Duane Alexander Miller, "Living Among the Breakage: Contextual Theology-Making and Ex-Muslim Christians," PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2014; Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, forthcoming.

Reviewed by Brent Neely[*]

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (2 Cor. 5.17, ESV)

I begin with a direct assessment. This is a fresh and compelling study in what is sure to be an increasingly important field.[1] Miller has provided us with pioneering research in an emerging sector of World Christianity: the indigenous theology of Christians from a Muslim background. Miller deserves commendation for doing well a work that needed doing.

While not a professional theorist, I write as someone who has served in the Middle East and with the Arabic-speaking church for the past sixteen years. In what follows, I hope to give an overview of the thesis basically by way of impression. I simply want to reflect (in an orderly fashion) on the things that impressed me about "Living Among the Breakage." This "review," then, will fall somewhere between a stream-of-consciousness reaction to the work, and a detailed review and assessment of each chapter.

Studying the Theology of Ex-Muslim Christians

Briefly put, Miller sets out to discover, describe, and analyze whatever theology is being produced by individuals and communities of Christians from a Muslim background (CMBs). This certainly is a project whose time has come and which will undoubtedly continue to demand attention in studies of the global church. Though a crowing triumphalism is hardly called for at this juncture[2], there is no doubt that across the Muslim world, in different cultures and in different proportions, there is a growing movement of Muslim peoples coming into the Christian faith. While in most countries the numbers represent a small sliver of the total Muslim population,

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the influx of Muslims into the church is no longer numerically imperceptible, nor mere wish-projection on the part of visionaries and zealots.

A key contribution of this study, then, is to elicit, search out, analyze, and order the "theology" being produced by these new groups of believers in Christ. The point is not that these CMB communities feature "professional theologians" or the publication of formal theological texts. No, rather, the point is that in reality the CMBs are "working out their faith" in practice, in church life, and in various forms of communication from popular-level books to online poetry. Thought, talk, and action about God (or even "for" God) constitute "theology."

Miller's task is to discover, digest, dissect, and then divulge this theology for the interested reader. It is, in a sense, to make the "informal," if not "formal," at least clear and ordered. Of course, Miller is aware of the various studies that have been done on *why* CMBs convert to Christianity, and does deal with reasons and trends that have been conducive to increased religious conversion from Islam to Christianity (social, geo-political, spiritual, emotional, economic, and technological reasons, for example). But, the focus and worthy contribution of this work is to give voice to the "new theology" emerging from within these communities. Broadly speaking, the first three chapters establish the field, the research question, the methodology, the analytic tools to be employed, and the historical-cultural-social context of the Muslim and ex-Muslim communities being addressed. Chapters four through six, then, constitute the core research itself, with chapter seven drawing threads together and the conclusion summing it all up.

It is important to note that the subjects of "Living Among the Breakage" are all very consciously "Christian." They have left Islam for Christianity. Both in sociological as well as spiritual terms, their experience is a break with the old, a movement into the new. (This is very much the case, even as the slow, sometimes painful, sometimes incomplete, stages of transition or liminality continue to define the lived reality of many of these believers.) Miller makes clear that the study is not examining communities linked to "hyper-contextualized" or "Insider Movement" expressions of "biblical faith." In Miller's own analysis, there may or may not be some implied critique of such models of enculturating the Gospel, but on the terms of the CMBs studied, there is no uncertainty: *they adamantly self-identify as Christians*, or at least wish to do so to every extent feasible. While in no way desiring alienation from family or culture, the CMBs, on the whole, repudiate Islam and its perceived

deleterious impact on their home societies. For many of them, anything less than a full identification with the global Christian Church, the body of Messiah, is something less than full discipleship.

