

A Sunni Woman's Heart

Part 2: A Need to Belong

by Tahira

The author, a Westerner, has lived in the Middle East with her family for nearly twenty years, residing in a variety of neighbourhoods and engaging in a variety of ministries. The following article is based on research she conducted for a doctorate in Intercultural Studies.

Everyone needs to belong. Humans are social beings. Yet the Protestant emphasis on an individual, personal faith sometimes leads workers to ignore the importance of social relationships and group identity for their ministries. I discovered that a Sunni woman's need to belong creates enormous obstacles to faith in Jesus. What might we do to help her find her identity in the Body of Christ?

Barriers

All of the women I studied consider being Sunni Muslim a very important part of their identity. Being Sunni determines in part their reputation, legal standing, job prospects, family structure, social network, major holidays, political expectations and area of residence. Bitter memo-

ries of past conflicts with other groups defined by religious identity (*tawa'if*)¹ are passed on from generation to generation, ensuring that Sunnis continue to be unified around feelings of victimization, resentment,

revenge, self-righteousness and alienation.² Stereotypes of non-Sunnis abound.

In this context, leaving Sunni Islam is deemed political and social treachery to family, community and religion. Evangelism is seen as an attack on the Sunni Muslim community. The associa-

tion in Sunni Muslims' minds between Zionism and Evangelical Christianity intensifies the Muslim tendency toward revulsion. In light of the threat to their sense of identity and social networks, it is small wonder that Sunni Muslim women so

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1 Tawa'if (singular: Ta'ifa) are sectarian divisions which determine a family's political and religious status.

2 This is equally true of other religious groups in this nation.

often reject the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus.

From childhood, people from my focus group have been inculcated with the notion that they are privileged to have been born into a superior religion and to belong to a great *Umma* with a glorious past and future. They share with the people closest to them the meanings and feelings associated with certain history, symbols, heroes, stories, special times and places, common rituals, dress and behaviours. Whatever their theology, their working heavenly hope includes nearness to family and a continued sense of belonging in the Islamic *Umma*. For many, these ties are so precious that nothing may be contemplated which threatens them.³

Women in Middle Eastern society need to belong to a family. A respectable woman lives with her husband or a near relative, preferably male. A Muslim woman who wishes to keep her reputation must marry a Muslim or remain single, living with family members. Some believers of Muslim backgrounds who have chosen not to change their legal religious identity have been able to remain at home, but it is difficult for them to enjoy home life when foundational loyalties do not coincide, and there is constant pressure to return to

thorough-going Islamic belief and practice. A married Muslim woman who converts risks losing her marriage and children. Again, the high social cost of following Jesus may hinder some from being willing to listen to what the Master has to say.

A Sunni woman may avoid questioning Islamic beliefs and standards due to a sense of loyalty to the spiritual wellbeing of her dear ones. Pious mothers sense the responsibility of creating a wholesome Muslim environment in the home. A Muslim who might otherwise be a seeker fears that her spiritual search is a moral weakness, which could result in her husband or family losing merits. Unless she is a good Muslim, she will not be able to intercede effectively for them, and if she leaves Islam, their intercessions for her will avail nothing.

Not only are there barriers to leaving the fold of Islam, there are also barriers to entering the Christian community. Some of the negative stereotypes Muslims have toward Christians have a basis in fact, and a seeker or believers of a Muslim background may feel revulsion at some 'Christian' practices. In the minds of many Lebanese Muslims, Protestant Christians are pro-Zionist, friends of the archenemies, the Jews. Contemporary life is busy

3 Furthermore, the Muslim community teaches that only the weaklings leave Islam, those who are ignorant or subject to temptation.

and pressured, and profound relationships are hard to build. Even local Christians acknowledge that relationships within the Christian community are shallow and not adequate to compensate believers of Muslim backgrounds for the damage they experience to a sense of belonging within the family and Sunni community.

