MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

*CONTEXTUALIZATION OF SUNNI HANAFI ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY*

*ESPECIALLY WITH REFERENCE TO UFA AND BASHKORTOSTAN, RUSSIA*

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**Contextualization of Sunni Hanafi Islam and Christianity**

**Especially With Reference to Ufa and Bashkortostan, Russia**

Introduction

This research paper will examine and analyze contextualization of the Christian gospel among Muslim-background peoples, especially the Hanafi branch of Sunni Islam, among which the candidate and his IMB team served from 1990-2015 in Ufa, the Republic of Bashkortostan, Russia. A brief review of the Hanafi branch of Sunni Islam will help to accomplish this examination and analysis. Some conclusions will follow, along with some expanded contextualization recommendations and the candidate’s working contextualization model capping this paper.

Such defining and reviewing is important as “contextualization of the Gospel in any provided group involves an in-depth study of its worldview, system of values, and behavior.”[[1]](#footnote-1) As Kato adds regarding the need for *contextualization*: “We understand the term to mean making concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation.... since the Gospel message is inspired but the mode of its expression is not, contextualization of the modes of expression is not only right but necessary”.[[2]](#footnote-2) The New Testament, particularly the apostle Paul’s contributions, illustrates the normative nature of contextualization of the gospel message of Jews in synagogue settings, e.g., Acts 9:19b-20, 22; Acts 13:14ff., where Paul contextually appeals to Jewish history, Jewish scripture, and the Messianic promise as being fulfilled in Jesus; and Acts 17:1-3 (Thessalonian synagogue). Pauline contextualization among Gentiles is also mentioned, e.g. Acts 14:11ff., about which Kent notes “Paul's speech to the pagans was appropriate to his audience. He made no appeal to Scripture, but built upon the knowledge they had from the natural world. He stressed the evidence in nature of a supernatural Creator, and showed the folly of idolatry”.[[3]](#footnote-3) Paul contextualized the gospel especially for Jews by regularly referencing Old Testament scripture, without actually advising his listeners of what we today would call (anachronistically) the ‘place’ or ‘scripture reference’ from the Old Testament. In contrast, we read in Acts 17:22-25ff. where Paul speaks contextually in reference to the altar (shrine) to the ‘Unknown God’ of the Athenians. As Packer notes,

[Paul] set not (*sic*) limit to what he would do, however unconventionally, to ensure that he did

not by personal insensitiveness or cultural inertia set barriers and stumbling-blocks in the way

of men coming to Christ. . . . His loving, imaginative adaptability in the service of truth and

people is a shining example to all who engage in evangelistic communication, and cannot be

pondered too often or too seriously.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As a result, this paper will peruse what would and would not be acceptable within a contextualization matrix, and examine the Biblical foundation for such contextualization, exploring and commenting on acceptable limits concerning gospel contextualization among Muslims. This examination and analysis also will propose a contextualization model used by the candidate as TeamUfa IMB leader and Equipping Team Leader for IMB across the nine time zones of the Russian Cluster, and draw some overarching conclusions with some missiological contextualization recommendations, based upon the analysis of worldview, value system, behavior of Muslims.

**Defining and Reviewing Islam, Particularly, the Sunni Hanafi School**

The worldview, value system, and behavior of Islam, if the Quran and Islamic tradition are to be taken seriously and literally at face value as a *supremacist ideology*[[5]](#footnote-5), is eventual territorial and religious worldview domination in a forced and visible theocracy. Though obviously not all Muslims, especially those living in the U.S.A., do not fit the typical stereotype of a more radical Islam, nevertheless Madsen persuasively frames a relevant worldview question:

Are the peaceful Muslims better than their religion? If someone becomes more Koranic, does

he also become more violent and progressive? How authentically Muslim or Koranic are   
 Muhammad’s peace-loving followers, compared to the militant ones? Are there people (e.g.,

‘Cafeteria Muslims’) who accept a Koran-and-water mixture of private zeal and public

tolerance? Surely there are, if the Koran says what it’s reputed to say: we disbelievers must

get our minds right or die. So we have to examine this aspect of Islam, along with less edgy

matters.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The Sunni branch of Islam has typically been termed as more ‘liberal’, especially the Hanafi

school of jurisprudence (named after Abū Ḥanīfa an-Nu‘man ibn Thābit, 699-767, the Kufans’

most prominent early legist and a well-to-do merchant of Iranian descent[[7]](#footnote-7)), according to

Talgat Tadjuddin, Grand Mufti for the Sunni Hanafi Muslims of Russia.[[8]](#footnote-8) This is due to Sunni

Hanafi Islam being far more *secularized* and *compartmentalized* in nature and expression than its

