Trends in Global Mission, Covid-19 and God's Work among Muslims

Abstract

Mission is shaped by the life and experience of the church, both past and present, and this in turn is the function of both the work of the Spirit of God and the interaction of the people of God with their contexts. In line with this position, we highlight some elements of the global context of mission, trends in world Christianity and mission and, then, examine, as a historical case, the reported evidence of the work of the Spirit of God among Muslims. In exploring the evidence of the Spirit's operation among Muslims, the paper reviews a selection of missionary sources, an autobiography of an illustrious Muslim convert and a selection of relatively recent secondary works. The underlying argument is that crises often lead to a search for new meaning and purpose; though not all of these may necessarily lead to outward conversion and belonging. This should not discourage us but rather be a source of rejoicing and a step towards partnership with God in his mission and ministry.

Keywords: world Christianity, Christendom, mission paradigm, secret believer, mission, Muslims, Imaduddin, convert

Introduction

We are living in a time of major change, not least in global mission. The model inherited from European Christendom is being challenged in profound ways. While it is still early to speak definitely, we sense that the Covid-19 is primarily acting as an amplifier of what is already happening rather than introducing something fundamentally new. This pandemic has stimulated enormous local activity by Christians as well as putting a break on some aspects of mission, particularly those related to mission as sending. This is an opportunity to take stock and re-engage in global mission in ways that are, perhaps, more appropriate for this moment in history. The current global context of mission highlights the action of the Spirt of God or 'the Spirit of Jesus'[1] in our world fractured by disease/suffering and often also by human thought/action.

The Spirit works in mysterious ways. We know from theoretical works that often crises like Covid-19 lead to much suffering but also religious change and transformation. In this sense, the locations of crises can be opportunities for ministry and mission. We know that the expectations of explicit conversion and belonging often largely remain unrealised, especially in Muslim contexts where believers respond to Jesus in their moments of crisis, often without identifying as Christians or belonging to a local church. Covid-19 combined with existing challenges faced by Muslims around the world could be another impetus for renewed responses to Jesus. We denote such believers as 'the secret believers'.

In the first part of this paper, therefore, we begin with a broad perspective on the global context of mission, trends in world Christianity and mission. Here we highlight Covid pandemic as a particular crisis facing humanity. In the second part of this paper, we demonstrate evidence of using a single regional and historical case. In this part, we highlight the reported evidence of Muslim responses to Jesus from a selection of missionary writings, a

[1] Gairdner, *The Rebuke of Islam,* 1920, p.79

Muslim convert's autobiography and a small selection of secondary sources which bring the discussion back to our present times. We expect this will lead to further discussions on the movement of God's Spirit in our broken world, besides encouraging further internal reflections on and discerning engagements in mission and ministry.

Global Context of Mission

That we talk about trends at all is an indication that ours is a globalized generation, aware of the big picture and able, to some degree, to reflect in global perspective. Thinking of trends can be helpful, as long as it does not obscure the reality that the local is always 'exceptional'. There is a tension here: we seek to understand the global while at the same time learning to listen and pay attention to the uniqueness of the local. While the Covid pandemic has been global in extent, impact and response have been experienced in widely differing ways that make the pandemic a profoundly local phenomenon.

It is important to hold this global-local tension if we are to avoid unhelpful and, ungodly confidence in analysis that can leads to a fixation with strategy and that in turn undermines dependence on God and sensitive listening to the Spirit and the local context. At this moment, the world population stands at 7.8 billion people, of whom more than 50% are urban, middle class and older than 30[2]. An aging[3], middle class[4] and urban population[5] are trends but such data masks huge diversity in national and local contexts.

In terms of global issues, we suggest that Covid-19 is one of three major challenges that are dominating the landscape. As we reflect on what it means to bear faithful witness today, we need to recognise all three, since they are inextricably interwoven and mutually reinforcing in their impacts.

Covid-19 and Poverty

We have entered an era of pandemics –some new (SARS, MERS, Influenza H5N1, Swine flu, Ebola, Zika), while others are long known diseases like malaria, yellow fever, measles, and dengue. The uncertainty and restrictions caused by Covid are likely to be with us for the next 2-3 years but it will not be the last novel virus to cause disruption. Most new epidemics have been zoonotic, that is, caused by a virus jump from an animal host. This is likely to continue and probably increase[6]. Covid-19 has been unusual in its spread and scale of disruption caused both by the disease and by attempts to contain it. Covid-19 is intensifying many of the major global issues threatening communities, including extreme poverty, the environmental impact of climate change, food and water insecurity and gender violence.

Between 1800 and 2017, extreme global poverty fell from 85% to 9%, with the biggest drop from 50% to current levels happening since 1966[7].Much of the drop took place due to changes in China's increasingly urban population and more recently to the rapid economic

[2] H. Ritchie & M. Roser, 2019. 'Age Structure', retrieved from *OurWorldInData*
[3] S.E.Vollset et al. 2020. 'Fertility, mortality…scenarios 'in *The Lancet*
[4] H. Kharas, 2017. 'The Unprecedented Expansion,' *Global Economic and Development,* February
[5] H. Ritchie, 2018. 'Urbanization', retrieved from *OurWorldInData,* September
[6] E.P.J. Gibbs, 'Emerging zoonotic epidemics' in *Vet Record*, 157 (22)
[7] H. Rosling 2019. *Factfulness: Ten Reasons* (Scepter, London)

growth occurring in parts of West and East Africa. At the same time, average life expectancy has risen from 31 years in 1800 to 73.2 years in 2020[8]. Although extreme poverty has been falling, 2020 will mark the first year in decades when that trend is reversed[9]. The situation is Africa is particularly severe, where incredible economic growth in some contexts is now in reverse. It has been estimated that those suffering from acute hunger globally could double[10]. For fragile states and communities, Covid is simply another body blow.

