

How Should Muslim Identity Be Determined?

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Abstract

The Muslim world remains the greatest missiological challenge for the global church. Many missiologists are presently wrestling with the issue of identity development for new believers in Christ from Muslim background. The insider movement initiative prescribes their permanent retention of Muslim identity. Controversy has arisen since the global Muslim community has hitherto been unwilling to confer Muslim identity upon Christ-worshippers. This article considers whether Muslim identity should be self-determined or reciprocally determined. The article concludes by stating the perils of an autonomous, self-determined Muslim identity, then offers recommendations for healthy, Christo-centric identity development among new believers who are from a Muslim background.

Key Words: identity, insider, interfaith, missiology, Muslim

Introduction

Fifty years have passed since Charles Kraft penned three watershed papers on contextualization in Muslim contexts (Kraft 1974, 1974a, 1974b). Kraft laid the foundation for a missionary initiative which would become known as “insider movements” (IM). In those movements, believers in Christ would permanently retain the religious identity of their birth, in an indefinite and open-ended fashion, while following the Lord Jesus Christ and the Bible. In an aptly-titled article, “Psychological Stress Factors among Muslims,” Kraft states:

My major suggestion is that we bend every effort towards stimulating a faith renewal movement *within Islam*. This, I believe, is Biblical. You might not agree that all of my suggestions are Biblical, and I am not entirely convinced on some of them myself. I do mean to be provocative, not definitive (Kraft 1974b, 143, emphasis added).

Insider advocate John Travis defines an “insider” as “a person from a non-Christian background who has accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior but retained the socioreligious identity of his or her birth” (Travis 2015, 8). As Christians seek to present the saving message of Jesus Christ to Muslims, a major issue has emerged regarding the religious identity of those who are turning to Christ. Can they still be considered Muslims? If so, who should make that determination: foreign missionaries, the new believers themselves, or the existing Muslim community? In other words, should Muslim identity be self-determined (as encouraged by expatriates)? Or must the Muslim community reciprocate by continuing to confer Muslim identity upon new believers in Christ?

This article addresses the quandary of how Muslim identity should be determined. Following a beginning comment on global controversies regarding identity determination, the focus turns to the insider movement proposal of Christ-worshippers permanently retaining Muslim identity (*Retentionism*, for short). The article then considers the historic perspectives of the Muslim community, or *umma*, on Muslim identity. Moving to the contemporary situation, I present field research on Retentionism. The article concludes with recommendations for healthy, Christo-centric identity development for former Muslims who have turned to Christ.

I write as a Muslim-background Christian. I define identity as the way in which people perceive themselves and the groups to which they belong, as well as how these individuals and groups are perceived by others.

The Global Context of Identity Crises

The question of identity determination has risen in global significance in the twenty-first century. The controversy over gender identity constitutes one contemporary example. If a person who was born male decides to become female, is his decision self-determined, or does the wider society need to reciprocate by confirming this identity determination? Should such a person born male be allowed to compete in women's sports? Likewise, if a Caucasian person decides to identify as person of color, is self-determination in the matter sufficient? Or is reciprocity required?

Readers familiar with these Western discussions regarding how various identities are obtained or retained may empathize with the Muslim community, which has been expected by some Western missionaries to accept *as Muslims* those who believe in Jesus as Lord, God, and Savior. However, no evidence exists that Muslims have ever extended present-tense Muslim status to a group that believes in the divinity of Jesus.

The Retentionism Proposal

Rebecca Lewis writes that insider movement (IM) believers “remain inside their socioreligious communities, retaining the identity of that community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible” (Lewis 2007, 75). Joshua Massey envisions the Retentionist insider paradigm as producing believers whom Muslims would view as “a strange kind of Muslim” (Massey 2000, 7). Rick Brown of Wycliffe Bible Translators, a leading IM theorist, coined the term “Biblical Muslims” (Brown 2007, 65), though Muslims have not used this term. Jan Prenger, also of Wycliffe, has researched insiders whom he describes as “Muslim Insider Christ Followers” (Prenger 2017).