Shia or Sufi counterparts. This is clearly evident and visible within the complementary

worldviews and cultures of the Bashkir and Turkish peoples, who are ethnolinguistic cousins in a

multiplicity of ways. The Hanafi school is one of five recognized Islam jurisprudential

expressions (*madhhab*). Further, the Sunni Hanafi school is viewed as being more flexible and

less rigid due to its legal interpretations not based exclusively upon the Quran and the hadiths,

but also upon legal analogies. This flexibility, according to Talgat Tadjuddin, may loosely be

compared to the American understanding of separation of church and state, whereas Sunni Hanafi Muslims would term it as separation of mosque and state.[[9]](#footnote-9) This effectively produces a definite, more ‘nonspiritual’ expression of Sunni Islam. In turn, this in practice produces a much more tolerant Islamic worldview that leaves room for open expression of other religious worldviews, including evangelicals and Baptists, without any coercion at the state or political level to pressure non-Muslims to convert, pay a dhimmi or poll tax (*jizya*), move out of the territory, or be executed. This is the Sunni worldview experienced by the candidate and his IMB team in Ufa and in which they served from 2000-2015. The Sunni Hanafi worldview is the dominant Islamic worldview in Turkey, the Balkan countries, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, certain regions in Iraq and China and India, and the Caucasus Mountain region of southern Russia, though its expression there is often much more strict and even violent due to historic, independent tribal dynamics. It is also dominant in Pakistan, other parts of Russia (especially the Republics of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan), Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and the Central Asian countries of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

**An Acceptable Contextualization Matrix And Its Biblical Foundation**

It is crucial to have some kind of filtering tool to assist with the task of assessing contextualization validity and biblical adequacy. Hiebert proposes four levels of contextualization which are incorporated in this candidate’s matrix : no contextualization, minimal contextualization, uncritical contextualization, and critical contextualization.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Stetzer has proposed five crucial principles for gospel contextualization: the Bible is the only infallible text that exists; there is a biblical precedent for using "bridges" to reach out to others with the Gospel; there is an incarnational approach to missions that is bound by biblical parameters; the sufficiency and unique nature of biblical revelation; and the need to be ethically sound in our evangelistic methodology.[[11]](#footnote-11) These also are integrated into the candidate’s contextualization matrix.

The candidate proposes the following contextualization matrix (see next page) based on a synthesis of the principles espoused by Hiebert and Stetzer. This fusion is substantially reflective of the candidate’s and his IMB team’s contextualization approach for evangelism, church planting, discipleship, leadership training, sowing of the Word, and development of leadership training used in the Sunni Hanafi Muslim context during the years of 2006-2015. This contextualization continues to be modified and used by other IMB and other evangelical mission workers living and serving in Ufa, though their focus is strictly upon Bashkir and Tatar individuals and families, whereas the candidate’s TeamUfa efforts more broadly targeted the overall mega-city of Ufa (population: 1.1 million):

***CONTEXTUALIZATION MATRIX***

***Candidate’s synthesis constructed/adapted from Hiebert’s (horizontal),***

***Stetzer’s (vertical), and Parshall’s implicit contextualization principles***

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **CONTEXTUALIZATION THEMES** | ***Critical Contextualization*** | ***Uncritical Contextualization*** | ***Minimal Contextualization*** | ***No contextualization*** |
| ***What kind of authority or role does the Bible play?*** | Exclusive authority | Ultimate authority (highest though not exclusive) | Low view of authority or one of several authorities | Equal to or inferior to other authorities |
| ***Do biblically defensible/allowable ‘bridges’ exist within the people group via which the gospel may be contextualized*** | Careful, filtered, biblically appropriate use of bridge(s) | Some consistency and biblical accuracy using bridges | Little, inconsistent, or often inaccurate use of bridges | Bridges used are not being biblically and effectively contextualized or used at all |
| ***Does an incarnational approach to contextualization exist? If so, what does it look like? How does it confront deficient linguistic categories and mores? How does it avoid syncretism?*** | Total or near-complete lack of syncretism | Some syncretism, eventually being confronted and overcome | Serious syncretism, not being confronted seriously and not being overcome | Systemic syncretism & grievous compromise of gospel message and lifestyle |
| ***What role does the sufficiency and unique nature of biblical revelation play within the contextualization?*** | Exclusive sufficiency | Partial or functional sufficiency | Minimal sufficiency | Biblical sufficiency  not needed, negligent, or not important |
| ***Evangelistic methods used ethically sound?*** | Ethically pristine | Partially or functionally pristine | Minimally pristine and questionable | Lack or absence of biblical  ethic in methodology used |

This contextualization matrix serves as an applicable rubric and measurably captures the intent and caution of Phil Parshall’s guidelines to avoid syncretism as an undesired by-product of inappropriate, casual, or non-existent contextualization:

1. *Islam as a religion and culture must be studied in depth*. (candidate’s note: this point

cannot be overstated, for as Zwemer notes, ‘Islam sprang up in pagan soil and retained

many old Arabian beliefs in spite of its vigorous monotheism. Wherever Mohammedanism

went it introduced old or adopted new superstitions. The result has been that as

background of the whole ritual and even in the creed of popular Islam, Animism has

conquered’.[[12]](#footnote-12) This has certainly been the case to some extent in Ufa and Bashkortostan.)

2. *An open approach is desired*. Careful experimentation in contextualization need not lead to

syncretism as long as one is aware of all the dangers.

3. *We must be acquainted with biblical teaching on the subject of syncretism*. New Testament

passages on the uniqueness of Christ should be carefully observed.

4. Contextualization needs constant monitoring and analysis. What are the people really

thinking? What does the contextualized communication convey? What do specific forms

trigger in the mind of the new convert? Is there progress in the grasp of biblical truth? Are

the people becoming demonstrably more spiritual?

