WHOSE STORY TO JOIN? THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL PLAUSIBILITY, SOCIAL MISSION STATIONS, AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO CHURCH PLANTING MOVEMENTS

J. S. Williams

— Editor's Note: J. S. Williams, a Ph.D. student at Biola University, won the Great Commission Research Network's doctoral essay contest this year. He was overseas and was not able to present his paper at our annual conference but we now we are providing it for your perusal in the Journal.

Abstract

Donald McGavran challenged the missions community sixty years ago to use the natural social bridges of a community, rather than create new ones, to see the gospel spread. This paper builds on this concept by applying social plausibility theory, as articulated by Peter Berger and Thomas Tuckman, to three case studies of church planting efforts among Muslims. The paper indicates, in keeping with McGavran, that missionaries may still construct "sociological mission stations" if they do not intentionally present the gospel to families and social networks instead of individuals.

Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire;
he breaks out against all sound judgment.
Proverbs 18:1 (ESV)

Sixty years ago, Donald McGavran asked a crucial question with ongoing resonance: "How do peoples become Christian?"[1] McGavran critiqued the mission station, an extraction approach—the attempt to bring new believers into a physical compound in order to save them. He argued that this approach hinders the gospel from running along the very bridges God had designed for it to use, family and social network relationships by which believers could pass along their faith.

As a frontline practitioner, I have observed the limitations of an extraction approach in my own country of service the past ten years, an Islamic country with a history of limited access to foreign Christians. I, too, want to know the answer to McGavran's crucial question, a question about *peoples* and not just individuals. Even as research in my own country is limited, I propose in this paper a paradigm drawn from social science that may prove fruitful in conducting further research on approaches that facilitate church planting movements.

The basic paradigm I propose, in keeping with McGavran's argument, is that movements to Jesus are best facilitated when the gospel comes as an invitation for a community to engage with God's redemptive story. I distinguish this kind of invitation from an invitation to individuals and from an invitation to a particular cultural stream of God's story. I base this paradigm off of the sociological theory of "social plausibility," as developed by Peter Berger and Thomas Tuckman, to help conceptualize the barriers to conversion and people movements. Adapting their paradigm of "social plausibility" allows us to conceptualize the depths to which the gospel must (and indeed does) go to bring people into a saving knowledge of God as revealed in the Old and New Testament.

I propose, in short, that converts from one religion that move into relationship with God through Jesus can survive that transformation through two primary approaches. Either they can join the community of the missionary and other ethnically different Christians, or they can move with their own community towards Jesus and stay within their own society. I offer the latter scenario as a paradigm that allows for (though does not guarantee) church planting movements,[2] while the former scenario tends towards isolated and extracted believers or, at best, a small community of gathered

---

[1] Donald Anderson McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 1.

[2] Since this paper is devoted to the conditions that allow for church planting movement (CPM) and not the movements themselves, the precise definition of a CPM is less important to the argument of this paper. Garrison's definition is sufficient for the purposes of this paper: "a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or populations segment" [David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, Bangalore: WIGtake Resources, 2003), 20].

believers. I will outline this paradigm below and then provide three short case studies that provide an initial foray into its explanatory power.

EXPLANATION OF THE PARADIGM

What is social plausibility theory? In order to examine its relevance to church planting movements, I will first describe the theory and then adjust it to our concerns so that it accurately reflects the biblical paradigm.

Social plausibility theory posits that for a person to hold convictions that transform his life, he must have these convictions reinforced by a community so that they become internalized and owned. If a person does not have a community in which to live out beliefs and have them reflected back to him, he will remain in a position of anomie—a phase of liminality that is impossible for humans to maintain and thrive within. Anomie can be tolerated for a season, but it has to be resolved. In seeking resolution, the person can return to his previous community, find a new community in which to live those convictions, create a new community somehow through current contacts, lose his sanity, or commit suicide. Berger puts it this way in *The Sacred Canopy*,

> [The] individual who wishes to convert, and (*more importantly) to 'stay converted'* must engineer his social life in accordance with this purpose. Thus he must dissociate himself from those individuals or groups that constituted the plausibility structure of his past religious reality, and associate himself all the more intensively and (if possible) exclusively with those who serve to maintain his new one. *Put succinctly, migration between religious worlds implies migration between their respective plausibility structures* (emphasis added).[3]
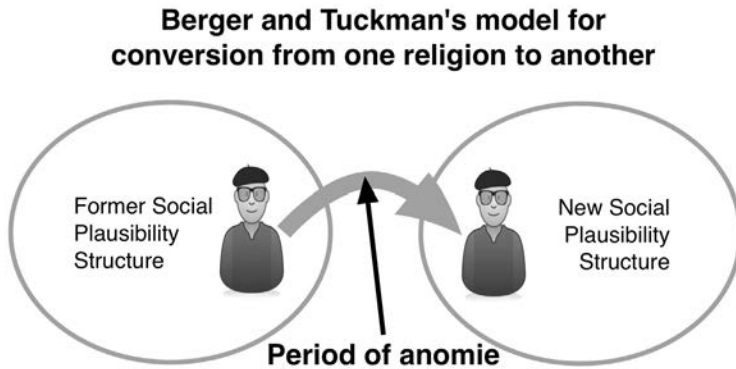
We must note a few things about this paradigm (see Figure 1). First of all, as Berger constructs it, there is a full-scale movement from one plausibility structure to another. This fits with his American context in which he examined religious conversion between groups by largely individualistic Americans. I will propose an alternative application of this structure below. Second, the space between the two plausibility structures is where the risk of anomie comes. Once a person is fully integrated into a new structure, the threat of anomie decreases. As other sociological studies indicate, however, this does not always happen successfully.[4] Failed

