

Recent Insights on the Process of Coming to Faith

David Greenlee

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I think I share something in common with William Carey. Given a moment to relax, I can enjoy leafing through an atlas or become transfixed by a map posted on a wall, wondering what kind of place is *really* represented by the multiple colors, squiggly border lines, and intriguing names of cities, provinces and states. Perhaps trained by the frequent practice of my early days with my mission organization, I frequently drift between that sort of wondering to prayerful contemplation of the people who live in those lands and a question of how many of them know, or have had a chance to know, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Although others were also greatly used of God, Carey and his contemporary Henry Martyn are perceived as figureheads of their era in making Christians aware of the spiritual needs of Muslims and Hindus of the Indian Subcontinent and Persia. A century later, Samuel Zwemer emerged as a spokesman on ministry among Muslims of the Middle East. We are in debt to these men, and the women and men they symbolically represent, who initiated significant Protestant Christian ministry among Muslims.

More recently God has brought about movements, and popularized concepts, which have helped to stimulate the increasingly global Church into this aspect of mission. Ralph Winter's 1974 seminal speech at the Lausanne Forum for World Evangelization turned the spotlight on the concept of unreached peoples. Luis Bush and the AD2000 & Beyond Movement gave rise to the Joshua Project and the concept of the 10/40 Window. Patrick Johnstone, joined more recently by Jason Mandryk, helped hundreds of thousands enter into informed intercession through the various editions of *Operation World*. And David Barrett and team's *World Christian Encyclopedia* and the related information from the World Evangelization Research Center—and more recently, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity under Todd Johnson—have further documented the status of global Christianity while highlighting the paucity of church resources and witness directed at those we consider the least reached.

The increase over the past thirty years in macro-scale research and information about Muslim peoples has been vitally important, intimately tied to the increased (even if still insufficient) engagement of the global Church with this fifth of humanity. There is still, however, little information on the micro-scale processes by which individuals and groups of Muslims are coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Whereas the first type of research is vitally important in terms of general prayer, mobilization, and placement aspects of mission, the second is needed to enhance the fruitfulness of those who are actively engaged in such ministry.

My own contribution to this field began in the early 1990s. In narrowing down my dissertation topic, I came across a comment by Greg Livingstone that “very little adequate research has been done, isolating the variables of how or why Muslims have been making commitments to Christ.”¹ In fact, although there were numerous books of stories and testimonies, as I prepared my research proposal I found very little analytical research along the lines Livingstone had suggested. So, I took up the challenge and did my field work among urban young men in a Muslim land who had come to faith in Christ.²

¹ Greg Livingstone, *Planting Churches in Muslim Cities* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) p. 154.

² David Greenlee, “Christian Conversion from Islam,” PhD diss., (Deerfield, Ill.: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1996).

Others were beginning to respond to this need, although with caution when it comes to publication of findings. A key contributor has been Dudley Woodberry, both with his ongoing global study³ and through the students he has mentored in recent years.

But the research gap continues, as revealed in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* listing of English-language missiological dissertations completed between 1992-2001.⁴ Although I know that some were overlooked, only three out of 925 dissertations listed fell in the category "Islam, conversion from."⁵

Closer to the field, my experience has been that consultations looking at Christian ministry among Muslims may touch on conversion—but that the key process and event of coming to faith tends to be overlooked, with emphasis placed on issues of society, programs, ministry tools, discipleship, and church planting.

In the following pages I will present selected findings from my own research and point to that of others on the topic of how Muslims are coming to faith in Christ. First I will refer to my own dissertation and a follow-up project, then I will summarize some key points from the Coming to Faith Consultation held in 2004.

Four Categories of Inquiry

Reading the literature on conversion, and the interview protocols of various researchers, we recognize a number of motifs or lenses through which we can view the dynamics of conversion. In my research until now I have found it helpful to use four categories in describing the factors God uses in drawing us to faith.

Communication factors: the type of tools such as the *Jesus* film or Bible studies

Social factors: issues such as shared ethnicity, the pressure on first-born sons, persecution, and the type of person perceived to be a key witness

Cultural factors: the background of the individual, level of religious practice, and his or her attitude toward society and dominant cultural values

Supernatural factors: special intervention from God, for example in dreams or healing.

No doubt these categories could be expanded and improved but recognizing that no researcher can cover all of the angles I have consistently based my work on these categories. Economic factors, for example, I tend to cover under an overlap between social and cultural factors, considering the economic status of the individuals and their sense of contentment with their lot in life as compared to a desire for change.

