Moving Toward the Enemy: A Case for Missiological Engagement in Counter/Deradicalization

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Abstract

The church on mission, especially in the Middle East, has been a controversial topic with memories of the Crusades and colonialism burned deep in the psyche of the region. While much attention has been paid to the implications of Islamic Theology in conversations about extremism and radicalization in the Middle East, Christian Theology and Missiology, have been largely neglected. The great migratory people movements of the last few years, especially in the Middle East, have brought the church into more intimate contact with historic enemies and the results are arguably unprecedented. Unexpected stories of worldview change among former extremists and exponential church growth in the Levant are widespread. This paper illustrates the phenomenon with stories from Lebanon which provide an interesting laboratory for research into how the church has contributed to the deradicalization of Syrian Muslim refugees. Common ground between the fields of missiology and de/counter radicalization is explored and time is taken to orient those who may be new to missiology to the concepts of doing justice, loving neighbor and loving enemy as integral practices of the Christian faith. Finally, this paper attempts to demonstrate that the church may have a role to play in de/counter radicalization if it is given space to carry out its natural mission and intervene pragmatically in social ills that are often drivers of radicalization, ideological re-pluralization and the creation of spaces for societal belonging. The paper closes with some practical suggestions for both fields and suggest that in our increasingly pluriform and globalized society we cannot afford continued isolation and kinetic measures as the primary tactics for countering and preventing extremism.

Introduction

Much of the research on Islamic radicalization indicates that there are multiple layers of complexity and story on the pathway towards radicalization. Layers of nuance from the

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disciplines of sociology, psychology and criminology paint a complex mural of motives, deep personal hurt, systemic abuse, tragic loss, egregious violence, theology and even love[2]. Perceived grievances, marginalization, prejudice, shame, injustice and lack of political freedom have been discussed as drivers in radicalization[3]. These exist in abundance in the Middle East with great complexity and layering, both personal and communal[4].

The great migratory movements of the last few years, especially as a result of the Syrian and Iraq conflicts have brought the Christian church into more intimate contact with those they historically considered enemies. Though once a majority, regional history is filled with accounts of forced conversion, persecution and rapid decline of Christian communities in the region since the 7th century[5]. The Church has committed its share of horrendous atrocities; memories of the Crusades and colonialism are burned deep in the psyche of the region. With this residue from centuries of conflict, the Ottoman *millet* system and historically divisive personal status and freedom of religion issues lingering in the backdrop, recent church growth in the Levant is surprising, with numerous stories of world view change even among former Islamic extremists.

While dialogue and debate in Islamic theology is commonplace in deradicalization programs[6], Christian Theology and Missiology, often a source of tension, and Christians,

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[2] See for example Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[3] See for example: Anne Marie Baylouny, "Emotions, Poverty, or Politics? Misconceptions about Islamist Movements," *Connections* 3, no. 1 (2004): 41–48; Doha Declaration - Education for Justice, "Counter-Terrorism Module 2 Key Issues: Drivers of Violent Extremism," accessed October 30, 2020, //www.unodc.org; David A. Winter and Guillem Feixas, "Toward a Constructivist Model of Radicalization and Deradicalization: A Conceptual and Methodological Proposal," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00412; Sara Zeiger and Anne Aly, eds., *Countering Violent Extremism: Developing an Evidence-Base for Policy and Practice* (Perth, Australia: Curtin University, 2014).
[4] Anne Speckhard, "The Jihad in Jordan: Drivers of Radicalization into Violent Extremism in Jordan," accessed March 11, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/32337905/The_Jihad_in_Jordan_Drivers_of_Radicalization_into_Violent_Extremism_in_Jordan.
[5] See Ellenblum, Ronnie "Demography, Geography and the Accelerated Islamisation of the Eastern Mediterranean" in Ira Katznelson, Miri Rubin, and Miri Rubin, *Religious Conversion : History, Experience and Meaning* (Routledge, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315605111; and Jack Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).
[6] Daniel Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism*, 1 edition (Routledge, 2016), 226.

Scott Gustafson: Moving Toward the Enemy

often a 'target society[7]' of Islamic extremists, are rarely involved. Christian theologians have dialogued readily with sociology, anthropology and other related fields as it pertains to religious conversion[8], as far as I've been able to ascertain, missiologists have yet to engage in conversation about counter/deradicalization and the role of conversion. I will attempt to draw attention to this gap by discussing potential areas of overlap and will illustrate with some anecdotal stories from the Levant where former extremists have deradicalized as a result of the organic missional efforts of some churches.

Though not without debate, paths towards extremism and the process of radicalization have been postulated and modeled, while off-ramps are much less understood[9]. Indeed, there is lively discussion in the deradicalization field on key terminology and definitions of success. Reduced recidivism is frequently cited as a marker of success, but many others note the importance of attitudinal, cognitive or ideological change that assumedly undergirds behavior[10]. Horgan notes the confusing terminology and calls for more conceptual clarity between disengagement and deradicalization indicating that many so-called deradicalization programs seem to be aimed primarily at reducing terrorist behavior[11]. Rabasa et al. note that the ideological component must be a part of any successful deradicalization program[12] while El-Said seems to allow for either simple behavioral change or both belief/behavior change to be classified as deradicalization[13]. Khalil et al. bring some clarity to the relationship between attitudes and behavior but note the limitations of their 'ABC' model within the debate on

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[7] Koehler, 87.

[8] Lewis R. Rambo, "Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change," *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (1999): 259–71; David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Pub Group, 1989); Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 17th edition (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 1986).

[9] Daniel Koehler and Verena Fiebig, "Knowing What to Do: Academic and Practitioner Understanding of How to Counter Violent Radicalization," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 3 (2019): 49.

[10] Braddock 2014 in Koehler and Fiebig, 47.

[11] John Horgan, "Deradicalization or Disengagement?: A Process in Need of Clarity and a Counterterrorism Initiative in Need of Evaluation," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2, no. 4 (2008): 3–8.

[12] Angel Rabasa et al., *Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists* (Santa Monica, UNITED STATES: RAND Corporation, The, 2010), 47, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=669769.

[13] H. El-Said, *New Approaches to Countering Terrorism: Designing and Evaluating Counter Radicalization and De-Radicalization Programs*, 2015 edition (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 10.

ideology's role in driving behavior or 'conveyor belt' thinking[14]. These varied perspectives illustrate that deradicalization as a concept is somewhat murky. Within this paper, the counter/deradicalizing effects of the church are characterized as shifting people away from adverse beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. I define extremism here as a worldview that seeks superiority and fulfillment by advocating for the discrimination, persecution or destruction of others who hold different views[15].

Religious conversion is usually discussed negatively as a pathway towards radicalization in prisons for example[16], but rarely as a valid exit. I will highlight what seems to be one such exit, albeit somewhat controversial in the unique Levant milieu. To be clear from the outset, though I present a positive view of religious conversion and the church's mission, there are risks, limitations and possible negative outcomes. Firstly, we cannot assume that all who have converted were extremists; the phenomenon seems widespread however there is little rigorous documentation. It is plausible as well that converts could 'play-up' their backstories to gain status and perceived benefit in their new Christian community. Also, some aspects of church mission and conversion are flash points for governments and sometimes codified offenses. Thus, the conversation involving Christian Missiology in these jurisdictions may be a non-starter and in fact could present physical and personal risks for those seeking different religious belief or for Christians desiring to practice missional aspects of their faith. Additionally, some forms of proselytism (and some toxic expressions of Christianity) may result in extremism of a different but equally harmful form such as was used to justify the Reconquista, Spanish Inquisition or the Crusades. Indeed,

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[14] James Khalil, John Horgan, and Martine Zeuthen, "The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, December 18, 2019, 1–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1699793; Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization*.

[15] I am indebted to ideas here: Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, 2nd Edition (London New Delhi New York Sydney: Continuum, 2003) p. 201; Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace, Revised and Updated: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 2019), 75; J. M. Berger, *Extremism*, Illustrated edition (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018).

