

Are There Nonproselytizing Methods for Planting New Churches in Muslim Lands?

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Abstract

This article offers an alternative to Christian witness and development in Muslim-majority nations. It reviews twelve Ibero-American projects in such nations that have found ways to (1) live out their faith in a transparent but nonthreatening way, (2) communicate a holistic gospel through various projects, (3) evangelize in a manner that is open, contextualized, and nonproselytizing, (4) contribute to social holistic transformation, and (5) encourage local expressions of Christian churches.

Keywords

proselytism, Christian witness, evangelism, planting churches, Ibero-American missionaries, Christian churches in Muslim lands

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Is it ethical to establish new Christian churches in primarily Muslim territories? Is it permissible for a development project in Muslim lands to include the planting of a church among its objectives? These are questions that many ask themselves when thinking about Christian missionary work in Muslim lands.

In fact, the dominant model, at least among evangelical churches, is that of active proselytism, understanding that the primary aim and mission of the church is to establish new churches where they do not exist. In the specific case of the mission of evangelical churches to the Muslim world, the most typical practice could be described as “missionary camouflage.” In other words, these missionaries seek to hide their primary activity under the cover of a business, project, or program. This practice includes the design of an entrance strategy crafted institutionally (by the sending church or agency) to give credibility and logistical support to the camouflage.¹ This model is at times referred to as bivocational ministry. It in fact involves a dual identity—on the one hand, as a missionary, and on the other as a teacher, businessperson, or development worker. This type of missionary model is normally accompanied by a reductionist vision of the gospel, primarily focused on individual salvation. It also frequently spreads a Northern and Western ecclesiology—in other words, a format of worship characterized by an auditorium model (a wor-

ship leader accompanied by a band/worship group) and a preacher, with limited participation from members.

This missionary model, which we have characterized as proselytizing, has two significant consequences. On one hand, the missionary's camouflage is quickly unmasked by his or her Muslim neighbors. What the missionary says, does, and tries to communicate (i.e., his or her daily life, work, and evangelism) do not present a consistent picture. It's not about doing or saying strange things; all foreigners sound a bit strange, which does not present a great obstacle to healthy coexistence. What is of greater consequence is that neighbors perceive a lack of transparency, a sense of a double agenda or hidden motives. The dual-identity model leads directly to a loss of credibility. Who will believe the message of an imposter, of someone who lacks credibility? The double-identity model becomes, in practice, the missionary suicide of the ones who practice it, incapacitating them for the very purpose intended, namely, to do mission work in a clearly Muslim context.

Furthermore, the proselytizing missionary model provokes a sense of invasion. "We are being invaded" is a frequently heard complaint in newspapers and other media.² This perception of an attack or an invasion in fact is the perfect fuel for the so-called clash of cultures.

Are there alternatives to the proselytizing model that do not compromise the intrinsically evangelistic nature of the gospel? In this article I offer an alternative (albeit a minority) view, presenting twelve Ibero-American projects in Muslim-majority nations that have found ways for Christian believers to (1) live out their faith in a transparent but nonthreatening way, (2) communicate a holistic gospel through various projects, (3) evangelize in a manner that is open, contextualized, and nonproselytizing, (4) contribute to social holistic transformation, and (5) encourage local expressions of Christian churches.

Summary of the twelve projects

We begin with a brief description of the aforementioned projects. They are Ibero-American, carried out by persons of Latin American, Spanish, and Portuguese origin and by Ibero-American organizations. Their style of organization, leadership, and proceedings are completely Latin. In other words, they are projects with a Two-Thirds World perspective, carried out by persons from the Two-Thirds World. At the same time, they are projects carried out "from below," with few resources, few influences, and with little or no support from the Ibero-American embassies or international organizations. They are characterized not by having sizable budgets but rather by relying on personal contact and shared time with the nationals. They are, definitely, projects carried out *together* with people, associations, and national organizations; they are birthed, developed, and monitored in partnership. The twelve projects studied are of various types:

- holistic rural development (water, sanitation systems, schools, hygiene, and preventive health care)
- at-risk populations (persons with special needs, women, children, and illiterate persons)

- work-skills training (welding)
- medical work
- collaboration with universities (language exchanges)
- a business project (restaurant).

