

"Born Again" Muslims: What Can We Learn from Them?

by Colin Bearup

Within what many see as the monolith of Islam, there are diverse streams and movements. Young, nominal Muslims engaging with a new experience of Islam may go through something very much like a conversion experience. Can we learn something from this? What are they seeking? What attracts them? Could it be that we have what they are looking for, but they don't recognise it?

"He Saved Me"

Suleiman (pseudonyms used throughout) was in a state of crisis. His romantic (un-Islamic) relationship was falling apart, there was conflict in his wider family, and he was in deep personal crisis. "I could have gone haywire. I could have gone both ways but to be honest could have gone down the Islam way, probably become an extremist. But the thing is, I didn't. The Sheikh came and *he saved me.*"

New Lives with New Masters

Over the last few years, it has come to my attention that British Muslims born into families of South Asian heritage are turning to Sufi movements unfamiliar to their families. Despite the abundance of spiritual masters on offer within the Sufi movements from their own Indian Sub-Continent, they are pledging their whole-hearted allegiance (making *bay'ah*) to Sufi masters from such places as Turkey, Syria, Yemen, and Morocco. Some are even swearing to obey sheikhs who are first generation converts of Western heritage. These particular Sufi movements which they are joining are thoroughly international and are recruiting "members" from across the world. Although my research was locally specific, I believe that it may have relevance right across the Muslim world on account of globalisation.

In 2018, I had the opportunity to conduct some research into how and why Muslims of South Asian heritage in the UK were switching to international forms of Sufism. I was particularly interested to know what these individuals

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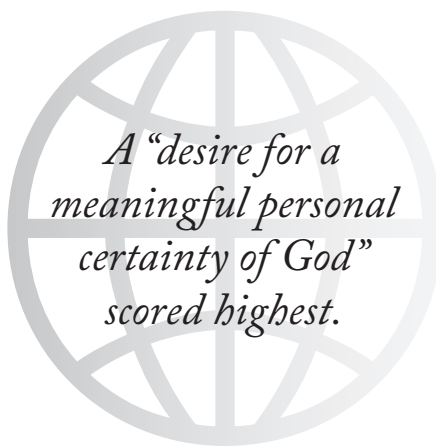
were seeking, what they felt they had found, and how this might inform missional strategies for calling them to follow Christ. I am convinced that this admittedly limited research among the South Asian diaspora in just one locality of the UK has a much wider relevance. Wherever members of this new generation are growing up in the world, globalised media networks make them aware of the many competing narratives in the Islamic world. When they wrestle with the question of what it means to be an authentic believer, reference to their own inherited or local tradition no longer carries the weight it once did. The matrix of globalisation, international travel, modern education, urbanization and the spread of science are generating new challenges, fresh outlooks and new felt needs in every part of the globe. If, as representatives of Christ, we are to engage with members of the rising generation of Muslims, it would be valuable to know what they are seeking and what sort of things they identify as signs of authenticity.

The Conversion Experience

The transition from the experience of Islam with which my respondents had grown up, to their new paths, would be classified by secular sociologists as a conversion experience.¹ As we shall see below, most of my respondents went from being Muslim-in-name-only to re-orienting their lives around Islam as taught by their new Sufi sheikh and as practised by the community of his followers. This would be analogous in several respects to someone from a nominal Christian home embracing Christ and starting a new life in a new church.

As Evangelicals, we are accustomed to approaching conversion theologically. The needy sinner responds to God's provision in Christ with the Holy Spirit playing a key role in that process. Since all people are sinners and we know that there is only one way of salvation, we may not think in terms of

different kinds of conversion. However, looking at even Christian conversion narratives, we can easily identify three different lived experiences. One is that of someone who was brought up in church but at some specific point is born again. What is already familiar to them comes to life in a new way. The new beginning is real and significant. We would also use the word conversion to describe someone with no religious experience of any kind who suddenly comes to faith in Christ. That transition includes entering new relationships and adopting new patterns of life. Theologically, the same event has occurred but humanly speaking the number of changes is considerably greater. Then,



of course, we use the word conversion to describe the transition from being a member of a non-Christian faith to becoming a Christian. The changes this entails are different again, especially if the person was fully engaged in their previous religion.

