

Testing Models, Shifting Paradigms

# Standing on the Shoulders of Others: When Innovations Surprise the Innovator

by Kevin Higgins

*Editor's Note: This article is an excerpt from the upcoming book, Connections with Muslims: The Ripple Effect of Phil Parshall's Life and Ideas (William Carey Publishers: Denver, CO, 2021). The editors of this wonderful festschrift, Kenneth Nebrbass and Mark Williams, have collected an anthology of articles honoring a contemporary pioneer who stretched the traditional paradigms of ministry to Muslim peoples. Printed by permission.*

**A**mong other things, I am a quasi-closet musician, or singer-songwriter. One genre I have studied and learned from is the broad category known as folk music. The best definition I have heard of folk music is that of Marcus Mumford (of Mumford and Sons), which basically was: *Folk means people, so folk music belongs to people.*

Implied in that remark is the insight that succeeding generations of artists and songwriters stand on the shoulders and learn from and even incorporate the music and lyrics of prior generations. This is actually true of all music, but folk music admits this fact, and celebrates it.

In the same way, whether we speak of music or mission:

*Every innovation stands on the shoulders of prior innovations.*

*Every innovator stands on the shoulders of prior innovators.*

That is true of me in my music, and it is true for me in my life in mission. And one of the innovators (there are many) upon whose shoulders I stand is Phil Parshall.

## ***My History with Phil Parshall***

Phil and I only met in person one time. I am aware that some of what I have written about, practiced, and advocated has gone beyond the limits with which he felt were warranted biblically and missiologically.

But let me describe my journey.

I first “met” Phil in the early 1980s. I was newly married, and by divine accident I had become involved working with Iranians in the Los Angeles area. I was grasping for anything I could find to help, and I found two giants. The first was Don McCurry, at the Zwemer Institute. I attended the seminars, met with Don, and learned all I could.

The second was Phil's book (perhaps his best-known work), *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism*. I remember reading it. I remember being impressed by it.

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But frankly, I did not yet have any experiential grid through which to absorb or appropriate his insights. He was one voice in my journey toward a sense of call to work with Muslims.

A few years later, midway through my seminary studies, my wife and I were invited to teach at a Bible school in Uganda. We agreed, seeing the position as a way to test a calling to mission by going to a different culture, albeit one that did not particularly need missionaries. This exposure to missions was a way to test the cross-cultural part of our call before testing the Muslim part.

Unfortunately, the Bible school never opened that year; nonetheless we found ourselves engaged in building relationships with Somalis in the little town in Uganda where we were living. God indeed used our experiences that year to confirm the two parts of what we sensed was our calling: working cross-culturally, and working with Muslims. It was also a year that brought us face-to-face with some of the barriers to fulfilling that calling.

Let me be transparent and say that some of those barriers were within us. This realization led to a journey of deeper growth in our own souls— healing our pasts, and addressing our own unhealthy pieces as people (especially mine!). But that year in Uganda, working in a relational way among Somalis drove me back again to a similar place I had found myself while working with Iranians in Los Angeles: I was in need of help and mentors. I found three.

In the process, I purchased my first Qur'an, and the first of my mentors that I will mention here was actually the Imam who began to teach me Qur'anic Arabic.

The second was an author I discovered by accident in a Nairobi bookstore: Giulio Basetti-Sani, who wrote *The Koran in the Light of Christ*.<sup>1</sup>

I am not suggesting Phil would enjoy being included with these two, but he was the third of my mentors. I returned to his book, *New Paths*, and found my life experience had caught up with the book. I found it speaking to me and helpful to me in so many practical ways. I will come back to this later.

It was some time before Phil and I crossed paths again, and the next meeting was face-to-face. I returned from Uganda, finished seminary, and then worked for several years in an urban church context which included an attempt at church planting among outpatient mental health patients. Interestingly to me, the insights in *New Paths*, originally focused on

adapting discipleship practices to fit Muslim contexts, had a profound impact on how I understood the work of church planting in an urban US context.

Around that time, our first children were born, we bought a house, and we were settling in. But God intervened and the call to cross-cultural life among Muslims was rekindled. In 1990 we began to prepare to move to South Asia. I took up reading *New Paths* again while we did support raising, and then arrived in South Asia in 1991, ready to put the book into practice.

Or so I thought.

