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Introduction

Just as with all spiritual realities, there are many different ways we can express what happens when someone turns to Christ. In evangelical Christian circles we tend to prefer terms like "born again," coming from Jesus' words: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:3 ESV).[1] Or we talk of someone being "saved," as in the case of the Philippian jailer: "Then he brought them out and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' And they said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household'" (Acts 16:30-31).

Both of these are truly beautiful word pictures, but I fear that we have failed to recognize that they paint *incomplete* images. Just as God is truly our Father, the still Bible uses a multitude of other terms and concepts to express who he is—creator, king, righteous judge, shepherd, among others. If we limited ourselves to the term Father we would have a woefully poor theology. In the same way, our theology of conversion suffers if we limit our thinking about it to only a few of the many possible terms or conceptualizations available.

Furthermore, like many words that are part of our Christian vocabulary, the common words for conversion have come to be loaded with unrecognized, and often unintended, theological frameworks. For example, our word choice of "born again" tends to project the idea that coming to Christ is an event, a singular moment in time that can be clearly documented with date-time stamp, such as the day and time a baby is born. This can produce a whole circus of questionable church practices such as expecting people to be able to testify of the exact moment of their conversion as a prerequisite to baptism or ordination.

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[1] All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted

Likewise, how should we understand what happened in the lives of Peter, John, or any of the other disciples? At what moment in time were they "born again"? Was it at their baptism, or on Resurrection Sunday in the upper room, or perhaps at some other moment? We have to be careful because our choice of a particular "moment" has theological implications.

Moreover, what about a man that eventually became a coworker of Paul, the Jewish teacher Apollos:

> Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately (Acts 18:24-26).

The story of Apollos is a bit murky. The text says he "taught accurately the things concerning Jesus," but his teaching, and presumably his personal experience, seems to have been based on nothing more than the message of John the Baptist, which was certainly lacking core gospel elements such as the cross and resurrection. At what moment in time was he saved? All this serves to remind us that turning to Christ is a much more complicated picture than common Christian terms might express.

While this may be only a minor problem when communicating with other Christians, it can be a huge obstacle on the frontiers of mission because the terms we use build the mental frameworks in which we conduct our ministry. For example, if I am thinking exclusively in terms of my Muslim friend be "born again," with its imagery of a painful, dramatic arrival, I might miss signs that he is already following the example of the Jews in Berea in Acts 17 who did not suddenly convert, but who appear to have slowly come to believe in Jesus as they carefully examined the Scriptures (Acts 17:10-12). In fact, when we frame salvation as a moment in time, we might actually be discouraging our Muslim friends from following the teachings of Jesus who said: "For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?" (Luke 14:28). Therefore, those of us called to reach people within the house of Islam need to develop more robust ways of thinking about how Muslims encounter and come to embrace Christ.

This article will explore a different way to think about conversion that helps us move away from a focus on a singular even, and towards a richer understanding of conversion. Could it be that a Muslim's experience of turning to Jesus is better understood through similarities to the experience of Abram leaving Ur of the Chaldeans, or that of Israel as they escaped Egyptian bondage? In other words, conversion on the frontier of mission is better understood as people moving from one spiritual homeland to another—the metaphor of spiritual migration.

Metaphorical Reasoning

The use of metaphors has always been one of the ways God helped people understand spiritual realities. Whether we look at Abram being told that he would have decendants like the stars of the heavens (Gen 15:5), Isaiah calling Israel God's vineyard (chapter 5), or Peter describing the church as a royal priesthood, the Bible is filled with metaphoric reasoning. Furthermore, in the gospels, the use of metaphor explodes, with our Lord Jesus greatly employing this rhetorical device. Over and over he said things such as "The kingdom of heaven is like . . . " and invited his hearers to think about what they did not understand (the kingdom of heaven) by comparing it to something they did understand (e.g., field or a wedding). This is a perfect expression of the use of metaphor as a reasoning device, and it would seem that Jesus used this linguistic structure more than any other.

Metaphors and analogies work so well because they structure our understanding through a simple comparison of two objects or ideas which are similar in one way or another. Metaphorical reasoning uses these similarities to build what we might call conceptual bridges, connecting something that is familiar, concrete, and easily understood to something that is more abstract or esoteric.