Each one of them, in reality, is part of a group (or cluster) of multidisciplinary projects. In other words, they are not isolated but rather are interconnected with other subprojects or are themselves subprojects of a larger project. They are carried out in North Africa, in the Sahel (Senegal), and in Central Asia (Uzbekistan), although the study includes special contributions from similar projects in Mauritania, Algeria, Turkey, India, and the Middle East. Another key factor of these projects is their long-term focus. The Ibero-American workers tied to these projects have lived an average of 17.5 years in the field.

The context of the projects

Here we summarize the contexts in which these projects are being carried out. They are all located in Muslim-majority countries, nations where over 90 percent of the population claim to be followers of Islam. For perspective, it is necessary to understand that Islam is not simply a religion (in the literal understanding of the word) but more broadly a way of life and a worldview that permeates everything in the culture. The societies in which these projects are located have strong elements of popular and Sufi Islam. And we cannot forget an important detail: the great majority of Muslim countries do not have religious liberty as it is normally understood in the West. In other words, Christian missionary activity (or that of any other creed, including another version of Islam) is not permitted; furthermore, individuals typically do not have the right to change their religion. However, the Muslim world is very diverse, and each context manifests important differences. I suggest a division of the Muslim world into six primary regions according to five criteria:

1. the existence or absence of religious pluralism
2. the level of freedom or religious tolerance
3. the acceptance or rejection of development projects
4. the cultural admiration or rejection of the West
5. missiological factors (how Christian mission is carried out: formal, nonconventional, etc.).

The six primary regions are the Middle East, the Gulf area, North Africa, the Sahel, “exclusivist Asia,” and “pluralist Asia.”

The relationship between development and church planting: Five models

When speaking of development projects and the planting of churches, we must clarify what kind of relationship exists or should exist between these. In fact, many allege that development agencies and their projects should not hold a position on topics of religion but rather that these two spheres should be strictly separated. A more recent concept, more in accord with a holistic and

multidisciplinary vision of society, seeks a symbiosis between development and religion. In the specific case of development organizations tied, directly or indirectly, to Christianity and Islam, the expansion of their faith (i.e., Christian evangelism and Muslim *da'wah*) is an intrinsic part of their being. For this reason, it seems disingenuous to ignore the multiple relationships between development and the expansion of faith. On the contrary, centering on the evangelical Christian perspective, I have proposed five relationship models between projects and churches: *one people, two audiences, one sole task, right to hear, and benefits for Christians*.³ These models relate directly to the very concept of Christian mission.

In the case of the first model, *one people*, the missionaries live incarnationally among the beneficiaries of the project, who are the very ones among whom they wish to see a church established. In other words, those who convert and form the church are some of those who were direct beneficiaries from the project. People see the quality of work or help, but in particular they notice the lifestyle of the missionaries and normally after some time ask, “Why do you do this?” and want to know about the faith of the missionary. They arrive at the point of deciding *as a community* to listen to the gospel. In other words, the community should give their approval, tacit or expressed, to the planting of a church. In any other way, the societal pressure will make it difficult for a local church to arise with any hopes for a long-term survival.

