

Insights from the Sociology of Religion for Movements to Christ among Muslims

By Stefan Hörschele

For a few years now, missiological literature has discussed the possibility, acceptability, viability, and shape of movements to Christ among adherents of non-Christian communities without a formation of formally recognized “Christian churches” among them. A particular focus of these writings is such movements in the Muslim world.

Much of the deliberations on these “insider movements” deals with biblical aspects (see Higgins 2004; Massey 2004a and 2004b; and Woods 2003) and missiological issues in the narrow sense of the word (see, e.g., Dutch 2000; Gilliland 1999 and 2000; Massey 1999, 2000, and 2004c; Piper

et al. 2006; and Travis 1999a, 1999b, and 2000). This is not surprising, for it is these two fields that matter most for missionaries, missiologists, mission administrators, and indeed for anyone who desires to see all nations receiving a witness of Christ.

In the strictly missiological articles on this topic, major issues in this debate have been the theology of mission, mission theory, practical experiences, and contextualization. Yet the ramifications of such movements are so complex that a large variety of theological issues are touched as well in these publications, including ecclesiology, soteriology, Christology, the doctrine of God, hermeneutics, the theology of religions, and ethics; thus, most aspects of Christian theology are involved in one way or another. Since this issue is indeed “[o]ne of the most significant missiological innovations in the past quarter century” (Whiteman 2000), it is not surprising that even Seventh-day Adventists are debating this matter (Coleman 2004; Doss 2005; Schantz 2004; and Whitehouse 1992, 1993, 1998, and 2001).



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Does Sociology of Religion Have Anything to Contribute?

One aspect that appears to have received hardly any attention in the whole debate is sociology. Understandably, those dealing with insider movements are usually not primarily interested in detached analysis of the social forces involved in religious movements. Rather, they commonly investigate principles for missionary action, God's will for today's missionary outreach, related theological issues, and practical models as well as case studies that reveal the dynamics in the spread of the good news.

However, insights from the sociology of religion may contribute to the ongoing discussion in a significant way. After all, almost all missiological issues are in some way related to societal forces, which is why various social sciences usually play a role in missiological deliberations in a more or less explicit way. It is one of the great facts of missiology in the last few decades that one of the social sciences, anthropology, has become a crucial tool for cross-cultural missionary action. It should be noted that anthropology also contributed to early reflections on the possibility of insider movements in Islam (Kraft 1973, 1979a, and 1979 b). Yet insights from the sociology of religion are also very relevant in the issue of witnessing for Christ among Muslims because this discipline provides models that explain dynamics occurring

when different religious groups meet and when new religious movements develop.

For a little more than a decade now, the sociology of religion has been in a state of tension because of a clash between what has been called the "old paradigm" and the "new paradigm" by the proponents of a novel approach (Stark and Finke 2000:1-79). Even though a heated debate has been going on about whether the new paradigm is tenable, it appears that the proponents of this new perspective have gained much ground. Since they believe that their approach to religion implies a full-fledged paradigm shift, some major elements of this new theory of religion will be outlined before the issues relevant to insider movements will be discussed.

First of all, this new theory is fundamentally opposed to what its main proponents call the "old paradigm," which was highly critical of religion, viewing it as irrational, and mirrored in the writings of most theorists whose ideas dominated the field until recently, e.g., Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer, and Max Weber; thus, it is nothing less than a social scientific attempt at rehabilitating religion.

More specifically, the new paradigm, in contrast to the old, theorizes as follows:

1. Religion is *not* intrinsically questionable, harmful, or a tool of oppression. It is actually used for a variety of purposes, including emancipation.

2. Religion is *not* doomed; “secularization” in the sense of an increasing and ever more widespread indifference to religion is wishful thinking among self-proclaimed enlighteners but cannot be derived from actual data.

3. Religion is *not* an epiphenomenon. It cannot be “explained away” by pointing out that something outside its major “product”—the divine—is the real reason for its existence.