Secular academics studying religious conversion from a sociological point of view recognise all these forms. Lewis Rambo has developed a widely used model for analysing religious conversion that seeks to identify typical stages.² As Green writes in his thesis:

These days, in Anglophone studies, including conversion to and from Islam, Rambo's seven-stage model dominates the field.³

Rambo regards conversion as a process and looks for seven stages. These are Context, Crisis, Quest, Encounter, Interaction, Commitment and Consequences. My respondents' stories exhibited all of these stages, thus giving some basis to regarding these accounts as being a kind of conversion—and Rambo's model proved useful in analysing them.

Reasons To Commit

I modelled my research on that of Dr. Julianne Hazen, herself an American convert to Islam, who investigated what influenced people to commit to a particular sheikh in America.⁴ Her initial research mainly focused on first or second generation converts to Islam. When she repeated the research in the UK, a much higher proportion of her sample were people of Muslim heritage. The difference in pattern was sufficiently marked for her to present these findings as a discrete sub-set.

Following Hazen, I used a brief questionnaire followed by a semi-structured interview. Unlike Hazen, all my respondents were from South Asian Muslim families. Whereas Hazen's research subjects were all following the one sheikh, my respondents had committed to three different Sufi sheikhs of different *tariqa* (traditional Sufi organisation). Sheikh Mehmet (like his father and predecessor Sheikh Nazim) is a Turkish Cypriot of the Naqshbandi *tariqa*. Sheikh Yaqoubi is from Syria, currently based in Morocco and is a master in the Shadhili *tariqa*. Sheikh Habib Umar is from Yemen and is the head of the Ba'Alawiya *tariqa*. None of the three is based in the UK. See table 1 on page 139.

As Hazen found in her survey of those already Muslim, a "desire for a meaningful personal certainty of God" scored highest (34) along with "the charisma of the sheikh." A "desire for spiritual healing" came close behind. The two highest scores are far from incompatible, since the desire for certainty is met in a person whose charisma is such as to deliver that certainty.

Table 1. Reasons to Follow a Sheikh

Which of these were important reasons in your decision to follow your sheikh? Give each line a score from 0–5 where 5 is highly important and 0 is no importance whatsoever.	
Potential Reasons offered on the questionnaire	Sum of scores maximum possible 40
Desire for more meaningful personal certainty of God	34
Charisma/leadership style of the sheikh	34
A desire for spiritual healing	29
Desire for a supportive community of faith	21
Personal, mystical experiences	19
Desire for intellectual development	18
Dissatisfaction with dominant social and moral norms	14
Dissatisfaction with previous religious/spiritual path	5
Fulfilling an expectation of family or community	4
Other? Please specify.	(2 responses)

Since my version of the questionnaire did not require the subjects to rank one above the other, the two reasons could potentially be scored equally. In the semi-structured interviews, the respondents told their own story of the need they felt and how their bonding with the sheikh brought them into a place of greater certainty, awareness and stability.

Only one of the respondents was of the Ba'Alawi tariqa. His admittedly solitary account was indicative of some significant differences in this tariqa's modus operandi. His pledge of allegiance was made to Sheikh Habib Umar, a man he had never met. The reason he had not met him was that this sheikh does not visit the UK. The work is done through intermediaries, deputies or senior members, and so this would also be true for many, if not all, of his group. The personal presence of the sheikh could not therefore have the same impact as for the other two tariqas. Nevertheless, the charisma or persona of the sheikh's representatives was a key factor in his decision. The desirable spirituality was embodied in real people, not in texts or other media. As this respondent put it in his interview:

So Habib Kazim fortunately comes to the UK... he will accept someone's pledge... on behalf of Habib Umar and seeing Habib Kazim, he's a man

who had a good influence on me... He seems very pure himself and conducts himself how I would expect someone of that ranking to conduct [himself]... And it was not just him, it was all the people and Sheikh Ibrahim being one of them and a number of other people that I have seen on this spiritual path, ... that's the type of person I would like to kind of maybe become or be under.

A desire for "spiritual healing" scored very highly in our questionnaire. In Hazen's US survey it came 5th but in the subset of those whose starting point was within Islam it came top. I was conscious in using Hazen's questionnaire that the term "spiritual healing" lacked definition and did not correspond to any particular Islamic concept. Nonetheless, my respondents were quick to identify it as a valid term to describe their need. The interviews give us a better idea of what they mean by it. Safe to say, it was clear that they were referring to a personal, individual need. The individual dimension was clearly operative.