Insider advocate Kevin Higgins presents three identity positions for Christ-worshippers which all begin with: “I can say I am a Muslim because the word Islam means submission and a Muslim is one who submits. So, I have submitted to God ultimately in His Word, Isa, and the Word of God in the Taurat, Zabur, and Injil which the Quran confirms” (Higgins 2006, 121).

These statements from IM advocates indicate that Retentionism constitutes a missionary initiative. New believers in these insider movements are taught and encouraged to insist on self-identifying as Muslims. The accompanying ethical dilemma becomes clearer for Christians if they consider the inverse situation: suppose Christians who came to believe in Muhammad and the Qur'an, refused to take on Muslim identity. Rather, they insisted on retaining Christian identity for the ostensible purpose of witnessing of their new Islamic faith. Could either arrangement be considered honest witnessing?

Insider advocates themselves seem to understand the ethical tension within this initiative. Higgins states: “I...believe that authentic Jesus movements within Islam will bring transformation...[to] the meaning of the word ‘Muslim’” (2007, 38). Again, how would Christians react if Muslims were publicly contemplating how they might change the meaning of the word “Christian?”

Insider advocates have begun to question whether self-identity is autonomous or whether it must be reciprocated. Mark Harlan reports that a professor who has researched insider movements in an East African country states:

In my opinion, this is all a matter of semantics. We have been using self-identity as the defining issue; if they call themselves Muslims (even if they have very divergent beliefs to other Muslims) they are broadly speaking (at least socially, culturally and officially) “Muslim.” So long as their personal way of describing themselves has the word “Muslim” in it...it is insider (2023).

The professor adds:

However, we had a follow up question to those interviewed. Since we are saying they are “socially, culturally and officially Muslim” this would mean the voice of the community (society and culture) and even the legal status (officially Muslim) is taken into consideration. So our follow up question was how the surrounding society sees them. Are they Muslim? Christian? Follower of Isa? Something else?

So again, as long as their personal way of describing themselves contains the word “Muslim” (this was the primary issue and our starting point) and, secondarily, if the surrounding community generally sees them as some type of Muslim, we considered this “insider” in our survey (Harlan 2023).

Clearly the concept of Retentionism has evoked some tension within the missiological community itself. Should Muslim identity be self-determined, or is community reciprocity required? Should self-identity be considered the primary criterion for determining Muslim identity, with community confirmation deemed secondary? If the Muslim community does not extend Muslim identity status, then can insider participants be considered as having retained Muslim identity? The answer to this question threatens to collapse the very definition of insider movements in Muslim community, since that definition requires the permanent retention of Muslim identity.

Historically, some tensions have existed within the Islamic umma regarding who a Muslim is and who is not. A sketch of these intra-Islamic tensions may help inform missiology today.

Intra-Umma Discussions regarding Muslim Identity

Islam, like Christianity, features diversity within its unity. Muslims, like adherents to any religion, have faced challenges to their orthodoxy throughout their history. Al-Ghazali (d. AD 1111) anchored the concept of Muslim identity in acceptance of the inerrancy of the prophet Muhammad. He denounced widespread usage of *takfir* (excommunication) by Muslims. In his classic work on Muslim identity, *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam and Masked Infidelity* (known in Arabic as *Faysal at-Tafriqa*), al-Ghazali states: “If a person knows that another person believes that everything the Prophet brought is true and despite this he brands the latter an Unbeliever, *he himself becomes an Unbeliever*” (Ghazali 2002, 132, emphasis added). This ruling becomes particularly relevant in the *Takfiri* dispute described below.

Writing two centuries after al-Ghazali, Ibn Manzur penned the classic 20-volume Arabic dictionary, *Lisan al-Arab (The Arab Tongue)*, in AD 1290. Ibn Manzur concurs with al-Ghazali’s line of thinking that Islam requires affirmation of the prophetic veracity of Muhammad: “Al-Islam means a demonstration of obedience to everything that the ambassador of Allah reveals so that his

blood will not be shed” (Abd al-Masih 1995, 294). Both al-Ghazali and Manzur raise important points for Muslims regarding religious identity, legal rights, and persecution, particularly since Muhammad had famously declared: “If someone discards his religion, kill him” (Bukhari n.d., 3017).

