

## Conversion to Christ as Spiritual Migration

### ABSTRACT

Metaphors have a powerful way of shaping our understanding, and sometimes it can be very helpful to introduce new ones into our conversations about the frontiers of mission. In this paper I will contend that using human migration as a metaphor for conversion offers us new and important insights about what happens when Muslims turn to Christ.

There are a few issues in particular that this lens brings into focus. Human migration theory helps us realize that there are two primary categories of factors involved in Muslim conversions, those that “push” them away from Islam, and those that “pull” them to Christ. Migration theory also points out that most migrants don’t simply go from “point A to B” in some kind of straight line. Conversion for many Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) is much more like a series of steps, and those steps are not always linear, or clearly sequential. Also, using the analog of human migration opens our understanding to some of the collateral issues of Muslim conversions to Christ.

### KEY WORDS

Conversion factors, metaphor, human migration theory, Muslim Background Believers (MBBs).

## Introduction

Just as with all spiritual realities, there are many different ways we can express what happens when someone turns to Christ. In Evangelical Christian circles we tend to prefer terms like “born again:

Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3 ESV).<sup>1</sup>

Or someone being “saved,” like the Philippian jailer:

Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:30-31).

Both of these are truly beautiful word pictures, but I fear that we have failed to recognize that they paint *incomplete* images. Just as God is truly our Father, the still Bible uses a multitude of other terms and

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted

concepts to express who he is; Creator, king, righteous judge, Shepherd, etc. If we limited ourselves to the term Father we would have a woefully poor theology. In the same way, our theology of conversion suffers if we limit our thinking about it to only a few of the many possible terms or conceptualization available.

Furthermore, like many words that are part of our Christian vocabulary, the common words for conversion have come to be loaded with unrecognized, and often unintended, theological frameworks. For example, our word choice of “born again” tends to project the idea that coming to Christ is an event, a singular moment in time that can be clearly documented with date/time stamp, such as the day and time a baby is born. This can produce a whole circus of questionable church practices such as expecting people to be able to testify of the exact moment of their conversion as a prerequisite to baptism or ordination.

Likewise, how should we understand what happened in the lives of Peter, John, or any of the other disciples? At what moment in time were they “born again”? Was it at their baptism, or on Resurrection Sunday in the upper room, or perhaps some other moment? We have to be careful because our choice of a particular “moment” has theological implications.

Moreover, what about a man that eventually became a coworker of Paul, the Jewish teacher Apollos:

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately (Acts 18:24-26).

The story of Apollos is exceedingly murky. The text says he “taught accurately the things concerning Jesus,” but his teaching, and presumably his personal experience, seems to have been based on nothing more than the message of John the Baptist, which was certainly lacking core gospel elements such as the cross and resurrection. At what moment in time was he saved?

All this serves to remind us that turning to Christ is a much more complicated picture than our words sometimes express. While this may be only a minor problem when communicating with other Christians, it can be a huge obstacle on the frontiers of mission because the terms we use build the mental frameworks in which we conduct our ministry.

For example, if I am thinking exclusively in terms of my Muslim friend be “born again,” with its imagery of a painful, dramatic arrival, I might miss signs that he is already following the example of the Jews in Berea in Acts 17 who did not suddenly convert, but who appear to have slowly come to believe in Jesus as they carefully examined the Scriptures (Acts 17:10-12). In fact, when we frame salvation as a moment in time, we might actually be discouraging our Muslim friends from following the teachings of Jesus who said:

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? (Lk 14:28).

Therefore, those of us called to reach people within the house of Islam need to develop more robust ways of thinking about how Muslims encounter and come to embrace Christ. Accordingly, in this article I want to explore a different way to think about conversion that will help us move away from the time/date mentality and towards a richer understanding of conversion. We might wonder if a Muslim’s experience of turning to Jesus might be better understood through similarities to the experience of Abram leaving Ur of the Chaldeans, or that of Israel as they escaped Egyptian bondage? In other words, I believe conversion on the frontier of mission is better understood as people moving from one spiritual homeland to another. Therefore, in this paper I will develop the concept of human migration as a different, and very helpful framework for thinking about a Muslim’s conversion to Christ.

But before we can get to that point, I want to reach into the biblical world to build a case for why it is appropriate to use such a conceptual bridge, or what is more commonly known as a metaphor or analogy, rather than other, more familiar terms that are part of our normal Christian lexicon.

### **Metaphorical Reasoning**

The use of metaphors has always been one of the ways God helped people understand spiritual realities. Whether we look at Abram being told that he would have descendants like the stars of the heavens (Gen 15:5), Isaiah calling Israel God's vineyard (chapter 5), or Peter describing the church as "a royal priesthood," the Bible is filled with metaphoric reasoning. Furthermore, in the gospels the use of metaphor explodes, with our Lord Jesus coming across as a "power user" of this rhetorical device. Over and over he said things such as "The kingdom of heaven is like..." thus inviting his hearers to think about what they did not understand, the kingdom of heaven, by comparing it to something they did understand, like a field or a wedding. This is a perfect expression of the use of metaphor as a reasoning device, and it would seem that Jesus used this linguistic structure more than any other. His example alone should be enough to encourage us to use this form of reasoning more often than we do in the modern Evangelical Church. However, for the purposes of this article, it is a good idea to go deeper still in order to understand how metaphorical reasoning functions.