5. *Cross-cultural communicators must beware of presenting a gospel which (sic) has been*

*syncretized with Western culture.* The accretions to Christianity that have built up over the

centuries as a result of the West’s being the hub of Christianity should be avoided as far as

possible.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Conclusions and Contextualization Recommendations

**The Place Of Platform Contextualization (Tent-making) Among Muslims**

In Ufa, the official government worldview and policy worked against pure ‘missionaries’ who established legal presence in the country via missionary, humanitarian, or religious-activity visas. However, they began allowing foreigners to open and maintain legitimate businesses which ‘validated’ the missionaries’ presence---they are meeting a felt business need and providing a necessary service, while at the same time allowing both local believers and Western expatriates a legitimacy of presence and less questions. This model must be encouraged and empowered by mission agencies and supported by churches. It is the emerging model for IMB work, with such tentmakers anchored on a team by a career-appointee couple or family.

**Making Room For Existential And Mystical Missional Inroads**

On the basis of multiple dream/vision stories the candidate encountered in Ufa, he does not believe we should forbid Muslim-background individuals in blanket fashion from possible exposure to gospel truth through illumination from God via dreams. We should not forbid that which God has not explicitly forbidden in scripture. People abused the gift of tongues, but God did not forbid the use of tongues as long as it was regulated. What would make for a minimum of modicum when it comes to dreams as illumination of existing gospel revelation?

God spoke to individuals through dreams and visions in both the Old and New Testaments via the expected nature of dreams/visions (Abimelech in Genesis 20; Abraham in Gen. 28, Jacob in Gen. 31, Joseph in Gen. 37 and 40-42). The Jews expected that God would speak in dreams to His prophets with authoritative revelation (Numb 12 + Deut. 13; 1 Samuel 28, Jeremiah 23, Zechariah 10, with references to the assumption that God will bring illumination to His king/prophets via dreams, as one possible source). Other references include Solomon’s dream in 1 Kings 3:5ff.; Daniel 2,4,5,7; Joel 2; Acts 2; Mary in Luke 1 and Joseph in Matt 1-2; and Peter/Cornelius in Acts 10. There does not appear to be evidence in Christian Scripture that Satan or a demon is able to ‘invade’ the resting consciousness of a person in a dream; only God Himself is able to accomplish such a feat. Again, the Bible is replete with such occurrences. Never once is such an occurrence attributed in scripture to any source or allowance other than God Himself.

Therefore, we should not attribute illuminatory dreams to Satan, but only God, or alternatively, to the subconscious of a person, who has certain thoughts, themes, images, etc. embedded in their subconscious, which may appear during a sleeping dream episode. Regardless, Satan is not capable of such omniscient ability and we should not attribute to him such capacity without normative, scriptural basis for it. We need to consider seriously the illuminatory nature of dreams to Muslims within Bashkortostan and the wider Sunni Hanafi world. A *horizontic* hermeneutic regarding the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 leads to the conclusion that the prophecy was partially fulfilled at Pentecost, continues to be fulfilled, and will be fulfilled ultimately when the last individual of the last people group to access the gospel believes upon Jesus. Dreams and visions from the Lord, in an illuminatory though not revelatory sense, continue to be actuated by the Spirit to draw individuals and people groups unto Himself.

Robin Hadaway[[14]](#footnote-14) believes, and has stated verbally that Phil Parshall concurs, that the best,

most effective emerging way to reach Muslims may be through feelings and more mystical

approaches via the Sufis and Shias. This candidate would propose that this approach should be

broadened and extended to the Sunni Hanafi branch of Islam based upon years of experience

among that worldview in Russia and the move of the Spirit that has been occurring among those

Muslim-background individuals. When this candidate and his IMB team finished their work in

Ufa and Bashkortostan in 2015, nearly every one of the twenty-five churches aligned with the

Russian Baptist Union had a majority active membership made up of Muslim-background

believers primarily from the historically Muslim Bashkir and Tatar people groups. This contrasts

with the fact that there were only a handful of Muslim-background believers in just a few of the

Russian Baptist Churches when the candidate’s family arrived in Ufa in fall 2000 to start

building a ministry team.

The Baptist association in Ufa elected Tatar believer Naeel Aiyupov as Director of Mission

the Russian Baptist Union’s first-ever non-Russian senior leader in history in autumn 2014. This

candidate participated in Naeel’s inauguration and service of installation in October 2014, a time

of great rejoicing, for that ground-breaking event marking a tipping point in Ufa, Bashkort, and

Tatar evangelical history in Bashkortostan and all of Russia.

Former IMB head trainer and Southeast Asia Affinity Group Leader Steve Smith, who also is

co-author with Ying Kai of the seminal work *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution*, speaking of

apparent new openness to the gospel in Central and Eastern Europe, stated in Athens, Greece

during a CityReach discipling and church-planting forum in February 2015: “God is bypassing

the head and going straight to the heart: miracles, healings, signs, wonders; there is a need to have an existential experience of God that doesn’t start with the intellectual side of life”[[15]](#footnote-15). On the basis of this candidate’s personal anecdotal evidence, it would appear this same activity of the Spirit is trending not merely into Eastern Europe, but even deeper into Russia. The Republic of Bashkortostan inside Russia, of which Ufa is the capital, is both a gateway region bridging the European and Asian continents which converge at the Ural Mountains just east of Ufa, and also bridging Russia proper with the Central Asian region to the south and southeast. This region appears to have experienced increasing instances of dreams and visions over at least the past ten to fifteen years. Could it be that God is doing such a worldview breakthrough work among Sunni Hanafi Muslims by going straight to their hearts?