---

[3] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 50–51.

[4] See the case study on individual conversions below and Theodore E. Long and Jeffrey K. Hadden, "Religious Conversion and the Concept of Socialization: Integrating the Brainwashing and Drift Models," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22, no. 1 (1983): 1–14.

Berger and Tuckman's Model of Conversion

Berger and Tuckman's model for conversion from one religion to another

Former Social Plausibility Structure

New Social Plausibility Structure

Period of anomie

integration can lead to a return to one's original religion and plausibility structure.[5]

Berger and Tuckman's paradigm, however, assumes two complete sub-cultural groups within a society from which one can choose. For instance, we can imagine a Catholic becoming a Lutheran or an evangelical in St. Paul, Minnesota. Applying Berger's framework to a missions context, however, requires that we make adjustments. As a minority representative in the midst of a majority culture, an apostolic worker[6] aims to bring broader communal change, though his methods will greatly impact his goal.

Buildings themselves illustrate the role plausibility structure plays in one's methods. One style of church planting has been to invite seekers into a recognized church building or an existing meeting place. This invitation

---

[5] See also Samuel Stroope, "Social Networks and Religion: The Role of Congregational Social Embeddedness in Religious Belief and Practice," *Sociology of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2012): 273–98 and Thoroddur Bjarnason, "Parents, Religion and Perceived Social Coherence: A Durkheimian Framework of Adolescent Anomie," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 4 (1998): 742–54. For a critique of Berger and Tuckman, see Robert Wuthnow, "Two Traditions in the Study of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 1 (1981): 16–32.

[6] The term "missionary" has become increasingly problematic because of its association with colonialism, particularly in the Muslim world. I will avoid the term from this point on in the paper and prefer terms such as an "apostolic worker." I use "apostle" in the adjectival form so as to distinguish from the Scripture-level authority of Peter or Paul, though I fundamentally believe that pioneer church planters are modern-day apostles in the sense of being "sent out" for the work of the gospel.

acts an invitation to the plausibility structure of the existing believing community. The inviter calls the seeker to join *her* turf, so to speak. The arrangement of the meeting place itself (Is there an altar at the front? Are there chairs? How are they situated?) indicates the dynamics of the community and will be based upon the culture of the believers hosting the event.

In many Muslim contexts, with tight security concerns, recognized church buildings usually do not function as the primary meeting place for gathered believers. Nevertheless, the invitation to engage Christ can be much like the invitation to enter a church building. The structure of meetings, the format of teaching, and the language used to describe faith all form a structure much like the furniture arrangements in a church building. They form and limit the way faith in Christ is experienced. They are their own plausibility structure that require a community to maintain them. We can visualize the invitation to a Muslim into a foreigner's plausibility structure with Figure 2.

This approach essentially mimics the pattern that Berger describes. The seeker is asked to move into the plausibility structure of the foreigner. The cross-cultural context of the event, however, limits the integration possibilities of the seeker. She still lives in her own country and context. It is possible for her to move to the foreigner's home country and make a more dramatic switch, but few apostolic workers desire this.

The alternative approach, which this paper advocates, is an adaptation of Berger's model. In this case, the apostolic worker labors hard to ensure that the invitation to the gospel is (a) an invitation to *the community* or *social networks* of the seeker and (b) an invitation for the seeker to bring the gospel

FIGURE 2:

Local Seeker Moves Towards Apostolic Worker's Plausibility Structure
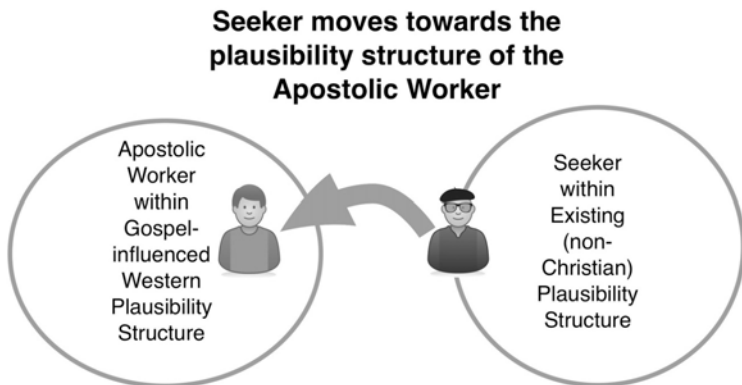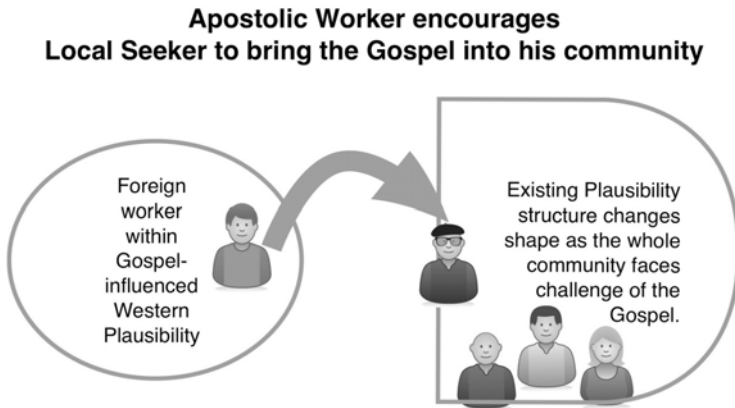

Seeker moves towards the plausibility structure of the Apostolic Worker

Apostolic Worker within Gospel-influenced Western Plausibility Structure

Seeker within Existing (non-Christian) Plausibility Structure

Apostolic Worker Brings the Gospel Towards New Community

Apostolic Worker encourages
Local Seeker to bring the Gospel into his community

into his or her community not to extract himself or herself from that community. Figure 3 indicates this approach.

As we apply this sociological framework in a biblical manner, however, we must address one final deficiency. Berger and Tuckman are confessed secularists that intentionally offer their framework in a way that ignores the existence of an eternal, God-formed reality.[7] These limitations will not work for those committed to the Scriptures as a defining pattern for reality.

For this, Tom Steffen's article on the role of symbol and narrative in forming and reforming reality and relationships provides a helpful adaptation. The way Steffen describes "story" parallels closely the way that Berger and Tuckman use the more technical language of "social plausibility." He quotes an insightful illustration from Miller Mair,

> Stories are habitations. We live in and through stories. They conjure worlds. We do not know the world other than as a story world. Stories inform life. They hold us together and keep us apart. We inhabit the great stories of our culture. We live through stories. We are *lived* by the stories of our race and place. It is this enveloping and constituting function of stories that is especially important to sense more fully. We are, each of us, locations where the stories of our place and time become partially tellable.[8]

---

[7] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 3.
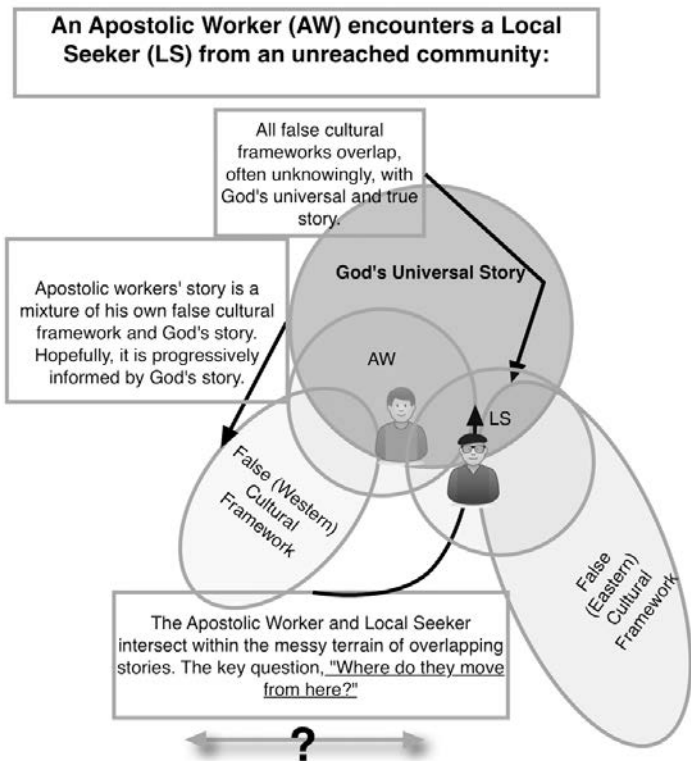
[8] Tom A. Steffen, "Foundational Roles of Symbol and Narrative in the (Re)construction of Reality and Relationships," *Missiology: An International Review* 26, no. 4 (1998): 481.