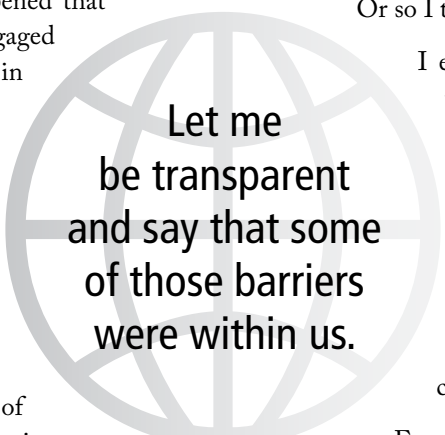
I ended up serving with a national church that deeply opposed such attempts at contextual approaches and took a very strong view of the—dare I say—evil origins of the Islamic religion. For a year I tried to integrate my past learning with the insights of my new colleagues. I learned their language and culture and worked hard at our various responsibilities, including running a business.

Eventually we ran into visa problems and needed to leave, returning to the US just in time to hear two men speak at my seminary about work going on elsewhere in South Asia. They spoke of a large movement, and I remember thinking to myself, “If this is even ten percent true, I need to learn from these people.” I spoke to them—one was an American and the other was the leader of the movement. I was invited to join them and help them with the business they were developing. My aim, while being willing to help, was to learn and return to the country where we had originally been called to serve.

And learn I did.

This was still the early and middle 1990s, when things like the “C Scale” were just beginning to be talked about.<sup>2</sup> The term “insider movement” had not yet been coined.<sup>3</sup> In fact, any talk of “movements” at all was at best in the very earliest of beginnings. But I was experiencing and seeing a movement up close and in person.

The movement had attracted attention, of course, and a decision was made to include it in what was intended to be a three-foci study: this South Asian movement and two other contexts in sub-Saharan Africa. I had the privilege of being a part of the team that designed, conducted, and wrote up the field research in South Asia. And it was this study which led to my actual meeting with Phil.



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I believe, I was introduced to Phil while the research was still going on. We met, as I recall, at Phil's home. I knew that these brothers were not in full agreement on any number of things. Phil was gracious and generous with his time and conversation.

Some months later, perhaps as much as two years, Phil was given a copy of the completed research results. That led to my next "meeting," not in person, but in the form of an article Phil wrote for *EMQ*.<sup>4</sup> Since the article included the word *danger* in the title, the reader can correctly surmise that Phil was not an enthusiastic supporter of what was happening in the movement.

I know from Phil's later writing that he knows what it is like for a scholar to have godly colleagues wonder about the implications of his own work. He also was challenged by those who felt he had gone too far, or that his ideas would lead others to do so. He describes this in his memoir.<sup>5</sup>

It is this reality that brings me to the main point of relating the history of my connection with Phil's, ideas and thinking: Phil was an innovator. He faced the challenges all innovators face. He needed the courage all innovators need. And his courage in the face of such critique should be applauded by those who follow and build on his innovative work. I count myself as one who applauds.

At the same time, innovators do enable later innovators to begin from a different vantage point than was available as they themselves sought to probe new territory. I self-consciously stand on the shoulders of men and women like Phil Parshall. To return to my metaphor of folk music, I feel I have recombined his melodies and lyrics in new ways. I am grateful.

### *Lessons I Have Learned*

I have hinted already at some of what I have learned. I want to touch on two main areas. The first is missiological, and the second is personal. I will limit myself to two examples of each. I want to outline the missiological "gleanings" I have attained from several of Phil's books I have studied and suggest ways I have been enabled by them to continue to press in, or seek beyond. This is not, of course, to suggest Phil would agree with every new insight or experiment that I feel he enabled me to imagine.

#### **Distinguish between Form and Function**

First, Phil's application of what he learned at Fuller School of World Mission encouraged me on my own path of integrating the social sciences and the Scriptures to examine and critique mission practice. It was liberating to be introduced to his practice of probing the consequences of contextualizing

so-called Christian "forms" (which were often Western) in order to allow truly biblical "functions" to flourish in a cross-cultural setting. An older mentor, even at a distance through his written works, can grant validation to the younger traveler who gains a sense of confidence from those who have gone before. That was true for me.

I have in some ways taken that contextualization process further than Phil originally imagined, or in ways that would subsequently make him feel a certain unease. So I want to be careful in what I say, lest it appear that I am assuming Phil would equally celebrate everything I envision as the natural implications of his seed-work. But I do feel as if I have stood on the shoulders of a prior explorer and benefited from his map-making as I (in my understanding) have been able to journey further in the trajectory of the path on which his ideas set me going.

#### **Listening to Others**

Second, Phil's books modeled an attempt to listen well to what Muslims themselves thought and felt. In saying this, I refer to his relationships with Muslim friends, as well as his reading of Muslim texts. This too encouraged me on my journey on the path toward realizing the importance of more than the Qur'an in that process.