[16] See for example: John Fighel, "The Radicalization Process in Prisons" (NATO workshop: International Institute for Counterterrorism, Eilat, Israel, December 25, 2007); Mark S. Hamm, *The Spectacular Few: Prisoner Radicalization and the Evolving Terrorist Threat* (NYU Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814725443.001.0001.

Scott Gustafson: Moving Toward the Enemy

some who convert could be de-facto converting to another form of extremism. Though this working paper is not attempting to present results of a cohesive study or make an empirical case for a new deradicalization model, I hope to illustrate that new learnings are emerging and that conversations around the church on mission and conversion may bear fruit. If this paper serves to engage practitioners and academics of both disciplines in conversations with the goal of better understanding and addressing extremism, it will have accomplished its purpose. The paper begins with a brief discussion on methods and follows with an introduction to Christian Missiology. Then I observe some of the potential salient areas of overlap between Christian Missiology and counter/deradicalization, discussing anecdotal evidence from the Levant as examples that serve to illustrate a potential new laboratory, a starting point for this nascent topic which I hope stimulates an interest in further research. I then synthesize some preliminary commonalities in the narratives of those exiting extremist pathways in the church context and suggest some areas for future dialogue and study.

Methods and Sources

In this paper though I do not explicitly rely on tidy empirical data to make my argument. Rather, it is supported through concepts and ideas gained across several different projects which I briefly describe below and annotate with corresponding sources/interviews in Table 1. These comprised numerous background conversations, visits and interviews with clergy and former Muslims from Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

Though not a rigorous academic work, in 2016 I undertook a project with a colleague where we gathered information on the phenomenon by talking with over 50 evangelical clergy and non-profit leaders and former Muslims who were beneficiaries or members of their organizations/churches. These were informal conversations and we kept identities and organizations anonymous. We were also afforded access to survey results by a large non-profit that polled over 100 churches and ministries in the Middle East/North Africa region about church growth statistics under the condition we would keep the organization's identity

and survey details confidential. Data from subsequent surveys has continued to be made available in the years since.

Another project I draw from is a historical work for the International Baptist Theological Study Centre (IBTSC) researching the changes in the Lebanese church since the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011. In addition to a thorough search of journals and media/news articles, I spoke with many evangelical clergy and denomination leaders all of whom were informed of the nature of my inquiry and consented to conversations, emails, WhatsApp messages etc. Since these were mostly general background conversations, no formal ethical review was required by IBTSC. Interviewees were given a choice to remain anonymous, but many did consent to the citation of their names.

Lastly I rely on an ethnographic project that was also conducted for and received ethics committee approval through the IBTSC in the summer of 2020. Semi-structured interviews and visual/filmic methods were employed with two clergy and four converts, all members of one Lebanese congregation. This project was focused on investigating social power dynamics at work in a diverse congregation and better understanding church growth in the context of conflict. I purposely sampled eight former Muslims and two clergy to capture age, gender and ethnic diversity of which 6 agreed to participate: 3 males, 3 females, all adults, representing Arab, Druze and Kurdish ethnicities. These were interviewed on zoom or WhatsApp and were also asked to send pictures and video clips, as they felt comfortable, that illustrated their everyday life. Publicly accessible church and church member social media and church official communication were also analyzed. No names or specific places associated with their work or homes are used. Informed consent forms were sent ahead of time and agreed to verbally or over WhatsApp. Visuals and recordings were stored securely on encrypted drives. For those that declined to be recorded, detailed notes were later analyzed with transcripts along with photographic material and coded for emerging themes. This mixed-method "way of engaging with multiple truths" helped "get beyond the public

representations" and observe how visuals synced (or did not) with stated practices and beliefs[17].

The Christian Plausibility Structure – Why Missiology?

While the 'what' of Christian mission may be obvious (helping the poor, education, healthcare, evangelism, etc.), a word is necessary before moving on regarding the Christian motivation (the 'why') for involvement in any social issue, deradicalization included. Missiologist and historian David Bosch notes that Christian mission thinking and theologizing is "the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus[18]." Mission is not a side issue for Christianity but "lies at the center of Christian identity and activity in the world[19]." Christian hope and impetus stems from the implications of the historical fact of the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. The Christian "plausibility structure" is that Jesus' life, death and resurrection were a "boundary event" that had cosmic implications for the restoration of all things; its effects reaching from each person's individual life extending outward to every aspect of the human story, every corner of society, even surmounting death itself[20]. In secular societies religion is often reduced to a personal spiritual endeavor, but many theologians and followers advocate for an "embodied Christology," that is the life and teaching of Jesus were not just high ideals, but "a specific and concrete alternative way of life meant to be followed[21]."

The impetus to engage in any aspect of mission for the church should not then be a mere altruistic do-good endeavor. Rather, doing justice, loving neighbor (especially the

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[17] Mike Crang and Ian Cook, *Doing Ethnographies* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2007), 110–11.

[18] David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20. anniversary ed., American Society of Missiology Series ; 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 519, http://swbplus.bsz-bw.de/bsz355734184inh.htm.

[19] Sathianathan Clarke, "World Christianity and Postcolonial Mission: A Path Forward for the Twenty-First Century," *Theology Today* 71, no. 2 (July 1, 2014): 200, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573614529787.

[20] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich. : Geneva [SZ]: W.B. Eerdmans ; WCC Publications, 1989), 15.

[21] Glen H Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War* (Cleveland, UNITED STATES: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 22, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=6147421.

Scott Gustafson: Moving Toward the Enemy

marginalized), and loving enemy are particular essentials, for the Christian "cannot separate a right relationship with God from a right relationship with [their] neighbor[22]." Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright appeals: "If we believe [in the Christian story]… there is no way we can rest content with major injustice in the world… doing justice is part of the Christian task…[23]."

When the church lives out its mission then, it is not setting out to condemn or conquer (despite the conflation of church and state motives at times historically), but to renew and help humanity live with the 'grain' of this hope of restoration by demonstrating and working towards wholeness and flourishing (the biblical concept of *shalom*). Within this plausibility structure, one can begin to grasp the motivation of Christians to participate in God's "space-time-matter mission of justice, beauty and evangelism[24]" rooted not in a desire for numerical growth, conversion, or assertion of superiority (which, again, have tragically sometimes been confused), but in a desire to proclaim and live out an abundant hope and strive for human flourishing.

I am well aware of the elephants in this room that tend to overshadow the plausibility structure outlined above: violence is often done to these theological ideals. Historically, the church has not always earned a reputation *writ large* as a called-out community of those participating in Jesus' liberating mission of justice. The Middle Eastern context, especially, is rife with examples of compromised mission, from the crusader era to current times. The conflation of power politics with Christianity has complicated and sometimes prevented peace efforts from the Middle Ages until today in the region with American Evangelical Christianity in particular marked by an acute bias against Muslims as "Christianity's great eschatological enemy" since before the founding of the nation[25]. Proselytism is also a hot topic with some

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[22] Ron Sider, "What Is the Gospel?," *Transformation* 16, no. 1 (January 1, 1999): 32, https://doi.org/10.1177/026537889901600110.
[23] N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, Reprint edition (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 216.
[24] Wright, 270.
[25] Thomas S. Kidd, *American Christians and Islam* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 9–19.

Scott Gustafson: Moving Toward the Enemy

Christian communities reinforcing the regional default by seeing "them" becoming "us[26]" as the only solution to Middle East sectarian conflict.

Partially due to these factors and dominated by Islamic majority, missionaries in the Middle East have been perceived as "a grave threat to Islam and Muslims[27]" and the indigenous church has historically been characterized by an inward-looking posture or a reciprocal tribal bent that views outsiders as threats. The church in both East and West has often succumbed to the "foolishness of thinking herself a master of culture, all the while demonstrating her slavery to it[28]" by locating "evil and barbarity only with others so as to ascribe goodness and civilization to ourselves[29]." When the church embraces this posture, it is a travesty, creating societal and individual conflict and devastation. Christians who identify with a Jesus who loved enemies should recognize and lament the seemingly cyclical recurrence of this out-group hostility. However, when the church acts in ways consistent with the way of Christ, like many faith communities in the Middle East have exemplified, they are influences for good.

