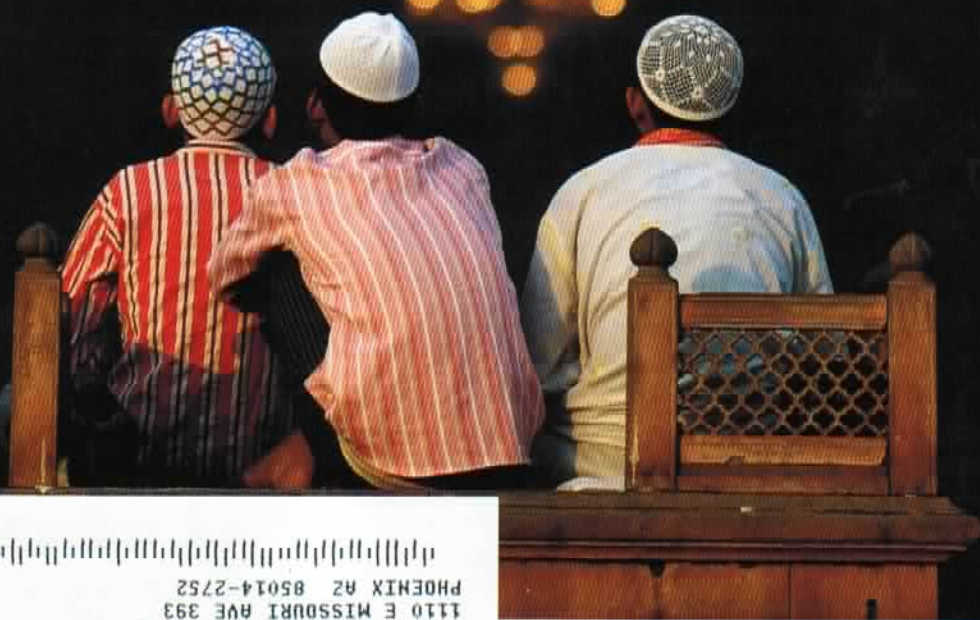


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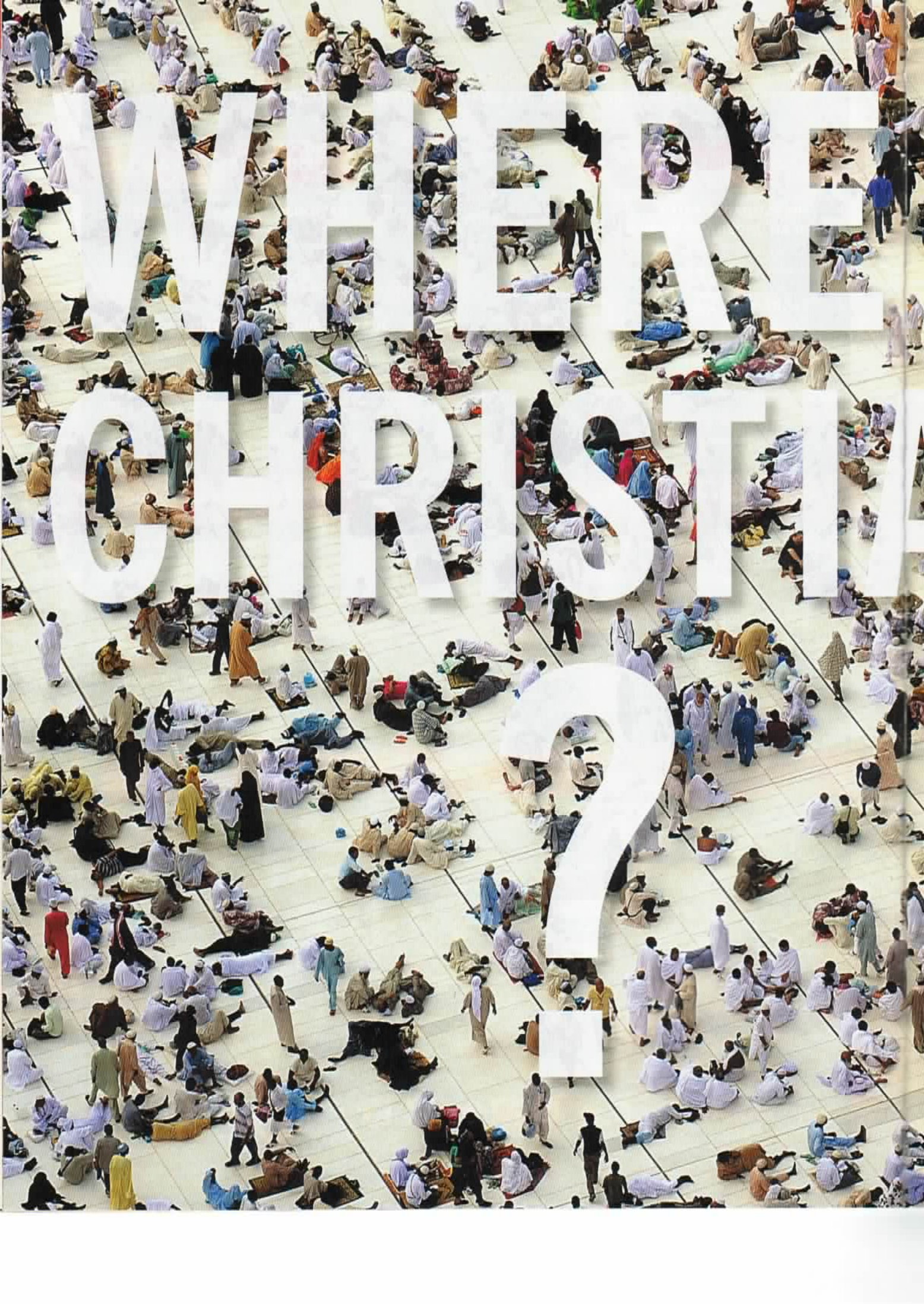
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OF A MUSLIM FOLLOWER  
OF ISA.



