

Reflections on Who I Am as a Follower of Jesus

by Isaac Turner

Isaac Turner (pseudonym) is an American who began his service among Muslims in South Asia in the mid-1970s where he and his wife (European) raised their children. After serving as a professor of Intercultural Studies from 1996-2002, he returned to South Asia where he and his wife currently enjoy ministering alongside their children and grandchildren. He holds a DMiss from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois, USA, and regularly trains and mentors Christians from all backgrounds in outreach and church planting.

Note: Recently I interviewed Abdul Rahman (pseudonym) a South Asian friend and brother regarding how he identifies himself in his family and community. He grew up in a Muslim family and decided to follow Jesus as a young adult. Abdul Rahman came to faith thirty-two years ago and has been greatly used by God since then in bringing others from a Muslim background to the path of Isa. Over the course of decades, we have enjoyed fellowship, ministered side-by-side and shared innumerable conversations regarding his own journey and identity. What follows has been fairly freely written in the first-person format, as if he himself wrote it in English. This seemed more readable than a word-for-word translation of an interview. As such, I have attempted to accurately represent his words and views, even in cases where I myself might have a different opinion, and as an ‘alongsider’ (a foreigner from a Christian background coming alongside local believers) would necessarily have a different identity from his. In all of our discussions we continue to be iron sharpening iron, as we learn from one another and grow together.

Abdul Rahman’s Journey

My first personal contact with Christianity happened as a young man when I went to visit a relative in the capital. The bottom floor of their home had been rented by a Christian organization to house a Bible correspondence school. Throughout my life, I had been warned against Christianity by my local Imam and others, who said that Christians were immoral, ate pork, drank alcohol and worshipped three gods. However, on one of my many visits to my relative, I was offered a Bible at a very low price by the office staff, and out of curiosity I decided to buy it.

I went straight from my relative to a nearby mosque to pray and placed the Bible by my side. Others in the mosque immediately began telling me I needed to get rid of that terrible book as it was corrupted and would lead me astray. But that only increased my desire to see what was in it so I went straight home from the mosque and started to read.

I was surprised by what I found. It did not have the terrible things I had expected to find. In fact, I was quite attracted to the message, though some things

were hard to understand. I continued going back to the correspondence school office to ask questions and learn more, and gradually I came to believe it was true. Hebrews 2:14-15 really spoke to me: through Isa's death, he was able to destroy the one who has the power of death, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. That was what happened to me. *Isa* delivered me from the fear of death that had been my constant companion and gave me the assurance that I was saved and would spend eternity in his presence. Having come to faith, the question I then faced was, what do I do next? I came from a business family and often helped out in our family store. But I had a lot of freedom. Christian friends recommended that I join a team of young people who went around the country selling Christian books. The idea appealed to me and I joined them.

With my business background and experience talking with people and selling things, I was a good book salesman. However, because we sold only Christian books it immediately turned many people away. The more religious people would tell their friends not to buy our books or to talk with us since we were Christians. The word 'Christian' was said by them more as a term of disgust and revilement than as a neutral name of a religion.

There was a further difficulty with my name. Since we sold Christian books, the public assumed we were part of the very tiny Christian community in the country, which consists of believers whose ancestors were either Hindus or tribal animists and whose expressions of Christianity look idolatrous to the Muslim majority. Muslims in our country tolerate Christians selling their own books, even if they have little interest in buying or reading them. But someone with a Muslim name selling Christian books was *not* to be tolerated. Hearing my name provoked endless questions and frequently ended in heated words, threats or worse, but unfortunately the questions provoked were not about Jesus. In order to prevent such unwanted reactions, I was told I must change my name and was given the name Richard. And so, for that year on the book-selling team I became a Christian named Richard.

As I reflect on my time selling books, I see now how little impact I had on those I interacted with. Because I was viewed as a Christian, most were not really interested in what I had to say or the books I sold. Yes, some bought books out of curiosity, but not many really considered the Christian message. They were absolutely convinced they had a later, uncorrupted and improved version of the same basic religious system we followed. From their perspective, I was the one who was out of date and deceived. I was the one who should be learning from them and their most recent revelation, the Qur'an, because since they perceived me to be part of the Christian minority they assumed I didn't know anything about the Qur'an. So, even though I had studied it and grown up with it as they had, I was no longer in a position to discuss or make any comments about the Qur'an or Muhammad, since that was their book and prophet and my questioning would be taken very negatively.