Space limitations do not allow for a complete historical treatment of all the deliberations of the Islamic umma regarding who remains within and those who are outside. The Wars of *Ridda* (Apostasy), the Kharijite Rebellion, and the Mutazilite Controversy over whether the Qu’ran was created or uncreated—all significant historical emanations—can only be mentioned in passing. I focus now on several intra-umma discussions with greater contemporary relevance.

Sufism and Muslim Identity

Wherever and whenever the strict, shariah-based, implementation of Islamic orthodoxy is enforced, it nearly always precipitates a revival of Islamic mysticism, known as Sufism. Such mystical interpretations of Islam have emerged and re-emerged throughout Islamic history. As mystics, the Sufis press toward a spiritual connection with the Divine. Since orthodox Islam claims that Allah is neither personal nor knowable by humans, the Sufi quest poses a threat to conservative orthodoxy. A famous Sufi, Mansour al-Hallaj, wrote:

I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart
I asked, “Who are You?”
He replied, “You” (Threshold Society 2022).

In essence, Mansour al-Hallaj was stating he attained unity with the Almighty, though classical Islam teaches that Allah has no partners. For this claim, al-Hallaj was hanged by the Caliph al-Muqtadir as a heretic in AD 922. Later, al-Ghazali would try to move Sufism back within orthodoxy, but tensions continue to exist until this present age.

Shi’ism

Shi’ites claim to be followers of Muhammad and the Qur’an. Yet, they feel the charisma of the prophet is so profound that it overflowed into certain of his family members, known as *Ahl ul-Bayt* (“The People of the House” of the Prophet). Different Shi’ite groups esteem various numbers of direct descendants of Muhammad as infallible imams.

The challenge to Islamic orthodoxy posed by Shi’ism is the claim that these imams give revelation and receive intercession. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear Shi’ites call upon the name of Imam Ali or Imam Husayn in a time of distress, or to express spiritual commitment to them. Some Sunnis feel that Shi’ite belief and practice violates the Islamic doctrine of *Khatamiyya*, the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad. The Qur’an, 33:40, states that Muhammad was *khatam an-nabiyeen*, the “seal of the prophets.” Therefore, anyone claiming the existence of a later prophet makes Muhammad out to be a liar.

I once met an Iranian who fell out of favor with his government after the Islamic revolution. He ended up as a refugee in Egypt. He was both surprised and shocked when an Egyptian asked him, “Are you a Shi’ite or are you a Muslim?” The Iranian man stated that he was nearly dumbfounded in trying to compose an answer—he had never considered such a question before.

The Ahmadiyya Movement

Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was a Muslim reformer who lived in the Indian subcontinent, 1835-1908. Though his followers self-identify as faithful Muslims who believe in the Qur'an and Muhammad, the wider Muslim community has not reciprocated by conferring Muslim identity upon them. The umma states that the Ahmadiyya (or Qadiani) are legally non-Muslims since they hold to a post-Muhammadan prophet. Even the Constitution of Pakistan legally categorizes them as non-Muslims for accepting a later prophet (Pakistan, Government of, 1974). This controversy underscores the tension of whether Muslim identity can be determined by self-identity or whether it must be reciprocated.

The Takfiri Doctrine

The strict, hardline Islamists who have sought global as well as local domination have introduced an ends-justify-the-means initiative, known as the Takfiri Doctrine. This doctrine constitutes the conferral of *kafir* (unbeliever) status upon otherwise confessing Muslims. Such a doctrine has been employed by Sayyid Qutb and Egyptian militants in fighting their governments and assassinating their Muslim governmental leaders. Ayatollah Khomeini successfully utilized the takfiri approach toward his nemesis Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

Of course, the Takfiris have crossed al-Ghazali's red line. The medieval jurist had stated that it is forbidden for Muslims to consider as non-Muslims those who believe as true all that Muhammad brought forth. Presently, the takfiri controversy has emerged as the most contentious issue facing the global umma.

