Believing Without Belonging

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Introduction
South Asia is seeing many thousands of Muslim people coming to faith in Jesus the Messiah (*Isa Masih*). This faith is being worked out within communities of belonging that are separate from the Christian community in identity and culture. Such believers are facing the question of how to believe in Isa Masih whilst still belonging to the culture and community of their heritage. For many there is a balance between belonging to "us" and yet also being "no us" in identity. This paper explores some of the issues of believing and having a mixed sense of belonging, of being both "us" and "not us" whilst also being in Christ.

Believing
A conversation with a Muslim friend sharpened the meaning of salvation for me. I asked him for his views of salvation. This is his reply.

> "Ah, well you see, there's what we're taught and what we know." Somewhat bemused I asked "And these are different?" "Oh yes" he said. "Let me explain."
>   "You see they teach us that on the last day we all stand on the field of judgment before Allah. Then we are each judged with our good deeds on one side of the scales and our bad deeds on the other. If the good deeds outweigh the bad then we're allowed into heaven. If our bad deeds outweigh

the good, then we go to hell. Maybe for just a while, but most people will stay there. That's what we're taught. … … … But no one believes that." [He paused for effect. I obliged. "What do they believe then?"]

"Well, you see, it's like this. On the last day we all stand on the field of judgment before Allah. Allah speaks and says 'But before we begin. Muhammad. Come. Come here. This isn't for you. Come stand beside me.' So Muhammad goes and stands beside Allah. When he gets there he turns and says 'That's my brother. Come brother. That's my cousin, come! He's mine, he's mine and he's mine.' Muhammad calls out all those that are his. They then enter into heaven, and after that judgement for the rest starts."

My friend has fairly broad theology. He belongs to a Sufi *torika*[1] and follows a *pir*.[2] He continued his story.

"Not only will Muhammad be called out, but all the holy men of history will be called out and they will then call to themselves all their people. My *pir* will be called too, and because I am *in him*[3] I will be saved."

I sat there for a while, stunned at his turn of phrase, and then said. "You know, I believe almost exactly the same thing." Now it was his turn to be somewhat surprised. I continued "but there is only one person that any of the holy books or scriptures call holy. Only one." Slowly, almost painfully, he agreed "Yes. That's the question really, isn't it?"

Worldviews and Assumptions
It is worthwhile stopping to examine the thinking that underlies this story. To identify the worldview assumptions that allow this story to be told and understood so as to then understand our South Asian Muslim neighbours better.

Not An Individual
People who are predominantly influenced by philosophical modernity (hereafter referred to as "Westerners") are strongly individualistic. Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," is the core

of much philosophy and highlights how central the individual is to Westerners. The individual is seen as the core building block in society. Psychiatry and psychology focus on issues like self-understanding and self-actualization. Indeed, my English thesaurus lists over seventy-five phrases and words revolving round the word 'self.' This centrality of the individual is indeed one of the markers of Western society.

This, however, is a far cry from how people see reality in South Asia. The identity of people here is much more bound up in being in group. "Who is your family? What social position do they hold? Are you older or younger?" are all key questions. Group belonging defines who you are. There are two African sayings: "You are, therefore I am" and "We are, therefore I am."[4] These two proverbs accurately reflect the thinking I see around me in South Asia.[5]

People here have a baseline sense of interconnectedness, which affects how they think and interact. When people first meet, the conversation quickly turns to where people are from and who is in their family. To truly know someone you must know with whom they are linked. If I know your family are tradesmen, that you are the oldest son, and that you come from a village called Islampur, then I know who you are as a person.

This is not to say that people here see themselves set in a broad, universalistic connectedness, rather their connectedness is usually curtailed to that of being in a small group of belonging, or limited set of groups that interlink. Those on the outside are often viewed with negativity and suspicion.