After one year selling books, I left the book team to spend a second year with another small team that included foreigners. We lived full-time in a larger district town and made visits most days of the week out to smaller bazaars in the countryside. On the same day each week we would visit the same bazaar and thus were able to build up regular interactions with local people who knew when we would be there. We rented simple one-room shops and sat on the floor with prominently displayed copies of the *Injil* and various study books comprising a Bible correspondence course.

It was usually one foreigner and one local believer from a Muslim background like myself who visited each bazaar together. We wore the white clothing of religious men. The foreigner's presence usually created lots of interest. When asked who we were, we explained that we were there because, though they themselves had heard of the *Taurot*, *Jabbar* and the *Injil*, they had never seen them or read them. We had come to give them the opportunity to do so. In this way, we had a very different identity from the team I had been on earlier where we were simply Christians selling Christian books.

With our different identity, I was also able to go back to my real name. And when people asked us what religion we followed, I would say I was an *Isayi*, one who is a follower of *Isa*. That would cause most people to stop for a few seconds to consider and then respond by asking, 'Oh, you mean Christian?' So, in a way, I had a different identity than before and could use my real name. However, it was not so very different and seemed to lead to about the same place. People were just not very interested in what we had to say.

The one exception to this were the poor people looking for financial opportunities. Since Christians are believed by most Muslims to be rich and willing to use their money to buy converts, the biggest response we had was from the poor. Some came right out and asked, 'If I become a Christian, what will you give me?' Others, however, were better at keeping their motives hidden, but were waiting and hoping that eventually the money would begin to flow.

I do not say that all those who came with bad motives went untouched by the gospel. Some did come to see the real worth of the gospel message and received it. But they were in the minority. In general, those who responded to us were from the lower social strata and had little influence on others. They faced the constant scepticism of others who looked on their becoming Christians as simply a means of gaining financial support.

But most significantly, those who came to faith were also looked on as Christians and traitors to Islam. And as such they came under significant persecution. In some cases, this led to the person turning back to Islam, at least outwardly. Where this did not happen, it still greatly hampered any attempt to share

their faith with others. They were hesitant to share and others were unwilling to listen.

After a year on the second team, I moved to another larger city and did the one thing I knew how to do – business. I opened a store there and became a shopkeeper again. God has given me a natural gift of relating to people and making friends. So, through my shop I made lots of friends and decided I wanted to use that to share the gospel. I began to invite some friends over to my house to read the Bible together. And, by the way, it was during this time that I got married to a girl from a Christian background. The official registration of the wedding was done in the Islamic way and on the official document my wife is registered as a Christian and I as Muslim.

Understanding what Islam truly teaches

From those days to the present, almost thirty years have passed. I have learned many things in that time and have seen God work in the lives of many people. Again, my own identity has changed over those years. That change in identity has come, in large part, through my own study of Islam.

It is strange but true that, while I grew up a Muslim, it has been only after becoming a follower of Christ that I have come to understand what is in the Qur'an. Like over 99% of the Muslims in my country, I had only read the Qur'an in Arabic and had no idea what it said beyond what my Imam told me. It has been very surprising because I discovered that many of the things I was taught by my Imams were not true.

The Qur'an does not say the earlier books such as the *Taurat* or *Injil* have been changed or abrogated. In fact, it says just the opposite. God has kept them from being changed and the Qur'an confirms rather than abrogates them. Similarly, I was always told that the prophets were sinless, but when I read the Qur'an, I saw that the prophets, including Muhammad, implored God for forgiveness for their sins. The one exception to that was *Isa*, who is said to be holy in the Qur'an. I had also been told the Qur'an teaches that Muhammad would intercede for his disciples on the last day, but when I read the Qur'an, I saw that no intercession would be accepted by God on the last day and Muhammad would not be able to intercede.

In addition, I did not find the things I had been told I would find in the Qur'an. I also found many things there that I had no idea existed; no Imam had ever told me about them. For example, the honour and respect shown to *Isa* was a big surprise to me. Not only is *Isa* called holy, but he is also called the Messiah and the word of God. He was strengthened by the holy spirit⁷ and his birth to the Virgin

⁷ Editor's comment: It is noteworthy that Abdul Rahman is looking directly at the Qur'anic text instead of at common Muslim interpretation. A lengthy discussion about the differences between Muslim hermeneutic of the Qur'an and Protestant Christian hermeneutic of the Bible is beyond

Mary was miraculous. He performed many miracles while on earth, something the Qur'an clearly denies about Muhammad. He also is called a mercy from God and it is said that he was taken up to heaven alive, where he still is today.