Muslim Identity and Biblical Christology

Muhammad insisted that Jesus was a mortal prophet. Islamic scholar Smail Baliç explains: "In Islam Jesus, like all other prophets, is reduced to human dimensions. Therefore, in Muslim discussion, Jesus does not possess the importance which is his in Christianity. In the Koran, Jesus is simply a subject of the history of prophets" (Baliç 1979, 2).

Baliç would disagree with the theological rapprochement attempted by Kevin Higgins in his Muslim identity statements which affirm the Qur'an. Baliç underscores that Allah in Islam is impersonal, in contradistinction to the biblical deity: "An intimate connection between God and man based on interaction in history is unknown to Islam" (Baliç 1979, 2).

Retentionism thus faces a theological challenge. Muslim identity is obtained, conferred, and retained through affirmation of Muhammad as the final prophet. Yet, Muhammad rejected Jesus as the divine Son, Lord, and Savior. Indeed, this is the very message Christian witnesses seek to communicate to Muslims! The challenge has come into focus: are those who come to believe in the biblical Jesus still *Muslims* in any appreciable sense of the word?

While it may have become fashionable in the West to downplay or consider outdated the concept of religion, in Islam, the word for religion, *deen*, rises with great importance. Muslims are taught that each departed soul will be asked three questions on the Day of Judgment: "1. Who is your Lord? 2. What is your religion (*deen*)? 3. Who is your prophet?" (Tadrees 2010). The Muslim will hope to answer, consecutively: "Allah, Islam, and Muhammad." Hence, Muslim identity possesses both legal and soteriological significance for Muslims.

Field Research on Muslim Identity

Understanding that some Western missionaries had insisted on permanent retention of Muslim identity for insider believers, I undertook a doctoral field research project to cull indigenous perspectives on the topic. This doctoral research sought, in part, to answer whether Muslim identity should be considered autonomous or reciprocal (Farrokh 2014). My field work included interviewing 20 Muslims, including five imams, in which they reacted to a hypothetical situation, set in their home country, in which a Muslim was straying from Islam. Though I conducted the interviews in metropolitan New York, I stressed to the interviewees that they envision a situation occurring in their home countries.

In the hypothetical, the protagonist begins to explore internet sites about Jesus and the Bible. He or she then comes to believe in the biblical Jesus, the divine Savior who died on the cross and rose from the dead. Finally, he or she then begins to fellowship with other believers who have the same belief.

I then asked interviewees if the protagonist was still a Muslim. If not, they were asked to specify when the person left Islam and why. The following are direct quotes from the 20 Muslim interviewees (Farrokh 2014, 161-163).

ID	Birth country/ ethnicity	Still Muslim?	When Left Islam?
Imam 1	Palestine	No. What he now believes is a contradiction to Islam.	When he came to believe that Jesus is other than a messenger.
Imam 2	Guyana/ Indian	No. From the moment he began to believe that Jesus is Son of God or had any divine qualities.	When he believed that Jesus had divine attributes. To attribute qualities of divinity to any prophet contradicts the Islamic concept of monotheism.
Imam 3	Sierra Leone	Not really.	Anyone whose beliefs contradict the Qur'an and <i>hadith</i> is not a Muslim.
Imam 4	Uzbekistan	No. If he believes in Jesus as a God, of course he is not a Muslim. He's a <i>murtadd</i> (apostate). That's the first word of the <i>shahada</i> . However, many people in Uzbekistan are not familiar with theological details. All they see are the labels, "Muslim" and "Christian."	When he broke <i>shahada</i> . There is one meaning to <i>shahada</i> and it's clear cut. The main principle in Islam is <i>tawhid</i> (divine Unity).
Imam 5	Palestine	No.	When he believes Jesus is Son of God, it means he has belief that is unacceptable, Islamically.
Female Muslim (FM) 1	India	No. If she believes Jesus is God, the monotheism is gone.	When she believed that Jesus is God.

