

POINTING THE WAY: THE TRANSLATOR'S ROLE IN CONTEXTUALIZATION

■ What should Muslims do with their culture when they become Christians? What role does non-Islamic culture play in the lives of Christians sharing their faith with Muslims? Bill and Jane (pseudonyms) document their fascinating experiences in a predominately Muslim land.

By "Bill and Jane"

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INTRODUCTION

When we landed at Citex (City X) airport in 1983 something also landed with us. As we descended from the night sky into that new world, a world dominated by the religion of Islam, our notions concerning identification and contextualization also descended from the realm of theory to practice, from the realm of speculation to application.

Our preparation for that moment had included the standard introductions to Cultural Anthropology at Bible college and linguistics school. There we were taught to view 'culture' in its broadest sense as 'the integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance' (Edward A. Hoebel, *Cultural and Social Anthropology*, New York: McGraw, 1972, p. 6).

Our teachers also challenged us to develop a Biblical perspective on the subject. What is God's attitude toward culture and what, therefore, should our attitude be? All cultures, like all individuals, reflect both the image of God and the depravity of man. Nevertheless, God, the originator of human culture, views it 'primarily as a vehicle to be used by Him and His people for Christian purposes, rather than as an enemy to be combated or shunned'. God is 'above' or outside of culture but chooses 'to work through and in terms

of the cultural matrix on which human beings are immersed' (Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979, p. 103).

In preparation for our future role as cross-cultural communicators of the Good News we were also taught to draw a distinction between the 'essence' of Christianity and its cultural 'expression.' Christianity is not linguistically or culturally monolithic (as, for example, Islam would like to be) but is kaleidoscopic. God, the God of infinite variety, is delighted when people from around the world worship Him in their own culture. Just as God does not want to destroy sinful individuals but to transform them, He also does not want to destroy or negate culture but to transform it into something beautiful for Himself. The 'essence' of Christianity, a personal, faith allegiance relationship with God through Christ, (Kraft, *op. cit.*, pp. 229, 230) should be expressed in ways which are appropriate within its cultural context. In other words, it should be 'contextualized.'

We came to view contextualization as the cultural correlate of our organization's approach to translation. We were taught that the goal of translation is not to find equivalent forms but to express equivalent meaning. A great diversity of linguistic forms can express the meaning of a passage of Scripture. In the same way, a great diversity of cultural forms can express Christianity's 'meaning' or 'essence.' Contextualization is to culture what idiomatic translation is to language.

During this period of training the Lord also gave us a keen interest in Muslim people. Friendships with Lebanese neighbors in our home city

prompted us to peruse much of the literature which is currently available on witnessing to Muslims and Christian missions to Islam. As we studied this material we were reminded of and disturbed by the fact that the vast majority of Muslims remain indifferent, resistant, and antagonistic to the Gospel. "Why is this so?" we asked. From our theological perspective it is no more difficult for God to save a Muslim than it is for Him to save, for example, a North American hedonist. The human heart—all human hearts—are equally in bondage to sin and equally in need of God's Spirit to set them free. Why, then, has the Gospel made such little impact on the world of Islam?

As we pondered this question and particularly as we read Phil Parshall's book *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism*, we came to the conclusion that, from a human perspective at least, un-Christian Christian attitudes are a major problem. Traditionally, missionaries have demanded that Muslims accept both Christ and our culture (and, of course, reject and be rejected by their own culture in turn). Their spiritual conversion and their cultural conversion are inseparably and necessarily linked in our minds. We will not accept the one without the other.

Christians and Muslims are still locked in a Crusade mentality. The armies are assembled. The battle lines are drawn. And, to make sure that there is no confusion on the field, each army requires that its soldiers wear distinctive uniforms. Muslims must look like Muslims and Christians must look like Christians. Each man must wear his community's emblems prominently and proudly (e.g. names, salutations,

dress, grooming, manner of prayer, fasting practices, architecture, day of worship). These distinctions must be maintained so that friends and foes can be clearly identified and so that defections and betrayals can be cheered and jeered appropriately. And, of course, when cross-overs do occur, the convert is required to divest himself of his old garb and put on the uniform of his new comrades-in-arms. We may be willing to practice the principles of identification and contextualization among those (animists, for example) who are no threat to us, but when it comes to Islam, our great arch-rival, we are prepared to concede nothing. No quarter is asked, no quarter is given.

Convinced that this state of confrontation and cultural competition is sinful we determined that, during our stay in Islamex (Islamic Country X), we would do nothing to perpetuate it. In fact, we felt that we should try to identify as closely as possible with the Muslim community; to participate in their culture and to adopt and adapt for our own use those elements of their culture which are not in conflict with Biblical principles. We felt that it was our responsibility to demonstrate by our lives that it is possible for a person to be loyal to Jesus Christ and to express that faith in ways which are appropriate in a Muslim context. We felt that it was our responsibility to model (albeit imperfectly) a new way whereby a Muslim can love and follow the Lord without divorcing himself from his community and cultural heritage.

But when the rubber hit the runway in 1983 these perceptions and plans had to be applied and tested in real-life situations. And the landing, as might be expected, was not entirely smooth. The following is a brief report on our attempts to identify with the Muslim community in Islamex and, in particular, with the Ethnex (Ethnic Group X) among whom we worked.

IDENTIFICATION

1. Muslim Names

Soon after we arrived we asked a young friend to suggest good Muslim names for our sons. He wrote down their names, learned how to pronounce them, went home to consult with his friends and came back with the verdict. They have been known by the names he suggested ever since. Another friend

gave Jane her new name and I had already selected mine before I came.

We received many positive comments about the fact that we had adopted Muslim names. Of course, some people assumed that we had become Muslim because, as one friend put it, a change in name usually indicates a change in ideology. But our explanation that we had chosen the names to make things easier for our friends was accepted. Our friends used our Muslim names and always seemed pleased to draw attention to these names when introducing us to others.

