



“WHEN Christian” DOES NOT Translate

Frank Decker

I grew up as a Muslim, and when I gave my life to Jesus I became a Christian. Then I felt the Lord saying, ‘Go back to your family and tell them what the Lord has done for you.’” Such was the beginning of the testimony of a sweet sister in Christ named Salima. As she stood before the microphone at a conference held recently in Asia, I thought about how her story would have been applauded by my Christian friends back home.

But then she said something that would have probably shocked most American Christians. She told us that in order to share Christ with her family, she now identifies herself as a Muslim rather than a Christian. “But,” she added, “I could never go back to Islam without Jesus whom I love as my Lord.”

Like this woman, countless people, primarily in Asia, who live in Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu contexts are saying *yes* to Jesus, but *no* to Christianity. As Westerners, we assume that the word “Christian” *ipso facto* refers to someone who has given his or her life to Jesus, and a “non-Christian” is an unbeliever. However, in the words of one Asian attendee, “The word ‘Christian’ means something different here in the East.”

Consider the story of Chai, a Buddhist from Thailand. “Thailand has not become a Christian country, because in the eyes of the Thai, to become a Christian means you can no longer be Thai. That’s because in Thailand ‘Christian’ equals ‘foreigner.’” So when Chai gave his life to Jesus, he began referring to himself as a “Child of God” and a “new Buddhist.” He then related a subsequent incident in which he had a conversation with a Buddhist monk on a train. “After I listened to his story, I told him that he was missing one thing in life. He asked me what that was and I told him it was Jesus.”

Chai continued to tell us the story in which the monk not only gave his life to Christ, but also invited Chai to come to his Buddhist temple to share about Jesus. Then Chai said, “At the beginning of our conversation the monk asked me, ‘Are you a Christian?’”

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and I said *no*. I explained that Christianity and Jesus are two different things. Salvation is in Jesus, not in Christianity. If I had said I was a ‘Christian,’ the conversation would have ended at that point.” But it didn’t end. And the monk now walks with Jesus.

Indeed, an American missionary that has been working in Asia for about two decades said, “For the first five or seven years of our ministry in [a Muslim country] we were frustrated because we were trying to get people to change their religion.” He went on to say how in evangelical circles we talk a lot about how it is not our religion that saves us; it is *Jesus*. “If we really believe that, why do we insist that people change their religion?”

Asif is a brother in Christ with whom I have spent time in his village in a country that is 90 percent Muslim. Traditional Christian organizations in that country have only had a significant impact on the other ten percent that has never been Muslim. Make no mistake – Asif is sold out to Jesus, as are the other members of this Muslim Background Believers (MBB) movement. I will never forget seeing the tears stream down Asif’s face as he told me how he and his brother, also a believer in Jesus, were beaten in an attack that his brother did not survive. These are Muslims who walk with Jesus and openly share with their Muslim friends about the Lord, who in Arabic is referred to as “Isa al-Masih” (Jesus the Messiah).

These “insider movements” are not intended to *hide* a believer’s spiritual identity, but rather to enable those within the movement to *go deeper* into the cultural community – be it Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist – and be witnesses for Jesus within the context of that culture. In some countries, such movements are just getting started. In other places, estimates of adherents are in the hundreds of thousands.

As the Body of Christ, we should be very careful that the things we uphold as sacred are not post-biblical accoutrements, but are indeed transcendent. If we are not open to “new wineskins,” we may unwittingly find ourselves attached to traditions, as were the Pharisees in the day of Jesus ... 🌐

**The names in this story have been changed. This article is excerpted by permission from the May/June 2005 issue of Good News Magazine, a renewal ministry within the United Methodist Church (www.goodnewsmag.org).*