Methods and Models for Studying Christians from a Muslim Background

Miller carried out his research by personal interviews, fieldwork, and observation, as well as through copious reading and analysis. He uses three basic sources for his research:

1. One source is the study of the intellectual products of CMBs. That is, he examines their writings and communications. These range from books (which are most often auto-biographical conversion narratives) to poetry.[3] This category also includes personal communication between Miller and various individuals whether in a "live" interview format or via email.
2. A second source studied was a newly-formed CMB Arabophone church in a Middle Eastern setting. This group has had its ups and downs in its few years of existence. It was planted by an evangelical Christian Arabophone church in a nearby city. The fact of its substantial membership, even its existence, is quite remarkable. Yet it subsists on the margins of its own village community. Open displays of Christian faith are not tolerated locally. Initiation rites (baptism) pose genuine risks for the convert. And, there is as of yet no strong development of local leadership. The church remains dependent on its patron, the planting church. (Whether the dearth of local leadership is primarily a consequence of the difficulty of developing strong leaders imbued with Christian[4] values in that Islamic environment or whether the problem lies with the hesitancy of the local evangelical Christian Arab patrons to trust and release may be debated.) Miller had good access to the leadership of the "founding" church, some access to the local leaders of the CMB church, but nothing like unfettered access to the "laity" of the community.
3. The final objects of study in the thesis are several growing, thriving (as well as splitting and collapsing) CMB churches in the USA and UK,

> churches composed of members of the Iranian diaspora. These Iranian Christian churches are part of what is probably the most dynamic and largest movement into Christianity among a Muslim people group rooted in the Middle East.[5] Of course, there are also considerable numbers of Iranian CMBs in the West who are more-or-less assimilated into the mainstream churches of their host countries. As the groups studied are in the West,[6] Miller's level of access and the level of freedom enjoyed by these groups were considerable.

There are an almost limitless number of factors that could be considered when studying CMB theology in context. So much can be said with respect to the interaction of cultures ("Western" with "Eastern"); socio-economic or geo-political factors[7]; apostasy laws in Islamic settings; the influence of communally-oriented vs. individually-oriented cultures; and so on. All these are relevant elements that surface throughout the study, not least in the successive chapters dedicated to the Arabic-speaking congregation (chapter four), the CMB writings (chapter five), and the Iranian fellowships (chapter six). The seventh and final chapter[8] aims to distill and translate the many findings into an ordered structure.

In framing the study of these nascent communities of faith, Miller finds assistance from various theoretical and anthropological models. I will not attempt to unpack these models in this review, but these paradigms *are* often helpful in clarifying the complexities of context as the converts negotiate between "old" and "new"; between "freedom in Christ" and rigid (Islamic) power structures under which many of them live; and between two identities: the Muslim *umma* (which will not readily release a dissenter) and the new community of faith (which may be a CMB church with no social capital or a pre-existing Christian church hesitant to fully embrace the CMB).

The research highlights the new convert's struggle with "liminality" or ambiguity as she seeks to fully and truly transition from Islam into Christianity, to transition socially, legally, and openly; this struggle is depicted with depth and texture, in part by use of the various theoretical models. And, in fact, the struggle to express a new Christian theology, a "CMB theology," is part and parcel of the struggle of these new communities to articulate a new and "situated" Christian identity. As Miller shows, questions of belief, faith, ritual, and so on, are very much questions of identity.

This brings me to one of Miller's chosen theoretical models which I found refreshing and convincing in its intuitive simplicity, the contextualization model of Shoki Coe.[9] This theory of contextualization is the one which Miller uses as he unearths the indigenous theologies of CMBs; Coe's model is one of "organic contextualization." As I understand it, the distinction between this notion of "contextual theology" and the contextualization model most well-known among evangelical missiologists is that "organic contextualization" amounts to a theology *by*, whereas the directed contextualization of many Western practitioners is more of a theology *for*. That is, the latter theology, while aiming to engage a local context by divesting itself of "Western" accretions to the Gospel, is nonetheless a professional project brought in to a non-Christian setting from outside. The model of contextual theology articulated by Coe and sought out by Miller is rather one in which a given (non-Western) community of Christian faith, perhaps over great stretches of time, works out its own authentic expression of Christianity "in local skin," so to speak. It is this organically contextual expression of the evangelical[10] faith of CMBs that is the concern of this thesis.

