

Cross-Currents in Muslim Ministry: A Review Article of *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God is Drawing Muslims around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ*, by David Garrison (Monument, Col.: WIGTake, 2014).

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The House of Islam, *Dar al-Islam* in Arabic, is “the name Muslims give to an invisible religious empire that stretches from West Africa to the Indonesian archipelago, encompassing 49 nations and 1.6 billion Muslims” (5). David Garrison’s thesis is that ‘a wind’ is blowing through the house: “Christianity’s re-emergence” from centuries of decline and in many cases obliteration (6).

Clearly by Garrison’s own assertion and from the many stories that are reported, this book needs to be studied by all who have an interest in the progress of the gospel in the Muslim world. If the stories and statistics are to be taken at face value there is an astonishing and unprecedented turn to Christ taking place in many locations and among many distinct communities at this time, for which we should give thanks to God. But such claims need to be critically evaluated rather than simply accepted at face value. In this review article, I want to do just that in the hope that further research will be more fruitful. I will start by outlining the book using Garrison’s headings.

[The Hinges of History](#)

In Part One, the author introduces the theme of the book in its historical context and explains his methodology. Garrison and his numerous associates in 14 countries interviewed more than a thousand people in 33 communities (‘people groups’) (26). The result is an account that covers 45 ‘movements’. Garrison helpfully embeds their informants’ stories in the descriptions of the region in question, demonstrating the tremendous variety of cultures encountered throughout the Muslim world and showing how each region is distinct. Islamic terminology is used quite a bit and a helpful glossary is included at the end.

The author is aware of some of the limitations of the study. One limitation the researchers imposed on themselves was to research only “movements to Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament” (37) suggesting that there may be other movements that are theologically heterodox. None such is reported, still less analyzed. If indeed such movements do exist, a serious comparative study would be very instructive indeed.

Another limitation was in the accessibility of key informants in certain regions. Though hundreds of people were interviewed in sub-Saharan Africa (where for the most part there is less difficulty gaining access), the interviewers were severely limited in the Arab world and ‘Western South Asia’, an area covering western India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. (One can only surmise that great difficulty was faced in Afghanistan, which is still in a state of serious conflict. Presumably the researchers would have been able to meet Afghan informants only across the border in the relative freedom of Pakistan.) Such problems meant that in these parts they struggled to gather even a dozen interviews, a weakness acknowledged by the author (38). It seems unwarranted, therefore, for Garrison to assert that for each of these movements they “have established a clear floor of 1,000 baptized believers or 100 churches” (39).

[The House of Islam](#)

In Part Two, each of the nine ‘rooms’ is described and analyzed in turn, and we are given a taste of what appears to be very significant happenings throughout the Muslim world. For

the most part Garrison's taxonomy of culture areas, or 'geo-cultural rooms' as he calls them, is sound, the glaring exception being South Asia. This region is divided into Western and Eastern 'rooms' in an artificial manner (the partition clumsily running right through India), for which no rationale is given.

Each of the nine culture areas is examined in turn: after an outline of the historical context, testimonies of local people coming to faith fill the pages. Often these individuals become the means God has used to bring many others to faith.

According to the research there are movements to Christ going on in all nine regions. The stories reported are very encouraging and not a few quite amazing. Throughout the Muslim world people are hearing the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, sometimes from foreign workers, at other times from satellite TV, but nearly always also from their neighbours and friends. Even in the Arab world there appear to be large numbers of Muslims turning to Christ. The accounts, however, are not always glowing: the realities of life for followers of Christ in North Africa, for instance, are clearly, though briefly, portrayed so that no one can be under the illusion that it is easy for them (96-97).

In the Arab world, Muslim movements to Christ often have an ambivalent relationship to the evangelical and ancient churches around them (216). This is due to the politically charged nature of religious communities. It appears in such situations Muslims are impressed by their Christian neighbours but such are the security concerns that it is almost impossible for Muslims to engage with them on matters of faith. The need for outside witnesses in such situations becomes clear.