Metaphors and analogies work so well because they structure our understanding through a simple comparison of two objects or ideas which are similar in one way or another. Metaphorical reasoning uses these similarities to build what we might call conceptual bridges, connecting something that is familiar, concrete, and easily understood to something that is more abstract or esoteric.

Although the use of analogies is not so common in the West today, down through history, metaphorical reasoning has played an important, if sometimes mysterious, role in philosophical, legal, and even scientific problem-solving (Barta, 2019). This form of logic is particularly helpful when we are trying to

understand something that cannot be directly observed; thus we would argue that metaphorical reasoning is a near perfect fit for thinking about the changes wrought in the human heart at conversion.

Drawing on the work of well-known qualitative researchers Miles and Huberman, we find that metaphors, parables, and other forms of analogy, function in human communication as “decentering devices.” That is, they help us step back from presuppositions we already hold and ask important questions like “What is really going on here?” and “What is this telling me about the big picture?” (1994, pg. 252). This is particularly important when discussing phenomenon with which we are overly familiar. Thus the “decentering” aspect of using migration as an analogy for conversion can prove quite useful for those of us who have grown up thinking exclusively through more common Christian frameworks. Furthermore, Miles and Huberman also point out that metaphoric reasoning allows us to go beyond simple description and move up to a more inferential level of thought, helping us see the significance of facts and find the meaning in them that might otherwise be hidden (*ibid*). Therefore, when we use a new metaphor to think about a well-known topic we are more likely to see new dimensions of significance and meaning in what was previously routine and overly familiar.

In light of the decentering power of using a new metaphor, I believe the extended allegory of “spiritual migration” can help us move toward a deeper understanding of what happens as Muslims are delivered out of the kingdom of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God’s beloved son (Col 1:13). While there are several aspects of human migration that could offer us spiritual insights via metaphoric reasoning; however, in this article we will primarily explore only two: the reasons people migrate and the path those migrations often take. There is one other small issue that we must address before entering our topic proper.

### **What Makes a Factor Valid**

As many of my readers know from personal experience, the act of leaving one’s homeland and moving to a foreign land is emotionally and physically demanding. It is not something that one undertakes without

strong motivation. In the same way, coming to Christ from a Muslim also requires compelling reasons due to the many obstacles faced along that path. For those who, like myself, who grew up in a Christian home, it is very difficult to grasp the intensity of the difficulties which are likely to characterize the experience for them. Therefore, it is critically important that we understand what motivates a Muslim to embark on such an arduous journey. But before we can conduct an objective and robust examination of these factors, I believe there is a common Evangelical presupposition that needs to be challenged.

Many Christians assume that if a person has a true conversion, the reasons that moved them were “spiritual” or we might say theological. People whose conversion is closely connected to practical reasons or physical realities are often viewed with suspicion. Of course missionaries must see to discern the sincerity of a person’s conversion, I fear that much of our skepticism is rooted in a false dichotomy of human nature. Although I have never heard it explicitly taught, the Evangelical missions community often acts as if only spiritual things effect the spiritual man, and only physical things impact the physical man. However, once we bring that idea out into the light, we quickly see its error because there is no solid scriptural support for such a sharp separation of the spiritual and physical sides of man. The things that affect humans physically also impact them spiritually (and perhaps *vice versa*). Thus, observable social factors can lead Muslims to make very real spiritual changes just as surely as the more “spiritual” things in their lives do.

And a brief clarification. This article is not about ministry to migrants *per se*. The insights here are certainly applicable to them, but that is not the focus of the article. I am using the term purely as a vehicle for metaphorical reasoning. Now on to our topic. Being spiritually pushed and pulled.

When social scientists consider human migration, one of the first taxonomies they develop is to classify the reasons people move, or migration factors, into those which “push” people to leave where they currently live and those which “pull” them toward a new a destination. Some examples of “push factors” are: famine, war, or poverty; whereas “Pull factors” include things such as: better jobs, good schools, or

political freedom. In most cases, if not all, people are motivated by a combination of both kinds of factors—some from the “push” category and some from the “pull” (Fouberg, Murphy, and de Blij, 2015, pp. 68-73).

Since most of the time we in the Evangelical mission community focus on factors that draw someone to Christ, or what we are calling “pull” factors, it may be beneficial to start at the opposite end of the concept.

### *Push Factors*

Over the past 20 years I have interviewed more than one hundred Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) for various research projects. I have also have had countless informal conversations MBB friends and heard them describe how they found new life in Christ. Many. Many times I have heard them talk about what we are calling push factors. But perhaps the clearest description imaginable came from an old Uzbek man I interviewed for my doctoral work in Central Asia as he talked about an incident that happened at the mosque one afternoon. He saw his fellow Muslim men spitting chewing tobacco into the drinking water flowing to a village:

I was very angry but couldn't say anything because there were several of them... that kind of attitude made me wonder, 'Why do believers like them do that?' They do it because they say, 'If you bring offerings, it removes God's anger from you.' So, if you bring offerings, you can do anything; it's sort of like bribing God. So, in the Islamic world people do not change, but they feel free to do whatever because all they need to do is bring offering and they will be released from their sin. So they remain sinful and never change. That's their main principle. They felt free to spit into water that others drink. All of them did! That really disgusted me and pushed me away from Islam" [emphasis added to reflect voice]<sup>2</sup>.

