

# INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES ON MUSLIM IDENTITY AND INSIDER MOVEMENTS

**Fred Farrokh**

International Trainer with Global Initiative: Reaching Muslim Peoples.  
Rev. Farrokh is a missionary ordained by Elim Fellowship, Inc.

Published in *Global Missiology*, January 2015 @ [www.globalmissiology.org](http://www.globalmissiology.org)

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Readers of *Global Missiology* will be aware of the current missiological controversy surrounding Insider Movements. Doug Coleman provides an excellent treatment of this subject by assessing the applicability of the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council to the contemporary Insider Movement paradigm (Coleman 2014). Continuing this assessment, I will evaluate the Insider Movement paradigm (IMP) from an indigenous perspective, giving special attention to the lens of Muslim identity.

In this article I begin with the working definition of Insider Movements (IM) provided by Rebecca Lewis. Second, I offer several general statements about the context of ministry among Muslims. Third, I present the IMP, largely in the words of insider advocates. Fourth, I provide indigenous input on Muslim identity. Finally, I present an indigenous evaluation of the IM paradigm. My conclusion is that the IMP, far from solving the enigma of ministry to Muslims, actually creates many additional challenges, yet without providing a solid platform upon which to minister to Muslims.

As a preface, I am writing as a Muslim-background Christian who has been involved in ministry to Muslims for over 30 years. As such, I am thankful for the efforts of all who have set out to present the gospel of Christ to Muslim peoples. Understanding that ministry to Muslims continues to be a challenging mission field, it is not my intention to judge the motivations of those whom I evaluate in this article. Neither do I suggest that they have not made other positive contributions to missiology. I also note that much of the material in this article is based on my recently completed PhD dissertation *Perceptions of Muslim Identity* (Farrokh 2014). Interested readers may glean more data and details of my research from that document.

## **I. Defining Insider Movements**

As Doug Coleman points out in his above-mentioned article, IMP is “not monolithic.” As a fairly new phenomenon in the Muslim context, it is not surprising that some confusion exists about what an insider movement is and what it is not. Rebecca Lewis writes that insider movement 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” (2007,

75). Therefore, IM approves remaining *inside* the Islamic mosque—hence Insider Movements—which is the locus of the Muslim socioreligious community. Likewise, Lewis states that IM promotes the permanent retention of Muslim identity, which is the focal point of this article.

Note that Lewis' definition of IM presents the IMP as a permanent identity solution; she states elsewhere that this identity is “God-given” (2009). It is natural that Muslim inquirers and seekers may go through a temporary, transitional period in which their identity may be in flux or in question. Discipling Muslims though this period is a key component of ministry to Muslims, yet the discipleship issue is not the primary focus of this study, since the IMP speaks of a permanent identity state.

Insider movements are not necessarily synonymous with indigenous movements, the latter being thought of as *of the people*. There are indigenous movements to Christ in Muslim contexts, such as in Iran and Algeria, where the new believers neither remain inside the Islamic mosque nor retain Muslim identity. These movements can be considered indigenous in that little outside influence has precipitated their spawning. Likewise, insider movements are not necessarily limited to localized, non-transnational movements that take place *inside* the borders of a Muslim country.

Additionally, insider movements are not synonymous with underground movements. Underground movements typically occur in high persecution contexts, including atheistic, communist and Islamic contexts. Underground movements usually meet in homes or other non-traditional church settings, in unadvertised locations. Information about the group and its meetings are shared on a need-to-know basis. Underground churches and fellowships in China are not Communist insider movements, since the believers do not identify as communists. Using the example of Iran again, believers there typically meet in underground fellowships. Yet they cannot be considered insider movements since the participants do not retain Muslim identity but identify themselves with alternate, non-Islamic identifiers.

## **II. General Statements about the Muslim Ministry Context**

I begin this section with several foundational statements about the Muslim ministry context. The billion and a half Muslims in the world constitute a remarkably diverse population, encompassing hundreds of people groups, languages, and cultures. Whether or not individual Muslims or their collective groups are actually practicing their faith, they nevertheless share a religion which is centered on the worship of God and the words of their final prophet, Muhammad. According to Islam, the Qur'an embodies God's teachings as relayed through Muhammad, while Muhammad's bona fide sayings, known as *hadith*, are also authoritative for Muslims.

