God’s Truth, Christianity, and Other Religions: Towards a Broader Understanding of Christian Conversion and Discipleship, with an Appraisal of Insider Movements within Islam

LARRY W. CALDWELL

This article argues that elements of God’s Truth may be found in religions outside of Christianity. As a result, new followers of Jesus do not need to abandon those Truth elements—including the Truth elements found within their cultures—in order to become Christians. This more positive view of the religion and current culture of these new followers of Jesus has enormous implications for Christian missionaries. Often these missionaries seek after a point of conversion without reference to the Truth found in the religion of the potential believers and then follow this up with a discipleship process that forces new believers to turn away from their culture. This article argues instead that an emphasis upon relationship is the key to Christian conversion and discipleship: relationship with followers of Jesus; relationship with Jesus himself; and relationship with Jesus in fellowship with other Jesus followers. Two case studies on conversion and discipleship from Chinese and Muslim contexts illustrate this relationship element and pave the way for an appraisal of insider movements within Islam in light of all that has been discussed.

Introduction

What does it mean to “convert” from one thing to another? I myself have “converted” many times in my life: from an old computer with a Windows XP operating system to a new computer using Windows Vista; from the Adidas brand of

Larry W. Caldwell, Ph.D., (lwcal@cs.com) is Professor of Missions and Hermeneutics at Asian Theological Seminary in Manila. He is also the Director of the Doctor of Missiology Program of the Asia Graduate School of Theology—Philippines, as well as the Editor of the Journal of Asian Mission.
running shoes to New Balance; from Coke Classic to Coke Lite; from a dial-up internet connection to broadband and so on. Oh, and I also once converted to Jesus Christ.

But what, indeed, does it mean to convert to Jesus? Those of us who are in the “business of religion” (and I say this in the good sense)—whether as scholars, pastors, missionaries or laypeople in the church—are in the religious business precisely because we were once converted. And now we are attempting—directly or indirectly—to convert others, to help them come to a decision to have a relationship with Jesus as Savior and Lord.\(^1\) We who are of the evangelical persuasion usually refer to this decision as one’s “conversion experience” and we often link this experience to a specific time in one’s life. Questions like this—“When did you accept Jesus into your heart?” or “When were you saved?”—refer to this conversion as a point-in-time concept. For example, because of God’s grace, I am able to say that I received Jesus into my heart on April 17, 1966 at 9:45 in the morning. I happen to be able to remember my conversion experience as a precise point in time. But I have other Christian friends who cannot remember a specific time; in their words they have “loved Jesus ever since I was a little child.” For them there was no one point where they went from unbelief to belief. Can a person really have a relationship with Jesus without a specific point in time that they can look back to and with all assurance say that they became a Christian on such-and-such a date? Still other evangelical Christian friends of mine describe their conversion experience more in terms of a process. For some it was a process over a long period of time when they were searching for ultimate meaning in their lives and eventually Jesus was the one who

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\(^1\) The phrase, “Savior and Lord,” reflects my understanding of the conversion process from my perspective as an American evangelical Christian. Those from different geographical and/or Protestant/Catholic perspectives may be more comfortable with different phrases, or none at all. At the very least, however, my understanding is that any Christian conversion experience involves individuals who previously did not have a relationship with Jesus coming into some kind of a relationship with Jesus, ideally an active and growing relationship. Throughout the remainder of this article I will simply use the phrase “relationship with Jesus” to encapsulate my understanding of the conversion experience.
met their need. Still others see their conversion as a process of many small steps of faith in God prior to their ultimate belief in Jesus. So is conversion a point in time, a process, or a combination of both? This question of what conversion is has great implications both for our evangelistic efforts as well as for how we disciple those who convert, especially in the Asian context.

Now please do not misunderstand me. There is nothing wrong with the point-in-time conversion model in and of itself. I myself have used point-in-time conversion strategies—Four Spiritual Laws, Evangelism Explosion, crusade evangelism participation, and so on—to lead people to faith in Jesus. I also firmly believe that all people in all cultures need to come to the realization, at some point in their lives, of their need for Jesus. We must all realize, furthermore, that conversion, no matter the model, is not up to us, it is the action of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual. We are merely God’s instruments blessed with the opportunity to help individuals discover who Jesus really is.

Nevertheless, I do believe that we must re-examine the popular dominant understanding of conversion as a point in time, especially in the Asian context. I say this for two reasons. First, the conversion as a point-in-time model tends to treat all potential believers as individuals who are concerned with some of the same religious issues as Westerners: concern, for example, with the gap between their sin and God (Four Spiritual Laws), or concern over whether or not they will be in heaven if they were to die tonight (Evangelism Explosion). Most Asians are not concerned about such matters, or at least not very concerned (and it may well be argued that many Westerners today are not much concerned about such issues either). Rather, Asians from a Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist background have other religious issues that concern them. Second, the conversion as point-in-time model almost totally disregards God’s previous workings in the potential believer’s life, culture or even religion. For

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2 The context for this article comes from my ministry in Asia and its vast religious diversity. However, the views expressed here are also applicable to other ministry contexts outside of Asia as well as to North American and European contexts with their increasing ministry opportunities among Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist immigrants.
the point-in-time evangelizer, time is of the essence and it is paramount that the targeted individual come to a point of decision for Jesus now. Such disregard of God’s previous workings oftentimes causes a disconnect between the decision that may be made and the new believer’s present religious and culture orientation. Shallow converts often result. Why? Because new believers with such a disconnect often do not know how to keep those neutral religious and cultural parts of who they are and incorporate those parts into their new-found faith. These new believers fail to understand that they do not have to give up all of their religious or previous cultural practices in order to become a follower of Jesus. Unfortunately, many national pastors and foreign missionaries ministering in Asia oftentimes do not consider these matters either. They—like the Christians who were of the party of the Pharisees in the book of Acts—fail to understand that a new believer does not have to give up his or her previous religious beliefs and culture if they are not in conflict with God’s Truth.