Although the use of analogies is not so common in the West today, through history, metaphorical reasoning has played an important, if sometimes mysterious, role in philosophical, legal, and even scientific problem-solving (Barta, 2019). This form of logic is particularly helpful when we are trying to understand something that cannot be directly observed. Thus we would argue that metaphorical reasoning is a near perfect fit for thinking about the changes wrought in the human heart at conversion. One of the reasons metaphors work so well is that they, along with parables and other forms of analogy, function in human communication as decentering devices. They help people step back from their presuppositions and ask important questions like *What is really going on here?* and *What is this telling me about the big picture?* This is particularly

important when discussing phenomenon with which we are overly familiar. Thus the decentering aspect of using migration as an analogy for conversion can prove useful for those of us who have grown up thinking exclusively through more common Christian frameworks. Therefore, when we use a new metaphor to think about a well-known topic we are more likely to see new dimensions of significance and meaning in what was previously routine and overly familiar.

In light of the decentering power of using a new metaphor, I believe the extended allegory of spiritual migration can help us move toward a deeper understanding of what happens as Muslims are delivered out of the kingdom of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved son (Col 1:13). There are several aspects of human migration that could offer us spiritual insights via metaphoric reasoning; however, in this article, I will explore two: the reasons people migrate and the path those migrations often take.

What Makes Conversion Valid?

Before we can conduct an objective and robust examination of these factors, there is a common evangelical presupposition that needs to be challenged. Many Christians assume that if a person has a true conversion, the reasons that moved them were spiritual. People whose conversion is closely connected to practical reasons or physical realities are often viewed with suspicion. Of course, missionaries must seek to discern the sincerity of a person's conversion, but I fear that much of our skepticism is rooted in a false dichotomy of human nature. The evangelical missions community often acts as if only spiritual things affect the spiritual man, and only physical things impact the physical man. However, once we bring that idea out into the light, we quickly see its error because there is no solid scriptural support for such a sharp separation of the spiritual and physical sides of man. The things that affect humans physically also impact them spiritually and perhaps *vice versa*. Thus, observable social factors can lead Muslims to make very real spiritual changes just as surely as the more spiritual things in their lives do.

When social scientists consider human migration, one of the first things they do is classify the reasons people move into those which *push* people to leave where they currently live and those which *pull* them toward a new a destination. Some examples of push factors include famine, war, and poverty whereas pull factors include things such as better jobs, good schools, or political freedom. In most cases, if not all, people are

motivated by a combination of push and pull factors (Fouberg, Murphy, and de Blij, 2015, 68-73).

Push Factors

Over the past 25 years I have interviewed more than one hundred Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) and had countless informal conversations with MBBs in which they describe how they found new life in Christ. Many times I have heard what can only be called push factors in their conversion. Perhaps the clearest description came from an old Uzbek man who recounted an incident that happened at the mosque one afternoon (author interview 2012). He saw his fellow Muslim men spitting chewing tobacco into the drinking water flowing to a village:

> I was very angry but couldn't say anything because there were several of them … that kind of attitude made me wonder, "Why do believers like them do that?" They do it because they say, "If you bring offerings, it removes God's anger from you." So, if you bring offerings, you can do anything; it's sort of like bribing God. So, in the Islamic world people do not change, but they feel free to do whatever because all they need to do is bring offering and they will be released from their sin. So they remain sinful and never change. That's their main principle. They felt free to spit into water that others drink. All of them did! *That really disgusted me and pushed me away from Islam* [emphasis mine].

This MBB clearly articulated what I have heard many others imply—that certain behaviors in their Muslim society caused them to lose interest in the religion handed down from their forefathers. In this case, it was an obvious disregard for the health and wellbeing of others which he recognized was rooted in the theological framework of local Islam (Abdul el-Zien 1977). Although attraction to the church was later part of this man's story, this was a factor that clearly pushed a 70-year-old man away from Islam.

One common push factor is religious nominalism and hypocrisy because people are often repulsed when religion is obviously little more than a social mask, especially in the home. One MBB related:

> My mom . . . [took] . . . all responsibility for the family because my father was [an] alcoholic actually. He was a drunk and we did not have peace in our home . . . I remember when I went to school the first time. My mom brought me to the school and said "wait for your father when all your

lessons will be finished. Wait for father and he will pick you up." But I was the last in the class. Nobody came to take me from the school. I went home by myself . . . I remember this feeling still. I was so angry, like nobody could come to take me . . . when I was closer to my house I heard my father's voice . . . he opened the door and he was drunk. It was so painful to me (author interview 2013).

Unfortunately, this kind of push does not always turn someone to Christ. It might push them completely out of all religion into atheism or agnosticism.