2. Religious Affiliation

At first we were reluctant to be pigeon-holed as either Muslim or Christian. When we were asked about our religious affiliation we would reply evasively using the Qur'anic expression, '*Ahle Kitab*' (People of the Book). After a moment of hesitation the person would often reply, "Ah, so then you are Christian."

For awhile we also experimented with '*Isa Muslim*' (Jesus Muslim) but got into some fruitless discussions with Muslim friends who wanted us to change it to '*Isa Musulman*' (Muslims in Islamex commonly refer to themselves as '*Musulman*'). And again people would often reply, "So, you are Christians then!"

Finally, realizing that people were determined to pigeon-hole us anyway and wanting to avoid any charges of duplicity, we adopted the term '*Isayi*' which is how our Ethnex friends commonly refer to Christians. It translated roughly as 'the Jesus one' or 'the one who follows Jesus.' And since we wanted everyone to be aware of our loyalty to Jesus it seemed like an appropriate title.

3. Salutations and Other Standard Expressions

We always used the standard Muslim greeting '*Assalamu alaikum*' and the response '*Alaikum salam*.' (We understand that Islamex Christians generally use the abbreviation '*Salam*' among themselves.) We also occasionally used the expression '*Bismillah-ur-Rahman-ur-Rahim*' ('In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful') when beginning a meal or a journey or a task. But there are many other expressions

used in a wide variety of situations which we have not mastered.

4. Dress

While in Islamex we wore the national dress, an outfit consisting of wide, baggy pants and a long-tailed shirt. We frequently received positive comments from people who were pleased that we found their national dress both comfortable and attractive. (Many Westerners do not wear it.)

But this clothing is not just 'national' dress. It is Muslim dress. Some of our conservative Muslim friends would not be caught dead in Western pants and shirt—not just because they find them uncomfortable but because they are considered un-Islamic. People occasionally assumed we were Muslim simply because we were wearing Muslim dress.

5. Grooming

Conservative Muslim women wear their hair long (down to the lower back). Short hair is considered unfeminine and un-Islamic. One of Jane's friends opined that any woman who cut her hair short would go to hell. One of our Western friends who has short hair was once subjected to a body search by some ladies to prove her gender. Needless to say, Jane wore her hair long—but not quite as long as her Muslim friends who apparently were not concerned about split-ends.

A woman's hair must also be braided and covered. A woman with hair uncovered is considered immodest. A woman with long hair blowing in the breeze is considered wild and wanton and seductive. Jane kept hers braided and covered in the presence of Muslims.

For Muslim men, wearing a beard is a requirement. Religious leaders and teachers of all ranks, seminary students, Hajjis (those who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca), and 'evangelists' and missionaries wear beards almost without exception. Laymen who want to make a statement concerning their piety and good character also wear beards.

However, most men in Islamex (at least in our area) do not wear beards but prefer the moustache. Even the President whose love for Islam is well publicized wears a mustache and has commented on this inconsistency publicly. But the mustache seems to be

the minimum requirement. One sees very few barefaced men.

When I arrived in Islamex I was sporting a big, bushy beard. I was occasionally asked if I was a Muslim simply because of my beard and clothing. Prior to our first visit to Ethnex District I asked an Ethnex friend if I should shave it off (thinking, perhaps, that the Ethnex people might not approve of a beard). The friend responded, "Oh no, they will respect you!"

However, during our first summer in Islamex I got an infection on my chin and had to shave the beard off to facilitate healing. I did not regrow it afterwards and now have a mustache. Some friends were a little puzzled, perhaps thinking that I was backsliding from my religious commitments. The medical explanation seemed to satisfy them, however, and I was happy to be free of the beard not only because it is much cooler without it but because I see Muslim religious leaders as modern-day Pharisees and do not want to be identified with them. I would rather identify with the average male who considers himself a good Muslim but who doesn't wear his religion on his sleeve—or on his face!

6. *Purdah*

Purdah, the system whereby sexually mature females are kept hidden ('curtained off' or 'veiled') from the view of men who are not related to them and the standards of modesty which are inherent in that system place many more demands on women than on men. However, the *purdah* system is not practiced uniformly throughout Islamex. The manner and degree to which it is applied varies from region to region, from village to city, from class to class, from sect to sect and even from house to house. It was, therefore, difficult for us to figure out how or with whom to identify.

However, we decided that it would be better to start at the conservative end of the scale and 'loosen up' if possible, than to start at the liberal end and have to 'tighten up.' So, within a few weeks Jane purchased her first *burqah* and wore it whenever she left the house. (*Burqahs* come in several different styles. The old-fashioned kind looks like a

badminton shuttlecock with cloth mesh or peepholes for the women to look through. The more modern type consists of a coat or cape—usually black—with a veil. Jane's first *burqah* was the old-fashioned type.)

The response of Muslim men to Jane's *burqah* was quite positive. Conservative Muslims are concerned by the erosion of traditional values that has taken place under Western influence and they were happy that a Western woman was upholding the old standards of modesty. When our Ethnex male friends introduced us to other people and gave a little background explanation about us to them they almost always mentioned the fact that Jane wore a *burqah* (Jane, of course, would not be present on such occasions).

Conservative Muslim women were also pleased that Jane was wearing a *burqah*. They do not see the *purdah* system or the *burqah* as an infringement of their rights but as their religious duty and as a defense. It protects them from lustful men. And Jane found this to be true. In the bazaar she was stared at and harassed much less than other Western women she knew who did not

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follow local custom. (She was also accompanied to the bazaar by one of our sons, by myself or by some female friend.)

Jane received, however, a few negative comments from some young, female school teachers who were more liberal in their outlook. They felt that Jane's wearing of the *burqah* was a very retrogressive step. They were happy to be free of it. They felt that Jane should wear a *chaddor* (a large sheet wrapped around the body) like they themselves wore.