This MBB clearly articulated what I have heard many others imply, that certain behaviors in their Muslim society caused them to lose interest in the religion handed down from their forefathers. In this case, it was an obvious disregard for the health and wellbeing of others which he recognized was rooted in the

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with author, 2012.

theological framework of local islam<sup>3</sup>. Although attraction to the Church was later part of this man's story, this was a factor that clearly pushed a 70-year-old man away from Islam. There are many potential push factors, too many for an exhaustive list, but we will explore a few examples.

One common push factor is religious nominalism and hypocrisy because people are often repulsed when religion is obviously little more than a social mask. Many MBBs I have spoken with remember the pain of hypocrisy in their family home:

My mom did all responsibility for the family because my father was alcoholic actually. He was a drunk and we did not have peace in our home...I remember when I went to school the first time. My mom brought me to the school and said 'wait for your father when all your lessons will be finished. Wait for father and he will pick you up.' But I was the last in the class. Nobody came to take me from the school. I went home by myself... I remember this feeling still. I was so angry, like nobody could come to take me... when I was closer to my house I heard my father's voice... he opened the door and he was drunk. It was so painful to me.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, this kind of "push" does not always turn someone to Christ. Sometimes this pushes them completely out of all religion into Atheism or Agnosticism.

As a brief aside, we must not forget that the push factor of hypocrisy cuts both ways. In situations where *Christian* nominalism exists side by side with Islam, people can be pushed out of the church into the waiting arms of the Muslim community. Or as a Ugandan pastor once told me, "I have learned that the best 'evangelistic' activity in my area is to strengthen the church so young people are not falling away to Islam, because they have not seen the best examples in their homes."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I believe Abdul el-Zien was the first to use islam with a lowercase "i" to differentiate between orthodox Islam and local expressions of the same. See his article, "Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam." *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Vol. 6, pp. 227-254. 1977.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with author, 2013

<sup>5</sup> Interview with author, 2017.

Another related push factor can sometimes be seen Orthodox Islam itself. Many MBBs report that the more they learned about their religion, the less they wanted to follow its path. Sometimes it was the harshness of Allah in the Qur'an, other times it was the theological implications of Muhammad's revelations that pushed them away. One man's story is a particularly good illustration of this.

He was an Islamic law scholar and judge. Although he had studied Sharia for many years, he found himself repulsed by what he found as he researched the hadiths in order to make one particular ruling. He was called upon to render a judgment in the torrid case of a Muslim who raped his non-Muslim neighbor's wife:

But as I studied the related hadiths, I realized that this man was guiltless according to Sharia. He was in a long-standing conflict with this neighbor, so taking her was considered a "spoil of war." I could not believe this! How could this be right? How could this be the just in the eyes of an Almighty God?<sup>6</sup>

This repulsive nature of what he was required to rule, on the basis of Islamic law, was simply more than this honest and sensitive man could take. It launched him on a slow journey, lasting more than 10 years, by which he came to know Christ.

A final push factor that I wish to explore is when Muslims feel their existential questions are left unanswered by the Islam they know. Sometimes these questions made Allah seem distant:

We always believed that there is God but we thought he was very far away and we were not sure if He heard us or not. I always wondered about that. I always asked my Mom those questions.<sup>7</sup>

Even as some become more serious about their Islamic faith, Allah was far away:

I would get depressed because I could not please God. So gradually I became disappointed because I felt like Allah was far away, that he didn't care about me, so he

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with author, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with author, 2013.

intentionally created all these hard laws that were impossible to observe... Over time I became disappointed in Islam<sup>8</sup>.

And then there are the existential questions that come from the hardships of life. One woman shared:

I remember when I got married, it was a bad marriage... I remember [asking God] ‘Why is my life so difficult? Why do I have to suffer all the time? Why did you even create us, people?’ Because my first husband was a drug addict and it was very hard.<sup>9</sup>

These stories all fit the observations of Henri Gooren who theorized that people become religious seekers when they become dissatisfied with the meanings generated by their natal religion (2007, p. 339). This is not surprising since one of the universal expectations that people have about religion is that it will answer their really important questions of life. These questions are not necessarily new ones, but due to events in the person’s life they have taken on a perhaps renewed importance. And if at such a “crisis point” they encounter other possible explanations, other ways of making sense of life, then they are likely to ‘migrate’ towards those.

