

MUSLIM MINISTRIES AND TRANSFORMING WORLDVIEWS

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In recent years, Christian ministries among Muslims have moved center stage, and deep personal encounters with different Muslim communities have raised important missiological questions. One of these has to do with the nature of conversion when Muslims become followers of Jesus Christ. This involves many dimensions, and there is no simple theory that encompasses the many dimensions involved. Here we will examine one, namely the transformation of worldviews, a dimension that is often neglected because worldviews are largely unseen and hard to examine.

Two biblical examples can help us understand the conversion of worldviews. The first is found in Acts 1:6-7 where the disciples asked Jesus if he would now establish his kingdom on earth. Despite Christ's many teachings about the Kingdom of God, they were still looking for an earthly kingdom in which Jesus would drive out the Romans and reign from Jerusalem. Only much later did Christians understand the Christ's reign is a spiritual kingdom that has invaded the earth, and that will be visibly manifest when he returns in glory.

The second worldview shift was experienced by Peter in Acts 10:9-33. Until then the Gospel was proclaimed only to the Jews and proselytes. Now Peter was called by the Holy Spirit to go to Cornelius, a Gentile. In his encounter in Cornelius' house, Peter learned three profound lessons. First, he came believing that God is the God of the Jews. He left realizing that God is the God of all people. Second, he thought Christianity was how he and the disciples did it. He learned that Christianity can be done in other ways in other sociocultural contexts. Third, Peter came as an outsider, making clear that as a Jew he should not really be there. He learned that these Gentile converts were his brothers and sisters—that he was one of them.

Worldviews and Conversion

Before looking at the conversion of worldviews, we need to examine what we mean by “conversion,” and by “worldview.”

Conversion

By conversion we mean people who turn from other ways to become followers of God as revealed himself to us incarnate in Jesus Christ as the Lord of their lives. Conversion is a turning around a moving in a new direction. This turning may be sudden or slow. Nor do we as humans always know when it happens. God, who sees the heart, knows, but our calling is to invite people to follow Christ, and to become his disciples. Moreover, once people have turned to Christ we need to encourage them to grow in the knowledge of truth, in love of God and in holiness.

Conversion involves many transformations. On the social level, conversion involves changes in the ways converts relate to their families, friends, community and public, and the ways they relate to other Christians. On the psychological level, it involves new ways of seeing and feeling about themselves, and integrating their new beliefs into their personal lives. On the cultural level, it involves a new way of living in this world. This affects all three dimensions of culture. On the cognitive level it is a new way of viewing reality. On the affective or feeling level, it bring new love and joy. On the evaluative or moral level, it leads to a new understanding of righteousness and sin, and a desire to be holy. At the core of this cultural conversion is the transformation of worldviews.

Worldview

The second concept we will use to examine Muslim conversions is 'worldview.' To understand worldview, we need first to examine the concept of culture of which it is a part. By culture we mean the more or less integrated systems of learned beliefs, feelings and values shared by a group of people and expressed by means of patterns of behavior, signs and products. Cultures are the everyday worlds in which we live, shaped by nature and by human creation.

Cultures have different levels. On the surface we see people's behavior and hear what they say. Beneath these are the patterns that order behavior and the linguistic and other signs they use. Humans are unique in their ability to create mental maps to think about the world around them, and to use these maps to choose courses of action. This ability to construct mental worlds that reflect the outside world is based on our ability to create symbols. A symbol is anything that stands for something else in the minds of a person or a group of people. For example, we see real trees and have a mental image of them. We create the spoken word "tree" to represent them. Thereafter, when we hear the word "tree" we retrieve the mental images of the real trees we have seen. Because symbols link thoughts to external realities that can be experienced by other humans, we are able to communicate our thoughts to them.

Each culture organizes its symbolic world in different ways. For example, in English we speak of six colors in the rainbow. Telugu speakers in South India use two – hot and cold colors. They see as many colors we do, but use adjectives to note the differences.

In culture we use signs to create belief systems that organize our thoughts. In the West these systems include beliefs about medicine, physics, car repair, cooking, child rearing and theology. Belief systems are what we think about and discuss. They are essential for human life.