Another push factor can sometimes be seen in a reaction to Orthodox Islam itself. Many MBBs report that the more they learned about their religion, the less they wanted to follow its path. Sometimes it was the harshness of Allah in the Qur'an, other times it was the some of the theological implications of Muhammad's revelations that pushed them away. One man's story is a particularly good illustration of this. He was an Islamic law scholar and judge. Although he had studied Sharia for many years, he found himself repulsed by what he found as he researched the hadiths in order to make one particular ruling. He was called upon to render a judgment in the torrid case of a Muslim who raped his non-Muslim neighbor's wife:

But as I studied the related hadiths, I realized that this man was guiltless according to Sharia. He was in a long-standing conflict with this neighbor, so taking her was considered a "spoil of war" and perfectly legal. I could not believe this! How could this be right? How could this be the just in the eyes of an Almighty God? (author interview 2016).

The ruling he was forced to make based on Islamic law was simply more than this honest and sensitive man could take. It launched him on a slow journey, lasting more than ten years, in which he came to know Christ.

A final push factor that I wish to explore is when Muslims feel their existential questions are left unanswered by the Islam they know. Sometimes these questions made Allah seem distant, even as they tried hard to find him. One person shared:

I would get depressed because I could not please God, no matter how hard I tried. So gradually I became disappointed because I felt like Allah was far away, that he didn't care about me, so he intentionally created all these hard laws that were impossible to observe . . . Over time I became disappointed in Islam (author interview 2012).

Other times existential questions arose from the hardships of life. One woman recounted:

> I remember when I got married, it was a bad marriage . . . I remember [asking God] "Why is my life so difficult? Why do I have to suffer all the time? Why did you even create us, people?" Because my first husband was a drug addict and it was very hard (author interview 2013).

Henri Gooren theorized that people become religious seekers and open to other religions when they become dissatisfied with the meanings generated by their natal religion (2007, 339). If at a crisis point in life people encounter other possible explanations, other ways of making sense of life, then they are likely to migrate towards those.

However, someone cannot cannot migrate to a place that they do not know exists. When someone is pushed from their natal religion, they must also feel the pull to something else. That is why observers speak of push-pull factors in one breath.

Pull Factors

When people physically migrate, it is natural and expected that they are drawn toward places which they believe are better in some way. It may be more politically stable or offer better economic options. They move in the hope of finding something better than what they had before. Furthermore, the improvement must appear to be very significant because the cost of migration is high. In spiritual migration, such as from Islam to Christ, the same is true.

In the seminal work, *Acts of Faith*, Stark and Finke spend a great deal of time exploring the idea of the costs associated with religion, particularly of changing religions. They point out that people are rational beings, thus they make rational choices, including those about whatever costs are associated with changing their religion (2000, 86). In other words, whenever a certain factor pulls a Muslim toward Christ, that factor represents something they subjectively feel is worth the price. This is important to keep in mind as we consider the various pull factors below because whether or not we consider them significant, many Muslims view these things as valuable enough that they would pay a dear price to obtain them.

One pull factor I have often heard recounted is the good reputation of Christians. This can come from several different perspectives. Sometimes it is the godly lives of

missionaries or local, evangelistically-minded Christians with whom a Muslim has contact. This is especially powerful when it is a family member who has converted. One woman shared:

> Every time he [husband] came home drunk I would scold and curse him . . . I cursed so badly. . . The day I came to Jesus, He also healed my tongue. I stopped using that dirty language. My oldest daughter saw that change and she said after two weeks, "Mom, can I come to that group with you?" I said, "Why?" She said, "Well, it must be a very good place. You have stopped cursing!" (author interview 2011).

Lofland and Stark called this the draw of "positive deviant behavior" (1965). That is, in the eyes of the local community, a former Muslim who now professes Christ is a social deviant, socially their behavior deviates from expected norms, and specifically in ways that are expected to be of ill repute. Therefore, when they demonstrate good behavior it is even more significant precisely because local expectations are that social deviants act the opposite.

Another common pull factor is supernatural occurrences, including dreams, visions, physical healings, and other supernatural encounters. While each convert's story is unique, the commonality of this pull factor is that in some way or another, God in Christ interrupted their life in a way that was both supernatural and undeniable.