In short, we must live in a story. As social beings, we must live within a particular *community's story*. Substituting "story" for the term "social plausibility structures" helps us add a crucial element to our theoretical perspective, namely, the role of "God's story" in our understanding of church planting movements. Rather than simply describing the world as a series of plausibility structures defined by each cultural context, we can describe the world as multiple stories that fit somehow (well or poorly) into the larger story that God is writing for the world. God's story is, of course, both the history of the world that he is writing, but more significantly for our purposes, the story of redemption that he has crafted with its narrative center in the revelation of Jesus. All stories are intended to find their meaning in this larger story and realign themselves according to it.

The story concept provides an even clearer framework, then, for understanding the gospel task. It allows us to put the question in sharper terms

FIGURE 4:

Apostolic Worker Encounters a Local Seeker

An Apostolic Worker (AW) encounters a Local Seeker (LS) from an unreached community:

All false cultural frameworks overlap, often unknowingly, with God's universal and true story.

God's Universal Story

Apostolic workers' story is a mixture of his own false cultural framework and God's story. Hopefully, it is progressively informed by God's story.

AW

LS

False (Western) Cultural Framework

False (Eastern) Cultural Framework

The Apostolic Worker and Local Seeker intersect within the messy terrain of overlapping stories. The key question, "Where do they move from here?"

?

by asking apostolic workers this question: "Whose story are you inviting people to join?" Many apostolic workers unthinkingly invite locals to *join their own story*. What's wrong with that?

The worker's story is actually a subset of God's story—not the sum of it. As Steffen notes in his quotation of Walter Fisher, "*There is no story that is not embedded in other stories*" (emphasis his).[9] From a biblical perspective, we can assert that the universe and the story of redemption is God's story, but God's salvation of me and my Irish/English-American forebearers is a distinct story within God's history of redemption. Likewise, my Protestant/Reformed story as expressed through the European Reformation and reformulated by American evangelicalism is not the sum of God's story. My task is not to invite people into *either of those stories*, but rather to invite them to put *their* story into the framework of God's universal story as communicated in the Old and New Testament.

Incorporating the language of story, then, allows us to frame the earlier imagery of social plausibility and its relationship as done in Figure 4. An apostolic worker (AW) committed to God's universal story moves to a new community to share the gospel. In the figure, I have paralleled my own context by imagining a Western apostolic worker who operates in a pioneer setting. The AW operates in his own "story" or plausibility structure, but his commitment to the scriptural story has brought him to reach out beyond his own story to understand the story of the focus community. Through his presence in the community, he encounters a seeker, someone interested in learning more about God as revealed through the Old and New Testament. For the sake of this paradigm, I have assumed that at this point in the interaction, the seeker acts as an individual, not a family. Anecdotally, most stories in our country of interested seekers that we hear are of individuals, not families. The diagram sets up a decision point for the AW. How will he proceed in light of this encounter?
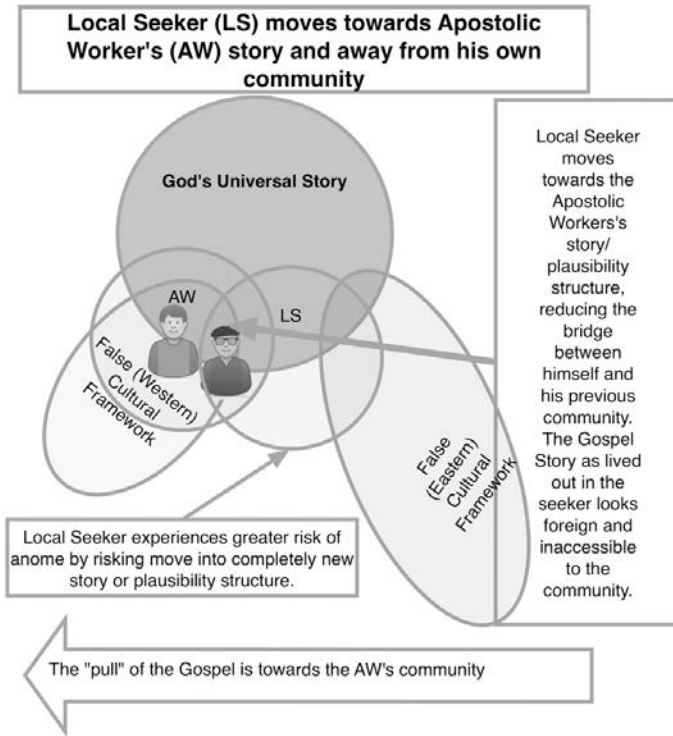
The first and most common approach parallels the pattern of Figure 5. The AW, largely unaware of other options, assumes a teaching role in the life of the seeker. He presents the gospel to him and begins teaching the seeker from the Scriptures. This is often done in the foreigner's home or perhaps in an office setting, if the two met through a business or NGO effort. Gradually, the seeker embraces the gospel and begins to identify increasingly with the story of the AW. In so doing, he moves away from the falsehood of his Eastern context, but he also moves more and more into the *Western* story of the AW.