³ One report from this study is available at <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/2001/01/200101.htm>, J. Dudley Woodberry and Russell G. Shubin, "Muslims Tell 'Why I Chose Jesus...,'" *Mission Frontiers*, March 2001. A more recent update will be published as a chapter in *From the Straight Cross to the Narrow Way: Journeys of Faith*, ed. by David Greenlee, (Waynesboro, Ga., Paternoster, forthcoming).

⁴ Stanley H. Skreslet, "Doctoral Dissertations on Mission: Ten-Year Update, 1992-2001", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 27,3 (July 2003).

⁵ For example, Andreas Maurer, "In Search of a New Life: Conversion Motives of Christians and Muslims," DTh diss., (University of South Africa, 1996).

Urban Single Men in the mid-1990s⁶

My dissertation research involved interviews with all of the seventeen known single Muslim men who had come to faith in Christ who resided in a pair of major North African cities. My research dealt with the entire known population who fit this category. Thus, inasmuch as the men told me the truth and I have analyzed their statements correctly, the findings are true (not statistical projections) with regard to this group. There would be danger in extrapolating these findings in a prescriptive way to other situations, or even to women in the same cities—but a similar danger of ignoring these findings and failing to allow them to help us form further questions and inform missiological reflection elsewhere.

Three significant changes have taken place since my study that might give rise to different findings today. First, the *Jesus* film had only recently been produced in the Arabic dialect of that country at the time of my research, but for several years now has been available in that dialect and the languages of several ethnic minorities of the country. Second, Christian satellite television coverage has increased significantly. These two media likely have had a significant impact on those who have come to faith in the past ten years. Third, and perhaps most important, the number of national believers and their own level of initiative and involvement in evangelistic efforts have significantly increased. Beyond this, we must add the factor of increased prayer by Christians around the world, something we must recognize but whose effect would be difficult to rigorously measure.

Factors contributing to conversion.

The following composite, although fictitious, account includes the most common features of the background and conversion process of the single urban men whom I met and studied:

It was three years ago when I became interested in Christianity. A fellow student was taking part in a BCC (Bible correspondence course). I'm not sure what happened to him since then, but I became intrigued by a small book he had about the Christian Bible. Eventually he gave me the address of the BCC program in Europe. Soon I received my own materials, but I had to be careful that my older brothers didn't find out about what I was doing.

After a year or so of writing, I eagerly accepted the offer to meet face-to-face with a Christian, a European who lives in my city. We began to study the Bible together. It wasn't so much what he said, but how he understood and loved me that convinced me of the truth.

After we had met together for a few months, he introduced me to some other young men from my city, Christian⁷ young men. What a surprise! I had wondered if I was the only Christian of my nationality. For, in fact, in those weeks I had come to living faith in Jesus Christ and began to consider myself as a follower of the Messiah, a Christian. Meeting with these men confirmed my faith and gave me new friends. They encouraged me to keep on in my new faith, despite opposition from my family and friends.

The basic pattern observed may have had several variations. Radio was often the introductory agent rather than a friend already participating in the BCC. If radio did not play a role, then Christian literature was likely to be reported as significant in the conversion process.

⁶ The material in this section is taken from various sections of my dissertation, noted above, including a rewording of parts of the final chapter.

⁷ I hear loosely translate their own self-description as a follower of the Messiah, in other words, a Christian. It is outsiders who tend to use the phrase "Muslim background believer" or MBB.

At times dreams were reported as precursors to the conversion process. These included positive dreams, attracting the individual to Christianity, and negative dreams, instilling fear related to Islam. But the occurrence of dreams was not a dominant factor in the conversion process of this group of believers.

If before conversion the individual had a high level of Islamic religious observance, he was likely to face open persecution as a consequence of the conversion process. Others, less devout in their Islamic practice, may have faced the threat of persecution, but this was not usually realized.

If an individual was unemployed or otherwise disaffected with society, his attraction toward foreign cultural values was likely to be high. Here, the role of a missionary in the conversion process would be enhanced in the perception of the individual.

Patterns linking the conversion process and current church participation.

In my analysis I found certain patterns linking factors in the conversion process to the overall level of church participation (which I evaluated in terms of the respondents own descriptions of participation in formal and informal gatherings of believers, burden-bearing, and witness).

Two significant patterns were revealed regarding participation in evangelism. First, there was a *strong tendency that those who had come through open opposition or persecution for their faith tended to become faithful, active evangelists.* Second, those who had a low sense of national identity, who were *discontent with their country or with their setting in life, strongly tended not to be active in evangelism.*

Christians are called to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). Love is the hallmark of disciples of Jesus Christ (John 13:34, 35). However, only four respondents were able to describe a clear concept of burden-bearing including practical demonstration of this concept.