4. Religion is *not* only a psychological phenomenon, it is a social reality.

5. Religious monopolies do *not*

proponents of the new paradigm (mainly Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, Laurence Iannaccone, and William Sims Bainbridge) outline a complex and ambitious new theory of religion. One important initial step in the formation of this theory was the study of religious commitment (Stark and Glock 1968), a study which is of great help in sociologically informed missiology even today. This type of research led to an increasing body of knowledge regarding the mechanisms that work in churches as well as sect and cult movements (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

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boost overall religious commitment levels; rather, the opposite is true: where more competing religious forces exist, the plausibility of particular truth claims will not diminish; rather, religious activities will be increased (Stark and Finke 2000:28-31). While most readers of this journal will probably agree with many of these points, they are stressed here because they form the basis of the concrete categorizations in the next section which have a major impact on how one views missionary approaches in the Islamic context.

Rather than simply deny the validity of the older theories, the

Finally, a general theory of religion was devised (Stark 1987a). In this theory, religions offer what nothing else can provide: meaning, salvation, and hope for the afterlife derived from God or gods. Thus, religions make available “compensators” which people choose in a rational way. The concept that religious choices are rational may contradict the older paradigm, yet it is of utmost importance and certainly agreeable since it implies that humans do not undergo a foolish metamorphosis in the most important decisions of their lives. In fact, religion is frequently likened to the rational

choices that consumers make in their selection of products, and therefore religious landscapes may be likened to an economy in which different forces vie for customers who choose what fits them best. Thus, the new paradigm is rife with economic metaphors: it speaks of religious markets, firms, products, and regulation, as well as religious capital, niches, and expenses (Stark and Finke 2000:193-217; cf. Iannaccone 1998).

While this theory may seem to desacralize religion at first sight,

paper is not intended to be theological in nature. The theological and ecclesiological implications of the lines of deliberation that are proposed here would need separate reflection. Rather, this paper is an attempt to explain from a sociologically informed missiological perspective phenomena which are social as much as they are theological. After all, religions are always of a mixed nature, including both human and supernatural elements, and one should not view sociological reflection as too mundane

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nothing is farther from the truth. What it does in reality is explain the mechanisms which are at work when humans commit themselves to a specific religious option. Thus, this new paradigm is of utmost importance when one studies processes of religious encounter and change, both on the micro and on the macro level. Therefore, this article takes the new paradigm as a starting point to elucidate the dynamics that take place when Muslims meet Jesus in one way or another.

It should be noted that this

or irrelevant to contribute to the advancement of God's mission.

Churches, Sects, Cults, and Medium Tension

One major aspect of the new paradigm in the sociology of religion is the way religious groups are discerned. According to Stark and Bainbridge, one has to distinguish three fundamentally different types of religious movements: churches, sects, and cults. This distinction is necessary in order to differentiate between movements with regard

to their tension with society and their degree of continuity with established religion.

According to this definition, a *church* is a religious group which has little tension with society. This at times (but not necessarily) implies that a large percentage of the population belongs to the church. The opposite of a church is a *sect*, which is defined by tension with society—in other words, a group of believers which rejects its environment. Still, a sect may belong to the same religious tradition as a church; it only interprets it differently, thus emphasizing certain elements more and demanding stricter standards from its adherents. These definitions arose from debates on church-sect theory as was formulated by Ernst Troeltsch (1931 [1912]) and Max Weber (1949) but modified by reducing the many points employed in various typologies to one that is measurable—tension with society. Furthermore, it should be noted that both “church” and “sect” orientations are definite possibilities in Islamic contexts.

Up to this point, the theory advanced by Stark and Bainbridge does not differ from others such as the one proposed two decades earlier by Benton Johnson, and they readily admit their indebtedness to him (Johnson 1963:542; Stark and Bainbridge 1985:23). However, there are two significant differences. One is the definition of “cults,” and the other is a cluster of observations on the

prerequisites for the success of new religious movements.

Cults, according to Stark and Bainbridge, are religious innovations like sects, but in spite of the fact that these two types of movements are lumped together under the label “New Religious Movements” in popular parlance, they differ from sects in a fundamental way. While sects aim at purifying some existing religious tradition and thus call for a return to a real or imagined past, cults do not seek much continuity with existing religious traditions. Rather, they constitute either complete innovations or imports from other cultural contexts or regions. Therefore, cults potentially share some characteristics with sects such as tension with society and conflict with the religious establishment, but they work in fundamentally different ways because they do not appeal to the same kind of people and do not work with the same set of motifs as sects. This difference will be crucial in the discussion below on Christian witness in Islamic societies (Stark and Bainbridge 1985:24-30).