Westerners, including missionaries, struggle to understand the place of dreams and visions. Yet they stand at or near the top of the list when you discuss the supernatural with Muslims who have turned to Christ. Testimony of a Muslim imam who converted to Christ illustrates this well:

> My niece gave me the Injil, and I was very interested to read it. But each time I tried, I soon felt a strange presence in the room, as if someone had walked in. This scared me and so I put the book up on a shelf. Finally, I pulled it down and started to read it strongly, quickly going through many chapters. Then, once again I felt that same presence. I look up and there was a man in a white robe standing near me. He spoke and said, "You know who I am. Why won't you believe in me?" I knew it was Isa, so I immediately fell on my face and said, "yes, yes, I do believe in you"! (author interview 2015).

Rick Kronk has documented and sought to explain this phenomena in his excellent book, *Dreams and Visions: Muslims Miraculous Journey to Jesus* (2010). He asserts that Muslims are culturally prepared to respond to supernatural encounters in a way that modern Western people are not. Dreams, and their daytime equivalent, visions, are a deep and significant part of the Islamic worldview and theology because Muhammad received his supposed revelations in this manner.

We must not think that supernatural pull factors are simply the result of Pentecostal and Charismatic influence in contemporary frontier mission. In writing about the early centuries of the Christian era, Lamin Sanneh writes, "Visions, dreams, ecstasy, exorcism, and healings featured prominently in the mission of Christianity for many centuries" (2008, 59). Thus the supernatural pull factor is not inconsistent with early historic Christian mission.

Although we should rightly celebrate the Lord using these supernatural means to pull Muslims toward himself, it is important to always remember that dreams or visions do not bring a complete witness in and of themselves. This supernatural pull factor is incomplete without someone or something bearing witness to the content of the gospel. It might be a person, it might be a copy of the Bible, it could even be a gospel recording or video of some kind. But in one way or another the dream or vision must be accompanied by human participation.

Conversion as Non-linear Movement

In the past, evangelicals have often imagined conversion as a singular event. This is probably due to the prominent place Saul's "Damascus road" experience plays in our theology. This has changed some in recent years, but conversion as a singular moment continues to influence mission thinking. But what if people don't always know what their final destination is when they start down the path we call conversion? Based on the testimonies of MBBs who have painted their conversion story as more of a complicated migration journey than a point-in-time decision, I believe we ought to think of conversion as more of a a movement through metaphysical space.

When people migrate from their homelands, it is often a long and circuitous process. They may first move from their village to the capital city, then to a city in a nearby country. Since the first step is often the hardest, it may take them two or three tries to make it in the first new location, so that they bounce back and forth a few times.

Specialists in human geography sometimes use the term "step migration" to capture this process (Conway, 1980). However, even this term can be deceptive. Steps imply order and plan, something that may be partly or even completely lacking when a migrant sets out to leave their homeland. What we understand as their final destination is often only known in retrospect, after many moves forward, sideways, even backward at times.

In the same way, when MBBs describe their personal experience of coming to Christ, it is seldom a simple switch from one religion to another. Even those who tell of a dramatic initial conversion experience often back-fill their story with details of several spiritual turns or unexpected twists. Perhaps this is because they have many obstacles to navigate—social, religious, political and economic. Consequently, their conversion stories do not usually play out as straightforward linear movements, as if they were going directly from one socio-religious place to another. The circuitous path many MBBs follow to becoming disciples of Christ can take many shapes.

One of the ways that coming to Christ looks like a step migration is that the final destination is often not in view at the beginning. Step migrations are often characterized by an initial move to a larger city in the same country before eventually settling in a distant foreign land. In a similar way, the last thing on most Muslim spiritual migrants' minds is joining a Christian church. One young MBB who came to Christ after moving to the U.S. for university study talked about his first step:

> I was challenged by the lives of my Christian friends. I thought to myself, "I should be a better Muslim." So I started really following the path of Islam, trying to be as good in my faith as they were in theirs. But the more I tried, the more I failed, and the more attractive their way of life was (author interview 2017).

Just as many physical migrants move to a big city in their own country to improve their life, many Muslims start the migration of conversion by first making changes in their lives *as Muslims*. Only much later can these be seen as their first steps in a journey to Christ—an ultimate destination they never would have imagined at the time.

Another expression of this step migration is when we see people spiritually moving sideways rather than forward. For many Muslims, the first step of their spiritual migration is toward an expression of Christianity that reflects missionary culture, but eventually they take more of a lateral movement. That is, while continuing their faith

in Christ, they moved to a more indigenous expression of their faith and one that does not include being part of what they now view as foreign Christianity.