So how do we discover what conversion is and, directly related to this, what can and cannot be used within other religions and cultures as we endeavor to “make disciples of all the people groups” (Mt. 28:19)? In this article I will look at five different approaches in attempting to answer these questions. First, I will use a simple Venn diagram to set the foundations for such answers by examining the relationship

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3 For the purposes of conciseness, and in recognition of the majority viewpoint, in this article I will occasionally use the term “convert” to describe an individual who makes a profession of faith in Jesus and attempts to live his/her life in obedience to Jesus. However, the word “convert” is not the preferred word to use today since it carries much negative baggage with it. I prefer to use the phrase, “follower of Jesus,” and will do so at many points throughout the article.

4 What we today commonly refer to as “the Jerusalem Council,” found in Acts 15, is the occasion whereby the leaders of the early New Testament church decided that pagan followers of Jesus did not have to become Jews (primarily through circumcision) in order to be saved. Their feeling was that “we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19). This decision reached at the Jerusalem Council is key to the question of how much previous religious beliefs and culture have to be given up when an individual decides to turn to God through Jesus.
between God’s Truth, Christianity and other religions. Second, in order to speak intelligently about what conversion is we need to look at the various options available to us from which to choose. The option that one chooses really determines the answers to these questions. Third, I will look at perhaps a better way to analyze (from a human standpoint) whether or not an individual is truly following Jesus through understanding that we are all in movement towards (or away) from Jesus and that such forward movement must continue on throughout our lives as disciples. Fourth, I will look more closely at what I term the “Two Levels” of evangelism and discipleship: surface level and deep level. Since many evangelism efforts are primarily concerned with converts making conversion decisions the result is often surface level Christians who are not discipled properly and hence do not develop a deep level relationship with Jesus or His Church. Fifth, I will outline what I call the “Three Stages” in the evangelism and discipleship process, with each stage having two steps of both acquaintance and relationship built into them. This fifth section will also include two field-based case studies of how the evangelism and discipleship process is being carried out according to these three stages and six steps.

With these five sections in mind, the article will then proceed to appraise the growing insider movements within Islam in light of all that has been previously discussed. Why such an appraisal? Precisely because one of the greatest criticisms of insider movements is doubt by outsiders concerning whether or not the insiders have truly “converted” and, as a result, if these insiders do choose to remain within their religion and culture it is likely that they are not really following Jesus and thus risk eternal damnation. A second criticism concerns discipleship: are these insiders being discipled properly when they remain within their Islamic religion and culture? These two questions will form the core of this appraisal. It is hoped that such an appraisal will be helpful both to those who are evaluating insider movements from the outside as well as for those missionaries working on the front lines of insider movements.
1. God’s Truth, Christianity and Other Religions

Let us turn first to our understanding of Christianity in relationship to other religions and religious views, since such an understanding directly impacts subsequent evangelistic and discipleship efforts in those contexts. Why turn here first when examining conversion and discipleship? Because many of us who call ourselves Christians have the notion that somehow we have a corner on God’s Truth. Somewhere we have gotten the idea into our Christian heads that God has revealed His Truth in a special way to us only and uniquely, and not to those who we call non-Christians. Now, of course, God did reveal Himself to us Christians specially through Jesus and through the Holy Spirit and through the Bible. So to a certain extent this notion of ours is true. But my contention is that God does not reveal Himself to us only. Rather, He is at work in all religions and all cultures, attempting to draw every individual to a fuller understanding of Himself. Our Christian concept of general revelation proves that indeed God is not stingy in revealing Himself, that He is revealing Himself even to those of other religions and cultures who hold views contrary to Christianity.

The following Venn diagram, in Figure 1, shows the relationship between God’s Truth, Christianity, and Other Religions. The three areas found in this diagram—God’s Truth, Christianity, and Other Religions—show that there are both sectors of common overlap and sectors of uniqueness.

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5 Please note that the three different areas and the seven different sections found within this Venn diagram are not drawn to scale.
Sector 1 of this Venn diagram shows those elements of God’s Truth that are found in Christianity but not in the Other Religions, such as a belief that Jesus is the only way to heaven, or the belief that Jesus is God’s only begotten Son. Sector 2 shows those elements of Christianity that are found within Christianity but that are nevertheless outside of God’s Truth, such as the overtly syncretistic components of modern Christmas and Easter celebrations, or, for example, the belief of many American Christians that the United States is God’s chosen nation. Sector 3 shows those elements of God’s Truth found both in the Other Religions and Christianity, such as the common animistic view of atonement through blood sacrifice, or Zen Buddhism’s emphasis on seeking after religious enlightenment through meditation, or the Japanese tea ceremony with its emphasis on hospitality, or the Hindu belief that all life is sacred. Note that these areas of commonality are not ones dealing with salvation issues; only Jesus is Truth unto salvation. Sector 4 shows those common elements found in both God’s Truth and the Other Religions—and correspondingly not found in many segments
of Christianity—such as great respect for ancestors or the importance of holy space. Sector 5 shows those elements of the Other Religions that are totally outside of God’s Truth, such as polytheism or spirit worship. Sector 6 shows those elements common to both the Other Religions and Christianity but that lie outside of God’s Truth, such as materialism, worship of self, or any other of a host of shared sins. Finally, Sector 7 shows those elements of God’s Truth found outside of both the Other Religions and Christianity, such as true agape love.