The next model separates the planting of the church from the project. I have called it *two audiences*. In this model, missionaries avoid any sign of proselytism. They make it very clear that to become a Christian (convert) does not lead to greater benefits or advantages from the project or help. It is also an incarnational project, but the missionaries are incarnational in another sector of society that differs from the sector receiving the help. They live in and identify more with a professional class, with those belonging to the middle class, probably those in a city, the government, and the neighborhood where they live—in other words, “those who observe” how the project is carried out. This is the public among whom they want to establish the church. It is important to clarify that the missionary is very intentional, very focused, in sharing his or her faith, discipling, and gathering disciples among the public, which is “observing.” This does not mean that he or she rejects testifying to the beneficiaries of the project or its employees, in the case where the project has employed local help. However, the missionary has decided not to take advantage of the power differential between the giver and receiver of help but instead has chosen another path so that this public might hear of *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah) and become incorporated into a church. He or she opens the door so that they might ask. The missionary is intentional in creating channels and opportunities for communication, although the initiative should come from those who receive the help, and he or she clarifies—once again—that being a Christian does not bring benefits or advantages from the project. As far as the project goes, everyone receives the same treatment and benefit; there is no discrimination on the basis of religion. Another characteristic of this focus is that it seeks by all means possible that locals would be the ones leading the church from the beginning. The missionaries are disciplers and gatherers

of disciples,⁴ but they adopt a secondary role in training, leadership, format, and style in the church.

The third model, *one sole task*, is the model of those who insist that good works do not require justification, but that they have a value in and of themselves. It is the focus of the professionals who understand that their calling is to serve with their profession and that others will plant the church. They are, for example, doctors, engineers, and therapists who also feel that they are missionaries. They of course do not avoid testifying of their faith; they take advantage of every opportunity to speak of the Lord, offer prayers, or give a portion of the *Injil* (Gospel). It is a perfectly valid model, but the expectations should be clear for all those who are stakeholders in the project. However, without desiring it to be so, this is the model of those missionaries who are not sufficiently intentional in the planting of a church. They have what we could call the illusion of intentionality. Probably, they manage a project with great ability but were never taught to establish a church, or the manner in which one plants a church in their home country is so different from how it should be done in their country of service. They wish to see a church established, it would make them very glad, but their intentionality is limited or misguided. The reality is that planting a church cannot be improvised; it does not arise by itself.

The fourth model is that of rice plus tract. It is the focus of those who say that “all have the right to hear,” which is how I have named this fourth type of relationship between project and church: *right to hear*. It is a model that intentionally takes advantage of the power asymmetry between donor and needy. Because it does not take into account whether or not the beneficiary wants to hear the gospel, it is imposed. To receive the brochure, video, propaganda, talk, etc. is a *sine qua non* condition to benefit from the project or aid. In reality, the right that is being used is rather that of speaking; “We have the right to speak about our faith.” Although it may operate at any time in the rest of the world, in Muslim contexts, this model is usually only linked to humanitarian aid in cases of disasters, because in other circumstances it would provoke a frontal and possibly violent rejection. It is a model that tends to produce good fruit in the short term, although its long-term effect may be negative.

The fifth model of relationship between project and church I have named *benefits for Christians*. It refers to a project that is focused on a selective public; it does not benefit equally all sectors of society. For example, a microcredit project associated with a church or a project of professional training for believers. These are projects that seek to empower members of a church or perhaps help them to escape a marginal existence. Another known example of this model is that of people who assist Coptic children who live and work in the garbage dumps in Cairo. It is a given that there is a church or group of Christians who will benefit. The study has focused on unreached populations, in other words, those in which a church does not exist and where the project has as one of its goals to contribute to the birth of a church. Thus, this model may be considered as a tangent in respect to the objective of our study, but I did not want to overlook it. This model may be very beneficial, although it can also produce or encourage the creation of “rice Christians.” Its

value is undeniable in the short and long term, as long as the requirements for access are clear in regard to the rest of society.

Missionary characteristics

In this section, we consider five characteristics of nonproselytizing missionary work that can be observed in the twelve projects.

