Response

God's Kingdom Advance is Stronger than Human Veto: A Response to Fred Farrokh's "Will the *Umma* Veto SITO?"

by L. D. Waterman

I want to thank Fred Farrokh for his significant contribution to our understanding of the identity of Muslims who come to trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It seems clear God is moving in our day in unprecedented ways to bring Muslims to saving faith in Christ. The better we understand what is happening in various parts of the world, the better equipped we can be to encourage, strengthen and catalyze additional movements in a Christward direction. I appreciate the fresh and helpful contribution to the discussion from brothers and sisters from a Muslim background as well as from some who are still Muslims.

Diversity in the Muslim World: One Size Never Fits All

I would like to underline one point that Farrokh mentioned in passing, in a quote from only one interviewee: "It varies from people to people and from town to town." With this very brief quote, the article seems to sidestep the huge issue of context. Soon after this quote, Farrokh concludes: "The implementation of SITO should not be considered simple or seamless in most Muslim contexts," implying that results from his study with diaspora Muslims in New York is comparable to those done in, for example, East Africa. My co-author,[1] Gene Daniels, notes that

> While it is completely valid to *compare* and *contrast* findings from different study populations, it is poor academic practice to use them in a critique. This points toward what seems to be a philosophical weakness in Farrokh's paper: the presupposition that Islam is a singular, unified entity; therefore a sample from any segment is a valid sample for the whole.

While the debate over the essential unity of Islam is a much larger topic, in the Bridging the Divide forum we have been hearing numerous case studies from around the world and have come to "recognize that each local Muslim context carries a unique configuration of Muslim political, cultural and religious authority."[2] It seems almost any attempt to make a global generalization about Islamic faith, practice, values or reactions can be contradicted through citation of counter-examples where that generalization would be untrue.

The fact that a certain ministry approach or identity stance is viable or impossible in one location does not guarantee the same will be true in other locations. Jerry Trousdale cites as one of "Jesus' Counterintuitive Disciple-Making Strategies," that we can "Expect the hardest places to yield the greatest results."[3] So rather than joining Farrokh's skepticism based on the limited samples in his research, I'm more inclined to praise God that what might not work in some places is *already* bearing great fruit in some others. CITO might not be viable in some places, but praise God that it's already happening in others.

Individual Converts Versus Movements: A Vital Difference

Farrokh cites a number of similarities and differences between his research and that of Naja and Prenger. One vital difference he does not mention is that Naja's and Prenger's research focused on *movements* to Christ consisting of significant numbers of people, whereas his own research was framed entirely in terms of the scenario of a single *individual* going through a journey to faith in Christ all by himself. David Garrison's research[4] also explicitly focused on movements as did that of Jerry Trousdale *(Miraculous Movements)* and the ministry of Abu Jaz, for which CITO was first coined as a descriptor. This difference does not nullify all the concerns found in Farrokh's research, but we do well to highlight the vital difference between an isolated individual coming to Christ in a hostile Islamic context and a group making that journey of faith together.

All the sources cited above (with the exception of Farrokh, who doesn't mention it) identify the group dynamic as a significant factor God is using to advance the gospel among the unreached in our day. This fits with the dynamics we can observe in the book of Acts, where the vast majority of conversions recorded (about ten times as many) are groups rather than isolated individuals. I would posit that Western individualism has been one of the factors limiting Kingdom advance among Muslims in years past—a hindrance the Lord is now correcting in the reaching of families and groups in various parts of the Muslim world. Farrokh's research gives us valuable insights, but by limiting its scope to the case of an isolated new believer he also limited its ability to compare well with the dynamics being described by others in movements of great numbers to faith in Christ.

Describing, not Prescribing

Farrokh seems to have misunderstood our goal in "Bridging the 'Socio-Religious' Divide,"[5] when he writes: "The authors suggest a reasonable outcome is for these new believers to remain "culturally inside and theologically outside." We were not trying to propose a particular "outcome" (a strategic ministry goal). We were aiming to identify helpful terminology to describe what is *already happening* in some movements of Muslims coming to faith in Christ in various parts of the world. It seems Farrokh's critique (examining "the viability of CITO") can be summed up as "CITO

probably won't work very well." We were citing it as a way to describe what *is already* happening in at least one place (and I would say many other places as well, though others have not used that terminology). I do feel very favorably about movements that are CITO, and I hope they will continue to proliferate. However, our presentation of CITO was not "Here's a great idea that you should try," but rather, "Here's a potentially useful way to describe an indigenous movement that's well under way."

