



Editorial

RDW

Dear Reader,

TIME's June 30 cover demands to know, "Should Christians Convert Muslims?"

Amazingly, this cover story in TIME mentions us four times, directly or indirectly. Also, my son-in-law, Dr. Todd Johnson, the Director of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary's new Center for the Study of Global Christianity, was interviewed at length by the writers of this cover story.

And it is nice that we are not being criticized in all four cases--only in one of them. All in all, it is a fair and accurate article, even if embarrassing at points. TIME'S story is mild compared to the earnest diatribe from India summarized on page 11—in that mirror you may not easily recognize what you see.

Certainly the most deadly accusation the story makes of Christian missions to Muslims in general is that while missionaries generally love the people with whom they work, many of them also seek to "replace" Islam--not just the faith but the very cultural tradition of Muslims.

It is sort of a "love the people, hate the religion and culture" situation. But is that okay?

Do you know what? Lots of people also hate Christianity as a religion, and in fact the Bible itself is highly critical of "religious rituals." Read Isaiah chapter 1 for one of the most harsh description of religious formalities in all the world's literature.

However, the incessantly inconvenient problem is that Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. are not just religious systems, they are also highly elaborated, major cultural traditions.

Saudi Arabian leading families know that. They may hate the U.S. military as well as Christianity, but they nevertheless seek to send their young people to Harvard and Princeton. They apparently are aware that Christianity as a religion is not the same as Christianity as a cultural tradition.

But some terrorists equate the two. They may want to destroy Harvard and Christianity--the whole Christian culture.

Do missionaries to Islam equate the two? Do they wish not only to change the faith of their "converts" but to "replace" the entire Muslim cultural tradition?

Yes, some of them do.

Should they?

No.

The New Testament portrays unpromisingly the fact that Greeks could adopt the vital, spiritual faith of the Old Testament (and later New Testament itself) and stay within their elaborate, Hellenistic cultural tradition. This was early opposed by Jewish followers of Christ, who insisted that Greeks be "converted" to Jewish culture, not just "converted" spiritually.

From this it is perfectly clear (but to many missionaries not obvious) that becoming a true, heart-follower of Jesus Christ does not require a cultural "conversion." It does require a conversion of the heart, but only Evangelical speakers of English talk like that!

Yet, this simple fact has ultra-profound significance for missions. Missionaries struggling mightily to be effective embroil themselves in language and cultural learning, v

difficult as to be described as "culture shock," and even after they have been years on the field they have (to quote Charles Kraft) "culture fatigue."

Curiously it is even harder for Muslims, Hindus, etc. to give up their culture than it is for missionaries to become accustomed to their culture.

Point One, then, is that it is better to concentrate on the Biblical, spiritual aspects of conversion than to try to extract people from their background. It is hazardous to

build on a few individuals who want to break away from their culture.

This is far easier said than done, of course. Point Two is that unknowingly the missionary quite often goes carrying with him preconceived ideas about what "a church" looks like. It is not necessary to impose an American-style church. (By this I refer to the practice of collecting together fragments of extended families and virtually ignoring the need for worship on the family level.)

True, the great twentieth-century missiologist, McGavran, taught missionaries that evangelism is not good enough. People won to Jesus Christ need accountable fellowship as well. Thus "church planting" become the almost universal rallying cry, largely in place of mere evangelism.

However, what if our American idea of "a church" is itself extra-biblical? Allowing people to remain within their Muslim culture may seem impossible if an American-style church is going to be necessary.

It isn't necessary! Once again we have to go back to the Bible. The so-called "churches" of the New Testament were

worshipping households--like that of Cornelius, Lydia, or Crispus. They were what are nowadays called house churches. This precisely means that we do not have to compete with mosques.

Point Three: It is not necessary to assume that our instant-conversion salvation formulas are entirely faithful to the Bible. We need to look for those who are hungering and thirsting after righteousness, not those who are basically seeking adventure in Western ways. We need to reread the New Testament emphasis on salvation as growth in grace over time.

Thus, much of the futility and confusion in outreach to Muslims (and Hindus, et al.) is due to common failure to understand these three points. But there is a fourth.

The Fourth Point, which the TIME article brings up strongly is the simple fact that most secular observers of mission work value more highly what they can see as visible, outward, physical, "humanitarian" endeavors. They then tend to measure the worth of missions by such external activities.

They are dead wrong on this score. By comparison, nothing, nothing outweighs the value of a life transformed from deceit, hate, pride, and greed to honesty, loyalty and love. More crucially scarce on the "mission field" are transformed people than all the powdered milk in the world.

On the other hand, if we want truly to transform people, to win them to our Lord and to our God, we cannot ignore the fact that we are basically in the business of glorifying that Lord, and that the glory of God cannot be fully appreciated unless we can demonstrate God's concern for suffering and pain, for disease, darkness and poverty.

This is the most important rationale for what is often dismissed as "social action."

That is, we may indeed win people to ourselves by meeting their "felt needs." But that does not necessarily win people to God and His Kingdom. To do that we must deal effectively with people's real problems—in the name of Christ. People must understand and be attracted to the kind of God we preach, not just to a kind of heaven-procuring "deal" He offers. His glory must be seen, not just heard. We heal people not because that will get them to heaven but because it can introduce both them and onlookers to the full scope of the love of their Father in heaven. The Bible says plainly, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven (Matt 5: 16).

A major additional plank in any plan to glorify God has got to be a recognition of His handiwork in creation.

This is the reason we have stressed so fervently the incomparable video, "Unlocking the Mystery of Life." Unfortunately, the super-special offer for 50 copies has ended. However, you can get copies for \$10 each, postpaid either by phoning in a credit card order (Betty, 626-296-7501) or by sending a check (made out to USCWM) to Betty Leung, Video Offer, 1605 Elizabeth Street, Pasadena, CA, 91104.