There are indeed many historical positives such as missionary educational, health and social institutions that have contributed greatly to human flourishing in the Middle East[30]. Numerous evangelical churches in the Levant that have responded since 2011 in the fray of refugee migration and served new neighbors and historic enemies at great cost[31]. These have adopted a holistic view of mission often referred to as 'integral' that values equally the proclamation of hope in the gospel (good news) and the doing of justice, both in word and

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[26] Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, 10.

[27] Sharkey quoted in James R. Krabill, David W. Shenk, and Linford Stutzman, *Anabaptists Meeting Muslims : A Calling for Presence in the Way of Christ* (Scottdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2005), 15, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=127845&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[28] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace, Revised and Updated*, 36.

[29] Volf, 58.

[30] See for example: Joshua Donovan, "Agency, Identity and Ecumenicalism in the American Missionary Schools of Tripoli, Lebanon," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 30, no. 3 (2019): 279–301, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2019.1656517; Deanna Ferree Womack, "Lubnani, Libanais, Lebanese: Missionary Education, Language Policy and Identity Formation in Modern Lebanon," *Studies in World Christianity* 18, no. 1 (April 2012): 4–20, https://doi.org/10.3366/swc.2012.0003.

[31] I describe this in detail here: Scott Gustafson, "The Lebanese Evangelical Church's Response to the Syrian Crisis: The Shaping of Identity," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 45, no. 1 (January 2021): 51–61.

deed[32]. We turn now to some illustrations and three areas of potential overlap for missiology and counter/deradicalization.

Counter/Deradicalization and Mission Alignment in the Lebanese Laboratory

As I have observed groups in the Middle East and researched the phenomenon of church growth and worldview change, I have not found any church or faith-based organization that sees deradicalization as its primary mission. However, I have seen counter/deradicalization as a *demonstrable side-effect of church programs and missional activities*. In conversations with clergy and non-profit leaders over the last few years, when I've inquired about church growth and world-view change, nearly everyone has a story about an extremist or former *al Nusra*, *al Qaeda* or *Hezbollah* fighter who has converted. Alongside the stories of conversion there also seem to be individuals that de-escalate from hostility as a result of interactions. In several cases for example, initially violent men in tent communities in Lebanon softened to Christian activity (though did not convert) in the area when food aid, education and winterization help were offered[33].

In this section I will attempt to outline three areas of overlap between missiology and counter/deradicalization and illustrate them with specific praxes and stories of Levant churches and Christian organizations that have become a laboratory for experimentation with these ideas. First however, some discussion of the recent Levant context and the drivers of radicalization is important.

Levant Context and Drivers of Radicalization

The temptation to dehumanize the 'other' in a conflict is well documented. In the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts there is no lack of 'others.' The chaos in Syria and Iraq led to the

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[32] For example: Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, UNITED STATES: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 286–316, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=2033595.

[33] Two clergy shared stories and pictures of people who were beaten and a tent-home that was burned down.

Scott Gustafson: Moving Toward the Enemy

growth of *Shi'a* and *Sunni* conflict, many extremist groups and the advent of ISIS, a particularly radical *Sunni* group. Salm in his detailed analysis of ethnic identity in Syria notes: "In effect, moderate *Sunnis* and religious minorities in Syria in part define themselves as being different from the *other* - radical *Sunni* extremists. Who they are *not* informs who they are…[34]" The context in Lebanon where many fled of poverty, sectarianism and marginalization among 1.5 million refugees provides a "… breeding ground for radicalization among both young Syrians and Lebanese… Real or perceived excessive use of force by Lebanese security forces in their raids of informal settlements increases the feeling of indignation and helplessness[35]." Among conservative Muslims in the region, the West and its perceived agents such as churches and NGO's, are viewed as a "highly contagious and potentially lethal plague. The West should not, indeed cannot, be saved. It must be eradicated[36]." In this powder keg, missionaries and local churches have struggled to survive and seen little 'success' historically, neither in numerical growth nor significant societal influence. In fact, many Christians have simply left the region[37].

For those that have engaged on mission in this difficult context, there have been some salient observations regarding radicalization and deradicalization. Those resorting to or supporting violence on various side of the conflict, whether *Sunni* Arab or Kurd, pro-regime *Shi'a* or ISIS supporter, seem to have several common factors: 1.) Extreme poverty that a militant group exploits with promises of financial provision for the radical and his/her family, 2.) Parental disapproval of the potential radical's new friends and the gradual transfer of main influence to this ready social network, that then introduces them to drugs and alcohol[38] and 3.)

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[34] Randall Salm, "The Transformation of Ethnic Conflict and Identity in Syria" (Ph.D., United States -- Virginia, George Mason University, 2016), 263,
https://search.proquest.com/abicomplete/docview/1873232648/abstract/5F1B9138E93849ABPQ/12.

[35] Javier Fabra-Mata, Arne Sæverås, and William Carter, "The Syrian Crisis and Its Impact on Lebanon – A Conflict Analysis" (Norwegian Church Aid, June 1, 2015), 7,
https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/3894/0ace656dc048a4960979f92708cf6392314a.pdf.

[36] Krabill, Shenk, and Stutzman, *Anabaptists Meeting Muslims : A Calling for Presence in the Way of Christ*, 16.

[37] Story by Emma Green, "The Impossible Future of Christians in the Middle East," *The Atlantic*, accessed October 29, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/05/iraqi-christians-nineveh-plain/589819/.

[38] Note that Captagon use is rampant in the Syria/Lebanon crisis in particular: Max Kravitz and Will Nichols, "A BITTER PILL TO SWALLOW: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CAPTAGON, SYRIA, AND THE GULF,"

Connections with an extremist sheikh that preaches *jihad* and indoctrinates regarding existential promises of assured afterlife and pragmatic promises of care for the family of the fighter, even after he is gone[39]. Though this pattern is noted, the process is not always linear nor does it always progress completely. Some do refuse to fight or commit suicide for example, though ideologically aligned, while others are coerced into action through drug addiction or threats to their families.

Radicalization has been defined as the "process by which an individual or group comes to adopt increasingly extreme political, social, or religious ideals and aspirations that reject or undermine the status quo[40]." Keen and Hamilton synthesize three common drivers in radicalization: 1.) A perceived grievance un-addressed in normal channels, 2.) Exposure to an extremist narrative or ideology that offers a compelling rationale for what must be done about the grievance (often violence) and 3.) a social network which creates a sense of belonging[41]. While deradicalization does not seem to follow an inverse linear pathway, these drivers correspond with the areas addressed by the most successful deradicalization programs (and as I hope to demonstrate, the church): addressing practical needs, challenging ideological and worldview frames and social belonging[42].

While experts seek to design programs that address these three areas, as I see it, *the church on mission in the region embodies these necessary elements organically*. There seems

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Journal of International Affairs 69, no. 2 (2016): 31–44; Will Nichols and Max Kravitz, "Soldiers of Abu Hilalain: An Investigation into Captagon Trafficking by Syrian War Militias and What It Means for U.S.Foreign Policy" (May 2015), https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu/dist/6/1613/files/2018/11/Captagon-Capstone-Final-Draft-2-2glwrj4.pdf.

[39] These are summarized from: Scott Gustafson and Hikmat Kashouh, "Preventing That Which We Fear: The Church's Role in Countering Radicalization" (Evangelical Missiological Society North Central Meeting, Trinity Evangelical University: Unpublished Paper, 2017), https://www.academia.edu/41776251/Preventing_That_Which_We_Fear_The_Churchs_Role_in_Countering_Radicalization.

[40] Alex S. Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz, "Homegrown Terrorism and Transformative Learning: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding Radicalization," *Journal of Global Change, Peace & Security* 22, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 38, https://doi.org/10.1080/14781150903487956.

[41] Lee Hamilton and Thomas Kean, "Preventing Violent Radicalization in America" (National Security Preparedness Group, 2011), http://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/default/files/NSPG.pdf.