The absence of face-to-face witness and the absence of a display of empathy *by a national believer* during the conversion process tended to go along with the current absence of the biblical concept of burden-bearing. But the presence or absence of empathy displayed *by a foreigner* had a less significant relationship to this concept. Further, students and those who had been openly persecuted tended to not have a clear concept of burden-bearing.

Various questions arise concerning this important concept. Do the Christian students in this country lack a sense of community? Does persecution tend to isolate and heighten individualism among Christians? Is there a sort of "spiritual imprinting" that occurs during the conversion process, such as the way one is treated by Christians, which strongly relates to eventual behavior of the convert? To answer these questions definitively requires further study. As a theoretical base the "conversion as socialization" concepts referred to by Brock Kilbourne and James T. Richardson⁸ would support such contentions.

When the findings regarding burden-bearing were discussed with an experienced missionary, he was not surprised. Speaking privately he stated:

⁸ Brock Kilbourne and James T. Richardson. "Paradigm Conflict, Types of Conversion, and Conversion Theories," *Sociological Analysis* 50.1 (Spring 1989), pp. 1-21.

The churches [in the two cities] have never developed that sense of community. There is little trust. They don't see each other much and don't share their inner struggles and those who did share got burned.

Another missionary commented that teaching is repeatedly given on the concept of love, but with little obvious change. Something must be done to help the church grow in this vital area of Christian discipleship. National leaders, who confirmed the seriousness of the problem, and missionaries serving the Christians need to find an answer to this difficult problem.

Congruence of cultural values

The clearest pattern linking current church participation with the conversion process has to do with the congruence of cultural values. This requires a distinction between congruence drawing an individual to conversion, as suggested in the work of Lewis R. Rambo⁹ and congruence between a congregation and the community which correlates with church growth, the emphasis of the work of David T. Britt.¹⁰

Those who are most likely to be disaffected by society are those most likely to be drawn, at least initially, by foreign cultural values associated with Christianity (inasmuch as it is commonly perceived in this country as "the European religion"). Those who are more content with society and have a stronger sense of national identity may still be drawn to Christianity, but not due to attraction to foreign cultural values. Missionaries are likely to play a more significant role in the former group than in the latter. The implications of this finding are significant for the theory of church growth.

Drawing together the theory of Rambo and Britt with my dissertation findings, I suggested two principles regarding congruence in conversion and church growth, which I refer to as a Theory of Congruence of Cultural Values:

- 1. An individual tends to be drawn to Christianity by elements in the Christian faith and in the nature of the sources of witness that are congruent with that individual's personal values. These values may both stem from and conflict with the individual's culture.*
- 2. Churches tend to grow when there is congruence between the congregation and the surrounding community. Congruence may be perceived in mutually meaningful cultural symbols, but may also be practically displayed in the response of Christians to the needs of the community.*

Surprises among the significant factors

The significance, or lack of significance, of certain factors was surprising. But such surprises are refreshing, showing that human—and even more so, divine—behavior cannot be neatly predicted.

I found only one oldest sibling, and one other who was an oldest brother (with two older sisters), among the sample. When well-informed people who knew the national situation were asked about this, they tended to initially insist that it was a fluke and that there are many oldest

⁹ Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 37,38.

¹⁰ David T. Britt, "From Homogeneity to Congruence: A Church-Community Model," *Urban Mission*, 8.3 (Jan. 1991), pp. 27-41.

brothers and oldest siblings who are Christians. However, when asked to name one, the only name mentioned by them with certainty was that of a man over eighty years old who had been a Christian for over sixty-five years.

In dealing with a culture where so much value is placed on primogeniture, one might think of parallels to this finding in biblical accounts of God stepping past the firstborn to bless the second born (e.g., Abel, Isaac, and Jacob). But God loves all humans. He desires that all come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9), whatever their birth-order.

A link may exist between the failure of Christianity to take hold in this land and the low number of the typically influential, conservative oldest brothers among Christian converts. Comparative studies of situations where there is a greater turning to Christianity by Muslims would help to reveal whether conversion of firstborn sons is indeed important in such movements. I would tie such studies to the work of G. William Skinner.¹¹

Such work could be significant not only for missiology but also for anthropology since Skinner reported that little anthropological work has been done regarding the complexities of sibling set relationships. Instead, Skinner says, kinship studies tend to be limited to gender and oldest/other distinctions. In any case, specific prayer for oldest brothers is warranted. Yet as we seek to win these influential oldest brothers, we must recognize that if they convert they may pay a higher social price than the younger siblings.