Environmental disaster

Human beings do not respond well to slow onset disasters[11]. Unlike Covid-19, the climate crisis is a genuine existential threat to our world, as noted by Bikita Mahdi, analyst for TearFund UK in a recent webinar. Drought, fires, storms, flooding, rising sea levels and the relentless extinction of species combine to threaten global food and water security and habitable space.

The huge reduction in the global economy, ground and air travel reduced global CO2 has reduced global CO2 emissions by an estimated 7% for 2020 if some restrictions continue till the end of the year. Yet for global rise in temperature to stay under 1.5 degrees rise, we would need a similar reduction (7.6%) every year this decade[12].

Climate change and the global economy are interconnected. Morgan Stanley estimated that 16 climate events cost the USA alone a staggering $309bn in 2017[13]. According to a Financial Times report, the then Bank of England governor, Mark Carney, warned in 2015 that 'Once climate change becomes a defining issue for financial stability, it may already be too late'.[14]

Fundamental questions about the sustainability and stability of the global economy are not just driven by Covid-19 and climate change. The myth of limitless growth has been brought into sharp relief by events such as the 2008 financial crisis. As activists around the world urge their governments to 'Build Back Better'[15] following Covid-19, it is clear that simply greening the economy will not be sufficient. We desperately need a new economic model that moves us from an economy of consumption to one of needs-based, sustainable production in which all benefit[16].

Racism, post-colonialism and neo-colonialism

[8] 'World Demographics' 2020 .retrieved from *Worldometers.info*
[9] 'Understanding Poverty' in *The World Bank* 16 April 2020
[10] P. Anthem 2020. 'Risk of hunger pandemic', *World Food Programme Insight*, 16 April
[11] See 'Key definitions' 2020. *Platform on Disaster Displacement*
[12]Quéré, Le et al. 2020. 'Temporary Reduction in Daily Global CO2 Emissions,' *Nature Climate Change*
[13] 'Weathering the Storm' 2018. *Morgan Stanley*, pp. 1-16
[14] C. Figueres & B. Zycher 2020. 'Can we tackle both climate change and Covid-19 recovery? 7 May
[15] 'Covid-19 can be an historic turning point' 2020, 25 June
[16] See, for example, K. Raworth 2017 on 'Doughnut Economics'

Global insecurities have fed the rise of populist, authoritarian regimes[17]. This in turn connects with a third global issue intersecting with Covid and the Climate Crisis; that of racism and the legacy of colonialism globally. The focus on systemic injustice and inequality has been heightened following George Floyd's unlawful killing in the USA. This sparked global outrage, from Brazil to Beirut, Syria to Singapore and generated solidarity among populations who feel oppressed by dictatorship, brutal policing and unaccountable political authorities.[18]

Forces of globalization, whether economic or cultural, have generated a counter-narrative expressed in nationalism, frequently allied to religious radicalism. These forces need to be seen against a postcolonial backdrop where as recently as 1914, 85% of the earth's landmass was controlled by European and, predominantly, British powers. Opposition to globalization, experienced as a form of neo-colonialism, can be understood as a profound struggle for identity and belonging.

The comments above are a very brief commentary on three global trends that profoundly affect World Christianity and Christian mission, including mission among Muslims. Space precludes any exploration of other equally important issues such as urbanization, migration and displacement of peoples, the changing nature of economic and military power with the rise of China, corruption, the impact of Artificial Intelligence and technology allied to fundamental questions of what it means to be human.

The Muslim world is caught up in all these challenges. Those who minister among Muslims must discern how each local context is impacted by global trends, including Covid-19, climate crisis and the struggle for identity. As we learn to listen and ask questions, we discover how people and communities are shaped by external forces and in turn, we learn to relate the gospel of the Kingdom to their situations. Whilst Christian mission among Muslims has tended to prioritise seeking an understanding of a specifically Islamic worldview in order to build bridges for the gospel, perhaps Covid-19 and other major global trends is surfacing how profoundly we share the same basic needs, fears and deepest desires. We share a common humanity facing shared threats. Christian mission among Muslims needs to think deeply not only about difference but also about the ways in which solidarity in our human condition and context provides bridges of empathy and grace.

Trends in World Christianity

We will make only brief mention of these since many readers will be familiar with the major trends in World Christianity. Following on from the comments above, it is worth pointing out that churches and Christian Non-Governmental and Faith Based organisations continue to be central players in efforts at poverty reduction, education and health care. This is not just true of those contexts in which state actors are unable or unwilling to provide basic services. In the UK, Christian groups have been at the forefront of the hospice care movement, food banks, and community initiatives to support young mothers and infants, the care of the elderly and so on. As state provision becomes increasingly costly, the space for Christian action grows. In Muslim contexts, Christian service, provided unconditionally, remains a primary way to bear faithful witness to the grace and goodness of God.

[17] J. Muis & T. Immerzeel, 2017 'Causes and Consequences', *Current Sociology,* p.912
[18] B. Daragahi 2020. 'Why the George Floyd protests went global' *Atlantic Council*

Those who identify as Christian have never reached beyond a third of the world's population and by 2050 is set to fall to 31%. Islam, in contrast, estimated at 26% in 2010, is set to rise to 30% by 2050. As Andrew Walls famously reminded us many years ago, Christianity, unlike Islam, is not territorial. The shift in Global Christianity from North and West to South and East is well documented. The multiplication of Christian denominations reflects these demographic shifts within World Christianity. By 1984, in Africa alone there were over 7000 independent denominations in 43 African countries, representing new expressions of church that are unrelated to earlier mission efforts[19].

