

Muslims turning to Christ - a global phenomenon



An unprecedented number of Muslims are becoming Christians. David Garrison, who has spent years researching the phenomenon, shares his findings.

Ten-year-old Nadia wasn't surprised when her father signed her marriage contract, nor when she had to move in with her 20-year-old husband two years later. Nadia's experience is not unusual in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It also wasn't out of the ordinary when her husband became an opium addict (Iran has the highest rate of drug addiction in the world). Two of Nadia's brothers also succumbed to drugs. One was sentenced to prison for killing a man in a drug-related dispute, the other committed suicide. One day Nadia's cousin who had recently become a Christian quietly gave her a New Testament in the Persian language.

Nadia prayed, 'Allah, show me your truth.' As she read it, Nadia said, 'I felt my heart open like an old door. Inside I felt very warm and thirsty. It was like drinking cool water, and I wanted to drink it all.'

'From that time on,' Nadia recalls, 'Jesus' work started in me. It was a strange happiness like nothing I'd ever known.' Within a week she'd led her husband and three children to faith in Jesus.

The good news gets better. What Nadia experienced has been happening to thousands of other men and women throughout Iran (see *Real Life*, p.22), and across much of the Muslim world.

Collecting testimonies

Five years ago, I began an investigation into increasing reports of Muslim movements to faith in Christ. (I defined a movement of Muslims to Christ to be at least 100 new churches started or 1000 baptised believers, all of whom have come to Christ over the past two decades.) I wanted to understand how and why entire communities were not only turning to faith, but being baptised - an act of confessional obedience that could earn them the death penalty under Islamic law.

My survey took almost three years and led me into every corner of the Muslim world. I travelled more than a quarter-million miles, from West Africa to the Indonesian islands. In the process, I visited 44 movements, each with more than 1,000 Muslim-background

believers in Jesus Christ who had been baptised as a defiant act of their new-found faith. With the help of dozens of on-the-ground collaborators, I was able to gather more than 1,000 interviews with these courageous men and women.

Akbar al-Masih

I met Akbar al-Masih in the crowded Pakistani city of Rawalpindi. Akbar was a Muslim-background believer from Afghanistan. Like many Pushtun people, Akbar's life had been torn apart by war. After the 2012 US invasion, Akbar joined millions of refugees who streamed into Pakistani slums and refugee camps. It was in Pakistan that Akbar met a Christian family who disciplined him. I asked Akbar to tell me how he had come to faith in Jesus.

'My name at birth was Muhammad Akbar, which means 'Muhammad is the Greatest'. Between the wars, I was in an open country looking for a job. One day I came upon a cinema showing a movie about the life of the prophet Isa (Jesus). I watched the movie alone, and learned many things that I did not know. I saw how they beat Jesus and nailed him to a cross. I said to myself, 'Now Isa will call down fire from heaven to destroy them!'

'Instead, Isa looked down at them with compassion, and said, 'Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing.'

'In my heart I said, 'That is for me.' That is when I became a follower of Isa, and changed my name to Akbar al-Masih (the Messiah is the Greatest).'

The core question, from among a list of things I asked them, was, 'What did God use to bring you to faith in Jesus Christ? Tell me your story.' Christmas day found me in the Horn of Africa seated on the floor with 20 leaders from an ancient Muslim community. I listened in disbelief as they told me of their discovery that Isa al-Masih (Jesus Christ) was God among us; the only way of salvation. 'C'mon,' I said incredulously, 'how many of you have been baptised?' I knew that this act of commitment separated casual fans of Jesus from actual followers. To my amazement, 19 of the 20 leaders raised their hands. One of them laughed and pointed to the lone unraised hand: 'He will be baptised next week.'

The next day a sheikh named Hasan told me his story. 'An African evangelist gave me an Injil (New Testament) in the Arabic language. Because the Injil was in Arabic, God's language, I knew that it must be true, so I began to read it.' That night Hasan had a dream. 'I saw a tall minaret. I was disturbed to see a man with an axe chopping the minaret down. When I looked closer, I saw that the man...was me!'

The shock of the dream awakened the sheikh in a panic. 'I had the same dream three times,' he said. 'The next day, I found the evangelist who had given me the Injil. 'What does this dream mean?' I demanded. He looked at me and smiled. 'You will win many sheikhs to faith in Jesus Christ.'

Today, Sheikh Hasan travels from village to village, speaking to sheikhs, who are leaders of the Islamic community. 'So far,' he told me, 'I have led 400 sheikhs to faith in Jesus Christ.'

A unique movement

As a Church historian, I needed to know if what is happening today was unique, or if it was something that had occurred periodically in the 14 centuries since Islam began. What I discovered was that the flow from one religion to the other has been almost entirely from Christianity into Islam. So what we're seeing today in the Muslim world truly is unique.

Over the course of those 14 centuries, tens of millions of Christians have been swallowed up into the Muslim world. Most of the combatants that populate such groups as ISIS, al-Qaeda and Hamas all had ancestors who came from the very heart of Christendom.

There were only five movements of Muslims to Christianity prior to the 20th century. But in just the first 12 years of the 21st century, we can document 69 movements of Muslims to faith and baptism in Christ Jesus. Several of these contemporary

movements number in the tens of thousands.

What is happening in the Muslim world in our day that is prompting so many to leave Islam to embrace, at the risk of death, a new life in Jesus Christ?

