

Book Review

The Life and Impact of Phil Parshall: Connecting with Muslims

Edited by Kenneth Nehrbass and Mark Williams

Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing, 2021

108 pages

USD \$11.99

Reviewed by J. Stephen Jester. Stephen has a PhD in intercultural studies from the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary and spent over twenty-five years working among Muslims in West Africa. He currently teaches Christian Worldview and Missions courses at Grand Canyon University.

Arriving as a new missionary to West Africa in the early 1990s, I experienced an array of new sights and sounds as a reminder that my new home was completely foreign to my experiences. The first morning in Africa, the “call to prayer” reverberated from the local mosque with an enchanted summons for devotees to attend morning prayer. We were filled with a passion for the place and people; but we had little understanding of Islam, the five pillars, and the impact of the religion to the daily lives of Muslims. It was in this context I first met Phil Parshall. I needed someone to serve as a guide and mentor for this young naïve missionary and I found his wisdom and discernment a beacon that helped me, time and again, to find my way. I was not privileged to meet him in person, but encountered him through the pages of *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism*, *Bridges to Islam*, *Beyond the Mosque*, and *The Cross and the Crescent*. I found these works practical and insightful for the challenges faced in my context. I found hope that I too could enter the culture and present the Gospel in contextually appropriate ways that remained faithful to the truth of Scripture.

The Life and Impact of Phil Parshall provides much more insight into Phil

Parshall by those who knew him and were shaped in some way by his experience and scholarship. This short book is a fitting tribute to the man whose life and thought influenced many cross-cultural workers in Islamic contexts. Edited by Kenneth Nehrbass and Mark Williams, the book is divided into seven distinct chapters with unique contributions from those who knew and engaged the ideas proposed by Parshall. Each author engages Parshall's thought, offering his or her own contribution to his ideas.

In chapter one, Gary Corwin provides a fitting review of Parshall's life and legacy with a narrative of his formative years and conversion. Early exposure to world missions developed in him an inner compulsion to perceive culture and people through God's point of view. The Muslim world was calling; and this led him to a significant phase of missionary work in Bangladesh. That context became the catalyst for developing his focus on "contextualization to local and Muslim patterns of life, but with great care not to cross lines into anything that was not biblically permissible" (9). It laid the foundation for *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* and many of his additional scholarly publications. Corwin's summary of Parshall's legacy highlights his contribution to Muslim contextualization, his scholarly publications and teaching, his willingness to contest an idea with humility while remaining open to all perspectives, and his initiation of "a movement of church mobilization for outreach to Muslims" (13).

Chapter two provides personal reflections from Kevin Higgins, one of those students of Parshall's who never sat under his teachings but was profoundly influenced by him nonetheless. Higgins describes Parshall as an innovator who allowed others to follow in his footsteps and even take his ideas in new directions. He learned from Parshall to cross frontiers in "probing the consequences of contextualizing so-called Christian 'forms'...in order to allow truly biblical 'functions' to flourish in a cross-cultural setting" (18). This happens when one listens well to what Muslims think and feel with a posture of humility toward the other.

Miriam Adeney reminds readers in chapter three that culture still matters. It mattered for Parshall in identifying with Islamic culture. It mattered to the early Church. Her lens for contextualizing within any culture comes straight from the Scriptures to emphasize that Paul and the early faith community wrestled with the same cultural adaptation issues and its consequences. It was important then and even more imperative today. While globalizing influences may alter certain aspects of the worldview and behaviors of a people group, sensitivity to the local culture remains an essential focus of living out the *Missio Dei*. For Parshall, adapting to the local was crucial. "Only one offense should intrude: the true offense of the gospel, the cross that is a scandal and stumbling block to people's pride in every culture. Beyond that, Christian witness should adapt" (40).

In chapter four, Enoch Jinsik Kim uses Parshall's humble contextualization

as his approach to Muslim Background Believers (MBB) in urban contexts. The challenge he considers is how they negotiate multiple identities in their social networks and the implications of these to evangelists working with these new converts. He uses sociological theory to consider the roles and positions people hold in their various communities. Negotiating multiple identities in these multiple roles can create identity confusion, leading to what Kim refers to as a “fuzzy zone” where they are working through role ambiguities that do not specifically fit traditional categories of Christian identity. This in turn leads to multiple challenges for those working in these communities. As a way forward, Kim offers some models for discipling MBBs through the journey.

Many barriers confront missionaries in contextualizing the Gospel to Muslims. In Chapter five, Harley Talman builds upon Parshall’s “new paths” to reaching Muslims through the lens of a case study in which the author identifies three obstacles: cultural differences, religious identity, and communal decision dynamics. Incarnational witness, an emphasis on the Kingdom of God (as opposed to Christianity as merely a religion), and group consensus were all means of overcoming the identified challenges.

Joseph Williams revisits the debate involving the C1-C6 Spectrum in chapter six as he looks at the concerns of syncretism in each of the C categories. He asks whether these categories are descriptive or prescriptive. At the heart of the issues expressed by Parshall, as well as by Williams and other missiologists, is the opaque distinction between religion, culture, and identity that cannot simply be reduced to a simple definition and categorization. This includes cautions to be considered that would hinder Muslim Background Believers from analyzing and evaluating their faith community under Christ’s Lordship.

Finally, John Jay Travis uses his experiences in Southeast Asia to demonstrate that Parshall’s emphasis on lifestyle and modelling remains one of the most relevant aspects of engaging with Muslims. Living cross-culturally as authentic incarnational agents necessitates relationship building, hospitality to the other, adapting to the culture in food and dress, and most importantly, walking daily with the Spirit through a robust personal discipleship.

I found this book a delight to read as it gave me additional insights into the ways Parshall has influenced missiology - and specifically, contextualization among Muslims. Each chapter provides more detail and substance on the man, his passion, and his lasting legacy regarding the debate on appropriate contextualization and incarnational mission. I highly recommend this work to students and instructors alike.