While recognising the shifts in geographic locus, perhaps we have been slower to recognise the extraordinary growth in diversity of the church in the past 50 years. As recently as the 1990s there were numerous countries, including many majority Muslim nations in North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, in which there was no known indigenous church. Today we rejoice in vibrant communities of Christ-followers in every nation. We will pick this up below but suffice it to say here that significant movements towards Christ have been documented from within Islam, Hinduism, various strands of Buddhism and ideological contexts of communism. Only secular materialism appears resistant to significant church growth.

The church has not only become more diverse through multiple movements to Christ within particular communities**.** Diversification has occurred through people on the move, whether that be those from Sumatran Muslim tribal groups finding Christ in Jakarta mega-churches, Afghan migrants in Germany, or Christians on the move such as Sudanese refugees in Cairo, Filipino maids in Hong Kong or Nigerian business people in London. The UN estimates that at the end of 2019 there were 79.5 million displaced people, 85% of whom were hosted in developing world countries[20]. This does not include the millions who have migrated for economic reasons, studies or family connections. While we have tended to describe the church by geography, ethnicity or religious background, these categories are increasingly inadequate descriptors in today's world of kaleidoscopic movement. More than at any point in history, the church is faced with the opportunity to demonstrate the sign of the Kingdom through a united people sharing a common identity in Christ. Given the earlier comments about racism and post-colonialism, this sign is profoundly needed.

Two other trends are worth mentioning briefly. Firstly, we note the increasing persecution and the marginalisation of Christianity. Open Doors, in their 2019 report noted a number of major trends shaping persecution of Christians:

- Authoritarian states are clamping down and using legal regulations to control religion. Examples include China, N Korea and Vietnam.
- Ultra-nationalists are depicting Christians as 'alien' or 'western' and trying to drive them out. Here examples include parts of India, Myanmar, Turkey, Nepal and Bhutan.
- Radical Islam has moved from the Middle East to sub-Saharan Africa and seen in armed insurgencies in Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger as well as Somalia, Yemen and Libya.[21]

[19] D. Robert, 2009. *Christian Mission,* p.73
[20] 'Figures at a glance', 2010. *UNHCR*, UK
[21] L. Laury, 2019. '5 Major Trends' in OpenDoorsUSA, 16 January

If persecution reflects attack from outside, we should also note internal factors that render the church vulnerable from within. The number of adherents is no measure of strength, as demonstrated by those contexts where 25, 40 or even 80% of the population profess Christian faith and yet society does not remotely reflect the Kingdom of God. The causes include a lack of theological rigour, a failure to read the context in the light of Scripture and the reduction of the gospel of the Kingdom in ways that separate the kingdom from the King. The common theme is a consistent underestimation of the degree to which context shapes us, resulting in failure to develop authentic, contextualised discipleship. Like woodworm that can eat the heart from a mighty tree, leaving it vulnerable to sudden and catastrophic collapse in storms, superficial expressions of discipleship are always deceptive. We may think the church is healthy due to size when it is in fact vulnerable to rapid decline due to an inability to reflect theologically and act courageously in contextually appropriate ways. The North African church is an example of an apparently large church going into catastrophic decline and most assessments today suggest internal factors as the cause rather than simply Islamic conquest[22].

Each of the trends in World Christianity mentioned above have implications for ministry among Muslims. We thank God for the remarkable signs of church growth in parts of the Muslim world. We recognise new opportunities for ministry provided by massive movements of peoples around the world. We are humbled by the faithful witness of our sisters and brothers in many Islamic contexts. We are sobered by the inner vulnerability of parts of the global church where rapid growth may give a false impression of strength. This is perhaps especially so in parts of Africa where Islam and Christianity coexist.

With this brief overview of trends in global context and world Christianity, we now consider how these are reflected in world mission.

Trends in Mission

The prevailing cross-cultural mission paradigm

The prevailing mission paradigm is under pressure and Covid is accentuating the fractures that have been there for some time. Within Protestant expressions of church, the idea that mission is centred on sending developed in the late 18th century, flourished in the 19th and came under increasing pressure in the 20th. However, Dana Roberts comments, 'By the end of the 20th century the most significant development in the structure of missions was not the end of the missionary movement but its transformation into a multi-cultural, multifaceted network.' [23] Mission sending had moved from 'West to rest' to 'from everywhere to everywhere. Newer mission movements are now contributing tens of thousands of workers from Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia, notably South Korea and, more recently, the Philippines.

This movement has resulted in the formation of hundreds of new mission sending agencies as well as the internationalisation of historic agencies who now generally function as multicultural organisations and teams. Newer expressions of sending include 'reverse mission', with those from the global South and East now moving to evangelise the post-Christian West. As mission agencies have struggled for legitimacy in a global context, larger churches, mega-churches and networks have sent workers directly.

[22] See R Daniel, 2010. *This Holy Seed*
[23] D. Robert, 2009. *Christian Mission,* p.73

These realities might suggest that the modern mission paradigm is alive and well. While some hail these innovations as a new era of mission, we suggest these developments simply reflect modifications to the existing paradigm, centred on mission as sending. This understanding of mission is faltering for numerous reasons, including:

- Unsustainable financial systems in both old and newer sending contexts.
- The proliferation of mission agencies and Christian Non-Governmental Organisations, doing their own thing without relationship to the Body of Christ locally.
- Visa difficulties arising from a range of circumstances, including suspicion of outsiders and the existence of locally trained professionals.
- An emphasis on short-term sending. Long-term is reduced to a few years, resulting in decreased cross-cultural ministry preparation, language and cultural acquisition.
- Covid, with its disruption of travel, adds further obstacles to a paradigm of mission as sending.