In short, I have discovered that while there are some difficult and harmful passages in the Qur'an dealing with *jihad* and warfare and the place of women and marriage, there is also a very large amount of good and helpful material that can be used very effectively in the initial stages of witnessing to people. Using such material helps people see that what they have been told in so many areas by the religious authorities is not what the Qur'an actually teaches. This is a very important first step in any person's pilgrimage to faith. They begin to see that they need to investigate for themselves what the different books say and not simply take the word of their Imams. I encourage them to purchase a Qur'an in their own mother tongue and read it for themselves, something very few would otherwise ever think of doing.

Having come to a better understanding of what the Qur'an says has also led to a change in my own identity. Since I am no longer a part of a Christian team, it has been years since anyone has asked me what my religion is. People hear my name, return my *salaam*, or listen to my speech and the Islamic religious vocabulary that I use and assume I am a Muslim. And if anyone would ask me, that is what I would say. I am a Muslim, or submitter to God, as per Romans 12:1. That gives me some significant opportunities, since I can talk about the Qur'an and Muhammad without immediately inviting a wall of hostility and prejudice. In fact, as a religious person, that is an obvious topic for conversation.

In my conversations, I can interact with people who have no preconceived idea of who I am and what I believe. I use that to help them see the errors in their own belief. Thus, the idea that they will keep the *sharia* (Islamic law) and be saved through it is fairly easily shown to be impossible. There are many examples in the Qur'an and Hadith that we cannot keep the law and it therefore condemns us. Then, we talk about the almost universal hope that Muhammad will intercede for them. According to the Qur'an, he is only a warner and bearer of good news, not a saviour or intercessor.

Through such discussions, I find out who is seeking and open. With those who are not, we simply go on to other subjects apart from religion. But those who are open come to realize that much of their religious understanding comes from the Islamic religious hierarchy. Rather than showing Muslims what the Qur'an actually

the scope of this article or this volume of , but this is a good example of how the issue plays itself out in one case study. While Islam generally teaches that the Holy Spirit is the same thing as the angel Gabriel, Abdul Rahman is intentionally preferring and advocating a literal reading of Surah 2:87 which the Yusuf Ali Qur'an renders as 'We gave Jesus the son of Mary Clear (Signs) and strengthened him with the holy spirit.'

says, imams in our country use their teaching to maintain their position of power. And as seekers read the Qur'an for themselves and discover that it says that neither obedience to the Islamic law nor the intercession of Muhammad is going to save them, they become open to hearing of another means that God has opened to find peace with God. That peace is made possible by *Isa*.

This is a message that is hinted at in the Qur'an (where *Isa* stands out as unique – honoured in this world and the next), but is clearly taught in the books given by the earlier prophets and most clearly in the *Injil*. In talking to those who are open, we go on to examine in the earlier books what God says about salvation through grace made available in Christ. People who follow and accept this line of thinking do not see themselves as rejecting the Qur'an or Muhammad. Rather, they reject what the religious hierarchy has falsely taught in order to maintain their own control over religion and the financial benefits it brings.

When such honest seekers come to faith in Jesus as their Saviour, I then help them gradually see that the Qur'an and Muhammad, while teaching some good and helpful things, also have faults, limitations and things we cannot accept. They come to see that Muhammad was a fallible human being like any other child of Adam and the book he recited, like any other human book, is a mixture of truth and error. I can use books like a biography of Muhammad translated by the *Islamic Foundation* into our language to tell some of the stories about Muhammad that the local Imams never tell, and people come to understand on their own that they should not blindly follow Muhammad's example in everything.

My main goal in relating to interested people is that they come to know the truth of salvation by God's grace through faith in *Isa*. However, I also want them to continue to maintain their identity as Muslims. To do otherwise is to cut themselves off from the wider community and puts them in a small religious ghetto that is ostracized and despised.

Maintaining a 'Muslim' identity

In the past, when anyone came to faith in Christ, they were rejected by their own community and often given shelter and work by the Christian mission. That is done less today as many are helped to take on an *Isai* identity and retain much of their old Islamic cultural forms. But even being *Isai* still means they are known as Christians and face substantial, if reduced, walls of prejudice and persecution. Once placed in a position outside the Muslim community, it is very difficult for anyone to cross that huge barrier and win people from the other side.