Muhammad esteemed Jesus Christ as a great prophet (Sura 4:171; 6:84-86; 33:7), but nothing beyond a mortal man. Specifically, Muhammad rejected the incarnation (112:3) and divinity (5:72; 5:116) of Jesus, as well as his crucifixion and thereby his resurrection (4:157-158). As such, the Bible and the Qur'an present mutually exclusive christologies. A simple but helpful analogy is that Jesus in Islam fulfills the role that John the Baptist does in the Bible—he prepares the way for another, and then withdraws from center stage.

In addition to the challenges posed by the anti-biblical Islamic teachings about Jesus, Islamic apostasy laws have overshadowed this ministry context for the past 1,400 years. The Qur'an and *hadith* clearly state that male apostates who leave Islam must be killed if they will not repent (Sura 3:90-91; 4:89; 9:74, see also Sahih Bukhari vol. 9, book 83, no. 17. In Sahih Bukhari (vol. 4, book 52, no. 60), Muhammad says, "if somebody [a Muslim] discards his religion, kill him." The preeminent Muslim scholar Mawdudi notes that the Islamic punishment of death to apostates has never been in question among the *'ulama* (scholars) until very recent times (Mawdudi 1953). Clearly, coming to believe in the divinity of Jesus is considered *shirk* (associating partners with God), which is the unpardonable sin in Islam (Sura 4:116). This crime requires that the Muslim community confer apostasy status upon the offending party.

Lastly, most Muslim societies have been affected by the *shari'a* legal system which is based on the Qur'an and *hadith*, even if the society is not technically living under *shari'a*. This reality creates a fear factor among most Muslims when it comes to deviating from the faith that has been handed down to them. As such, fear is a formidable spiritual opponent to Muslims. All of these factors have a tendency to freeze Muslim identity and suppress what is known globally as freedom of religion or freedom of conscience.

### **III. Understanding Insider Movements in the Muslim Context**

Insider movement advocates present their paradigm as an answer to the expulsive context of Islam described above. The apparent genius of IMP is its proposition that Muslims can come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, retain Muslim identity, and remain in the good graces (in most cases) of their respective Muslim communities. Instead of the historical problem of converts being killed or ostracized, IMP ostensibly envisions a movement that could gain traction in Muslim contexts.

IM advocates realize that such a model requires several prerequisites. First, IM proponents rightly understand that Muslims will remain in good standing if they can affirm, at least at a basic level, the prophethood of Muhammad. Indeed, affirmation of Muhammad through *shahada* confession is the door into Islam for those who want to enter it. Due to the anti-biblical trajectory of Muhammad's teachings regarding Jesus, Christian missionaries historically rejected the notion that Muhammad was a prophet sent from God. IM advocates, however, initiated a campaign to rehabilitate the image of Muhammad. Charles Kraft contends Muhammad was actually serving the God of the Bible within his Arabic culture: "I believe that this is what Muhammad himself was trying to do: to combine an allegiance to the Judaeo-Christian God with Arabic cultural structures" (1979, 118).

Second, IM advocates progressed from this re-interpretation of Muhammad to an attempt to reconcile the Bible and the Qur'an. Geoffrey Parrinder, a Methodist missionary from the UK, stated as early as 1965 that Muhammad was primarily and appropriately rebuking Christian heresy, rather than attacking the biblical faith: "It has often been thought that the Qur'an denies the Christian teaching of the Trinity, and commentators have taken its words to be a rejection of orthodox Christian doctrine. However, it seems more likely that heretical doctrines are denied in the Qur'an, and orthodox Christians should agree with most of its statements" (1965, 133).

Similarly, the Lebanese Christian Fouad Accad presented a “Building Bridges” evangelism method in which he states that the Qur’an is “pro-Christ, pro-Christian, and pro-Bible” (1997, 10).

Third, IM advocates introduced evangelism strategies that reflected this higher view of the Qur’an and Muhammad, while simultaneously promoting the permanent retention, or even fulfillment, of Muslim identity. Kevin Greeson of the International Mission Board has championed a Muslim evangelism strategy known as “The Camel Method.” This strategy presents Christ to Muslims based on Sura 3 of the Qur’an, even though the historical context of that passage was Muhammad’s rejection of the Najrani Christians who came to witness to him (see Nickel 2006). Muhammad ultimately rejected the biblical Jesus, cursed these Najrani Christians (Sura 3:61), and reduced the Lord Jesus Christ to his own personal herald. Regardless of this context, Greeson seeks to super-impose the biblical Jesus onto this passage. He invites Muslims to become “Pakka Muslims” (“Complete Muslims,” see Greeson n.d., 3) which is a clearly an IM position. His introduction to the “Camel Tracts” evangelistic pamphlet states: “I am grateful to King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, Islamic Foundation, and others who are translating the Arabic Koran into all languages of the world. I feel blessed as I read the Koran in my mother tongue” (n.d.: 1). Finally, he encourages his Muslim readers: “Do not miss out on Allah’s blessings ... Please find a Koran translated into your language and together let’s find a treasure that will change your life” (n.d.: 2). This method of trying to find the biblical Jesus in the pages of the Qur’an is a hallmark of the IM paradigm, though it creates significant hermeneutical problems.