Many point out how the Muslim world today is churning. Shi'ites and Sunnis, Arabs and Persians, extremists and moderates, militants and pacifists, unemployed youth and disenchanting women all give evidence to a dissatisfaction with the unfulfilled promise of Islam. Tens of thousands of Muslims are expressing their displeasure by migrating to the West, others foment movements within their own countries through what has been termed the Arab Spring. But violence and turmoil are not new to the Muslim world. Their history is full of it. What is different today?

Amaal

Amaal was a 23-year old Arab Muslim girl with a smile that could light up a room. Her friendship with a young Christian family led her to faith in Jesus Christ.

Amaal immediately shared her new faith with her mother. Afterwards Amaal's mother said, "I should kill you for this." Amaal was stunned.

Amaal left home and found a job in a resort hotel, only to have her boss attempt to blackmail her in exchange for sexual favors, prompting her to flee again.

Some years later I found Amal hiding in the home of a kind Muslim couple. The next day, I gave Amaal a New Testament and wondered what I could share with this sister whose faith had cost her so much.

I didn't have to wonder long. "Listen to this," Amaal said,

"Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you.... When they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (Matt. 10:17-20)

Amaal's eyes glistened with tears. "He knew," she exclaimed, "Jesus knew!" For Amaal, it was enough. Jesus knew where she was, what she would encounter, and that He would always be with her.

For centuries, Christians have either fought against Muslim armies ? whether Arab or Ottoman ? or avoided contact with Muslim populations altogether. Even during the era of Western colonial expansion, missionaries were often pressured to avoid stirring potential conflict with Muslims, and instructed instead to take their gospel message to less belligerent communities.

It wasn't until the late 20th century, just as the West was disengaging its colonial empires, that Christian missionaries began turning their attention to the Muslim world. This new engagement included the translation of the gospel message into local Muslim languages and dialects. Finding that many Muslims were illiterate in their own language, missionaries forged ahead with non-literate means of communicating the gospel. They produced video products, such as the Jesus film, and orality-based resources such as audio Bibles and Bible story sets.

These colloquial translations received an exponential boost with the arrival of video cassettes, radio, satellite television, and most recently the Internet. And then there was prayer.

Prayers answered

Twenty-three years ago, a small band of Christians began praying for Muslims and with Muslims during the Islamic month of

Ramadan. Muslims pray and fast for 30 days, often asking Allah to speak to them during this time. Today, the 30 Days Prayer movement (30daysprayer.com) counts hundreds of thousands of faithful Christian prayer warriors who cry out to God on behalf of Islam's 1.7 billion adherents, asking God to reveal to them his truth. Is it a coincidence that 82% of all the Muslim movements to Christ in history have occurred during these same 23 years? The prayers of God's people are not in vain.

What we're seeing today in the Muslim world truly is unique

Other factors God has used to bring about today's Muslim movements were less intuitive, yet equally prominent in the testimonies of Muslims coming to faith in Christ. These counterintuitive factors were found within Islam itself. Muslim converts spoke of their abhorrence of the violence that permeated their communities. Others contrasted the life of Muhammad with that of Jesus, finding in Jesus one who reflected an ideal that resonated deep within their heart. Perhaps most surprising in these testimonies was the role of the Koran itself.

Though the Koran possesses an almost magical power and allure for Muslims, it remains a virtually unintelligible book, shrouded in eighth-century Arabic, a language that few understand. In 1982, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia began an ambitious project to translate the Koran into all the languages of the world. The now deceased king would be horrified to learn how Muslims around the world point to their reading of the Koran in their own language as a key reason for leaving Islam.

Amid is a Muslim-background Christian I met in South Asia. He said, 'Once I read the Koran in my own language I realised I was lost.' Amid discovered that the Koran had no plan of salvation within it. 'No titles of honour for Muhammad in the Koran, but 23 honourable titles that Allah gave to Isa [Jesus]. I saw that Muhammad is dead, but Isa is alive in heaven with Allah now. Muhammad is not coming again, but Isa will come again at the last judgement. Only four times does the Koran speak of Muhammad, and yet 97 times it talks about Isa. Muhammad is not a saviour, but Isa's very name means 'saviour.' Muhammad is only a messenger, but Isa is called Ruhullah, the Spirit of Allah.'

These discoveries led Amid, and many other Muslims, to read the New Testament and discover Jesus for themselves. This unexpected pathway from Koran to the gospel is occurring throughout the Muslim world.

Our role]

So how can we participate in this unprecedented turning of Muslims to faith in Christ? My research revealed some practical steps we can take and some things we should not do.

Firstly, Christians must combat social injustice. As a powerful voice for protest that appeals to disenfranchised people, Islam thrives in an environment of social injustice. It is for this reason that Islam has gained a foothold in Western minority communities that most often feel the sting of racial and social injustice. Another positive practical step we can take to join in today's movements of Muslims to Christ is to pray. Whether it is joining the powerful 30 Days of Prayer for the Muslim World, or simply whispering a prayer for Muslims whenever we see some tragedy reported on our news networks, when we pray we are advancing Christ's kingdom among Muslims. We must also support effective gospel outreach to Muslims. Despite the violence and upheaval that we see in many corners of the Muslim world today, we must not retreat from our proclamation of the gospel message. Now, more than ever, is the day of salvation for Muslims, and we must make every effort to offer Muslims an alternative to the grim realities that they face every day.

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Finally, we can celebrate the fact that God is bringing the Muslim world to our doors. Rather than fearing or opposing Muslims who have come to our cities and towns, we can rejoice at the opportunity to minister to them in Jesus' name, and share with them the reason for the hope we have within us.