The author is not unaware of possible non-spiritual motivations for 'conversion': commenting on communities of new believers from several Turkic people groups he suggests that, "Doubtless some of them were attracted to the development programs that the Western Christians offered. Some saw these foreign relationships as avenues to a better life in the West. When Western (and Korean) organizations offered church buildings and pastoral subsidies to local leaders, the motivations for conversion became even more clouded" (150-51). Thankfully some of the local believers interviewed also expressed their unease about the corrupting influence of handouts (152).

The researchers were not content to enumerate 'conversions'; questions about discipleship addressed qualitative matters too. In a stirring story from 'Western South Asia' we are told that a leading figure in a movement was told that the gospel was having big consequences: "Last year, more than 100 jamaat [worshipping group] leaders said to me, 'I no longer beat my wife'" (198)—not the sort of comment one reads every day but one that clearly means a great deal to the leader—and no doubt to the wives as well!

Maps helpfully indicate the main countries in each region. There are, however, a few inaccuracies (or lack of precision) in the maps: in the East Africa map, 20 nations are labelled but only 19 given in the statistics (67); in the North Africa map, the disputed territory of Western Sahara is not labelled (89) though it is included in a list of nations (84); in The Persian World map, Muslims populations are labelled in 4 nations but only 3 are given in the statistics and the hatched areas of Afghanistan do not correspond with Persian peoples, who are the majority community in central (Hazara) and northeast (Tajik) regions (125); in The Arab World map 19 nations are labelled but 21 given in the statistics (203). Furthermore, it is surely a significant shortcoming that the Maldives are neither labelled in maps of Eastern or Western South Asia nor even mentioned in the text.

A more serious inaccuracy, though—because this myth had a part in the destruction of so many lives—is the assertion that the Rwanda genocide was a product of racial division: “Bantu Hutus...killed 800,000 Nilotic Tutsis” (65). This is inaccurate and misleading: genetic studies have shown that the Tutsis have 85% Bantu DNA, only slightly less than that of the Hutu. The Rwanda genocide was far more complex than a racial ‘clash’, a theory that has been vigorously disputed.

In the House of War

The book concludes with Part Three, in which Garrison outlines the factors that may have led to these movements. Ten ‘bridges of God’ (borrowing McGavran’s term) are enumerated. Among them are faith, prayer, vernacular Bible translations, patient witness, the Holy Spirit, and communication. There are some helpful ideas here that suggest fruitful areas for further research. Even, it is argued, features of Islam have been important: Islam “contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction” (243). This, I think, is a significant insight. Many Muslims they interviewed become interested in Christ on reading recently produced vernacular versions of the Qur’an. For many, it appears, the mystique felt on hearing the Qur’an in an unintelligible language (as Arabic is for the clear majority of Muslims) has been shattered.

We have much to be thankful for in the work that has been carried out by Garrison and his team. The study is let down, however, by a few malapropisms: “1,500 Chinese children died while interred [rather than ‘interned’] in refugee camps” (55); “Christian tribes jousted [rather than ‘jostled’] for centuries with neighbouring Cushitic Muslims” (66); revenge is ‘extracted’ (rather than ‘exacted’) (78, 163, 181); and Imperial Russia is said to be in ‘ascension’ (rather than ‘ascendancy’) (145). Furthermore, this reader is mystified how superpowers might be able to “dominate...through their predecessors” (6).

In the analysis that follows, however, I seek to unpack three more serious concerns that I have with the book. It is hoped that further research will address these concerns and thereby give us a more robust account of the wind in the house of Islam.

Definitional Ambiguities

The author informs us that he used a phenomenological, or descriptive, approach to examining these movements (31). This seems eminently reasonable. There is a lack of clarity, however, in discussions of ‘conversion’ and ‘religion’. The former is defined in theological terms— “converting to faith in Christ” (35)—and distinguished from a change of the latter. Hence, “Changing religion, at least in the Christian faith, has never been the point of true conversion, though it often follows true conversion and has historically been associated with true conversion” (36). A change of religion does seem to be expected. So Islam is identified as a “life orientation” that one must “turn from” in “true conversion” (36). Thus also, the subjects of the study are designated as “Muslim-background believers” (36 and passim) suggesting that the believers have left Islam behind.