In summary, this Venn diagram shows that God’s Truth is not unique only to Christianity, but that parts of His Truth can be found in other religious belief systems as well. What are the implications of this for conversion? It means that it is possible that elements conducive to conversion (following Jesus) may already be in place within the religious (and cultural) beliefs systems of a particular people group without any direct knowledge or understanding of Jesus. If that is indeed the case it may be important to expand our understanding of just what conversion is.

2. What Is Conversion?

So how does all of that found above in the Venn diagram relate to the topic of conversion and discipleship? Precisely at the level of how we who call ourselves Christians view those who hold to religious views different from Christianity. By not seeing such preliminary common ground in other religious views it is then oftentimes very easy to view conversion as a point—here and now with little regard for God’s previous workings in the particular religion or culture. But should we really limit ourselves to the conversion as point concept? Perhaps we would do well to review our choices when answering the question, “What Is Conversion?” as seen in Figure 2.
Figure 2: What Is Conversion?

1. Point

2. Process + Point

3. Point + Process

4. Process

5. Process + Point + Process

Figure 2 shows that there are at least five choices available to us. The first choice is what the typical understanding of point-in-time conversion is all about. The emphasis is primarily on the point, with little concern for anything either leading up or following that point. Choices two and three are variations on choice one, with choice two allowing for some process in the life of the potential convert prior to the particular point-in-time that they now find themselves in, but with no real need for post-conversion follow-up. Choice three still puts the emphasis solely on the point-in-time conversion but sees that there is a necessary continuing follow-up process. Choice four—only process—is what many evangelical Christians believe has been their case and I am not about to persuade them otherwise here. However, oftentimes even with process conversions there was some crucial point in time that kept them going in the process. From a human perspective, I believe that we are better off in our evangelism efforts when we do bring non-Christians to a definite point of relationship with Jesus rather than to leave it only at the level of process. In fact, for me, choice five is probably what most often
happens when an individual decides to follow Jesus; a prior process leads to a conscious point-in-time decision followed by a continuing process that both confirms and reinforces that decision.\textsuperscript{6}

I especially like choice five because it allows for the prior working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Jesus follower before he or she ever makes a conscious decision to follow Jesus. In fact, they may have never heard of Jesus before, or at least had not heard a credible presentation of who Jesus is. Furthermore, this fifth choice also allows for God working within the religious and cultural understandings of the potential Jesus follower, thus causing us to re-evaluate our own post-conversion prejudices in regards to those same religious and cultural understandings (both as outsiders who observe insiders making such decisions to follow Jesus as well as the insiders in their post-conversion view of their own religious and cultural systems).

3. Movement Towards Jesus

As expressed above, I want to strongly argue that we should seriously consider the advantages of this fifth choice, process + point + process, viewing conversion as a point in a process that both precedes and follows that point. What this really means is that we would do well to see conversion and discipleship as a “movement towards Jesus,” where the act of conversion is a point in time in a continuing movement towards an individual’s greater awareness of, understanding of, and ultimately commitment to Jesus.\textsuperscript{7} This “movement towards Jesus” alternative is reflected in Figure 3.

\textsuperscript{6} Note that Figure 2 is a very linear way of thinking about conversion. Non-linear thinkers may view choice 5, for example, in a more circular way with the point being a part of a concentric circle. Still others may view choice 5 as a process + many points along a continuing line of process.

\textsuperscript{7} Note that followers of Jesus can also move away from Jesus for a time and then continue on in their forward movement; likewise, their movement may stagnate for a time, with little or no forward movement. In actuality, such times of either backwards movement or no movement may occur several times in the life of a follower of Jesus.
Yes, every individual should come to a point of decision for Jesus. But we neglect God’s prior workings in the potential believer’s life if we totally disregard the process that has already occurred. The conversion as point-in-time model oftentimes treats the potential believer as merely a target for evangelism efforts. To the contrary, conversion as process means that the bringer of the gospel takes the time to build a relationship with the potential convert as a fellow human being—including getting to know his or her religious and cultural beliefs. It means taking the time to get to know the person: hurts and needs, points of commonality, religious views, cultural practices; in short, trying to figure out what indeed is Good News—gospel—for him or her. Relationships like this take time but can have great rewards. For, if by God’s grace, the potential convert knowingly decides to follow Jesus then we subsequently have an open door to continuing the relationship and a very natural discipleship process occurs.

4. Two Levels of Evangelism and Discipleship

Conversion as a point-in-time model—usually devoid of much relationship building—usually does not allow for a natural discipleship process to develop. For with the conversion as point-in-time model it is primarily in the “follow-up” stage after conversion that attempts begin to be made to build relationship. Sadly such follow-up attempts oftentimes fall far short, if they ever occur at all. As a result, such
point-in-time converts are often shallow Christians at best, syncretistic ones at worst, whether in Asia or North America. As Figure 4 shows, conversion as point-in-time evangelistic efforts often result in surface-level converts when what we really desire is to nurture deep-level discipled followers of Jesus who have a strong relationship with both Christ and His Church.

**Figure 4: Two Levels of Evangelism and Discipleship**

Surface-level converts result because most point-in-time evangelistic models place undue emphasis upon conversion only. Of course conversion is a crucial first step to having an authentic relationship with Jesus. But in this regard the point-in-time evangelistic models have weak theological underpinnings. How so? Precisely because Jesus Himself was not really interested in making converts. He was only interested in individuals believing in Him, or following Him. His last command to His disciples (and to all of us today who would be His disciples), found in the Great Commission,
was to make *disciples* of all the people groups (Mt. 28:19), not to make *converts*. It seems that Jesus recognized the difference.⁸

As a result, many Evangelicals dedicate the vast majority of their time and effort towards the goal of making point-in-time converts with very little energy left over for the making of good disciples. Whether this is because of the Western evangelical emphasis upon numbers of converts, or just expediency, it often interferes with good disciple-making. The end result is lots of surface-level converts but few deep-level disciples since there is usually little or no time allowed for follow-up discipleship. Such surface-level converts are relatively easy to make. By contrast, a process-driven conversion model, because of its more neutral attitude towards time, results in more fully discipled followers of Jesus who have a deeper relationship with Jesus as well as with the Church.