FM2	Bangladesh	No.	When she came to believe God came through Jesus, she is no longer a Muslim.
Male Muslim (MM) 1	USA/Palestinian	Yes.	NA
MM2	Bangladesh	No.	If your belief changes, your religion changes.
MM3	Pakistan/Punjabi	I don't know. I can't judge anyone.	NA
MM4	Saudi/Indian	No. If you believe Jesus died, it means you don't believe in the Qur'an. Therefore you are not a Muslim.	When he believed that Jesus died.
MM5	Pakistan	No. He came to believe Jesus is God. Jesus is only a messenger.	When he came to believe that Jesus is God.
MM6	Morocco/Berber	No.	The condition to be a Muslim is to believe in one God.
MM7	Trinidad/Indian	No. If he doesn't believe in the Oneness of God and that Jesus, the messenger, is distinct from God, he does not believe in the fundamental creed of Islam. He has associated a partner with God.	When he associated Jesus as a partner with God.
MM8	Turkey	No.	He changed his religion.
MM9	Palestine	No.	Because the Qur'an is God's words. When you say that what God says is wrong, you are saying the Qur'an is wrong, so you don't believe in Islam.
MM10	Bangladesh	No.	Once he believes by heart and by mouth in another thing, he is no longer a Muslim.
MM11	Morocco/Berber	No.	If he believes Jesus died on the cross, then he is not a Muslim.
MM12	Jordan	No.	When he believed Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead.
MM13	Turkey	(Implied no)	In the learning time, he is still a Muslim. In the long time, he's not really a Muslim.

The field research with Muslims—including five imams—illustrates the lack of conferral of Muslim identity upon those who have come to believe in the biblical Jesus. A reading of their

responses yields the conclusion that their loss of Muslim identity coincided with assumption of beliefs in the biblical Jesus.

In my field research, I continued the hypothetical scenario by stating that the protagonist continued identifying as a Muslim. I asked the same 20 Muslims to respond. Though space is too limited to provide a complete table again, the reasoning of several of the imams proves instructive. The Indian imam (#2) explains:

We consider him not a Muslim in the technical sense of the word, even though he may consider himself a Muslim in the general sense of the word. However, he would not have the same privileges as a Muslim. He would get no inheritance from Muslim relatives, while a Muslim would. He will not have a Muslim funeral. When the word Muslim is used in reference to humans, it means they have made a conscious decision to take the Islamic teachings as a whole, not picking and choosing. If you do not believe in Muhammad as the final prophet, you are not a Muslim (Farrokh 2014, 164).

A Palestinian cleric remarked with incredulity, “He is a confused guy! He can call himself whatever he wants, but people won’t take him seriously” (Farrokh 2014, 165). Several of the lay Muslims gave similar responses, which raise questions regarding the efficacy of a self-identified Muslim identity as a missiological strategy. Even Joshua Massey’s hope that Muslims would see insider believers as a “strange kind of Muslim” may prove elusive. The data indicate that Muslims are not reciprocally conferring Muslim identity upon Christ-worshippers.

The Potential Pitfalls of Insistence on a Self-Identified Muslim Identity

The Peril of Permanent Identity Bifurcation

Those who have ministered to Muslims or planted churches in Muslim contexts will understand that identity transformation is likely to be complicated during transitional stages. In such cases, the inquirer or new believer may have shared about their spiritual pilgrimage with some people but not with others. Secret believers in Muslim contexts often withhold news of their journey to Christ from their family members. In these cases, the new believers may experience “temporary identity bifurcation” in the transitional stage of coming to Christ.

The insider paradigm recommends staying inside Islam as a *permanent* identity state. Indeed, insider advocates insist on identifying Christ-worshippers as Muslims in the present tense. Due to theological factors, such as Islam being a Christ-diminishing movement, and sociological factors, such as the reality of persecution for faith deviance in Muslim contexts, these new believers risk being saddled with “permanent identity bifurcation” (PIB) (Farrokh 2016). For example, they may insist to their families that they are still Muslims. Yet, they may participate in various biblical, non-Islamic practices, such as Christo-centric worship, the Lord’s Table, and baptism.

Individuals tend to break down emotionally when living with PIB in the long term. Their consciences may bother them for being duplicitous or deceptive. One new believer in Christ from North Africa refused to tell his wife about his conversion to Christ over the long term. The situation weighed on him heavily. One night, he began talking in his sleep about Jesus. His wife, awakened and startled, asked him why he was talking about Jesus. He confessed to her his spiritual journey. After that, sadly, he was not heard from again in believers’ circles, and he had changed his phone number.