This is where we begin to touch on the “pull” factors of conversion. Obviously, someone cannot convert to a faith they know nothing about, just as they cannot migrate to a place they do not know exists. Thus we can say that as one is “pushed” from their natal religion, they must also feel the pull to something else. However, we must remember that the factors which motivate people to physically migrate are complex and intertwined, therefore, we should expect the same of “spiritual migration.” People themselves are often unsure of the individual factors that are motivating them (Datta 2004). That is why human geographers always speak of “push-pull” factors in one breath. Consequently, we must be careful not to over-dissect the push factors in isolation, so we should quickly move on to those that “pull” people toward faith in Christ.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with author, 2012.

### *Pull Factors*

I find that most Evangelical Christians are more comfortable once we begin to discuss things that draw or pull people towards Christ, or what could be called “pull factors.”<sup>10</sup> And when people physically migrate, it is natural and expected that they are drawn toward places which they believe are better in some way. It may be more politically stable, offer better economic options, or simply appear to be safer. They move in the hope of something better than what they had before. Furthermore, the improvement must appear to be very significant because the cost of migration is high. In physical migration it is the cost of leaving everything you know, and perhaps paying vast sums of money for transport or even to smugglers. In the spiritual migration from Islam to Christ, believers pay not only the cost of leaving the familiar, but also it they often pay with the disapproval, or even persecution, of family and community.

In the seminal work, *Acts of Faith*, Stark and Finke spend a great deal of time exploring the idea of the costs associated with religion, particularly of changing religions. They point out that people are rational beings, thus they attempt to make choices, including those about whatever costs are associated with changing their religion (2000, p. 86). In other words, whenever a certain factor pulls a Muslim toward Christ, that factor represents something they subjectively feel is worth the price. This is something we should keep in mind as we consider the various pull factors below, because whether or not we consider them significant, many Muslims view these things as valuable enough that they would pay a dear price to obtain them.

One of the pull factors that often comes up in interviews is the good reputation of Christians. This can come from several different directions. Sometimes it is the godly lives of missionaries or other evangelistic Christians with whom a Muslim has contact:

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<sup>10</sup> I believe this has to do with what Christians rightly perceive as the superiority of our faith as compared to Islam. However, a word of caution is in order here. Proclaiming the superiority of Christ’s self-sacrifice over all other religious systems must not sink down to a contest of religions, or a debate over whose “prophet is better.”

We always thought well of [Russian] Baptist believers. We liked that fact that they always told the truth. Not Orthodox Christians but Baptists. We always respected them.<sup>11</sup>

However, an even more powerful draw seems to be the godly lives of Muslims who had already converted to Christ:

It was in 1994. That's when I first heard about Jesus and came to Him. I came with a friend. It was a Pentecostal church in Bishkek. I really liked it, I felt welcomed there. Local Kyrgyz believers were very warm and called me 'brother'. I thought, 'wow, they are very welcoming!'<sup>12</sup>

The witness of a changed life is especially powerful when it is one of your own family members:

Every time he [husband] came home drunk I would scold and curse him both in Russian and in Uyghur. I cursed so badly... The day I came to Jesus, He also healed my tongue. I stopped using that dirty language. My oldest daughter saw that change and she said after two weeks, 'Mom, can I come to that group with you?' I said, 'Why?' She said, 'Well, it must be a very good place. You have stopped cursing!'<sup>13</sup>

Or this man, who converted in his 60s, and only after more than ten years of opposing his wife, who converted first:

The greatest testimony to me was my wife. She was changing right in front of me. She became very obedient. She became gentle, very different. I thought, 'Maybe she is pretending so that I would come to this Russian God?' But God began to change me.'<sup>14</sup>

Lofland and Stark called this the draw of "positive deviant behavior" (1965). That is, in the eyes of the local community, a former Muslim who now professes Christ is a social deviant<sup>15</sup>, socially their behavior

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with author, 2012

<sup>12</sup> Interview with author, 2013

<sup>13</sup> Interview with author, 2011

<sup>14</sup> Interview with author, 2011

<sup>15</sup> It could be argued that insider movements overcome this problem. However, a truly transformed life will always manifest changes that set the person apart from the brokenness of their society. And in collectivist societies *any*

deviates from expected norms, and specifically in ways that are expected to be of ill repute. Therefore, the influence of their good behavior is even more significant precisely because local expectations are that social deviants act the opposite. Yet as new creations in Christ, they exemplify the positive changes that the gospel brings into the human heart. One study participant seemed to intuitively understand this:

I always say that we need to be careful because [the] Islamic spirit is very strong here. People think God is very far away and they can come to Him through rituals, Namaz, etc. So I give them information about the living God little by little. They observe how I live, they see my children, they say, ‘Your children never say bad words; they never fight, they are very obedient’. So they see the character of Jesus in my family. It makes me very happy; it’s like a letter to them.<sup>16</sup>

Another pull factor which has been a common theme of conversations with MBBs over the years is that of the supernatural, including dreams, visions, physical healings, as well as other supernatural encounters that are harder to classify. While each convert’s story is unique, the commonality of this pull factor is that in some way or another, God became interrupted their life in a way that was both supernatural and undeniable.

