



## First Let Me Go and Bury My Father

by Dr. Nik Ripken

*The Costly Call to Follow Christ –  
and A Special Challenge for Muslim Seekers*

In the Gospel story, the call to follow Christ is simple and direct. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said (Mark 1:17). What amazes modern readers is the immediacy of the response. Those who heard Jesus’ invitation left family and work to follow Him. In some of those earliest encounters, there seems to be little discussion of – and little struggle with – the cost that following Jesus would require. At other times, however, the issue of cost takes center stage. Jesus was remarkably frank about what following Him would require – and those who encountered His invitation struggled deeply with the cost of His call. In Matthew 8:19-22 and in Luke 9:57-60, we are introduced to several unnamed people who grapple with the implications of discipleship. The comments – and Jesus’ responses – illustrate the kinds of costs that are required of any who would follow Jesus – in any age.

It is impossible to read Scripture without our cultural lenses. One man, for example, indicates a desire to follow – but wants to delay His obedience until he has “buried his father.” Our first inclination is to wonder if the man’s father is already dead. We perhaps presume that the man is asking for a few days for a burial and a season of grieving. But, on closer examination, there is no indication in the comment that the man’s father is already dead – or even that the man’s father is near death. From a different cultural background, we might hear the man’s comment very differently – and hearing it differently might lead us to profound insights about both the call of Christ and the cost of responding to that call. What if the man’s father will not die for another thirty or forty years? What if the man cares more about what his father wants than what Christ is requiring? What if the man is unable or unwilling to follow Christ without his father’s approval or blessing? These kinds of questions give rise to a set of troubling questions that demand our attention – especially as we think about how people from Muslim backgrounds might come to faith in Christ.

### *The Source Material*

Over the past few years, over three hundred Christian believers from Muslim backgrounds have been interviewed. These interviews have yielded remarkable information about the process of conversion. Some findings are rather straight-forward and objective; this kind of information is easily discerned. Other findings, however, seem to surface with time. Sometimes transcending objective and measurable trends, these other findings suggest themes, stories, and narrative streams that are not always readily apparent. This article will highlight some of those themes – and will seek to suggest some appropriate understandings and responses.

### *The Global Profile*

At the risk of generalization, it seems that most of the Muslim believers coming to faith in Christ had not met a western worker before their considering themselves (in their words) “Christian.” This is somewhat of a surprise – and not at all what we would have expected. Of those believers interviewed, only about ten percent recalled meeting a follower of Jesus before their own decision to follow Christ. Once that decision was made, however, these new believers were diligent in seeking out people of faith, even people from other cultures and backgrounds. At that point, they began to seek out someone to assist with baptism and other believers to share in worship and fellowship. In many cases, they also were seeking other Christians who might be able to provide them with some of the “Jesus-plus” benefits: perhaps a job, a spouse, an education, or even the opportunity to live in a “Christian” country where there would be less potential persecution and more support.

Globally, believers from Muslim backgrounds are overwhelmingly male, younger than 25 years of age, and unmarried. These believers have typically never held a job and have little standing in the community. They are also typically literate, which is significant when an encounter with Scripture is possible. Early on, once these new believers have articulated faith in Jesus, they tend to make themselves known to outside believers. In their minds, they have “left Islam” at this point. Somewhat surprisingly, this process of conversion is not closely tied to the

“evangelism” of Christian workers. Rarely do Christian workers intentionally seek out men and women of proven character and substantial social standing within local communities. On the contrary, conversions that result from more western evangelistic effort tend to focus on “the low hanging fruit,” those who actively seek out outside believers on their own. This evangelism is more passive in nature as seekers and believers from Islamic backgrounds initiate the contact with the believing outsider.

The small percentage of women believers from Muslim backgrounds globally is simply startling. In an effort to gather information, some western workers have included wives, sisters, and daughters in numbering those who are believers in Christ based solely upon the testimonies of husbands, brothers, and fathers. But when these same “Christian” women were interviewed, few could articulate a personal relationship with Christ. Most of them knew of no other believers beyond their own family, and almost none had told anyone else of their faith in Christ. According to the information gained through our interviews, women make up fewer than ten per cent of the believing population. And among that ten per cent, the overwhelming majority are single women.