After awhile we began to notice that

some of our conservative, upper-class Ethnex lady friends who lived in Citex had developed a flexible approach. In Ethnex territory they wore a modern-style *burqah* but in Citex wore a *chaddor*. Following their example Jane evolved the following 'system': in some of the more liberal areas of the country (i.e. in the national capital and some of the larger cities) she would wear only a light scarf thrown over the shoulders. In Citex, the provincial capital where we lived (a more conservative area), she would wear a *chaddor* to the Old City or to the Cantonment or around the University area. To visit her friends in the village nearby she would wear a modern-style *burqah*. She would also wear this *burqah* when flying to or walking around in Ethnex town, the administrative center of the district in which Ethnex people live. When traveling in outlying areas of Ethnex District (i.e. when on the road) she would wear a full-length *chaddor*, but when staying in an Ethnex home she would wear a half-size *chaddor* as is the custom of the women there. The old, village-style *burqah* was allowed to languish in the closet.

Concerning who was allowed to see whom, we observed the customs of the house we were visiting. I would let Jane and the boys approach the door and knock first and make the initial contact. I would stand back and wait for the host to usher me into the guest room when the way was clear. If the ladies in the house were keeping strict *purdah*, then I would not see them and would not even refer to them, although I would make the standard, general inquiry,

"How is everything in the house?"

If the women presented themselves, I would greet them politely and would inquire about their health, etc., but would avoid being familiar and would converse primarily with the men. I would never go into the family area of the house unless invited to do so by the host and only when he was present.

7. *Dietary Restrictions*

While in Islamex we did not eat pork or drink wine (with the exception of two occasions when we were offered a glass by Christian friends in their

homes). We did not keep any forbidden (ha'ram) substances in our house. We feel that it is important that our Muslim friends know that our pots and dishes and cutlery have not been contaminated and that we can satisfy them on that point if asked.

8. Standard of Living

We tried to maintain a modest standard of living so as not to distance ourselves from our friends, most of whom were not wealthy. We lived in a small rented quarter with three rooms, a closet-sized kitchen, a bathroom and a courtyard. We did not have servants. Our friends seemed to feel comfortable in our home and often commented how nice it was and how adequate it was for the four of us (even though we often felt cramped for space).

Our single, major departure from a modest standard of living was the purchase of a Jeep in our third year to facilitate travel to and within Ethnex District. In retrospect it was not a wise move. Apart from the economics of it, it placed us on the level of high-ranking government officers in the District—not a very good way to develop rapport with the common man. We sold the vehicle prior to our recent departure from Islamex and in the future plan to rely on public transport.

9. Worship

Within the first few months of our arrival I asked a friend to teach me how to pray in Muslim fashion and how to do the preliminary ablutions. With this information and the assistance of a booklet on the subject entitled *Elementary Teachings of Islam*, we proceeded to write a Christian version of the prayer routine (which is more accurately thought of as a liturgy or worship service). We followed the basic format of body postures; substituted quotes from the Bible for the Arabic words; and eliminated the repetition that is involved in Muslim prayer by organizing the quotes around the themes of God's holiness, God's justice and God's love. We then memorized the prayers and used them ourselves, being careful to do the necessary ablutions first, and to pray with the head covered and feet unshod on a clean surface and to face in the direction of the *Ka'ba* in Mecca.

I occasionally prayed in this fashion

in the homes of our Ethnex friends when we visited them. They know we are followers of Jesus but never raised any objections and would always render any assistance required with courtesy and respect (e.g. to provide a prayer mat or to point out the '*Qibla*,' the direction of prayer in that vicinity). On one occasion a friend asked what I was saying in my prayers. I replied that I was speaking in English using words from the Bible. My friend chuckled and said that perhaps it would be better to use the Arabic words.

10. Going to the Mosque

On two occasions I went to a mosque to participate in congregational worship, once in Citex and once in Ethnex District. On the first occasion I went with non-Ethnex friends who had jumped to the conclusion that I was becoming or had become a Muslim. On the second occasion I went with an Ethnex friend to a small mosque in his village. He knew that I was a Christian. There was no untoward incident on either occasion.

However, I did not make a practice of attending the mosque during the stated prayer times. I do not believe that it is wrong to do so but chose not to make a habit of it for several reasons. First, I did not find it particularly edifying. I would try to pray my prayers (silently and in English) but was distracted by the others. The language barrier also made the proceedings of little interest. I also did not want to create a stir or to fire false rumors or to cause any problems by my presence. I feel, however, that I should participate in congregational worship from time to time if for no other reason than to learn what is done on those occasions.

While in Ethnex District, however, I did make it a practice to go to the local mosque early in the morning or in the afternoon (not during the stated prayers) to have my Quiet Time. I would pray in Muslim fashion and then read the Bible. Mosques are very peaceful and clean and very conducive to worship. Sometimes other worshippers would wander over to see what I was doing and occasionally would ask what I was reading. I would respond that I was reading the '*Taurat*' or '*Zabur*' or '*Injul*' (Torah, Psalms or New Testament). Once a young man

muttered something in disgust and walked away but that was the only negative response I received.

11. Fasting

We participated in the month-long Fast of Ramazan every year while in Islamex. Whether alone in our own home or with Muslim friends in their homes we would get up in the middle of the night to have 'breakfast' and then would refrain from eating or drinking until the fourth '*Azan*' (Call to Prayer) in the evening. If we missed any days during the month for some reason, we would make them up afterward.

Our Muslim friends were amazed that we would participate in the Fast voluntarily. (They participate under compulsion from their community). We explained that, for Christians, fasting is not a requirement but is recommended for certain special purposes (e.g. to spend more time in prayer and study of God's Word, to bring before God some very urgent and important request). We said, therefore, that we were very happy to participate with them in their fast. They were very pleased by this. In fact, this shared suffering did more to establish empathy and friendship with them than anything else.