He is engaging more in God's story, but significant amounts of the foreigner's story are being adopted by the seeker, as well. This distances him from his community and their story. It also leaves him in a significant bind. He has increasingly separated himself from his home context. Friends and

---

9   Steffan, "Foundational Roles," 485.

Local Seeker Moves Towards the Story of the Apostolic Worker

Local Seeker (LS) moves towards Apostolic Worker's (AW) story and away from his own community

God's Universal Story

AW

LS

False (Western) Cultural Framework

False (Eastern) Cultural Framework

Local Seeker moves towards the Apostolic Workers's story/plausibility structure, reducing the bridge between himself and his previous community. The Gospel Story as lived out in the seeker looks foreign and inaccessible to the community.

Local Seeker experiences greater risk of anome by risking move into completely new story or plausibility structure.

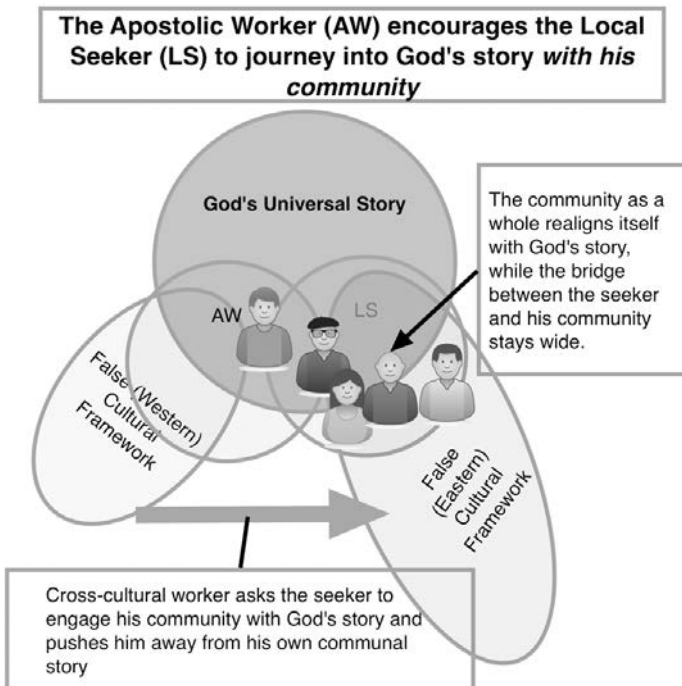The "pull" of the Gospel is towards the AW's community

family progressively see him as foreign. He has limited options for surviving: (1) align himself more fully with the foreigners, depending on them for income and governmental protection (in case there should be prosecution for his apostasy from Islam), (2) maintain a private testimony in front of the foreigner but a public reputation as a Muslim, (3) seek asylum in another country to pursue religious freedom, (4) commit suicide, or (5) publicly identify as a Christian and face dramatic persecution. American Christians tend to glorify the latter approach, but it may not be the path to greater fruitfulness. As Nik Ripken, a researcher of persecution, has argued, isolated believers who face persecution rarely lead to mass reproduction, even as persecution against an expanding group often leads to greater multiplication.[10]

---

[10] Nik Ripken, "Persecution (Unpublished Interview)." (2008) and Nik Ripken and Gregg Lewis, *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected* (Nashville, TN: B&GOSPEL Publishing Group, 2013).

In short, a static position of anomie is not possible. The believer cannot live apart from engagement with some social human story. He can form a new communal story by drawing friends and family into a Christ-formed story distinct from the existing communal story. However, the "bridge" for this to happen is narrow, because he has initially separated himself from the existing communal story so dramatically (that said, our first case study below shows that narrow though this bridge may be, it is still a bridge). An alternative, however, presents itself as one that enables that to happen more readily (see figure 6).

Under this scenario, the AW actively resists inviting the seeker into his own story or plausibility structure. The AW acts with considerable intentionality. The previous scenario could be considered the default one. It is the one that Berger and Tuckman envision, and because religious perspectives are so intertwined with the story in which we live, it is the most likely to happen. In this case, though, the AW *pushes* the seeker back towards

FIGURE 6:

Apostolic Worker Pushes Seeker Towards His Community and Calls on Community to Engage God's Story

The Apostolic Worker (AW) encourages the Local Seeker (LS) to journey into God's story *with his community*

God's Universal Story

AW   LS

The community as a whole realigns itself with God's story, while the bridge between the seeker and his community stays wide.

False (Western) Cultural Framework

False (Eastern) Cultural Framework

Cross-cultural worker asks the seeker to engage his community with God's story and pushes him away from his own communal story

his community. From the first day, he invites the seeker to share his pursuit of God's story with other community members. As a result, the seeker moves *towards* God's story with other members of his community and so initiates a shift for the whole community to engage with God's story. The whole community may or may not want to put themselves in God's story. However, because the seeker has engaged God's story primarily, rather than the AW's story primarily, and brought others along with him or her, the "bridge" for the larger community to engage God's story through the seeker's story is greater. There is significant overlap, in other words, that allows for people to engage the story without a dramatic threat of anomie.