Germane to this study on Muslim identity is the fourth major initiative of IM advocates—a re-interpretation of the word *Muslim*. Kevin Higgins shows how this re-interpretation is indispensable to the paradigm:

I do, however, believe that authentic Jesus movements within Islam will bring transformation (and indeed reform) in the light of God’s Word and Spirit as applied from the inside. Views concerning Muhammad, the place of the Qur’an, the value of the salat, *the meaning of the word “Muslim,”* [emphasis mine] the nature of Jesus, the character of Allah, and many other elements of Islamic faith and life will change within and through such movements to Jesus (2007, 38).

In the following section I provide indigenous perspectives on how Muslim-born persons feel about Higgins’ re-interpretation of the term *Muslim*. Higgins, in recommending identity statements for Insider Muslims, goes on to present his belief that the term *Muslim* could now identify a Bible-believer:

“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. In addition I can accept and affirm all of the teaching of Muhammad as I find it in the Quran, and can say honestly that he had a prophetic role in calling Arab, Christian, and Jewish people of his time to repent. I can call him a prophet. I can say the shahadah with integrity because I believe Muhammad was called by God to a prophetic role. I read the Quran through the interpretive key of the

Gospel and the previous books. When I read the Quran through that lens and filter I find that it agrees with the Bible and that perceived contradictions are due to misunderstandings of the Quran” (2006, 121).

Rick Brown of Wycliffe Bible Translators argues, like Higgins, for the permanent retention of Muslim identity. In his 2007 article in the *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, Brown presents his concept of “Biblical Muslims.” Brown distinguishes these Biblical Muslims from “Sub-biblical Muslims” (2007, 69). Obviously, something that meets biblical standards need not be changed.

Moreover, Brown has lead an international movement to produce what have been called Muslim Idiom Translations of the Bible, which among other things, have radically changed or removed “Father-Son” and Trinitarian terminology in Bibles published for Muslims. John Travis has played a role in these type of translations, even admitting to missionary Roger Dixon that his goal was to present Jesus (or ‘Isa) to Muslims as an exalted prophet and delay portraying Jesus as the second person of the Trinity (see Dixon 2012, 121).

**Introducing the Kingdom Lines Depiction of the Insider Movement Paradigm**

I graphically depict the overall efforts of IMP advocates in a figure below called “Kingdom Lines.” This image has five lines and includes the Christological basis I believe is foundational to ministry to Muslims. The “B” line represents the biblical Christology. The “D” line represents efforts of Christian missionaries, such as Rick Brown and John Travis, to bend the biblical Christology downward in the direction of the Qur’anic Christology. The “Q” line depicts the Qur’anic position that Jesus is merely a mortal prophet. The “U” line represents efforts to forcibly bend the Qur’anic Christology upward in the direction of the Bible. Finally, the final line is the “IM” line, representing insider movements. This line will be explained through the identity lens during the remainder of this article. Note that the B and Q lines are canonically fixed by their respective scriptures, and mutually exclusive.