Family Influence and Dissatisfaction

The reasons that scored least well in our survey are also significant findings. Family expectations scored just

4 out of a possible 40. The interviews confirmed family expectations as being of minor importance. Not one of the respondents was following parental example or recommendation in pledging allegiance to their sheikh. Just one had brothers who were already committed *mureeds* (fully committed Sufi disciples) but his verbal testimony demonstrated that his path was not significantly influenced by them. While he could have followed his brothers' sheikh, he chose to follow an Asian sheikh for a few years instead. His account of how he finally decided to follow their sheikh did not involve any input on their part.

"Dissatisfaction with previous religion" scored just 5 out of a potential 40. However, since the subjects were not abandoning Islam but rather finding a place within it that met their needs, it is not surprising that they did not assign a high value to dissatisfaction. In a sense, their dissatisfaction was with themselves. They have not started attending new mosques; rather they have found out how to be real Muslims in their home mosques by following a Sufi path. They have supplemented regular worship in the mosque by also attending regular Sufi gatherings elsewhere. In their verbal accounts, their previous inability to find what they needed in their mosques and parental traditions was very evident.

All but two described themselves as previously non-practising and one of those two described himself as "practising but not fully." When they started seeking solutions to their issues, they did not find them in the norms of their local mosques nor with South Asian sheikhs. For all but one of them, committing to a sheikh was the culmination of a personal process of seeking to engage with Islam as a whole. They were moving from nominalism to commitment. Although dissatisfaction with their previous religious path was not given as a primary reason for taking the Sufi path, it is

clear that their previous religious setting was far from satisfactory, as these samples indicate.

Rashid: I started going to the mosque and...at that time, there were no young people.... You'd see just the elders. There was a complete detachment. I wouldn't feel comfortable and confident going to any of the elders to say, you know, could you help me in this kind of thought process.

Salim: First time I ever met [the sheikh] and he's come out with some humour...and he amused the people around him and I could tell it was to amuse other people and I thought wow!... You know, I went to mosque there was no laughing and joking when we were kids at the back we were told to shut up.

Suleiman: This religion looks like it's just for Pakistani people. You go to the mosque, all you see is Pakistani people and it's in Urdu, everything's in Urdu there's no catering for anybody else at all and I thought that was the religion.

The desire for supportive community scored moderately well, but only one respondent gave it a score of five. As we shall see below, the interviews made it clear that for several the fact of being in a community was highly valued even if it was not a major consideration in the decision to make the initial pledge allegiance.

Two respondents supplied answers under the "other" category in addition to the reasons for which they gave scores. One wrote "to reach God" which corresponded with his giving highest scores to "desire for spiritual healing" and "desire for meaningful certainty." The other wrote "ease of access to the sheikh" and "the learning environment." For this respondent, too, "spiritual healing" and "certainty" scored very high. His two other reasons seem to correlate with his registering a score of three against dissatisfaction with his previous religious path. In his interview, he spoke unbidden of the way in which his tariqa's teaching was delivered in contrast to anything he had come across previously.

Their Need and God's Provision

From my own perspective, when I heard their stories it seemed to me that what they had really been seeking was to be found in the gospel of Christ. None of them were approaching their need from the point of view of being separated from God by sin, but all were aware of being alienated from God, lacking what he intended for them. They all recognised their inability to achieve what was necessary. When they encountered a person and a community that seemed to possess answers, they opened themselves up to new teachings, new practices and a new identity. True, there was no question of breaching the outer boundaries of Islam, which would have certainly raised the



stakes enormously, but the fact remains that they were seeking things that God provides through Christ.

Conversion Motifs

In the world of conversion theory, Lofland and Skonovd advocate the identification of what they term *conversion motifs*.⁵ These are themes that characterise different types of conversion stories. It is an approach which allows for the classification of the subjectively expressed account of the convert and has been used as a frame of reference by other researchers.⁶ The six motifs listed by Lofland and Skonovd are Intellectual, Experimental, Mystical, Affectional, Revivalist, and Coercive.

The Intellectual Motif describes the conversion of individuals through intentional private research whereas the Experimental Motif concerns persons entering into the life of a group, behaving as though they were believers before coming to a settled conviction. The Affectional Motif refers to the phenomenon of individuals being drawn to conversion by people with whom they have close emotional bonds such as a marriage partner, close family members, or intimate friends. The Revivalist Motif relates to the sort of conversion experience which occurs in the intense atmosphere generated by a mass meeting or some other highly emotive occasion. The Mystical Motif covers sudden paranormal-type insights or experiences. The Coercive Motif signifies genuine conversion that comes about as a result of the pressures of family, group members or imposed circumstances.