A second major element of the new paradigm in the sociology of religion, at least as far as this study is concerned, is a theory on the success of religious movements. Among the various factors that are necessary for such a movement to be able to grow constantly over a number of decades or even centuries, a central issue is the degree of ten-

sion with society. If tension is too high, a new faith may simply not attract enough followers; if it is too low, it will not offer enough incentives for adherents of an established faith to leave their former affiliation. Therefore, the most promising degree of tension is medium tension (Bainbridge 1997:410).

Among the other factors mentioned by Stark and Bainbridge, cultural continuity and a favorable ecology may be counted as the crucial conditions for the very possibility of the growth of new religious movements. The

“new paradigm” in the sociology of religion.

1. Christian mission among Muslims commonly functions like an imported cult.

2. Insider movements may develop dynamics visible in the formation of sects.

3. Medium tension is critical for insider movements to gain momentum.

4. In the future, such movements may take different paths according to what is known about sect development.

These insights will be unfolded in the following sections.

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remaining factors concern the structure and dynamics inside such movements (Stark 1987b; Bainbridge 1997:409-411); they do not need to be dealt with here because the focus of this article is not on the internal operations of insider movements but their position with regard to Islam and the Christian faith. Therefore, medium tension, which presupposes cultural continuity and a favorable ecology, emerges as the main issue vis-à-vis society.

Now what does all this mean for the spread of the good news among Muslims? At least four insights can be derived from the

Insight No. 1: Christian Mission among Muslims as the Importation of a Cult

It is a well-known fact that the history of Christian missionary activities among Muslims, different from attempts to bring the gospel to peoples of Africa or the Pacific, is largely a history of failure. In one way, this is surprising, for Islam shares more with Christianity than many traditional religions and indeed more than most other religions except Judaism. Of course, one could argue that this very resemblance hinders effective missionary work; but

this fact alone can probably not account for the generations of almost fruitless Christian efforts to convert Muslims into members of Christian churches.

Of course there are also exceptions to the rule that Christians do not make much religious impact in Islamic lands. Two examples that have been cited in the debates around insider movements come from North Africa (Schlorff 2000:324-325) and Indonesia (Willis 1977); in fact, it has been asserted that the history of missionary outreach in Indonesia reveals “the major model of Muslim ministry” (Dixon 2002:443). Still, it remains a fact that only a tiny fraction of Muslims has been reached with the message of Christ so far, and that most of the Islamic world remains openly hostile towards any attempt of inciting members of its communities to what they view as apostasy—the conversion to Christianity.

A comparison with regions of the world where Christian missionary work has been more successful is very instructive. In large parts of Africa and Oceania during much of the twentieth century, societies were partly traditionalist and partly Christian, and in Korea, both Christianity and Buddhism are acceptable choices for the people. The Christian faith was introduced just 100 years ago, but it was so much more accepted than in Islamic countries that the dynamics behind such growth must be thoroughly analyzed.

In one way, the attempts of Christian missionaries in these various areas, including the Islamic world, resembled one another very much: in each case, the Christian faith came as a cult, a religion that was completely foreign to the indigenous people. Thus, at least at the beginning, Christianity was an imported faith, a “New Religious Movement.” Such a religious option was attractive for a few progressive individuals because of its very otherness, but the large majority almost automatically rejected it. One might want to compare this to the way New Religious Movements such as Hare Krishna or Scientology are rejected by much of European and North American society, or to the way a German convert to Islam is viewed by the German mainstream.

What, then, was different between the African and Korean cases on the one hand and Islamic societies on the other? While there are elements of similarity or continuity in both cases, the Muslim insistence upon the impossibility of leaving Islam, connected with a death threat from society, made a tremendous difference. This categorical rejection of any religious mobility reduced the perceived continuity between Islam and Christianity to zero in practice. In the language of Stark and Bainbridge, in many Islamic societies, the very possibility for new religious movements in the “cult” category to thrive does not even exist be-

cause two major factors in the growth of religious groups are missing: cultural continuity, which is not distinguished by Muslims from religious continuity, and a “favorable ecology,” i.e., the general predisposition for religious change (Bainbridge 1997:409-411). In other words, any religion outside of Islam, any “cult” is *automatically* in such high tension with society that it can hardly succeed.