Urbanization, modernity, and power encounter

Power encounter and dreams are often reported as very significant in the conversion process of Muslims. Those I interviewed rarely reported power encounter and, when they did, it was more in the truth encounter form as formulated by Alan R. Tippett¹² than in the “signs and wonders” form often stressed in popular literature. Dreams also played a minor role but did not, in line with common anecdotal accounts, feature Jesus.

More significant than a quest for power was the influence of modernity or modernization and urbanization. Two respondents indicated that they had become atheists before becoming Christians. Several referred to the frustrations of unemployment or the attraction of foreign cultural values. Many spoke of the importance of displays of love and understanding by missionaries and national Christians.

This suggests that in the urban setting, evangelism must consider not just folk Islam but modernity. Some may very well be seeking power. But my findings suggest that at least as many are seeking an end to the *anomie* common to urban settings worldwide. The power that some seek is not against evil spirits but over the powerlessness they face in the grip of urban economic and political structures. However, due to the commonly-known differences in the involvement in folk Islam of Muslim men and women, it would not be surprising to find significantly different underlying attitudes toward power among Muslim women converts to Christianity.

¹¹ William G. Skinner, “Seek a Loyal Subject in a Filial Son: Family Roots of Political Orientation in Chinese Society,” in *Family Process and Political Process in Modern Chinese History*,. Proceedings of a conference sponsored by the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica; Department of History, University of California, Davis; and, Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange. Taipei, Republic of China, June 1992, pp. 943-993.

¹² Alan R. Tippett, *Introduction to Missiology*, (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1987).

Middle Eastern Women

Building on my work with North African men, in cooperation with a number of women missionaries I carried out a project to analyze factors leading to the conversion of women in a number of Middle Eastern countries. A pilot project was carried out with a small sample, fourteen women, but was expanded to a study of fifty women (forty-two actually useable interview sets) in the Middle East and France.¹³ A colleague presented the findings at the 2003 "Seeking Answers" consultation of women involved in ministry among Muslim women.

A similar protocol was used as in my dissertation, however in this case various women carried out the interviews, providing me with the data to process. The drawbacks of using several interviewers were offset by the advantage of access to a large number of women.

In reading the stories of these women, one of the first things I noticed was the *great diversity*. For example, considering the women in the pilot study, we can see the diversity in first contact with Christians:

- Karima: A brother
- Faith: A sister
- Samira: An uncle
- Rhoda: A Coptic friend and attendance, as a little girl, at a Coptic wedding
- Mona: A Syrian Christian woman and her daughters who were classmates in elementary school in Saudi Arabia; one had her cross necklace ripped off by a teacher
- Randa: Arab Christians from her home country (although she was from a minority)
- Nina: A woman from another country on an outreach program of Arab Christians
- Nawal: Catholic nuns in a rural school
- Suna: European missionaries, contact being made through her husband who had secretly become a believer
- Kaouther: A European who provided a room for her
- Huda: A Christian woman who befriended her while she lived in Europe
- Najwa: A missionary cautiously recommended by a Muslim friend because she might have good advice about some employment difficulties
- Hafeda: Radio (occasionally) when a teenager; poor reception but enough to remember the stories of Moses
- Alifa: The *Jesus* film and an Arabic evangelist on satellite TV

The media and witness

In the broader study, several communication tools were mentioned. Eleven of the women reported the influence of media other than the *Jesus* film in their conversion. Several, especially in Turkey, watched "Ben Hur" or similar films on television which attracted them to Christianity. After a dream of Jesus, Zaha went to a video shop and checked out "Jesus of Nazareth" (evidently the version by Franco Zeffirelli). She was intrigued that scenes in the film were identical to those in her dream.

Sixteen of the women reported that the *Jesus* film had been instrumental in their conversion. (Two of those who did not refer to it may have come to faith, as for most of the men in my earlier study, before the film was available in their own language.) For example, Asma said that "I found the *Jesus* video very good but not a set of teaching videos that compared the Qu'ran with the Bible." Bilqis reported that she had a video at home about Jesus. One day she

¹³ Two reports were received from SE Asia but were not included in the analysis since the contextual setting was significantly different from the rest and two responses were too few to use as a comparative group.

was watching it, and asked Jesus on the video ("I suppose it was a prayer, but I didn't think of it that way," she said) whether He was true, what was truth, had He really lived and done all He was claimed to have done? She felt as if someone answered that yes, He was truth.

Two interesting findings arose:

Single women were far less likely to report the Jesus film as a significant factor in their coming to faith.

Among married women, those from ethnic minorities are significantly more likely to be impacted by the Jesus film than are other women.