This candidate can attest to conversations with thousands of Sunni Hanafi Muslim-background individuals in Ufa and Bashkortostan, as well as from neighboring Tatarstan, from 2000-2016 that portrayed a growing sense of emotional, mystical, and intellectual dissatisfaction and disillusionment with Islam as a worldview and its inability to address the deepest hunger and philosophical questions of especially a new generation. Bashkir, Tatar, Mari-El, Udmurt, and Chuvash Baptists in Ufa and from across Bashkortostan have gathered en masse annually the past five years for a three-day time of worship, preaching, and training in all of their national tongues, not in Russian language. Much of the worship is centered around a desire for God to move even more powerfully among their individual people groups, often in fashion that is much more unusually expressive, even spontaneous, in contrast to their normally-reserved character, especially in public. Sunni Hanafi Muslims, especially from village settings, thrive in a culture of national dances with vivid costuming, dramatic presentations, philosophical insight, mysticism, and contemplation/meditation. Such practices are reflective of what Robin Hadaway describes as a fourth worldview, excluding the essences of the fear-power, shame-honor, and sin-guilt worldviews: that of existentialism-transcendence.[[16]](#footnote-16)

It appears that among the Sunni Hanafi Muslims in Ufa, Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, and other regionalized pockets of Russia, with increasing regularity among those forty years and younger, a spiritual and worldview vacuum is growing in intensity and magnitude. The historic popular, folk, and animistic Sunni Islam of Ufa and Bashkortostan is neither answering adequately nor filling that void. Neither the *honor-shame* nor the *guilt-sin* worldview has either the impetus or the spiritual and worldview apparatus to satisfactorily overcome the spiritual void increasingly felt inside Sunni Hanafi Muslims. The fear-power worldview is pervasive among Sunni Muslims who originate from more provincial and rural settings, but it is not sufficient by any measure to fill the spiritual emptiness gnawing at Muslims.

This candidate proposes that there needs to be more of a contextualization effort among Sunni Hanafi Muslims via the realm of the existential-transcendent worldview. This approach addresses what Parshall and Hadaway have described how *Orthodox Islam* answers ‘eternal destiny’ questions, whereas *Folk Islam* answers ‘what’s happening now’ Islam[[17]](#footnote-17); Hadaway also considers that there should be much more of an emphasis of ‘feelings over doctrine; emotion over logic, the mystic over concrete, charismatic over dogmatic, a vibrant encounter with God, appealing to 2 Cor. 3:16-18’.[[18]](#footnote-18) For the context of Sunni Hanafi Muslims in Ufa and Bashkortostan, the time has come to consider seriously a researched synthesis of both rejoinders hybridized in a unified existential-transcendent approach for contextualization.

Such contextualization would include heavy emphasis of existential and transcendent truth found in verses such as Numbers 23:19; Joshua 2; Psalm 23; 27:1ff; 34:10; 46:5, 10; 90:1ff.; 91:1ff.; 126:1ff.; 139:1ff; Proverbs 4:23; Matthew 6:19-34, 11:25-30, and 18:21-25; ; John 14; Romans 8:31-39; 1 Corinthians 13; Col. 3:12-27; and Hebrews 11. This contextualization should also use an approach that shows Jesus in a concretely unusual light regarding how He relates existentially and authentically to human beings, yet reveals transcendence in and via

Himself, e.g., *Seven Stories of Hope[[19]](#footnote-19)*, examining some mixture of the following New Testament passages, among others:

1. The Sinful Woman: Luke 7:36-50

2. Who Can Come To God? Luke 18:9-17

3. Who Is Your God? Matthew 25:31-46 and/or Matthew 16:21-17:9, Luke 22:66-23:25, and

23:32-43

4. The Cost Of Following Christ: Luke 18:18-30, 19:1-10

5. The Merciful King: Matthew 18:21-35

6. When God Forgave A Criminal: Luke 22:66-23:25; 23:32-43

7. The Uniqueness Of Jesus: Matthew 16:21-17:9 (this addresses Parshall’s third guideline)

8. The Power Of Forgiveness: Luke 18:9-17

9. In Which Category Am I? Acts 17:16-34

Such an approach would appeal heavily to Jesus followers’ own personal testimony and the testimonies of other believers in the given geographic area. This would involve giving concrete details of the feelings, emotions, and existential experiences encountered during the process of conviction of sin, righteousness, judgment, faith, crisis of belief, and verifiable concrete changes that have occurred in the life of the believer since conversion. This will be a powerful apologetic and motif for the Sunni Hanafi Muslim. This is one of the primary contextualization approaches the candidate and his IMB team used to engage Muslims with the gospel the past seven years.