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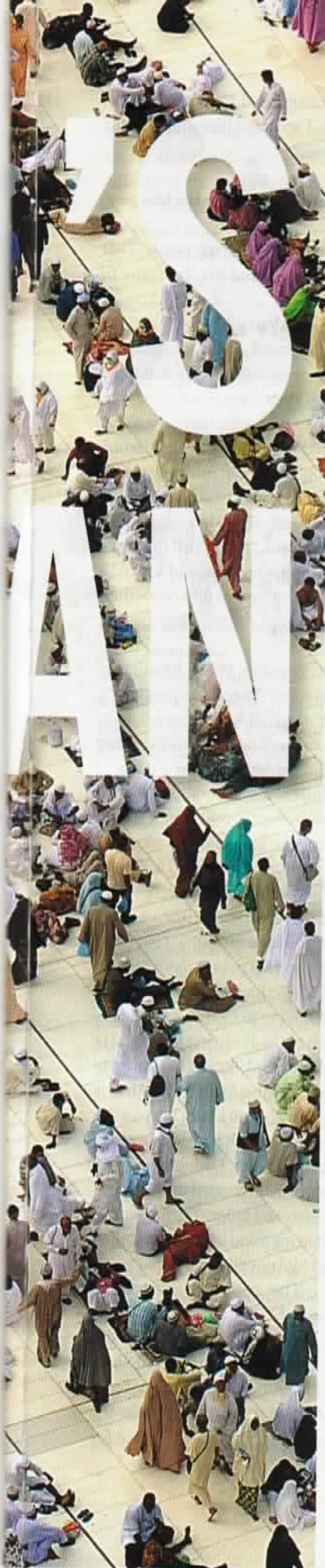
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WHERE ARE

CHRISTIANS?



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# WHAT IT'S LIKE TO FOLLOW CHRIST EMBEDDED IN MUSLIM CULTURE. AN INTERVIEW WITH A MUSLIM FOLLOWER OF ISA.