Again, Miller's use of various theoretical and sociological models by which to organize thinking on the otherwise diffuse experience, praxis, and writings of CMBs is helpful. Another theorist Miller relies on is Stephen Lukes in his examination of the "dimensions of power."[11] For me, the deployment of the theory of "power" gleaned from Lukes was not equally clear at all junctures of the thesis. It must be stated that I fully concur that some theory of "power" is entirely relevant to the subject at hand, whether we are considering the "power" of faith in the transition of a convert from the "old" to the "new," with all its implications of radical transformation[12]; whether we think of the palpable emphasis of much Muslim thought and practice on "power" (not least with respect to coercive apostasy laws)[13]; or whether we consider the paradoxical power of fearless love and forgiveness towards one's oppressor (as expressed by many CMBs).[14]

So, my quibble, if any, is not with the validity of a heuristic lens of "power theory." Rather, my point is that while the importance of the concept was striking from example to example, I could not always seamlessly map its relevance onto a clear pattern or construct throughout the work. Undoubtedly, those with greater training in sociology might have made all the connections quite readily, but as a non-specialist reader I would have benefitted from more "help along the way."

Usually, a review is expected to include reservations or critique. Beyond the things just stated, I have no major criticism to offer. One might wish for further studies of this sort among more communities (more Arabophone groups as well as other settings, African, East Asian, Indian, and otherwise) to provide a larger base of investigation. But, this is no great criticism. It is an acknowledgement that more remains to be done, as Miller, no doubt, would agree. Similarly, one might wish he had had greater access to all the believers of the Arabophone congregation (see just below), but this, obviously, could not be helped. In many cases, the difficulty in gaining deep and sustained access to new faith communities of CMBs is simply a function of the geopolitical realities of our day and reflects the fact that Ex-Muslim Studies is itself an emerging field. Finally, I would agree with Miller himself in stating that further study could profitably be done among other Muslim apostates, whether of the non-religious variety, or, perhaps, among those who have converted to more traditional or sacramental forms of the Christian faith.[15] (It may be worth noting that studies of faith migration in the opposite direction, that is, *into* Islam, are also available.[16])

Distinctives and Challenges of CMB Theology

Obviously, then, *the context* of theology is enormously important, but it is ultimately the theology itself that is so compelling. What "Living Among the Breakage" is about is also that which makes the thesis the most interesting—an emergent CMB theology. Miller's description of ex-Muslim theological discourse was particularly enlightening in his fifth chapter where he especially focuses on CMB writings. We will not elaborate here, but the construal of CMB theologies as mostly "liberation theology"[17] or "wisdom theology" is both creative and instructive. Not surprisingly, the theologies examined in the thesis were for the most part recognizably "evangelical."[18] However, certain aspects of the CMB theology stand out particularly sharply, especially against the backdrop of the converts' former Islamic identity. In some cases, these emphases actually represent something of a divergence from those of standard Western evangelicalism. In what follows I reflect on the distinctives, contributions, challenges, and problematics of CMB theology elucidated by Miller's work.

One point of interest was the "foundational biblical texts" to which the CMBs constantly referred. While for Western Protestants a book like Romans might well be the text of choice, the recurrent platform for CMBs was apparently the Sermon on the Mount. Indeed, the ethical profile of Jesus and the manifest love of God were stand-out themes both in the conversions and subsequent theologies of many CMBs. It is not, of course, a novelty for evangelical piety to focus on the love of God, but the centrality of this motif for these ex-Muslims is striking.