More important than these issues, mission reduced to sending is increasingly ill-adapted to today's very varied mission contexts and is increasingly out of step with our understanding of the nature of mission. The current system has shaped mission from historic sending contexts but also the new mission movements from Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia. It fundamentally fails to take account of the degree to which the sending model of mission reflects a Christendom view of the world[24]. Alan and Eleanor Kreider have shown that the 'sending and going' model fitted within a broader Christendom paradigm, in which four elements were tightly interwoven[25]:

I. Mission defined by geography, with parts of the world 'Christian' and parts 'not yet Christian'.
   The current paradigm of mission still maintains the importance of geography with phrases like 'the 10/40 window'. However, geography has been largely substituted ethnicity for geography. While for many this remains compelling, increasingly this approach fails to take account of the complexities of identity and movement that characterise the global context and especially the growth of the church in all nations.

II. Mission as the responsibility of the church.
   Today we recognise that mission is God's - the Missio Dei - and that we are called to participate in his mission. None-the-less, the legacy of Christendom assumptions about mission are so strongly embedded in mission language, structures and systems that it is possible to affirm the Missio Dei and at the same time take over the work of mission, ignoring what God is already doing and focusing on our statistics, strategies and resources.

III. The goal of mission as the establishment of the church.
   When mission is the responsibility of the church then, naturally, church concerns will define the content of mission. When cross-cultural workers come from church contexts shaped by enlightenment thinking, church concerns are reduced to 'spiritual' activities and all that flows from that in terms of a dichotomised gospel in which the Kingdom is separated from the King. Our understanding of the work of mission continues to suffer from a reductionist view of the nature of God's mission.

IV. Special agents are required for mission.

[24] See M.W. Stroope, *Transcending the Modern Mission Tradition*
[25] Kreider A & Kreider E. *Worship and Mission after Christendom*, p. 16

> In 1974, the Lausanne Covenant noted that, 'evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world'[26]. Nearly 50 years later, mission continues to be promoted and practiced as something done by Christians with a special calling, among particular kinds of people, focused on gathered church activities.

It may be that the perpetuation of a Christendom view of mission, where mission is primarily based on cross-cultural sending, is the single biggest obstacle to the whole people of God taking responsibility to step out and participate in the fullness of God's mission. Covid, along with the climate crisis and post-colonial context, offers an unparalleled opportunity to realign our understanding and practice of mission. This realignment will grasp two key realities.

First, the centrality of the people of God in a locality as the primary human instrument for mission in that context. The growth of the church in every nation over the past 30 years means that the primary witness to the gospel of the Kingdom is no longer dependent on individual cross-cultural servants but local worshiping communities of disciples. This is not to suggest that local churches exist in every community or ethnolinguistic group, but all these groups are accessible to near neighbours. Covid, far from being a frustration to the mission of God, could be just the restraint to the global mission industry we need if we are to reimagine how different parts of the Body of Christ act together to support faithful, holistic local witness.

Second, the recent pandemic and impact of climate change are powerful reminders of the brokenness of our world and the iniquitous inequalities and injustices that define countless lives globally. We are reminded that God's mission is more than simply the rescue of lost souls from a disintegrating planet but the renewal of all things (Rev 21:5) and healing of brokenness as God brings all things in heaven and earth together under the Lordship of Jesus (Eph 1:10). A narrow, reductionist, spiritualised understanding of mission is unsustainable Biblically and indefensible contextually. As with pandemics in the past, Covid-19 has provided the church with an opportunity to demonstrate the wholeness of the gospel.[27]

So far in this first section, we highlighted some elements of the global context of mission, trends in world Christianity and in mission. Although we noted several current challenges, the most immediate one is obviously that of Covid-19. What might we learn from the past, form reports of missionaries and converts and the work of the Spirit of God, especially in periods of crises? We therefore offer a historical case in the second part of this paper. This case highlights missionary reports which noted particular difficulties they encountered in their work among Muslims. The argument here is that while crises do act as a cause for Muslim response to Jesus, the apparent lack of converts is not a sign of the failure of mission. It takes faith and some awareness of the first hand testimonies to recognise the often hidden work of the Spirit among many Muslims.

God's Mission and Muslims

Mission must be shaped by the life and experience of the church. This historical case is an opportunity for us to learn from those who have gone ahead of us. We know from anecdotal evidence that often people are more decisive in responding to the Gospel of Christ during

[26] 'The Lausanne Covenant,' *Lausanne Movement*, Clause 6
[27] R Stark *The rise of Christianity, Chapter 4*

moments of crisis; their response may not always be overtly visible but it does not mean it is absent. Covid-19 is a huge crisis today and its impact is only beginning to manifest. As our world emerges from this, we must remain open to the Spirit's work among those finding themselves in a complex web of crises, especially Muslims. A case in point is that of the millions of Indian Muslims whose dissent against Hindu Nationalism, impending National Register of Citizens (leading possibly to becoming stateless) etc, was cut short by Covid-19. Such an experience of fragmentation is comparable to the late 19th and early 20 century struggles Muslims, among others faced in many parts of the world; they witnessed emerging ideas of nation-states, democracy and self-governance; many experienced a more rigidly defined sense of identity or humiliating religious debates or a loss religious and cultural identity; hunger, poverty and sickness afflicted the masses. The sense of deprivation or helplessness was no less then as now.

As noted before, one can learn from the past so we can respond as God's people with wisdom. Looking back can also help us cultivate a more responsive heart and eyes to recognise God's work among Muslims around us today. It will also help us make a more considered decision about our own role and partnership in God's mission in our world today.

A case from the New Testament (NT)

As Christians, it should not be surprising if one starts this discussion with the NT. Given the limitation of space, it might just suffice to highlight one case from the Gospel of Mark 5.18-20.