By Gene Daniels

CAN PEOPLE FROM OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS genuinely follow Jesus without becoming “Christians”? The question is a point of much dispute within today’s missions world. Those who follow Jesus yet don’t formally express Christian faith are said to belong to *insider movements*. And no insider movement has received more attention than Muslims who embrace Christ yet stay within their Islamic community. “Insiders” are hard to access due to cultural, geographic, and linguistic barriers. As a result, many Christians have taken positions on insider movements without ever having met or spoken with someone who belongs to one. In the following exclusive interview, we hear from just such an insider.

The following is the synthesis of two interviews conducted in 2011 with “Abu Jaz,” a key leader in a movement that describes itself as the People of the Gospel. This group represents several thousand Muslims in eastern Africa who have converted to faith in Christ during the past decade, but who have remained in their Muslim communities. Abu Jaz is married and has three children. He started following *Isa al Masih* (“Jesus the Messiah”) as the Savior 18 years ago.

The interview was conducted by “Gene Daniels,” a missionary in the Muslim community for over a decade, who has published many articles in missionary journals. *Christianity Today* has verified the authenticity of the interviewer and interviewee, whose real names are withheld so that the work of the People of the Gospel will be protected.

**Describe your conversion to Christ.**

One night the only food my wife and I had was a small portion of macaroni. My wife prepared it very nicely. Then one of her friends knocked on the door. I told myself, *The macaroni is not sufficient for even the two of us, so how will it be enough for three of us?* But because we have no other custom, we opened the door, and she came in to eat with us.

While we were eating, the macaroni started to multiply; it became full in the bowl. I suspected that something was wrong with my eyes, so I started rubbing them. I thought maybe my wife hid some macaroni under the small table, so I checked, but there was nothing. My wife and I looked at each other, but because the guest was there we said nothing.

Afterward I lay down on the bed, and as I slept, Isa came to me and asked me, "Do you know who multiplied the macaroni?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "I am Isa al Masih. If you follow me, not only the macaroni but your life will be multiplied."

He didn't tell me that he was God; he didn't tell me that he died on behalf of me; he didn't say, "I am the Son of God." He didn't talk to me about any complicated theological issues. He only told me that if I followed him, he would multiply my life. At that time, I was very happy if he only multiplied the macaroni like he did that day. I didn't understand what he meant

when he said that my life would be multiplied. Now I understand what that means. But at that time, I accepted him simply as the "lord of macaroni."

**Much like the crowds in the Gospels who accepted him as "lord of bread."**

Yes, I just accepted him as one who satisfied my needs. That day I understood that because Allah loved me, Isa came to my home.

When I think back now, the kingdom of God came to my home. Jesus said, "[I]f I cast out demons . . . the kingdom . . . has come upon you" (Luke 11:20, *NASB*). Any miracle that takes place by Isa al Masih speaks of the kingdom of God. It was not because I was poor that Isa came to my home; there are many poor. It is not because he wanted to multiply my macaroni. Maybe there might be other people who can multiply macaroni, like magic. So what is the purpose? Isa al Masih came to my home with the kingdom of God. He didn't completely explain theological issues, he only said, "If you will follow."

I went to an [evangelical] church after that, and I faced a cultural challenge as a Muslim. Everything was different—their way of worship, the way they sang songs, the way they danced. Nothing was familiar to me.

I have my own expression of worship. When it comes to greetings, I say, *As-salaam 'alaykum* ("Peace be upon you"), and I expect people to reply, *Wa 'alaykum Salaam wa rahmatu l-laahi wa barakaatuh* ("Peace to you and may God's mercy and blessings be upon you"). And we Muslims have a way of shaking hands. But in the church, it was totally different.

Nobody liked my expressions. Brothers and sisters told me that *As-salaam 'alaykum* and *Wa 'alaykum salaam* were from the Devil, so it was hard for me to join and start life with members of the church.