5. The Three Stages and Six Steps of the Evangelism and Discipleship Process

How do we obtain such deep-level followers of Jesus? I propose that we look at the evangelism and discipleship process as encompassing three stages: pre-evangelism, evangelism, and discipleship, as shown in Figure 5.

⁸ Cf. Jesus’ reference to the Pharisees who were actually quite infamous for their zeal in making converts: “Woe to you . . . Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert . . .” (Mt. 23:15).

⁹ I am expanding here ideas that were first proposed by my Converge Worldwide missionary colleague, Steve Cable, who has been ministering successfully among Buddhists in Thailand for two decades.
Looked at this way, conversion becomes a part of an overall evangelism and discipleship process, rather than the end goal of all evangelistic efforts. I believe that the entire evangelism and discipleship process, as outlined below, begins to get closer to the command of Jesus to make disciples of all people groups.

Stage 1 is purposefully termed “pre-evangelism” since evangelism—in the sense of bringing someone to a conversion decision—is not the purpose of this stage. Rather, in Stage 1 the evangelist is doing all he/she can to enter into a relationship with the potential convert. Everything that was said in the previous paragraph on relationship building applies to this first Stage. Such relationship building may take a few weeks, or it may take a few years. Time is not the enemy here. Sometimes Western evangelists tend to be motivated in their evangelistic efforts by what I call the “Jesus is coming back soon” compulsion. Such compulsion requires the evangelist to press for a decision as soon as possible in the belief that Jesus may return soon and thus all opportunity for conversion is lost. The “you might die tonight” school of evangelism is also ruled out in this pre-evangelism stage. To the contrary, in this pre-evangelism stage the evangelist wants to take all the time that is necessary to build a trust relationship with the potential convert.

Such Stage 1 pre-evangelism involves two distinct steps. The first step helps the potential convert to become acquainted with Christians. Why is this necessary? It is necessary because many potential converts oftentimes have a faulty understanding of who Christians are, either through a previous negative experience with Christians or because they have only a vague notion of what a Christian is. Thus, this step...
helps them get to know the evangelist as a Christian: to overcome their previous negative experience and/or to allow them to experience Christians first-hand for the first time. Over the course of time this preliminary acquaintance step will lead naturally into the second step of relationship with the evangelist as a friend who is concerned about their lives in its many different respects; a relationship that is not limited simply to the spiritual realm.

It is in Stage 2 where evangelism as conversion takes place. By now the evangelist has built a relationship with the potential convert to the point where the evangelist clearly knows his/her spiritual needs and can, when appropriate opportunity arises, speak the Good News in ways that are fully understandable and applicable. This will likewise involve two steps: first, helping the potential convert to clearly know who Jesus is, acquainting him/her with the Truth of Jesus; and second, allowing the potential convert the freedom to decide to enter into a relationship with Jesus. Once again, there may be a significant time lag between these two steps. The Holy Spirit has His own time table! In Stage 2 there may be a clear “point” where conversion happens or it may involve a longer process in moving towards a life-changing relationship with Jesus.

Stage 3—discipleship—is but the continuing process of acquaintance and relationship that has thus far determined the previous two stages. Now the new convert is given the opportunity to expand his/her current relationship with the evangelist to acquaintance and relationship with the Body of Christ: a church or fellowship group of some kind. Though discipleship can occur one-on-one with the evangelist, it is in the total context of a church or fellowship group that the new convert can truly be brought to full maturity in the use of his/her spiritual gifts. Here the two steps may be speeded up considerably so that once the new convert becomes acquainted with a church or fellowship group, and feels a level of comfort with them, he/she can usually then move towards more purposeful relational involvement rather quickly.

Figure 6 shows the relationship between the three stages and the six steps:
Figure 6: Three Stages and Six Steps in the Evangelism and Discipleship Process

- **Stage 1: Pre-Evangelism**
  - Step 1 – Acquaintance with Christians
  - Step 2 – Relationship with Christians

- **Stage 2: Evangelism**
  - Step 3 – Acquaintance with Christ
  - Step 4 – Relationship with Christ

- **Stage 3: Discipleship**
  - Step 5 – Acquaintance with Church
  - Step 6 – Relationship with Church

It is now time to briefly examine these stages and steps in light of two real case studies from the Chinese and Muslim worlds where some of my former students are following this approach and are planting church and fellowship groups with success.