Of the varied dimensions to this constellation, the dreams and visions are perhaps the ones that modern Westerners, including missionaries, struggle the most to understand. Yet they stand at or near the top of the list when you discuss the supernatural with Muslims who have turned to Christ. Many stories could be told, a couple will have to suffice:

My niece gave me the Injil, and I was very interested to read it. But each time I tried, I soon felt a strange presence in the room, as if someone had walked it. This scared me and so I put the book up on a shelf. Finally, I pulled it down and started to read it strongly, quickly going through many chapters. Then, once again I felt that same presence. I look up and there was a man in a white robe standing near me. He spoke and said, “You know

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departure from social norms is considered deviant, thus the perception of social deviance will always play some role on the frontiers of mission.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with author, 2013.

who I am. Why won't you believe in me?" I knew it was Isa, so I immediately fell on my face and said, yes, yes, I do believe in you!<sup>17</sup>

Another story came from a MBB who previously was in prison for petty theft:

Not long after I got to prison, I had a dream. It was just like it was real life; it still feels real to me. I was standing there, watching this huge chasm, and people were being thrown into it. They were screaming, and it was horrible. I knew that they were being thrown into hell. Then I watched this one man being thrown in, but suddenly, *Isa* caught him as he was falling and pulled him to himself then tossed him up into the sky, and the man went to heaven.

I knew this man was *Isa*, I don't know how, but I did. He was wearing a white robe and a turban. I just stood there and watched him grab people who were falling into hell, and he was saving them. Each one, pulling them to himself and then tossing them into heaven. I remember marveling, "How powerful he is to save them! What a wonderful savior *Isa* is! He is so strong he saves them from hell"<sup>18</sup>.

We could not hope for a more graphic and powerful illustration of an impactful dream, nor one that gives real meaning to the word Savior!

Rick Kronk has documented and sought to explain this complex set of phenomena in his excellent book, *Dreams and Visions: Muslims Miraculous Journey to Jesus*. He asserts that Muslims are culturally prepared to respond to these supernatural encounters in a way that modern Western people are not:

Thus, revelation, and its common vehicle dreams and visions, are inseparably united in the worldview of Islam... In contrast to Western thought, which has historically given little credence to the unconscious, Muslims are fully aware of and engaged in a daily experience that is not only open to, but depends upon supernatural encounters such as occur in dreams and visions (2010, p. 67).

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with author, 2015

<sup>18</sup> Interview with author, 2013

Dreams, and their daytime equivalent—visions, are a deep and significant part of the Islamic worldview and theology because Muhammad received his supposed revelations in this manner. Also, some of the hadith collections advise about their important role in life:

That will be because the Prophethood and its effects will be so far away in time, so the believers will be given some compensation in the form of dreams which will bring them some good news or will help them to be patient and steadfast in their faith. (al-Bukhaari, 6499; Muslim, 4200)

Also, we must not think that supernatural pull factors are simply the result of Pentecostal and Charismatic influence in mission. The majority of the many supernatural pull factor stories I have heard were from people who had not encountered *any* Christian witness prior to their encounter. Furthermore, in writing about the early centuries of the Christian era, Lamin Sanneh says, “Visions, dreams, ecstasy, exorcism, and healings featured prominently in the mission of Christianity for many centuries.” (2008, p. 59). So while this type of experience may seem to be a strange “pull factor” to us as Evangelicals, perhaps it is a sign that Christian expression on the frontiers is returning to its roots.

And although we should rightly celebrate the Lord using these supernatural means to pull Muslims toward himself, it is important to always remember that dreams or visions do not bring a complete witness in and of themselves. This supernatural pull factor is incomplete without someone or something bearing witness of the gospel. It might be a person, it might be a copy of the Bible, it could even be a gospel recording or video of some kind. But in one way or another the dream or vision must be accompanied by human participation.

Since discussions about the nature of the transmission of the gospel are somewhat doctrinal in nature, I am uncomfortable illustrating this concept with personal stories from MBBs, although I have heard many that would fit. Therefore, it is better to stick to biblical support for such ideas. And there is no better illustration of the idea that dreams and visions are incomplete by themselves than the story of the gospel

coming to the household of Cornelius, detailed in Acts chapter 10. In this story there are two amazing visionary encounters, but it is the first one that is of most directly connected to our topic:

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter." He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." (Acts 10:1-6)

Here a pagan, but God-fearing, man has a powerful encounter with an angel of God. Nevertheless, his vision only opened the door and prepared his heart for what Peter would later say in person. This perspective helps us keep balance. We can recognize that supernatural encounters like dreams and visions are a very real pull factor in Muslim conversions to Christ, and at the same time stay rooted to the biblical truth that it is humans who God has ordained to share the gospel.

There are many other possible pull factors, but these give some idea of how they function. Of course, the matter of push or pull factors is only one way that conversion is analogous to human migration studies. Next we will turn our attention to a different dimension of the metaphor.

### **Conversion as Non-linear Movement**

In the past, evangelicals almost universally imagined conversion as an event, probably because of the prominent place Saul's "Damascus road" experience plays in our theology. This has changed some in recent years, but conversion as a singular moment continues to shadow mission thinking. And this has an interesting parallel in academia. For example, a common construction of conversion found in social science literature is that of religious "switching" (Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Hefner 1998). In this view, a person simply goes from one position to another, from one religion to another. They may even "switch back" to their former religion (Hefner 1998). And while they sometimes include complex models with multiple stages or steps, the picture is still more or less a straight line of movement toward a fixed goal, the new faith.