One day the pastor came to me and said, "How are you?" I answered, "*Alhamdulillah!*" ("Praise be to God!"). The pastor was very angry. He said, "No, brother! No more *Alhamdulillah*. Your God is changed from *Allah* to *God* [using the tribal name]. You have to express your thanksgiving to God as a Christian, and we have our own expression of thanksgiving to God." He ordered me to say, "Praise the Lord" and "Praise to God." He asked me to not use the term *Allah* because Allah is evil, Allah is the Devil, Allah is the black stone, Allah is an idol. That was the first time I had heard [anyone say] that Allah is an idol or evil. I was shocked. When I do my spiritual duties, I think I am doing them for Allah. He is the one who created the universe, sustains the universe, and judges the universe. I couldn't in my mind imagine that Allah is an idol or evil.

The next day the pastor asked, "How are you?" I wanted to replace his words with my own *Alhamdulillah*, but since the pastor warned me not to, I didn't. I tried to say, "Praise the Lord," or "Praise to God," but for



33 years I had never used these words or the tribal name for God, and it was difficult to do so. So I stayed [in the church] without saying *Alhamdulillah* for more than three months. I simply said, "I am fine." I wanted to express my gratitude to Allah, but because of their understanding [of the term], I suppressed it.

Then I started questioning the justice of God. I asked him, "God, you are the one who put me in a Muslim culture; it was not my choice. They don't allow me to express [my praise] in the congregation. When they hear Islamic terminologies, they immediately rebuke me, so I prefer to keep silent. You like the Orthodox culture, you like the traditional African culture, you like Jewish culture, you like the European culture, you like cultures of other people groups, but you dislike the Muslims. So you are not just."

This stayed with me for two years. But finally, because I had no other alternative, I completely accepted the evangelical cultural context, and I dissolved all of my Islamic cultural identity. No more Islamic terms; [you could say] that in my context I became circumcised. Then people finally accepted me as a believer, but it isolated me from my own Muslim community.

#### **Did the church accept you when you abandoned your Islamic identity?**

When I changed my culture they thought I had finally become a believer; before that they did not consider me one. When I changed my culture to become like them, they even clapped their hands and said, "Now Abu Jaz has become a believer." But I had already believed for two years.

***I went to an [evangelical] church, and I faced a cultural challenge as a Muslim. Everything was different—their way of worship, the way they sang songs, the way they danced. Nothing was familiar to me.***

After some time, I had the chance to go to a Bible college. While I studied there, I learned the difference between the supracultural substance of the Word of God and the cultural form that expresses it. Then my question was answered, [and I understood] that God really does love everyone. God opened my eyes to understand that all cultures are equal in his eyes. It is not holy contexts, only holy texts.

From that time, 1998 by the European calendar, I started to prepare myself to speak with my own community. In the Bible college, I discovered myself, and I wanted to restore my cultural identity again, the identity of my culture, not for the sake of the people, but to express myself and my faith in God. I went back and restored my former Islamic cultural identity. Then I rejoiced that God is just.

Still, even if I had theological and cultural challenges in the Christian community, I experienced love there, a love that was alive. The believers showed me and my wife kindness and love. So I praise God for these people.

But I understand the pain of Muslims. I understand what they fear. When they hear the Good News, they want to have Isa al Masih, but because they have been told that it is only

Christians who think about him, they reject him. But now we are not repeating the same mistake.

#### **Talk a little about the theology of your movement.**

We do not use systematic theology, even though I studied [it] in Bible college and understand how and when Christians developed different Christologies, for example. I know church history, and I know the creeds and when they started. The early church fathers faced external and internal challenges; they wrote the creeds to solve their own challenges, in their own contexts. So if [the] church fathers solved their own problems by finding answers in the Word of God, then the people who are working among the Muslims have to identify their own problems and even call councils to discuss the challenges and apologetic [issues] in these contexts.

#### **How do you go about sharing the gospel in your context?**

It is important to start [by asking], *What is the purpose of preaching the gospel?* We find our thinking in Acts 14:15, where Paul says, "We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them." So bringing the Good News to people is turning them back to their Creator God. Of course, we must do this in Isa, in Jesus, but we have to start just as Paul did, with the Creator God.