Garrison reports that rarely did the ‘Muslim-background believers’ of their research wrestle with divided loyalty demands of Christ and Muhammad. Clearly for most of those interviewed there was no conflict in their allegiance: “Muhammed had faded into irrelevance” (114). The complex nature of religious identity, however, comes out in some reports: in West Africa, for instance, we are told that “To be Fulani, a Kanuri, a Susu, A Bambara, a White or Black Moor is to be a Muslim.” He goes on, adding that, “To reject this core identity is tantamount to suicide. Consequently, the Muslim movements to Christ in

the north have a much more tenuous identification with the Christian religion and culture, while still exhibiting a deep commitment to the person of Christ and to the authority of the New Testament” (166). This all begs the question that is hardly addressed: what is to be the Muslim-background believer’s ongoing relationship to Islam?

Individual stories are important to the author but the focus of the work is on *movements*. This is so because throughout the Muslim world individuals are only significant in their communities: “In movements to Christ, it is not the individuals, the single converts, who represent the nature of a true movement. It is the communities, beginning with the families that produce the swelling ranks of true *movements* of Muslims to Christ” (173, original emphasis).

A movement of Muslims to Christ is defined, somewhat artificially, as “at least 100 new church starts or 1,000 baptisms that occur over a two-decade period” (5). Garrison asserts that such movements are taking place in “more than 70 separate locations in 29 nations. The author acknowledges that the sample movements they researched may not be representative of all the movements in a ‘room’ (30). He says that, though “movements often begin with some measure of outside stimulus, at some point they become driven indigenously and so become independent of those outside, foreign forces” (37). It seems no attempt is made to compare those that have had outside stimulus and those that have not, which would seem to be a weakness, especially as many outsiders (inevitably, given that the book is in English and published in the USA) who read this account would be interested in how they might be able to help in other analogous situations.

Critical Deficiencies

The author frequently seems to lack a critical perspective. Thus, he reports the standard orthodox history of Muhammad (68) without even a hint that historiography is increasingly casting doubt on many of these assertions. In some reports the author’s writing becomes quite subjective— “I had the distinct impression that he had never sat so close to a foreigner in his life” (113).

In many cases, it seems, information from movement leaders is relied heavily upon. So, for example, we are told that in Eastern South Asia “Their leaders say these Insiders number in the tens or perhaps hundreds of thousands” (99). He goes on to qualify this report by saying that, “At this point it is impossible to know”. If it is impossible to know, then isn’t it just a little bit irresponsible to report the leaders? One thinks this is especially pertinent of Bangladesh as here multiple mission agencies have often peddled influence on such nascent movements, buying workers by offering higher salaries. When material opportunities are so significant it is incumbent on researchers to take assertions with more than a degree of caution.

A wide discrepancy is reported between missionary Roger Dixon’s estimate of “over 12 million Javanese Muslims who had converted to Protestant Christianity” and that of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* which “could account for no more than 2.82 million Christians on Java..., many of whom would have come from non-Muslim backgrounds and nearly half of whom were Roman Catholic” (57). No attempt, however, is made to resolve this discrepancy. Clearly someone’s estimate is wildly inaccurate, if not both. It is inadequate to simply report such figures without comment.

In commenting on reported movements in ‘Western South Asia’ Garrison offers us a footnote to the effect that the plausibility of an unpublished indigenous survey, conducted

in 2010 and purportedly “revealing tens of thousands of baptisms” is “highly disputed by many” (273). Why is this comment put in a footnote? Surely the fact that ‘many’ are disputing the claim demands a fuller discussion in the body of the book. There is clearly much going on below the surface, to which we are not privy. Although negative reports are sometimes included there seems to be a reluctance to engage with such possibilities. We are left then with a considerable measure of doubt as to the veracity of the research.

Further related to these claims, it has also been documented in some parts of the Muslim world that those who enter the church often do so through a revolving door. The Middle Eastern theologian and activist, Nour Armagan (pseudonym) asserts that “in the Islamic world, around 80% of new followers of Christ give up on their new faith after two years, and by the fifth year only a small proportion remain as Christians.¹ Research, supervised by me, in one overwhelmingly Muslim country has reported that “probably over 50%” of professing believers have left the church, though very few say they are turning back to Islam.² It is hoped that another edition of Garrison’s research will include some carefully elucidated data on this phenomenon and provide some necessary analysis.