This connectedness is embraced right at the level of being. Cross-cultural psychology usefully describes societies in terms of individualism and collectivism.[6] Collectivist outlooks tend to see the person as set in a group (e.g. family or religious identity) and that people find their core sense of identity in the group. Societies where collectivism is strong tend to look to external norms for regulating behaviour and often consider the leader as exemplifying the group's ethos, leading to a marked personalisation of authority where power and authority are seen as embodied by a person rather than an impersonal code. Seeing the world in a collectivist way can be very deep indeed, right at the level of being in that I am part of a larger group, I am joined with others in being.

Hierarchy

Related to the strength of individualism and collectivism is the issue as to how vertical (hierarchical) or horizontal (egalitarian) a society tends to be. A vertical society expects there to be some people at the top, and others at the bottom, each with different levels of access to resources and power. Furthermore this is seen as natural and God-ordained, and to tamper with this is to go against the will of God. Horizontal societies tend to see all people as being born equal, having equal value and worth whilst having equal rights to access resources.

Putting these two sets of concepts together we find societies tending to vertical individualism, vertical collectivism, horizontal individualism, or horizontal collectivism; and South Asian countries have a strong tendency to vertical collectivism.

South Asian cultures are predominantly vertical collectivist and the concept of connection is strong but definitely not egalitarian. Society here is unquestioningly hierarchical. The title of Dumont's book on Indian society, Homo Hierarchicus is both alliterative and deeply descriptive of societies which are profoundly affected by views on status, honour and prestige, all bound up in a highly developed sense of hierarchy.

Taking cues from others, how people value and rank each other (honour or shame) therefore becomes a matter of extreme importance. Honour is the warp and woof of life in this setting, such that "for most villagers, the most important social goal after survival [is] the maintenance or improvement of status."[7] Indeed, honour and shame seem to be the two most important dynamics in most decision making processes.

Leadership: Hierarchy And Linkage

The two themes within vertical collectivism (i.e. hierarchy and interpersonal linkage) find a focus in leadership. My leader is seen as someone representing me and someone with whom I am linked. His victory is my joy. His shame is my shame. Similarly, my behaviour reflects on him personally. If I fall, I bring shame on the group and on my leader. If I serve, then it is on behalf of my leader.

It is hard to over-stress the importance of the role of a leader here and the sense of connectedness with him. He is the focus of many hopes, ambitions and dreams of advancement.

He gives me identity, for I am his man. To pick the right leader is to find a path to provision and benefits, which are often rare commodities in South Asia. A good leader will help provide loans, resources, and good political connections. A follower invests an enormous amount into the person that they follow, and loyalty to superiors is seen as a key value in this society. Loyalty is the expression of my connectedness, and the word for 'obey' here is actually the word 'to honour.'

Patronage

The patron-client relationship is often employed as a model for understanding the dynamics of society in South Asia, and in most circumstances it is the dominant modus operandi in relationships. Patronage is an etic model that is usually set in a political or economic framework, it therefore needs careful application in a different setting, but it is a model that can be helpful. The core of the patron-client model is that of a hierarchical and deeply personal bond between the patron and client, rooted in an unequal distribution of resources and which facilitates an exchange of differing kinds of resources. The Patron offers access to scarce resources (e.g. goods, protection, influence, employment) that may be economic, political, or spiritual. Ideally the Patron is supposed to act as a father-figure acting with favouritism, faithfulness and loyalty, kindly providing for clients that which they don't have access to. The client on the other hand, offers thanks and honour to the patron, avoiding situations that may dishonour him, working to increase his reputation, providing service when requested (rent-a-crowd, labour etc.), acting with loyalty and faithfulness. The word 'gratitude' sums up the ideal client response.

Eisenstadt and Roniger include the following points in their eloquent paper on patronage (though they concentrate mainly on political and economic patronage):[8]

a Patron-client relations are based on marked inequality and difference in power. A patron has a monopoly on positions and resources that are of vital importance for his client.
b There is a strong element of solidarity in these relations, linked to personal honour and obligations.

c There is often a spiritual attachment between patrons and clients.

d Interaction is based on simultaneous exchange of different types of resources (e.g. employment and loyalty). These resources are usually perceived as being in markedly short supply.[9]

e Patron-client relations are binding and long range, ideally life-long. However, they are (in principle) voluntary, and can be abandoned voluntarily.