The Charge of Deception by Muslims

Muslims are already decrying what they perceive as deception in Christian missions. As early as the late 1980s, the idea of gospel contextualization had caught the attention of Muslims. As far back as July 1987, the *Islamic World Review* warned Muslims that Christian missionaries were using an “underhanded style” called the “Contextualized Approach.” They protested, “It means they now speak in the context of the people and the culture of the country where they are operating, and are less honest in their dealings with simple, often illiterate, peasants. They no longer call themselves openly Christians in a Muslim area, but ‘Followers of Isa’” (Woodberry 1996, 173).

The Perception of Neo-Colonialism

The term “Muslim” is both dear and important to Muslims. They do not translate it into the local equivalent of “People Submitted to God” in the countries into which they move. They always retain the term “Muslim.” As the data above indicates, few Muslims are willing to confer Muslim identity upon those who worship the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Islamic umma was constructed to exclude Christ-worshippers. Therefore, Retentionism, when applied as a construct of self-identity, may actually usurp the Muslim community’s main identifier. As such, Muslims may find Retentionism’s approach to be an encroachment.

Failure of Believers to Develop Christo-centric Identity

Finally, the most tragic pitfall of Retentionism is the impact on the spiritual identity of persons and groups who insist upon Muslim self-identification. David Owen, a Fuller Theological Seminary student under Kraft, proposed the concept of “A Jesus Movement within Islam” (Owen 1991). While Christian missiologists may debate various aspects of the Qur’anic ‘Isa, no basic taxonomy of religions could classify Islam as a Christo-centric religion. In Islam, Muhammad claims center stage. The Islamic prophet sought not to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ but to demote him into his own personal herald. Islam is not a Christ-exalting religion but a Christ-diminishing one.

There is no “come to Jesus” moment in Islam. Thus, attempts to encourage believers in the Lord Jesus to stay “inside Islam” will tend to retard their discipleship in Christ. While “staying inside Islam” might engender rapid “decisions” for Christ, the biblical mandates to evangelize and disciple new believers should operate synergistically, rather than in hostility to each other.

The Christo-centric Alternative

Researcher Duane Miller asserts that believers who are Christians of Muslim background are pursuing a “Christo-centric” identity:

The discourse, writings and liturgies of the CMB’s [Christians of Muslim Background] I studied tend to be *Christocentric*, meaning ‘those types of theology in which the person and work of Christ are the bases for all theological and ethical propositions.’ There is a strong tendency in these theologies to find all understanding about who and what God is like as seen through the person of Jesus (Miller 2016, 224).

Miller’s research among CMBs applies at both individual and collective levels of identity. The new believer is found “in Christ”; the believers, in a collective sense, become part of the body of Christ. Such an identity flows in harmony with the biblical trajectory, though it cuts against the Qur’anic trajectory.

Conclusion

Neither the Bible nor the Qur'an feature *identity* as a stand-alone term. Yet, both holy books seek to promote their respective spiritual identities. Whenever the gospel has reached into previously unreached areas, including Muslim contexts, the resulting frictions will inevitably impact identities.

Historically, the Muslim community has ruled that Christ-worshippers reject outright the prophetic veracity of Muhammad and are thus deemed non-Muslim. Insistence by some missionaries and missiologists that new Christ-worshippers seek to identify as Muslims seems unwise for the reasons noted above. While the term "Christian" may have negative associations in some Muslim contexts, other alternatives exist. Many Muslim-background believers in Christ appreciate that the two millennia "Grand Tradition" of Christ's Church actually surpasses the 1,400-year duration of the Muslim umma.

Returning to our roots as Christians, the New Testament featured a grafting in of formerly pagan Gentiles to the Kingdom of God. Jesus promised that he will build his church. He is able to graft in believers from every tribe, tongue, and nation to himself, the true vine. Since believers are "in Christ" as the body of Christ, he confers upon them individual and corporate Christo-centric identity. This identity includes today's believers in Christ who are from a Muslim background.

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