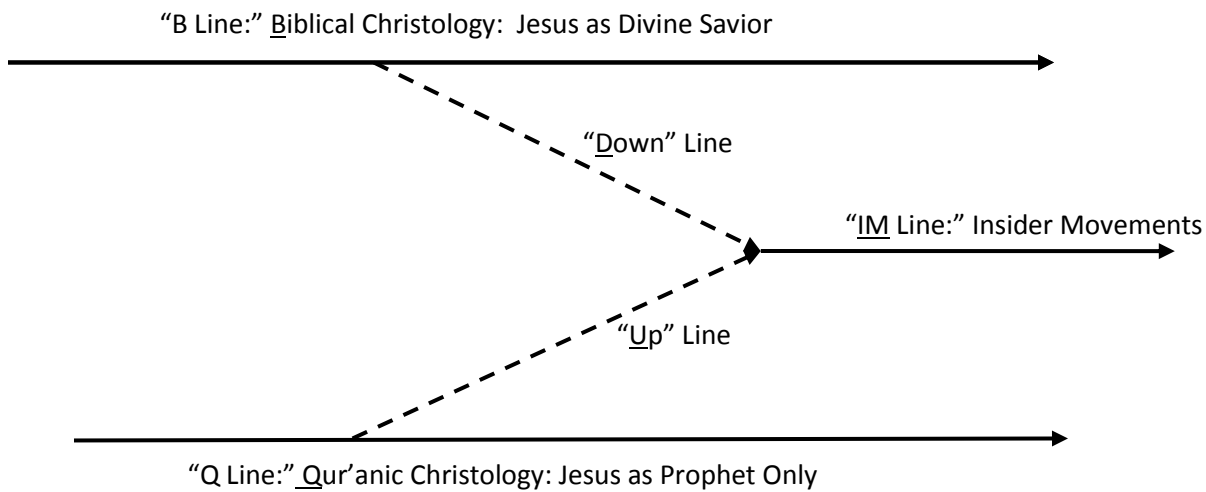


Figure 1. The “Kingdom Lines” depiction of the Insider Movement Paradigm

Historically, Christian mission efforts have sought to lift Muslims from the Q line to the B line. The IMP departs from this paradigm through the creation of a new hybrid position represented by the IM line. These Muslim insider believers are encouraged to remain inside their socioreligious community, which is centered in the mosque, and retain Muslim identity, which requires some level of affirmation for Muhammad and the Qur'an.

### **J.H. Prenger's Informative Research on Insider Muslim Beliefs and Practices**

J.H. Prenger has helped remedy a deficiency in field research on IM. Dr. Prenger recently interviewed 26 "Muslim insider Christ followers" in seven different countries of South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia and Africa (Prenger 2014). The research is the most expansive to date regarding the direct beliefs and practices of Insider Muslims. Prenger is to be commended for providing many direct quotes from the Insider leaders. Several quotes indicate their IM positional status. For example, a Southeast Asian Muslim Insider leader "Drew" (a pseudonym) illustrates his views of Jesus and Muhammad by analogy:

"I am a university student now and Jesus is my professor, but when I was in elementary school Mohammed was my teacher, yet I don't find any of his teaching contradicting the teachings of Jesus. Jesus explains more about what Mohammed is talking about but they're not contradicting. There's nothing wrong with believing in Mohammed because it does not affect your salvation" (2014, 88).

Note that Drew claims to have arrived at a theological reconciliation between Jesus and Muhammad. He testifies to salvation and simultaneously confesses belief in Muhammad, which is predicted by the IM position.

Prenger also asked these 26 insider leaders for their beliefs regarding prophets, which is an important question, since Muslims are required to believe in all bona fide prophets, culminating in Muhammad. Prenger states, "'Andy' (a pseudonym) was the only one that explicitly said in response to the question about prophets in general that he believes that Mohammed was not a prophet" (2014, 85). Again, these IM leaders, based on the data given, appear to occupy the IM line in terms of beliefs and identity, especially with their affirmation of Muhammad at some level.

Regarding attending the Islamic mosque—a hallmark of the IMP paradigm described by Lewis—Prenger again provides informative quotes which indicate a significant number of these Muslim Insiders continue to attend the Islamic mosque. They have their own reasons and rationales for doing so, which are highly instructive.

Several of the Insider leaders adapt something akin to Paul's marriage instructions in 1 Corinthians 7 to continued mosque attendance. Prenger notes: African IM Leader "'Brad' explained strategy in regard to the mosque system as continuing what you did before. If insiders attended the mosque before they came to faith in Isa, they encourage them to continue going" (2014, 213). Prenger affirms that one of the South Asian Insider leaders adheres to the same principle: "Regarding mosque attendance, Mitch supports the idea that someone should not

change their attendance habits after coming to faith in Isa. ‘He can worship in the mosque in the name of Jesus’” (2014, 209).

It appears there is community pressure to attend the mosque in Homer’s context, as he states: “Sometimes others would come to my house saying, ‘You did not come to the mosque.’ So you have to go” (2014, 104).

A number of the Insider Muslim leaders promote their movements from within Islamic mosques. “Monty” of Southeast Asia boldly states: “We want to build a believer community inside the mosque. We want to build a Bible college within the Islamic boarding house” (2014, 301). “Axel” [of South Asia] has since then left this Christian group and now operates as a Muslim insider, with beard. He attends the mosque and prays with his friends there. Axel said that he actually prefers praying like that over the way they pray in churches.” (2014, 209).