In fact, for many CMBs there is an explicit and stark contrast between the *unconditional* love of God in Christ and the *conditional* love of the deity revealed in the Qur'an. Equally fascinating, and related to all this, was the discussion by CMBs of the Trinitarian character of God. This provided, what was to my mind, some of the most sophisticated theologizing by CMBs in Miller's study. For some of these believers, the eternal loving community that is the Trinity is vital to the truly loving essence of God; this, for them, stands in stark contrast to the essentially unknowable God of Islam. In the words of an Iranian-American Christian believer:

> I believe that an important consideration is that Allah metaphysically cannot be love because he is a Monad God, not a Trinity. For Allah to be self-sufficient and perfect in his love he must have an object of love detached from creation. Because he is a Monad, he had no object of love prior to creation and hence was incapable of loving, which makes him imperfect and unable to love in his nature without humanity. St. Augustine explains how this dilemma is solved in his illustration of the Trinity; The Father is the lover, the Son is the beloved and the Holy Spirit is the spirit of love between the Father and the Son. Hence the Christian God is self-sufficient in His love apart from creation and only in Christianity can it truly be said 'God is Love.'[19]

According to these ex-Muslims, the God of Islam, even on a Sufi-telling, is a monadic being who *ipso facto* cannot have been "Love" from all eternity. (Once again, the *power* of a sacrificial, non-coercive *love*, in the face of persecution, is a key theme in the life-stories of many of the CMBs.)

Another fulcrum of CMB theology underlined in this research is the prominence of ecclesiology, both as critically important to the church and as an ongoing problem. Not far removed from this branch of theology is another heavy concern of the CMB communities studied, namely the sacraments, especially the initiation rite of baptism. Given the radically final consequences of the choice of baptism in a Muslim-dominated setting, this is probably not that surprising. In any

case, a noteworthy trend among these ex-Muslim churches and communities was the very strong emphasis placed on the necessity and meaning of baptism. Being evangelical in orientation, there was usually no question of the salvific efficacy of baptism, but, nonetheless, there was an unusually strong insistence that baptism was somehow a vital part of becoming Christian, almost a part of the salvation process.

As to ecclesiology, two key questions are: "What is the church?" and, "How are its leaders to be formed?" This is very clearly an area in which the struggle to articulate theology and establish praxis is very closely tied to the struggle to establish a new Christian identity. Ecclesiology is highly important to the rising CMB communities. Equally, it is an area of real difficulty. The cultivation of CMB leaders *for the churches* is a related zone of difficulty.

How might qualified shepherds be raised up for these fledgling flocks? The case studies seemed to offer more questions than answers. In the Arabophone context, several years into the life of the new CMB church, it was still unclear when or if local leadership would emerge, be trained, and be trusted by the patron church nearby. In several of the Iranian Christian fellowships (situated in the West) there were no external limits on the churches' freedom to develop, to expand, and to appoint leaders, but a propensity towards mistrust and competition seemed to produce a pattern of church splits and/or collapses; a healthy path to leadership development seems elusive.[20]

Beyond the issue of leaders for the churches, however, is the simple question of the nature of "the church" into which the ex-Muslim Christian is to be integrated. For many CMBs in the West, particularly those seeking to join a "regular" evangelical church, a very common problem is the failure of the church to be for them a place of genuine community. Beyond the question of whether or not a given church welcomes CMBs,[21] is the more dominant fact of the cultural individualism of most Western churches. Too often, as the convert is transitioning (sometimes painfully) from the old *umma* of Islam to the new family of faith, she does not in fact find the church to be a "family."[22] The new life in Christ will not, in this life, be utopian, to be sure, but the CMB church is certainly right in striving in its ecclesiology to move past ambiguity, disorientation, and a transitory status towards a rooted experience of being in and with the Church at large. CMBs are right to expect the church to be a dynamic, bonded gathering of the renewed people of God, a community, a family in which the disciple's identity is grounded.

So, to restate the issue: deeply impacting CMBs who are grappling with a contextual ecclesiology, are a pair of realities noted by Miller—the fissiparous and fractious nature of many of the emerging CMB churches, and the difficulty many CMBs have in finding a new spiritual home in the pre-existing Christian congregations. A century on from his day, the challenge of Temple Gairdner (d. 1928) of the Anglican mission in Cairo still resounds: the church must be *a home* for new believers out of Islam.[23] Perhaps we all have some "theologizing" to do.