Beneath symbols and belief systems are basic assumptions about the way the world is put

together. These are what people take as granted about the nature of things, and the categories and logic they use to form a coherent understanding of reality. Taken together these assumptions make up a 'worldview,' a way of looking at reality.

Worldviews make cognitive assumptions about the nature of reality. In the West, these include the reality of atoms, viruses and gravity. In Arabia they include *jinn*, *quarina*, *baraka*, and evil eye. Modern people see time as a straight line from a beginning to an end, that can be divided into uniform intervals such as years, days and minutes. It does not repeat itself. Other cultures see time as cyclical, as a never-ending repetition of summers and winters, days and nights.

Worldviews have affective assumptions that underlie notions of beauty and style, and influence people's tastes in music, art, dress and food, as well as the ways they feel about themselves and life in general. For example, in cultures influenced by Theravada Buddhism, life is equated with suffering. By contrast, in the United States after World War II many people were optimistic and believed that by hard work and planning they could achieve a happy, comfortable life.

Worldviews also have evaluative assumptions regarding the nature of right and wrong. For instance, North Americans assume that honesty means telling people the way things are, even if doing so hurts their feelings. In other countries, one must tell others what they want to hear, because it is more important that they be encouraged than that they know the facts.

Taken together these assumptions provide people with a way of looking at the world that makes sense out of it, a *worldview* that gives them the assurance that they understand the world and that their understanding is right. Those who disagree with us are not wrong; they are crazy and out of touch with reality. If our worldview is shaken, we are deeply disturbed because the

world no longer makes sense to us.

Worldviews are largely implicit. Like glasses, they shape how we see the world around us—they are what we look *with*, not what we look *at*. Like glasses, it is hard for us to see our own worldview—others often see it better than we do.

Worldviews serve several important functions. On the cognitive level, our worldview gives us a rational justification for our beliefs, and integrated them into a more or less unified view of reality. On the level of feelings, it provides us with emotional security. On the evaluative level, it validates our deepest cultural norms. In short, our worldview is our basic map *of* reality, and the map we use *for* living our lives. Finally, our worldview monitors our responses to culture change. We are constantly confronted with new ideas, behavior and products that come from within our society and from without. Our worldview helps us select those that fit our culture and reject those that do not. It also helps us reinterpret those things we adopt so that they fit into our overall cultural pattern.

Worldviews change over time. New ideas may challenge our fundamental assumptions, and internal inconsistencies in our beliefs create tensions. To reduce the stress, we modify or drop some of our assumptions. The result is a gradual worldview transformation of which we ourselves may not even be aware. At times our worldview no longer makes sense of our world. If another, more adequate one is presented to us, we may reject the old and adopt the new. For example, Muslims may decide that Christianity offers better answers to their questions than do their old religion. Such worldview shifts are at the heart of what we call conversion and transformation.

Contextualization

Before we look at converting worldviews, we need to look at the relationship between the

Gospel and the human social, cultural and historical contexts in which we communicate it. Our initial thought is to separate the Gospel from human contexts. We see it as something apart from these, as an acultural message unaffected by the culture and history of the hearers. While it is true that the Gospel is divine revelation, and therefore, in one sense, unchanging, for humans to understand it, it must be communicated in terms of their language, culture and worldview.

On further thought, we realize the need to communicate the Gospel in the cultural systems of the people, but tend to see their old culture as evil, and in need of radical transformation. Since we are Christians, we assume that converts in other cultures should become like us in their theology, worship forms, ecclesiology and life style. But then Christianity is seen as a foreign religion, and the old religious ways do not disappear, they go underground and are practiced in secret.

As we study other cultures deeply, we begin to see the good in them, and to call for a radical, uncritical contextualization of the Gospel. We also realize that our own form of Christianity is culture bound, and often unbiblical. The result is theological relativism, a loss of absolutes, and of unity in the church.

As we relate to churches in different cultures, we come to see that the Gospel came to all of us from without, that our theologies and ecclesiologies are our attempts to understand it in our contexts. There are absolutes and universals in divine revelation, and these speak to all humans in all their contexts. We realize, too, that that revelation was given to humans through humans who lived in particular historical and sociocultural contexts.