One couple shared with me about how they joined the missionary-led Baptist church when they first came to Christ and remained there for several years until they faced a deep spiritual crisis at the death of the man's father:

> When my husband's father died, we realized that we didn't know any of our relatives anymore, we were out of contact with them for so long! We were so lost . . . we did not even know what rituals to do. We were so far from our culture . . . We felt like we had lost our identity. Until that time we told everyone that we were Christians . . . but no more. Now we are just followers of Isa. We are no longer part of a church, but now we have a small group where four, five, or six families come together to talk, eat and share. We take turns at whose house we meet (author interview 2012).

This couple's conversion journey started out as a dramatic joining of the "foreign religion," but eventually life led them down a more complicated path toward experimentation of being both a follower of Christ and part of their own people. Not everyone has this kind of experience. However, it is possible that it is more common than many missionaries realize because they are used to thinking only in terms of the dramatic first step, rather than a long spiritual journey.

Over the years I have heard many MBBs recount this spiritual step migration process which led them through different expressions of their faith. One very good MBB friend, who is now a cross-cultural missionary, put it this way:

> I wish I had known at first what I know now. If I had not gone so far away culturally from my family, I probably could have reached some of them. That was all I knew then, but later I became more sensitive. I now see the need to stay closer to my culture rather than emphasize our differences. I would try to stay nearer so they could see my life and ask questions (author interview 2013).

Describing this spiritual migration, Lewis Rambo speaks of a person who develops and grows beyond an exclusively personal conversion into having active engagement with social structures and cultural institutions of their natal society (1993, 147). To put it missiologically, such a complicated step migration may be one of the ways converts eventually contextualize their faith praxis and develop into effective evangelists among

their own people. This instinctive contextualization is not a modern anthropological construct. It reflects an ancient and deep impulse in the Christian faith, dating at least back to the early centuries of the Christian faith. Lamin Sanneh, an MBB himself, has observed that our faith has always been "subjected to the principle of transmission to the dynamics of reception and adaptation" and that there will always be "the primacy of indigenous appropriation" (2008, 47). Thus some of the non-linear movement we hear expressed so often in conversion narratives are examples of this "indigenous appropriation" working out in individual lives of Muslims as they settle down in their new spiritual homeland.

Emotional Implications of Migration

When we engage Muslims with the gospel we are hopefully engaging them through more than intellect, but with and through emotions as well. Thus it is helpful to consider some of the emotional dimensions of human migration and what insights it might offer for spiritual migrants. There are perhaps many, but we will only take time to explore three.

Migration Can Be Traumatic

Since many terrible things are driving Muslims from their ancestral homelands (war, terrorism, famine), we often think of trauma as a cause of migration. While that is true, we must also consider that the very act of migration can generate significant emotional trauma due to the profound dislocation and emotional distress migrants experience as they attempt to reestablish themselves in a new land. Thus, when we apply the metaphor of migration to conversion, we begin to recognize that many Muslims experience confusion, distress, and related emotional trauma as they turn to Christ. A close friend once told me: "For the first few years I did not know who I was. Was I still a Muslim? Was I now a Christian? It was a very confusing time for me. All I could do was to hang on to Jesus and hope things would get better someday" (author interview 2004). This trauma of spiritual migration can also extend to the new believer's entire family. One MBB shared in a conference:

> I wept when I realized how much pain my family was feeling because I had become [a] Christian. They really felt I was dead to them, and when I thought about how I caused that pain, I was crushed. It is still a good thing that I came to know Christ, but it caused my family so much pain, and that hurt me when I finally allowed myself to think about it.

Missionaries and Christians in general tend to ignore this dimension of conversion because we are focused on the immense, eternal benefits of coming to Christ. However, by framing conversion through the metaphorical lens of migration, we can appreciate the pain it can cause in the here and now. By recognizing this we become more compassionate and understanding with new believers, encouraging them to process their pain in healthy ways rather than hiding it because they feel it is unworthy of Christ.

Continued Emotional Connection to the Homeland

No matter how bad the situation was, and no matter how great the new land is, people normally desire some kind of ongoing connection to their homeland. The land of our childhood has a powerful though often subliminal hold on our minds. This is because of "episodic memory"—memory that is linked to particular places, times, and emotions (Stratford 2012). Whenever someone migrates, episodic memory acts as a strong emotional attachment to their past, no matter the push or pull forces involved. We often see this manifested as migrants set up ethnic enclaves in their new land to help them maintain a sense of connection to the old.