This is general revelation. If we destroy general revelation, there is no more special revelation. As far as I know, Paul directly addressed non-Jewish religions twice, and both times,

he started with general revelation but ended up with Jesus, the ultimate revelation of God, as the one appointed by God the Creator to save people. The Book of Acts tells us that. But to believers, in the Epistles, he taught them that Jesus is divine. No one can say Jesus is Lord without the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3).

Muslims believe there is a Creator of heaven and earth, and his name is Allah. If you tell a Muslim about the Creator of heaven and earth, but say that the Creator is not Allah, the Muslim will be very confused. What you are telling him is not good news.

If you believe that even Muslims have received general revelation, then you have to start there. If you don't believe this, you don't believe your own [evangelical] theology. But if you come to them with good news, [to] restore their relationship with the Creator God, then you have to receive the name they have for him, *Allah*. If we say that the one they know as Allah is not God, we are not [speaking] against the religion of Islam, or Muhammad or Qur'an, but against the doctrine of general revelation. The missionary must first receive the name of the Creator God from the people, and then they have heavenly authority to give the people the name of the Savior, Isa al Masih.

**How is this different from simply believing in the Muslim prophet Isa, as in the Qur'an?**

Muslims believe that Isa is a prophet and messenger of Allah, but that he is superseded by Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. According to Islam, salvation is based on the teaching of Muhammad. But you still have something to start with in Islam. You start with their limited Christology and Christ's role in the kingdom of God, mainly his role in the Day of Judgment. Muslims start to think from Islamic Christology, but they end up with Isa [as the one] who overcame the power of death. They progressively understand him, from prophet and messenger to Savior and then to Lord. But this takes time and the Holy Spirit, as it also did for Peter.

**But while they are slowly coming to understand who Jesus is, why don't you also slowly bring them into the Christian church?**

It is possible for Muslim-background believers to join the existing church. But the evangelical church in my country represents a mixture of two religious forms, the Coptic Church and traditional religion.

If I say to Muslims, "Come to this church with me," I am inviting them to a very strange thing. Also, this is saying to them that they do not deserve a church that connects with their community. This is why we need a Muslim-focused church-planting strategy, because it will produce a church that uses the terms and forms from their Muslim community, not something from other religious communities.

**Many Christians in the West would agree that Muslim-focused evangelistic strategy is needed. But many of them also feel that a Muslim-focused church is going too far.**

Why is it too far? All people have a church-planting strategy that fits their religious context. Why is there a [problem] when we come to Islam? So we ask, "Do Muslims deserve a church that fits their cultural context?" We are not trying to bring them into the already [existing] evangelical church. They should have a church that reflects their culture. Then we can say that we have an indigenous church, one that grows from the soil of the Muslim community. To "hook" one person into the evangelical church is possible. But the question is how we can fish with a net.

When you are talking to one person you [are also] talking to his community. He represents the whole community. What we say to one will go back to all the rest. So we want to reach a whole community and bring community transformation. The content of church is from heaven, but the form of the church should be from the ground, the culture. The church should



reflect Muslim culture, not Muslim theology.

**How do the people in your movement view Muhammad? Is there confusion?**

First, we cannot rule out syncretism at the beginning of a new believer's life. The purpose of discipleship is to separate their old beliefs from their new beliefs. So when they put their faith in Jesus, they may have at the same time Muhammad in their heart. But when they start to pray in the name of Isa for their own need, they experience joy, assurance, and peace. And when they pray in the name of Jesus and find people healed and demons cast out, they completely stop thinking about Muhammad. It is a process of the Holy Spirit.

[We should] categorize people in how they relate to Jesus: Where are these people, and where is Jesus in their life? We should ask, "Does this person accept Isa as Lord of their life?"

### But what about Muhammad?

Before [they believe in Isa], Muslims acknowledge Muhammad as the final prophet of God. Then we tell them about Isa al Masih. They already know that Isa al Masih was a prophet that raised people from the dead. They know that Isa al Masih did miracles and that he will come as the sign of the Day of Judgment.

Even though they know all this, they are not intentionally thinking about Isa; they are thinking about Muhammad. But when we tell them the gospel, they begin to think about Isa intentionally as the one who will save them from the Day of Judgment, from Satan, from antichrist, from death.