Prenger notes a degree of freedom among some Insider leaders to operate freely within the mosque setting:

“‘Angus’ [of South Asia] reiterated that with the identity they have they can talk about Jesus with anyone. ‘People see us as a sect within Islam that observes all holy books and waits for the judgment day when Jesus is coming back,’ he said. They follow the month of Ramadan and other events on the Islamic calendar. Arthur [also of South Asia] is in somewhat of a different situation in that he is still very much part of the Mosque system and its leadership. He preaches from the pulpits in the mosques” (2014, 210).

This recent field research confirms that these “Muslim Insider Christ Followers” largely retain Muslim identity and remain as participants in good standing inside Islamic mosques.

#### **IV. Indigenous Perspectives on Muslim Identity**

Questions about Muslim identity are not new to our generation. Historically speaking, Muslims associate specific things with the word *Muslim*. Al-Ghazali, who died in 1111, was a luminary Islamic scholar who wrote over 70 books and treatises on Islam. This scholar weighed in on the question germane to this discussion: what makes a person a Muslim, or a non-Muslim?

“‘Unbelief (*kufr*)’ is to deem anything the Prophet [Muhammad] brought to be a lie. And ‘faith (*iman*)’ is to deem everything he brought to be true. Thus, the Jew and the Christian are Unbelievers because they deny the truthfulness of the Prophet” (2002, 92). Specifically, al-Ghazali rules that Christians are non-Muslims simply because they are *mushrikeen* (associationists who consider Jesus a partner with Allah).

Whether a group considers itself Muslim becomes irrelevant if the wider Muslim community considers them non-Muslim. For example, the Ahmaddiya movement in Pakistan consider themselves Muslims, enthusiastically affirming the prophethood of Muhammad and the Qur’an. However, the Second Amendment of the Constitution of Pakistan, based on Islamic Law, inserts specific language to decree them non-Muslims since they believe that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835 – 1908) was a bona fide post-Muhammadan religious reformer (see [Pakistan.org](http://Pakistan.org) 1974). If

the *umma* (Muslim community) does not accept the Ahmadiyya as Muslims, it remains to be seen how they will continue to accept as Muslims those who believe in the incarnation, divinity, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—doctrines contradicted by the Qur’an.

### **Farrokh’s Field Research on Muslim Identity**

For my PhD dissertation, in 2013 I interviewed 40 Muslim-born persons regarding their perceptions of Muslim identity. All of the respondents were born into Muslim families; none were converts into Islam. Twenty of the forty were presently Muslims, while the other 20 had come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. I conducted these interviews among Diaspora Muslims in Metro New York. Thirty-five of these 40 interviewees were born abroad, representing 17 different birth countries. Thirty-one of the 40 had spent their entire formative years in those respective countries.

The self-reported birth countries of the interviewee pool, including multiples, are: Bangladesh (3 persons), Burkina Faso (3), Egypt (2), Guyana, Iran (2), India, Kazakhstan, Jordan (2), Lebanon, Morocco (2), Palestine (3), Pakistan (4), Sierra Leone, Saudi Arabia, Trinidad (2), Turkey (4), United States (5), and Uzbekistan (2). Twenty-eight respondents were male adults, while 12 were female. The diversity of the population provides connectedness with the wider Muslim world.

These interviewees, whose names are required to be kept confidential by the rules of academia, responded to a third-person hypothetical vignette, set in their home country. In this vignette, a Muslim comes to show interest in the gospel as a result of visiting web sites about Jesus and the Bible. Then the protagonist (named “Ahmed” if the interviewee was male, or “Fatimeh” if the interviewee was female) came to believe that “God visited the earth in the form of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and rose from the dead.” Finally, the protagonist begins to fellowship with others who hold the same beliefs. In presenting this interview vignette, I never used the words “Christian,” “church,” or “Christianity.”

Of those 40 interviewees, 95% (38 respondents) stated that a Muslim who came to believe that God visited in the earth in the form of Jesus was no longer a Muslim. One interviewee said the protagonist was still a Muslim; another was unsure. The majority’s summary reasoning was that a Muslim who came to believe in the divinity and redemptive mission of Jesus was theologically disqualified from retaining Muslim identity. In fact, 95% of the interviewees stated that the protagonist has come to believe in a different Jesus than he or she had previously believed in. The data here immediately call into question Rebecca Lewis’ proposition that a Muslim can simultaneously believe in the biblical narrative regarding the Lord Jesus Christ.