## *The Process of Coming to Christ*

### *a) Dreams and Visions*

Given the fact that most of our interviews were based in communities where there was no western or near-culture worker attempting to incarnate Christ, it is no surprise to discover the pivotal role of dreams and visions in the process of conversion. Dreams and visions seem to be a fairly common (even normal) experience for many with Islam. What is miraculous is not the dreams and visions themselves. What is miraculous, though, is how the Holy Spirit breaks into this common experience and brings understanding and guidance. The Holy Spirit seems to grant new content that leads to a new direction. As God makes Himself known through dreams and visions, it is common for Muslims to see “a bright light” and to hear “a voice without a body” commanding them to “find Jesus, find the Gospel.” The angel Gabriel is a common carrier of this new message, as are visions of Isa and of the Quran. Dreaming of the Bible is not unusual. Through these encounters, God is making Himself known. And, in turn, these dreams and visions tend to initiate a spiritual pilgrimage that, sadly, may last as long as three to five years given the absence of both personal witness and Scripture in either literate or oral forms in most Muslim contexts. These dreams and visions do not bring salvation, simply a powerful change of direction.

### *b) The Bible*

As already noted, most Muslims who come to Christ are literate. Remarkably, many who experience dreams and visions often come into contact with the Bible. It is not uncommon for a Muslim to read the Bible three to five times before expressing faith in Christ. At the time of baptism, most Muslim-background-believers will know much more Scripture than a typical western believer will know even much later in life. This was such a dominant theme of the interviews, that it possible now to say, “Where there is no Bible, there is no salvation.” Muslims have such a high regard for their Quran that they typically come to Christian faith with a profound desire to read and understand the Bible. In light of this observation, the sobering truth is that millions of Muslims are not literate – and that many evangelistic efforts are focused on those who can read. This finding is especially devastating for Muslim women whose illiteracy rate is usually double that of her male counterpart. Women within Islam are experiencing dreams and visions equally, if not in excess of, to men. Yet their freedom and ability to both find and read the Bible is more restrictive than it is for men.

### *c) Encounters with Other Believers*

As this pilgrimage to faith continues, God’s divine intervention continues as the seeker will often meet an in-culture or near-culture believer who can explain the dreams and visions, rightly interpreting the Bible stories that are being read or, occasionally, heard. These conversations are modern reproductions of the witness and insights shared by Joseph with Pharaoh, Ananias with Saul, and Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch. This part of the process is a wonderful partnership between the Holy Spirit and the seeker, especially as open, godly resources that point to Jesus are in such limited supply. The presence of dreams and visions, interaction with the Bible, and the witness of another believer are common experiences for Muslims as they draw near to the kingdom of God. It would be wise to look for and ask about such common experiences even in casual conversations with Muslims. Frequent spiritual conversations with those from Islam often allow them to discern what the Holy Spirit has already initiated in their hearts and within life’s experience.

## *A Special Challenge*

The profile and the process described above may be well known and unremarkable to many. But beyond this basic description lies a special challenge for most Muslims. Since this reality is a little more hidden, let’s begin with two condensed interviews.

*Mahmud narrates his personal pilgrimage of faith, describing how he dreamed of the Bible and felt impelled to find one and read it. He talks extensively*

*concerning his many dreams about the Book until he miraculously finds a copy of the Bible, in his native tongue, in a Quranic bookstore. He says this: "I dreamed repeatedly about this Holy Book. Having purchased the Bible, after a year of searching, I read it through and through three times. There was an Arab Christian church in a nearby city and I began to sneak into their church services, talking to the pastor secretly about what I had been reading, and the questions that I had. I did this for two years and, after my father died, I followed Jesus and was baptized."*