> **18** As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. **19** Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." **20** So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.[28]

We hear of a strange event richly described in verses 1-13; 14-17. The story may not strike a chord in the largely secular context of Europe where such events are considered largely reserved for Hollywood and no one expects to see them in real life. The largely disenchanted worldview here celebrates the spooky occurrences in story books and in the imaginary representations of this in films or limited to Christianised or pagan Halloween. Halloween, creates a cultural space within the disenchanted world of the west, to wallow in the 'irrational' and 'benign' connection with the spiritual world of divination, horror, pranks and trick or treats. This world is however not so disconnected from real lives of people in much of the non-western world. For a reader from South Asia, for instance, this story may not be familiar in its eerie details but will certainly be something real. We read in verses 14-17 that the man Jesus healed was 'sitting fully clothed and in his senses'. Inexplicably, instead of celebrating this inexplicable transformation, we hear they were 'afraid' and they 'urge' Jesus to 'get out of their territory'.

How does God work in a place where Christ is banished and where Christ is declared a 'persona non grata'? Presumably, a place which excludes Christ would not welcome those seen to belong to Christ including missionaries wishing to proclaim Jesus or serve in the name of Jesus. Does God not work in such place? Does he not love those who inhabit this

[28] *Holy Bible* (*NIV)* 2011

sphere and would he exclude them from his Kingdom simply because they happen to live here? There are clues in this unremarkable story of God's mission which is bigger than what his people can even conceive. What we do as Christians in and through our own tiny spheres is only a small part of God's own plan for his Kingdom.

The answer to the question we posed is in the reason why Jesus sends the man healed back to his place and not leave it to physically follow Jesus as a disciple 'staying with' Jesus. The man was 'not allowed' or he did not 'let him' [follow]. We know at time Jesus did forbid those healed to not speak [perhaps with a view to be a living witness for those around]. It is different here as Dummelow suggested, 'it was a Gentile area, and there was no danger of any popular excitement'.[29] We know this also because not only the particular place where the event took place is named (v.1, Garasenes) but also the special region it was part of and to which the man healed went back to in obeying Jesus (v. 20, Decapolis). The inhabitants of this region were non-Jews. This is a single-most important event early on in Jesus' ministry not only because of the miracle but also where it took place – in a non-Jewish religious and political space. So what is this Gentile place from which Jesus was banished but to which Jesus sends one of his aspiring followers?

Verse 20 tells us that this area was called 'Decapolis' (or 'ten cities'). We know from 63 CE to about 106 CE, a conglomeration of the ten cities was formed on the 'eastern frontier of the Roman Empire'. They were aggregated in a collective because of their common culture and language. This commonality was due largely to their political autonomy under the nominal control of the Romans. Culturally, they were Greco-Roman and not Jewish or other Semitic populations of the time; their language was Greek and not Aramaic. We have the impression from reading the Gospels that Jesus' primary focus was his own people, the Jews. This outreach into a majority Gentile territory is quite exceptional in this context. The fact that Jesus was investing time in a Gentile region is especially stressed also by Mark in 5.1-10. Matthew 4.23-25 suggests people in this region were particularly attracted to Jesus. It seems this was more to do with miracles and healing than with any sort of significant and open following of Jesus.

So, the answer to our questions seems obvious. Jesus was no more welcome in this region that was majority Greco-Roman. Not only was this not Jewish, it had its own religious and political system and its own language and culture. There may have been initial interest in the miracles and healing but this positive orientation was quashed by the official banning of Jesus. Jesus' interest was not in expanding an army of disciples that would physically follow him; his priorities were right. One could become a disciple and not be seen to be physically following him and not be physically belonging to those named after him. The need was for the disciples to be where they were and 'be a living witness' to Jesus who heals people from sickness and sin. The purpose of following is not to do something for Jesus but to demonstrate what Jesus has or can do for us. The proof of the Kingdom is not what the followers do and from what affiliation or their location or their name but in being a witness as recreated beings irrespective of their physical belonging. This was how God's own mission works even in a hostile context where Jesus himself or those explicitly bearing his name are not welcome. The presence of a re-constituted human, extracted from the depths of darkness to a renewed awareness of his self and his consciousness of Jesus, his healer may have been a modest start of God's mission but this was merely a start of a body of Christ that outstripped the Jewish followers not too long after Jesus' death. Some of the early followers prevented

[29] Dummelow, *Commentary on the Holy Bible,* 1937

from physically following Jesus and from belonging to his community, from among those Matthew calls, 'Large crowds' (4.25), may have been part of the community of those like our man called to follow as 'the insiders' or secret followers or believers!

Missionary writings on Muslims

Burgoyne, who was based at the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society at Mirzapur (UP, India), wrote of Islam being the most 'persistent challenge' for 'the missionary enterprise' for a hundred years.[30] He was writing around the second decade of the twentieth century and, hence, his views reflect the context of this enterprise in much of the 19th century. He portrays Islam as a 'virile' and 'fanatical' faith embedded 'behind a wall of law and tradition'; a view that still prevails among many Christians. Unsurprisingly therefore, many missionaries working among Muslims then were of the view that their hard work in missions was not bearing fruit because of this 'wall'. Muslims who were positively inclined towards the Christian faith, they asserted, were 'fearful' of the consequences of conversion to Christianity. Fear of the law (on apostasy) and its consequences, missionaries believed, held seekers back.[31]