Why would single women in general be less likely to refer to the *Jesus* film and married minority women tend, more than the group as a whole, to consider it a significant factor in their conversion? Sara, a Bedouin, said "I watched the *Jesus* video but it didn't help me much" although Alifa, a North African university woman was deeply impacted when she saw it on television, in particular Jesus' demonstration of power over the raging Sea of Galilee. Adar, a married Kurdish woman, said that she "watched the *Jesus* film many times and was greatly affected by it."

Regarding the minorities, it could be that a language factor entered in, but we do not know which language of the film they watched. It is well-known that when the *Jesus* film is produced in a minority language it receives a special reception: Jesus speaks "my" language, not just that of the majority.

A married woman might be able to watch the film privately while her husband is at work, while a single woman might need to go to a friend or a missionary's home. For example, unmarried Emine's half-sister took her to a missionary's home where she watched the film.

The importance of the Bible

Twenty-two women, just over half, spoke of the Bible in relating their conversion experience. Of these, nine mentioned personal Bible reading and fourteen some form of group study or teaching as a significant contributing factor to their conversion.

Analysis of these factors suggests that personal Bible study plays a greater role in the conversion of Muslim women in societies where there is greater general freedom and more pressure toward individualism. Group Bible study, even small groups or in pairs, is more important where society is still strongly collective or where reduced religious freedom pushes women toward the reassurance others can give her.

Persecution

Muslim women who come to faith in Christ are likely to face opposition wherever they are found. Women in France were just as likely as women elsewhere to report opposition either as they approached turning to Christ or grew in the faith.

I found two interesting relationships among the women we are studying. First, *women who have never married were far less likely to report opposition than those who are married* (including those who were divorced, widowed, or remarried.) This was not a factor of age (some of the single women were no longer young). It is also not a matter of opposition from the

spouse. Three women reported opposition from a spouse, but two of those three reported opposition from other sources as well

I have not been able to delve into the theory behind this. This suggests a certain level of freedom for the single adult women who have come to faith that is not afforded to others.

Education also appears to be a predictor of persecution. *Those with a low level of education and those with university education were the least likely to face opposition.*

Again, we assume that persecution is in some way related to freedom. Whether the woman said she was a committed Muslim or nominal has no relationship to whether she reported facing opposition in this study.

My suggested explanation for this pattern is that those with university education, and correspondingly the families who sent them, may tend to be more open-minded than others. The poor, who are likely to have only a low level of education, may be open to new ideas because they have nothing to lose. But, as in my own country, those with the most conservative values are those in the middle. *Thus, opposition is most likely to come for those in the middle who have the most to lose from change and instability.*

Who witnessed to her? Is she a witness now?

Of the forty-two cases analyzed, twenty-five referred specifically to a foreigner, from outside the region, as having a key role in witnessing to her. Of these, fifteen referred to a foreigner but made no mention of witness from family, national believers, or workers from other countries in the region.

Twenty-two of the women referred to the Bible in their conversion narrative. I have found some interesting patterns linking the reported impact of the Bible and the role of Christians from outside the region.

For example, there is a strong likelihood that if they did not report the Bible as a factor, they also did not speak of the impact of foreign workers. If they did report the Bible as a factor, two out of three also referred to the contribution of a foreign worker in her conversion.

Bible a conversion factor?	No	Yes
No reference to foreign worker	12	8
Worker from outside the region played a key role	5	17

p=0.014

Table 1 The role of witnesses from outside the region and the impact of the Bible.

In my earlier research among men, I noted a tendency that, among MBBs, the most active in evangelism were those who had faced persecution. Those who reported no opposition were significantly less active in evangelism. Further, a lower level of evangelism was noted among those who were discontent with their national identity, and more likely to report a foreigner as the key witness in their conversion process.

The persecution/witness correlation was not confirmed in the study among women. However, although there were some differences in how we asked the questions, the disturbing pattern appears again that those who report a key role by a foreigner in witnessing to them, in turn tend to be less active in witness.

Active witness?	No	Yes
No reference to foreign worker	5	12
Worker from outside the region played a key role	15	10

p=0.052

Table 2 Do foreign workers foster active witness among MBBs?

So what fosters witness? I wish the answer were simple and straightforward! It may be easier to point to what seems to hinder witness, rather than what fosters it. Reflection on this data and some earlier studies makes me wonder along the following lines.

Bible study. Who can argue against Bible study? God's Word is vital in witness. However, could it be that foreign workers use a Bible study method which does produce some fruit, but is not easily passed on? The writings of those developing ministry among oral learners causes me to wonder if even among university students there are women who *can be won* using this highly literate approach, but who then are *unable to replicate* the method and use it to win others.