Transparency

The first characteristic is that of transparency, both of the project as well as of the workers in the project, according to their motivations and Christian faith. In stark contrast to the above-mentioned model of camouflage, these nonproselytizing projects clearly affirm that they are followers of the Messiah and that their intention is to bless the nation and its inhabitants in the name of God. They also do not hide that a part of their funding comes from Christians, primarily in Latin America, who donate on a monthly basis as a demonstration of their good will toward Muslims. These foreign workers obtain their visas transparently through the projects or national organizations with whom they collaborate. They tend to open their homes to friends and neighbors, who know much about them, their families, their work, and their motivations. They have nothing to hide. They do not hide their prayers, singing, or their Christian worship services and so forth.

Holistic gospel

The second characteristic is the practice of a holistic gospel, one that encompasses all facets of life. An important part of this characteristic is tied to the project itself and its goal of supplying real and felt needs in a population. The gospel and the project are intimately tied; the latter is a consequence of the former. In fact, the question frequently arises, “Why do you do this for us?” The question comes with a stated or implied clarification that “I would never do this for an ‘infidel,’” for in Islam to seek the good of the *dar el-harb* (the house of war, i.e., territory and population of non-Muslims) is unthinkable. This question gives an opportunity to give a reason for the Christian faith and practice. Note that we are speaking of the integral nature of these projects, which represents a step beyond the Western concept of adding words to actions, or of accompanying preaching with social work. Rather, the integral nature of these dozen projects is altogether coherent; it is a way of life that encompasses everything. Thus, it is not necessary to argue the priority of one aspect over another, as does, for example, the Lausanne Covenant.⁵

Open evangelism

The third characteristic is a style of visible and open evangelism. This characteristic may seem surprising, given that we are speaking about contexts that are overwhelmingly Muslim. It is normally taken for granted that, in contexts that are hostile to the gospel, evangelists must be discreet, share their message little by little, without raising suspicion, trying to not “cause a revolt.” The idea is to avoid confrontation and win trust through “friendship evangelism.” The exact oppo-

site is what the cooperants/missionaries and projects studied practice. They believe that evangelism, by its very nature, cannot be discreet, go unnoticed, be done “half-way,” or remain hidden. The essence of evangelism is to call people to a radical change to follow Christ. It cannot be done discreetly. In other words, the aim of these cooperants is *not* to go unnoticed; quite the opposite, they want their entire life to give testimony of the lordship of Christ. They want it to be noticed. Of course, they have learned how to do so in a manner that is not threatening, in a manner in which the persons around them do not feel themselves to be objects of proselytism. At the same time, they have removed from their vocabulary (and their mentality) all vestiges of war-related language. Such language is common among a large part of the missionary movement, which has inherited certain colonialist notions of conquest, victory, advancement, expansion, spiritual war, and so forth.⁶ In contrast, these workers have also learned to utilize the religious language of their context in such a way that people understand the spiritual concepts and practices that they share.⁷

Holistic transformation

The fourth characteristic is that of holistic transformation, which these projects offer to their immediate societies. This characteristic is very tied in with the second (holistic gospel) and is in fact a direct consequence of it. The project and the entire lives of the nonproselytizing cooperants/missionaries challenge the status quo. They bring a change in deeply rooted social values, for example:

- the perception of the intrinsic value of all persons, including those in situations of vulnerability
- hope for the future
- quality education for all, regardless of gender, social class, or economic capacity
- new egalitarian and quality relationships between diverse professions and social classes
- openness to other ideas and persons
- tolerance, religious pluralism
- ecological aims motivated by spiritual and religious reasons.

These values represent advancements in almost all of the UN Sustainable Development Objectives (SDG), as reflected in the twelve groups of the projects studied.⁸

It is beneficial to clarify that the missionaries studied may be described as social activists, but they clearly avoid any revolutionary model. They see themselves as honorable foreign guests, and as such, they make an effort to respect the local culture and institutions, at the same time as they question them. They are not simply respectful guests; rather, they also see themselves as ambassadors of the King of the universe, charged with a message of personal, community, social, and ecological transformation. It is a difficult balance that requires much tact and also kind firmness. Clearly, we are speaking of projects limited in their scope. In other words, the impact of the personal, social, business, and ecological transformation to which they contribute may not be spectacular at first glance. It is not massive, but it does not mean that it might not be profound or lasting.