Another contextualized approach, appealing to both the honor-shame and fear-power worldviews dominant within Muslim cultures, is the *Seven Signs of John* tool[[20]](#footnote-20) for evangelism, discipleship, and starting churches. This tool helps within Muslim people groups to pull back the ‘veil’ of Jesus to present Him to unbelieving hearts through the following Biblical vignettes of Jesus:

1. The turning of water into wine (John 2:1-12)

2. The healing of the royal official’s son (John 4:46-54)

3. The healing of the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-17)

4. The feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-14)

5. The walking on water (John 6:15-25)

6. The healing of the man born blind (John 9:1-41)

7. The raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-46)

Such an approach shows Jesus as having power as the transcendent and immanent Son of God

over creation and the elements, over distance, over sickness and physical ailment, and over

death. Such contextualization reveals Jesus as sympathetic to the shame and fear that came

through wrong theology, crushing physical desperation, the seeming finality of physical death,

and in relation to nature, creation, and weather phenomena that still instill anxiety among

traditional or folk religion people groups. Some might choose to use stories showing Jesus’

power over demons, as this would be relevant especially to folk Muslims.

Parshall claims folk Islam cannot be understood apart from Sufism,[[21]](#footnote-21) while Ernst estimates approximately half of all contemporary Muslims are engaged in some form of mystical Sufi Islam.[[22]](#footnote-22) This is in fulfillment of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali’s belief that Islam is best served by the necessity of a legal ritual framework coupled with the feelings of religious experience.[[23]](#footnote-23) Sunni Hanafi Islam assuredly reflects the comprehensiveness of a legal ritual framework, while the Sufist tendencies and yearnings in the hearts and minds of an increasing number of Sunni Hanafi Muslims can be nourished and ultimately satisfied by a contextualized gospel. This gospel emphasizes the mystical and transcendent, yet immanent, nature of God through Jesus leading to a balanced life of obedience to God’s commandments while personal experiencing Him through the indwelling presence of the Spirit addressing both the heartfelt fear-power and dishonor-shame worldview deficiencies of Islam.

Many other crucial contextualization linchpins exist. Most, if not all, of these prerequisites are directly related to Islamic culture and in no way violate the spirit or example of timeless, transferable, transcultural contextualization principles we encounter in a serious missiological reading of the New Testament, especially the book of Acts and the Pauline epistles. These aspects include attitudinal considerations, dress/appearance, a comprehensive and all-inclusive study of Islam, distinctively observed gospel-centered social and cultural festivals, food, day(s) of worship, storytelling and history, corporate worship settings, language, spiritual disciplines (prayer and fasting), recitation of Christian scripture, and missiological bridging between biblical mandates/expectations and Islam.

**Attitudinal Considerations**

Within the big picture of Western, gospel-centered believers attempting to contextualize the gospel among Muslims, believers generally and historically have done a poor job of relating attitudinally to Islam and Muslims themselves. Certainly, animosity has existed on both sides of the Christian-Muslim divide with enough blame to go around multiple times. It is granted that the Crusades are a dark stain on the history of the Church; yet, Islam must also be held equally accountable for its own atrocities against followers of Jesus and for its long embittered memory embodied by contemporary lack of forgiveness and concretized guilt by association against modern believers for events that happened nearly a millennium ago. On the other hand, all too often it was Muslims who showed the greater hospitality and toleration for their Christian counterparts during the late Dark Ages and Middle Ages. Their liberality, when it occurred, served as a painful, humiliating indictment of Christians’ failure to embody both in attitude and behavior the spirit of 1 Peter 3:15-16:

In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to

anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness

and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your

good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that

should be God's will, than for doing evil.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Therefore, it is incumbent upon Jesus followers to show honor, humility, graciousness,

hospitality, gentleness, respect, and unconditional love to Muslims. Such a relational outpouring

will be a crucial contextual key to unlocking and to joining the conversation God is having

already in the heart and mind of every Muslim on the planet. This means drinking a lot of coffee

and tea in each other’s households and spending as much time with each other as possible so that

our lives intersect regularly for kingdom purposes. It means reading the *Inzhil* together,

especially the more unusual ‘unveiling’ passages showing the uniqueness of Jesus (see earlier

section in this paper regarding approaches such as the *Seven Stories of Hope* and *Seven Signs Of*

*Jesus*) and God’s immanence through Him. It means listening to the heart cries of all Muslims

and sharing our story of how Jesus found us and changed us and continues to change us and

share how faith in Him practically works. As Taber persuasively articulates, when relating to

Muslims we should “abandon triumphalism and develop sincere respect, appreciation, and

sensitivity for all Muslim persons, for their faith, and for their way of life”.[[25]](#footnote-25)

**Dress/Appearance**

Regarding dress and appearance, the New Testament is largely silent in reference to any kind

of timeless, transcultural mandate about how Jesus followers should dress in relation to

missionally contextualizing the gospel. Of course, prudence demands that not only Western, but

all missionaries, dress conservatively within Muslim contexts, especially for female Christians.