Spiritual Patrons and Saviours

The opening story shows how perceptions of Muhammad fall within the framework of patronage type thinking. He is the patron who will, through loyalty to those who are joined with him in community, save and provide. We see this operating at the level of Sufi pirs, imams and other leaders at a lesser extent. Within this is there is a sense of incorporation into the leader and into his group with the accompanying morals of loyalty, honour and duty being highly valued.

Believers in Jesus within this community tend to have a story that talks about an initial event that attracted their attention to Jesus. This initial attraction then leads to enquiring about him and learning more about him. Through this exploration the sense of his honour and status grows. He is Word of God (*Kalimatullah*), Spirit of God (*Ruhallah*), able to perform miracles and raise the dead, able to provide food and has access to Allah. Furthermore, he's not dead but is alive and with Allah now. Then begins the decision making process, deciding who is the patron of highest status and honour. This is important as the one who is deserving of honour is also deserving of loyalty.

For some the decision is that Jesus is has highest honour, best able to save and provide and is the one worthy of loyalty. This is a consistent finding when talking to followers of Jesus from that background. Jesus is the one to whom they are loyal, the one they follow and the one worthy of honour. But with this comes the issue of belonging. Does following Jesus mean I belong in the "Christian" community? This is complex question and needs to be unpicked carefully.

Belonging

As we have seen, most people in South Asia think of themselves as primarily finding identity in a group. Rather than the individualism of Westerners people here view themselves as set within a group, intricately linked in being with others in those groups (particularly the leader) and governed by mores of honour and shame. This isn't the belonging to an amorphous whole, but a belonging to a series of communities that interlock. These can be identified first *poribar*, then *atiyo*, *gushti* and then *jat*.

Poribar

The *poribar* is the family unit that lives in the extended household. (*bari*) Traditionally each poribar had an extended household living in rooms within a walled off compound in the village. There would be the *pater familias*, his wife/wives, sons and their families. The word *poribar* stems from the word porivara that means "dependent," so the *poribar* is roughly the extended family unit that is dependent on the *pater* and each other.

Atiyo

One's *atiyo* is the extended family who often live close. This is one's uncles and aunts, cousins and other relatives who tend to be in the same village or area.

Gushti

The word *gushti* is has no precise meaning. It tends to mean all members who are related to the same ancestral male through shared blood (*rokter shomporko*). This has a sense of clan or larger extended kith and kin than the term *atiyo.*

Jat

The word jat is a slippery term that covers several genera of large social groups of social group; caste; religion etc. Although *jati* is commonly translated as caste, Bengalis use the word to refer to lineage or kin, family (*paribar*), sex and religion. What is interesting is that the code of conduct of a particular clan, family, or sex is thought to be imbedded in the bodily substan-

ce shared by the persons of each genus and to be inherited by birth. In this sense *jatis* and kin groups are 'social species' which, like natural species, are unassimilable to each other. This line of thinking is also extended to religious groups. Socio-religious *jati* are the basis of social compartmentalisation in a lot of South Asia.

Compartments that don't overlap
The idea of the *jat* is therefore on of a socio-religious compartments that don't overlap or inter-breed. There is the Christian *jat*, the Muslim *jat*, and the Hindu one. Each is identified by multiple social markers such as diet, dress, facial hair, skin tone, language, educational levels, social ranking, purity markers, and the like. The table below shows some examples:

	Muslim	Christian	Hindu
Diet	Eats beef Rejects pork Rejects alcohol	Eats beef Eats pork Drinks alcohol	Rejects beef Eats pork Drinks alcohol
Dress	Men – Lungi, Shalwar Women – Sari, burka	Lungi or trousers Sari	Lungi, trousers of dhoti Sari
Facial Hair	Beard no moustache	Moustache, no beard	Moustache, no beard
Language	Religious language – Arabic terms (e.g. Allah, *do'a, namaz*)	Religious language – Hindu terms (e.g. *Isshor*, *prathona*)	Religious language – Hindu terms (e.g. *Isshor*, *prathona*)
Educational levels	Perceived to be higher	Perceived to be lower	Perceived to be lower
Social ranking	Perceived as higher	Perceived as lower	Perceived as lower
Purity markers	Perceived as cleaner	Perceived as less clean	Perceived as less clean

These markers highlight the very real different sense of identity and belonging that being in a different jat brings. Intermarriage between them is very rare as would be business partnership. There is more of sense of closeness between the Christian and Hindu jat as most Christian converts have traditionally come from a Hindu background and there is a shared sense of being joint minorities against the larger and more powerful Muslim majority.

Diagrammatically we can image the Muslim and Christian jat as differing in size and nature.
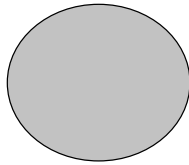
Muslim

Christian

Is A Follower of Jesus a Christian?

If a Muslim comes to know Jesus as Saviour and Lord they must then face the issue of where does their sense of group belonging lie. To become a "Christian" is to have to change dress, diet, supportive relationships, language, and to cut oneself off from one's setting and family. The question arises, is it possible to stay in one's social community but follow Jesus? And if so, is there a new group of belonging?

J

G
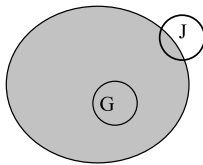
Christian

Muslim

J = Jesus group   G = Generic God group

The groups of believers in Jesus situated within the Muslim *jat* that I saw there tended to fall into two broad categories. One type of group would publicly own the name of Jesus (so they might be called something like "Jesus' Congregation" or "Group of the Messiah" wherein the title is in language forms of the Muslim *Jat* (not Christian ones). Furthermore styles, language, dress, diet and other identity markers are also those of the Muslim jat. People aren't changing their name to Stephen, wearing different clothes and eating pork and yet their allegiance and loyalty are firmly anchored on the person of Christ.

The second type of group doesn't publicly own the name of Jesus, and tend to have group names like "The Way" or "Truth."

Outsiders with only a little interaction with them would simply see a pious group of what they would assume to be Muslims. However, those close to them start realising that the New Testament (*The Injeel*) is being used and other subtle signs of a Christocentric orientation, and they start raising questions about the group.

Both groupings then face a significant time of opposition and persecution. This opposition includes the issues of identity and are they "us" or "not us." Are they in the Muslim jat or Christian jat? The question is not so much a theological one (are you Muslim or Christian in a theological understanding) but a socio-religious identity issue (are you in the Muslim *jat* or Christian *jat*). "Someone who dresses like us, eats like us, has the same names as us, but follows Jesus – where do they fit"? This "us / not us" social negotiation is the core dynamic in what happens through the next few years.

The social negotiation process has several parties involved. There is the group of believers themselves and how they want to be perceived. There is the Muslim community and families with all the attendant dynamics that go with this (e.g. a neighbour with a land dispute or a family desire to minimise shame). There is also the Christian community and their response to the new believers where, oddly enough, a refusal to be seen to relate to them strengthen the new believers' claims till still being "us" as Muslim jat. Outside influences also come into play with issues such as Western ("Christian") military actions causing dissent and scapegoating.

This is, of course, a very local thing. In some localities the identity as "us" has not been too difficult to achieve, however in others its fraught with problems. Things that affect this process are issues like numbers involved, status of people involved, outside events, Christian presence rivalry and other motives.

My observation is that the groups that owned the name of Jesus have been able to negotiate a liminal position, a "somehow us *and* somehow not us" identity. Their public stance means that their neighbours know what they stand for which is different and yet they are still somehow in the broader sense of the Muslim *jat* because they are clearly not part of the Chris-

tian *jat*. These groups are the stronger groups both numerically and in identity. The groups that have tried to site themselves as completely within the Muslim *jat* are those that struggle more. It seems that their indistinctness means that there is more suspicion surrounding them and they stay small and weak.