Lofland and Skonovd's original model presupposed that a conversion story would show one main motif, but subsequent writers have found it useful to identify different motifs at different stages in the conversion process especially if the journey is long and conflicted. One person's journey may, for example, start with an intellectual quest and conclude with a mystical experience.⁷ In my research, I looked for these motifs without predetermining how many might be found in any one account.

Each interview was recorded, transcribed and analysed with a view to identifying Lofland and Skonovd's conversion motifs. A score of 2 was given where the motif was prominent, 1 where the motif was present but not prominent, and 0 where the motif did not occur. The results are presented in table 2, on page 141. In general, the motifs came through clearly but since this assessment is necessarily subjective, I then had someone who was not involved in the process or acquainted with the respondents make a similar evaluation based

Table 2. Occurrence of Lofland and Skonovd's Conversion Motifs

Motif	Score (Max 16)
Mystical	12
Revivalist	4
Experimental	3
Intellectual	2
Affectional	2
Coercive	0

purely on reading the transcriptions and then compared their findings with mine. Where we differed on our identification of motifs, I went back to the recording and made a fresh evaluation.

The Mystical Motif is clearly dominant. For half of the respondents, dreams were a prominent feature. This is not to say that the place of dreams was identical in each account. One respondent reported that he had been learning from a variety of sheikhs for some time but had never met his current sheikh nor heard him speaking before the sheikh came to him in a dream. On the other hand, another respondent listed “mystical experience” as a reason for becoming a mureed in the questionnaire but in the interview couched his whole story in terms of logic and reasoned decisions. When I asked about the mystical component and whether dreams featured at all, he looked a little awkward and said that he had received two significant dreams. I suspect that as a young man in a highly secular professional workplace it was his habit to downplay the paranormal side in his daily discourse with outsiders. It was nonetheless a significant factor in his journey.

All respondents, whether identifying dreams as important or not, spoke of some kind of transcendental encounter in which some other power seemed to take control and direct them. This aspect carries over into their accounts of their current life as mureeds. As respondent Yasin put it, “they say your sheikh chooses you, you don't choose your sheikh.” This would be generally

true of Sufism, both South Asian and other expressions, and in itself does not shed light on the phenomenon of South Asians joining non-South Asian traditions. The similarity between their experience and that of many Christians should not go unnoticed. Their words seem to echo those of Jesus himself in John 15:16,

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. (ESVUK)

That experience of both making a choice but also recognising God bringing us to that point despite ourselves is one many of us can identify with. We will explore this further below.

In three respondent accounts, the Revivalist Motif was evident. Each time it came in combination with the Mystical motif—that is to say, the key mystical experience occurred in a highly charged environment. In one case, the highly charged moment was the key turning point. For the other two, it was an important step along the path that led to the decision. The mystical component was combined with, but not confined to, that highly emotive episode.

The Affectional Motif appeared only twice and never strongly. The two who experienced this were not following the same sheikh nor in the same tariqa. In the one case, though the respondent had initially met the sheikh through his brothers who were already mureeds, he then sought out other sheikhs. His

own perception is that he was strongly led through dreams and other experiences in which his brothers had no part. The second respondent in whom the Affectional Motif was present had originally only met the sheikh by tagging along with close friends. He had been aware they were going to a conference about Islam but at that point neither he nor his friends had been aware of Sufism as a lifestyle nor of the sheikh as anything more than a good conference speaker. He described how his friends were inspired to make bay'ah (pledge allegiance) at the conference and how he had simply followed them. However, the sheikh told them they were not ready and refused to accept them. Subsequently, he and his friends committed to learning more about this and other tariqas. When he eventually offered himself to the sheikh and was accepted, it was along with two friends but also with a strong sense of being personally guided.

In two respondent accounts, the intellectual motif was present but not dominant. Their period of searching included some research of their own but other motifs were also present and more significant.

The Absence of Coercion

The coercive motif did not appear in any account, much as one might have expected. However, it is worth noting that the absence of pressure to submit was explicitly remarked on by several respondents as something that touched them. For example:

Suleiman: There was *no* emphasis on you to practice, there's *no* emphasis on you to follow or take initiation. You just come, you experience it for yourself. . . . And I thought there must be something *real* here.