12. Festivals

There are two major religious festivals ('*Eids*') in the Muslim year. *Eid-ul-Fitr* (the Festival of Breaking) is celebrated at the end of the month of Ramazan when the Fast is over (broken) (M. Geijbels, "Muslim Festivals and Ceremonies in Pakistan," Rawalpindi, Pakistan: Christian Study Centre, 1982, p. 18). It is celebrated with great joy, not to mention relief! *Eid-ul-Azha* (the Festival of the Sacrifice) is celebrated two months and ten days later at the time of the pilgrimage (*Ibid.*, p.20). Muslim families who can afford it will sacrifice a sheep, goat or cow at this time to commemorate Abraham's sacrifice of Ishmael [sic] and then will distribute some of the meat to relatives and friends and neighbors. During *Eid* celebrations it is customary for Muslims in Islamex to wear new clothes and to go to the homes of their relatives and friends to offer congratulations. There they are served cold drinks or tea and sweets. And, of course, they receive visitors in return and show the same hospitality. We always participated in

these festivals. We were not always in a position to buy new clothes nor were we able to sacrifice an animal but we always put on our Friday best and made the rounds to congratulate our friends. We also made preparations to entertain those who might visit us. During the big *Eid* we also accepted and ate any of the sacrificed meat that came our way.

On the first day of both *Eids* at about eight o'clock in the morning Muslim men gather at a specially designated and prepared *Eid* ground to offer prayers. Bill did not participate in those prayers but was present on one occasion to observe.

13. Day of Worship

In Islamex we observed Friday as our day of rest and worship in keeping with Muslim practice. The other six days of the week were working days. National and expatriate Christians generally worship on Sunday. Some also take Friday off either by choice or by necessity.

14. Death Customs

When a death occurs, it is expected that friends and relatives will visit the house of the deceased to console the bereaved, to pay their respects and to offer prayers for the departed soul. These prayers are fairly standard it seems and are in Arabic.

We do not believe it is a Christian practice to pray for the dead but we did go to pay our respects if we knew the family fairly well and on one occasion Bill offered a 'Prayer for the Bereaved' in English.

It is also customary for neighbors to bring prepared food to the house of the deceased. (The bereaved are in mourning, of course, and cannot prepare food for themselves.) This goes on for three days. We were able to do this on several occasions and it was much appreciated.

15. Handling the Holy Books

Muslims handle the *Qur'an* with great respect and care. They keep it wrapped in a thick, clean cloth and place it on a high shelf above all other literature. They carry it cradled in their arms or on their head and would not

dream of placing it on the floor or under their chair. Before and after reading the *Qur'an* they may kiss it.

We had to leave behind our North American sloppiness in this area when we went to Islamex. We took copies of the Bible and the *Qur'an* with us, protected by good quality zippered leather covers. We placed these books side by side on a special shelf in our house and, when reading the Bible in the presence of a Muslim, we would kiss it. When we gave copies of the Bible or New Testament to our friends we would wrap them in cloth especially purchased for that purpose.

We believe that physical identification or participation in the culture is an essential element in this process and, in the context of Christian missions, the onus is on the outsider to move culturally toward the insider just as God took the initiative to identify with man.

OBJECTIONS

The decision to follow the course of action described above was not taken lightly. In fact, we approached the subject of identification with Muslims with considerable trepidation, recognizing the controversial nature of it. However, we read as much as we could, prayed about it, talked about it and attacked the issue from every conceivable angle. We raised as many objections as we could think of and tried to deal with them one by one. Some of the objections pertain to identification in general; some pertain to identification with Muslims in particular. The following is a brief list:

1. "Total Identification Is Impossible"

"No matter how hard you try to dress like them, eat like them, live like them, talk like them, act like them, etc., you will never be accepted as an insider because you can never divorce yourself from your own identity and culture. You can't fool anybody. Therefore, you need not and should not try."

This objection states an obvious truth, but the goal of Identification is not to achieve the impossible or to deceive anyone, nor is it to deny or

reject one's own culture and identity (which would be psychologically unhealthy).

One's identity is a composite of two perceptions: who you think you are and who others think you are. The goal of identification with people of another culture is to acquire a second identity, to move towards biculturalism in the same way that language learning moves one towards bilingualism. It is to feel less and less like an outsider and more and more like an insider and to be regarded in that same way by the members of the other group. It is to reduce to the fullest extent possible the cultural distance that initially separates the outsider and the insider. We believe that physical identification or participation in the culture is an essential element in this process and, in the context of Christian missions, the onus is on the outsider to move culturally toward the insider just as God took the initiative to identify with man.

Take, for example, the (trivial?) matter of clothes. When we first arrived in Citex we were struck by how strangely everyone was dressed. And when first put on, their baggy pants and long shirt felt very odd. Now, however, wearing them seems perfectly natural. We are at home in them. We like how they look and feel. And we feel quite comfortable in the bazaar among other people who are dressed 'normally' like us. And our friends who might have been surprised initially now think nothing of it. In short, our wearing of their national dress has reduced the cultural distance between us and them and has helped establish rapport.

Another important goal of identification is to develop empathy for people of another culture, to begin to see and experience life as they do. This can only be done by participating in their culture just as the Lord participated in our joys and sufferings here on earth. One could be, for example, the world's leading expert on the Fast of Ramazan, having read widely and interviewed Muslims and observed them during the Fast. But without participating in the Fast one could not know how it feels to be a Muslim during that month. One's knowledge would be theoretical, not experiential (and one would also, we

expect, be more inclined to be critical of the practice).

2. "Total Identification Is Unnecessary"

"The essential element in identification is love. If you love people and accept them and respect them, they will know it. Identifying with them physically (i.e. dressing and eating and living like them) is unnecessary."

True. At least partially true. Physical identification without love is mimicry at best or mockery at worst. But if one of the goals of Identification is to demonstrate love and respect for, and acceptance of, a people and their culture (the two cannot be separated), then how will this love, respect, and acceptance be demonstrated?

To use the example of clothes again—we could praise the traditional dress of our Islamex friends. We could comment favorably on its appearance and on how comfortable and cool it must be and on how suitable it is for sitting on the floor. But if we refused to wear it, our friends would conclude rightly that our praise was superficial or insincere and that down in our hearts we still felt that our Western trousers and shirts and dresses were superior. Love, respect and acceptance must be demonstrated in tangible ways.