But have we ever stopped to consider that perhaps people don't always know what their final destination is when they start down the path we call conversion? What if the line twists and turns in ways they do not even understand themselves? I believe it can be helpful to think of conversion as a "movement through metaphysical space" because many of the former Muslims I have spoken to painted pictures of their conversion that were much closer to a complicated journey rather than to a decision. And it is here, in the idea of conversion as a complicated movement, where a more nuanced understanding of conversion can be derived from the analogy with human migration.

When people migrate from their homelands, it is often a long and circuitous process. They may first move from their village to the capital city, then off to a city in a near-by country. And since the first step is often the hardest, it may even take them two or three tries to "make it" in the first new location, so that they bounce back and forth a few times. Specialists in human geography sometimes use the term "step migration" to capture the reality of this process (Conway, 1980). However, even this term can be deceptive. Steps imply order and plan, something that may be partly or even completely lacking when a migrant sets out to leave their homeland. In fact, what we understand as their final destination is often only known in retrospect, after many moves forward, sideways, even perhaps backward at times.

In the same way, when MBBs describe their personal experience of coming to Christ, it is seldom a "switch" from one religion to another. Even those who report a dramatic initial conversion experience, often back-fill their story with details of several spiritual turns or and unexpected twists. Perhaps this is because they have innumerable obstacles to navigate around—social and religious, sometimes even political and economic. Consequently, their conversion stories do not usually play out as straightforward linear movements, as if they were going from one socio-religious 'place' to another directly. The circuitous path MBBs often follow to becoming disciples of Christ can take many shapes, a few of which we should explore.

One of the ways that coming to Christ looks a lot like a step migration is that the final destination is often not in view from the first or even second step. Step migrations are often characterized by a first move to a larger city in the same country before eventually settling in a distant foreign land. In a similar way, the very last thing on most Muslim spiritual migrants' minds is joining a Christian church. One young MBB who came to Christ after moving to the US for study talked about his first step:

I was challenged by the lives of my Christian friends. I thought to myself, 'I should be a better Muslim.' So I started really following the path of Islam, trying to be as good in my faith as they were in theirs. But the more I tried, the more I failed, and the more attractive their way of life was<sup>19</sup>.

It is easy to forget that people usually don't have a plan for their spiritual life. It is only with the benefit of hindsight that they can see where they were going. Just as many physical migrants move to a big city in their own country to improve their life, many Muslims start the migration of conversion by first making changes in their lives *as Muslims*. Only much later can these be seen as their first steps in a journey to Christ—an ultimate destination they never would have imagined at the time.

Another expression of this “step migration” is when we see people spiritually moving but in ways that might be better classified as “sideways” rather than forward.

One couple I interviewed talked about how they joined the missionary-led Baptist church when they first came to Christ and remained there for several years, with the husband rising to “associate pastor.” Then a deep spiritual crisis was precipitated by the death of the man's father:

When my husband's father died, we realized that we didn't know any of our relatives any more, we were out of contact with them for so long! We were so lost... Then they all said [to the husband], “You are the oldest, so you are like the head of the family now. So you must contact all relatives to inform them of family events; you must know when we have

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with author, 2017

celebrations and to know what rituals to do.” My husband felt so bad because he did not know what to do anymore. We were so far from our culture... So that made us think,, “how did we come to this?” We felt like we had lost our identity<sup>20</sup>.

For many Muslims, the first step of their spiritual migration is toward an expression of Christianity that reflects missionary culture<sup>21</sup>. But in this case, the combination of several years growing in Christ, then a personal crisis, set in motion their next step of spiritual migration, something that we might see as more a lateral movement. That is, while continuing their faith in Christ, they moved to a more indigenous expression of their faith and one that does not include being part of what they now view as foreign Christianity.

Until that time we told everyone that we were Christians... but no more. We are just followers of Isa. We are no longer part of a church, but now we have a small group where four, five, or six families come together to talk, eat and share. We take turns at whose house we meet (*ibid*).

This couple’s conversion journey started out as a dramatic joining of the “foreign religion,” but eventually life led them down a much more complicated path toward experimentation with ways of being both a follower of Christ and part of their own people. Certainly, not everyone has this kind of experience, but I believe it is much more common than many missionaries realize because they are used to thinking only in terms of the first step in what is a long spiritual process.

Over the years I have heard many Muslim Background Believers recount this spiritual step migration process which leads them through different expressions of their faith. One very good MBB friend, who is himself now a cross-cultural missionary, said it this way.

I wish I had known at first what I know now. If I had not gone so far away culturally from my family, I probably could have reached some of them. That was all I knew then,

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with author, 2012

<sup>21</sup> Even when the evangelist involved is a local believer, there is often very significant missionary influence on church culture and patterns of discipleship.

but later I became more sensitive. I now see the need to stay closer to my culture rather than emphasize our differences. I would try to stay nearer so they could see my life and ask questions<sup>22</sup>.