**Case Study #1:**
**A Strategy for Reaching University Students in China**

Chinese university students typically come out of worldviews that are both materialistic and atheistic. Though most have some knowledge of Christians and Christianity, such knowledge is either false or lacking in its foundational details. Through becoming legitimate English teachers, evangelists in China are having success as they lead many of their Chinese students through the three stages of the evangelism and discipleship process as delineated in Figure 7.
Figure 7: The Evangelism and Discipleship Process Among Chinese University Students

**Stage 1: Pre-Evangelism**

**Step 1—Acquaintance with Christians**
- Christian teachers join Chinese university faculties (especially as ESL teachers)
- Christians enroll in Chinese universities as foreign students (especially studying Mandarin)
- Christians form English clubs on university campuses

**Step 2—Relationship with Christians**
- Christian teachers/students meet with Chinese students outside of the classroom
- Christian teachers/students invite Chinese students to their homes for informal and fun gatherings
- Friendships with Chinese students developed through English teaching and English clubs

**Stage 2: Evangelism**

**Step 1—Acquaintance with Christ**
- Christian teachers/students tell about Christian holidays as opportunities arise
- Chinese students are invited to Christian fellowship meetings and Bible studies
- Religious questions of the Chinese students are answered looking for common ground between their own religious worldviews and Christianity

**Step 2—Relationship with Christ**
- Evangelistic Bible studies focus on what the Gospel is for those particular Chinese students
- One-on-one meetings between Christian teacher/friend and Chinese student; attempts to make Jesus relevant to the student’s felt needs
- The Chinese student decides to follow Jesus

**Stage 3: Discipleship**

**Step 1—Acquaintance with Church**
- New Christians meet regularly with a discipler
- New Christians meet with other Christians in Bible studies, cell groups
- New Christians are exposed to church through “fun” activities like camps, social events

**Step 2—Relationship with Church**
- New Christians regularly attend local worship services
- New Christians eventually become actively involved in church activities according to their gifting
- New Christians are trained in evangelism and discipleship
from first initial acquaintance to deep full relationship—a more holistic experience for both the evangelizer and the one who is being evangelized. This is especially seen in Stage 2 when the English teacher attempts to understand the Chinese university student’s religious worldview as well as to meet the student’s deep felt needs. This type of evangelism respects both the student’s previous beliefs as well as the student’s present life situation, resulting finally in a gospel presentation whereby the student freely commits to having a deep relationship with Jesus.

Case Study #2:
A Strategy for Reaching Muslims in Settings of Poverty

Figure 8 illustrates the second case study: those who are doing ministry among Muslims living in urban and rural settings of poverty. Christian development workers in such settings have unique opportunities to build upon the commonalities that are already found between Christianity and Islam and from that common ground bring the Good News of Jesus.
Figure 8: The Evangelism and Discipleship Process Among Muslims

**Stage 1: Pre-Evangelism**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1—<strong>Acquaintance with Christians</strong></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Christian development workers sharing their expertise with the local people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Christians setting up low-cost grade schools and vocational centers</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Christian medical professionals offering their services</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Step 2—<strong>Relationship with Christians</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Christian development workers win the trust and confidence of the local people</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Christian teachers and medical professionals gain the support and protection of the local people</td>
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**Stage 2: Evangelism**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1—<strong>Acquaintance with Christ</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Christian worker looks for common ground between Islam and Christianity</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Active inquirers are invited to one-on-one Bible studies that focus on commonalities</td>
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<tr>
<td>- The inquirer’s questions are answered in culturally-appropriate ways</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Step 2—<strong>Relationship with Christ</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Evangelistic Bible studies carefully focus on what the gospel is for the inquirer in light of his/her felt needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Truth of the uniqueness of Jesus as the Son of God is eventually explained</td>
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<tr>
<td>- The inquirer decides to follow Jesus</td>
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**Stage 3: Discipleship**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1—<strong>Acquaintance with “Church”</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- New followers of Jesus meet regularly with a discipler one-on-one as safety allows</td>
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<tr>
<td>- New followers of Jesus meet occasionally with other followers in Bible studies and/or small groups as safety allows</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 2—<strong>Relationship with “Church”</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>- New followers of Jesus attend semi-regular culturally appropriate fellowship services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- New followers of Jesus eventually become actively involved in fellowship services according to their gifting</td>
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<tr>
<td>- New followers of Jesus are trained in discreet evangelism and discipleship</td>
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Once again, as with the Chinese university students, development workers ministering among Muslims in urban and rural poverty settings have ample opportunity for full-orbed evangelistic and discipleship efforts among Muslims. Development workers who both respect the Muslim culture, as well as its religious understandings and worldview, will go far in developing culturally-sensitive fellowships of discipled believers in Jesus.

An Appraisal of Insider Movements within Islam

In light of all of the above how do we evaluate the growing number of insider movements especially among Muslims in regards to conversion and discipleship? When I use the phrase—“insider movement”—I am referring to those individuals within Islam who choose to fully follow Jesus and remain fully within their Islamic religious and cultural systems. I especially like the definition of Rebecca Lewis:

From the outset of this appraisal I want to emphasize that what follows is the result of extensive conversations with missionaries working with Muslim insiders and some conversations with insiders themselves, as well as my own extensive reading on the subject. Though I do not have personal front-line experience in working with insiders, nor am I an expert on Islam, I am confident that some of the points raised here will be helpful in the ongoing discussion concerning insider movements within Islam.

Note that I am aware there is currently much variety in insider movements among Muslims on various issues; it is not one monolithic Movement. This article will thus speak in mostly broad generalities in relationship to conversion and discipleship among Muslim insiders.

. . . an “insider movement” is any movement to faith in Christ where a) the gospel flows through pre-existing communities and social networks and where b) believing families, as valid expressions of the Body of Christ, remain inside their socio-religious communities, retaining their identity as members of that community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.\textsuperscript{12}

The following appraisal will be done in light of the five topic areas covered in this article: 1) the relationship between insider movements and God’s Truth; 2) the various options for insiders regarding the question, What is Conversion?; 3) insiders and their movement towards Jesus; 4) insiders and the two levels of evangelism and discipleship; and 5) insiders and the three stages and six steps in the evangelism and discipleship process.