The same is true when it comes to more weighty matters. We could tell our Muslim friends that we find many aspects of their public and private worship acceptable and even commendable. However, when we pray their way—this is indisputable and dramatic proof that we mean what we say. It is a clear demonstration of respect for, and acceptance of, that custom.

(We have been interested to note that these objections against physical identification or excessive participation in the culture are usually raised by missionaries in Third World countries who want to maintain a Western standard of living and lifestyle.)

3. "Islam Must be Totally Rejected"

"The religion of Islam is inspired by the devil, and Satan is using it as a powerful weapon to wage war against the Lord Jesus Christ. Islam is also a total way of life. In it there is no distinction between religion and culture. The good (if there is any) and the bad are inextricably linked. Therefore, Islam must

be rejected *in toto* and the convert from Islam must completely divorce himself from it."

Islam, as a religion and a culture, is 'inspired' by the devil and is being used by him to keep hundreds of millions of people in bondage to himself. But Islam is not unique in this. The same can be said about every religion and culture in the world, including 'Christianity' and Western culture. The Bible teaches (we believe) that every human being is infected by sin in every part and faculty. The same is, therefore, true of every culture. But God's approach to sinful human beings and sinful cultures is not rejectionist and destructive but redemptive and transformative. Of course, some elements of all cultures (occult practices or prostitution, for example) are so demonic or contrary to the explicitly stated laws of God that they must be rejected outright. However, many other practices can be reinterpreted, reoriented, and cleansed by the Spirit of God and brought into God's service. And this also applies to Islam.

(If one took the rejectionist argument to its logical conclusion, one would have to utterly reject all cultures and try to create somewhere a society with an absolutely unique 'Christian' culture. Such attempts have been made but have always failed because sin can't be left behind, nor can culture itself. The product of such attempts is always a sinful variation of an already existing culture.)

On the subject of spiritual warfare it is true that a fight to the death is taking place between Islam and Christianity. We are not among those who believe that dialogue will eventually iron out the major differences between the two faiths. Between Islam and Christianity there is a great gulf fixed—an ideological gulf that cannot be bridged. When everything else is stripped away the fundamental point of contention remains: loyalty to Mohammed and the *Qur'an* or to Jesus and the Bible.

But down through the centuries this basic spiritual conflict has often been obscured by conflict at the military, political, economic and cultural levels. The underlying spiritual battle has been amplified into a competition between civilizations. We are convinced that our way of life is superior to theirs and they are convinced that their way of life is

superior to ours. And neither side is willing to compromise. There isn't much middle ground.

However, it is the middle ground we are looking for and hoping to find, with God's help. By demonstrating respect for Muslim culture we are attempting to deflect attention away from culture to Christ, away from trivial, inconsequential matters to the One who demands the loyalty of all men. This is our message to them, "We are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. We love Him very much and will never abandon Him. However, as loyal followers of Christ, we are free and happy to pray in your way or in our way, to fast in your way or our way, to relate male to female in your way or our way, etc. These things don't matter." Culture is not the issue. Christ is the issue!

To follow this approach, however, we have had to deal first with our own negative feelings and then with the negative feelings of fellow believers. The conflict spoken of above has embedded a strong aversion to Islam deep within the Christian psyche. Islam made its initial dramatic gains at the expense of the Christian church. Europe almost fell to Muslim armies on several occasions. The Crusades did nothing to improve relations and since that time European colonialism, the Palestinian issue, OPEC, international terrorism, and the Ayatollah have kept the pot on the boil. Islam is the only major world religion to have arisen after Christianity, and it poses a direct challenge to Christ and stubbornly resists Christian missionary efforts. We are reluctant to concede that there might be anything good or redeemable in it. Rejectionist sentiment springs, we believe, from this deep reserve of hatred for Islam and, therefore, must be rejected itself for that very reason. If the principles of identification and contextualization are valid and applicable to other cultures, then they are also applicable to Islam, our traditional prejudices notwithstanding.

4. "This Approach Creates Confusion"

"When Muslims observe your behavior they will naturally conclude that you have become a Muslim. This approach is therefore a betrayal of the Lord Jesus Christ. A clear witness must be maintained at all times. There must be no confusion."

Muslims who casually observe our behavior from a distance often do conclude that we have become Muslim. And rumors have circulated in Ethnax District to this effect. But the sky has not come crashing down. We don't believe that God is in heaven chewing his nails or gnashing his teeth because a few Muslims have jumped to an erroneous conclusion.

What God is concerned about, and what we are concerned about, is that our Muslim friends know where our loyalties lie. And this is not a complicated matter. When we are introduced to someone for the first time we are often asked if we are Muslim (because of our names or dress or way of praying, etc.). We simply respond that we are 'Isayi', followers of Christ, and that clears up the matter. Our response may, of course, raise other questions in their minds but that is good. We want them to ask questions.

If we took it as an operating principle that under no circumstances must any confusion ever be created, then we could not even use Muslim greetings or wear Muslim dress. We would have to present Christ and the Good News and ourselves as something completely foreign to them. This principle, of course, would also be applicable in other situations. In every culture, in every context, Christianity would have to be presented as culturally 'other', so as to avoid confusion. We don't believe there is any Biblical basis for such an anti-culture approach to Christian missions. The Apostle Paul, while maintaining a clear witness for Christ, became 'all things to all men' in order to win some. We are trying to follow his example.

5. "This Approach Condone Error"

"When you condone or accept part of Islam, you are condoning or accepting all of it. Muslims will assume that you also accept the prophethood of Mohammed and the inspiration of the *Qur'an*. You must not allow such assumptions to be made."

