

A Holistic Identity for a Holistic Culture: My Pilgrimage as a Global Professional

By M. James

M. James (pseudonym) and his family served more than 25 years in the Arabian Peninsula, where he was employed. Together with a team, they co-labored, following up on media inquiries, ministering to seekers, discipling believers, and training workers.



A respected reputation in the community is essential for establishing trust, which enhances discipleship. Before leaving the US to serve overseas, I learned skills for not offending colleagues in the secular workplace, then later inviting them to church activities in the evenings and on the weekends. After accepting a position in the Middle East, I began to comprehend the possibility of a more holistic lifestyle that better integrated my profession and my faith. As my language and cultural fluency increased, I learned new workplace boundaries. I also learned the importance of having an identity that was reasonable to my neighbors, professional colleagues, and anyone else among whom I ministered. In this article I share a bit of my pilgrimage as a global professional over two decades in the Arabian Peninsula, and what my pilgrimage taught me about identity and witness.

Western Dualistic Identity

The question of identity is daunting and bewildering for any young adult. Although I discovered skills in mathematics when in high school, a life dominated by numbers sounded boring. A friend signed up for

engineering, and in a moment, I chose my life profession without knowing anything about it. At university, I discovered the source of lasting joy, God's promises and a redeeming relationship with Jesus. I also began my indoctrination into maintaining a secular persona in the laboratory by day while serving as an Intervarsity Bible study leader by night.

If I remained an engineer in the US, I felt I would be burying a talent, per the parable of Jesus. My extended family included pastors, missionaries, and overseas workers, so I naturally considered this calling. The prospect of being used by God overseas sounded more exciting to me, and my wife joyfully confirmed this path for our lives. At the Urbana student missions conference, I was assured that engineering and cross-cultural service coalesced in tentmaking, which was an important strategic development for ministry among unreached peoples.¹ Specifically, my employment provided the expatriate residency in countries that restricted Christian ministry. This meant my engineer identity now also included a missionary identity. We were sent out to study language and culture before accepting an engineering position in an unreached country.

Being a tentmaker, sometimes termed "global professional" (GP), was a strategic step, but the strategic thinking seemed to end at placement on the field. We were in the country and on a ministry team but were unsure of what exactly to do beyond visiting neighbors in the evening. In the greater region, some were working within the expatriate church and others were identifying as Christ-following Muslims. However, my national colleagues were suspicious of a Western stranger handing out Bibles or one claiming to be a Muslim who followed Christ. In fact, both of these extremes resulted in prison sentences and expulsion from the country.

1 Weerstra, H.M. and K. Smith. July 1997. Editorial: Tentmaking on the Frontiers, *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, V14, no.3. Clark, C. July 1997. Tentmaking State of the Art, *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, V14, no 3.

Unifying My Identity

Thankfully, our language and cultural training helped us navigate these boundaries and point us forward. Many of my GP colleagues in the region remained completely secular at work, as they did in their home countries. They assumed they could not mention religion at work. I had done the same in the US, living a segregated life with a secular focus of meeting deadlines during the day and ministry activities in the evenings and on weekends. However, we were no longer in the US, and I soon discovered the nationals in my Middle Eastern context had a “zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness” (Rom. 10:2). Paul was writing about his fellow countrymen, and I felt it applied to my adopted people group. Even a national who was an atheist would say “the praise is for God” many times a day and pray with his colleagues at the mosque. In other words, irrespective of internal disbelief, religious duty pervaded the society, and discussions of religion were appreciated and considered a form of entertainment, no matter the social context—whether the workplace, coffeeshop, or home.

A Western Christian lawyer once shared with me that his national supervisor was asking questions about Jesus. The lawyer’s employment contract was ending, so I encouraged him to gift the supervisor an ornate New Testament as a departing remembrance. The lawyer was unsure of my advice, so he gifted his supervisor with the comment, “Here is a gift Bible from Mr. James.” The supervisor had never met me and responded, “I don’t know Mr. James, but please thank him for this precious gift.” I surmise the national supervisor thought it was peculiar to receive a Bible from a friend of a friend. Even so, he communicated his appreciation to his Western colleague who feared presenting the gift directly. Unfortunately, many of my GP colleagues who were unfamiliar with the national culture felt it was safer for their continued employment to present themselves more as secular professionals than followers of Christ.

Western professionals in the Arabian Peninsula (AP) had a reputation for a strong work ethic with an ability to complete projects and meet deadlines. A national friend once shared a local proverb, "Nothing is too difficult for a Christian." When I inquired about the meaning of this proverb, he explained that his people were happily living in the desert when the Christians came and built a city. Another proverb that he shared states, "Sleep at the home of a Christian, but eat with the Jews." It implied that Westerners will honor their word in keeping you safe, but don't trust their food as they will eat anything. In both proverbs the term "Christian" had little to do with being a follower of Jesus. In fact, most of my national colleagues assumed all Westerners were Christians and often asked why Christians drank alcohol, didn't pray, didn't fast, and were promiscuous, as they saw in movies.