By maintaining their Muslim social identity followers of *Isa* remain in their communities and share with others the way they have been witnessed to. Such sharing raises questions and suspicions. But believers can defend themselves from

accusations because they are not simply rejecting the Qur'an and Muhammad, but looking at what those sources really teach.

I encourage those who come to faith in *Isa* to begin meeting together each week in small house fellowships, just like the gathering we host each week in our home now and that we have regularly enjoyed in other believers' homes through the years. In such meetings, they would pray for one another, read and teach from the Bible and do what is usually done in Christian fellowship meetings.

Depending on their situation and previous practice, I also encourage people not to cut themselves off from their own community and society. If that happens, their voice is no longer heard and considered and they will struggle greatly just to continue on in faith themselves.

This is an area where there are no hard and fast rules. I encourage people who come to faith not to necessarily make any big announcement of the fact, but to see that their life changes and to gradually take opportunity to share with people as they have been shared with. I sometimes illustrate what I mean by comparing the believer to a pregnant woman. In our culture, a woman does not go around and announce that she is expecting a child. She doesn't have to. It gradually becomes obvious to everyone. In the same way, if the believer in *Isa* is genuine, he will not have to announce his new faith, but his life and words will gradually make it obvious.

Of course, the believers' faith in *Isa* does become obvious to everyone over time, just like a pregnancy, and when this happens the believers must be ready for the persecution that comes to any who follow *Isa*. It is a life-long struggle to remain within a suspicious community while talking about Jesus. Many believers from Muslim backgrounds in our country who identify themselves as *Isayi* or Christian have merged into the Christian society and cut off contact to such a degree that after the initial painful ostracism from their families they experience little ongoing persecution.

I experienced this in my own life. When I took a more Christian identity, I went through the very painful trial of being ostracized and rejected by my own family and community. It was very difficult. But then when I took on the Christian name of Richard, I found that while the overt persecution lessened, I was also simply dismissed by the Muslim community as someone who didn't know anything worth sharing with them. Now that I use my given name, I am not easily dismissed, and the persecution that comes has more to do with my allegiance to Jesus.

An example of what I'm saying comes to mind: Over the course of six months last year, the largest house-fellowship in our city withstood an intense onslaught of community opposition – from barring the use of neighbourhood wells, taunting and spitting into the meeting rooms, to death-threats, rape attempts, violent attacks, and surrounding believers' homes for hours with armed men. The neighbourhood's

fundamentalist minority was attempting to expel them from the community for their allegiance to Jesus, and it would have been easiest to give in by leaving their homes and moving to where a small Christian community already lives. But this house-church stood their ground, insisting to their neighbours that as followers of Jesus they were more truly ‘submitted to God’ than their oppressors, and eventually the neighbourhood opinion moved against the fundamentalist fringe. Though difficult, this group of believers has chosen to remain in their Muslim neighbourhood and weather the inevitable persecution.

It is a delicate balance, and each individual believer’s situation is different, but in this we can also follow examples in Jesus’ life. In answering suspicious critics who wanted to brand him, he was notoriously evasive. He was shrewd when answering Pharisees (e.g. Mark 11:28-33). It seems that Jesus saw a time and place for revealing his identity and provoking opposition, and at other times avoiding it. Even when asked ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus didn’t always give a ‘straight’ complete answer but focused on the next thing that particular individual needed to hear (e.g. Luke 18:18).

Conclusion

I will close with something that has helped me to come to my present identity and position. After finishing my two years with the Christian teams I began to consider the position of some of the very unorthodox Sufi Muslims in our society. Many of them never say formal prayers, they drink alcohol and smoke hashish, and believe in reincarnation and their own divinity. They are much further from orthodox Islam than the person who calls himself an *Isayi*. Yet, while the *Isayi* is ostracized, the Sufi is accepted as a part of the Muslim community. Why? Because they *refuse* to be ostracized. They retain the outward trappings of Islam – clothing, beard and prayer hat – as well as the Arabic religious terminology. They insist they are *the real* Muslims.

If we want to be salt and light in a society that would all too happily call us irrelevant and place us to one side, then we need to follow something of these Sufis’ example. I believe we can sometimes bring glory to Christ and fruit into His Kingdom through tactfully remaining within our community. No matter one’s social identity, everyone who talks boldly about Jesus will face hostility. The question is whether we easily allow the hostility to expel us or, as the Lord leads, tactfully refuse to be rejected and ostracized.