Sometimes the need for continued connection to one's spiritual homeland is manifest in the almost unexplainable power of sensory memory. I remember once visiting with a MBB evangelist who had planted several churches. On the way to visit me he had this experience in a taxi:

> When the driver figured out I was a *kafir,* he quickly pushed in a cassette tape. As it played my heart was so touched by the sound of someone chanting the Qur'an. I did not want to feel that way. I did not want to listen. But there was just something about it. The sound was so moving. It was really hard not to be drawn in (author conversation 2008).

Similarly, an Iranian believer in the U.S. spoke of how he reacted when he heard Farsi spoken for the first time in 20 years:

> I started weeping uncontrollably. I don't know where it came from. When I ran away from Iran and Islam, I thought I had forgotten everything about my people and my culture. But suddenly the pain was so real, it had been so deep I had never thought about it until suddenly it was in my face (author interview 2017).

This web of emotional attachments is usually *involuntarily* evoked and catch the person unprepared making it easy to lose control in the moment. We should not be surprised that many MBBs continue to feel a strong sense of attachment to their spiritual homeland. Unfortunately, many missionaries misinterpret these emotional attachments as disloyalty on the part of the new believer. Yet if we apply the metaphor of spiritual migration it becomes easier to see that such longings for the familiar are simply part of being human, because all people have a history. In this case, it is a personal history connected to a Muslim way of life. This can help us sympathize with new believer if they occasionally struggle with all they have left behind for Christ, rather than judging them as weak disciples.

Some Do Not Stay

Despite all the dangers faced and obstacles overcome, not all migrants remain in their new location. For some people the pull of their homeland and perhaps disappointment with the new land are too great. Eventually return to the land they left. This is a dimension of the migration metaphor I would prefer not to explore, but not all Muslims who turn to Christ remain in his body. Obviously this issue has a great deal of theological freight that is beyond the scope of this article, but in practical terms, it is something that most missionaries will face sooner or later.

Sometimes MBBs, including those we have personally discipled, turn their backs on their new faith and return to Islam. In the very least, they return to their Muslim community. Some MBBs may return to the Muslim community relationally while remaining secret believers in Christ. This probably happens more often than we would like to admit. In fact, due to the very sensitive nature of the subject, we know very little about how or why some MBBs turn back to Islam. Nevertheless, the migration metaphor reminds us to confront this reality honestly.

Conclusion

Humans seem to be hardwired to think in terms of metaphors—word pictures that help us understand a concept. Evangelical Christians have traditionally used only a few key ones to describe the act of conversion, images such as being "born again," or "saved." However, no single metaphor can capture all the nuance of a complicated spiritual reality. For this reason, the analogy of spiritual migration can be helpful for gaining a richer understanding of the processes of becoming a disciple of Christ in a frontier mission context. Focusing our thoughts through this lens opened three areas of insight.

First, we considered the concept of push and pull factors. That is, the reasons Muslims turn to Christ can be effectively grouped into those that push them away from Islam, and those that draw them to Christ and his church. Doing this can help us move beyond typical evangelical positions which focus on the attractive power of the gospel, and closer to the messy, complicated world of people who have mixed motivations. The two sides of this equation are deeply interrelated, and are both expressions of God's sovereignty in a person's life—even before they know Christ.

Second, we explored the idea that migration is often non-linear; that is, people seldom move all the way from one religion to another in a single step or in a straight line. This is something social scientists often call step migration. Sometimes people move first to a place closer to home, such as becoming a more devout Muslim. Other times they make lateral moves, such as leaving Western style Christianity to experiment with more indigenous forms. People on the move often do not know their final destination; they are just compelled to go.

Finally we looked at the emotional implications of seeing conversion as a spiritual migration. Migrants usually experience powerful emotions as they move through their journey. In the same way, many Muslims who turn to Christ also face difficult emotions as part of that process. Recognizing this helps us stay more real about their humanity without casting any shadow on the depth of their love for Christ.

For these reasons and others we did not have room to consider, I believe that exploring how people come to Christ through the analogy of human migration offers practical insights into the way the Holy Spirit works and can help us find more robust missiological models for reaching Muslims, and even across other frontiers of the mission world.

Gene Daniels *(pseudonym) has a passion to spread the fame of Jesus in the Muslim world. Twenty-five years ago, he and his family started this journey as church planters in Central Asia, and now his focus is on research, training, and writing.*

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