

# EDITORIAL COMMENT



## Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist Followers of Jesus: How Should We Respond?

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**C**an you have genuine members of the Body of Christ who do not consider themselves “Christian” but do consider themselves Bible-believing followers of Jesus? Is it possible to have people who faithfully study the Bible in order to follow and obey Jesus but who also consider themselves to be Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews...culturally?

In this issue we will hear from a number of people who are following Jesus with biblical faith but who have chosen to remain within the cultural contexts of their birth. When they came to faith in Jesus, they did not leave the cultural heritage of their birth to join a “Christian” cultural community, contrary to what some expect they should do if they are genuinely saved. Instead, they have remained in their contexts to tell their family and friends about the Jesus who loves them, can answer their prayers and can save them from their sins. These people are part of what are called Jesus Movements.

This can all be very confusing and controversial to those who were born into “Christian” cultural contexts and who believe that there is little difference between their cultures and genuine biblical faith in Jesus. For some Christians, accepting Jesus means also accepting the cultural forms that accompanied the presentation of the gospel they received. It is also hard for many of us—especially those in the West—to fathom how someone can remain a “Muslim” or “Hindu” and still faithfully follow Jesus from a solidly biblical foundation, not to mention growing in his or her relationship with Jesus.

The answer to this apparent contradiction in terms comes down to the

distinction between genuine faith and the cultural/religious forms and practices that surround a person because of the family and community into which he was born. It is what is in the heart that counts, not what can be seen on the outside. The cultural/religious behavior on the outside may look alarmingly similar to those who have no faith in Jesus, thereby obscuring the heart transformation that Jesus has accomplished on the inside. The article on Syncretism on page 20 illustrates this point.

To be sure, these followers of Jesus confront unique challenges that make their lives more difficult. Even though outwardly remaining a Muslim, Hindu, etc., they often face persecution from those both inside and outside their culture who do not understand or accept the choice they have made to follow Jesus from within the culture of their birth.

### **No Easy Choices**

Because of the long history of conflict and animosity between “Christian” com-

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Each person who chooses to remain within the culture of his birth must be led by the Holy Spirit as he studies the Scriptures with others into choosing wisely which aspects of his culture contradict biblical teaching and must be left behind and which may be retained or given new biblical meaning. But this is the task that every believer faces each day, including those who come from “Christian” cultures. All of us as Jesus followers are called to discern what must be rejected from our surrounding culture, no matter where we are born. Even within a “Christian” culture, if we are truly faithful to follow Jesus, we will be seen as a peculiar people who will be “encouraged” to fit in with the surrounding culture or face persecution for our obedience to Jesus.

munities and other competing cultural/religious communities in various places around the world, there are no easy answers for those who come to faith in Jesus from non-Christian cultural/religious backgrounds. If they leave to join a traditional Christian church, they are seen as traitors to their family, friends and community. At this point, simply following Jesus is not perceived as the problem so much as having joined a foreign, even hostile, community.

Upon joining a “Christian” cultural community, the new convert is often greeted with suspicion. “Is he a spy? Is his new faith genuine? Can we really trust him?” No matter how hard he tries, his behaviors don’t fully match the new culture he has joined, and to many he will never truly “be one of us.” The convert is often

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not trusted to marry into the families of the church. This is a very serious problem for anyone coming to faith in this way. It can be a very lonely existence for the new convert and a not-so-subtle warning to anyone else who would think of leaving the culture of his birth to follow Jesus

### **The Good News**

While many may be uncomfortable with the idea of Muslim or Hindu followers of Jesus, and while there are legitimate concerns about whether the biblical faith of these people can survive in such hostile cultural contexts, one thing seems clear. We worship a risen Savior who is King of Kings, before whom the religious and cultural barriers of the world present no insurmountable obstacles. His Kingdom continues to break forth in places and in ways that defy our best efforts to control and quantify. (See Rebecca Lewis’ article starting on page 15.) God’s purposes within every tribe and tongue will not be thwarted by these man-made limitations nor by our inability to understand what He is doing. While God’s people have wrestled with the problem of how to bring Muslims, Hindus, etc. to faith in Jesus, God has been at work in unexpected ways to overcome these cultural barriers and introduce people to the Jesus of the Bible. We should all rejoice when the biblical Jesus is exalted and followed by people of any background and culture.

If these people remain faithful to Jesus, the potential for impacting the major blocs of unreached peoples with biblical faith is enormous. The gospel has the potential to move rapidly from person to person within these cultural contexts and to transform them from the inside. Donald McGavran taught about the potential of whole people movements where the gospel travels rapidly along

the natural lines of family and community relationships. Over time the study of the Bible in search of the real Jesus could become an accepted practice within these cultures.

In many cases the message of Jesus is not the initial or primary obstacle to people coming to faith, but instead the foreign cultural connections of the messenger and the expectation that a Jesus follower must join a foreign cultural community. These kinds of obstacles can be reduced when the gospel is presented by someone within the culture, thereby making rapid growth possible.

### **How Should We as Outsiders Respond?**

To say the least, the phenomenon of Bible-believing followers of Jesus identifying themselves as Muslims, Hindus, etc. has become a hot topic of discussion in mission circles and beyond. In some cases it has led to persecution of these Jesus followers by those in the Church who believe that this phenomenon is a corruption of the faith. Some have even appealed to governmental power to suppress such expressions of faith. As Rebecca Lewis explains in her article starting on page 21, this has been a common practice over the centuries by those trying to maintain what they feel is the “correct” expression of the faith. Tragically, it has led to the martyrdom of tens of thousands of people who were seeking to follow Jesus. In our day, such practices should not be tolerated by any follower of Jesus.

Whether we think that Jesus Movements are a good or bad thing, I hope that we can all agree that these people have the right to follow Jesus according to their conscience and should be free to do so without harassment by people who claim to know the better way to follow Jesus. It is their choice to make whether they stay within the culture of

their birth or not, and we should respect their choice.

Jesus Movements are indigenous movements that need to be left to flourish on their own without the kind of outside influence or control that could rob them of their indigenous character and even endanger lives. The members of these movements need to be the ones in charge of the contacts they have with believers and ministries from other cultures. History has shown that even well-meaning endorsement of Jesus Movements can be dangerous. Mission organizations, no matter how well intentioned, need to allow Jesus Movements to take the lead and not try to claim ownership of or authority over these movements.

As followers of Jesus from different cultural backgrounds, we must be willing to allow God to establish biblical faith in other cultures in ways that looks very different from our own. One day, when we stand before the throne of God and worship Jesus along with people from every other tribe and tongue, I do not think we will worship God out of the uniformity of one “Christian” culture but out of the unique cultural expressions of every people. In this way God will be most glorified.

### **Join the Mission Frontiers Support Team**

With this issue we are initiating a renewed effort to be good stewards of our finances. We are asking all of our readers who believe in what we are doing to consider giving a yearly gift of \$180 or a monthly gift of \$15 to help us further the vision of reaching the unreached peoples. Our initial goal is to have 1,500 of our readers join our support team. You can read the details on page 6. If you cannot afford that much, please consider giving whatever you can. If you can’t afford anything at this time, but enjoy reading MF, please consider your ongoing subscription as our gift to you. We already have 14 people who have sent in \$180 or become monthly givers. I will let you know in each issue of MF how we are progressing. Go to [www.missionfrontiers.org/donate](http://www.missionfrontiers.org/donate) to give or to the next page to learn more. f