Our Christian missionary sisters who wear a veil in Muslim contexts will actually find quicker

acceptance from Muslims for their respectable modesty in order to gain a hearing for the gospel

and kingdom. This practice is true among a multiplicity of people groups among whom IMB

missionaries serve and to which they attest. In doing so, our female missional sisters in no way

detract from the spirit of the New Testament nor do they neglect any crucial principle. This

principle of modesty applies equally to male missionaries.

**Comprehensive, All-inclusive Study Of Islam**

Serious study of Islam on the part of those wishing to introduce Jesus as Messiah and Son of

God to Muslims enables the Jesus follower to discern the worldview differences between his/her

own people group and culture and that of Islam and Muslim-background people groups. In

previous centuries, all too often (though there were rare exceptions), missionaries went to the

field with a manner, often unconsciously, of ethnic/racial superiority, smugness, and

condescension. They came bearing a radically different worldview and unexamined assumptions

about their and their new host’s culture, presuming that their message of Christianity would be

immediately understandable and discernable and obvious. They attacked their hosts and their

worldview for being provincial and primitive, insisting that the national people blindly accept an

Americanized or Anglicized version of a strange new faith and worldview. In too many

instances, the Westerners had done little or no serious, thoughtful, and judicious study of the new

worldview(s) and people groups they would encounter. Neither castigating the nationals for their

culture and worldview, nor blindly ignoring the dangers of syncretism, advanced the kingdom of

God very far. Thoughtful Jesus followers will engage in an in-depth, comparative, brutally

transparent study of both their own and their potential new host’s worldviews, discovering the

areas in which they as missionaries are able to adapt to the host culture without compromising

changeless Biblical and missiological principles. This approach is thoughtfully reflective of the

Pauline missiological code he states to the Corinthian believers, and also as recorded by Luke in

the book of Acts:

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God

but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became

weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I

might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its

blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:21-23)

Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of

the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they went

on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had

been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. (Acts 16:3-4)

**Distinctively Observed Gospel-centered Social And Cultural Festivals**

Islam, much like Judaism due to some shared ethnic and social roots and even having

borrowed from Judaism, places major emphasis on social and cultural festivals. The festivals are

crucial aspects of Islam. The two main festivals of Islam, `Id al-Fitr and `Id al-'Adha do not exist

merely for the cause of merriment and celebration. The festivals have a manifestly *religious*

nature and intent. Missionaries would be amiss missiologically and socially to preach the gospel

and for Muslims to repent and turn toward Jesus as Messiah and God and not find ways to tap

into existing social celebratory networks. Jesus did not nullify or negate Jewish festivals and

participated in them and filled them full of their intended meaning. Paul did not suddenly cease

his involvement in Jewish festivals and celebrations upon becoming a Jesus follower. He saw the

value of redeeming important religious and social celebrations with a deeper kingdom purpose,

and we would do well to learn from his example. Though the Christian missionary will not want

to participate in or to perpetuate consciously any aspect of folk, traditional, or pagan religion

present within Islamic festivals, nonetheless, there is negotiable missiological room for

celebrating the historicity of the Triune God of the Bible by redeeming Muslim festivals for

Biblical and missional purpose. As Speight observes:

…in their festivals Christianity and Islam are not primarily concerned with primeval events

belonging to the timeless past as are the primitive myths of other religions. Christianity and

Islam take history seriously. Their festivals, and in fact their very existence as religions,

depend upon datable and precise historical events. Primitive religions and even some highly

developed ones, such as Hinduism, are indifferent toward history.[[26]](#footnote-26)

A suggested way to redeem a festival such as Id al-Fitr would be to make the normal festival

foods, invite friends and neighbors into one’s house to feast together, involve every family

member in giving food and gifts to the poor, and have an accessible time of contextualized

worship, including reflective recitation of Biblical scripture from at least two male members of

the family, and buy/give new clothes to each family member.

**Day(s) Of Worship, Corporate Worship Setting, Biblical Recitation, And Prayers**

If all of the earth and cosmos are God’s (Psalm 24:1) and He is Lord over all of it, and if

Jesus’ death fulfilled the Law of Moses and restored its original relational intention toward God

and fellow humans, and if we accept as truth the Pauline admonition that the preeminence of

Christ (Colossians 1) motivates us to freedom and liberty in the Spirit away from the letter of the

law, then missiologically, theologically, and practically it is acceptable to have any day/time of

the week and place designated as a time for corporate worship. Therefore, it is not a sin if a faith

community (church) gathers for worship on a Friday in Muslim contexts. Of course, there are

other contextual questions that need to be worked out regarding the differences between

traditional Friday Muslim mosque prayers and Christian worship. Parshall relates the following

suggestion from a Muslim convert to Jesus in reference to contextualization of prayer and

recitation of the Bible for those coming out of Islam:

A catechism can be developed where Bible verses are recited at appropriate times during

prayer. Verses which commence on standing, kneeling, bowing and prayer with uplifted

hands can be spoken by the worshipper as he makes each change in position. This would give

prayer a Biblical flavour rather than being a carbon copy of Western cultural forms.[[27]](#footnote-27)

This approach could conceivably be used, as some advocate, for a type of “Jesus mosque’

worship setting, regardless of actual physical location and type of structure.[[28]](#footnote-28) This is the model

used increasingly in training sessions in Ufa and across Russia based on the Russified version of

the *Perspectives On The World Christian Movement* text. Such an emphasis on memorization

and recitation of Bible verses appropriate to worship and sermon themes will resonate with

Muslims for whom there is great admiration of expansive Qura’nic memorization and recitation.