[42] Rabasa et al., *Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists*, 54; Froukje Demant et al., "Decline and Disengagement: An Analysis of Processes of Deradicalisation" (Amsterdam: Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, 2008), 112–18; Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization*, 148.

to be potential overlap here for the fields of missiology and counter/deradicalization in the addressing of grievances and felt needs, affective belonging and worldview re-pluralization[43].

First area of overlap: Pragmatic need-meeting

The first area of alignment is in the pragmatic addressing of grievances and felt needs. By intervening in societal ills such as unemployment and poverty and providing social services like food programs, counseling, drug addiction programs and prison ministries, churches have the capacity and experience in many cases to address common grievances and social issues. Soft methods in counter/deradicalization are quite similar to these missional practices stemming from a holistic theology of mission[44]. Wright describes "a broad totality of concern for human need" and call for the church to engage redemptively with "structures and frameworks riddled with sin" rooted in respect for the *imago dei* in humanity[45]. Bonhoeffer, the German activist and theologian said: "The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving[46]."

Though they are a common response to extremists, policing, kinetic militaristic, punitive and harsh policies by governments rarely move a person away from radicalization, rather, they frequently contribute to its progress[47]. The US Institute for Peace implores governments not to rely on military solutions but to encourage religious actors on the frontlines particularly in their roles in providing psycho-social support to those vulnerable to recruitment[48]. While comments like these are frequently aimed at Islamic actors, as I hope to demonstrate, Christian non-profits and churches are also well-positioned. Root-cause solutions are needed

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[43] This is discussed at length in Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization*, 75.
[44] Wright, *The Mission of God*, 315.
[45] Wright, 315, 431, 455.
[46] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 375.
[47] El-Said, *New Approaches to Countering Terrorism*. 251.
[48] Melissa Nozell and Susan Hayward, "Religious Leaders Countering Extremist Violence: How Policy Changes Can Help," United States Institute of Peace, accessed February 18, 2020, https://www.usip.org/blog/2014/10/religious-leaders-countering-extremist-violence-how-policy-changes-can-help.

for "no amount of retaliatory violence will give us security in the age of terrorism[49]." Turkish approaches to the PKK in the 1990's like sustainable economic development, cooperative conflict resolution, improvement of basic human rights and religious liberty among Kurds, resulted in a calming of tensions[50]. Some other soft approaches to modern deradicalization globally involving social investment, respectful debate, reintegration and economic interventions are resulting in moderation and change and less recidivism. For example, government programs in Turkey and Saudi Arabia seeking to deradicalize imprisoned extremists provide them with a stipend or small business funding at release, education and their children with scholarships[51]. Other common schemes involve counseling, sports, creative arts, vocational training, theological dialogue and mentoring[52]. In broader counter-radicalization efforts, experts advocate proactively addressing root-cause issues such as the elimination of torture, for prison reform, increasing economic initiatives, and addressing the systemic issues of corruption, unemployment, poverty and lack of political participation[53].

These justice and social issues are all shared concerns for the church on mission. Many of the related justice and peace-based ethical frameworks, some of which are utilized in deradicalization programs, are deeply rooted in Christian missional thinking. Advocates and ethicists of Restorative Justice[54] and Victim Offender Reconciliation Programs[55], and the 10 practices of Just Peacemaking (or Just Peace theory)[56] base their framework and pragmatic interventions in theological and missional principles. In each of these cases the practices of pacifism/non-violence, and practices that lead to peace and justice have been demonstrated to

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[49] Susan Thistlethwaite, "New Wars, Old Wineskins" in Dr Jon L. Berquist, ed., *Strike Terror No More: Theology, Ethics, and the New War* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2002)264-79.

[50] Stassen, *Just Peacemaking*, 11.

[51] See for example multiple references to "soft" methods implemented by Sudan, Turkey and Morocco in El-Said, *New Approaches to Countering Terrorism*.

[52] Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization*, 227–50.

[53] El-Said, *New Approaches to Countering Terrorism*, 215–53.

[54] Lawrence W Sherman, *Restorative Justice: The Evidence* (London: The Smith Institute, 2007).

[55] Howard J. Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Virginia: Herald Press, 1989).

[56] Stassen, *Just Peacemaking*.

lead to better outcomes such as the reduction of recidivism and prevention of violent conflict[57].

There are many existing church programs aimed at these social issues on local levels. Since Christians have a unique call to love their enemies, they may be one of the only societal groups motivated in hostile environments. Disillusioned returning foreign fighters from Syria for example are "marginalized, stigmatized and labelled by misinformed and misplaced reactive regulations and the media [so that] most members of societies want nothing to do with them[58]." The same might be said about refugees in general fleeing to Europe and Middle Eastern host-neighbor countries. Some churches and ministries in Lebanon (and Europe) are practicing a proactive 'love of neighbor and enemy' through food and visitation programs, education and medical clinics, that serve these societal outcasts. A former ISIS fighter from Syria that moved his family to the Bekka valley renounced *jihad* after disillusionment during the war and experiencing the love of Christians from a local church who visited and provided food. This man became a Christian and now serves with the ministry that cared for his family, even delivering aid to ethnic Christians whom he formerly considered *kafir* (infidels)[59].

Of the many refugees living in tent settlements in Lebanon, most of them locate on farming land with rent negotiated via a labor barter with land-owners[60]. Conditions are deplorable with open sewage, thin material for walls and roof offering minimal protection from the elements, and often times harsh weather. Sexual abuse and child labor are commonplace in this arrangement and children have very few educational opportunities. One Lebanese non-profit, seeing the desperate conditions in the Bekka Valley refugee camps, decided to procure land and improve living conditions, despite the safety and security risks endemic to the area near the porous Syrian border. The ministry became the landlord;

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[57] Sherman, *Restorative Justice*; Ronald J. Sider, *If Jesus Is Lord: Loving Our Enemies in an Age of Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 149.

[58] Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization*, 27.

[59] Personal conversation with this former fighter and the NGO leader, October, 2016

[60] Many sources depict these conditions, see for example Jeremy Weber, "Grapes of Wrath: In Lebanon's Napa Valley, Syrian Refugees Face a Steinbeck Scenario," *Christianity Today*, September 2016, Gale Academic OneFile; Fabra-Mata, Sæverås, and Carter, "The Syrian Crisis and Its Impact on Lebanon – A Conflict Analysis."

interfaced with a landowner and built a different kind of camp. They brought in stone to allow the camp to drain, built upgraded shelters for over 50 families with proper toilets, running water, electricity and ensured tenants were treated fairly. They provided monthly food rations, access to counseling, vocational programs and built several schools and a playground that served the surrounding area[61].

A Baptist church of just 50 members in the Bekka valley began a partnership with the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD - the development arm of the Lebanese Baptist Society) in 2012 to provide monthly food rations for a few Syrian families moving into their community. Expanding rapidly over the next few years, they added a school, kitchen, counseling program and more food and winterization supplies distribution, eventually serving over 2000 families on a monthly basis. Through visitation, advocacy, counseling and the various other holistic ministry strategies, the church has seen their numbers swell[62]. Some former extremists are now deradicalized, attending church and their children are enrolled in school. Some who were strongly opposed to Christian presence in the camps have softened. In one case, an extremist husband repeatedly abused his wife for interacting with Christians and attending women's groups but relented as he saw his family receive material benefit and observed the community[63].

Another church in the Bekka Valley has also seen some deradicalize. The church is now composed of 85% people from a Muslim background, numerous former extremists among them. A Syrian Sunni Arab for example, fought with al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria. The Syrian government captured and put him in prison for two years, however he escaped and came to Lebanon. Hearing about the church's holistic programs he visited and received material assistance. The love and practical need-meeting in the community seems to have stimulated a cognitive opening for consideration of an alternative worldview. Over time members befriended him and he asked for a Bible, studied theology and eventually became a

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[61] Janane Matar, Interview with Director of Triumphant Mercy, May 25, 2020.
[62] Alia Abboud, Interview with Author, March 25, 2020; Jihad Haddad, Personal Conversation with Author, January 2019.
[63] Anonymous Pastor, Personal conversation with author, March 2017.