*Then consider the testimony of Abdi. He flipped things around a bit. Curious about things Christian, and wanting to be better prepared to debate Christians, he secured a copy of the Bible and read it. He began to compare Jesus to Mohammed and the Bible to his Quran. Soon he began to dream about what he was reading. He said, "The angel (he thought it was Gabriel) appeared to me in my sleep. He told me that this Holy Book was true and that I needed to believe in it. I began to attend the mosque for prayers every day and multiple times on some days. I asked questions like, 'How can I know if I can be saved? How can I know if I will go to the Paradise or that God loves me?' I was told not to ask these questions and to simply submit to Islam. When these and other questions were not answered to my satisfaction, I left the mosque and never returned. I searched after spiritual truth for many years and in many places. Sometime later I met a westerner who was a believer in Jesus. We met secretly for months and months. After three years my father passed away and I was baptized."*

It took dozens of early interviews to hear what was being said. Tucked away in the midst of thousands of words and hours upon hours of listening were nearly-hidden (and easily missed) statements such as, "My father died and I became a Christian." "My old father passed away and I was baptized." "I did these things for five years until my father died and then I followed Jesus." Earlier interviews were reviewed, with some being redone, in order to further investigate what had now appeared unexpected within many subsequent in-depth conversations. Consequently, over a period of time in one Horn of Africa people group, interviews attempted to record life stories and the salvation history among believers from Islamic backgrounds, including all the believers who could be found encompassing the past fifty years to the present day. When details concerning the father were not naturally shared as the interviewee told his story, it was specifically asked, "Was your father alive when you came to Christ or when you were baptized?" It was discovered that approximately 83% of all believers from this particular

people group waited until their father was dead before expressing faith in Jesus. At the very least, they avoided believer's baptism within their local, believing community while their father was still alive. If they were baptized, it was often done secretly within the western or near-culture believing community. Faith and baptism remained hidden as long as their father was alive.

Occasionally the father was still alive but had divorced the mother of this believer. Or, in some cases, the father lived in another country. The significant truth that emerged was that the father, usually dead, was no longer a factor or had no influence in the home. He was gone. Was this an anomaly only to be found in the Horn of Africa or was this finding true for other countries?

Traveling to two Central Asian countries to attempt further interviews, workers there inquired what, if any, issues were emerging was surprising from believers within Islamic settings? When told of the unexpected finding within one people group in the Horn of Africa, the statement was offered, "That is not true here." They were correct. In their setting it turned out not to be 83%, but 90%! In another Asian country, among a much politicized Muslim people, seventeen interviews were initially attempted. In 100% of these initial interviews, the father had died, or was not a factor in the home, before either faith was expressed or baptism received. Globally, seldom has the percentage been below 75%, when one learns to listen or to ask appropriate questions, in regard to the father's demise before the time of a son's or daughter's conversion.

Globally, it is more difficult to ascertain if this trend continues among women believers in Christ from Islamic background. It appears to be as true for women as for men but a significantly larger number of interviews among women is needed before a more conclusive statement can be made.

What are the implications? What missiological truths may be suggested by this unexpected finding? Does this mean that workers from the West and near-culture believers should target young men and women whose fathers have died? Or shall we pray, tongue in check, for the death of fathers so that their offspring can come to faith in Christ? Unmasking this fact was simply the first step – what remained was attempting to discern the "why" of the matter. If it is true, then why?

It appears that a primary motivation for Muslims coming to Christ is fear and hatred toward their father with a subsequent rejection of their culture.

It is generally believed that if the first-born son within a family comes to Christ then the gospel is more likely to travel quickly and deeply within the family. Often, though, the first-born son comes to Christ after his father divorces

his mother and takes a younger, second wife. It is also common to see subsequent children of various wives come to Christ due to divorce and abuse within the family. On the surface, the higher the status within the family a new believer has, the more influence that believer holds in influencing the rest of the family toward Jesus. Yet if the motivation for coming to Jesus is basically unhealthy (specifically motivated by fear of the father or hatred of him), this can easily negate any positive influence that status within family can offer.