Not Persecution-Proofing

Farrokh concludes:

> It appears unlikely that the *umma* at large will embrace believers in Christ as social insiders. It is therefore likely, at least in the near future, that Muslim-background believers in Christ will continue to endure some forms of social ostracism and persecution.

I would offer two rejoinders to this.

First, I don't see CITO making an appeal to "the *umma* at large." CITO is happening in some locations and cultural contexts, and I hope and expect it may happen in some others. However, I don't expect Islam as a whole to be transformed into a Jesus-following majority any more than (and likely less than) first-century Judaism was transformed. The book of Acts portrays a wide variety of Jewish responses to the gospel, by various groups and cities. As the gospel spread in diverse ways at that time, I'm encouraged to see and expect it to spread in diverse ways now as well, in the Islamic world.

Second, I agree entirely with the second sentence, concerning persecution. Neither Abu Jaz nor we have claimed that CITO is a form of persecution-proofing. Both 2 Timothy 3:12 and the book of Acts (not to mention recent reports such as *Miraculous Movements* and *A Wind in the House of Islam)* make it clear that great Kingdom advance in hostile religious environments will almost certainly be accompanied by some form of persecution. But again I would note the difference between the dynamics and results of persecution toward an isolated individual vs. persecution of a larger group.

Farrokh's title asks, "Will the *Umma* Veto SITO?" I would personally expect the final answer to be "yes." First-century Judaism ultimately vetoed the gospel as "theologically outsider," and Gentile predominance led to the church becoming culturally outsider as well. But what glorious Kingdom advance was made during the messy decades while the question was still being argued! The cultural sensitivity encouraged by early church leadership (e.g. in texts such as Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians 8-10) certainly helped maximize reception of the gospel in a variety of first-century cultures.

In a similar way, I see this time of great ferment in the Islamic world as a golden opportunity for the gospel to advance. Regardless of what verdict the umma as a whole

or any portion of it may reach about movements to Christ, I think it's healthy for those coming to Christ out of Islam to aim to remain socially connected with their context *as much as possible,* even while growing in biblical faith and practice. Using CITO as a descriptor for that effort doesn't solve all the questions or problems, but I don't yet see a better alternative.

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Endnotes

[1] In the article by Gene Daniels and L. D. Waterman, "Bridging the 'Socio-Religious' Divide: A Conversation Between Two Missiologists," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology,* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2013).

[2] Item 7 of Bridging the Divide 2014 Summary Report, available at http://btdnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Bridging-the-Divide-2014-Summary-Report.pdf.

[3] Jerry Trousdale, *Miraculous Movements,* Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson (2012), Chapter 2.

[4] David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam,* Monument, CO: Wigtake Resources (2014)

[5] Daniels and Waterman, "Bridging the 'Socio-Religious' Divide."

A Response to L. D. Waterman

by Fred Farrokh

I thank L. D. Waterman for his response to my article "Will the *Umma* Veto SITO?" In large part we are in agreement that we do not ultimately expect the Muslim community, or *umma*, to embrace CITO, or my preferred term, SITO. That is, Muslims in general will not continue to confer social insider (SI) status on those who have become theological outsiders (TO) through their adoption of belief in the Divine Savior Jesus Christ. I concur with his statement that "it's healthy for those coming to Christ out of Islam to aim to remain socially connected with their context *as much as possible.*" I also share his final assessment: "I see this time of great ferment in the Islamic world as a golden opportunity for the gospel to advance."

I also appreciate the opportunity by the *IJFM* editorial board for this brief response. Hopefully I can clarify some issues articulated by L. D., and his original co-author Gene Daniels, in their response, in case other *IJFM* readers share those concerns.

