

An Interview with Duane Miller on Living Among the Breakage: Contextual Theology-Making and Ex-Muslim Christians

Marthe Curry, PhD

Director of the World Missions Department of the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas,
based out of San Antonio.

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Duane Alexander Miller, PhD, is lecturer and researcher in Muslim-Christian relations at The Christian Institute of Islamic Studies. He is co-author of *Arab Evangelicals in Israel* (2016) and author of *Living among the Breakage* (2016). His research on religious conversion from Islam to Christianity and the history of Christians missions in the Muslim world have been published by Oxford, Cambridge, Thomas Nelson, and Edinburgh presses, among others.

- MC: This book is the result of spending years with converts from Islam to Christianity and those who work with them. I'm quite interested in the need for MBBs to create a new identity: no alcohol, no prostitution (somewhat along the lines of “fundamentalist” Christians); redefinition of “person”; all while allowing their families to save face. Typically, how long does the process take, and what is the hardest task?

DAM: Christians in the West commonly assume that persecution is the greatest challenge that converts face. The persecution is very real and worthy of our attention. However, over the long term it is not the main challenge that converts face—it is rather the formation of a stable and flourishing new identity as a Christian. Many converts come from ethnic groups where Islam is considered essential to that identity. So what does it mean to be an ethnic Turk and also be a Christian? This can also be a struggle along the lines of national identity: what does it mean to be a Saudi and a Christian? In the West we are so used to the idea that each person has the freedom and the right to create his or her own sense of identity and meaning, and that identity is extremely malleable—witness the scores of gender identity options on Facebook—but this is not how most of humanity functions. I draw on the work of Peter Berger, the great sociologist of religion, to provide the setting for the book in the introduction. I found his research to be very helpful.

Regarding the question of how long, it is different for different people. I have met converts who ten or twenty years after their conversion they're still struggling with these issues. In general, though, I would say at least five years.

- MC: The MBBs appear to be most impacted by the love of God even more than the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Do you see this as a response to the harshness of their former religion?

DAM: This book is the fruit of my doctoral research which was coordinated through the Centre for the Study of World Christianity at the University of Edinburgh. World

Christianity is interdisciplinary and seeks to study forms of the Christian faith that scholarship has largely neglected. So while my book is interdisciplinary, drawing on history, sociology, anthropology, and biblical and Qur'anic studies, it really is fundamentally concerned with the contextual and applied theologies proposed by the MBBs I met and spent time with. My challenge was to take lived religion—testimonies, sermons, poems, conversations—and try to discern under the surface a more organized vision of God and humanity, which is to say theology.

In the final chapter I present my main findings. One of those is that the evangelical language of penal substitution—so normative for many evangelicals—is largely rejected by these believers. And this even though many of them belong to evangelical churches. Penal substitution proposes that the atonement is efficacious because the Father punished the Son with the wrath that we were due. Since the Son has received our punishment we are freed from punishment. This way of speaking about the atonement would not be common in an Anglican, Orthodox or Catholic setting today. Many attribute this theory of the atonement to St Anselm of Canterbury in his book *Cur Deus Homo?* But it is clearly not what Anselm has in mind. I had five pages arguing this point, which I had to reduce to one paragraph for the University of Edinburgh!

Anyway, the main thing that attracts Muslims to Christianity is precisely the unconditional and sacrificial love of God, which is something they had not found in Islam. And this is true—that the proposal that God loves all people unconditionally is indeed completely foreign to historical, orthodox Islam. When these converts hear people talking about the Father punishing the Son for something the Son didn't do, they think, “Well, that's not very loving, so it must be wrong.” Some are quite happy to simply believe, as the Creed says, “in the forgiveness of sins”, without trying to look under the hood, so to speak. One Egyptian convert seemed to endorse an Orthodox soteriology of theosis.

- MC: Does this emphasis on love bleed over into their becoming prey to emotionalism in expression?

