

Away With The Sterile Debates

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A Response to Joseph Cumming's 'Muslim Followers of Jesus'?

To facilitate a truly global conversation, we ask Christian leaders from around the world to respond to the Global Conversation's lead articles. These points of view do not necessarily represent Christianity Today magazine or the Lausanne Movement. They are designed to stimulate discussion from all points of the compass and from different segments of the Christian community. Please add your perspective by posting a comment so that we can learn and grow together in the unity of the Spirit.

As a follower of Jesus with a Christian family background, as a Lebanese having grown up and currently living on the Muslim-majority side of Beirut, as the grandson and son of grandparents and parents who have loved and served the Muslim community with the gospel of Jesus throughout their lives, I am often alarmed at how sterile and decontextualized much of the whole debate over so-called 'contextualization' has often become in churches, seminaries, and missionary circles. The irony is that most of those directly affected on a day-to-day basis by the issue, the 'Nabils' and 'Ibrahims' in the Muslim world, whose lives are on the line yet for whom the victory of one side of the debate over the other is virtually meaningless, are not even aware this debate is raging. Did members of the Gentile churches of the New Testament await the outcome of the debate within the Jerusalem church about their legitimacy before they became and called themselves Christ-followers (Christianoi)? Thank God they did not!

Joseph Cumming has served us well in his article by distilling this tiresome debate for us in around 2,000 words. He puts faces and names to the controversial phenomenon: 'Nabil' and 'Ibrahim' summarize the main issues of the debate dialectically in eight concise points. Cumming helpfully recasts the debate in the comparative context of Messianic Judaism. I say 'helpfully' because today, unlike in the '70s, most American Christians have become sympathetic to the cause of Messianic Jews. Conversely, due to the widespread attitude of suspicion of all things Muslim since 9/11, a substantial number of American Christians find it hard to believe there is anything legitimate or even redeemable in a Muslim's religion and culture. Never mind the fact that, as an Arab Christian, I share much more with the culture of Arab Muslims than with that of American Christians.

I remember sitting half-amused some time ago at an international missions conference lunch table, while two gentlemen debated whether my grandfather, Fouad Accad (author of *Building Bridges: Christianity and Islam*, 1997), would have sat more comfortably with the C4 or the C5 side of the 'contextualization' debate. My grandfather was an Arab Christian, a friend of Muslims, conversant in the Qur'an and Muslim traditions and practices. He lived and died in the Arab world, was there as friend and mentor at the side of many high-profile Muslim leaders as they embarked on the path of Christ and remained respected leaders in their communities. He did not engage them in a debate on whether they should proclaim their break with Islam, pack their bags and travel 'West' or simply await persecution and death. He did not give them a list of items they could legitimately keep in their religious bag and others they should do away with. Nor would he have awaited the decision of mission and church leaders on whether he should proceed with his calling using the C4 or C5 model of ministry. Thank God he did not!

Those like my grandfather and father, who are engaged in living and modeling Christ in the Muslim world (be they cultural insiders or outsiders), should not, and indeed do not, await a green light from some mission-theory gurus sitting in the West in order to pursue Christ's calling. Joseph Cumming and his family are an excellent example of that. They lived the way of Christ and shared his love in the context of real-life friendships in North Africa, and they practiced responsible and wise

discipleship several years before the C1?C6 debate began to rage. This kind of discipleship continues to ask two simple, time-tested questions: (1) how will you make sense of your social identity, with full respect for your context and avoiding the loss of your social influence, in the light of your experience of the living Christ and in obedience to his Word? And (2) how will you live your life in the path of Christ in a way that is compelling and can serve as a model for your family, relatives, and broader community? These are the two great questions of relevance and continuity that no effective servant of the Good News can afford to ignore.

When certain key figures of the Jerusalem synagogue (Paul in Acts 9) and of the Jerusalem church (Peter in Acts 10) came to terms with the fact that their primary accountability was to God and to the living Christ, rather than to Judaism and its precepts, they were released for effective ministry to the Gentiles, for whom, they realized, Jesus had died as well. When we, in our churches, come to terms with the fact that our primary accountability is to God and the living Christ, rather than to Christianity and its institutional boundaries, we will be released for effective ministry to Muslims, for whom Jesus has indeed died. Cumming has mastered the art of marrying relational transparency with gospel clarity, on the one hand, with the ability, on the other, to explain clearly some complex and sensitive issues of missiology to the internal audience of the church. Let me be clear. It is not the classification of a phenomenon on a scale that is the problem. On the contrary, when Travis developed his C1-C6 spectrum in 1998, he provided an important framework to understand what God had been doing across the world. (See "Must All Muslims Leave Islam to Follow Jesus?" by John Travis, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 34 (4), 1998, pp. 411-415.) It is the ensuing discourse, which turned an interpretive framework into a missional methodology, that misses the forest for the trees.

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