Scott Gustafson: Moving Toward the Enemy

regular teacher in the church. The Pastor counted 11 extremists in his congregation at that time and reported he has regularly worked with *al-Nusra* Front, *al-Qaeda* and *Hezbollah* members among others[64]. The practical helps of these churches seem to open the door for ideological shifts and function as onramps into a new social community.

Second area of overlap: Worldview

       The second area of alignment is ideological: Christian communities can contribute to re-pluralization and challenge extremist worldviews. Christian and Muslim communities have lived for centuries in the Middle East with varying levels of tense tolerance. The refugee influx in Lebanon however brought many into much closer contact with Christians for the first time. Individual deradicalization often begins with some kind of trigger, a traumatic incident, and when accompanied by the compassionate intervention of an out-group it may lead radicals to "question ideologies that vilify those with different beliefs[65]." In Lebanon, these encounters are frequent as a result of the Syrian crisis and the unexpected grace of Christian hospitality towards fleeing refugees is disarming to those who had never met a Christian[66]. Some extremists have had their worldviews challenged by the proactive care of Christian communities and sometimes by supernatural phenomena. One former militia leader noted "we saw love in their eyes" when interacting with Christians after fleeing Syria. A female *Sunni* Kurd shared: "They are infidels! I am telling you the truth, that is how we used to think. We didn't know. We used to say, 'don't get near him that's a Christian, never, don't get near.' But now, really... the love we see in them we've never seen before, ever[67]." All six interviewees in this project also shared stories of miraculous protection, healings and spiritual visions and dreams, which seem common. This element of supernatural experience in the Syrian phenomenon is perhaps strange to Western ears, but not unusual among those

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[64] Anonymous Pastor, Personal conversation with author, March, 2020.
[65] Rabasa et al., *Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists*, 30.
[66] Robert Andrews, "Defusing Radicalism Among Refugees: The Unintentional Effect of Caritas" (Evangelical Missiological Society Midwest Annual Meeting, Trinity Evangelical University, 2017).
[67] Scott Gustafson, "Voices Around the Table: Understanding Church Growth in Contexts of Conflict" (International Baptist Theological Study Centre, Amsterdam: Unpublished Paper, 2020).

Scott Gustafson: Moving Toward the Enemy

experiencing a worldview change from Islam[68]. So many report these experiences that one pastor says "I can't possibly remember them all, we've come to expect this as commonplace[69]." Radical worldview change related to the supernatural is not foreign to Christianity. The Apostle Paul, arguably the most influential man after Jesus for Christians, was a violent extremist who experienced a dramatic conversion[70].

In Lebanon, churches have grown numerically *and heterogeneously*; former Lebanese majority congregations welcome Muslim Syrians and Kurds, now a majority in many churches, into the fabric of the community. Bosch admonishes: "A talk-alike, think-alike, look-alike congregation [citing Anderson] may reflect the prevailing culture and be a club for religious folklore rather than an alternative community in a hostile or compromised environment[71]." Moltmann identifies a key marker of the church is for it to be a "fellowship of the unlike[72]." The oft-discussed missiological 'homogenous-unit principle' states that church growth most commonly occurs in mono-cultural affinity groups and is illustrated in the commonly held belief that "Men simply will not cross cultures to get saved[73]." This has been challenged by the cross-cultural hospitality of near-neighbors which has perhaps served to lower hurdles.

In recent history, some mission practitioners advocated, in light of Jesus' commands to 'shake the dust from your feet' in Luke 10, that it is "folly to persist in working among that part of the population which unceasingly opposes the gospel[74]." Lebanese leaders have persisted in quite the opposite direction, moving towards a historically resistant Muslim

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[68] In a study of 750 former Muslims this was the 2nd most cited reason for conversion J. Dudley Woodberry, Russell G. Shubin, and G. Marks, "Why Muslims Follow Jesus: The Results of a Recent Survey of Converts from Islam," *Christianity Today*, October 2007, Gale Academic OneFile.

[69] Anonymous Pastor, 2017

[70] See the full story in Acts 9, Paul was struck blind and had a vision of Jesus. The whole church at the time was afraid of him as he had persecuted and imprisoned many.

[71] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 425.

[72] Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, 1 edition (London: SCM Press, 1977), 185.

[73] Donald Rickards, "The Development of New Tools to Aid in Muslim Evangelism," in *The Gospel and Islam: A 1978 Compendium*, ed. Don M. McCurry, Edition Unstated edition (Monrovia, Calif: Missions Advanced Research and Communication Center, 1979), 431.

[74] Rickards, 431.

population, even those that killed, bombed and raped their own families in very recent history[75]. There is a robust tension in the missiological imperatives of seeking "men of peace" and dust-shaking vs. do-gooding to haters and loving enemies (Luke 6)[76]. Historically, the church on mission has preferred the former and neglected the latter. However, the Lebanese church demonstrates that a crucial aspect of missional calling is to love enemy and "do good to those who hate" which is infeasible when avoidance or reciprocal violence marks the Christian posture towards the antagonist.

The proactive nature of these practices that stimulate ideological change is illustrated in Jesus's interaction with Zaccheus and demonstrates the Christian missional ethic. In Luke 19:5 Jesus insists on *inviting himself* to a meal which became the vehicle of social change in the life of a first century outcast. Zaccheus was a Jew serving the Roman oppressors as a tax collector, a traitor vehemently hated by all for their treachery and greed. Of small stature, he climbed a tree to watch Jesus one day in the crowd. Of all present, Jesus singled him out to spend time with. The result of Jesus' visit was Zaccheus' repentance and 'salvation' evidenced by generous restitution to everyone he had wronged[77]. Bosch notes that "he is the only rich person in Luke's gospel who chose a different path[78]."

Intentional and urgent relational engagement with the social outcast, and with those perceived to be enemies bent on harm to the church (like terrorists) is an uncomfortable suggestion that fights basic limbic impulses. While 'the other' as an abstract topic is a frequently discussed issue in philosophy[79], theology and missiology[80] it is infrequent we see

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[75] This is a ubiquitous story in Lebanon. Two pastors who shared their deep struggle with the tension between revenge and grace were Haddad, Personal Conversation with Author; Hikmat Kashouh, Interview with Rev Dr. Hikmat Kashouh, March 2020.

[76] I'm Grateful to Dr. Tim Noble for highlighting this tension between Jesus emphasizing receptivity in Luke 10 and 'doing good to those who hate you' in Luke 6:27.

[77] Luke 19:1-10

[78] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 102.

[79] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 60196th edition (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010).

[80] Calling this out specifically: Pohl, *Making Room* p 14; other relevant examples are: Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace, Revised and Updated*; Tim Noble, "Who Do You Say I Am Recognising and Receiving the Other," 117th ed. (Lepzig: EVANGELISCHE VERLAGSANSTALT, 2018); Mike Pears and Paul J Cloke, eds., *Mission in Marginal Places: The Theory* (UK: Paternoster, 2016).

such plain operationalization of these ideals, especially towards the "ultimate other[81]", the enemy. In Lebanon, proactive visitation and social programs along with church activities that include Syrian Muslims have been unique exceptions that have challenged the ideology of extremists[82]. A middle-aged female Syrian recounts her observation of Christian love, hospitality, and welcome: "They have love, forgiveness, they don't differentiate this one is black that one white, this one is Kurdish that one is Arab, that one is a foreigner, never, they don't make differences like this[83]." A male former militia leader used to look with disdain on the *Ba'ath, Shi'a* and other groups, but was convinced to consider other perspectives in part due to the surprising love and hospitality of Christian community[84].

Converts and clergy with whom I have spoken also note a change in the content of beliefs and posture towards others due to this kindness. Reflecting about how the church loved her family, one interviewee said, "This is something really, that brought us closer to the gospel and made us want to see Jesus." Formerly opposed to the idea of Jesus' divinity, many now embrace this and are attracted to his character in the gospels, especially the sermon on the mount. Another said, "There is never a day that I don't feel him with me." They also believe in the power of prayer. A former Muslim who introduced one interviewee to the church told her to take her ill children there: "If they pray for you, for sure your kids will get better." And many evidence a compassion for others by getting involved themselves in the relief and aid programs and a desire to share their new faith with family and friends after conversion, albeit cautiously. One man reported: "When they know I used to be *sheikh* I get lots of surprised questions, but I love telling my story[85]."