Therefore, I endeavored to be a Christian engineer who was unlike other Westerners. I greeted in Arabic, used local proverbs, freely discussed religion, told illustrative stories, and built relational trust. I made it clear that I wanted the best for my colleagues, friends, and family. I explored the cultural boundaries of acceptable workplace practice in my context and discovered that verses on my office wall were not acceptable, but an open Bible on my desk was fine. Giving out chocolates at Easter to signify I was celebrating was fine, but distributing Christmas cards with Bible verses was not. Discussing God's redemptive work through Jesus on the cross was always appreciated! Often this initiated further discussions on the nature of God, the Trinity, angels, demons, prophets, prayer, and mankind's relationship with God.

One day a national colleague unexpectedly declared, "You are a Calvinist!" I was taken aback and inquired about the reason for this strange declaration. He laughed and said he enjoyed YouTube clips on religious discussions and had learned about the sovereignty of God, depravity of man, irresistible grace, and other tenets that seemed to align with our previous discussions. He still didn't believe in salvation by way of the cross, but he enjoyed our conversations and was comfortable to listen and learn.

My professional life was marked by sharing what I knew to be true and striving to make my life choices and actions give credence to my words. When I returned to work after the funeral of my father, I shared my mixed feelings of loss, remembrance, and joy for my father who trusted in God's promises. My national Muslim colleague asked me to stop sharing until he left the room, not because he disagreed with me talking about the eternal life for those who trust in the cross, but because he had no hope. "We only know loss and passage of time to ease the pain," he shared. "When you share about the joy of your father's life, I feel the pain of my father's loss. We have no hope in death."

Another time, this same national colleague entered my office with a concern that our Hindu colleague, Raj, had died at his desk! We knew Raj had heart issues, but I could see he was still breathing. Immediately, I asked one colleague to call the ambulance, another to make a path for the stretcher, and a believing colleague to begin praying for Raj. After the ambulance left, my national friend inquired of the believer, "Were you actually praying for Raj the entire time?" After an affirmative answer, he vocalized his thoughts, "Why didn't I pray? I should have been praying too." After Raj's recovery and return to work, my Muslim colleague encouraged Raj to attend church and follow Jesus because, "It was the Christian God who saved your life!" Also, when I was faced with a difficult situation at the workplace, my Muslim colleague reminded me of God's promises! "You are a follower of God and he cares for you! I know that he will bring a solution for you."

Biblical and Historical Examples

This more natural approach to God-centered identity is not new. There are many biblical examples of professionals serving cross-culturally and sharing the truths of God. These include Joseph in Pharaoh's government, Daniel as an administrator in Babylon, Nehemiah as a governor of Persia, and Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila as itinerant tentmakers in various areas of the Roman empire. In each case, God used their professional skills, second-language abilities, and cross-cultural insights

to serve his greater purposes. In fact, the first four chapters of the book of Daniel could perhaps be renamed “Nebuchadnezzar one, two, three, and four” as the narrative focus is more about God’s reaching out to the king through Daniel.

Beyond the biblical era, examples include men like John of Damascus (675 – 749). His family served the Umayyad caliphate through management of taxes and the sovereign wealth, in addition to John holding public debates seeking to refute Islam.² William Carey (1761 – 1834), the father of modern missions, managed an indigo factory for many years and later established the first degree-awarding national university while translating the Bible into various Indian languages. Other examples could be named of professionals, including missionary physicians, midwives, and many others.

A Trustworthy Identity

From my experience, understanding the national culture and language was essential to building trust. In 2020, the Fruitful Practice Research team surveyed various missionaries in the Arabian Peninsula about their experience with the Arabic language and ministry. As one would expect, those with a stronger Arabic proficiency tended to have deeper local friendships, more frequent spiritual conversations, and more experience in discipling national believers. One survey participant shared how a national seeker expressed joy in finally meeting someone who spoke Arabic as he was frustrated with spiritual conversations via Google Translate.³

Along with my engineering profession, my language and cultural skills enhanced the opportunities to connect and build trust with national colleagues, neighbors, and friends. This often led to the seemingly logical

2 Butler’s Lives of the Saints. edited by Michael Walsh. July 1991. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers.