The issue here is *not* to stop Bible study methods. Instead, perhaps we should examine them. What can we do so that MBB women can not only learn from the Scriptures but also know how to use the Scriptures in witness. Although "storying" is not to be taken as a simplistic solution, what can we learn from the case of Yasmine reported to be "a primary oral communicator [who] has heard the gospel, accepted Christ, been discipled, and is sharing the gospel with her friends and family totally through oral means." And, may I add, she does this in highly literate France.

Social self-assurance. Why do people allow foreigners to influence them toward religious conversion? With regard to societies as a whole, Robert Montgomery¹⁴ points to the convert looking for some advantage — economic, military, social, political, etc. Even if we filter out those who merely want to use the foreigner, with no spiritual interest, it is true that *to our advantage in witness* there are some who look to foreigners because, even if they do not know what they want, they want change.¹⁵

For Layla, her openness to change was coupled with a secure social position that allowed her the personal freedom to be so open in her witness, after coming to faith, that eventually she had to back off to avoid trouble. Rosa came to faith and despite opposition from her husband was able to maintain and further develop relationships among the French North African community which in turn have led to several coming to faith. For others, though, could the welcome from the foreigner and the warmth and security of her home unwittingly serve to remove the MBB from her normal networks of interaction?

¹⁴ "The Spread of Religions and Macrosocial Relations." *Sociological Analysis*, 52:1(1991), pp 37-53.

¹⁵ I refer here to Westerners, Koreans, and others who are clearly outsiders from more prosperous countries. Near-neighbors are also foreign, and especially if culturally insensitive may be perceived as outsiders without the perceived attraction of those from economically more prosperous settings.

Further, we have seen the pattern that those who had a close relative come to faith before or at about the same time tend to themselves be active witnesses. Having a brother, sister, cousin or some other close family member sharing the faith would tend to give a measure of reassurance which would encourage witness to others, including other family members.

The issue to consider here, then, is how foreign women can be loving, open, and helpful to Muslim women who are coming to faith, but do so in a way which helps them as much as possible maintain their normal networks and relationships.

God's supernatural intervention

God has intervened through healing, dreams, and audibly speaking to Muslim women to help draw them to faith. These events do not stand alone but are linked with Christian witness and God's Word.

Of the women in this study, nineteen indicated that God spoke to them through one or several dreams or an audible voice. Seven referred to a healing, with two of these seven also reporting a dream. All but one of the healings was reported from the MENA region, while the dreams were more evenly spread across the three regions.

Zaha said that "I gradually came to know the truth, mostly through the many dreams and visions I had of Jesus, his disciples, and parts from the Bible before I knew they were in the Bible. I always prayed to find a missionary that could help me understand and one whom I could ask questions of."

Asma had a frightening experience which deeply impacted her. She remembered that "My friend had just told me that there is power in the name of Jesus. I had a dream that a demon was attacking me. I cried out in the name of Allah and it retreated only to come straight back to attack me. Then I remembered what she had said and I cried out in the name of Jesus and the demon fled."

Cansu experienced the very practical work of God in providing a ride to school every day for a year, at a time when her family did not have money for the bus fare. Even when it was raining, and she could not afford an umbrella, the rain would stop when she needed to go out. Faith was delivered from severe headaches after prayer for healing and deliverance.

All three married women who reported that their husband was clearly opposed to their movement in faith toward belief in Christ also had a dream. This is not enough data to form the basis of a theory, but it points to God's mercy toward these women who needed the additional encouragement to overcome their husband's opposition.

Correspondingly, those who had a close relative come to faith at about the same time were least likely to be granted a dream by the Lord. Clearly a close relative coming to faith would be an encouragement, helping the woman clear the barriers impeding her progress toward conversion. Could it be that here we see God intervening to grant encouragement which no human was in a position to provide?

Dream(s) from God or healing?	No	Yes
National believers most worthy of her trust?		
No	11	22
Yes	7	2

p=0.017

Table 3. Women who reported dreams or healing as factors contributing to conversion and current trust of national Christians

It is not surprising that those who are discontent with their national identity would tend to trust foreigners more than nationals. But why is there a pattern linking God's supernatural intervention with being discontent with national identity and the linked characteristic of trust?

First, we need to recognize that dreams are *not* a recent phenomenon in Islamic society nor in God's drawing Muslims to himself. E.G. von Grunebaum and Roger Caillois¹⁶ edited a very interesting book which helps us understand the role of dreams through history in Islamic society. Lillias Trotter noted in her diary numerous instances of Algerians who had come to faith in the early 1900s under the influence of a dream. C.E. Padwick studied these notations and identified four categories of message of the dreams: moral warning, guidance, encouragement, and the presence of Jesus.¹⁷

Second, in preparing this report I have not had time to go deeper into the missiology and psychology of dreams. God certainly *does* speak through dreams, and at times it is clear that he does so with little or no prior contact with Christianity by the dreamer. In other cases we must admit that complex psychological issues are involved beyond the scope of this paper to discuss.