By way of contrast, in many African societies the conversion to the Christian faith was often very attractive at least to some. In addition to some elements of

religious movements which fundamentally diverge from previous religious traditions, are received so differently in different contexts is of utmost importance in understanding the failure of Christian missionary activities among Muslims. As an imported high tension cult, the Christian faith was naturally an option only for a tiny minority of individuals who would dare experiment with religious views which forced them to hide their persuasions from their most intimate friends at the risk of their lives.

Already in the 1970s, this was realized by John D. C. Anderson,

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continuity to previous religious patterns or needs, the liberating potential of Christianity was fully operative in contexts where some degree of religious diversity was tolerated. In other words, cults did not *necessarily* arise as a high tension phenomenon; rather, in spite of all their strangeness, they remained an option at least for a minority and, subsequently, for increasing numbers of people. Some hostilities and persecution occurred sporadically, but not with such a systematic rejection of converts to Christianity as in Muslim contexts.

Thus, the fact that novel reli-

who suggested that the common missionary approach to Islam was not “Christian” but “cultic” (Anderson 1976). Although the differentiation between “cult,” “church,” and “sect” that proponents of the new paradigm in the sociology of religion now make was not yet common parlance in those years, Anderson pointed out almost exactly how cults or imported, foreign religious groups function in an environment that categorically denies the right for such groups to exist. Thus, in reflecting upon missionary failure in Islamic contexts, he asks, “What is at fault here? Is

it the fanaticism of the persecutors? Or is it the immaturity of the Christian convert? I suggest it is neither. It is the traditional 'cultic' approach to Islam which is adopted in the name of Christ that is primarily at fault" (290).

Anderson clearly saw that a formal conversion of a Muslim to Christianity is, in most cases, such a serious action that he almost *has* to be persecuted. He is not simply punished for "changing religion" (which is the Western perspective) or to adhering to a despised "cult" but (1) for blasphemy, i.e., rebellion against God, the highest authority of the universe, (2) for treason against his country and its culture, and (3) for thoroughly and entirely dishonoring his family (289). These are the three major realms of life and the ultimate allegiances of every human being. Seen from a human perspective, who would want to blame Muslims when they persecute such a person?

With Anderson, one definitely has to view the grave dangers of the "cultic" approach to Islam. When bringing a message to people one has to consider the way *they* can understand it, and in the case of Muslims, there is usually simply no way they can attribute a positive meaning to the term "Christian." In many Islamic countries, it is as true today as it was in the 1970s that governments, and indeed the overwhelming majority of the people, "have a total misunderstanding of what true Christian-

ity is all about. They are thinking in terms of 'cultic' Christianity rather than of the kingdom of God as Christ taught it" (292).

Of course, much has changed in missionary models in the last generation; therefore, it would be wrong to assume that today the majority of outreach models "fail to see anything good in Islam" and teach that "converts should repudiate everything in Islam" (291). Still, the recommendation in this ground-breaking essay is valid more than ever: "We need to differentiate between the traditional concept of making a Muslim into a Christian, with all the transfer of his loyalties to an imported Christian sub-culture that this involves, and, in contrast, that of making him into a disciple of Jesus Christ" (292).

In other words, one cannot expect a full-fledged cultural change, which is usually implied when a Muslim turns "Christian"; rather the goal must be for "the Muslim and his culture being changed from within" (292). Cultures and people are commonly transformed when some benefit is seen in the recommended change, and whether there are real benefits is judged by the criteria of the traditional culture, i.e., from inside. Especially in the case of many Islamic societies, traditional culture prescribes that Islam must remain the framework of identity for any religious movement to be recognized. This has to be respected, even if this may imply some unexpected consequences.

Insight No. 2: Insider Movements as Sect Formation Processes

If Christ is not to be proclaimed with the aim of forming Christian churches, does this mean that the proclamation of what Christians consider good news is made impossible? For quite some time, it seemed so. It is not surprising that among Protestant “mainstream” denominations, there has been a growing uneasiness in the last few decades with the idea of telling Muslims to change religions. This uneasiness is visible in the many publications stressing the necessity of Christian-Muslim dialogue. Representatives of these denominations are certainly right in pointing out that traditional Christian mission in the Islamic world has often complicated Christian-Muslim relations rather than enhancing mutual respect. But are they right with the soteriological implication that God works enough inside Islam and with the implicit and at times explicit concept that witness to Muslims should be only non-religious—by good deeds?