Conclusion

In wrapping up these thoughts on Miller's thesis, I will ruminate on some (hopefully) germane ideas with a degree of freedom. I want to hark back to two elements he describes as thematic in CMB thought, *a God of love* and *the ethics of Jesus* (and his people). Once again, for many CMBs the Sermon on the Mount is fundamental. It is emblematic of a God who is Love, and it sets out the challenge of discipleship in the way of that God. To borrow a qur'anic idiom, we might say that the *sabil allah* (the way of God) is actually the way of the cross.

As noted, when it comes to this classic teaching from the New Testament gospel(s), there is a degree of contrast with some forms of Western Protestantism which gravitate first to "justification texts" in Paul for articulating everything from "the Gospel" to Christian faith and life. Yes, it *is* the post-crucifixion, *resurrection* life of Jesus which enlivens and justifies us by grace through faith. But it is also the case that Jesus' *earthly* life (and death) embodied his mission and the love of the Father for us, and that must inform and shape our ongoing "following."

And thus we might correct shallow or mistaken views "as to what Christian commitment involves, by stressing the need for constant meditation on the four gospels, over and above the rest of our Bible reading; for gospel study enables us both to keep our Lord in clear view and to hold before our minds the relational frame of discipleship to him. The doctrines on which our discipleship rests are clearest in the epistles, but the nature of discipleship itself is most vividly portrayed in the gospels."[24] Cross Bearing is integral to "Gospel bearing"—The path of discipleship is not optional; it is of no use to be a pauline theologian, without being a disciple first and foremost. The Muslim world so needs to encounter disciples dead to self, alive with the Spirit.

These days our screens seem to be dominated by a despairing Western hedonism or the oppressive face of ISIS; what a contrast to see the glory of a God of love shining out of the face of Christ. The beauty of this Lord, as well as the travail and triumph, the purity and passion, of followership come through hauntingly in the poem of Fatima al-Mutayri, a young Saudi martyred for her faith in Christ in 2008:

May the Lord Jesus guide you, O Muslims
And enlighten your hearts that you might love others…

And what we say are the words of the master of the prophets
And we do not worship the cross and we are not insane
We worship the Lord Jesus, the light of the world
We left Mohammed and we are no longer on his path
And we follow Jesus the Messiah, the clear truth
And truly we love our homeland and we are not traitors
We take pride that we are Saudi citizens…

Be content to leave us alone to be believers in Jesus
Leave us to live in grace until our time comes
My tears are on my cheek and, Oh! The heart is sad…

And the Messiah says: blessed are all the persecuted
And we, for the sake of the Messiah bear all things
And what is it to you that we are [considered] infidels?
You will not enter our graves or be buried with us
Enough, your swords do not concern me at all

Your threats do not concern me and we are not afraid
By God, I am for death, a Christian, Oh my eye
Cry for what has passed in a sad life
I was far from the Lord Jesus for many years
Oh history record and bear witness, Oh witnesses!

We are Christians walking on the path of the Messiah…
Where is the humanity, and love, and where are you?
And my last words I pray to the Lord of the worlds
Jesus the Messiah, the light of the clear guidance,
That he changes your notions and sets right the scales of justice
And spreads love among you, Oh Muslims[25]

The church has a vital responsibility in engaging CMB brothers and sisters as they move out of liminality into a fully integrated new identity. Miller's thesis title alludes to lines from T.S. Eliot, "living among the breakage."[26] There are multiple sources of "breakage" in play—causes of stress, strain, and pain as the convert moves from the old identity into the new. These pressure points include the human frailty of the CMB; the frailty of the Christian communities they join; the tension of inhabiting (in some measure) the identities and expectations of both the old and new "worlds" simultaneously; the coercive force of "apostasy ideology;" and the disorientation, "freedom," and fragmentation of the postmodern world. All this must be navigated as new identities and new theologies[27] together struggle to the surface.[28] Muslims finding the embrace of Christ represent a rising tide in our world; they must also experience the embrace of Christ's community. Miller has provided us with a lucid look at this developing, global narrative, a story full of both hope *and* challenge for all the Church.