3 Daniel, G. et al. Fruitful Practices for Language Learning: A Quantitative Study of Language Learning and Effective Ministry in the Arabian Peninsula. October 2021 Seedbed, V32, no.2.

progression in one friend's mind, "If you understand our culture and you can read the Quran, then why don't you become a Muslim like us?" This gave me the opportunity to explain my relationship with God, my trust in God's promises, and my place among the community of believers, which goes beyond national borders. When requested to give an opinion about the prophet of Islam, I would respond that it is better to ask an imam at the mosque that type of question. I would say something like, "I know Jesus and God's work through him; would you like to know more about the joy of redemption, grace, and God's promises for us?" Once, in front of a group of colleagues, a national boldly stated that the Bible was corrupted and couldn't be trusted. In response, I raised my voice for all to hear and angrily requested him to leave my office because it was dishonoring to God to imply weakness in preserving his Word. After the confrontation, other Muslim colleagues privately assured me that my response was justified and this particular distraction was no longer included in our discussions.

As a Christian engineer, I never felt I was hiding my true identity or putting forward a false front. I had the same identity as an expatriate professional who truly followed the Messiah, whether I was among my work colleagues, neighbors, family, or home supporters. In *Authentic Lives*⁴, Thomas Hale notes that a hidden identity may make a Christian professional feel more like a secret agent than a sent-one of Jesus. Though I didn't feel this, our children often struggled in explaining to their national friends why we, unlike most expatriates, knew the language and cultural customs. As a result, their friends assumed we were associated with the CIA. I can relate to a fellow GP who felt that if he did not share every aspect of his life, his colleagues would embellish his identity with the worse possible conclusions. For example, if I shared that I was planning a trip to Dubai, my national colleagues assumed I was arranging to visit a prostitute. As such, I quickly learned that I needed to share the details that I was planning a trip to Dubai with my family to shop at the

4 Hale, Thomas, *Authentic Lives: Overcoming the Problem of Hidden Identity in Outreach to Restrictive Nations*. 2016. William Carey Library.

mall! When I was asked why I knew Arabic and local customs, I answered directly that I loved the language and people and that it would be a shame to live among a people and not learn from them! Then I quoted a local proverb such as, "Learning the language of the people protects you from their evil," or "Forty days among a tribe and you become one of them." I would add that I don't believe either of these proverbs, which usually resulted in laughter.

A trustworthy identity in the community supported our ministry. We hosted Bible studies, disciplined national believers, and coordinated media follow-up of seekers. Though we were sent out through a sending organization and maintained a ministry fund, my expatriate Christian engineer identity greatly reduced questions about external finances. Instead, it exemplified a fact that it is normative for believers in the Lord Jesus to work, provide for their family, and support the ministry of the church. It was common knowledge in our country that converts to Islam receive a financial gift and most nationals thought the same was true for those who converted to Christianity. That is, there seemed to be no need to work since the church would provide an income to new believers!

With employment and a modest home, our neighbors and colleagues didn't have to wonder how we fit into their society. Obviously, we were expatriate Christians who supported their nation's development, cared about their families, prayed for their health concerns, talked a lot about Jesus, and gifted people with an ornate Bible on the first visit. For media follow-up, the story was the same. The initial meeting of a new contact always involved excessive adrenaline for both of us. I didn't know him, and he didn't know me beyond the message that there was a Christian living in his city who would contact him. At a coffee shop, fears were soon calmed through introductions, discussions of family, and honest sharing of my place in his society. Building trust is essential in sharing truth and deepening the discipleship relationship.

An Identity in Christ Foremost

As a Westerner, I always strove to order my life with God being first, family second, and my profession third. However, national friends were more holistic regarding faith and profession. For them, prominence was in their tribe and family name. I studied Arabic and was comfortable with the language, but I know I will never be as fluent as a national speaker. I studied the national culture and have over 25 years of experience among the people, but I know I will never be a citizen or a member of their national tribe. I am a global professional who strives to magnify the work of God, effectively communicate the promises of God, show forth the life of a Christian, and disciple new believers through group study, reliance on the Bible, and guidance by the Holy Spirit. We have the promise that God will build his church (Matt 16:18), sometimes through—and often in spite of—his people.

My pilgrimage as a global professional has taught me that lifelong learning of language, study of local culture, discipleship, and church growth better equip us to be used by God. An authentic, holistic, consistent identity can help us establish ourselves cross-culturally, demonstrate the life of a Christian, and work towards the establishment of the local church within whatever country in which we serve.

Questions for Conversation

1. What misunderstandings and suspicions in your context do outside workers need to overcome? What would a “trustworthy” identity look like in your context?
2. Does your current role in society give you natural opportunities to share your faith, or do you have to force those to happen?
3. Is your current field ministry profile similar to any biblical examples? What changes might you make to better align yourself with what you see in Scripture?

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