This is really another way of stating the confusion argument and our answer is the same. We are not concerned about

the premature conclusions of casual observers. We are concerned that our Muslim friends know that we are loyal to Jesus Christ and the Bible. And they do know. Once a good friend of ours was introducing me to a group of men. He mentioned that we had adopted Muslim names and that Jane was observing *purdah* and that we were keeping the Fast. One of the men asked if we had become Muslim. Our friend replied, "No, they have accepted our culture but not our ideology. (Turning to me.) Isn't that correct?" I replied, "Yes."

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6. "This Approach Is a Denial of Christian Freedom"

"Islam is a legalistic and ritualistic religion. In essence, a return to Old Testament legalism. But Christ died to save us from all that. Your approach is, therefore, retrogressive. You are steering the Muslim convert back into the slavery from which Christ wants to free him."

First, a word about legalism. Obedience to a code of law is not legalism. Legalism (in the theological sense) is obedience to a code of law in order to win divine favor. It is a question of improper motives.

(Incidentally, the Old Testament is not legalistic. It contains many rules and regulation, to be sure, but those laws were not given as a means of salvation. Believers in the Old Testament were saved by grace through faith just as we are.)

Next, a word about ritual. Performance of ritual is not ritualism. Ritualism (as we understand it) is performance of ritual in order to win

divine favor. It is, again, a question of improper motives. Performance of ritual is not wrong in itself. All human behavior is highly ritualized. Whether we are tying our shoelaces or greeting someone on the street or going to church we follow 'scripts' or 'routines' which we have learned (often without conscious effort). Very little of what we do is completely random or spontaneous.

Concerning corporate worship, Protestants have generally reacted against Roman Catholic and high church ritualism. We abhor cold, lifeless liturgies and printed prayer books. We want our worship to be warm and spontaneous. Some have taken this to the *n*th degree and do not plan worship services at all but wait patiently for the Spirit to move one of the assembled to lead in prayer, song, etc. But it does not take a keen observer very long to detect the 'routines' that underlie even the most 'spontaneous' Christian worship.

There is no question, however, that Muslims obey their laws and perform their rituals with improper motives. Their teachers instruct them to expect rewards from God for their piety. And the more they do (they are told) the more they can expect. Religion is viewed as a system of rewards and punishments. A Muslim is justified by his works. And he must do it all on his own. There is no one to help him.

However, when a Muslim comes to Christ all this changes. He realizes that his obedience and performance have accomplished nothing and that he must rely, instead, on what Christ has accomplished for him. His piety, henceforth, will be an expression of thanksgiving for salvation, not a futile attempt to attain salvation.

However, when a Muslim's motives undergo this radical transformation will his methods also necessarily change? Will he have to jettison everything that was part of his former religious experience? We think not. We believe that there are many elements of Islamic culture and religion which can be reinterpreted and reworked by the convert with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and

that, properly motivated, he is free to practice them.

And that brings us back to the question of freedom. The Muslim convert's freedom in Christ is at stake here and must be defended at all costs because the religion of Islam does not grant linguistic or cultural freedom to its adherents. In theory every Muslim in the world should be a carbon copy of Mohammed (who was an Arab). Linguistically, the *Qur'an* is only the *Qur'an* in Arabic. Translations are only 'interpretations' of the *Qur'an* and are not regarded as authoritative. From Day One the convert to Islam is required to read the *Qur'an* and to pray in Arabic and even to use the Arabic greetings when addressing other Muslims. Culturally, the ideal is that every Muslim in the world should follow the Arab pattern and dress and pray and fast, etc., like every other Muslim. (This is not the case in reality, of course, because Muslims are just as factious as Christians and culture is a very powerful and resilient force.)

In contrast, Christianity not only permits but encourages linguistic and cultural diversity. We attach great importance to the original Scriptures written in Hebrew and Greek (we refer to them to check our understanding) but we believe that good translations in English or Swahili, for example, are equally authoritative and beneficial. Christians are not required to master Hebrew and Greek but are encouraged to study the Scriptures in their own language. Similarly, converts are not required to adopt someone else's culture in order to come to Christ but are allowed to come to Christ in terms of their own culture. This is the issue that was settled at the Council of Jerusalem in the first century (Acts 15). It was acknowledged that Jews were free to come to Christ as Jews and that Gentiles were free to come to Christ as Gentiles (without becoming Jews first). A cultural conversion was not required to validate a spiritual conversion. We believe that the Lord also wants Muslim people to come to Him and to express their newfound faith in ways which are culturally appropriate to them. If He grants them this freedom, can we do otherwise? No, this approach is not a denial of Christian freedom. It is an affirmation of it.

7. "This Approach Is Cowardly"

"This approach will encourage timid, cowardly converts (if they are real converts!) to come tiptoeing to Christ through the back door. This is not right. Muslim converts must be encouraged to maintain a strong and vigorous witness for Christ right from the start and to face the inevitable persecution courageously."

Genuine converts will witness for the Lord (their love for Him cannot be contained) and persecution will follow (it cannot be avoided). But it is up to them to decide when and where and how and to whom to witness.

It would certainly take courage for a Muslim convert to stand up in the mosque on Friday and proclaim loudly that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, or to take a long, cool drink of water in the bazaar at noon during Ramazan, or to return sacrificed meat that had been sent to him as a gift by relatives and friends during *Eid* or to refuse to pay the tithe (*zakat*). But what would such a 'witness' accomplish? Nothing, apart from his own death or expulsion from his community.

The Muslim convert needs time to get to know the Lord better, to study the Scriptures, to assess his culture and former way of life in light of his new allegiance to Christ, to develop the good character which is the fruit of the Spirit, and to witness to his closest friends and relatives. This whole process would be immediately aborted, however, if under pressure from some well-intentioned but wrong-headed missionary, he was encouraged to 'take a stand' on these inconsequential cultural matters. When persecution comes (and it will), it should be on an issue that matters and that is clearly understood by all, and the only issue that matters is loyalty to the person of Jesus Christ.

8. "Outsiders Are Not Qualified to Contextualize"

"Culture is a very complex thing. Outsiders, such as yourselves, can never understand the hidden meanings that are attached to the various elements of Islamic culture or the ways in which those elements interrelate. You are, therefore, not qualified to contextualize. You will make serious mistakes. Your job as translators is to give them the Word of God. Let the Muslim converts themselves do any contextual-

izing that needs to be done."