In short, we affirm the truth of Scripture as divine revelation, given in human contexts, but communicating God's Word to us. We must not equate that Gospel with any human culture,

but we must also communicate it in human cultural forms so that they be hear and believe. And the Gospel is not simply information to be accepted as truth, it is a call to follow God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ. For most followers, this involves a transformation not only of their beliefs and practices, but also of their worldviews.

Converting Worldviews

Conversion on the cultural level should involve all three dimensions: beliefs, feelings and judgments. There must be some minimum knowledge of Jesus, and a desire to follow him. These must lead to a decision to follow him. Conversion is not simply holding an orthodox knowledge of Christ, or a love of him, but choosing to follow him. Often conversion has a minimum of knowledge or even desire and decision, but through careful discipling these can grow to maturity.

To be complete, conversion must involve all levels of culture. When we see Muslim converts, we first look at their behavior. Do they enjoy fellowship with fellow Christians. Do they study their Bibles, and worship sessions. In short, do they act like Christians. Transformed behavior is important in the process of conversion, because it is a sign of inner transformation, and a testimony to the world of that transformation. But behavior can also be falsified. People may act like Christians, and yet not have experienced a fundamental transformation of their allegiance.

On another level we often look for transformation in rituals. Are the young converts willing to be baptized and to take the Lord's Supper. Rituals are times when we give expression to our deepest beliefs, feelings and values, and participation in them is an even more public witness to inner transformations. But people can take part in rituals for wrong reasons. They may want to remain part of a community that converts, or seek favor with the missionary.

Below behavior and rituals is the conversion of beliefs. Can and do the new converts express their new faith in basic simple terms. Do they affirm the Lordship of Christ, the authority of Scriptures as divine revelation, and their asking God for his salvation? Here we may make the list long or short, but we seek to know what the seekers truly believe. But people can publically affirm their faith, but not truly experience a conversion in their inner beings. Or, more often, the conversion of their beliefs may place through conversion followed by a time of disciplining. We cannot assume that the belief systems of new converts are complete when they become followers of Jesus.

At the deepest level, conversion, to be complete and lasting, must transform worldviews. It is possible for a person to become a 'Christian' at all the higher levels, and still retain a sub-Christian 'worldview'. This is the case of Simon in Acts (Acts 8:9-24). He was converted and baptized, but still saw God's manifestations of power in terms of his old magical worldview. This power could be bought, learned and controlled by magicians who understood its formulas. He saw Peter as a super magician. Peter rebuked him and he repented. He had to experience not only a change in beliefs, but also a transformation in his worldview.

How can we help new converts as they wrestle with their encounter with Scriptures and the challenges it poses to their worldviews? This takes time and patience, and is a life long processes, both for the new converts and for the missionaries who are often more shaped by their modern worldviews than by a biblical worldview.

Phenomenology

The first step is to help Christian converts study their local culture and worldview phenomenologically. Here the local church leaders and missionary lead the congregation in

gathering and analyzing traditional beliefs and practices associated with issues that arise in the life of the church. It is important, here, not to pass judgment on the findings. If the leaders criticize the customary beliefs and practices, the people will not talk about them for fear of being condemned. Premature judgments often focus on the orthodoxy of the beliefs, not on the struggles the believers face. The result is a deep cognitive dissonance that remains unresolved in the minds of the believers between what they are expected to believe, and their old beliefs and practices which cannot simply be displaced. Old ways must be consciously dealt with and owned by the converts themselves, or the new ways become meaningless. Moreover, because the old ways are not adequately dealt with, they often go underground.

Ontology

The second step in converting worldviews is to help new believers to study the Scriptures related to the question at hand, to evaluate their own past beliefs in the light of their new biblical understanding, and to formulate new, more biblical ways of looking at reality. The gospel is not simply information to be communicated and accepted as truth. It is an invitation to which the people must respond. In the process it is not enough that the leaders be convinced about changes they think must be made. They may share their personal convictions and provide leadership, but they must allow the people to make the final decisions in evaluating their past worldviews. If the leaders make the decisions, they must become policemen who enforce them. If the people make the decisions corporately, there is more accountability, and less likelihood that the customs they reject will go underground.