This candidate witnessed such a dynamic both in the madrasahs of the main mosques multiple

times both in Ufa and in village settings. He also witnessed a parallel dynamic in Baptist

churches comprised of majority Muslim-background believers, especially in smaller cities,

towns, and villages. This is an example of acceptable, Biblical contextualization.

**Language**

Mission training and sending organizations rightly and strongly emphasize linguistic proficiency in the national tongues of missionaries sent to the people groups they would reach with the gospel. With linguistic fluency also inevitably comes a more effective and insightful worldview and cultural articulacy. Though missionaries will always be considered ‘outsiders’ to some extent by some segment of the populace, they gain street credibility with the average person, and equally important, with the gatekeepers and persons of peace with whom they come into contact, if they are able to communicate with increasing effortlessness. Struggling to gain linguistic proficiency pays huge dividends relationally, as the missionary learns how to contextualize the good news, discipleship, church planting, and training efforts in a new tongue. Frivolity, and lack of seriousness concerning language acquisition, screams of disrespect and condescension to the people group and their culture. Lack of serious language study and serious attempts at fluency eventually lead to some type of linguistic faux pas and offense to the people group and culture. As this candidate stated to numerous individuals in Ufa regarding the use of the Bible in order to study English, one cannot grasp the language, worldview, and culture of English-speakers without exposure at some level to the Bible. The same could be said of the relationship between Arabic language and the Koran, as well as German language and the German New Testament due to Luther’s ushering in of modern German via the biblical vehicle.

**Spiritual Disciplines (Prayer And Fasting)**

Jesus and the early church assumed the practice of fasting (and the praying that obviously

accompanies it) for spiritual purposes, though it is not mandated or prescribed. The synoptic

gospels all relate the same confrontation that disciples of John the Baptizer and the disciples of

the Pharisees had with Jesus regarding fasting, without Jesus negating or nullifying the practice

and its value (Matt. 9:14ff., Mark 2:18ff., Luke 5:33ff.). On that basis, the contextual missionary among Muslims will do so also for missiological reasons. Fasting may help to resolve any perceptions on the part of Muslims that their Christian friend is spiritually weak by failing to fast. This will enable the Jesus follower to at least not lose respect, if not gain it. Such a practice may lead to new Jesus followers from Muslim-background individuals. At a minimum, such heart-felt and God-focused fasting and prayer, especially during Ramadan and other Muslim festivals, will help to reduce tension and opposition to the gospel and those transmitting it.

**Bridging Between Biblical Mandates/expectations And Islam**

Donald McGavran’s groundbreaking text, *The Bridges of God*, was a missiological tipping point in the history of the Church when it was first published in 1955. McGavran advocated for the missiological concept of a ‘bridge’ onto which a Jesus follower could help an as-yet unbelieving individual cross in order to connect them with Jesus. The bridge typically is something from the lost person’s culture/society that is recognizable, yet not necessarily antithetical to Biblical revelation or Jesus Himself and His claims. As McGavran states, “In leading peoples to become Christian, the Church must aim to win individuals in their corporate life. The steady goal must be the Christianization of the entire fabric which is the people, or large enough parts of it that the social life of the individual is not destroyed*.*”[[29]](#footnote-29)

Because of the significant intertwining of Islam socially and religiously, bridges are a crucial missiological and contextualization tool for the Jesus follower to redeem for kingdom purposes in a contextually relational manner. When the apostle Paul was in Athens, he mentioned the ‘religiosity’ of the Greeks and the shrine to the “Unknown God” as recorded in Acts 17 as a functional bridge. Pauline contextualized special revelation as a bridge to the Jews and natural revelation as a bridge to the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch as recorded in Acts 13. Paul and Barnabas also practiced bridging for gospel contextualization in Lystra in Acts 14.

One particular bridge used by this candidate during sixteen years of service among Muslims in Russia was initial gospel conversations using the Quran. Though controversial and abhorrent for some Jesus followers to practice, this candidate normally was able to use certain Suras and verses in the Quran speaking positively of Jesus and the ‘people of the book’ as a bridge. We should not deceive ourselves into thinking we can help a Muslim all the way across a Qura’nic bridge into a salvation encounter with Jesus (for the Quran is not inspired scripture as is the Bible). Nonetheless, this candidate participated in many conversations in which the Quran was used initially in a gospel conversation and then transitioned at some reasonable point to the example and words of Jesus as recorded in the Bible. This resulted in many Muslims moving across the bridge to confessing Jesus as Lord and believing in His resurrection, becoming part of new church starts, becoming evangelists and disciplers themselves, with many now serving as missionaries to their own and other people groups across Bashkortostan, Russia, and to other unreached and unengaged people groups on the planet.