If it was correct that there is only one way to translate “church” into the Islamic context, by forming organizations that resemble Western, and possibly African, Korean, or Latino denominations, then this conclusion might be considered, although it would strangely leave the great commission unfulfilled. Since in many cases “church”

automatically means “completely unacceptable high tension cult” and “conversion to Christianity” means “blasphemy, treason, and ultimate dishonor” in Muslim perception, is it better to wait for God’s own hand in history and to withdraw from evangelistic activities in Islamic contexts? Some sensitive Christians might suggest such a course of action.

However, rightly understood, “church” is very different from an incorporated organization that may proudly look back to decades, centuries, or millennia of history. To the contrary, “church” is the community of those who follow Christ with all of their hearts and lives, wherever and in whatever concrete organizational way they do this. Or to put it in a Seventh-day Adventist way, church is wherever people “keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (Rev 14:12). Can this be translated into Muslim thinking in a way that Christendom theology, the crusades, the anti-Islamic polemics of centuries, and remainders of colonial thinking are avoided? Is there a way for followers of Christ to exist in Islamic communities in a way that is true to Christ’s ethos of incarnation, truth, and service? Is there something like “dynamic equivalence conversion” in a Muslim context (Teeter 1990)?

At least theoretically, it should be possible to conceptualize “dynamic equivalence churches,” which function in a culturally appropriate way and eschew al-

most all traditional Christian terminology. This was already pointed out in the 1970s (Kraft 1973 and 1979). And concrete concepts for the Muslim context did not take very long to develop after the flaws of traditional approaches had been increasingly understood. One year after John Anderson's plea for abandoning the "cultic approach," this call was renewed by John W. Wilder, who used the same term (1977:303), yet Wilder went significantly beyond Anderson. He outlined how communities of Muslim followers of Christ might

313), he anticipated an important part of the argument in this section, even if he expressed it without consciously couching it in sociological language and before the sociological thinking about religion had gone in this direction.

Wilder calls the movement that he imagined a "sect" and described the probable development of such a group in a very impressive way. He argues that such a people movement to Christ would certainly experience opposition, but—and this is crucial—"it would be likely

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emerge in an article entitled "Some Reflections on Possibilities for People Movements among Muslims."

Almost thirty years after Wilder's reflections, it is remarkable to see that ideas on how insider movements could function were essentially ready, at least in theory. Wilder sketched many of the crucial aspects of what is today called a "C5 community" (Travis 1999b). Although Wilder did not fully approve of the dynamics that he outlined regarding what he provisionally calls "Christian Muslims" (Wilder 1977:305,

to be the opposition which a strange new sect attracts, not the utter rejection awarded the apostate. For the movement would be *within* Islam" (310). In other words, the very fact that this religious group desires to be viewed as "Muslim" is enough for extreme persecution and utter failure to be avoided. And in fact it is Muslim according to some of its practices and beliefs, even if other aspects of religious life are interpreted in peculiar ways.

Since the examples that Wilder provided to illustrate this point are extremely compelling,

they are worth pondering. He argues, "Even the most heretical sect has remarkable staying power" (311) and thus indirectly points out that cults may have a much harder time in many contexts while successful sects or at least those movements which have significant continuity with the religious tradition will much more easily win a market share in a religious economy. Mormons, Christian Scientists, and Unitarians in North America all had some connection with the traditional Christian faith and could therefore establish themselves in a much easier way than, say, Hare Krishna. In the Islamic world, the Ahmadiyya movement may have problems with recognition by other Muslims, but at least they do not face the threat of eradication.

What is more, these examples show that quite some divergence from traditional belief is actually possible, since all of these examples, perhaps with the exception of Unitarians, may be considered "half-cultic" and not fully sect-like. Therefore, a sect identity for Muslim followers of Jesus is a definite possibility. Christians in some denominations actually consider themselves both Buddhist and Christian or adherents of multiple religious traditions (Cornille 2002), whether religious leaders like the idea or not. Of course, it is not at all the intention of the author to suggest any kind of actual syncretism in core beliefs, but once one recognizes that religious identities

are always of composite nature, the crucial missiological task becomes the need to identify which terminology and contents of belief are acceptable under given circumstances, i.e., based on their actual interpretation in a particular group.