The 'wall of law and tradition' involves the imagery of an invincible fort that neither the soft approach of personal friendships nor institutional debates had been able to breach[32] Friendship with Henry Martyn (1781-1812) has been given as a reason for Abd al-Masih's (1776-1827) conversion to Christianity. Abd al-Masih has been hailed as one of the first native missionaries of CMS and the first ordained priest in the Anglican Church.[33] The friendship approach to Muslims was something Abd al-Masih continued to use in his own outreach to Muslims though characteristically without much success in terms of converts to Christianity.[34] In speaking of Henry Martyn's mission, Burgoyne also draws readers' attention to Abd alMasih's conversion being merely the tip of the iceberg – not because there was mass conversions but because 'many of them [were] still believers in secret, but finding their spiritual food in this Revelation'.[35] Zwemer's work too alludes to secret Christians among the Muslims – 'Moslems who would secretly assert themselves as Christians, but make no open statement because of the danger attending'.[36] Based on the testimony of a 'secret believer', Zwemer suggested that most such believers found Christ through their direct engagement with 'the word' rather than through any sort of 'direct missionary activity',[37] something a recent work based on an Indonesian convert corroborates.[38] In discussing this phenomenon, Burgoyne speaks of the courage to stand with Christ and not 'be ashamed'; but given the sort of danger he sees such believers face on account of 'the wall of law and tradition', he grants, 'those secret disciples who are truly His followers will be honoured by the Master'.[39]

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[30] Burgoyne, *The Christian Church and the Convert from Islam*, ca. 1923; repr.1999
[31] Zwemer, *The Law of Apostasy in Islam,* 1924
[32] Burgoyne, ca. 1923; repr.1999, p.1
[33] Kings, Abdul Masih: Icon of Indian Indigeneity', 2011
[34] Burgoyne, ca. 1923; repr.1999, p.5
[35] Burgoyne, ca.1923; repr. 1999, p.17
[36] Zwemer, *The Law of Apostasy in Islam*, 1924, p.24
[37] Zwemer, 1924, p.126
[38] Riddell et al. 'The Incarnation Expressed through a Conversion Testimony from Indonesia', 2011, pp.195-210
[39] Burgoyne, ca.1923; repr. 1999, p.44

Unlike what we know of the Christian approaches to mission in the 18th and early 19th century, much of the late 19th century is often characterised as the period of Muslim-Christian debates with the Great Agra Debate (1854) being right at the heart of this. Quite in contrast to his initial positon regarding the 'fewness of converts', Burgoyne speaks of 'the number of stalwart converts' won for Christ by such argumentation'.[40] Another report in Creighton's (1850-1936) work that is purportedly based on the paper written by a convert suggests too that; 'converts from Islam to Christianity have come and are coming in their thousands'.[41] This indicates some sort of mass movements of Muslims; but we know Creighton himself denies this in asserting that 'conversions from the Moslem faith in India have always been individual – there has never been anything of the nature of a mass movement'.[42] Of these individual converts, Creighton claimed the number of the learned converts ('men of real intellectual mark') from Islam was far greater than that of those that were not learned.[43] The reason for this was said to be the strategy of missionaries to focus their efforts on 'Moslem students', aiming through them to 'influence Muslim thought'.[44]

Quite in contrast to these claims, the success of the missions in gaining a large number of converts and gaining 'stalwarts' or great numbers of 'Moslem students', the actual number of converts, it appears, was quite modest. Gairdner proposes insecurity and political pressure as factors discouraging Muslims (in large numbers) from 'open confession of Christianity' and suggests, for this reason, that mass conversions have 'been very rare'.[45] It has already been demonstrated how missionaries in the Middle East gradually turned their attention from conversion to 'nation building' because of the difficulties involving conversion;[46] Gairdner called these 'general institutional work'.[47] Gairdner also says, 'there is good reason to believe that there were many secret believers: one heard of them in Palestine, in Syria, even in Turkey…'.[48] His position here was not based on conjecture as the following claim shows: 'one not infrequently met them [secret believers]' and 'in some cases they escaped from their country and were baptised in Egypt or elsewhere'.[49] He calls upon all Christians to pray for those seeking freedom by fleeing but especially for those 'who have secretly believed'.[50]

An example of the rare open confession/conversion comes to us from the aftermath of the Great Debate of 1854 in Agra, India. The debate here would likely have been impossible without the oversight of the colonial authority which seemed amenable in this circumstance to the cause of the missionaries. Despite its high profile nature and the focus on Muslim intellectuals ('Moulvis…surrounded by their students'), apparently the debate succeeded in the dramatic conversions of just 'two of the Moulvies' who had 'for the first time heard the arguments in favour of Christianity'. One of them, Creighton suggests went into the 'service

[40] Burgoyne, ca. 1923; repr.1999, p.17
[41] Creighton, *Missions: Their Rise and Development,* 1912, p.137
[42] Creighton, 1912, p.136
[43] Creighton, 1912, pp.136-7
[44] Creighton, 1912, p.137
[45] Gairdner, 1920, p.196
[46] Dogan & Sharkey (eds.), *American Missionaries and the Middle East*, 2011
[47] Gairdner, 1920, p.197
[48] Gairdner, 1920, p.197
[49] Gairdner, 1920, p.197
[50] Gairdner, 1920, p.197

of the State' whereas the other went for 'the service of the Church'.[51] One of the most dramatic conversions referred to by Creighton involved a Muslim Mawlvi, Imaduddin (1830-1900) who was baptised in 1866 and ordained in 1868. He was hailed early on as 'the great literary champion of the Church at Amritsar'.[52] The Ecclesiastical Gazette contains the minutes of the meeting that took place on Tuesday 2 January 1872.[53] Among more important issues pertaining to 'money grants' and 'letters of thanks', it contains (as part of the standing committee notices) a brief report about the Bishop of Calcutta and the secretary of the Calcutta district committee's decision to set apart some money 'out of the Indian fund' for publishing in Lahore two books ('Life of Mahomet' and the Writings of Mahomet as compared with the Gospel'). These were books said to be in 'the Hindustani language' by 'the Rev. Imaduddin, C.M.S. Missionary' – one of the two converts following the Great Debate in Agra referred to above. Another of SPCK monthly meeting held in April 9 speaks of a further grant for the publication of another book a catechist from Amritsar. In this context, we hear of Imaduddin again; and this time he is referred to as 'the native Presbyter Imaduddin'.[54] We have another reference to Imaduddin in the Dictionary of Indian Biography.[55]

Here we have the convert whose ministry in the church (as he also points out in his autobiography) gave him the time to focus on his many writings. Maqsood Kamil, a Pakistani scholar based at our centre did an original research on Imaduddin's role in fulfilling the unfinished agenda of the Great Debate. This has proved to be a definitive work on this convert and his theology as it used all of the available primary sources (which are many) to reconstruct this story.