A plethora of places exists in the Quran for contextualizing aspects of the gospel and discipleship to Muslims. Jesus is mentioned ninety-three times in the Quran. Many of those ‘mentions’ are not positive in nature; however, many are. Some Suras/verses affirm Jesus’ virginal conception/birth (3.47 and 66.12). One appears to affirm His deified essence as the Word of God and Messiah (3.45). Other texts affirm Him as a prophet like Abraham and Moses (e.g., 2.137). Some uphold that He did miracles (2.253ff., 43.63ff.). There are sections that speak positively of Jews and Christians as people of ‘The Book’, and those that speak of Muhammad’s need for forgiveness yet in contrast imply that Jesus is sinless by not prompting Him to seek forgiveness for anything.

Another contextual approach is to place emphasis on the monotheistic nature of Christianity, its shared abhorrence of idolatry, and its shared love of honoring people with hospitality, as does Judaism. Grand Mufti Talgat Tadjuddin in Ufa drove home such a point to the candidate many years ago when he expressed favor toward Baptists for their warmth, friendship, humanitarian outreach, and hospitality. He further expressed support for Jesus as the returning Mahdi (Messiah) and that Islam’s view dovetails with Baptists’ view of the Second Coming of Jesus as Messiah. Tadjuddin additionally stressed that ‘we admire you Baptists in that you do not bend the knees to commit idolatry’[[30]](#footnote-30) i.e., bow to, cross oneself before, or light candles to icons as Orthodox Church believers do in Russia. Tadjuddin also underlined the commonalities between Islam and Christianity regarding monotheism and denunciation of polytheism (idolatry), the holiness and justice of God, God’s sovereignty over all things, the sinfulness of all humans, the mercy and forgiveness of God, the belief in a universal resurrection and judgment, true religion as reflected in prayerful worship and care for the poor and marginalized (orphans and widows), and God’s revelation of His will through prophets. These could and should serve as additional contextualization bridges.

**A Further Proposal Of A Comprehensive Contextualization Model *In Situ***

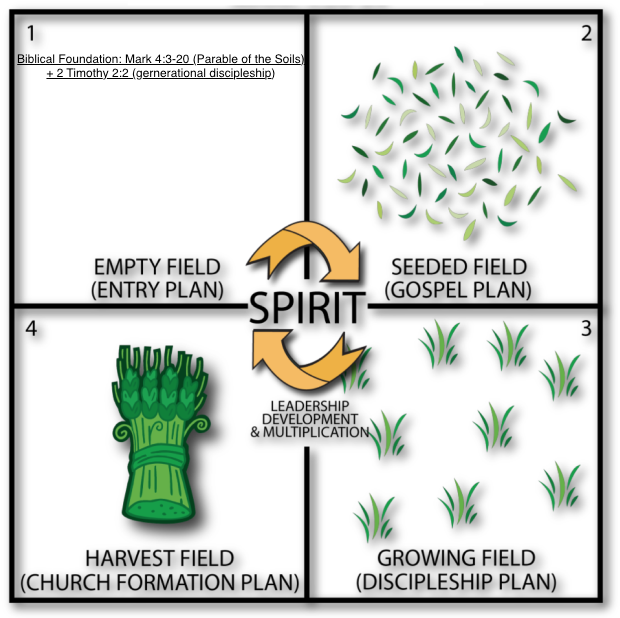
Below is a stripped-down, minimalist snapshot of the candidate’s 5-Fields visual graphic that

captures the worldview and Biblical basis for his prior IMB team’s contextualization efforts

among atheists, agnostics, New Agers, Hindus, Buddhists, Wiccans, folk/animist Muslims,

folk/spiritistic Orthodox, committed Orthodox, Jewish, alcoholics, drug-addicts, marriage- and

family-fractured folk, the non-committal and other worldview segments of Ufa, and Russia:



The assumption of the graphic, based upon the biblical passages of Mark 4:3-20 and 2 Timothy 2:2, is the presence of gospel-ready individuals, couples, families, and sometimes even people group segments, that will respond affirmatively to Jesus and become part of a cycle of discipleship and church planting that reproduces and multiplies. This is in accordance with the Parable of the Soils (Mark 4), as well as the generationally multiplicative worldview inherent in Paul’s discipling model in 2 Timothy 2:2. This model provides for flexible, yet biblical, contextualization among any Muslim ethnolinguistic people group, neighborhood, population segment, and other demographic segments encountered. Below is an exhaustively expanded Five-Fields graphic reflecting the effective and ongoing contextualized model advocated by the candidate as used among Sunni Muslims in Russia:



This model is biblically loyal, missiologically sound, contextually flexible, Christologically robust, Trinitarian-faithful, and missionally practical. It equips each believer with the ability to be a disciple and discipler at some level. It dovetails with Jesus’ promise regarding those who bear thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and hundredfold (Mark 4:20) as they multiply disciplers and nurture such fruitful trainers. Jesus’ admonition in Mark 4:13 is to take this parable seriously, for it unlocks the parabolic meaning of the *kingdom*; hence, the importance of the contextualization validity embodied in these graphics is not necessarily always linear, chronological, or artificially time-sensitive in typical Western nature. The argument could be made from the Pauline epistles that Paul did not serve haphazardly. We should have a reasonable and contextualized plan for each Muslim setting. This working model captures Parshall’s intent that “the missionary himself changes and adapts to the Muslim culture, if not contradictory to the basic tenets of the Bible”.[[31]](#footnote-31)

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