DAM: In our own Anglican tradition we have a great emphasis on order and what used to be called churchmanship. This is supposed to help reign in passion and emotion so the church as a body can function healthily. Many converts come from honor-shame cultures, not guilt-innocence cultures, as we do. Honor-shame cultures seek to access resources and solve problems through the local community, whereas guilt-innocence cultures do this through institutions. All of this leads to some pretty dysfunctional churches. In terms of leadership this was something that the converts themselves were clearly aware of, as I note in Chapter 6, which is about Iranian Christians in the diaspora. I recall what one Iranian pastor said about converts: “New saddle, same horse.” The idea being that it is easy to convert on a superficial level (new saddle) while retaining many of the negative aspects of inherited cultural behaviors. It doesn't come across mostly as emotionalism, but as slander and gossip.

- MC: Why do MBBs seem to be more comfortable in evangelical settings? Or is the correct question Are evangelicals more evangelistic than liturgical/traditional denominations?

DAM: One might think that since the ancient churches of the Muslim world are mostly Eastern or Oriental Orthodox, that people would be converting to those forms of Christianity. But that rarely happens. First, those ancient churches are still suffering from the trauma of centuries of living as dhimmis under the shari'a. It was a belittling and dehumanizing way to live wherein Christians (and Jews) were routinely publicly humiliated by Muslim rulers. Christians could always convert to Islam, but were not allowed to evangelize Muslims or even learn about Islam. This has led in many places to quietism and seeing Islam as invincible. One pastor has likened how these Christians see Muslims to how a prostitute views her pimp as someone who really loves her, even though no one else sees it that way. Second, evangelicalism—as broad as that term is—places a great deal of importance on conversion. The strength of evangelicalism is that each and every Christian is seen as an evangelist. In other churches people tend to assume the priest or bishop is in charge of evangelism—if they even know what the word means. I will say that theologically there is nothing in Anglicanism, Catholicism or Orthodoxy that preclude vigorous evangelism by the laity. The barrier really is pastoral.

- MC: Can you describe instances where foreigners participated helpfully/appropriately with a MBB church in achieving contextualization?

DAM: In this book I use the model proposed by Shoki Coe to understand contextualization. The term is a contested one. Americans tend to think of contextualization as something missionaries or theologians do for others. Coe views contextualization as something that grows out of an indigenous Christian community and is done by the locals. I call the former directed contextualization and the latter organic contextualization. I'm not interested in telling ex-Muslims how I think they should think, though when they ask me questions about theology or history I answer them. The proper role of the theologian here is make theology with, not for, MBBs, and I have seen that happen. Presently I'm engaged in a verse-by-verse study through Galatians (in Arabic) with an Iraqi Christian who converted years ago. During one of our conversations I related that I had heard of some MBBs in Australia who explicitly renounced the covenant of Islam so that they could fully embrace and live in the New Covenant of Christ's shed blood. He expressed interest, so I challenged him to write something. He did, with very little input from me. His text, which is in Arabic, is something I never could have produced, and if he decides to share it, it will, I think, speak to the heart of MBBs powerfully.

- MC: What is the role of technology in conversion and growth.

DAM: One of the questions I tackle in Chapter 3 is about the increase in conversions since the 1960s. That is when we started to see substantial numbers of people converting from Islam to Christianity. I suggest that there are three families of factors facilitating conversion—transcendental, related to globalization, and missiological. Technology and

communications fit into the second category. The fact that someone can read a Bible in their own language in their phone or a PDF file is important. That people in the Islamic Republic of Iran can and do listen to Christian programs via satellite is another example. Previously governments had the ability to control the flow of information—they could intercept and burn books or tracts, for instance. Today this is much more difficult. It is a two-edged sword, though. The same factors that allow for an illiterate lady in a village in Saudi Arabia to hear the gospel and believe also allow for a young man in Denver to become a militant Muslim and learn how to make a bomb.