A central component to my research was analyzing how Muslims in various communities respond to faith deviation—a Muslim straying from Islam. In most cases, these interviewees felt the friends and family of the person who strayed from Islam would seek to bring him or her back into the fold through re-education efforts of various kinds, including verbal warnings and threats, mocking and Islamic re-education initiatives. If these efforts were unsuccessful, they would likely take expulsive measures, such as: ostracism; arranging punitive marriages (for women); expelling the guilty party from the family or community; physical attacks; or, killing him or her.



A detailed breakdown of these responses, including 180 direct quotes from the respondents, is available through this dissertation (see Farrokh 2014).

In summary, the contemporary Muslims and Muslim-background Christians I interviewed rejected the premise of the IM paradigm. Furthermore, these interviews were conducted on Muslim-born persons living in the Metropolitan New York diaspora, where one might expect a slightly more elastic view on Muslim identity than one might find in the global *umma*. This diaspora setting also improved chances that the Muslim-born interviewees would speak their minds candidly without fear of legal or security repercussion. Nevertheless, these 40 Muslim-born persons, who hailed from 18 different birth countries, were nearly unanimous in rejecting the IMP—that a Muslim could come to faith in the biblical Jesus and yet permanently retain Muslim identity.

### **How Muslim Scholars Define Muslim Identity**

Among those I interviewed were five scholars of Islam, three of which were serving as imams in local mosques. A Palestinian imam, identified in the research as U5,<sup>1</sup> denied a more flexible use of the term Muslim: “The word Muslim is not translatable as a name; it is only translatable as a term, as a description. I think the problem is with translation. In English you say the word Muslim and then say it means submitted. In Arabic the word submitted is coming from the same word for Muslim.”

Notably, wherever Muslims go they continue to identify themselves by the word “Muslim.” They do not translate it as “submitted to God” in the nations where they have emigrated. For example, one will find a “Muslim Student Association” at most universities, but one will not find an “Association of Students Submitted to God.”

Another imam respondent, U2, an Indian ethnic, stated that a Muslim who comes to believe in the biblical narrative regarding Jesus Christ is no longer a Muslim in the eyes of the Muslim community:

“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.”

The conclusion from this imam is that a Muslim who comes to believe in the biblical narrative regarding Jesus has indeed rejected Muhammad’s teachings and can no longer be considered a Muslim.

Interestingly, neither the imams, the Muslim laypersons, nor the Muslim-background Christians brought up the notion of “cultural Muslims.” They did not raise the possibility of a person

remaining culturally Muslim but spiritually non-Muslim, or quasi-Muslim. No one said that a person who is once a Muslim is always a Muslim. To do so would deny the whole Islam corpus of literature on apostasy. Therefore, this fieldwork argues against the use of the word Muslim as primarily a cultural descriptor.

## V. Indigenous Assessments of the Insider Paradigm

This section assesses from an indigenous perspective the main tenets of the IMP in the Muslim context. First, Muslim scholars have not followed Christian missionaries in moving toward a reconciled Christology. In fact, the Islamic distinctive of *tawhid* (Divine Unity) makes the biblical and Islamic Christologies mutually exclusive. If Muslims were to move toward a biblical Christology, they would necessarily need to deny *tawhid*, which is the cornerstone of the Islamic faith. Bosnian Muslim scholar Smail Balić's final assessment on the potential for a reconciled Christology rings true, "the chasm seems to be unbridgeable" (1979, 1). Mahmoud Ayoub is a Muslim professor with moderate views and is the only Muslim scholar cited by Rick Brown in his "Biblical Muslims" article. However, even the accommodating Dr. Ayoub cannot bring himself to accept a divinely incarnated Word: "Islam would not go on to say, 'And the Word was God.' God transcends his revelation" (2007, 12).

The Palestinian imam whom I interviewed, U5, stated that the Qur'an unequivocally rejects the divinity of Christ:

"You will never find a Muslim scholar who believes there is anything in the Qur'an that supports the divinity of Jesus. The words *kalimatullah* (word of God) and *ruhallah* (Spirit of God) will be understood by Arabic speakers. They do not mean Jesus is divine. There are lots of expressions in the Qur'an and *hadith* like this. *Baytullah* is "the house of God," not "God is the house."

Muslim scholars understand the broader picture and role of Jesus in Islam. Tarif Khalidi sums up eloquently: "Clearly there is *something* about Jesus which makes his Qur'anic image so utterly different from the Jesus of the Gospels ... He is the only prophet in the Qur'an who is deliberately made to distance himself from the doctrines that his community is said to hold about him" (2003: 11-12). Similarly, Sahih al-Bukhari has the Islamic Jesus, according to Muhammad, rebuking Christians upon His return to earth because they wrongly promoted Him to a status above that of a mortal man (vol. 4, book 55, 657). The same *hadith* narrates Jesus breaking the cross in His Islamic second coming.