Testimony of a Convert

It is clear from the review above that the notion of 'secret believers' was not absent in mission literature examined. Many of these sources reflect the late 19th century discourse. We are of the view that Imaduddin, our illustrious convert, should be at the heart of this discourse. In our modest effort here we merely wish to cast an eye on Imaduddin's autobiography for evidence of his reference to 'secret believers'.

There is however a minor issue to get out of the way. Those writing autobiographies, in all sincerity, aim to retell their story they believe is true. Many historians do not like to accord much value to 'first person accounts' as these are judged to be unreliable as subjective accounts. We rely on Popkin who challenges this position. Popkin argues that despite their reservation on such accounts, historians often themselves do autobiographies. Such accounts, he argues, do in fact add significantly to our understandings of not just 'human experiences' but also of the key 'historical events'.[56] So, the business of first person accounts is not just for the writer or his followers; such writings can and do matter and these do count as important sources for our understanding of history.

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[51] Creighton, 1912, p.135
[52] *The Call from the Moslem World,* 1926
[53] *The Ecclesiastical Gazette* 1872, p.97
[54] *The Colonial Church Chronicle*, 1972, p.234
[55] Buckland, *The Dictionary of Indian Biography,* 1968, p.215
[56] Popkin, *History, Historians and Autobiography*, 2005

We are drawing readers' attention to an easy-to-miss reference to 'secret believers' in Imaduddin's modest autobiography.[57] This is significant even if made in passing. The published version of this autobiography contains a 'part two' as well. The first part was written immediately following his baptism in 1866. Part two was written in 1873 and contain, as expected, a more theologically reflective account where he recounts various things he sees as evidence of 'the grace of God' for someone who had successfully scaled the 'wall of law and tradition' and had faced the threat of dire consequences. These included:

> i). His estranged wife who was deeply offended by his decision to be baptised. As part of his commitment to transcend 'the wall' he was even willing to 'leave her behind for the sake of Christ'. This however did not happen as she herself had an 'encounter with Christ' and followed him into Christianity.[58] This led his 5 daughters and 4 sons to follow suit and received baptism. All of his sons save one, who passed away, became 'servants of God' (*masih ke bande*) with him.[59]
>
> ii). He thanks God also for 'setting him apart' from 'worldly work' to focus on ministry with the Church. He regrets having 'wasted' much time within the 'wall of law and tradition' of Islam which he believed kept him 'away from God'. This was why 'full time ministry' was important to him.[60]
>
> iii). He thanks God for the opportunity full time work in mission afforded him to focus on the writing of books that Maqsood Kamil is masterfully reading for the first time after nearly a century. He claims he was writing these books for his own benefit, for the benefit of his 'brothers' *(mere bhaiyon ke faide ke liye*) and for other people groups/religions (*gair qaumon ke liye*). The expectation behind writing, it appears, was to encourage those like him who were undecided about the extent of following Jesus; so they make a full commitment to Christ and receive baptism.[61]

In the first part of his account he gives his rather original take on the nature of Islam which is not as antithetical as one would expect from a convert of his stature. He makes reference to *muhammadi 'alim* (Muslim religious doctors) and *ruhani talib-e haqq* (spiritual seekers of the reality) and suggests that Islam is a product of a search for spiritual fulfilment (*ruhani khwahish*) that its role models put together from different sources. He suggests those who were searching for truth did not have access to the true injil (the Gospel), otherwise they would have received the true knowledge of God (*sacchi ma'rifat-e ilahi*) and would not have remained followers of Muhammad (*muhammdi*). Muhammad made sure his people (*umma*) remained bereft of the *injil* and the *torah* and the Qur'an was offered as the complete and final revelation in place of these. He bemoaned the fact that Muslims even in his day do not see the need to read the *injil* and this to him explains in part why they remain bereft of the full revelation of God in Christ.[62]

The idea of the divine grace (*fazal*) expressed, as he saw it, through his conversion to Christ, ministry in the church and the many writings are, we think, the keys to understanding his

[57] Imaduddin, *waqi'at-e imadiyya,* 1957
[58] Imaduddin, 1957, pp.25-26
[59] Imaduddin, 1957, p.26
[60] Imaduddin, 1957, pp.27-29
[61] Imaduddin, 1957, pp.29-30
[62] Imaduddin, 1957, pp.10-11

position on Islam and Muslims. Having had the 'spiritual fulfilment' in Christ, his aim was to make Him known through encouraging Muslims to read the *injil* and the *torah*. His books were expected to serve the purpose of leading Muslims to the realisation that *din-e muhammdi* (the religion of Muhammad) was 'not true'. He was much encouraged himself by the conversion of Mawlwi Safdar Ali (1957.20) though he found this conversion surprising enough to lead him to acquiring a Bible to read for himself.