To involve people in evaluating their own culture and worldview in the light of new truth draws upon their strength. They know their old culture better than the missionary, and are in a

better position to critique it, once they have biblical instruction. Moreover, to involve them is to help them grow spiritually by teaching them discernment, and by helping them to learn to apply scriptural teachings to their own lives. It puts into practice the priesthood of all believers in a hermeneutical community.

It is also important for missionaries from outside to study their own worldviews, for they use these in studying the Bible, and their interpretations are often shaped more by their culture than by the Scriptures.

A Christian community may respond to old worldview assumptions in different ways. Many they will keep, for these are not unbiblical. Others they will explicitly reject as unbecoming for Christians. The reasons for such rejection may not be apparent to outsiders who see little difference between what the people keep and what they reject, but the people know the hidden meanings and associations of their old beliefs. On the other hand, at some points the missionary may need to raise questions that the people have overlooked, for they may fail to see clearly their own worldview assumptions until these are pointed out. New Christians will also replace old assumptions with those drawn from Christian communities elsewhere, and so join the historical and international church.

What helps check this process of critical contextualization from leading us astray? First, the process takes the Bible seriously as divine revelation, and as the rule of life and faith. Second, it recognizes the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believers open to God's leading. Third, the church acts as a hermeneutical community, checking against individual interpretations of the Scriptures. This corporate nature of the church as a community of interpretation extends not only to the local gathering and church in every culture, but also to the

church around the world and in all ages. In a hermeneutical community, the role of the leaders is to mobilize all members in the community to participate in the study and decision making, not to make and enforce the decisions by themselves. They have expertise in some aspects of the process, but others do in other areas of life.

Missiology

The final step in worldview transformation is to help new believers live out their new decisions. Often challenges to worldviews arise when converts face critical decisions that force them to think about their new beliefs. Such situations call for immediate decision and response. It is important these be also used as times to reflect deeply on the worldview issues that underlie the problem at hand, and to stimulate long term discussions in the Christian community regarding its response to similar situations.

In this third step we must begin where people are and lead them to maturity in Christ through a careful discipling of their worldviews. This is a long process, and we must be patient and encouraging, slow to judge and quick to pick up the weak and faltering. People cannot jump from one worldview to another. There are times of radical worldview shifts, but most often worldview transformations are processes of thinking and rethinking key worldview themes. People begin with the worldviews they have. Over time they need to examine and transform them. Moreover, it is important not only that the worldviews of individuals be converted, but also that the worldview shared by the community also be transformed.

Worldviews and Muslim Ministries

There are many worldview issues involved in Muslim ministries. These vary from country to country, and religious community to religious community. Current discussions often touch on worldview transformations, particularly as these relate to orthodox Islam, such as the nature of God, of Jesus, of human relationships to God, of the cross and salvation, and of eternal destiny. We need also to examine the worldview assumptions of folk Muslims, such as their beliefs in spirits, dreams, *baraka*, *jinn*, and evil eye. A systematic analysis of the worldviews underlying these beliefs can help us understand many of the issues we wrestle with.

We need also to examine the worldview assumptions we bring with us when we debate critical issues in Muslim ministries, such as what does it mean to become a 'believer,' how should believers relate to one another and the society around them, and what is the nature of the church. We need to examine our assumptions underlying issues such as 'whole ministries,' 'spiritual warfare,' 'people movements,' and 'Kingdom of God.'

Finally, we need to seek to embody the Gospel in new social and cultural contexts without losing its message and power. If we over-contextualize the Gospel, we lose it. If we under-contextualize it, we fail to communicate the Gospel and make it captive to foreign contexts, and, in so doing, also lose it. Effective long term ministries among Muslims need to take into account not only the personal and social dimensions of becoming a follower of Jesus Christ, but also the cultural and worldview transformations that need to take place as converts and churches grow in Christian faith.