1. Insider Movements and God’s Truth

As we have already seen in the discussion concerning the Venn diagram in Figure 2, there is a substantial amount of God’s Truth already found within other religions of our world. What about elements of God’s Truth already found within Islam? For the sake of space considerations I will focus our attention only on Sections 3 and 4 of the Venn diagram, found in Figure 9. Let us look first at Section 3: those common elements of God’s Truth found in both Islam and Christianity. There are many such common elements: a belief in one

\textsuperscript{12} Rebecca Lewis, “Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities,” \textit{International Journal of Frontier Missiology} 24:2 (Summer 2007), 75. A more thorough definition, though along the same lines, is given by Kevin Higgins: “A growing number of families, individuals, clans, and/or friendship-webs becoming faithful disciples of Jesus within the culture of their people group, including their religious culture. This faithful discipleship will express itself in culturally appropriate communities of believers who will also continue to live within as much of their culture, including the religious life of the culture, as is biblically faithful. The Holy Spirit, through the Word and through His people will also begin to transform His people and their culture, religious life, and worldview”; see his article, “The Key to Insider Movements: The ‘Devoted’s’ of Acts,” \textit{International Journal of Frontier Missiology} 21:4 (Winter 2004), 156.
God; a belief in a holy book with corresponding common Scripture portions; and an understanding of Jesus as a special person, to name but a few. Of course Muslims and Christians will disagree on some of the specifics of what I have just mentioned. However, even with these disagreements there remain elements of common Truth. Let us look, for example, at the Muslim and Christian common understanding of Jesus as a special person. Obviously, Muslims will see the specialness of Jesus only in terms of prophet, not in Christian terms as God in human form. But even in this there is a commonality with the Christian view, since Christian theology often refers to Jesus as “prophet, priest and king.” Section 4—common elements found in God’s Truth and the Other Religions—shows that Islam also has many religious/cultural considerations that are at once outside of most of Christianity but still allowed by God’s Truth, such as an abhorrence of any visual religious symbols or representations of God, praying five times a day, giving alms to the poor, or the prohibition against the wearing of immodest clothing within a worship setting. These cultural elements of Islam do not have to be rejected when a Muslim becomes a true follower of Jesus since these elements do not go against the Truth of Jesus.
Thus, this common ground of God’s Truth is some assurance that there is a solid foundation for insiders to more easily discover the Truth of Jesus as God’s Son within the confines of Islam. As a result—in terms of formal religious and cultural knowledge—in theory a Muslim is much more prepared for a salvific understanding of Jesus than in most cases would be a Hindu or a Buddhist. Missionaries working with Muslim insiders do well to use the Truth found in Islam and the Qur’an for both evangelistic and discipleship purposes since this good foundation of God’s Truth is fertile soil for evangelism and discipleship. Those critiquing insider movements within Islam should welcome such extensive common ground. At the same time, however, missionaries working with insiders need to make sure that those insiders who wish to follow Jesus indeed receive a salvific understanding of Jesus, enough to make a credible decision to follow Jesus within the confines of Islam and their Islamic culture. Furthermore, missionaries must insure that these insiders receive information about the gospel that goes beyond the confines of Islam but is clearly a part of God’s Truth among them: that salvation is through believing in Jesus only, that the Bible is the final authority for all matters of belief and conduct, that there is a Holy Spirit (not

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13 It is this lack of such extensive foundational common ground in both Hinduism and Buddhism that leads me to be more concerned about insider movements within these two major religions, though such movements are indeed happening. Those missionaries working within insider movements in Hindu and Buddhist contexts will need to be especially attentive to some of the issues raised in this article.

14 Will insiders continue to recognize Jesus as a great prophet but not as the Messiah who is also the Son of God? In the book of Acts the Jewish Christians recognized that Jesus was both Messiah and the Son of God; this is what distinguished these early Christ followers from their fellow Jewish compatriots within Judaism. Certainly Muslim followers of Jesus today must also recognize Jesus as Messiah and the Son of God which will, in turn, set them apart from their fellow Muslim counterparts within Islam. This recognition by insiders will be done in both religiously and culturally acceptable ways (cf. the Jewish Christians in Acts) and may not be fully understood by outsiders.

15 While insiders may certainly continue to read the Qur’an they must now also begin to recognize that the entire Bible, both Old and New
necessary the theological concept of the Trinity), and that the insiders have an evangelistic obligation to help fulfill the Great Commission both among their own people group as well as among other people groups, to name but a few.

What this all means is that there must be honest interaction and dialogue between the missionaries working within insider movements and insiders who are truly following Jesus. Such dialogue, since done within the confines of the Islamic religious and cultural views of the particular insiders, will by its very nature oftentimes make the missionaries—and other outsider Christians—uncomfortable with conclusions that may be reached by the insiders in their own seeking after and reliance upon the Holy Spirit to guide them. And if there are no missionaries present among the insiders then the Holy Spirit alone will be the one to do this. Here a pertinent question must be asked: Do we trust the Holy Spirit enough to believe that He can be working mightily in the lives of insider followers of Jesus despite their having no contact with outside missionaries or Christians? I truly believe that the Holy Spirit is capable of this and it is indeed happening.

2. Insider Movements and the Question: What Is Conversion?

So how do insider movements among Muslims answer the question, What Is Conversion? (see Figure 2). Significantly, many of Testaments, is also God’s inspired Word for them. While there are many truths found within the Qur’an there are also many falsehoods which need eventually to be addressed as unacceptable since they fall outside of God’s Truth. Such an understanding of the Bible should eventually lead to a revised understanding of the prophet Muhammad as well. Though Muhammad was a great prophet, with many good teachings, he also had false teachings which the insiders will no longer be able to follow.