Having laid out this paradigm, we will now turn to some case studies that draw out how church planting movements take into account the problem of social plausibility in religious conversion.

SOCIAL PLAUSIBILITY THEORY AND CHURCH

PLANTING MOVEMENTS IN PRACTICE

Does this theory match reality? Space does not allow a detailed description of multiple case studies reinforcing this pattern, but I believe a small sampling of three published descriptions of Muslims coming to faith in Jesus can indicate the viability of the paradigm presented. In the first two cases, we can see this on the positive end—David Garrison's report of a movement in South Asia and stories about movements among Muslims by CityTeam. In the third case study, however, we find how loss of social plausibility structures hinders movement and promotes a fractured identity among believers.

Case Study 1: Sharif in Jedidistan

In the section on Muslim movements in *Church Planting Movements*, Garrison tells the story of "Sharif" in Jedidistan and the movement God sparked through him.[11] As Garrison tells it, Sharif's rejection by his own family prior to even hearing the gospel made him open to hearing the good news from a white foreigner. As it turned out, Sharif followed the pathway of extraction I detailed in the first section of the paper (figure 5). He was ostracized from his family for his faith, moved away to a major city, joined a traditional church and mission agency, and essentially moved into a new plausibility structure—one influenced by foreign missionaries.

This approach did not lead to a movement, but Sharif used the small bridge available between him and his community that I noted above, by

---

[11] Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, 110–122.

moving back to his community after a season away. He moved in with a childhood friend Bilal. Bilal recognized the change in Sharif and began studying the New Testament with him. After Sharif was beaten again for his faith by other youth in the community, Bilal agreed to embrace Jesus as well. This is when the door opened for the community as a whole. After Bilal's baptism (by Sharif—not a foreigner), they led their first family to Christ. Garrison reports that over the next decade, nearly 4,000 churches were planted, and more than 150,000 Muslims came to Christ.

Sharif's path proves instructive. The movement did not begin until Sharif went *back to his community* and shared with a sympathetic friend. Indeed, until Sharif had a co-believer in his community, Sharif was isolated and dependent on a foreign plausibility structure. After he found a partner, they began to develop a blended "story" that could reach their whole community with the gospel. Significantly, their first set of converts was a whole family. In short, with a partner and a push towards whole families, Sharif and Bilal saw large-scale community transformation and engagement with the gospel. This has not meant an absence of persecution, but it has meant that many people in the community see following Jesus as a viable path within their community.

Case Study 2: Miraculous Movements and Disciple-Making Movements (DMM) Training

CityTeam claims that "God has used the leaders David [Watson] trained to start over 100,000 churches in the past 15 years, and more than 4 million people have been baptized as a result of God's movement in the areas where trained locals have devoted themselves to disciple-making."[12] This is remarkable fruit. Watson and his partners now provide trainings to multiple groups and agencies throughout the world. I attended a fifty hour training on the approach and have also incorporated insights on the approach from the published writings.

Space does not allow a full summary of the Disciple-Making Movement (DMM) approach. For our purposes, we can simply note the outline provided by Trousdale in *Miraculous Movements*:

- Pray abundantly
- Gain access to the community
- Find the person of peace
- Start a Discovery Bible Study (DBS) with the person of peace and the members of his network
- Develop leaders[13]

---

[12] Patrick Robertson, David Watson, and Gregory C. Benoit, *The Father Glorified: True Stories of God's Power Through Ordinary People* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 148.

[13] Jerry Trousdale, *Miraculous Movements: How Hundreds of Thousands of Muslims Are Falling in Love With Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 187–199.

In terms of strategic action points, two aspects stand out: (1) finding a "person of peace" and (2) using the DBS teaching approach. As Watson details it, an apostolic worker's primary task in a new community is to find a "person of peace." The DMM trainers defined this, based on Matthew 10 and Luke 10, as a person or family who is "open to the apostolic worker" as a person, "open to the message" that the apostolic worker brings, and "open to passing on" the message to others. The first two aspects of an "open" person easily fit into figures 3 and 4 above (discovery of an interested person).

The third element, someone *open to passing on the message to others*, is what connects this approach to the concerns of social plausibility. Insider-bridge people, rather than foreigners, become the means of the gospel entering the community on a large scale. Moreover, the focus is always upon family groups and existing networks rather than social patterns imposed by the foreigner.

Two further aspects of the DMM approach stand out as engaging social plausibility concerns. First, DMM places upon the apostolic worker a strait-jacket that requires the worker to invite the seeker and his community to consider God's story rather than the foreigner's story. Watson and others insist adamantly that in leading a DBS, the facilitator should ask questions but not offer prescriptive statements. This distinctive is deceptively simple, because there is a prescriptive element to the questions. Facilitators are taught to ask, "How can you obey what God's Word says this week?" The Scriptures as interpreted by the groups become the prescriptive guide for the community. Significantly, the CityTeam researchers have found significant orthodoxy and orthopraxy through this approach.[14] The repeated pattern of analyzing life and community by the Scriptures is proving a safeguard against falsehood.