Third, it seems that God tends to send dreams to those in need of special guidance. Lillias Trotter, according to Padwick, "had formed a theory of a sort of economy of this grace, believing that the guidance of dreams was granted chiefly, if not solely, in cases where other guidance was not available."¹⁸ Our examples show support her contention of "chiefly" but disprove the notion of "solely".

On reflection, then, the patterns of who received a dream are *not* surprising. However, while rejoicing in God's special intervention, it is obvious that we now have the hard work of helping these sisters develop trusting relationships with other national believers.

The Coming to Faith Consultation

In early 2004 a consultation was held drawing together over fifty missiologists, missionaries, and Muslim background believers from over twenty nations of origin to present and discuss their recent research on how Muslims are coming to faith in Christ. We rejoiced with a participant in CTFC who had attended the Pattaya 1980 Lausanne consultation who said that "Then we spoke of two believers here, or three there. Some said that they did not know of any [Muslim background] believers but had hopes that there were a few. But now we speak of hundreds."

¹⁶ *The Dream and Human Societies*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.

¹⁷ "Dream and Vision, Some Notes from a Diary," *International Review of Mission*, 28, (April, 1939).

¹⁸ "Dreams", p. 206.

As we gathered, we asked God to help us do research that makes a difference, research that is needed because God *is* at work! We recognize that there is no single process of conversion, and the difficulty of applying a lesson from rural Algeria to urban South Asia. But we agreed that we need to do the research and appropriately share it as encouragement and as instruction for one another, heeding the words of Richard Peace that “How we conceive of conversion determines how we do evangelism.”¹⁹

Therefore, we asked God to help us biblically and, more broadly, missiologically understand how Muslims are coming to faith, grounded in today’s ministry realities. The researchers used a variety of approaches, but the underlying intention was to move beyond stories and provide analysis rarely provided until now.

Several of the papers will be published in 2005 under the title *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way: Journeys of Faith*²⁰. The findings I refer to below provide a preview of the broader work to be presented in that volume.

People convert for a variety of motives

Dr. Andreas Maurer, drawing on his dissertation at UNISA (South Africa) reminded us in the words of one writer that “the conversion door swings both way.” Some turn away from faith; we call it “conversion” when movement is toward *us*, “apostasy” when toward *them*.

Implications of the bi-directional conversion process he studied in South Africa that that churches should be sure to take adequate measures to care for new converts who join the faith community, while taking special care of people in the church who wish to convert to another faith.

Practical steps for churches to provide *group* care for new believers include

- A group trained to welcome new converts
- Genuine interest and care, lead into study of the Bible and discipleship issues
- Introduced through this small group to the larger faith community
- Singles (and individuals) who have come to faith should be “adopted” into a family
- Group trained to counsel and care for people who are contemplating converting away from Christianity

Women’s issues

Several papers dealt specifically with women coming to faith. Dr. Evelyne Reisacher of Fuller Theological Seminary, studying Algerian women in France noted that fear of rejection as a result of conversion was a much higher barrier than the fear of death. These women’s own perception is that they tend to emphasize the social rather than the theological as they consider faith in Christ, yet this is itself a way of theologizing. They also say that it is more difficult for women to decide to follow Jesus than men, but once they decide they are more likely to continue.

What are their concerns? Women MBBs have less freedom than men—they cannot just go out on their own to meet a friend in a park or coffee shop. As they consider the shame they may bring on their family, they wonder what their brother or father, as male guardian, will think.

¹⁹ Richard Peace. *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) p. 286.

²⁰ Edited by David Greenlee, (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster US and Secunderabad: OM Books India).

What are the implications for me as a mother, or of ever becoming a mother? And yet the personal identity offered in and by Jesus Christ is a positive thing. These women need to hear the stories of other women to encourage them as they consider turning to Christ.

A writer from South Asia emphasized the role of women who *experience* life. "Active processes going on inside and around her enable, trigger, and confirm an understanding of the message...touch(ing) something very deep inside her core." Stories are very significant, not just the words but how the story is told. Intimacy with Allah is not a part of a Muslim woman's experience but for those coming to faith in Christ this is a possibility.

In our witness, "if we miss out on relationship we miss everything." We must allow women to observe our behavior and give them practical ways to follow, to touch the reality of Jesus.

Movements to Christ

Some of the papers focused on individual aspects of coming to faith. We also heard of the dynamics where many are turning to faith.