Lewis Rambo describes this kind of spiritual migration as a person who develops and grows beyond an exclusively personal conversion and into having active engagement with social structures and cultural institutions of their natal society (1993, p. 147). To put it missiologically, such a complicated step migration may be one of the ways converts eventually contextualize their faith praxis and develop into effective evangelists among their own people. It seems that such a “lateral movement” cannot take place as long as the convert is living fully immersed in the culture of the missionary church. But just as with physical migration, another step of spiritual migration can be touched off by either a life crisis or simply a desire to be more successful, or in this case more fruitful.

However, a word of caution is in order here. It would be easy to mistake this fairly natural contextualization as a modern anthropological construct and forget that the phenomenon in is not new. It reflects an ancient and deep impulse in the Christian faith, dating at least back to the early centuries of the Christian faith. Lamin Sanneh, an MBB himself, has observed that our faith has always been “subjected to the principle of transmission to the dynamics of reception and adaptation” and that there will always be “the primacy of indigenous appropriation” (2008, p. 47). Thus some of the non-linear movement we hear expressed so often in conversion narratives are examples of this “indigenous appropriation” working out in individual lives of Muslims as they settle down in their new spiritual homeland.

### **Emotional implications of migration**

Until this point we have confined ourselves to applying various theories of human migration to what we are calling the spiritual migration that is seen in Muslim conversions to Christ. And for a purely academic

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with author, 2013

article that would be enough. But our concern is missiology, which is more than just the study of mission, but should always connect deeply with the practice of mission. And when we engage Muslims with the gospel we are (hopefully) engaging them with more than our intellect, that we are engaging them with our emotions as well.

Throughout this main body of article we have explored missiological meanings directly generated by applying certain human migration theories to Muslim conversions to Christ. However, I believe there are other observations that can be made from the overarching concept that may be less academic and cognitive, and more drawn from the emotional realities that result from seeing conversion as a form of migration. There are perhaps many, but we will only take time to explore three.

### *Migration itself can be traumatic*

The news we read from the Islamic world is filled with images of terrible things that are driving many Muslims from their ancestral homelands—war, terrorism and famine to name a few. Thus we commonly associate trauma with migration, from the perspective of causation. And this is important. However, we must also consider that the very act of migration, the journey itself, can generate significant emotional trauma. Migrants often experience profound dislocation and emotional distress as they attempt to reestablish themselves in a new land.

When we apply the metaphor of migration to conversion, we quickly recognize that many Muslims experience a great deal of confusion, and related distress, as they turn to Christ:

For the first few years I did not know who I was. Was I still a Muslim? Was I now a Christian? It was a very confusing time for me. All I could do was to hang on to Jesus and hope things would get better someday.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Private conversation with author, 2004

And when we consider the larger, family context, of conversion, we see another way this trauma plays out for those who move to a new spiritual homeland in the body of Christ:

I wept when I realized how much pain my family was feeling because I had become Christian. They really felt I was dead to them, and when I thought about how I caused that pain, I was crushed. It was still a good thing that I came to know Christ, but it caused my family much pain, and that hurt me when I finally allowed myself to think about it.<sup>24</sup>.

Missionaries, and Christians in general, tend to ignore this dimension of conversion because we are focused on the unmitigated good of coming to Christ. However, by framing conversion through the metaphorical lens of migration, we can appreciate the fact that pain is sometimes present even in the midst of the greatest things that happen in our lives. And by recognizing this, we can be more compassionate and understanding with new believers, encouraging them to process their pain in healthy ways rather than hiding it because they feel it is unworthy of Christ.

#### *Continued emotional connection to homeland*

No matter how bad the situation was, and no matter how great the new land is, people almost always desire some kind of ongoing connection to their original homeland. One of the reasons is that the land of our childhood has many powerful, though often subliminal, holds on our minds. These places are connected in our minds at a deep level related to our sensory perceptions. This is because smells, tastes and sounds are linked to “episodic memory,” that is memory that is linked to particular places, times, and emotions (Stratford 2012). Whenever someone migrates, they carry with them these strong emotional attachments to their past, no matter the push or pull forces involved. We often see this manifested as migrants set up ethnic enclaves in their new land to help them maintain a sense of connection to the old.

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<sup>24</sup> Shared as personal testimony at a conference in, 2016

Sometimes the need for continued connection to one's "spiritual homeland" is manifest in the almost unexplainable power of sensory memory. I remember once visiting with a MBB evangelist who had planted several churches. On the way to visit me he heard a recording in the taxi:

When the driver figured out I was a *kafir*<sup>25</sup>, he quickly pushed in a cassette tape. As it played my heart was so touched by the sound of them chanting the Qur'an. I did not want to feel that way. I did not want to listen. But there was just something about it. The sound was so moving. It was really hard not to be drawn in.<sup>26</sup>

Or consider the Iranian believer in the US told me of how he reacted to hearing Farsi spoken for the first time in 20 years:

I started weeping uncontrollably. I don't know where it came from. When I ran away from Islam, I thought I had forgotten everything about my people and my culture. But suddenly the pain was so there, it had been so deep I had never thought about it until suddenly it was in my face.<sup>27</sup>