It is true that we outsiders can never comprehend Islamic culture, or even a particular Islamic culture, the way an insider can. We can't even come close. It is also true that it should be the responsibility of the Muslim converts themselves to decide what elements of their culture must be rejected outright, retained unchanged or reinterpreted for continued use.

However, this does not mean that translators or missionaries have no role in Contextualization. On the contrary, they have a key role to play as models or signposts pointing to a new way which Muslims have never considered before.

As things presently stand, a Muslim who is considering conversion to Christianity assumes that he will have to change his name, reject his religion and culture in its entirety and be rejected by his family, friends and community in turn. He also assumes that he will have to openly associate with the low-class, Christian community who eat pork, let their women wander around 'out of control' and who collect garbage, sweep the streets and clean toilets for a living. (And we wonder why there are so few conversions!)

It is hard for Westerners to comprehend what conversion to Christianity means in an Islamic society. In our society we can accept Christ or reject Christ and still be regarded as solid members of our community. But consider what happens, for example, when a red-blooded American boy, professing Christian and member of a fine upstanding family, goes off and joins the Hare Krishna. His conversion is regarded as a slap in the face for his family and friends and everything for which they stand. He has rejected his own culture and opted for some inferior, freaky, foreign religion. Those who love him feel betrayed and hurt and angry, and even in our tolerant society he may be disowned.

This is what we are trying to avoid. We are trying to show our Muslim friends, by our example, that there is an alternative, that there is a way for them to love the Lord Jesus and still remain solid citizens of their community, in fact, exemplary citizens of their community. We may have made mistakes. We may make others. (We trust that the Lord will prevent us from

making serious mistakes.) But our example is not meant to be regulative. It is suggestive. We are only pointing out the path to our Muslim friends. They are the ones who will have to walk down it.

Missionaries to Muslims do not have the luxury of neutrality on these issues of identification and contextualization. If they do nothing, if they insist on retaining their own cultural expression of Christianity, or if they try to shift responsibility onto the shoulders of colleagues or some future hypothetical Muslim converts, then their long years of association with Muslims will only serve to reinforce the notion in Muslim minds that Christianity is foreign, that it is the religion of some other community. Response to the Gospel will remain minimal. The status quo will not change.

9. "Problematic Practices"

Facing Mecca. "Facing Mecca while praying is an open endorsement of Mohammed and his religion. There is no way that practice can be retained in Christian worship."

Muslims pray in the direction of the *Ka'ba*, the small shrine located in the central courtyard of the Sacred Mosque in Mecca. Concerning the *Ka'ba*, the *Qur'an* states that 'Abraham and Ismail raised the foundations of the House' (Surah 2:127). The meaning of this is not clear but 'Muslim legend has interpreted the phrase to mean that they rebuild a shrine first erected by Adam of which only the foundations still existed' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1966, Vol.13, p.178). Abraham and Ishmael then dedicated that building to the worship of the one true God.

Muslims believe that they are following the religion of Abraham (*Qur'an*, Surah 2:130). They look to him as the father of their faith just as we look to him as the father of ours. And there is a sense in which, through Ishmael, they can be regarded as estranged or misguided children of the covenant. In fact, they still bear the mark of the covenant, circumcision. We are, therefore, happy to face the *Ka'ba* when we pray and in so doing identify with them as they identify with the patriarch. Of course, our prayer for them is that they may soon become Abraham's spiritual children in reality.

Concerning the direction of prayer,

there are also some practical matters to consider. All mosques are constructed in such a way that when the worshipers face the front of the mosque they are also facing the *Ka'ba*. Many Muslim homes also have areas set aside for prayer which are oriented in that direction. Should we recommend to the Muslim convert that he stop using those facilities? Or should we recommend that he face in any direction but the *Ka'ba*? (He would immediately incur the wrath of everyone around him if he did). No. As a Christian he is free to pray in any direction he chooses, including the traditional direction. In doing so he will be identifying with Abraham whose real faith he has now discovered and made his own.

Ablutions. "The Muslim practice of doing ablutions before prayer is based on the pagan belief that physical and moral defilement can be washed away with water. This, of course, is wrong. Christ said that moral defilement is in the heart where water can't touch it and we believe that it is Christ's death on the cross which has taken away our sin and made us fit to come into the presence of God. This practice must be dropped."

Christians customarily take a shower, brush their teeth, comb their hair and put on clean clothes before going to church. They do this out of reverence for God. God is a very important person (the most important person!) and we should not 'come into His presence' dirty and unkempt.

Many Muslims are farmers or laborers or tradesmen. Would we really want to recommend that they stop washing up before prayer when they become Christians? Would we want the new community of Muslim converts to gain a reputation for being dirty? We think not. Washing up before prayer is a good practice, as long as it is understood that it is meant as a way of communicating respect for God and, of course, staying clean (and it does have merit even from the point of view of personal hygiene and health).

The Sacrifice. "The sacrifice of an animal during *Eid-ul-Azha* commemorates the ransom of Ishmael with a ram, which, of course, is historically inaccurate. Muslims also regard it as a way of gaining favor with God. Christians, of course, do not offer blood sacrifices because Christ has offered himself as

our sacrifice once and for all. Christians, therefore, should not participate in this festival."

First of all, it needs to be clarified that there are no idols or altars involved in the Muslim 'sacrifice.' The animals are slaughtered in the customary manner by pronouncing the name of God over them (*Allahu akbar*, 'God is Great') and by slitting their throats. They are then butchered and some of the meat is distributed as charity to the poor and some to relatives and friends.

The Muslim convert will certainly want to evaluate this practice of sacrifice in light of the Scriptures. First, he will want to get the facts straight, that it was Isaac, not Ishmael, who was involved in the incident and why it had to be Isaac. He will also need to be taught the significance of that event—that it pointed forward to the sacrifice of Christ, and that Christ's sacrifice has taken care of our sin once and for all.