In one such movement, the handful of national believers and foreign missionaries believed that if people were praying, some were responding "and we wanted to go out to find them." Some have looked back on this special year as a year of prayer, one of the first in the growing number of such intercession emphases. It was much more than that, the special prayer beginning *after* the wave of God's work had begun to swell. There was an order of magnitude increase in the number of known national believers, from about thirty to about three hundred. The biggest factor was the bold witness of nationals who overcame fear as a community, not just individuals

A couple who have worked among the Fulbe since the mid 1980s encouraged us to slow down, not speed up. In the first ten years of living among this people there was no visible response, then seven who followed Christ, men and women who to other Fulbe appear as Muslims with a dangerous interest in Jesus

Drawing on his study of movements and his own experience, this writer suggests that in such settings it is not necessarily wise to quickly form a church. If you have just a tiny group and try to make it a church, it tends to stagnate and die. It may have too high a profile, and the believers may not be mature enough, still struggling with life issues and applying the gospel to their own lives. If we form a church, this pushes church organization matters to the fore. Some of the new followers may not have been very religious anyway and may come with wrong motives. As a result the missionaries feel they must take the lead and the planted church unavoidably takes on an outside flavor while local ownership is squelched.

MBBs from one of the largest unreached peoples

In a country with some degree of tolerance, Dr. P.I. Barnabas, a national leader, surveyed 118 MBBs. Some of his key findings included

Main motive for coming to faith in Christ:

- 66% passionate for eternal life
- 16% healing or a physical blessing
- 11% lifestyle and witness of a Christian
- 6% forgiveness

First heard the gospel through.

- 36% a family member
- 25% pastor or evangelist
- 22% a friend
- 6% overhearing a Christian worship service, singing
- 3% a dream
- 2% their boss at work
- 2% a gospel tract
- 2% reading a Bible
- 1% a teacher
- 1% television (although there are many Christian broadcasts on local stations)

Dr. Barnabas conclusion referred to his amazement at the love of God for his own people. His study pointed to the vital importance of personal witness and, as a leader himself, the need to strengthen the three key sources of witness: family, pastor/evangelist, and friends.

Hindrances to continued growth in West Africa

Dr. Dan McVey was not surprised at the factors impacting the initial stage of growth among a West African tribe he studied, tools such as the *Jesus* film and chronological Bible storying, prayer and power encounter, and the use of scripture. He found that the motives for this Sahelian people to come to faith, somewhat different from the preceding study, were

- Power and goodness of Jesus (35%)
- Lifestyle of Christians (22%)
- Desire for salvation (17%)
- Search for guidance and protection (11%)
- Dissatisfaction with Islam (6%)
- Acts of kindness done by Christians (5%)
- Drawn to Christ from their earliest childhood whether by familial influence or spiritual inclination (3%).

Asked what distinguishes followers of Jesus from the rest of the community, the new believers referred to

- Character/way of life (69%)
- Truth of God (14%)
- Method of prayer (8%)
- Name of Christ (2%)

Finally, and of special interest, McVey investigated why there was a plateau in growth after an initial stage of many coming to faith. His research pointed to seven factors:

- God's calling
- Limited population
- Pause for observation
- Persecution
- Restricted access for further evangelism
- Not enough effort
- Not enough time (for more to consider and respond to the message)

A Central Asian's story

A Central Asian MBB has himself carried out research on the growing church in his country. He referred to two main influences on people coming to faith: the changed life of a friend or spouse, and answered prayer or miracles.

In his post-Soviet setting urban migrants have moved from rural poverty to the city where there has been greater freedom from family influence. The cities do not always provide jobs and uplift; but some hopeless people have seen love between Christians which has drawn them to Jesus.

Miracles and dreams seem to help people come to Christ, he observed, when there is no other relationship with Christians. After that relationship is established, preaching and relationships with Christians continue the process. Having spent some months in the USA for training he noted that "We are asking God to do miracles, but people are looking for changed lives."

Regarding opposition his view is that "persecution is normal....When someone comes to faith in Christ, they are immediately persecuted. We know the process. Afterward they are stronger."

Summary Factors

There is no single way that God is at work in drawing Muslims to faith in Christ, and no single way in which they live out their life of faith. There are a vast variety of context in which MBBs follow Jesus.

In our research of those who are coming to faith, though, three factors are repeated over and over. Though one may be emphasized more, or less, than the others, the three key factors influencing Muslims to come to faith in Jesus Christ are

- The truth of Scripture
- A sign of God's power
- A loving witness

To God be the glory among all the peoples of the world!

David Greenlee is Operation Mobilization's International Research Associate. He holds the PhD in Intercultural Studies from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, USA.