Bridges

We all belong to a common humanity, and the things that unite us far exceed those which divide. Women workers share many experiences and circumstances with Sunni women as females, including menstruation, wanting to marry, marriage, childbirth and child rearing, and the pressure of societal expectations upon women. Even resident foreigners share with women of this segment of society the frustrations, delights and fears of life. We are all sensitive to the need to show mutual tolerance and respect for the sake of national and global survival. We are monotheists and share some key foundational stories: Creation, Noah, Abraham, and the exodus from Egypt. There are many issues of morality, which we can address with one voice. Any

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of these common elements of life can build bridges, however tenuous, that span the chasms between religious groups (*tawa'if*) and allow greater communication to take place.

There are also potential theological bridges. The Islam of my focus group stresses that the individual ultimately stands alone before God, and that no intercession of dear ones will save them from the Fire.⁴ This truth might

serve as a caveat against giving total loyalty to a human community. Both communities honour people who have rejected their family's religion while remaining re-

spectful, who recognized that obeying the call of God was more important than family tradition, acceptance and protection. Reminding Muslims of these people's courage may help them to find the courage to respond to the call of God in Christ. Abraham is one example with profound religious significance (See Joshua 24:2 and Genesis 11:26-32).

Fault Lines

The women I studied believe that they belong to a superior, elect and

4 Although this is the official view, in practice there is a great deal of intercession for deceased relatives and allegedly atoning rituals such as reciting the Fatiha 10,000 times on another's behalf. A friend points out that most of the taps at ablutions stations in mosques are donated in the name of a particular person, and the worshipper who washes there is expected to say a prayer on behalf of the donor.

privileged group, with the right to enforce their (or as they see it, God's) norms on others and to defend themselves with violence. At the same time, they want to see themselves and their community as tolerant, reasonable and just. At times I sensed that they were aware of this inconsistency and distressed by it. Further, they share the tension that all thoughtful citizens experience between the loyalty to the religious group, which is ruining the country, and loyalty to the country, which might be costly to the religious group. There is a tacit recognition that bitter divisions need something more powerful than *shari'ah* (Islamic law) to heal them. Weak though it seems, the ethical teaching of Jesus might indeed prove the only solution.

Frustration with the Muslim community to which a woman belongs results in inner wrestling. The sense of belonging the women feel in the Muslim community, though very positive in many ways, carries with it a powerful sense of responsibility and pressure. A woman not otherwise open to Christian teaching might be attracted to truths that relieve her of burdens she feels she cannot bear or of unfair expectations and restrictions. Finally, although these women might not admit it to outsiders, they are regularly disappointed by the disunity, ungodly character and

flawed behaviours of the Muslim families, communities and *Umma* to which they tie their identity.⁵ The result could be weakened loyalties or profound doubts, opportunities for the Holy Spirit to redirect the individual's sense of belonging toward the Father.

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Worthy of Observation

It is worth investing extra effort in people whose commitment to righteousness exceeds their commitment to religious, political, ethnic and clan groupings. One experienced worker in Syria has devised a simple gauge of relative commitment. He uses three tea glasses, one each to represent Muslims, Christians and Jews. Pointing to each glass in turn, he then asserts 'In this glass are people whose actions please God, and there are those whose actions are evil.' He

5 Of course, the same is true for members of all the religious groups, or *tawa'if*.

6 A Muslim friend explains that this is because of the belief in a kind of purgatory through which even the most wicked of Muslims will eventually reach heaven. No such hope is imagined for the Jew.

claims a greater openness to the Gospel among those willing to concede that some righteous Jews are better than some wicked Muslims.⁶ Another indicator might be commitment to some single aspect of righteousness and willingness to work across religious group boundaries to promote it.⁷ It would also be well to explore the sense of admiration some Muslims have for prominent Christians, like Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II, who showed love to people of other religions. A willingness to express appreciation for such heroes shows a love of godliness and may indicate a window of opportunity to connect their behaviour with the salvation they have experienced through Christ.⁸

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Another group of people to look for are those who are dismayed by or alienated from the Muslim group to which they have belonged. Although it is not especially strategic to found a church with malcontents, rebels and social isolates, God may have cut the social bonds of these individuals in order to make them more receptive to the acceptance of God in Christ.

Missional Strategies

It is hard to imagine that any woman from this subculture would be willing to risk alienation from the family and community to which she is so closely bound without being thoroughly convinced of the abundant love and acceptance of God. Appropriate teaching might focus on the immanence of God: his gracious Fatherhood, his nearness to his people in heaven, his acceptance of

those who fail in their worship, the proof of his love in the Incarnation and the cross, and the saving intercession of Jesus. Just telling a woman that God loves her is not enough; she must experience that love, normally first from a believer or believing community and decisively through personal experience of Jesus.