Though these missional practices are native to the church, I suggest they have a secondary, positive coercion effect on society. "Coercion (whether psychological, physical, or economic) is morally appropriate as long as the intent and overall effect is the promotion of

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[81] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace, Revised and Updated*, 9.
[82] Gustafson, "The Lebanese Evangelical Church's Response to the Syrian Crisis: The Shaping of Identity."
[83] Gustafson, "Voices Around the Table: Understanding Church Growth in Contexts of Conflict."
[84] Gustafson.
[85] The quotes in this paragraph are all from the project: Gustafson, "Voices Around the Table: Understanding Church Growth in Contexts of Conflict."

Scott Gustafson: Moving Toward the Enemy

everyone's well-being...[86]" Though the spectrum is wide regarding theological discussions, even when a church or group espouses a conviction of salvific exclusivity, while it can, in certain cases, function as an ideological basis for violence, it does not necessitate it or out-group hostility[87]. Both Christian and Islamic scholars must deal with this tension between exclusive salvific theology and the requirements of pluralistic coexistence and compassion towards the 'other.' Some have sought to relieve this tension by gutting sacred texts or an ideological call to acknowledge some version of 'all paths lead to God,' neither of which are agreeable to orthodox devotees on either side[88]. Cultivating a pluralistic environment where there is freedom for mutual discussion and persuasion seems like a more attainable path forward.

Ideology and its place in any deradicalization program is a subject of ongoing debate and is a prescient ethical issue, especially as it pertains to coercion, religious freedom and freedom of thought. If "'de-contestation' or 'de-pluralization' is, in fact, the core dynamic of radicalization[89]" then it simply cannot be ignored. In general, Western programs taking place in pluralistic and democratic societies tend not to tread this ground out of a fear of compromising human rights and focus instead on disengagement[90]. In contrast, states where Islam is the official religion pursue vigorous ideological discussions in an attempt to change the perspectives of violent Muslims to more moderate views through theological debate and other coercive methods. While it seems apparently acceptable to exert coercive emotional, physical, spiritual and psychological pressure for example within Islam (i.e. attempts to convince a *takfiri* to become more moderate and pluralist), the involvement of a Christian community that may be perceived to be evangelizing would be unacceptable to some.

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[86] Sider, *If Jesus Is Lord: Loving Our Enemies in an Age of Violence*, 21.

[87] Most Evangelical churches would ascribe to the core tenet of the reformation: "salvation by grace alone through faith alone, in Christ alone" and yet are practicing love of neighbor and love of enemy. See this explanation for example: Martin Accad, "Mission at the Intersection of Religion and Empire," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 28, no. 4 (2011): 11.

[88] See chapters 5 and 6 for a tidy summary: Sathianathan Clarke, *Competing Fundamentalisms: Violent Extremism in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism* (Louisville, UNITED STATES: Presbyterian Publishing, 2017), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=5974328.

[89] Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization*, 74.

[90] Koehler, 20–21.

Western states, like the UK, seem to be comfortable in certain cases funding Islamic organizations to publicly disseminate their messages (essentially evangelism) and influence worldview change, even favoring liberal *Sufi groups* over conservative *Sunni* groups for example[91], while other programs like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) withhold funding for Christian non-profits seeking to help the persecuted out of a fear of discriminating against Muslim groups[92]. The logic and application of religious non-discrimination policy is inconsistent.

It seems worthwhile to navigate this minefield rigorously with ethicists and theologians. For a Salafist *takfiri,* there is no difference consequentially between a moderate Muslim and a Christian. Their extremist acts are justified by the apostasy in each case (in their ideology), as with other targets such as *Shi'a*, *Yazidi* or *Druze*. What makes, for example, programs or conversations that may influence a change in adherence between Islamic sects (or theological positions) ethically different from that between Abrahamic faiths? From a utilitarian or pragmatic perspective if there is a change away from an extremist ideology (and thereby violence), does the new ideological destination matter as long as it is one of non-violence and pluralism? To be clear, I am not advocating for Christian proselytism (which I would generally define as demeaning, denigrating or immoral approaches to mission contrasted with "ethical evangelism"[93]) or religious conversion as an end-all solution to extremism. However, is not a conversion (or de-conversion) of some sort exactly what is entailed in the ideological component of deradicalization?

While these questions may seem base, could ethicists and theologians from Islam, Christianity and perhaps Hinduism in certain cases engage with deradicalization experts to explore the moral boundaries and possibilities of stimulating these kinds of mutually receptive ideological environments? It is worth mentioning here that increased religious freedom in a

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[91] Rabasa et al., *Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists*, 52, 121.

[92] Yeganeh Torbati, "How Mike Pence's Office Meddled in Foreign Aid to Reroute Money to Favored Christian Groups," ProPublica, accessed November 9, 2020, https://www.propublica.org/article/how-mike-pences-office-meddled-in-foreign-aid-to-reroute-money-to-favored-christian-groups?token=-yUF56AxJcFQBoS_MWQ1wIGE6H8f7WO-.

[93] There are numerous opinions on the ethics of proselytism, and not all are negative. These are nicely summarized here: Tim Noble, "Proselytism and the Ethics of Mission," *Acta Missiologiae* 6 (2018): 47–63.

Scott Gustafson: Moving Toward the Enemy

country has been empirically linked with increased peace[94]. From the Christian perspective, as I alluded to in the first section, missional engagement - practically, ideologically, and theologically - is an invitation to become more wholly human, to live out practices and beliefs that are 'with the grain' of the universe and lead to human flourishing. Christian reformers from early days have advocated for the religious freedom of all[95]. There are many other ideologies that have congruent aspects to their plausibility structures utilizing different nomenclature but nevertheless compatible with a co-striving for common good. Exposure to these alternative narratives, demonstrating an increasing number of plausible pathways towards the common good (or 're-pluralization' as Koehler calls it) must allow for the *possibility of conversion*. We ignore these sensitive conversations to our detriment.

Third area of overlap: A New Family

Lastly, Christian communities can provide a positive affective social network as caring communities that live out their ideals in the rhythms of societal life. Bosch and others call the church to this kind of community building: "If the church is to impart to the world a message of hope and love, of faith, justice, and peace, something of this should become visible, audible, and tangible in the church itself[96]." This message is not just for the in-group, for "the church is the only society in the world which exists for the sake of those who are not members of it[97]." Though perhaps we could think of other rare selfless societies, Bonhoeffer stresses the central nature of this posture for the church: "the church is only the church when it exists for others[98]." And, he extends this sentiment especially to enemies. "The Christian too [like Jesus], belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the thick of foes. There is his

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[94] Institute of Economics and Peace, "Five Key Questions Answered on the Link Between Peace & Religion: A GLOBAL STATISTICAL ANALYSIS ON THE EMPIRICAL LINK BETWEEN PEACE AND RELIGION," 2014, http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2017/04/Peace-and-Religion-Report.pdf.
[95] See for example the remarks on the 16th century reformer Helwys who insisted on the two-way dimension of religious freedom; " Noble, "Proselytism and the Ethics of Mission."
[96] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 414.
[97] William Temple quoted in Walt Kallestad, *Turn Your Church Inside Out: Building a Community for Others* (Fortress Press, n.d.), 13.
[98] Kirsten Busch Nielsen and Ulrik Nissen, *Mysteries in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Copenhagen Bonhoeffer Symposium* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 173.

commission, his work[99]." Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church lived out this radical form of community with such an attractive and counter-cultural praxis of love and lived protest to the extremism of the Nazi regime that it ironically earned him a death sentence. *I'd suggest there is something of deep treasure that needs serious consideration in the application of love and self-sacrifice as a response to extremism vs. violence and coercion.*

Simple cultural practices like the sharing of meals and visitation practiced regularly by Levant Evangelical churches, even with perceived enemies, embody this ideal. In breaking bread in the presence of another, hosts and guests alike silently confess a shared fragility, a mutual admission of need, humanity and weakness. Christine Pohl elaborates on how hospitality in the history of the church was a unique practice in its inclusion of and orientation toward marginalized groups. The "profoundly egalitarian dimension" of the shared table is especially poignant in Lebanon's sectarian context[100]. This simple encounter is one example of where historically persecuted Christians and war-refugee Muslims in the Middle East are helping to restore dignity and honor to one another as beleaguered compatriots – a new family of outsiders.