Jesus Is My Inheritance

The attitude of the strong groups matches with that of others who have said "Islam is my heritage and Christ is my inheritance."[10] The task for me as a believer is to evaluate my heritage in the light of my inheritance. The centrality of Christ is to the fore, whilst there is both respect and critical engagement with my past and my heritage. The focus through this endeavour is on the person of Christ. He is the one to whom I look, he is the one who leads me through this process.

As we have seen, in South Asia patronage is one of the dominant forms of relationships, and honour and shame are key dynamics in decision making processes. For believers in Jesus this finds its focus in Him. Jesus is now see as the one to whom I look for salvation, for resources and for my identity. Any such relationship calls for loyalty from the client, a loyalty to honour him, stay true to him and be joined with him. This is then frames the question of faith for believers in Jesus. How do I balance being "Us" with my Muslim heritage and yet "Not us" with my allegiance and loyalty to Jesus.

Persecution

The groups involved don't take their stances in order to avoid persecution. Indeed, persecution comes in waves. This can take form or direct attack on their faith stance ("you are Christian and shameful") or indirect attack such as land grabbing, stealing, and other crime aimed at them knowing that they no longer have the protection of their family, village and community. Its in this setting that new groups of believers walk the path of being "us" and yet "no us" as faithful to their leader and Lord, Jesus.

My experience has been that the stronger groups do the minimum needed to stay as "us" with respect to the Muslim *jat*.

That minimum in one setting may include going to the mosque weekly, having only a small group meeting with no singing or overt public expression of worship to Jesus, keeping a Qur'an in the house. In another setting the minimum may be going to the mosque once a year and not having a building with a cross on it. Each locale is different and the working out of faith in each finds a different level and expression.

Belonging to Jesus

A question I sometimes asked of believers was "I*sa Masih* died and rose again, and we are saved. How does his death and resurrection lead to our being saved?" Before we look at the answer first let us explore the question. This question came to be shaped as it was because in the discussions people rarely talked about Christ's death as a stand alone event. Most of the discussions concerning Christ's death also include mention of his resurrection, and commonly his ascension. For them, Jesus' death is not an isolated event; rather it is part of a tightly knit package. It is his death, resurrection and ascension that are brought to the foreground as a unity, rather than highlighting his death as bringing about salvation.

Thus, the question was phrased "*Isa Masih* died and rose again, and we are saved. How does his death and resurrection lead to our being saved?" In reply, there is an answer that many of my informants give in part or in whole. One believer put it most eloquently with a accompanying descriptive gesture.

> It's like this. I'm joined with *Isa*. [Here he interlaced the fingers of both hands, both palms facing downwards. As he continued talking he made a wave-like gesture with his interlinked hands, sweeping down and back up]. Jesus died and rose again. Since I'm joined with him, I am therefore dying with him and have been raised with him.

I have found this answer to be profound in its understanding and its simplicity. His starting point was how he saw that he was joined with Isa Masih. The gesture of interlacing the fingers of his hands was used to emphasise his meaning. Others used similar hand gestures such as hooking their two index

fingers together or clasping their hands together, each underlining of their profound sense of this union.[11] Furthermore, how he has used his verb tenses is also insightful. As well as talking about being linked with Jesus he described how he was dying, and yet had been raised to new life. This union is seen as a living and ongoing dynamic which is both in process and already achieved.

Another believer puts it like this:

> I am living, living according to His sayings, in this way we are in Him. I mean, so the commands and the things like teaching and advice that He spoke, if we keep and follow those things and are able to live according to them then we are in Him, and *Isa Masih* is within me. *Isa Masih* is there, meaning He is directing me by His character qualities, for the outward expression of Himself. He is doing this all the time, in that manner we understand that He is within us.

In a discussion that comes to focus on baptism another believer describes *Isa* and humanity sharing a burden. In experiencing hardships we are suffering with him, and he with us so that "this pain is my pain." Baptism is seen as dying and rising from the water joined in joyful resurrection.