This fear and hatred of father, as motivating factors toward faith in Jesus, play out in two different scenarios. On the one hand, when fear of the father is the dominant factor, conversion is often delayed until the father is deceased or until the father is no longer a daily force in the family. There have been a few times when the one interviewed said something similar to, "I loved or respected my father so much that I did not want to shame him while he was still alive. Therefore, I waited to become a believer after his death." This was occasionally heard, but rarely. On the other hand, when hatred of the father is the dominant factor, faith was often expressed in a way that would punish the father and bring shame on the family. Becoming a "Christian" was the ticket out of their present culture and punished their family, especially their father, in the process. If there was a delay in the faith-making process until the father was dead, fear was the contributing factor for the delay. If faith emerged earlier, especially if the new believer was still under twenty-five years of age, then hatred of the father led the way.

One leader of a prominent mission agency among Muslims claimed that this dysfunctional journey to Jesus was so prevalent in his ministry world that, when young men sought him out desiring to express faith in Jesus, he sent them home to ask forgiveness from their fathers. The problem was not their faith search. The problem was their willingness to go behind their father's back in regard to such a critical issue as one's personal relationship with God. Perhaps, it can be argued, that the father was not opposed to their son's seeking of spiritual truth. Perhaps it can be suggested that the father is opposed to, and shamed by, having his children making and implementing such important family decisions without his knowledge and involvement. What is proposed here is not to give the father veto rights over a son's or daughter's soul. What is suggested is that perhaps Islam and many Muslim father's are opposed to Christianity as they see it as anti-family and are doubly shamed as the faith-making process takes place in the shadows without their knowledge. Even believers in Christ would be understandably angry if a "foreign" religion came into our country and community and targeted our late teen or early adult children with a religious entity that was perceived to be an anti-American religion. Add to that secret meetings and rituals similar

to believer's baptism and we as parents would be understandably opposed to this outside religious invasion before we knew of its intent or content.

What is suggested here is that, when single young men or women express interest in Jesus, wise workers need to start a conversation, investigating the uncomfortable truths concerning family relations as unmasked above. They may begin a deeper dialogue by saying something like, "I am so glad that you are interested in having faith in Jesus. God is bringing you to Himself so that you can be love and light to your entire family, especially your father." At that point, though, a typical response might be: "If forgiving and loving my father is part of this faith, if that is required, then never mind. My father beat my mother and abused my sisters before divorcing my mother. He deserves to go to hell." Painfully, it is at this point that they may decide not to continue toward the faith. It is suggested here that faith in Jesus involves forgiveness of sin. Hating one's father is a sin. Is it not better to look for and deal with this possible issue before baptism with love and patience?

How can faith be carried into succeeding generations if a substantial percentage of believers use their faith in ways that are anti-family and anti-culture? If western workers continue to evangelize, baptize, and gather mostly single young men and women without the knowledge and possible blessing of the family, especially the head of the household, perhaps we are anti-family? If these same "converts" harbor less than Christ-like feelings toward their fathers, the problem is compounded. There are more than a few pastors of house churches from Muslim backgrounds who have yet to tell their families that they are believers.

This is such a significant problem that there is a growing concern among some researchers that the Christian faith is simply attracting dysfunctional young men and women. In light of this troubling observation, we struggle to understand the "why" behind this connection between faith-making and the relationship between the new believer and his or her father. Though it is in its infancy there is a growing attempt to look inside Islamic families. These are families that have no known interest in things Christian. In the first twenty-one interviews among "normal" Muslims, questions were asked concerning who nurtured them growing up? Who influenced them as they passed from childhood into becoming adults? Who did they love and honor? Ultimately, who did those interviewed want to grow up becoming like?

In moderate Muslim countries, out of the first twenty-five interviews, only one male or female stated that they wanted to grow up and become like their father. Only one.

Of course many more such encounters will be necessary before a more authoritative finding can be offered. At least let us add this factor for which we look and listen. The intent here is not to criticize or demonize Islamic families. But perhaps it is fair to say that we should not be surprised when people without Christ act like people without Christ? What would one suspect to be the foundation of family life among people groups and religions where Jesus is not known or where He is often despised? Usually, when asked what they desire the most from western workers in regard to our faith, believers from Islamic backgrounds state, "We know how to do marriage in Islam. But we have no clue how to relate to one another as husband and wife in Jesus. How is marriage done by followers of Jesus? Can we have access to your marriage; can we watch how you as husband and wife relate to each other in Christ?" As this question has often gone unanswered, it is not uncommon to discover that believers from Islamic backgrounds have experienced frequent divorce after expressing faith in Jesus and after baptism.