Some groups of Christians are doing a good job in embracing Muslim-heritage believers. Many could do much better. The need of Sunni Muslim women (and, I believe, of all people) to belong to a community demands from the missional church a more profound ecclesiology, along with a corresponding change in congregational relationships, an improvement

⁷ Examples might include peacemaking, sexual morality, human rights or stewardship of the environment.

⁸ It may be, however, that many Muslims would assume the motive behind these admirable deeds to be the acquisition of merit.

in the integration and discipleship of believers of a Muslim background and a reconsideration of strategies for evangelism.

In terms of theology, the church must learn an ecclesiology that is not primarily based on bloodlines and political classification. I recommend an organic model of

church, with a special focus on the church as the family of God. The practice of informal meetings and visits in homes would be in keeping with this theology. Social gatherings involving food and fun commu-

nicate that the church has accepted the whole person and not just her spiritual component. Much more could be done to help the church appreciate the profound communal symbolism of baptism and communion. It is unlikely that a heterogeneous church can thrive until the current, fairly homogeneous congregations deal with their chronic problems of backbiting, fear of change, divisiveness and clannishness.

The church should monitor itself to ensure that believers from Muslim families are truly accepted and taking leadership roles within the body

of Christ. Giving gifted and mature Muslim-background believers the responsibility of discipling people of all backgrounds would enhance understanding within the church over time. Christian-background church leaders should learn all they can from Muslim brothers and sis-

ters in Christ, and especially from those who most successfully deal with the tension between devotion to Christ and respect for their community of origin. Believers from a Christian background should be trained through

mentoring and other forms of instruction to be sensitive to Muslims in speech and behaviour.⁹ Prejudicial comments against Muslims should be countered, even in private conversations between people of Christian backgrounds. At every level, from kids' clubs to seminary, there is a need for a re-evaluation of the church's curricula to ensure that the questions of believers and seekers from all backgrounds are being adequately addressed.

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9 Here are a few of the specific suggestions made to me about sensitivity: women wearing head coverings in church, sitting with dignity and respect in church, solid Bible teaching and modesty in dress. It would also be beneficial to ask how the church's style of music enhances or detracts from the ability to participate in heartfelt worship.

the Bible and Christian history, stories, theology, customs and traditions, but they should be given the freedom to question what they hear in light of the teachings of Scripture. They also may appreciate the offer of inclusion in family-oriented holidays like Christmas.

Since few churches are at present ready to integrate believers from Muslim backgrounds, those discipling them would do well to consider alternatives that meet the person's need to belong, such as small group discipleship and worship groups. From the start, the evangelist should seek to build positive and honest relationships with whole families whenever possible, and no attempt should be made to alienate the seeker or new believer from her family and community. However, some negative family reaction is almost inevitable. Wise Christian leaders have at times been able to act as peacemakers and to reconcile estranged new believers with their families. Teenagers and young adults need special assistance in learning to balance their right to freedom of religious choice with genuine gratitude, respect and humility toward their parents.

Very few Sunni women are willing even to consider the good news of Jesus, in part because it is a threat to their social identity. To win the opportunity of presenting the Gospel, some obvious first steps might include building common ground, appealing to society's urgent need for inter-religious understanding, showing persistent love in practical ways, initiating or joining secular and cross-religious organizations and acting as peace-makers at all levels. Some Muslim women are open to practical instruction on relationships from a Christian perspective, provided that it is not blatantly anti-Muslim, and some might attend a public lecture or a ladies' discussion group on such a subject.¹⁰ While many women of this subculture consider the ethical teachings of Jesus unworkable, many also recognize that Jesus presented lofty ideals to which a pious person should aspire. With the illumination of the Spirit, his teachings might lead a Muslim woman to sense the truth and beauty of his words and character, her own inadequacy, and her need for the kind of gracious acceptance Jesus offers.

10 Some topics might include family unity, overcoming resentment, resolving sectarian hostility and cross-generational conflict. A neutral venue would make such a prospect more inviting.