The main fact that emerges in this section, then, is that a "sect" identity for Muslim followers of Christ may in many cases be the most appropriate conceptualization of "church" in Islamic contexts. A sect aims at the purification of religion from unacceptable elements while remaining in basic terminological continuity with the mainstream. This may be compared to other reform movements of Islam, and, to mention just one Christian example, Anabaptists of the sixteenth century who aimed at re-establishing the original church. It should also be noted in this context that Islam has many sects and is certainly not inimical to the formation of new ones. This possibility is not only an advantage for enterprising individuals who have some new message to declare, but also testifies to the fact that tolerance does exist in this religion, at least for those who remain under the umbrella of "Islam."

A new sect commonly aims at reinventing the original, which is particularly helpful in at least three ways which will be mentioned only briefly here.

1. It goes back to the roots. Thus, the Qur'an rather than the Sunna would be emphasized in a

Muslim movement to Christ, and the Qur'an points believers to the other Holy Books (29:46; 10:94), which every Muslim believes to have been sent by God.

2. Sects commonly attract people of high moral standard. Thus Muslim followers of Christ would strive to become better Muslims, persons who submit to God in all aspects of their lives.

3. Like other sect movements, insider movements will emphasize certain elements of tradition and de-emphasize others. Thus, like every religious group, they will implicitly redefine the

individual and collective identities. Theologically, however, faith in Christ does not need to be conceptualized as a "religion" at all, at least since Barth's famous insistence upon the idea that Christian faith is actually the opposite of "religion" and Bonhoeffer's suggestion that "religionless Christianity" might be needed (Wüstenberg 1998). Christendom is a historical product, and Christianity as a "religion" is a sociological entity, but nowhere in the Bible does one find the necessity to define a follower of Christ as an adherent

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ultimate values of a particular religious tradition. After all, there is no copyright regarding the definition of any religion; identities are always discursive and thus subject to debate.

Of course, these reflections reach into theology, especially the theology of religions, but it is not the aim of this paper to give definite statements on this perspective. Rather, it should suffice to say that the clarification of the question of what Islam is to Christianity is far from achieved. Sociologically speaking, "religions" are constructs which make people organize

of a particular "religion." Therefore, it might be considered as an imposition of religious studies on theology, accepted more or less voluntarily, that Christian theologians conceive of their faith as one of the "religions."

I am emphasizing this point because it is indispensable, in my view, that followers of Christ who want to share the good news become aware of the implications of their unspoken and unreflected assumptions. In the case of ministry to Muslims, it is these assumptions that have hindered Christian religionists for a long time to witness in a meaningful

way. In many Islamic societies, such a meaningful way would be envisioning the emergence of communities of followers of Christ as a Muslim sect rather than some type of church perceived by the receiving people as an unacceptable and dangerous cult.

Insight No. 3: Medium Tension Plays a Critical Role

The third insight that can be derived from the new paradigm in the sociology of religion is what has been called “medium tension” with society. Before this concept is applied to the Islamic context, some further explanations are necessary.

1. *A favorable degree of tension.* It must be duly stressed that the degree of tension that a religious movement has with the rest of society is crucial. Only a tension in the medium range will enable religious movements to grow significantly. The reason for the importance of medium tension is, put simply, that high tension will raise the cost of adherence to a level that few will accept, while low tension will imply that there is no incentive to join this particular group since it demands little and in exchange offers little as well. In other words, most people in society prefer types of religions that make reasonable demands of the individual, not ridiculously low demands or exceedingly high demands. Thus, the importance of medium tension in the effective growth of a religious movement can hardly be overestimated.

2. *A sound balance of continuity and discontinuity.* In every religious economy, there is a spectrum of faiths or faith interpretations. Some will be more orthodox and others more heterodox, but the decisive issue in the development of such movements is not necessarily dogmatic content; rather it is the ability of a movement to hold continuity and discontinuity with the religious and cultural past of the mainstream in creative and sound balance.