A Lebanese pastor of a large church full of former Muslims says: "Being willing to humbly enter people's homes and listen to them [the Syrian Muslim 'other'] is not just a psychological technique. It is a reflection of the nature of God[101]." Adams surmises: "In many Muslim cultures, hospitality and sharing a meal are a sacred trust, a bond that cannot be betrayed. This tradition resonates powerfully with the Lord's Supper as a context of bonding, blessing, peace, and reconciliation within the community…[102]"

At a church I recently studied that grew from 60 Lebanese to a diverse mix of 1500 Syrian, Arab, Kurdish, Druze and Iraqi attenders over the last 10 years, leadership estimates

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[99] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 18.
[100] Pohl, *Making Room*, 76.
[101] Hikmat Kashouh, *Following Jesus in Turbulent Times: Disciple-Making in the Arab World* (Langham Global Library, 2018), 15.
[102] John Dudley Woodberry, ed., *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims*, 2nd ed., rev.enlarged (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2010), 145.

Scott Gustafson: Moving Toward the Enemy

that 10% of the Muslim background attenders are former extremists[103]. They define this 10% as those who practiced violence *or were willing to* in order to advance their worldview. One of their pastors five years ago learned that a Syrian *Sunni* came to their church specifically planning to kill him and others in the congregation. This man since converted and is now an active member of the congregation. The unexpected love and community that welcomed him despite his antagonism, had a powerful effect. These conversion stories are not isolated cases. Most evangelical churches in the region have had similar experiences, as well as many in Europe working among refugees[104]. It is of course plausible that some Muslims have become even more extreme as a result of their contact with missional Christians, and some have simply become atheists or non-practicing[105], however, my supposition is that the kind of community enabled by the beliefs and practices of Levant Christians has been a compelling alternative. I have heard many speak of church communities as their new 'family.' Even the former militia leader reported: "They are my family now[106]." The affective power of an open embrace to join a loving community is compelling.

Miroslav Volf calls for this: to be willing to see even hardened enemies as having the potential to be embraced "in God" through Christ's death[107]. This relational posture of "embrace" in his estimation does not stand opposed to justice for violent acts; it calls for

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[103] Gustafson, "Voices Around the Table: Understanding Church Growth in Contexts of Conflict."

[104] See for example Ruth Bender, "Some Muslim Migrants Find More Than Refuge in Europe's Churches; Germany Sees Rise in Conversions to Christianity, a Status That Could Help Asylum Claims," *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, September 16, 2015, 1712659569, ProQuest One Academic, http://dtl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1712659569?accountid=10143; Lizzie Dearden, "Muslim Refugees Are Converting to Christianity in Germany | The Independent," accessed January 31, 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/muslim-refugees-converting-to-christianity-in-germany-crisis-asylum-seekers-migrants-iran-a7466611.html; Hollie McKay, "ISIS Nightmare Prompts Some Muslims in the Middle East to Convert to Christianity," Fox News, accessed January 29, 2020, https://www.foxnews.com/world/isis-nightmare-prompts-some-muslims-in-the-middle-east-to-convert-to-christianity; Szabolcs Kéri and Christina Sleiman, "Religious Conversion to Christianity in Muslim Refugees in Europe," *Archiv Für Religionspsychologie / Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 39, no. 3 (2017): 283–94, http://dx.doi.org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/10.1163/15736121-12341344.

[105] "Life under ISIS Led These Muslims to Christianity," NBC News, accessed December 8, 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/life-under-isis-led-these-muslims-christ-n963281.

[106] Gustafson, "Voices Around the Table: Understanding Church Growth in Contexts of Conflict."

[107] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace, Revised and Updated*, 127.

justice as a dimension of grace in the very invitation to the outcast[108]. This combination of a "tangible" gospel and a posture of proactive embrace is potentially a very powerful antidote to extremism demonstrated both in some deradicalization programs and broadly in the Lebanese church laboratory. Integral mission in the Lebanese church case study has targeted key drivers of radicalization as a natural by-product of being "an alternative community in a hostile environment[109]."

What I have attempted to demonstrate in this section is that the church can share a community role in both *counter-radicalization*, by alleviating suffering, speaking to injustice and intervening in the social ills that can lead to extremism and *deradicalization* through its missional approaches towards extremist actors by providing for pragmatic needs, offering a new kind of community and confronting ideologies of hate and exclusion with the antidotes of love and kindness. Certainly, religious conversion is controversial, but the common stories in the Levant are illustrative that the Christian practice of integral mission and love in action towards neighbor and enemy can result in changed lives. While not direct counter/deradicalization programs, these faith-based ministries are having desirable effects as a by-product of their religious mission. It would seem reasonable that governments and professionals should encourage or at least make space for, through non-interference, programs, organizations and efforts that have demonstrated congruent interventions and outcomes. Conversion and church growth are only some of the outcomes of the practice of integral mission. Some have converted no doubt with mixed motives[110] and many others have remained in their cultural and religious 'lane', but a potentially compelling number of those who formerly held extremist views have since renounced them.

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[108] Volf, 220.

[109] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 415.

[110] For example provision of aid can be seen as coercive Kathryn Kraft, "Religious Exploration and Conversion in Forced Displacement: A Case Study of Syrian Muslim Refugees in Lebanon Receiving Assistance from Evangelical Christians," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32, no. 2 (May 4, 2017): 221–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2017.1298904.

Conclusion: Areas for Future Dialogue and Study

I have tried to illustrate that the church on mission has a potentially robust contribution to make in a conversation with counter/deradicalization in curating 'soft' approaches to grievances and pragmatic societal needs, cultivating worldview re-pluralization and embodying loving social structures of belonging in difficult contexts. Some common elements emerging in the anecdotal stories, conversations and interviews with those exiting extremist pathways in the Middle Eastern evangelical church context are:

1.) Experience of suffering, loss, violence, injustice or reduction in social status
2.) Unexpected welcome and hospitality by clergy and members of the Christian community
3.) Provision of practical needs like food, household goods, winterization supplies, education and counseling
4.) Experience of love, friendship and a 'family' sense of belonging.
5.) A growing attraction to the teachings and person of Jesus and/or a supernatural experience.

The conversion phenomenon and number of extremists on this exit path seems to be widespread, though difficult to verify due to its controversial nature. A large Christian non-profit group surveying over 100 different churches and ministries in the Middle East and North Africa demonstrated there were nearly 300,000 conversions in just the last three years[111]. A recent open letter to President Trump from the International Religious Freedom Roundtable signed by over 30 organizations and 30 other international leaders cited 21,000

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[111] This organization wishes to remain anonymous, See Scott Gustafson, "Preventing That Which We Fear: The Church's Role in Countering Radicalization," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (July 2020): 18–21 where survey results were initially published.

Muslim converts in Northern Syria seeking refuge from ISIS[112]. Other studies, though focussing on individual conversion stories, allude to the possibility of large-scale religious change in the Arab world[113]. To put this in context, there have been very few conversion movements approaching this size in the last 2000 years and likely only two from Islam to Christianity since the 8th century. The modern growth of the Iranian church is one example where conversion growth is now estimated to surpass 1 million[114]. If the 10% estimate (of converts who were extremists) is remotely close, this is potentially a very large population of extremists exiting pathways of radicalization. This paper has not relied on quantitative empirics to document the scope of extremist conversion but future quantitative research in this area would be very beneficial. In conclusion, I offer some further areas for conversation:

1. Local churches and international missions should step up efforts to clarify, confess and de-link themselves with atrocities that have dogged the church and prevented positive societal engagement[115]. Open inter-faith conversations going beyond theology on such issues as the Crusades, Zionism, drone strikes, Western

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[112] "Letter to President Trump: Support, Do Not Abandon, Christians, Yazidis and Kurds in Syria's Northeast – Jubilee Campaign, USA," accessed January 29, 2020, http://jubileecampaign.org/press-releases/letter-to-president-trump-support-do-not-abandon-christians-yazidis-and-kurds-in-syrias-northeast/.