Second, DMM's emphasis on movement prior to actual conversions preserves social plausibility structures. In other words, groups usually form *before* many or any of the participants have made explicit commitments to Jesus. This enables a group to move into God's story as a group because identity and religious category discussions are put off until significant worldview change has begun to happen. Moreover, those discussions become a group discussion done in interplay with the Scriptures.

The success of the DMM paradigm points to the importance of social plausibility structures. By preserving communal structures while also challenging them with the Scriptures, Watson and others are seeing numerous movements catalyzed. It seems that the DMM approach is providing a transferable strategy that is bearing fruit in multiple contexts, in large measure, I suggest, because it offers a way to address the problem of social plausibility.

---

[14] David Watson, "Disciple-Making Movements Introduction," *IC 2011* (August, 2011).

Case Study 3: Individual Conversion Stories

A third set of case studies, drawn from Jens Barnett's two chapters in *Longing for Community*,[15] indicate the limitations that anome pose to the gospel spreading through a Muslim community and indeed how it can hinder the spiritual growth of the individual.

Barnett interviewed half a dozen Arab believers from Muslim backgrounds. All of them appear to have become believers as individuals and then made attempts to engage traditional ethnic churches or English-medium churches in new countries. All of them struggle to identify themselves as "Christians," often rejecting the term in favor of simply calling themselves "Muslims." By the end of the two chapters, Barnett explains that most of them have stopped attending the other-cultural churches of which they were once a part. During the interviews, they say things like, "I will always be a second-class Christian,"[16] "I no longer care what Christians think. I care what Muslims think …. I will not compromise Christ, ever—but I am not a Christian…"[17] and "I am not an *ideal* Muslim… My faith [in Christ] makes me a better Muslim."[18]

Barnett offers his own psychological examination to explain the "hybrid" experiences of these believers, a model akin to Berger and Tuckman's. Barnett's model concerns how the internal and external experiences and pressures come into dialogue with each other.[19] He pushes against a one-dimensional "I'm this" or "I'm that," wanting to allow an internal dialogue within a person without any one particular "part" of a person "winning." As he puts it,

> [By] allowing a healthy dialogue within, believers are able to find creative and synergistic "win–win" solutions to problems that obey the Holy Spirit's voice and are true to scripture while also "hearing," or valuing, voices from multiple cultural identifications.[20]

This lines up with my image of engaging God's story with the different story within which one was born, while adding the complexity of competing foreign stories, which simultaneously influence the believer because of their role in his coming to faith.

Nevertheless, Barnett's study exposes how an individual conversion limits the plausibility structures available for these believers. His stories expose the difficulty imposed by calling people to faith and then asking them to

---

[15] Jens Barnett, *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between*, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013).

[16] Ibid., Location 996.

[17] Ibid., Location 842.

[18] Ibid., Location 1034.

[19] Ibid., Location 913.

[20] Ibid., Location 929.

join existing churches with a majority of participants from another culture or ethnic background. None of these believers described the churches as "their churches" but instead used "us" language to describe themselves in their Muslim community. For believers of between ten and twenty years, this suggests a significant sense of distance from the Christian community. Of relevance to our study, these believers do not appear to have reproduced themselves. The plausibility structures they have adapted have distanced them from their home community.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to provide a paradigm for examining church planting movements (or the lack thereof) using social plausibility structure as theorized by Berger and Tuckman. This is a necessary extension of Donald McGavran's crucial thinking in *Bridges of God* on how *peoples*, not just individuals, become Christian. The paper proposes that retention of social plausibiliy structures through attention to family and relational networks in unreached communities is a key element in church planting movements and a twenty-first century application of McGavran's writings. In church planting movements, individuals retain a coherent plausibility structure and so transition more successfully from one allegiance to a biblically informed allegiance to Jesus as Lord.

There is considerable room for further research on this topic. I have touched briefly on strategies for retaining plausibility structures while challenging them with the biblical story line. More details might be provided on how this is being done among church planting movements. Moreover, even as Barnett studied the fractured identity of individual converts, research of those involved in church planting movements would help show whether or not they experience such a fractured identity. Does the retention of group structures and plausibility structures provide believers with greater wholeness as believers? Perhaps as further studies of CPMs come out, this will become evident.

Finally, worth further discussion is how the consideration of social plausibility structures moves us beyond discussion of *mere identity* in the contextualization debates surrounding mission to Muslims.[21] Using missiologist John Travis's scale[22] of how Muslim background believers identify themselves—as "Muslims" (C5), as a new term (C4), or as "Christians" (C3)—we see in the Sharif case study that these believers have developed a

---

[21] See J. S. Williams, "Inside/outside: Getting to the Center of the Muslim Contextualization Debates," *St Francis Magazine* 7, no. 3 (2011): 58–95.