3. Stark and Bainbridge insist that this tension can actually be measured. One can do so by looking at the “subcultural deviance” marked by *difference* with society in beliefs, norms, and behavior, by *antagonism* against society visible in particularism, conversion, and defense, and by *separation* from society discernible in the group’s degree of social encapsulation and social distance to others (Stark and Bainbridge 1985:49-60). Thus, research can reveal the actual tension that a particular religious group has with a given societal context.

4. *The position in the spectrum of religious movements.* These tools result in a framework that allows us to classify religious movements on a church-sect spectrum and, in an analogous manner, on a spectrum of cults which are more or less in tension with a particular society. Thus, one can identify the place where a specific movement stands in the spectrum of faiths available in a certain area.

What does this mean, then, for movements to Christ in Islamic societies?

1. *A favorable degree of tension.* There are a variety of religious currents in the Islamic world. Consider, for instance, various popular practices such as the veneration of Muslim saints, divination, magic for the protection of the individual, etc. All these popular practices exist in many Islamic societies (cf. Parshall 1994), and accepting or at least tolerating them would mean “low tension.” High tension, on the other hand, would

which commonly translates into ultra high tension, must be avoided; rather, a sect identity with significant differences from the environment would assure that these differences can be perceived as redemptive by members of a particular society.

2. *A sound balance of continuity and discontinuity.* Of course, medium tension with the mainstream as such does not guarantee that a particular movement is spiritually healthy and theologically acceptable, even if it is culturally appropriate. This is why a large variety

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automatically be produced by any movement that challenges the very foundations of Islam or that interprets Islam in a way that is completely unacceptable for the majority. The Ahmadiyya movement, for instance, may be classified as high tension, although not ultra high tension; in some contexts such as East Africa it probably takes a position between medium and high tension.

For followers of Christ in Muslim contexts, it would be crucial that tension is visible at points where it is actually understood. In other words, a cult identity,

of medium tension movements can be conceived theoretically in many societies. Still, the necessity of striking a sound (and creative!) balance can hardly be overestimated. It implies nothing less than the difference between critical contextualization and syncretism on the one hand and failure on the other.

In recent missiological literature, there is a marked emphasis on “healthy” or “critical” contextualization as opposed to uncritical contextualization. Even Seventh-day Adventists have emphasized this (Bauer 2005; GMIC 2003). Thus, the medium

tension that is suggested here must imply a conscious choice of elements that embody continuity and a clear decision regarding necessary discontinuities with the religious traditions in a particular society. "Medium," therefore, does not at all imply "lukewarm" (Rev 3:16) but signifies an engaged search for what is appropriate (Kraft 2005; Travis 2005), even if this means that one has to go further than the Western or Christian mainstream can understand. In fact, "appropriate" may, in such cutting-edge contexts, often mean "going far enough" (Winter 1999; Doss 2005), and may imply that

movements actually do need to embody *some* deviance from the most popular interpretations. The only caveat is that this deviance should not be so much that an ultra high tension sect or a cult identity results from it. Certainly the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses or the ethos of the Amish People may appeal to a few people in Western society, but they will never succeed in reaching the mainstream. Likewise, a witness regarding Christ in Islamic societies must take the Muslim mainstream serious and deviate from it in ways which are not only understandable but hopefully inspire Muslims

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in some cases 90 percent of a particular traditional practice is accepted and 10 percent is changed in order to convey the message of the gospel (Maberly 2005:261).

3. *Subcultural deviance and its measurement.* This essay is not to be misunderstood as a call for the merging of incompatible religious concepts or the watering down of central tenets of belief in some faith traditions. Rather, the argument is that religious movements such as insider

to respect and admire persons who identify with movements resulting from such a witness. In other words, Muslims should become *more exemplary* Muslims; the many good and acceptable values cherished by traditional adherents of Islam should be expressed in a touching way.

What does this mean in practice? There should be *some difference* with society in norms, behavior, and even beliefs, but all this is supposed to be inspiring, attractive, and liberating. God

the redeemer is supposed to be clearly visible in people who live up to the highest standards of morality, even as perceived from a traditional point of view. As far as *antagonism* is concerned, this certainly cannot be avoided, as in all movements of social change. However, it must be reduced to a lower level than a cult movement would imply, i.e., such a movement must defend itself and will certainly try to convert others to its particular outlook, but its sense of particularism should not lead to complete *separation* from society, to total encapsulation. The social distance to other members of society will build up automatically to some degree as a distinct identity starts to be reflected in an emerging social structure, yet this should not divorce the movement from the cultural context.

