

**BOOK REVIEW: INDONESIAN REVIVAL:  
WHY TWO MILLION CAME TO CHRIST BY AVERY WILLIS, JR.  
(WILLIAM CAREY LIBRARY, 1977)**

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I believe that this book is the single best case study on conversion from Islam to Christianity ever written. Willis is better known for his work with the popular Masterlife series; this was his 1974 dissertation for Southwestern Baptist Seminary, which was subsequently published in book form.

He has many advantages that other scholars do not have: his obvious ease with the local languages and many years of living in Indonesia as a missionary mean he is able to use indigenous sources extensively. He is deeply conversant with important aspects of Javanese history—political, religious, cultural, ritual. Also helpful is that his sample is quite sizable—500 interviews. He is studying Javanese converts, so the limitation to one ethnicity in a diverse and populous nation like Indonesia is also a plus.

Perhaps his greatest strength is that, while writing from an avowedly confessional point of view, he is able to appreciate the complexity of conversion, how it almost always comes about through a combination of different factors—spiritual, yes, but also sociological and political. His detailed use of the records of five denominations, and his awareness of the different ethos and history of each one, shows his ability to appreciate the diversity among conservative evangelicals, a group which many secular academics simply lump together without justification. His years of missionary labor in Indonesia appear to have paid off, as he is able to marshal the research aid of numerous indigenous pastors. It is hard to picture research of this depth and quality coming about from a handful of field research visits, even lengthy ones.

That his volume was published in 1977 begs for a follow-up from some ambitious researcher (or, more likely, team of researchers). His final analysis of the hundreds of interviews performed yields the following list of reasons for conversion, in order of how many peop-

le mentioned them: Spiritual need, Government, Protection, Church, Family, Society, Christian Life, Gospel, Reaction, Service, Miracles. He explains that the Islamist violence directed at suspected Communists after the attempted Communist coup in 1965 was the occasion for the conversion of many Indonesians who were put in a place where they had to choose a religion (to prove they were not godless Communists). The Javanese were nominally Muslims, though they tended to practice a form of Islam which had syncretized numerous elements from the traditional, pre-Islamic religion. Confronted with the revenge killings exacted by Muslims and the need to choose a religion, a significant number chose Christianity. He spends a full three chapters giving the political background and also lets us know about the nature of Javanese society, and proposes a list of reasons why Javanese culture (as opposed to other Muslim cultures in Indonesia) appears to have been more disposed towards conversion to Christianity. Finally, he is refreshingly frank about the failures of his own community (Baptists) and their short comings at different times—both among the missionaries (and he was one of them) and the Indonesian leaders. The scope and depth are commendable; if there is one drawback it is that among his interviews there is a disproportionate number of church leaders and pastors, and fewer regular church members than one might hope.

The most unfortunate thing about this book is that in the field of conversion studies it appears to be relatively unknown. Even a meticulous scholar like Lewis Rambo, who delved deep into this literature for his ground-breaking 1993 volume *Understanding Religious Conversion* (Yale), does not mention Willis' important contribution in his bibliography. There is much here for the scholar, confessional or secular, to analyze and contemplate. This book will be of interest to historians, missiologists and anthropologists, and scholars in the fields of politics and religious studies.