Vital indigenous churches

Finally, the fifth characteristic is the growth of indigenous churches that are full of vitality. We have studied ten churches that have arisen tied in one way or another to the twelve project groups. Five of the churches are North African, one is Uzbek, and four are Senegalese; also we have added limited comments related to Turkish churches. We have created a 23×13 matrix of characteristics, measuring degrees of vitality, age, gender focus, visibility, contextualization, dependence, and leadership, combined with variables related to the presence of religious minorities, city, tolerance, type of Islam, and the existence of religious pluralism. This first quantitative analysis has given way to a more detailed qualitative analysis. The study of the churches in North Africa, Senegal, and to a lesser degree, in Uzbekistan and Turkey, has manifested the importance of two elements: first, the degree of the integral nature of the church, in other words, its capacity to respond not only to spiritual facets of life but rather to all facets, doing so in a harmonious manner. Second, these churches highlight the importance of the capacity to develop an ecclesial national identity, internal (or endogenous), honorable, credible, useful or beneficial for the community, transparent, and relational, which promotes peace, *salaam*, the relational well-being that comes from God. As a result, these churches, though small in size, are incredibly solid and impactful. They overflow with vitality.

Conclusion

Are there nonproselytizing methods of establishing churches in Muslim-majority contexts? My answer is Yes, offering as an example a small group of Ibero-American development projects that contribute to social holistic transformation “from below.” I believe that this possibility represents a relevant contribution to the achievement of the objectives of sustainable development, given that it adds a spiritual dimension—so important for Muslim societies—to the more traditional goals (formerly the Millennium Development Goals and the Human Development Index of the UN Development Programme), and it does so in collaboration or alliance between human collectives in Muslim and Ibero-American countries (see SDG #17, Partnerships for the goals).

Of course, this example is only a small sample. It cannot in any way qualify as extraordinary, and the degree of extrapolation to other contexts remains to be proven. Without a doubt, however, it is worthy of consideration. It constitutes an alternative, in this case nongovernmental, to the “clash of cultures,” with its protagonists—persons of the Christian faith working together with persons of the Muslim faith—in a framework of mutual respect.