First, I do not suggest that the Muslim umma can veto or completely stop what God is doing in the Muslim world, as the title of L. D.'s piece seems to indicate. I simply imply

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that Muslim communities do have the power to determine upon whom they will confer social insider status. Christ's Kingdom is indeed advancing today, even as it did in New Testament times. We can rejoice that God is now touching and reaching Muslims in greater numbers and in more diverse places than we have ever seen.

Second, regarding diversity, I realize the Muslim world is amazingly diverse and that Muslim contexts differ significantly. I have traveled and ministered widely in the Muslim world. In my article, I was not proposing a one-size-fits-all approach to ministry to Muslims. Rather, I was merely reviewing recent field research in Muslim contexts. Nevertheless, since L. D. brings up the missiological "debate over the essential unity of Islam," it is important to note that Muslims, at the very least, share the religion of Islam, regardless of their sectarian affiliation or level of observance. I believe we can speak of "the Muslim world" as an unreached bloc of people, without denying the diversity within that bloc.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, I address the charge that field research that focuses on "movements" is more important than field research that focuses on "individuals." From a social science research perspective, one cannot interview a movement. One can only interview people within that purported movement. (Perhaps a researcher could conduct a focus group interview made up of multiple individuals.) Ben Naja interviewed 390 *individual* believers in one East African country. J. H. Prenger interviewed 26 *individual* Muslim insiders in seven different countries, ostensibly to promote diversity. I interviewed 20 *individual* Muslims and 20 *individual* Muslim-background Christians, from a total of 18 different birth countries, also to encourage a diversity of responses.

If there is an insistence on movements, I would suggest that all Muslim-background Christians worldwide in this generation could be considered a movement. The Muslim-background Christians whom I know experience "group dynamic," including fellowship and church issues, as well as family concerns, community pressures, and shame-honor issues within all of those contexts. I don't know anyone in ministry to Muslims who is not dealing with these issues, or who is promoting radical Western individualism. At the same time, I believe that placing our hope in large group conversions can be a bit of a mirage in Muslim contexts.

Allow me to further explore this important discussion raised by Waterman and Daniels regarding "movements." I must confess I am still unclear about what constitutes a "movement," who determines when such a movement has

occurred, and how this single (extra-biblical) term has taken on such luminary importance in missiology. I fear in our chasing of movements, we may find ourselves skipping some steps in the slow, patient, and prayerful process of adequately discipling and pastoring converts from Islam. Jesus' Great Commission was to preach the Gospel and make disciples of all nations. I fear the new emphasis on creating fast-growing movements may reduce missions to McMissions.

Finally, I summarize why I believe SITO is not a preferred model in Muslim contexts. The Muslim community has decided, and has the right to decide, who is a Muslim and who is not. For 1,400 years the global umma has considered the affirmation of the prophethood of Muhammad the essential ingredient to be a Muslim. The umma has also determined that those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord, God and Savior are not Muslims, and any Muslim who comes to confess this belief is now an apostate. He or she will likely be persecuted to varying degrees—this is where the diversity lies—as I chronicle in my article. This is the historical challenge in ministry to Muslims—one which has limited fast-growing movements in Muslim contexts.

If missionaries promote the necessity of Muslims retaining social insider status in Muslim contexts (which the missionaries rightly understand is important for fast-growing movements) then they will frequently and invariably push their disciples into a continued affirmation of Muhammad as God's prophet. This is the same Muhammad who denied the Divinity, Lordship, Sonship, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus.

If SITO is not the answer, then what is the answer? Movements to Christ among Muslims hinge on the willingness of Muslims to embrace Christ as Lord and thereby break with Muhammad (thus becoming ex-Muslims). These new believers must be willing to deal with the umma's response to that break. The first believers in Christ in any Muslim context should be encouraged and prayed for, not simply pitied because they are perhaps only individuals who do not yet constitute a "movement." The encouraging trend is that we are indeed seeing larger numbers of Muslims rejecting Muhammad. Those among them who turn to Christ break free of a spiritually-binding *shahada* covenant which their communities have collectively affirmed for centuries. This opens the door for them to individually experience new birth in Christ and a new collective identity in the Body of Christ.

Like L. D. Waterman, I am optimistic regarding the future of ministry to Muslims. I also welcome other researchers providing information on what is happening in diverse Muslim contexts. **IJFM**