationists would be helpful in concluding.

First to the rejectionists, we must listen more to where the congregation (whether accommodationist or rejectionist) is going rather than where it is right now. We must evaluate based upon the goal for actual beliefs (both narrative and doctrinal) and practice (both virtue and ritual) and evaluate less upon terminology that is ambiguous, depending upon the person who uses it. Further, we must consider the question, "What is Islam?" Those who fall in this

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<sup>32</sup> At least it is not among the congregations of which I am aware.

camp generally view it as a religion only. Is that assumption true<sup>33</sup>? Could it be that religion is only one aspect of Islam?

To accommodationists, we must listen more to the doctrinal actual concerns that rejectionists have and develop some form of standard for the community we are trying to plant. We must consider that God's people are interdependent and Muslims who follow Jesus need to learn from Christians who follow Jesus just as much as we need to learn from them. One aspect of this is learning to understand Christian history and terminology.

Further, we should be careful to guard against the mentality "our way is better than their way". We must consider that while we view Islam as a civilization and want to see it redeemed, God does draw people to Himself through dissatisfaction with their civilization as well.

And both sides of this discussion, myself included, could use a healthy dose of humility, patience and unity. Rarely have I observed leaders from either side of the discussion working very hard at learning from the other side. And we have perpetuated this attitude in our fruit. Those who leave Islam to follow Jesus and those who remain within Islam while following Jesus have so much to learn from one another as they grow – what kind of example are we setting?

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<sup>33</sup> When our family entered Muslim ministry, this was my perspective. It has only been after living among and learning from those within collectivist societies where all aspects of life are integrated that my view has changed.