Eventually, as one example of his influence in my life, this led to my studies in how Muslims approached the translation/interpretation of the Qur'an. I tried to listen well, and in so doing I found insights and wisdom which can inform Christians about the task of translation of the Bible.<sup>6</sup> Phil was one of the early sources of such inspiration.

#### **Practice Humility in Relationships**

In the arena of what I have learned from Phil in terms of relationships, I want to also mention two examples. Both actually both spring from a certain kind of manner which is evident in his written work.

The first is the humility with which Phil describes his own struggles with seeking to live a godly life. He is very honest in his memoirs about the struggles that missionaries face in a number of areas (e.g., marriage, sexual temptations, and more). But he does not point the finger. He is vulnerable enough to include himself. Such transparency is as freeing to younger leaders in the realm of spiritual growth as is his pioneering of experimentation in missiology.

I have sought to lead, as well, from a place of humble transparency. I have learned about the value of humility by observing a number of people in my life over the years. Phil's voice is among them.

The second is Phil's willingness to show how his own spiritual life falls short in comparison to some of his Muslim friends. This exhibits the same humility I just cited. He mentions this in *New Paths*<sup>7</sup> and also in his memoirs,<sup>8</sup> thus at the earlier and later stages of his written work. This consistent posture suggests to me that humility was part of the fabric of Phil's inner life.

In recent years, just as the term "insider" has emerged as a way of speaking of believers and movements, so too has the term "alongsider" emerged as an increasingly common way to speak of missionaries. The term has been coined to try to find vocabulary that captures the humble, servant, learning posture many of us are seeking to embrace. And many of us have learned the hard way how to be alongsiders—finding our pride and presumption broken by experience. We become alongsiders through our willingness to learn from others (from insiders, from other missionaries, and from Muslims who do not yet believe). While Phil never used the word alongsider, he modeled some early elements. And once again I reckon my journey is in part, at least, a result of standing on the shoulders of things he spoke and wrote.

Phil also would not have used the term "holy envy," by which some have tried to express a posture of intentionally looking for the best in other religions—in their religious practices and their religious followers. This attitude is not employed to diminish the so-called dark sides of religions. But it is a posture that assumes a charitable assumption about others, while also being willing to look honestly at the dark sides of our own religious traditions.

Again, I see seeds of this in Phil's own life and work. I know he would not welcome all the comparisons, or align himself with all that some people mean when they speak of holy envy.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Giulio Basseti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light of Christ: A Christian Interpretation of the Sacred Book of Islam* (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> There have been numerous articles and discussions of the C Scale. I give one example in the references.

<sup>3</sup> For discussions about insider movements from different perspectives, see the Lausanne discussion, for example, at <https://www.lausanne.org/lgc-transfer/highly-contextualized-missions-surveying-the-global-conversation>.

<sup>4</sup> Phil Parshall, "Danger! New Directions in Contextualization," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1998): 404–6, 409–10.

<sup>5</sup> Phil Parshall, *Divine Threads within a Human Tapestry: Memoirs of Phil Parshall* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> For example, the way that Muslims incorporate the original text of the Qur'an and in some cases include both a very literal translation and in the same publication a more explanatory translation.

<sup>7</sup> Phil Parshall, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism: Evangelical Approaches to Contextualization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Parshall, *Divine Threads within a Human Tapestry*.

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This is yet another area where I see myself and others, in our own various perspectives, standing upon the shoulders of those like Phil, able to discover things we could not have seen or obtained otherwise.

## Concluding Thoughts

I want to return to some of my opening remarks about folk music. In 1965, at the Newport Folk Festival, Pete Seeger (a patriarch of the folk music movement) reportedly tried to cut the cables that powered the amplifiers Bob Dylan was using to electrify his sound. Dylan played his old music; he just represented it in a new sound (and louder, of course).

This response reminds me of how the Athenians resisted Paul on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22–34). At that rock festival, some in the audience, including Peter Seeger, hated the music; some loved it; some reserved judgement. Dylan took a risk. He innovated, but it was not a risk he would have ever been in a position to make had people like Seeger not pioneered the folk music movement to begin with.

By taking the risk of documenting his thinking and ideas in written forms, as well as by his own living of his life, Phil Parshall has added to the canon, as it were, of the folk music of missiology and mission practice. Others like me stand on his shoulders, and we have taken some aspects of his portfolio to places Phil would not be comfortable going. However, a generation of missiologists are very aware that they would not be standing where they are if not for the innovative spirit of Phil Parshall. **IJFM**