

Believers' Identity: Snapshots from an Islamic Republic

by Eileen Perry

For eleven years, Eileen Perry (pseudonym) served with her husband and three children in an especially volatile part of Mid-Asia. While there she worked in a variety of educational projects for women and children. They currently are in transition to Europe to work amongst refugees from the same people group.

A Shared Journey

The issue of the identification of new Christian believers in Muslim countries perplexes many. Expatriates and believers alike often struggle with how best to define their faith and spiritual journeys. Local believers have issues of security and community rejection to wrestle through. As Christian outsiders our debates are about how to introduce or identify ourselves. We hope that our introduction will lead to more discussions and opportunities to share. However, both of us connect on this question as we seek God's wisdom in this important area of identity.

It seems like I have been in countless conversations or training sessions discussing the issue of how we should identify ourselves as believers in a Muslim country. My head has swum with possibilities and I have tried them all. People we would meet each day, like many other Muslims around the world, love to know your religion even before asking your name. I have tried many variations of how to introduce my faith perspective. I would say, 'I'm a person of the book,' or 'I'm a follower of Jesus,' or 'I love God and his ways.' At the end of each experiment they always summed me up and said, 'Oh so you are a Christian.' I am sure my blond hair and blue eyes did not help my efforts to try these different ways of explaining my faith. However, since I wrestled with this question so much, I struggled to discern how I could effectively teach those with whom God had entrusted me how to explain their new faith to others. In the beginning I felt I had to encourage them to declare their new-found faith and talk about their change to Christianity. But in recent years I have chosen a different route—to leave it to the Holy Spirit to guide and direct them in this area. I felt led to not mention the term 'Christian' but rather to simply express the teachings of Christ. I saw the Holy Spirit's faithfulness in action as they learned how and when to describe their beliefs to family and strangers alike. I learned much as I watched my local brothers and sisters. And each one did it a bit differently.

Male Identities

Early in our time in Mid-Asia we met a local brother who opened our eyes to the complexity of living out one's faith in a hostile environment. Initially he appeared

very devout, always walking around with his prayer beads whenever in public. It came as a surprise to find out that he followed Christ. The beads acted as a cover to throw others off from the reality of his faith. Many times locals that worked for faith-based NGOs would also carry prayer beads to make others believe that they followed Islam. Those few in their trusted circles knew otherwise.

Another brother answered questions with questions when asked about his beliefs. He openly expressed his respect for Jesus and his teachings in very public venues but never openly shared with Muslims that he was a Christian. When asked directly, he would ask in return, ‘When you say Christian what does that mean to you?’ Then he used their definition to determine his well-thought-out response. Even his own family did not know for sure what he was. However, amongst local, trusted, believers he openly talked of his faith and helped others to grow and wrestle with theological issues.

Other brothers take a quiet stand by not attending the local mosque. They do not proclaim their new-found faith, but simply stop attending the neighbourhood site of worship, even though they periodically receive much pressure by doing so. In addition, they discontinue their daily prayer rituals (*namaṣ*) or do not partake in traditional fasting during Ramadan. Families encounter persecution when their neighbours see this. These men often lead their families to faith and openly share with their immediate family if they trust their wife or if they have a living situation with relatives that they trust.

Female Identities

Widows share their faith boldly and more freely than married women or female teenagers. Due to the absence of the male authority in their family they often have greater freedom with their family members and the general public. I observed some openly claim to be Christian in a mixed group within their families. However, married women who came to faith apart from their husbands will share with some women about their faith, confess openly to being Christians with foreigners and then hide it from their husbands out of fear. Teenage women confess to other believers about their faith but if their family does not also believe, they often do not share with their families about their beliefs. If they develop the courage to do so, they normally share only with the other females in the family.

How People Identify Themselves in Different Ways

In this Islamic republic it appears that the majority of believers express their faith in different ways in various settings. On the whole, the communities, out of caution, do not publicly proclaim their faith. Most choose to not follow the outward signs of Islam like practicing *namaṣ/salat* and fasting. Many secular Muslims also abstain from these practices, so believers hide behind these assumptions. People share in various ways in their family unit depending on their gender and status in the family.

The husbands and widows more freely and openly identify themselves as Christians and encourage their family members to follow them. The teenagers and married women more cautiously share their faith with other members, if at all. Most believers, when established in a trusted fellowship, introduce themselves as Christians. Additionally, they will share with foreigners that they believe in Jesus, love Jesus or are Christians.

Case Studies

One of my students, Masuda,⁶ whispered in my ear one day that we share the same faith. In the same breath she asked me not to say anything about it in the class since several of her relatives also attended. Over the months God moved in the heart of her niece who began to respond positively to Jesus' pursuit of her. Masuda, though still nervous about identifying herself, moved past this fear and began praying for and with her niece. Masuda and I often met after class to pray and share verses. Soon she began to invite her niece too. Her niece more boldly declared that she had become a Christian and continued to use that term with me and another expat she met with and with her aunt. Her aunt, on the other hand, more quietly declared her beliefs and often referred to other believers from Muslim background as *Imandar*, or those of the same faith.

Suela, an illiterate cleaning lady, came to faith through the witness of a local believer as well as through miracles and dreams. It was the latter that finally drew her to Jesus. She never called herself a Christian in my presence but claimed, 'I believe in Jesus, look at all he did for me.' She would often say that she believed but did not feel comfortable putting a title on that belief.

Aisha, another illiterate cleaning lady, more boldly proclaimed that she was a Christian with other local women. One woman from her small fellowship was put into prison by her husband. When the husband questioned her, she said, 'Yes I'm a Christian, what will you do about it? Go ahead and tell the police.' She showed great boldness around others yet did not share about her faith openly with her husband.

Laila, an older divorced/abandoned woman quickly declared her new found faith to her relatives after watching the *Jesus Film*. However, they teased her about becoming a Christian. After a few months of this she retracted and has not since declared any faith. Off and on she asked questions about Jesus and Christianity but it appears that the experience she had with her relatives silenced her and created a tension and concern about pursuing more. Her daughter, on the other hand, boldly shared her interest in Jesus yet has not come to the place of accepting a title for her beliefs.

⁶ All names in this section are pseudonyms.

Ahmed openly shares about his Christian faith. He has a brain tumour and due to this terminal condition he more willingly takes risks with his faith and how he shares it. He loves to talk about his faith with strangers, other believers, and foreigners, but he shows caution with his wife's relatives.

Conclusion

How Mid-Asian believers identify themselves is a huge issue—one that I think we as outsiders do not fully comprehend. We intellectually fathom the risks and study the various potential terms to use. Emotionally, most of us have never experienced first-hand the real threat to our lives and the abandonment of family due to how we identify ourselves. Fortunately we serve a God with many titles who exhibits creativity beyond our imagination. His graciousness abounds in so many areas, including this one. May we extend that same grace to our new brothers and sisters as well as each other as we wrestle with this issue and seek God's guidance for each situation we face. In whatever way God leads them, may their personal choice of identity draw us into deeper worship as we and our brothers and sisters share about our sweet relationship with the Lord.