Salim: Not once did anyone say that you must take allegiance or *bay'ah* or anything like that.

Muzammil: The environment was a very good—or for me—enjoyable learning environment, very chill[ed], very

laid back and it was easy for me to sit there and actually think, you know what? This is actually different to what I've got—of what's in my mind about how to become a practicing Muslim.

This lack of coercion is in implied (and occasionally explicit) contrast to both the ways of their home mosques and of the Islamic fundamentalist groups that some had encountered at university. The value they placed on freedom to participate or not, to interact without being criticised, and to commit or not, came through in the interviews without being solicited.

Although the Mystical Motif is clearly dominant, the variety of experience should not be ignored. The secondary motifs show significant variation. One respondent conformed exactly to the Experimental Motif. He came across a Naqshbandi *zikir* gathering (chanting and meditation) that happened to be using his local mosque and he was attracted to it. He participated in it for some years before seeking bay'ah. Perhaps a larger sample may well have provided more examples of this and other motifs.

Being Connected

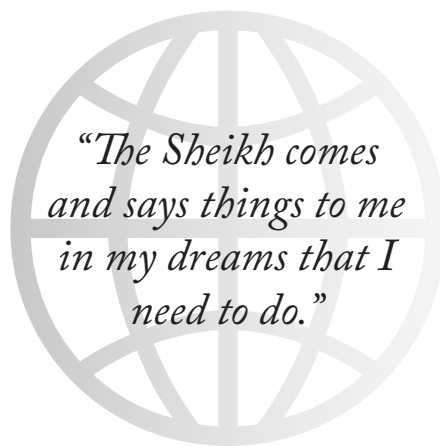
The respondents were all asked what difference having a sheikh made to them. I asked them how they would explain it to a fellow Muslim who did not have a sheikh. The positive things they spoke of corresponded with the need for "spiritual healing" which they had listed as a primary reason for needing a sheikh. A sense of being connected to the sheikh was expressed by all respondents. All were asked how that works in practice when the sheikh lives overseas. For the Naqshbandis, travelling to Cyprus at least once a year to meet the sheikh is now a part of their lives. While having that personal access was very important to them, being connected was not limited to face-to-face meetings.

Only three mentioned access via the internet or other media and none of them saw that as of primary importance.

Connection via the group's network was strongly indicated by two and mentioned by two others. Respondent Amir explained it most fully.

Within all tariqas...there's a structure. You will have a sheikh, underneath that sheikh you will have deputies. Beneath those deputies, you will have other leaders of smaller *jamaats* [groups] and within those groups, you will have leaders and all the direction and the messages that filter down from the sheikh, filter down the structure and then you hear at the ground root level.

Some respondents did not choose to mention this aspect of connection but that cannot be taken to prove that it was of no significance to them.



Nevertheless, the plain fact is that half of them made no mention at all of this communal aspect and instead spoke of a mystical connection. This was true for members of all three tariqas.

Salim: You have this spiritual connection is called *rabita* [bond or tie] that spiritual connection is you can call them from millions and millions of miles away and they will come just like that.

Ahmad: In practice, how that works, we do what we call *muraqaba* [supervision]. We do meditation and we believe in heart to heart transmissions.

Yasin: If you have a sheikh—you know that that they're watching you—in a sense they're connected with you.

Muzammil: What we are taught is that [the sheikhs] will have some effect on you...just because of how spiritual they are, that will just have an effect on you whether you are making an active effort or not it'll just have an effect.

The most striking of these was respondent Muhammad. Speaking three years after Sheikh Nazim's death and quite deliberately speaking in the present tense he said,

He comes and says things to me in my dreams that I need to do... When I'm in need of help, I'm going through some trouble sometime. I spiritually direct myself to him and I seem to get an answer.

Having a Guide

In terms of the benefit they found from having pledged to follow a sheikh, all the respondents spoke of having a guide. They spoke in different but complementary ways of what this meant. It is not so much that they had contrasting views but rather that each expressed in their own way the part of the overall picture that seemed to them to answer my question. Reference was made to such things as decision-making, having a framework within which to understand their faith, direction in personal development and access to the divine. An appreciation was expressed for the clarity they now had in dealing with matters from an Islamic point of view which came from a confidence in the knowledge possessed by the sheikh and those close to him. The following quotes give an idea of the range of what is meant by being guided.

Rashid: So, over the past 10 years of my life, I can confidently say that any major decision that has been taken has not been taken without that consultation.