Missiological Vulnerabilities

Garrison’s missiology tends to be reductionist and pragmatic. This can be seen in his emphasis on the human dynamic rather than the divine. The significance of prayer, for instance, is that it “has been the first and primary strategy for virtually every new initiative into the Muslim world. It is the great unseen force that has both stimulated Christians to venture in the House of Islam and pierced the hearts of Muslims whom they encounter there” (237). Prayer here seems to be simply a tool to get the job done. This is surely a shallow view of the means the Lord has given us to have fellowship with him and to bring to him our cares and concerns. The work of the Holy Spirit, likewise, is largely restricted to the extraordinary – dreams, visions and the like (238-39) – rather than in the ordinary lives of people living as Jesus’ disciples in their work and family life, and seeking opportunities to talk of him to their friends and relatives.

Furthermore, the author has an over-riding concern in the *strategic*. Thus, he uses military tones in talking of respondents to the gospel as “beachhead communities” (150). Such talk plays into the hands of those who see the call to discipleship to Christ as nothing short of a crusade against Islam. How can we possibly communicate the radical self-sacrificing message of discipleship effectively when such careless writing is out in the public domain? No doubt the book is the subject of intense scrutiny by leaders throughout the Muslim world. What will they think when they read such a sentence? Is this simply a careless slip or is the writer here displaying a territorial Christendom-style attitude? When the Lord Jesus announced that his kingdom is not “of this world” (John 18:36) he was putting paid once and for all to any confusion of his kingdom with earthly kingdoms. Talk about beachheads surely simply foments antagonism to the gospel.

Ironically, Garrison seems to be aware of the weaknesses of pragmatic approaches to ministry. So, in discussing the progress of the gospel in West Africa, he criticizes “Western expressions of Christianity which emphasize rational precepts, doctrines and programs”. The people welcome, rather, the offer of “power to defeat the challenges of curses, physical

¹ Nour Armagan, “The Gospel, The Global Church and the World of Islam,” in *Christ Our Reconciler: Gospel/Church/World* (J. E. M. Cameron, ed.; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity, 2012), 88.

² From an MTh dissertation. Source withheld for security reasons.

illness, mental illness, and demonic possession” that come from a bold offer of the gospel (166). But how different is this, when power is seen simply in utilitarian terms, as another means to an end? Never mind what the Lord Jesus said about loving “the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your *mind* and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). And never mind that the Lord Jesus himself often declined to *use* his power (Mark 1:38). A solid biblical theology must underpin all efforts at contextualization of the gospel—including among those for whom power is so important. This demands more than superficial readings of the Gospels.

In like manner, then, contextualization is treated as a *tool* for effective communication by outsiders (245) rather than a process in which indigenous Christ-followers reflect on Scripture and work out their discipleship (with or without foreign interaction). A pragmatic approach to contextualization soon runs into trouble when new tools for ministry are touted. Thus, the author can cite “19th century American revivalism” as a good example of cultural adaptation, “important for the contextualization of the gospel in its day and time” (248). A careful analysis of 19th century American revivalism, however, shows some serious deficiencies in theology and practice that continue to have negative consequences today as the methods have been exported around the world.³ Far from an appropriate adaptation, revivalist methodology emerged out of an uncritical adoption of Enlightenment ideas of humanity. If careful, critical contextualization of the gospel message had been going on in the 19th century such deficiencies would have been dealt with at source, to the benefit of contemporary Americans as well as the recipients of their gospel efforts. One cannot but wonder, however, whether such ideas continue to have a detrimental effect not only on local believers in other countries but also on missiology in the West.

This article has been quite critical of several aspects of the research that is recorded in this book. My hope is that it will sharpen the critical faculties of researchers in the house of Islam that will, in turn, enable better approaches to ministry among Muslims. But it is not just Muslim ministry that is in need of critical reflection. Approaches to work among Hindus and Buddhists, likewise, to say nothing of others, will also benefit from the lessons one can learn from reflection on such work.

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³ Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994).