It is from this background that Imaduddin, makes his passing reference to 'secret believers'. He acknowledges that even those who understood Christianity often did not take the final step towards conversion as Safdar 'Ali and he had done: 'they [Muslims] said to me clearly that they know *din-e muhammdi* cannot be true (haqq) but we cannot help; we do not wish to lose izzat (honour) in our world'. Some of them advised him too not to reveal his new faith: *'zahir mein musalman kahlao; dil men masih par aitiqad rakkho'* (remain a Muslim externally but in your heart have faith in Christ).[63] Some of them said to him that the religion of the Christ (*masih ka madhhab*) was reliable (*durust*) and intellectually satisfying (*muwafiq-e 'aql*) but that they did not understand the 'Trinity' and 'Son of God' and some of the Christian practices (and hence, unable to take the risk of becoming openly Christian).[64]

Recent scholarship

In recent times several Christian missiological and academic works have come to light on the topic of 'insider's movement'.[65] *Chrislam* is one of many missiological sources on this which reveals a sadly widening gulf between those that advance the 'Kingdom' and 'Ecclesia' centric missiologies. *Chrislam* revisits this emerging fault-line through attempting to apparently represent the voices of those that support the notion of this movement. The real intention of the work seems however polemical. It does not afford a fair opportunity to the supporters of the idea of the insider movement. Although they accept that such movements are real, the book intends to 'critique the advocates of insider movement' methods, theology and goals'.[66] The critics appear to suffer from the fear that the reality of secret believers not only encourages syncretism, it also works against the interest of the doctrine of the church and the mission mandate of Christians. Tennant would perhaps not neatly fall in the opposite camp of the evangelicals in his approach to this issue, but he shows tremendous amount of maturity and insight. He argues for 'the hidden history of insider movement' in that Islam has had believers for generations but instead of adopting a fixed position, he poses some critical issues for missiologists to address; these involve: 'the nature of faith in Christ'; belonging; the label of Christianity; baptism; public versus private profession of faith and commitment.[67]

Some relatively recent research monographs in sociology/sociology of religion are enabling the Christian assertions about secret believers (at least since the time our review here in the 19th century) to emerge from the fog of claims and counter claims and polemics between missiologists. Seppo Syrjanen's was perhaps the first such work done in the context of Pakistan (1984).[68] Katherine Kraft demonstrates in her sociology of conversion in the selected Arab contexts (and especially among women) the enormous difficulties 'converts'

[63] Imaduddin, 1957, p.22
[64] Imaduddin, 1957, pp.22-23
[65] Lingel et al. *Chrislam: How missionaries are promoting an Islamised Gospel,* 2012
[66] See introduction in Lingel, J et al. 2012
[67] Tennant, 'The Hidden History of Insider Movement', 2013
[68] Syrjanen, *In Search of Meaning and Identity,* 1984

face. Some of these owe to the notions of *tawhid* and *umma* whereas others come from disappointments converts face in relating with churches and missionaries. The decision to 'convert' is already hard and this is complicated by the provisions of *shari'ah* (the law). Among these, there are those who cannot (legally) change religion and belong to a church. This raises difficult issues of belonging, kinship relationships and identity.[69] Duane Alexander Miller's is another recent work from the University Edinburgh which promises the development of new thinking in this field.[70] Although mired in issues relating to conversion, Miller proposes the idea of 'theology making' among 'ex-Muslims'.

Covid-19 is a watershed event, a sort of tipping point for many already mired in hopeless conflicts and ideological battles. It is therefore also a moment when we can expect a great movement of God. Garrison calls it, 'A Wind in the House of Islam'.[71] In current research, we are noting a range of Muslim responses when faced with impossible challenges such as statelessness as e.g. when Muslims migrate because of conflicts back home to other regions of the world. Some exceptionally convert and their affiliations change; but the majority of those in flux often believe in Christ or follow him without belonging to a local church. In choosing to believe or to belong, they find answers for their crises (dilemma/deprivation to use Rambo's terminology[72]). Here 'conversion' to Christ is evidently a process that involves change, often without any external evidence of belonging.

Conclusion

We began by saying that mission is shaped by the life and experience of the church, both past and present. We see evidence of the Spirit of God both among and through His people and around them in the unique and often crisis ridden locations.

In this paper we first highlighted some elements of the global context of mission, trends in world Christianity and in mission. One particular context of Covid-19 was, we said, particularly noteworthy as it represented a level of crisis this generation had not seen before. Many, especially in the majority and minority contexts of Islam, experienced Covid-19 at a time they were already suffering. The second part of the paper follows the observation we made about learning from the past. We argue that the apparent lack of converts, especially among Muslim whose lives have already been damaged by pre-existing crises, are precisely the locations where one may witness the operation of the Spirit of God. These are not places where missionaries either local or cross-cultural, can easily function or see much fruit of their labour. It takes faith to discern God's work here. It will help those burdened with a call for mission among Muslim to be aware of the reports of God's people from the past (and indeed in our own time) of how they saw God's work among Muslims.

We highlighted a selection of these reports of the Spirit's operation among Muslims. These included missionaries, an autobiography of a convert, and more recent writings on it. This reported evidence highlighted the phenomenon we called 'the secret believers'. Our case shows such believers then or now are not a figment of missionary imagination; their reality is rooted in history of mission for well over a century. It is important for us as the people of

[69] Karft, *Searching for Heaven in the Real World,* 2013
[70] Miller, 'Living among the Breakage', 2014
[71] Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 2014
[72] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* ,1995

God today to honour God for his work and seek ways to help further this as we interact with our own unique contexts and our own local life and experience as His people.

The experience of Covid-19 has been truly universal. Some have suffered or are suffering more than others in places where they were already experiencing other forms of challenges. The evidence on how crises lead to variegated responses to Christ has the potential to open the hearts of God's people to the movements of the Sprit among Muslims. This can encourage a more robust theologising and actions resulting from such reflections. So there is more room and more need for missionaries willing to follow the Spirit to nurture, disciple and initiate afresh new movements. Covid pandemic offers an unprecedented opportunity for the people of God in mission. It does not matter how small their number, if they bear in mind that it is God who works and that they are mere partners with Him. This view could potentially lead to a healthier, more fruitful and sustainable witness among Muslims.

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