This web of emotional attachments is strong, and is usually *involuntarily* evoked, that is to say we don't completely control how we feel when we encounter them. Therefore, we should not be surprised that many Muslims who take the journey to faith in Christ continue to feel a strong sense of continued attachment to their spiritual homeland. This is what David Greenlee called the new believers' need for "congruence," that is some sort of connection "between the old and the new, between the former faith and the set of values in Christianity" (2006, p. 56). At the same time, we recognize that complete "congruence"

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<sup>25</sup> *Kafir* originally meant an "ungrateful one," i.e. one who did not believe in the mission of Muhammad. In Turkic languages it eventually became a strong term of abuse applied to those who have left Islam (Bjorkman: 1990, pp. 407-409).

<sup>26</sup> Personal conversation with author, 2008

<sup>27</sup> Interview with author, 2017

is not possible for any genuine conversion, whether in the case of a secular woman in Seoul, or of an Islamic cleric in South Asia. Some things, perhaps many, must be disconnected between the old way of life and the new.

That said, many missionaries unfortunately misinterpret these emotional attachments as disloyalty on the part of the new believer. But if we apply the metaphor of spiritual migration it becomes easier to see that such longings for the familiar are simply part of being human, because all people have a history, in this case it is a personal history connected to a Muslim way of life. This can help us sympathize with new believer if they occasionally struggle with all they have left behind for Christ, rather than judging them as weak disciples.

### *Some do not stay*

Despite all the dangers faced and obstacles overcome, not all migrants remain in their new location. For some people the pull of their homeland, and perhaps disappointment with the new, is too great.

Eventually return to the land they left. This is a dimension of the migration metaphor I would much prefer to not explore, but we need to at least acknowledge that as painful as it is for us to consider, not all Muslims who turn to Christ remain in his body. Obviously this issue has a great deal of theological freight that is beyond the scope of this article, but in practical terms, it is something that most missionaries will face sooner or later.

Sometimes MBBs we know, perhaps even someone we have personally discipled, turn their backs on their new faith and return to Islam, or at the very least return to the Muslim *Ummah*.<sup>28</sup> How often this happens globally is impossible to say, but we know it happens more often than we would like. In fact, due to the very sensitive nature of the subject, we actually know very little about why or how some MBBs

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<sup>28</sup> It is possible that some Muslims may “return to Islam” not theologically, but relationally, while retaining their faith in Christ secretly. This topic is far beyond the scope of this article, but certainly deserves more reflection and research.

turn back to Islam. The most we could do is speculate, but that would probably not be helpful. So rather than trying to build a case from conjuncture, I believe the migration metaphor simply offers us an opportunity to confront this reality honestly.

## **Conclusion**

Humans seem to be hardwired to think in terms of metaphors, word pictures that help us understand a concept. Evangelical Christians have traditionally used a couple of these to describe the act of conversion, images such as being “born again,” or “saved.” However, we must remember that one single metaphor can never capture all the nuance of a complicated spiritual reality. In this paper I have suggested that an analogy of “spiritual migration” might be particularly helpful for gaining a richer understanding of the processes of coming to be a disciple of Christ in a frontier mission context. And by focusing our thoughts through this lens, we saw three specific areas that metaphor can open new theoretical and practical insights. By thinking in terms of a Muslim’s spiritual journey to Christ through the lens of human migration, two theories stand out; push/pull factors and the sometimes complicated and erratic nature of “step migration.”

First, we considered the concept of push and pull factors. That is, the reasons Muslims turn to Christ can be effectively grouped into those that push them away from Islam, and those that draw them to Christ and his Church. Doing this can help us move beyond typical evangelical positions which focus on the attractive power of the gospel, and closer to the messy, complicated world of people mixed motivations. But we must also remember that push/pull factors are not mutually exclusive, in fact most people turn to Christ due to a complicated combination of the two. Also, thinking in terms of human migration reminds us that many of these factors, particularly those on the pull side, are beyond our control, they are expressions of God’s sovereignty in a person’s life—even before they know Christ.

Then we discussed the idea that migration is often non-linear, that is people seldom move all the way from one religion to another in a single step, or in a straight line. This is something social scientists often

call “step migration.” Sometimes people move first to a “place” closer to home, such as becoming a more devout Muslim. Other times they make “lateral” moves, such as leaving Western style Christianity to experiment with more indigenous forms. In both cases using the metaphor of step migration helps to remind us that people on the move often do not know their final destination; they are just compelled to go.

And finally we explored a less academic, but none the less real, part of understanding conversion as spiritual migration—the emotional implications. Migrants experience a number of powerful, often negative, emotions as they move through their journey. In the same way, many Muslims who turn to Christ also face difficult emotions as part of that process. Recognizing this helps us stay more real about their humanity without casting any shadow on the depth of their love for Christ.

For these reasons and several others we did not have room to explicate, I believe that exploring how people come to Christ through the analogy of human migration offers practical insights into the way the Holy Spirit works and can push us toward more robust missiological models for the reaching Muslims, and even across other frontiers of the mission world.

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