Therefore, Christian missionaries, such as Kraft, Brown, Greeson and Higgins, have taken steps to promote a reconciled theology (now being called by some as "Chrislam" (see Lingel, Morton and Nikides, 2012)). However, Muslims are not moving toward them. Instead, they continue to insist that Jesus is merely a prophet who promotes the Islamic theological agenda. Khalidi rightly notes the significant differences in the body of literature he calls the "Muslim Gospel" (that is, the Qur'anic and *hadith* passages pertaining to Jesus): "Jesus is always identified as a Muslim prophet—and this must be constantly borne in mind, for he is, after all, a figure molded in an Islamic environment" (2003, 44).

## Contemporary Muslims Assess Insider Muslims

My own PhD research is the first to interview Muslim laypersons and clergy for their perspectives on the IMP. As mentioned above, in these interviews I described a hypothetical Muslim who strays from Islam. This individual comes to believe that God has visited the earth in the form of Jesus, who died on the cross and rose again. I then narrated that the hypothetical lead character continued to claim Muslim identity and attend the Islamic mosque for prayers and Muslim holidays. I asked the interviewees if the hypothetical figure was right in doing so. These follow-up questions evoked bewilderment and confusion on the part of several of the Muslim interviewees. If some had never heard of a Muslim leaving Islam, few would have encountered this specific scenario. An Uzbek scholar, U4, blurted out, “He is a confused guy! He can call himself whatever he wants, but people won’t take him seriously.”

In summary, sixteen of the twenty Muslim interviewees (80 percent) did not accept the protagonist’s claims to retain Muslim identity. Several considered the hypothetical figure as a confused or hypocritical person with whom they pled to make a clear choice about religion. Moroccan MM6 introduced a powerful and evocative Islamic concept in his response to this question as he labeled the Ahmed character a *munafiq* (hypocrite). *Munafiq* is a Qur’anic word still used by Muslims 1,400 years later.

A Bangladeshi man, MM10, reiterated the *munafiq*/hypocrite theme: “No. He is not pure. He is holding out one thing, and believing another thing. That is never the sign of a good man.” His Bangladeshi compatriot, FM2, sat up in her chair, pointed her finger, and sternly announced, “I will catch her! She is not honest. She is trying to manufacture the Bible and our Muslim stuff into one thing” These responses indicate that many Muslims will not be comfortable with a person who holds biblical beliefs and yet claims he or she is still a Muslim.

## Muslim-background Christians Assess Insider Muslims

Though Muslims and Muslim-background Christians may disagree on some major things, they united in rejecting the IM paradigm. I asked the identical question to the Muslim-background Christians whether the hypothetical Muslim who came to believe in the biblical Jesus was right to continue calling himself or herself a Muslim. Nineteen of the 20 respondents felt it was wrong of the hypothetical figure to continue claiming Muslim identity.

Several of the Muslim-background Christians stated they have gone through a situation similar to the one hypothetical vignette. Though these Muslim-background Christians are presently living in Diaspora, many of them are enduring excruciating social and family pressure because of their decisions to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Many were disowned after their conversions to Christ. One was poisoned nearly to death. Another was recently blamed for a tragic death that occurred in the family.

A Turkish woman, FB9, gives an apt summary statement regarding the predicament of Ahmed/Fatimeh, “You can’t have it both ways.” MB1 from Burkina Faso feels Ahmed’s insistence on continued Muslim identity is a denial of Christ, “To remain a Muslim is to deny his

faith.” The Iranian MB5 echoes this reply: “He is denying Christ by doing so. It’s one or the other.”

A Pakistani man, MB9, indicates the Ahmed figure may seek to avoid persecution through the IMP, “He thinks he is a Muslim by his own interpretation. I would not agree with him doing this because he’s disguising himself as a Muslim. He does not want to deal with the repercussions the Muslims are going to give him.” Here MB9 concurs with the *‘ulama* who indicated in the previous chapter that the term Muslim is not a term individuals can re-interpret according to their own interpretations.