It could be clearly understood, however, that the sacrifice is commemorative, not propitiative or discontinued. (It appears that Jewish Christians in the early church still participated in the Old Testament sacrificial system—Acts 21:20-24). In fact, for a community of Muslim converts the Sacrifice Festival could serve as a functional substitute for our Good Friday celebration.

Purdah. "Purdah, the segregation and seclusion of women, is an archaic institution built on male chauvinism and bigotry. It denies women their God-given rights in society and subjects them to many abuses. Christ came to set men and women free from bondage. Christians, therefore, must not condone or participate in the *purdah* system in any way, shape, or form."

Human behavior can be divided into the good, the bad and the sub-ideal. Sub-ideal behavior is not explicitly condemned by God (it is not immoral) but neither does it measure up to His ideals concerning how human beings ought to live. An example is the institution of slavery. Nowhere in Scripture is there even a hint that slavery should be abolished. However, laws were given to curb its abuses and the Holy Spirit has worked steadily over a long period of time to eradicate the practice in societies where there has been a strong Christian influence.

We believe that the *purdah* system is not the ideal way of relating male to

female in society or of preventing illicit sexual activity (which is its aim). Ideally, male and female should be governed by an internal commitment to high moral standards. In the absence of the indwelling Holy Spirit, however, Muslims have opted for a system of external constraints designed to enforce moral behavior.

The *purdah* system also seems to be built on some strong prejudices against women. Their spiritual and intellectual capacity is thought to be inferior to that of men and (most dangerous of all) their morals are suspect. If some immoral activity is discovered, the presumption of guilt often rests on the female. She seduced the male and how could he have resisted? The burden of maintaining moral purity, therefore, rests on the female and since she cannot be trusted she must be kept under control.

How to 'handle' women and human sexuality is probably the great cultural issue that divides Muslims and Christians. They are appalled by our lewdness and licentiousness and advocacy of sexual abandon. They have seen Western films and magazines and believe that Christian women in general are promiscuous. They may be enticed by it, to be sure, but they wouldn't dream of letting their wives and sisters and daughters behave that way, and they would disown them or kill them if they did!

We, on the other hand, can't understand how they can keep their women as virtual prisoners in their homes and deny them the right to go out and get an education or a job—or even to buy their own underwear! Our society values individual freedom above sexual morality; they see things the other way around. On balance, it is hard to say who is right.

In any case, we do not think that a frontal attack on the *purdah* system is advisable. The modification or eradication of that system is not (we believe) the first item on God's agenda. First, they need the Word of God, then they need the Holy Spirit to apply that Word to their hearts and to build a system of internal constraints and to change their views concerning the nature, status and role of women. In the meantime, it is the duty of female missionaries to make every effort (setting aside their hard-won rights, if necessary) to demonstrate that Christian women are morally

beyond reproach and that they can be trusted. If this means wearing a *burqah*, so be it.

10. "This Approach Does Not Work"

"You were in Islamex for over three years with no success. You won some friends, but did not win any converts. And your Ethnex friends did not even show much interest in the Gospel. The approach does not work and therefore should be abandoned."

We never expected that this approach alone would bring about a significant turning to Christ among the Ethnex people. For that to happen three things are required:

First, they must have the Word of God readily available in their own language in a form that will facilitate and encourage its use (and, so far, not one word has been translated.)

Second, there must be a powerful work of the Holy Spirit among them to bring them face to face with the Risen Lord and to give them the desire to follow Him no matter what the cost. It will take a miracle, no doubt many miracles, to break them free from Satan's grasp.

Third, there must be a powerful work of the Holy Spirit in the worldwide and national church to change the missionary's approach to Islam. The old, adversarial, competitive, imperialistic, chauvinistic, extractionist, intolerant approach does not work. That has been proven beyond a shadow of a doubt. If the status quo is to change, a new way must be found whereby Muslims can come to Christ in the context of their own culture and community. Cross-cultural workers are responsible to point the way by word and deed and must be prepared to do so.

CONCLUSION

Several years ago an Ethnex friend confided to Jane that he thought I would become a good Muslim eventually.

We found his statement encouraging for several reasons. First, we had obviously succeeded in communicating to him our respect for his culture. He could see that we were happy to be with them and were comfortable with many of their customs. Second, we had succeeded in communicating our

interest in spiritual things and our commitment to clean living. He had noted our respect for God and our honesty and our lack of interest in the common vices. And third, we had succeeded in communicating that we were not Muslim, although we had accepted many aspects of Islamic culture.

However, as the years go by and his predictions concerning my conversion to Islam are not fulfilled, we hope that he will begin to ask the question why. "Why do Bill and Jane refuse to become complete Muslims? It would be so easy for them. They obviously respect our culture and are God-fearing people. All they would have to do is accept the Prophethood of Mohammed and the *Qur'an* and that would be it. Then they would be one with us, fully accepted. And they would receive great honor and respect. And we would do favors for them and provide accommodation for them and even help them arrange suitable marriages for their sons. But they refuse. They stubbornly remain loyal to Jesus Christ and the Bible. What is so special about that Book? What is so special about that Person?"

We hope, of course, to be able to answer our friend's questions by making the Scriptures available to him in his own language. We also pray that, as he reads, the Holy Spirit will open his eyes and help him see Jesus for Who He really is and give him a desire to follow the Lord.

Of course, as he weighs that decision, a flood of other questions will come into his mind. Will I have to change my name? Will I be cut off from my people? How will I pray? When and where will I pray? Will I no longer be able to go to the mosque? What will happen when the Fast of Ramazan comes? Will I offer a sacrifice during *Eid* or not? Should I pay the welfare tithe (*zakat*)? And if my family should follow me in this decision, how will it affect the women in my household? As he contemplates these things, we hope that he will think about us and realize that he can become a loyal disciple of Jesus Christ and remain a respected, functioning member of his community. ■