They further state, "From cradle to the grave we know how to raise our children as Muslims. But we have no clue about how to raise our children as parents who follow Jesus. How do we do this? Can we watch you; can we have access to you in your homes and watch how parents raise children in the love of Jesus and as believers in Christ?" To the extent that these questions remains unanswered, to that extent the faith is seldom passed from the parents into succeeding generations. Sadly, it is precisely at the point of our personal space, inside our homes, that is placed off limits to lost families or those newly in-Christ.

## Conclusions

Though the conversation continues, are there some initial observations and suggestions that we can offer?

- Have deep, intentional conversations with any seeker after Jesus from an Islamic background, especially if they are young and single. Listen carefully. Confront with love any sin or challenge that may surface in regard to hatred of father, family, and culture. Do not rush into prayers of salvation or baptismal events before these issues are surfaced and addressed.
- Do more than JUST harvest this "low hanging fruit." Do not remain passive in evangelism, waiting for seekers to seek you out. Do not settle for solving only the secondary issues; single young men with no education, job, wife, cultural status, and who dislike their home culture. Prayerfully use all seekers and resulting spiritual conversations as a springboard into the broader family and culture. Never stop with the twenty-somethings who are often single, without employment or status.

- Intentionally evangelize heads of households, particularly the father. Without intentionality, western workers will generally evangelize those who are approximately five years younger than themselves. Take the initiative to incarnate Christ among men and women over thirty years of age who are married, have jobs, and who have significant status in the community. These are not low hanging fruit but highly transferable within their own culture.
- Model families reaching families. Heads of households, particularly in Islam, specifically men, can keep the gospel and its power to themselves. Be intentional as families and teams to incarnate the gospel to families and social units. Singles are vitally important as part of families and teams reaching families from within Islam. If we sow broadly, perhaps we will reap broadly.
- Do not model fear. Be careful not to assist a seeker or convert in hiding their pilgrimage, their faith, or their baptism from the extended families within whom God planted them. There is a great need to be wise and careful, but not to the extent that one's family never hears the gospel from a believing family member. Assist these seekers and believers in wise ways of living out their faith before their families. It is not suggested here that the western worker should be central in all the events of a seeker's pilgrimage into faith, but that is another paper and discussion! The issue here is assisting a loving witness to grow and bear fruit within their biological family. Help families to hear together, believe together, baptize each other, and then worship as extended families within their homes.

In Matthew 8:19-22 and Luke 9:57-62, Jesus deals directly with serious issues of faith and family. His words are difficult to hear and to digest. Often we listen to western workers as they prepare to serve overseas, or soon after arriving at their field of service. One question is often asked: "What was the hardest issue to face in dealing with God's call on your life to send you to the Nations?" A typical response might be: "It is so hard to say goodbye to family. My parents are old. I am so close to my sister and I have such a hard time missing my family's life events. I love my family. I miss my father." When asked what helped them to continue in their obedience they often mention that they heard again from Jesus and through His Word about "not placing their hands on the plow and looking back" or "letting the dead bury the dead" and continuing to pick up their cross and follow Jesus. Though they loved deeply their fathers and families, their obedience led them forward.

When dialoguing with seekers or believers from Muslim backgrounds, we discover that they often interact with the same Scriptures from a diametrically different starting

position. They might say: “But you do not know my family, my uncle, or my father. If I accept this Jesus, they will beat me and kick me out of the house. They may put me into jail. My father will cut off my inheritance and he may kill me. I must wait until he dies. Once I see him dead and buried, then I will know that I am free to follow Jesus.”

Even then, the Word of the Lord is clear. He speaks of “letting the dead bury their own dead.” Perhaps this is the day for cross-bearing. Listening carefully to the “how” those from Islamic backgrounds are coming to faith in Jesus is important. Listening for the “why” they have become seekers after the Christ is equally insightful. Through Jesus let us help bring healing to families that have yet to experience His transforming power of love, especially inside the home.

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