At that point, they mix Muhammad with Isa al Masih. Before, Isa was not the issue. Muhammad was the issue. But when they hear about Isa, they start to bring Isa up to the level of Muhammad. Before, Muhammad was the one who

***We need a Muslim-focused church-planting strategy, a church that uses the terms and forms from their Muslim community, not something from other religious communities.***

controlled their life. But when they hear the Good News of the kingdom of God, they start to think about Isa. Now syncretism has started; before there was no syncretism. If missionaries don't ever want problems with syncretism, then just leave them with Muhammad [grins].

But syncretism did not start with us. It started even in Paul's time. That was the reason Paul wrote the Epistle to the Galatians. It is not [an] issue because we are Muslims; syncretism starts because people normally start with their own religious background. When people start to think about Isa intentionally, the Holy Spirit has room to lead them into all truth, even if they first mix Isa and Muhammad. The Holy Spirit through time will glorify Isa al Masih in their lives.

### So after the new birth, the Holy Spirit begins to open their minds to understand more fully the Messiah.

Yes, of course. Before they believe in Jesus, the Holy Spirit will convict them about sin, righteousness, and judgment. As soon as they give their will to Jesus, they will receive the Holy Spirit and be born again and become a child of God. Then the Holy Spirit starts to live in them. Because the Holy Spirit lives in them, he will lead them to all [the] truth of Jesus. Then the Holy Spirit will give them revelation, and they will say that Jesus is Lord.

The [rest of the community] have started to think now, and they say, "*Lial lial rasul Isa*"—"These are the people of the messenger Isa." They'll say, "Who are these people? These people are not Christians. These people are not Muslims. Who are they? Let's go and hear what they are thinking." We explain as much as possible from the Bible. People ask us, "Who is Isa for you?" Our answer is, "He is the Word of Allah." Then we quote from the Qur'an, but explain what the "Word of Allah" means from a biblical perspective.

### If the Muslim community thinks the new believers "are not Christians and are not Muslims," what do the new believers themselves think? What is their self-identity?

When they first come to believe in Isa, of course they still think [of themselves] as Muslims. What else could they think? We are not telling them they are now Christians.

But when they understand the gospel more clearly, they don't want to have an Islamic religious identity. Yet they also do not want to let go of their cultural identity as Muslims, which naturally includes forms from their previous way of life and worship.

### Where is Jesus in the life of the people in your movement, the People of the Gospel?

When people want to know our faith articles, we can tell them. But when it comes to individual people, we cannot say so easily,

because they are not all on the same level. We find some people who say Jesus is God, some who understand that Jesus is the Savior. Others say he is the Word of Allah, without explanation, as they are struggling to understand what that means. Sometimes they understand Isa, other times they don't. So we have to instruct them.

We have to teach them from the things that they already know. For example, some people may not [understand] if I tell them that Jesus died on their behalf. Islam has a different theology of sin; they don't accept that Jesus died on their behalf. It is true that he died on their behalf, but it is not the only benefit [of Christ's death].

When he died on the cross, he defeated death and the one who owned the power of death, Satan. And because God raised Jesus from the dead, he was appointed by God as a judge on the Day of Judgment, and the Savior from the Day of Judgment. The Cross is the answer for every [issue] in life. It is the solution regarding our relation to God, Satan, sin, death, and so on.

It is the evangelist's responsibility to choose which benefit of the Cross is the answer for the spiritual needs a Muslim feels. Then gradually the Holy Spirit will explain the benefit of the Cross as it relates to their sin.

Muslims are afraid of evil spirits; they are afraid of the Day of Judgment. They are afraid of the Devil. I have a message from the kingdom of God that addresses all of these spiritual needs. So we are using the Muslim way of thinking about Isa, even if it is incomplete. If Muslims understand even one of these, they will call to Isa, and the Holy Spirit can lead them to understand more benefits of the Cross.

There are lots of opportunities in Islam; there are also lots of challenges. But the opportunities are bigger than the challenges. We must remember that it is not we who are bringing God to the Muslim people. He was already here. ☛