4. *The position in the spectrum of religious movements.* Probably insider movements could become an alternative to the semi-secular identities of a large number of Muslims, thus leading to a revitalization of a healthy spirituality, and also to fundamentalist movements, which over-emphasize certain elements of religion at the expense of others. In other words, they would be a way for Muslims to be deeply religious without being fanatics.

One of the problems in the religious economies of many countries is the fact that they are over-regulated. This results in situations in which the majority of the people adhere to a particu-

lar tradition only nominally while a few zealots try to force their views on the rest of the society, with varying success. New religious movements of the medium tension type would challenge the many who prefer nominal adherence, soften the monopoly of a particular official type of religiosity which does not work for the whole society anyway, redefine the spectrum of choices, and position themselves in a central place of the spectrum, which would open the way for many to experience spiritual renewal.

Insight No. 4: Paths of Sect Development and the Future of Insider Movements

This last section is shorter than the previous ones because it is more hypothetical. Still, it is necessary to sketch possible paths that insider movements can take and to reflect on them. It is now recognized that the earlier concept of a one-way route in the development of sects is not correct. H. Richard Niebuhr, in his classic *The social sources of denominationalism*, suggested that sects tend to become denominations, which finally end up being churches (Niebuhr 1929). Yet the opposite direction may also be taken by religious groups, and most sects will actually not reduce their level of tension with society and thus never become churches (Stark and Finke 2000:259-276; Stark and Bainbridge 1985:137). Therefore, the path of sects and the anticipated development of

insider movements is not one-directional. Four major types of direction can be imagined:

1. "Churchification," i.e., becoming so much accepted in the mainstream of society that initial tension is progressively reduced. The prime example from the Christian context is Methodism, which started as a revival movement but subsequently became an church increasingly adapted to society, and in Africa, this route was taken even by Seventh-day Adventism in some regions. This development is imaginable for insider movements but is problematic at the very least, for resulting bodies of believers would probably be fashionable without necessarily conveying the message and values of the gospel.

2. Remaining an obscure sectarian movement. This usually occurs when tension with society is too high. An example for such dynamics are many of the thousands of African Instituted Churches which never grow beyond local phenomena. Such a future for insider movements is conceivable; however, since it does not differ significantly from the cult identity of Muslim converts to Christianity, it would not be desirable.

3. Becoming an "established sect," a relatively large movement which, however, remains strongly separated from the rest of society. The Jehovah's Witnesses may be counted as a typical movement of this category in the Christian world. In spite of their impres-

sive size in some countries, their degree of difference, separation, and antagonism towards society is so high that they are not recognized by the mainstream as a respectable religious option. It is hard to imagine that insider movements would move in this direction since they would have to start out under very different premises than such fundamentalist groups.

4. Upholding medium tension with society, i.e., functioning like a "denomination." This is, in my view, the suitable direction to take. Seventh-day Adventism in many areas of the world may serve as a pattern for this route. Once formally organized, Adventists never sought ultra-high tension with society. There were times when they were in somewhat high tension with the environment, but not too much of it, and certainly not in enough areas to make a difference. In other words, this track would challenge people to take their faith seriously, to be authentic followers of Jesus, and to live according to the principles of the reign of God. In short, it would be a framework for a community which "keeps the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus."

Conclusion

Four insights have been presented, and it is the hope of the author that they will inspire the reader to view insider movements from a new perspective. It should be added, of course, that these

considerations are not meant as normative but as an attempt at making sociology of religions fruitful for a missiological discussion.

Of course, it must be conceded that in some Muslim societies “medium tension” may imply things that differ from what has been outlined above. Where the established religion (“church”) is so weak that the Christian Church *can* operate as a “cult,” traditional Christian approaches may be attractive to a significant number of people who actually search for a religious alternative with a completely different paradigm.

Yet in many Muslim societies, medium tension does mean that the established religion is so strong that Christian churches *cannot* operate at all among Muslims, since they are viewed as dangerous “cults.” However, in these societies the gospel mandate is still valid. Since medium tension is necessary for a new religious movement to grow, a “sect” type of religion will be the most common means of religious innovation, and indeed one that is accepted in that environment. Should missiology learn from these sociological findings?

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