16 Such evangelistic efforts can use the Qur’an, parts of the Bible, or some combination of the two.

17 Furthermore, such conclusions may differ among the various insider movements, since the Holy Spirit may choose to work with a different time frame depending on the religious and cultural understandings of the particular insider group.
the conversions of Muslims—both within and outside of insider movements—are happening through dreams and other supernatural encounters with the risen Christ. Such encounters are clear evidence to the Muslim that Jesus is indeed more than just a prophet and, for many, is truly the Son of God. As a result, through these point-in-time encounters they have gone through some type of “conversion” in regards to their understanding of Jesus. “Point-in-time” evangelicals should be greatly encouraged by such encounters! However, I would argue that such an encounter is simply a point-in-time in the ongoing process that has already been happening in the life of the particular Muslim insider through his/her understanding and practice of Islam. They primarily know who Jesus is in their dream or supernatural encounter because of their prior knowledge of Jesus (though incomplete) through Islam (choice 5 in Figure 2). All missionaries working with Muslims must consider (and ultimately praise God for) the good process foundation that has already been laid down through the common ground of Islam.

At the same time, missionaries or other insider followers of Jesus, must ensure that this supernatural encounter with Jesus results in a salvific understanding of whom Jesus is, not merely a further proof that Jesus is a great prophet. By salvific I mean an understanding that prompts them to make a credible decision for Jesus that will ultimately lead to their salvation and place in heaven someday. Clearly understanding who Jesus is—through further dialogue and searching of the Qur’an and New Testament—will help move the Muslim to truly follow Jesus.¹⁸

What about those insiders who have decided to follow Jesus without such a dream or supernatural encounter? Such insiders have, by their own volition, made a conscious decision to follow Jesus (oftentimes because of a clearer understanding of Jesus as offered by a missionary or another insider). As a result, his/her “conversion” experience should be understood for exactly what it is and no judgment should be made as to the efficacy of that decision. Here is

¹⁸ While such follow-up is not always essential, it does appear to have a solid biblical foundation as seen in the supernatural encounter that the apostle Paul had on the road to Damascus and his subsequent talks with Ananias and the other disciples in Damascus afterwards (cf. Acts 9:19).
perhaps where outsiders need to trust the Spirit more in regards to His work in the lives of both individuals and religions. But once again the question must be raised: Was this a decision unto salvation? Of course, in the final analysis, only the Holy Spirit ultimately knows; however, this does not excuse us from asking the question. Indeed, the question must be asked because the eternal destiny of the insider is at stake. Has this insider had enough contact with and/or understanding of Jesus in order to make a credible decision to truly follow Him? What really needs to be more clearly defined at this Stage is the “recommended salvation allowance” necessary for an insider to be truly saved. Much more work will need to be done in this area both by those within and outside of insider movements.¹⁹

3. Insiders and Their Movement Towards Jesus

Like any follower of Jesus—within Christianity or within Islam—the question needs to be asked: Are these insiders continuing in their movement towards Jesus? (cf. Figure 3). This, I believe, is the crux of the matter concerning Muslim insiders: are these insiders being discipled in their faith and how is this discipling being done within the confines of both their Islamic religion as well as their Islamic culture? Of course this is an issue for all Christians who have decided to follow Jesus, to keep them in movement towards Jesus. But given the oftentimes restrictive Muslim environment how really possible is it for these new Muslim followers of Jesus to continue to grow in their faith? Can they grow through reading the Qur’an alone, or through following their previous Muslim religious and cultural rituals only? While there is much positive information in the Qur’an regarding Jesus, is this information enough to truly help these insiders grow in their relationship with Jesus? Parts of the Hadith are also good, but

¹⁹ Here I am following the analogy of multivitamins that advertise the “recommended dietary allowance” of various vitamins in relationship to an individual’s overall nutritional needs. I believe this concept translates to one’s spiritual needs as well. In like manner, what is the “recommended theology allowance”—basic theological understandings—that insiders must acknowledge as true before they can make a salvific decision to follow Jesus? These salvation and theology “recommendations” warrant more detailed study.
what about the whole Counsel of God as found in the entirety of the Old and New Testaments? And what in their religious and cultural rituals needs to be re-evaluated, changed, or even abandoned in light of the Truth of Jesus?

Once again, these questions are ones for all Christians, not just for Muslim insiders. However, often restrictive Muslim religious and cultural systems may not allow for such introspection. As a result, the Muslim insider who is following Jesus may be at a distinct disadvantage in his/her movement towards Jesus. Here the very difficult question may be most relevant: Is it better for this Muslim insider to leave his/her Muslim religion and culture in order to truly follow Jesus? This question is not being made to justify either extraction evangelism or proselytism, both of which are by definition anathema to advocates of insider movements. Nevertheless, this question must be raised, and legitimately so, if the very nature of the insider’s own cultural and religious system is severely thwarting his/her continuing discipleship and movement towards Jesus.

A further question arises at this juncture: How does one evaluate whether or not insiders are in movement towards Jesus? Of course they (or others) can say that they are. However, there is a biblical way that does give evidence of such movement. The New Testament says that you will know Christians by the fruit in their lives; in other words, that their lives will exhibit traits and qualities that will identify themselves as followers of Jesus in forward movement towards Him (cf. Mt. 7:16-20; Gal. 5:22). Are Muslim insiders displaying the fruit of the Spirit in their lives? If that is indeed happening then we can only conclude that these insiders are continuing in their movement towards Jesus within the confines of their Islamic context. If it is not happening then it is appropriate to question why it is not and consider whether or not the Muslim religion and culture of the insider may be holding him/her back in their growth as followers of Jesus.