[113] Kathryn Kraft, "Community and Identity Among Arabs of a Muslim Background Who Choose to Follow a Christian Faith" (UK, University of Bristol, 2007), 11–13.

[114] Java had a movement of 2 million in the 1960-1970's and Iranian converts are estimated at 1 million today: Robert W. Hefner, *Conversion to Christianity : Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Avery T. Willis, *Indonesian Revival Why Two Million Came to Christ* (South Pasadena, Calif: William Carey Library Pub, 1977); Jayson Casper, "Researchers Find Christians in Iran Approaching 1 Million," News & Reporting, accessed September 15, 2020, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/september/iran-christian-conversions-gamaan-religion-survey.html.

[115] Pieter Pikkert, "Protestant Missionaries to the Middle East:Ambassadors of Christ or Culture?" (PhD diss., University of South Africa, 2006), https://www.academia.edu/8365081/a_PhD_Doctoral_Thesis_about_the_European_Missionaries_in_the_Middle_East; Heather J. Sharkey, "Arabic Antimissionary Treatises: Muslim Responses to Christian Evangelism in the Modern Middle East," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research; New Haven* 28, no. 3 (July 2004): 98-102,104.

involvement in the Middle East etc. at high levels may lead to reputational changes for the church, address this driver of radicalization and open doors of peace[116].

2. Christian groups and churches are often prepared and willing to address underlying issues of poverty, hunger and justice, but are frequently prevented from carrying out this core part of their mission in areas where radicalization is high due to legal or discriminatory regulations. These restrictions may contribute to ongoing conflict by indirectly legislating outgroup hostility and effectively serving to encourage de-pluralization in whole societies. Advocating for religious freedom, especially in areas governed by signatories of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the allowing of churches to carry out their mission in Muslim countries may do more to alleviate radicalization than incite it.

3. Deradicalization experts, missiologists, theologians and church leaders should engage together in conversations about ethics, re-pluralization and what programs and services of local faith communities might be beneficial. Conversations about mutually exclusive theological salvific claims and the resulting practical postures in pluralist societies would be beneficial conversations from both the Islamic and Christian perspectives. This suggestion may seem naïve as many Muslim majority countries criminalize (or in the least, socially ostracize) conversion, are wary of proselytization, and such evangelistic activities often incite even moderate Muslims to anger, thus the argument could be made that Christian presence in itself is a contributor to radicalization. The example of the Institute for Middle East Studies inter-faith dialogue program in Lebanon[117] and engagement models based on respect for the other and 'mutual evangelization' or persuasion are beneficial[118]. Though immoral coercion is a danger, most churches and NGO's

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[116] Many examples of this: Stassen, *Just Peacemaking*; Sider, *If Jesus Is Lord: Loving Our Enemies in an Age of Violence*.
[117] See https://abtslebanon.org/institute-of-middle-east-studies/about-imes/
[118] See for example: Martin Accad, "Christian Attitudes toward Islam and Muslims: A Kerygmatic Approach," in *Toward Respectful Understanding and Witness among Muslims: Essays in Honor of J. Dudley Woodberry*, ed.

Scott Gustafson: Moving Toward the Enemy

involved in relief work are committed to the principles of non-conditionality and certainly religious freedom should be upheld[119].

4. It may be worthwhile for program implementers to consider the involvement of Christian practitioners and theologians and Christian converts in formal counter/deradicalization program design and implementation. Could churches - especially those with many members from Muslim backgrounds for example - help fill volunteer counseling and mentoring roles in counter/deradicalization programs serving Muslim extremists and avoid some of the pitfalls of 'formers' involvement[120]? Rabasa et al. discuss the necessity of challenging radical worldviews by public renouncement and "wholesale rejection of former beliefs" by former members[121]. Dialogue with Islamic clergy, politicians and security seem common but to my knowledge programs have not included Christians or converts from Islam. As Christians seem to be often an avowed enemy and greatly misunderstood internally by Muslims, dialogue would seem quite profitable.

This paper is an effort to consider the strategic implications of missional themes such as doing justice, loving neighbor, and loving enemy for the synchronous purposes of mission and counter/deradicalization. It is also an invitation to conversation for experts from both missiology and counter/deradicalization. In our increasingly pluriform and globalized society we cannot afford continued isolation and kinetic measures as the primary tactics for countering and preventing extremism when there are potential learnings in new, albeit unfamiliar and sensitive areas. As demonstrated in Lebanon, when the church carries out its natural mission through hospitality, "overcoming evil with good[122]", actively seeking the

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Evelyne Reisacher (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2012), 33–34; Noble, "Proselytism and the Ethics of Mission."

[119] Kathryn Kraft, "Faith and Impartiality in Humanitarian Response: Lessons from Lebanese Evangelical Churches Providing Food Aid," *International Review of the Red Cross* 97, no. 897–898 (June 2015): 395–421, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383115000570.

[120] Daniel Koehler, "Involvement of Formers in Countering Violent Extremism: A Critical Perspective on Commonly Held Assumptions," in *Perspektiven aus Wissenschaft und Praxis*, ed. Maria Walsh and Antje Gansewig, 2020, 15–22.

[121] Rabasa et al., *Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists*, 28.

[122] Romans 12:21

marginalized and creatively working to alleviate key ills of society, much positive fruit results. Counter/deradicalization efforts have shown similar positive results in softer approaches: there is much common ground here on which to engage. Though certainly some uncomfortable conversations around incendiary topics may follow, entering into the vagary may prove to be a fruitful endeavor for the benefit of all humanity.

Acknowledgment

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Table 1: Projects and Corresponding Interviews/conversations

Sources/Interviews Referenced	Methods/Ethics notes	Citation
Footnotes 33,59, 63, 69, 75	Researched and co-written with Dr. Hikmat Kashouh.in 2015-17 and paper presented in March, 2017. Informal conversations, visits and emails with 50+ leaders and former Muslims that were beneficiaries and/or attendees of their churches/organizations. No recordings, real names nor demographic data was used. Consent was sought verbally with understanding that all references would be anonymous. Data used anonymously from a non-profit survey of 100 organizations in the Middle East.	Gustafson, Scott, and Hikmat Kashouh. 2017. "Preventing That Which We Fear: The Church's Role in Countering Radicalization." Evangelical Missiological Society North Central Meeting. Trinity Evangelical University. *Unpublished manuscript.* 2017. Academia Link Short published version: Scott Gustafson, "Preventing That Which We Fear: The Church's Role in Countering Radicalization," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (July 2020): 18–21.
Footnotes 61, 62, 64, 75	Project for IBTSC in spring 2020, Literature review, informal interviews or conversations with 8 clergy and non-profit leaders. Ethical clearance not required as conversations were comprised of informal in-person visits, emails and WhatsApp exchanges for background and historical details. Verbal consent attained, no recordings.	Gustafson, Scott. "The Lebanese Evangelical Church's Response to the Syrian Crisis: The Shaping of Identity." *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 45, no. 1 (January 2021): 51–61.
Footnotes 67, 83, 84, 85, 103, 106	Project Completed in October 2020 for IBTSC.purposeful sampling/semi-structured interviews of 4 former Muslims, 2 clergy of one congregation in Lebanon along with Visual methods. IBTSC ethics committee approval. Pseudonyms used.	Scott Gustafson, "Voices Around the Table: Understanding Church Growth in Contexts of Conflict" (International Baptist Theological Study Centre), Amsterdam: *Unpublished Paper*, 2020)

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