[1] Miller's thesis can be found on his Academia.edu page at: https://www.academia.edu/3621412/Living_Among_the_Breakage_Contextual_Theology-making_and_ex-Muslim_Christians (accessed 28 March 2015). All citations in this essay will be based on the pagination of Miller's doctoral thesis.

[2] Is it *ever* called for (!)?

[3] Poetry is a particularly important mode of expression in Middle Eastern societies.

[4] Which are contrasted with the values of the mosque in Miller's study.

[5] If we may designate Iran as a "Middle Eastern" country.

[6] The growth of Iranian house-churches is reportedly remarkable within the country of Iran as well.

[7] E.g., the impact of mass-media bringing new "worldview possibilities" into heretofore tightly controlled Islamic environments; or, the possible lure of "freedom" or "prosperity" in the West as an incentive towards less than sincere "conversion" by asylum applicants.

[8] Followed by a brief conclusion section.

[9] See "Living Among the Breakage," 13-18. (See Shoki Coe, "In Search of Renewal in Theological Education," *Theological Education* 9, no. 4 (1973): 233-243 and ibid., "Theological Education—a Worldwide Perspective," *Theological Education* 11, no. 1 (1974): 5-12.) Miller supplements this approach with a sociological theory of theological knowledge advocated by Robert J. Schreiter ("Living Among the Breakage," 22-24). Miller particularly uses Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (London: SCM, 1985).

[10] Miller notes that the majority of Christian communities emerging from Muslim backgrounds may be traced back to efforts of American/Western evangelicals and are themselves evangelical. This research demonstrates, however, that these new groups of believers are by no means mere clones of the Western evangelical communities from which they directly or indirectly stem.

[11] "Living Among the Breakage," 24-26. Lukes' work is Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London, New York: MacMillan, 1974).

[12] On Rambo's model of "conversion" see "Living Among the Breakage," 40-43. The work is: Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1993). (Also reference to Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion; the Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), throughout chapter two.)

[13] See "Living Among the Breakage," 54-62. There is a heavy legacy of "apostasy law" in many Islamic cultures, whether or not punitive "*shari'a*" measures are the explicit law of the land.

[14] See the poem by Fatima al-Mutayri at the end of this review.

[15] See "Living Among the Breakage," 254.

[16] Here I provide a couple of relevant titles with which I myself have just a passing acquaintance. These (along with their bibliography) may be an entry point for anyone caring to look into conversion to Islam in the West: Marcia Hermansen, "Roads to Mecca: Conversion Narratives of European and Euro-American Muslims," *Muslim World* 89, no. 1 (1999): 56–89, and Kate Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008).

[17] The patterns and *ethos* of a liberationist approach are evident in many CMB authors; however, one ought *not* look here for *the politics* of traditional Latin American liberation theology.

[18] See the note above on the evangelical roots of most CMBs.

[19] "Living Among the Breakage," 241.

[20] Miller notes the work of Roy Oksnevad on precisely the issue of ecclesial disharmony in Iranian churches of the diaspora (see p. 245). Oksnevad's relevant article is "BMB Discipleship: An Investigation into the Factors Leading to Disharmony within the Iranian Churches in the Diaspora" in *Saint Francis Magazine* 8, no. 4 (2012): 397-434. (Unfortunately, currently the Saint Francis Magazine is no longer online.)

[21] Perhaps a weightier, riskier, and more historically loaded issue for the churches of the historic Christian minority in the Muslim East.

[22] Related issues are addressed in the work of Kathryn Kraft with whom Miller interacts at various points in the thesis.

[23] "Living Among the Breakage," 232.

[24] J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, as cited by Michael Bird in *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), Kindle Locations 7933-7936.

[25] (Abridged, slightly edited) For the whole poem and a few more details, see "Living Among the Breakage," 160-161.

[26] These poetic lines are quoted just before the formal "page one" of the thesis.

[27] Just a reminder: "new theology" does not refer here to a *de novo* creation or to a mutating heterodoxy. It refers to the struggle for the Christian faith to be expressed afresh in unique and new contexts.

[28] See, e.g., "Living Among the Breakage," 252-254.