[22] John Travis, "The C1 to C6 Spectrum," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34:4 (October 1998): 407–408.

C4 or C3 identity but have done so *as a group.*[23] The group dynamic, not the identity, seems to have been one of the crucial elements in enabling a church planting movement. According to personal communication with Travis, a number of the movements using the DMM approach may be considered C5. Again, it is the group dynamic and engagement with the gospel that is crucial, not religious identity categories per se.

Returning, then, to McGavran's poignant observations in *Bridges of God*, I believe we can posit a concern for the twenty-first century application of his thought. McGavran saw literal buildings and mission stations as a hindrance to the gospel. The physical movement of individual converts into church buildings or full-service employment situations cut believers off from their community and moved them into the domain of the foreign missionaries. However, there are other ways to isolate believers and promote extraction. Methods that call for individual conversion and discipleship of individuals create sociological mission stations. Unfortunately, unlike the previous century mission station, missionaries who disciple individuals often fail to recognize that they are inviting disciples into a place of isolation from their community. They carry the expectations of network expansion but fail to recognize how their method of discipleship undermines it. These mission stations are not created through mission compounds, but through meeting places, methods of discipleship, materials used for discipleship (including foreign-identity Scriptures), and even theological terms and categories. All of these fields deserve further attention and research.

The next phase of missions, I suggest, is to move away from social mission stations, to see God's story become the dominant concern for apostolic workers, so that all peoples, particularly those from large religious blocs like Islam, can be invited to engage God's story with their own. This phase, I propose, will be a controversial phase (as all phases have been) but one with dramatic breakthroughs of the kingdom. Apostolic workers will need to intensify their study of Islamic (as well as Buddhist and Hindu) cultures, to look for the ways God has planted his witness among them over past centuries, and to join in the process of discovery with families and networks that come to faith as they articulate God's story for their own community. We can expect that this will also mean dramatic and increasing spread of God's good news to all the peoples of the world as we learn to utilize the bridges God has built for his good purposes.

Bibliography

Barnett, Jens. "Living a Pun: Cultural Hybridity Among Arab Followers of Christ," In *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between*, ed. David Gospel. Greenlee, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013.

---

[23] Travis confirmed in personal correspondence that this was not a C5 movement.

Barnett, Jens. "Refusing the Choose: Multiple Belonging Among Arab Followers of Christ," In *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between*, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013.

Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1969.

Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckman. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1967.

Bjarnason, Thoroddur. "Parents, Religion and Perceived Social Coherence: A Durkheimian Framework of Adolescent Anomie." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 4 (1998): 742–54.

Garrison, David. *Church Planting Movements*. Bangalore: WIGtake Resources, 2003.

Long, Theodore E. and Jeffrey K. Hadden. "Religious Conversion and the Concept of Socialization: Integrating the Brainwashing and Drift Models." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22, no. 1 (1983): 1–14.

McGavran, Donald Anderson. *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005.

Ripken, Nik. "Persecution (Unpublished Interview)." (2008).

Ripken, Nik and Gregg Lewis. *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected*. Nashville, TN: B&GOSPEL Publishing Group, 2013.

Robertson, Patrick, David Watson, and Gregory C. Benoit. *The Father Glorified: True Stories of God's Power Through Ordinary People*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013.

Steffen, Tom A. "Foundational Roles of Symbol and Narrative in the (Re)construction of Reality and Relationships." *Missiology: An International Review* 26, no. 4 (1998): 477–494.

Stroope, Samuel. "Social Networks and Religion: The Role of Congregational Social Embeddedness in Religious Belief and Practice." *Sociology of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2012): 273–98.

Travis, John. Interview with J. S. Williams. Email interview. Pasadena, CA. November 15, 2013.

Travis, John. "The C1 to C6 Spectrum." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34:4 (October 1998): 407–408.

Trousdale, Jerry. *Miraculous Movements: How Hundreds of Thousands of Muslims Are Falling in Love With Jesus*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012.

Watson, David. "Disciple-Making Movements Introduction." *IC 2011* (August, 2011).

Williams, J. S. "Inside/outside: Getting to the Center of the Muslim Contextualization Debates." *St Francis Magazine* 7, no. 3 (2011): 58–95.

Wuthnow, Robert. "Two Traditions in the Study of Religion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 1 (1981): 16–32.

About the Author

J. S. Williams is an American-born PhD student at Biola University in Intercultural Studies. He and his family have lived and worked for over ten years in Muslim Central Asia. He has done development work in Central Asia but currently runs a language and culture consultation business. He is researching Muslim self-identity among Turkish and Persian-speaking Muslims. He welcomes feedback at js7@fastmail.com and blogs occasionally at josephswilliams.wordpress.com. He writes under a pen name for security purposes.