There are no easy answers here for insiders or for outsiders. Both will have to rely totally on the Holy Spirit for guidance and outsiders especially will have to accept the decisions that insiders make.
4. Insider Movements
    and the Two Levels of Evangelism and Discipleship

    Do Muslim insiders have an authentic relationship with Jesus? Building on the previous section, if they are indeed displaying the fruit of the Spirit in their lives then we can only conclude that they are in continuing movement towards Jesus and thus are not simply surface-level converts (cf. Figure 4). How deep or mature their discipleship becomes, however, remains one of the key issues of outsiders who are evaluating insider movements. In regards to this deeper maturing discipling both missionaries and their fellow insiders must work to ensure that new followers of Jesus continue to deepen their relationship with Jesus in the midst of their Islamic religious and cultural context. Once again, how this will happen is a crucial question that needs to be adequately addressed within every Islamic context where insiders are found.

    What about an authentic relationship with Jesus’ church; is this relationship really necessary? Can such fellowship with other followers of Jesus be limited or eliminated altogether, given security concerns of the particular insider? Central to the answer to this later question is the fact that insider movements are not C5 or C6 contextualization efforts. Security concerns should not take precedence. Instead, insiders within insider movements, by their very nature, will fully choose to stay within their Muslim contexts for reasons of faith and culture, not for reasons of security. For if their primary motivation is one of security then should they not be considered C6 Christians and not insiders? Here is where we also need more discussions.

    Fellowship with other believers is important for all followers of Jesus (cf. Heb. 10:25). For those within insider movements this means that an insider should be fellowshipping with at least one other insider on a regular or semi-regular basis. Of course the size of this fellowship group should ideally grow as more insiders follow Jesus, and the nature of what this fellowship will entail will be determined by the insiders themselves in the midst of their own unique Islamic context as they are guided by the Spirit. But it would seem that some regular or
semi-regular fellowship with other followers of Jesus is crucial for any deep-level discipleship to occur.20

5. Insider Movements and the Three Stages and Six Steps in the Evangelism and Discipleship Process

Insiders—and the proponents of insider movements—do well to seek God’s Truth as found in the Qur’an and use it for gospel purposes—in both steps 1 and 2 of Stage 1 of the evangelism and discipleship process (cf. Figures 5 and 6) in both their acquaintance with insiders and their relationship with insiders. Insiders will initially need to become acquainted with missionaries if no insiders are found in the particular Muslim people group, and then later on become acquainted with other insiders who are following Jesus. But in many cases—especially where dream evangelism has occurred—there may be no pre-evangelism stage for acquaintance and relationship with Christians.21 Interestingly enough, this is biblical since for many pagans in the second half of the book of Acts there was not a lot of pre-evangelism. However, for some Muslim cultures the pre-evangelism stage does work and may be followed.

Little needs to be said concerning Stage 2 of the evangelism and discipleship process. Insider Muslims do have an acquaintance with Jesus and they do have a relationship with Jesus to the point where they are in active movement towards Jesus.

We have already talked about some of the issues regarding Stage 3 of the evangelism and discipleship process above in the section on the two levels of evangelism and discipleship. To reiterate briefly, the issues relate directly to this: Are these insider followers of Jesus truly being discipled within the religious and cultural confines of Islam? Of course we could and should ask this same question with North American or European followers of Jesus who are found within the cultural confines of secularism, hedonism, and so on. Clearly the issue of Stage 3 discipleship is not just for those within insider movements!

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20 Future issues along this line will involve the insider’s relationship to other non-insider local Christians and churches, as well as to the national and international body of Christ.

21 Cf. footnote 7 above.
At the same time, questions like the following are very germane to insider movements: Are these insider Muslims meeting regularly with disciplers who are teaching them the Truth of the Bible (along with the Truth found in the Qur’an)? Are they fellowshipping “regularly” with a fellowship group (2 or 3, or more, other insiders) to truly grow in their new and subsequently maturing faith in Jesus? Obviously we are not talking about the typical Western understanding of church here, but rather “church” in the sense of gathered believers in fellowship together who are purposefully proding one another on into an ever deeper relationship with Jesus.

**Conclusion**

In this article I have argued that elements of God’s Truth may be found in religions outside of Christianity and that new believers do not need to abandon those Truth elements in order to become a follower of Jesus; in other words, new believers do not have to give up elements of their own religion or culture that do not go against God’s Truth. This more positive view of the new Jesus follower’s previous religion and current culture has enormous implications for Christian evangelistic efforts. Many of these evangelistic efforts, while emphasizing correct Bible content, primarily seek after a point-in-time conversion usually without reference to God’s Truth already present in the religion of the potential believers. And then if these evangelistic efforts follow up with a discipleship process it is oftentimes one that emphasizes correct Christian conduct and forces new believers to turn away from their religion and culture. I also argued that an emphasis upon relationship with the non-Christian—a relationship that values his/her religion and culture and seeks to build upon the work that the Holy Spirit has already done in that religion and culture and in that non-Christian’s life—is perhaps a better model of conversion than the dominant conversion as point model. Furthermore, I argued that the discipleship process, in like manner, needs to be one that values the new believer’s previous religion and current culture rather than one that only emphasizes correct Bible content and correct Christian conduct. This is the key to Christian conversion and discipleship: relationship with followers of Jesus; relationship with Jesus Himself;
and relationship with Jesus in fellowship with other Jesus followers. This article ended with an appraisal of insider movements within Islam, attempting to flesh out a bit some of the points raised throughout the article.

We have covered much ground in this article: from Venn diagrams to an appraisal of insider movements among Muslims. There is indeed much to ponder. But I remain convinced that as we re-examine God’s role in the lives, religions and cultures of non-Christians both prior to as well as after their conversion we will go a long way towards planting churches and fellowship groups that are made up of solid Jesus-following disciples who have an authentic relationship both with Jesus and with fellow believers.