### **Field Research Conclusion**

This research mitigates the viability of the IM paradigm in the Muslim context. According to Islamic teachings, as well as the sentiments of Muslim-born person whom I interviewed, a Muslim who comes to believe the biblical narrative regarding Jesus Christ is no longer a Muslim in the eyes of the Muslim community. Such a person no longer retains Muslim identity. Insider movements in the Muslim context can therefore only ultimately fail because the Muslim community has long ago decided that the indispensable ingredient for remaining in good standing inside the Muslim community is the affirmation of the prophethood of Muhammad. Yet Muhammad’s prophetic input regarding Jesus Christ is of such an anti-biblical trajectory that those who continue to affirm this prophethood, or remain under the collective affirmation of such, will not fully find either their individual identity in the biblical Jesus Christ or their corporate identity in the body of Christ.

Note that I do not suggest that no souls are being saved in movements that are being reported as Insider Movements. If participants in such movements have indeed come to faith in the Bible and Jesus Christ as Lord, they are no longer Muslims and they no longer retain Muslim identity in the eyes of the *umma*. Therefore, they do not meet the working definition of insider Muslims presented by Rebecca Lewis. We must consider them non-Muslims—and thus non-Insiders—if they in fact have experienced salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. In these cases, they are simply being mislabeled as “Muslims” in the present tense. An analogy would be an atheist who comes to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who nevertheless refers to himself as an “Atheist follower of Jesus.”

### **VI. Missiological Implications of this Research**

1. The Christological chasm forms a theological barrier to Christ-centered insider movements developing in the Muslim context.
2. The heterodox re-interpretation of Islam by non-Muslims violates the Muslim community’s ability to define and identify itself, insults the intelligence of Muslims, and thus cannot provide a solid missiological foundation. Higgins, as quoted above, is correct in stating that IM is dependent on a radical re-interpretation of Islam, and redefining the term “Muslim.” However, these initiatives threaten to demolish the identity markers the Muslim community has set up to define itself, and thus represents a tragic case of neo-Colonialism. Muslim identity belongs to the Muslim community, not to missionaries.

3. It is unclear whether the movements being described by IM advocates are moving toward the biblical Jesus, toward the Qur'anic Jesus—who is a mere prophet shorn of his saving power—or hovering between the two positions.
4. Christian efforts to bend the biblical Christology down toward the Islamic Christology threaten to undermine the uniqueness of the biblical Lord Jesus Christ.
5. This research argues against Lewis' contention that personal Muslim identity is God-given and unchangeable (Lewis 2009). If Muslims renounce the prophetic credibility of Muhammad, they are no longer Muslims, according to the Muslim community's own criterion for Muslim identity. Ethnicity is unchangeable since it involves a person's physical DNA, but religious identity is changeable. Jesus, as Lord, has the right to change a person's religious identity.
6. This research renders Lewis' definition of IM as a contradiction in terms in the Muslim context. Retaining Muslim identity requires an affirmation of the prophetic veracity of Muhammad, who claimed that Jesus Christ was neither Savior nor Lord. Therefore, no person who retains Muslim identity—based on the indigenous definition—can simultaneously live “under the Lordship of Jesus Christ” (Lewis 2007, 75).
7. People movements to the biblical Christ can happen and are happening in Muslim contexts, but these are based on individual and collective decisions to reject Muhammad. Muslims who come to faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior retain their ethnic identity and have the potential to become spiritual salt and light within these groups if they remain faithful to Christ and avoid the pitfalls associated with insisting on permanently retaining Muslim identity.

## **VII. Concluding Thoughts**

IM advocates created a paradigm which they envisioned could create mass movements to Christ in the Muslim world. They have also demonstrated their understanding that retaining Muslim identity requires an affirmation of Muhammad. Therefore it is not surprising that they sought to repair the image of Muhammad by attempting theological reconciliation with Muhammad's positions. By doing so, they sought to clear the way for a large group of Muslims to come to Christ, without ever leaving Islam, Muhammad, the mosque, or Muslim identity.

Ironically, IMP is imperiled in the Muslim context because it fails to account for key contextual factors. Most importantly, obtaining and retaining Muslim identity is inextricably linked to an affirmation of Muhammad. Because Muhammad's teachings regarding Jesus contradict the Bible, those who seek to permanently retain Muslim identity will not be able to fully find their identity in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This research has sought to amplify indigenous voices in this missiological discussion. I welcome further indigenous input into this discussion. It is hoped that this input will be a source

of guidance in ministry to Muslims at a time when unprecedented opportunities exists to share the Gospel with Muslims

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Notes:

1. Field interviewee codes are “U” for ‘*ulama* (scholar), “MM” for male Muslim, “FM” for female Muslim, “MB” for male believer, and “FB” for female believer. All interviews were conducted by the author in Metro New York between August and October 2013.

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