> I am suffering the pain of death with Him. We have experienced the hardship that he bore by accepting death on the cross for us. We are suffering the pain of that hardship in our lives, "This pain was my pain." *Isa* took it. After that we died. By rising up from the water, we have experienced the life and the joy of being resurrected from the dead, and with what joy He has come for us. And now we want to spread that joy among people.

This idea of being joined with Christ, being "in Him," is very Pauline language but very few of the interviewees have ever read Romans.[12] Most are still reading the Gospels and have not moved on to the epistles. Yet many talk in this manner, speaking of being linked with Isa Masih, of being joined with him, in participating in who he is and what he has done. It is this

linkage that holds them to him is his death and resurrection and they therefore see themselves in sharing in his death, new life and salvation.

It is this linkage and the sense of belonging in Jesus that is the core of faith for the believers in the Muslim *jat* in South Asia. Their sense of "us" is now founded in Christ whilst the sense of social belonging in the *jat* is somehow "us" and somehow "not us."

Believers in the West
For those of us working in the West with Muslim communities, the us / not us dynamic is even more complex. Immigrants who have moved to a new country have the tension of trying to balance identity with respect to previous belonging and their identity in their new belonging. In the same household we may have Grandfather who speaks Urdu, has a long beard and goes the mosque daily; whilst his son has a clipped beard, speaks both English and Urdu and goes to the mosque on a weekly basis; whilst the grandson is in university, doesn't speak Urdu and goes to the mosque on religious festivals. The issue of identity and belonging is different in each case. Some may feel that Western society push them away and that they are forced to defend a Muslim identity. Others may feel that they want to put any Muslim identity down and just be Western.

In South Asia the growth of the body of Christ in Muslim settings is happening in a fairly settled Muslim *jat* identity. In the West, this identity is far from settled and so the question as to what expressions of outreach and church planting are most applicable is not a settled one. For some outreach from a traditional church setting is helpful, for many others its a step of identity change that is too great.

Looking around work in the UK its my sense that currently the most helpful basis for outreach to our Muslim neighbours is small community based groups (who may be part of a larger church), who are committed to each other as community and yet who are deliberately reaching out to their Muslim neighbours, inviting them to meals, sharing in celebrations, helping where needed and being open community. Its a similar pattern to the Fresh Expressions and Emerging Church types of expe-

riments being seen. In this is community, an sense of family and a sense of openness that new believers from a Muslim background can associate with.

Such groups will be changed because they are joined by others from a different cultural and faith background, and they need to be open to the changes that will come. However, with openness and sensitivity groups of believers can emerge that are both "us" and "not us," focused on Jesus our inheritance, and joined with him and each other in deep community.

Noter

1) A Muslim Sufi religious order or group.
2) A Muslim Sufi religious leader with followers and devotees.
3) Emphasis mine.
4) Mdimi, Mhogolo G. "A Vision of Full Humanity: An African Perspective" Transformation (1998) Jan: 6-10
5) For a good introduction to these issues see Malina and Neyrey 1991 (especially chapters two and three; 25-96), and for a fuller, more nuanced approach see Triandis 1995 and the description to horizontal and vertical collectivism
6) The works by Triandis cited below are a good introduction to this.
7) D Abecassis. *Identity, Islam and Human Development in Rural Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press. 1990) 38.
8) SN Eisenstadt, L Roniger. "Patron-Client Relationships as as Model of Structuring Social Exchange" Comparative Studies in Society and History (1980) vol. 22, no 1. 42-47. This is one of the touchstone papers on Patronage.
9) See Fosters work on the Image of Limited Good.
10) Mazhar Mallouhi A Muslim Follower Of Jesus
11) http://conversation.lausanne.org/resources/detail/10008#article_page_2 24 Feb 2010
12) This sense of being joined in person with one's leader fits well with the collectivist outlook discussed above
1) Cf (Rom 6.3-4, 8-12)

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