Muhammad: The difference it makes is that having a sheikh, having a tariqa, you follow certain ways that keep you in touch with Islam, in touch with your God... With Sheikh Nazim, he comes and says things to

me in my dreams that I need to do. He may give me advice or may give me certain readings to do.

Salim: Guidance in the way that... you can change your views on things, for example, service and humanity. You can read all the quotes you've got about service from different people out there but when I went to Cyprus I saw service and I saw humanity was more important than the actual religion itself.

Suleiman: This sheikh has taught me everything—love, family, work and community, spirituality, friendship, children—everything.

Ahmad: It's like a guide, guide to God which you can't get in books. You've got books, you know, there's a lot of guidance in books, but it's the sheikh who has actually reached God and he can say "look this is the way come follow me."

Amir: So it's given me progression in the ability to serve, for example, but it's also developing me in my thinking and what I consider to be important and why consider not to be important and it's giving me some awareness about what matters and what doesn't matter.

Muzammil: If he [the sheikh's representative] is closer to God, he's gonna have a little bit more access. If I can get in with that person or we get a bond, and then that way we've got a chance of getting a closer or we are going to get closer to God.

False Christs?

What these men are describing is a far cry from the standard representation of Islam as a dry set of rules and rituals; in reality, Islam has always been more than that. On hearing these accounts, I found myself reflecting from my Christian perspective that what they long for is something God desires them to have and has actually made provision for. It is Christ who brings the believer into right standing with God. It is through Christ that the Holy Spirit is given, the ultimate connection to the divine. The gospel

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calls believers into mutually supportive communities. The head of those communities is Christ, who describes himself as our shepherd. The Epistle to the Hebrews expounds how it is Jesus who meets our need. Because we are so quick to sum up everything in identifying Christ as God, we overlook the many other roles he plays for the believer. All the qualifications that supposedly give Sufi spiritual masters authority are actually found in the person of Christ in abundance. To put it the other way around, Sufi sheikhs are false Christs, pale alternatives to the real thing. The need the research respondents feel for a relationship to God through a mediator is entirely appropriate but they are not finding the mediator that God has provided for all mankind. That mediator is Christ.

The communities from which these people come have a long history of Sufi-style spirituality, that is to say a collective, family-based association with Sufi sites. Their forebears may have prized ancestral links to specific locations and familial association with *pirs* (Sufi masters in South Asia), but the rising generations need to find their identity on an altogether broader stage. In today's context, the fact that their sheikhs have a following of a multi-national character and have a global reach plays a part in establishing a greater credibility in the eyes of these respondents. The variety of nationalities among the followers was explicitly and without prompting mentioned as a sign of authenticity by two of the respondents. That such diversity serves as an attractor says something about those attracted by it, living as they do in a world in which global events are acted out in their living rooms via the television and for whom Islamic teachers compete with each other on the internet. What is true of the diaspora

community is likely to be increasingly true across the world as globalisation challenges traditional norms.

Sufi Mission

In past ages and even in the present, Sufi sheikhs traditionally set up a residence in a particular location, drew people to them and sent out representatives. However, in today's world the emerging sheikhs are highly mobile. Respondent Rashid was able to meet Sheikh Nazim because the sheikh was making one of his regular visits to London as part of his regular itinerary.⁸ In passing, one respondent mentioned that he had heard the sheikh speak once before, when the sheikh had visited a little-known small town in northern England. Sheikh Yaqoubi also travels regularly to meet with and to build up his following. It was at a residential conference at a venue on a university campus hired by the sheikh's people that respondent Yasin first came across him. During the research period, Sheikh Yaqoubi came to the UK during the Christmas holidays to hold a conference. It was live-streamed across the world. Respondent Muzammil was able to join the Ba'Alawi tariqa because it had a well-organised programme of study circles and travelling teachers across the UK led by Sheikh Ibrahim Osi-Efa.⁹

Missional Reflections

These research subjects felt a compelling need to seek spiritual change and were willing to restructure their lives around the thing that met that need. They were looking for spiritual security and expected to find it in a person. They were not looking for an idea or the answer to a puzzle. The decision to commit was based on a belief in the power and presence of a mediator. It

required a mystical experience to get them to that place of certainty.