Notes

- 1 .I have objected to this type of entrance strategy. “Mission agencies approve and sanction openly deceptive strategies when they create plans to dissimulate, cover up and disguise evangelistic activities in places and among peoples who would not receive them if they knew the truth. A semi-conscious individual psychological struggle [on the part of the missionary public/private identity] has become a structural issue” (Christian Giordano, “Identity, Context, and Message: Iberoamerican Mission in Muslim Lands” [MTh thesis, London School of Theology, Brunel University, 2008], 24, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.2644.4241>).
- 2 .Al-Jazeera, “Al-Jazeera: Six Million Muslims Convert to Christianity in Africa Alone Each Year,” *Muslim Statistics* (blog), December 14, 2012 (this item has been removed from the Al-Jazeera website but is fully translated at <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles6/AlJazeeraAfrica.php>). See also Salah Guemriche, *Le Christ s’est arrêté à Tizi-Ouzou: Enquête sur les conversions en terre d’islam* (Paris: Denoël, 2011); La Rédaction, “Jésus en terre marocaine,” *Le temps Maroc (hebdomadaire)*, December 12, 2009, pp. 19–23; and Catherine Simon, “Nouveaux chrétiens au Maghreb,” *Le Monde*, March 5, 2005, online edition, sec. A la une, http://www.lemonde.fr/a-la-une/article/2005/03/05/nouveaux-chretiens-au-maghreb_400445_3208.html.
- 3 .I have adapted and expanded this classification from Andrés Guzmán, “Ourselves as Servants,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 4th ed. (Pasadena, CA.: William Carey Library, 2009), 700–702; Andrés Guzmán, “Iglesias + Proyectos – Entrevista AD” (Skype interview, January 4, 2012); Christian Giordano, “Integralidad, iglesias y desarrollo en Islamía” (unpublished manuscript, January 2012).
- 4 .Chilean theologian Pedro Arana used to say, “Be disciples, make disciples, and gather disciples.” See Pedro Arana Quiroz, Samuel Escobar, and C. René Padilla, *El Trino Dios y la misión integral* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairos, 2003), 65, 72.
- 5 .“In the Church’s mission of sacrificial service, evangelism is primary,” in *Lausanne Covenant* (1974), #6, <https://www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant>.
- 6 .For a description of warlike missionary language, see Evangelical Fellowship of India Theological Commission, “Statement on Mission Language,” *International Review of Mission* 90 (2001): 190–91, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2001.tb00282.x>; School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, “US Consultation on Mission Language and Metaphors” (June 1–3, 2000), <http://www.ad2000.org/re00620.htm>. See also J. R. Krabill, D. W. Shenk, and L. Stutzman, *Anabaptists Meeting Muslims: A Calling for Presence in the Way of Christ* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005); Deenabandhu Manchala, “Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship; Reflections from the Vantage Points of the Marginalized People,” *International Review of Mission* 106, no. 2 (2017): 201–15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12180>; Willis Horst, Ute Muller-Eckhardt, and Frank Paul, *Misión sin conquista: Acompañamiento de comunidades indígenas autóctonas como práctica misionera alternativa*, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Kairos Ediciones, 2011); Christian Giordano, “Identidad, contexto y mensaje,” in *Rios en tierra seca*, ed. Federico A. Bertuzzi (Granada, Spain: Musulmania, 2012), 275–86.
- 7 .The concept of open evangelism is not new. It has been advocated by experts in the ministry to the Muslim world such as Henry Martyn, Don McCurry, Charles Marsh, Roland Muller, and David Shenk. See Don McCurry, *Esperanza para los musulmanes* (Miami, FL: UNILIT, 1995) and *Healing the Broken Family of Abraham: New Life for Muslims* (Colorado Springs, CO: Ministries to Muslims, 2001); “Estudio comparativo entre la fe cristiana y el islam” (Cursos verano IIBET, Málaga, Spain, 2007); Charles Marsh, *Comparte tu fe con los musulmanes* (Barcelona: CLIE, 1986); Roland Muller, *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door* (Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris Corporation, 2001); *The Messenger, the Message, the Community: Three Critical Issues for the Cross-Cultural Church Planter* (Osler, SK: CanBooks, 2006); and *Tools for Muslim Evangelism* (Hamilton, ON: WEC Canada, 2000), <http://www.rmuller.com/tools.html>; David Shenk, “Messianic Hope in Biblical Eschatology” (paper presented at the International Conference on the Mahdism Doctrine, Quom, Iran, 2006), 12; and “¿Quién es Jesús?,” October 2009 (translated from D. Shenk, “Incarnation: Obstacles and Bridges,” in *Anabaptists Meeting Muslims: A Calling for Presence in the Way of Christ*, ed. J. R. Krabill, D. W. Shenk, and L. Stutzman [Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005]).
- 8 .See <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>. The only objectives not covered by the projects studied are #7 (Affordable and clean energy) and #14 (Life below water).



Author biography

Christian Giordano, a Spanish missiologist and practitioner, has spent over forty years planting churches in Spain and the Muslim world. As one of the few Spanish evangelical experts on Islam, he serves as a bridge between Latin America, Spain, and the Muslim world. He teaches at Facultad de Teología Asambleas de Dios (Córdoba, Spain) and at Palmer Theological Seminary (St. Davids, PA, USA). Also, since 1994 he has served with PM Internacional, a mission agency formed mainly by Latin American missionaries, based in Granada, Spain, and focused on mission to Islam.