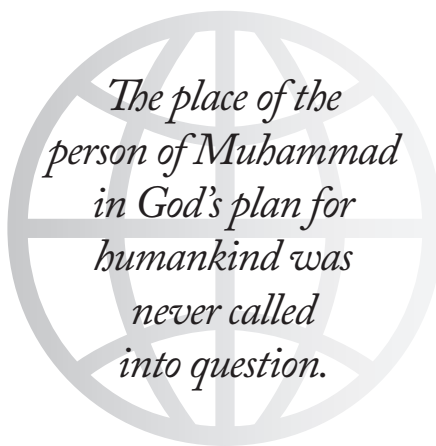
As Christians, we can identify with their sense of need and we can see their sheikhs as poor alternatives to Christ, the saviour given by God. We have all heard many accounts of how our living Christ has connected with Muslim individuals in different places through a mystical experience, usually a dream. These individuals did not encounter that experience. They took the path they did because it was made available to them.

We do not have access to data on what opportunities they may or may not have had thus far in their lives to engage with Christ and his people, but we can reasonably hypothesize that the qualities they admired in those who represented the Sufi masters could, if met in followers of Jesus, also command their respect and attention. These qualities include a calm, peaceable confidence that enabled an informal accepting style. Their focus was always on connecting the seeker to the master who they themselves were pledged to. Their quality of personal spirituality impressed the seekers. Ibrahim Osi-Efa, who champions the Ba'Alawi cause so effectively in the UK, should be of particular interest to us. In his case, his disciples let him guide them to putting their trust in a sheikh they could not physically encounter but to whom they now believe they are connected. As representatives of Christ, we too commend a Master who cannot be visited in person, but who calls people into a spiritual relationship. Osi-Efa, a man of African descent, crossed sharply defined cultural boundaries in winning the confidence of South Asians.

What We Might Learn

To be sure, none of these research subjects faced the traumas inherent in breaching the outer boundaries of Islamic identity. The place of the person of Muhammad in God's

plan for humankind was never called into question. It would be naïve in the extreme to imagine that simply adopting a certain style would in itself win people like these over. However, one might reasonably speculate that if their sense of need was sufficiently intense and if they met Christians who were sufficiently impressive and who could engage with them on their terms and then they experienced a sufficiently strong mystical encounter to confirm the way ahead, such seekers could come to Christ. One might also reasonably say that representatives of Christ exhibiting lesser qualities should expect no hearing. The quality of the messenger is paramount.



This paper may have ended with mere speculation. However, I have recently met a man with a proven fruitful ministry among Asian Muslims who has successfully become the sort of messenger I am talking about. He presents himself as a follower of Christ who loves Muslims. He avoids argument, offers prayer and spends time with them in their homes and their mosques. They detect something special in him. In response to their invitation, he opens up the scriptures to show them the person of Christ rather than a theological scheme. People are putting their faith in Christ and then learning about what he has done for them. And then they are commending the messenger to others. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 2–3.

² Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian, "Converting: Stages of Religious Change" in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, eds. C. Lamb & M. Bryant (London: Cassell, 1999), 23–34.

³ Tim Green, "Issues of Identity for Christians of a Muslim background in Pakistan" (PhD thesis, SOAS, 2014), 88.

⁴ Julianne Hazen, "Conversion Narratives among the Alami and Rifa'i Tariqa in Britain," in *Sufism in Britain*, eds. Ron Geaves and Theodore Gabriel (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 138–157. Also: Julianne Hazen, "Contemporary Islamic Sufism in America: The Philosophy and Practices of the Alami Tariqa in Waterport, New York" (PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2011).

⁵ John Lofland and Norman Skovovd. "Conversion Motifs" in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 4 (1981): 373–85, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1386185>.

⁶ For example, Green, "Issues of Identity"; Hazen, "Contemporary Islamic Sufism in America" and "Conversion Narratives."

⁷ Green, "Issues of Identity," 96.

⁸ Ron Geaves, *The Sufis of Britain* (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 1999), 146–148.

⁹ The tariqa has attracted a following in the UK mainly as a result of the efforts of activist Ibrahim Osi-Efa, who is of Nigerian heritage. He was introduced to it by Californian Shaykh Hamza Yusuf. The role of Osi-Efa is described by Sadek Hamid in "The Rise of 'Traditional Islam' Networks: Neo Sufism and British Muslim Youth" in *Sufism in Britain*, eds. Ron Geaves and Theodore Gabriel (London, Bloomsbury 2014), 183–186 and also in *Sufis, Salafis and Islamists: The Contested Ground of British Islamic Activism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).