

ISFM Orlando 2009: "Best Practices in Frontier Mission"

Unpacking the Insider Paradigm: An Open Discussion on Points of Diversity

H. L. Richard (Moderator)

H. L. Richard

The point of this workshop is to grapple with some of the diversity within the insider paradigm. It's partly for self understanding and definition for those of us who work from an insider understanding, and partly as a response to the numerous critics of the insider paradigm. I'm not the best one to deal with the critics of the insider paradigm, although I face more criticism than I would like in the Hindu debate. But mostly the Hindu side of things is under the radar. The contentious matters are on the Islamic side. If you're not aware of that, blessed are you! To me I thought it would be helpful if we could define where there is diversity, where our own internal discussions should be focused. There is diversity over the right way to do this, especially in defining what is error, what is syncretism. So this is to be a workshop on those kinds of matters, and I hope you are ready to contribute. Otherwise, I hope you have a dancing bear ready to come up here when this thing collapses in the next 10 minutes.

There hasn't been a preceding session on the many definitions of insider movements, so some of you who might be wondering "What is this guy talking about, what is this workshop about?" If you will permit me, then, I will set the stage so that we have some orientation for our discussion.

One of the interesting internal debates is the C-scale, which I hope you are all familiar with. The C-scale was developed by John Travis, who examined the degrees of contextualization and cultural assimilation of church models in the Islamic world.

C1 is basically the foreign church that has very little relationship to the Muslim culture, except that it is in the Muslim country, like the Armenian churches in Iran. All the way up to C6 which is the secret believers, where you don't even know that they are there, but there they are, because they are completely assimilated and secret. C5 has been understood by many as insider movement contextualization. In my rather distant following of the discussions, most are

This is the condensed version of a participatory workshop held the final day of the 2009 meeting of the International Society for Frontier Missiology in Orlando, Florida, September 15–17, 2009. The discussion was led and moderated by H. L. Richard, a consulting editor of the IJFM and president of the Rethinking Forum. Except for plenary speakers, contributions from the floor will remain anonymous.

saying, “No, there are subtle differences between C5 and insider movement.” But I think for our purposes here we need both of these definitions to get started.

Here is the definition of C5 from the fourth edition of *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (pg. 665):

C5—Community of Muslims who follow Jesus yet remain culturally and officially Muslim. C5 believers remain legally and socially within the community of Islam. Somewhat similar to the Messianic Jewish movement, aspects of Islamic theology which are incompatible with the Bible are rejected or reinterpreted if possible. Participation in corporate Islamic worship varies from person to person and group to group. C5 believers meet regularly with other C5 believers and share their faith with unsaved Muslims. Unsaved Muslims may see C5 believers as theologically deviant and may eventually expel them from the community of Islam. C5 believers are viewed as Muslims by the Muslim community and think of themselves as Muslims who follow Isa the Messiah.

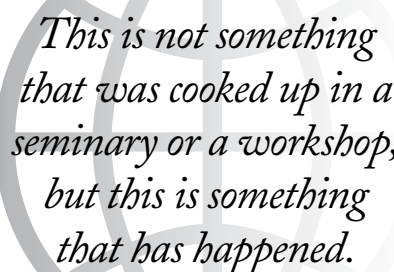
“C5 believers remain legally and socially within the community of Islam,” and the principles go over to Hinduism and Buddhism and other situations. C5 is high level contextualization, an insider identity. So you do not convert from Islam to Christianity, but you remain by law, by society, by culture, Muslim. This is somewhat similar to the Messianic Jewish movement.

“Aspects of Islamic theology which are incompatible with the Bible are rejected.” We’re not talking about syncretism. “Aspects of Islamic theology incompatible with the Bible are rejected or are reinterpreted if possible. Participation in corporate Islamic worship,” which is one of the controversies, “varies from person to person and group to group.” That’s what this workshop is all about. Where are the variations? “C5 believers meet regularly with other C5 believers and share their faith with unsaved Muslims.” This meeting together is very crucial.

If they’re not doing that, then they are C6, secret believers. But these are open disciples of Jesus, sharing their faith of Jesus, but they are not identified primarily as Christians. That’s C5.

Here is an insider movement definition from Becky Lewis who has also described insider movements in the new edition of *Perspectives* (pp 673ff). This definition came out of a key consultation that tried to bring clarity to the idea of an “insider movement.”

An insider movement is any movement to faith in Christ where the gospel flows through pre-existing communi-



This is not something that was cooked up in a seminary or a workshop, but this is something that has happened.

ties and social networks, and where believing families, as valid expressions of faith in Christ, remain inside their socio-religious communities, retaining their identity as members of that community while living under the lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.

Note this phrase, “Retaining their identity as members of that community.” If you are in a Muslim community, or a Buddhist community, or a Hindu community, you maintain that identity in that socio-religious community. That is where you work out your discipleship to Jesus. You follow Jesus as a Hindu, as a Muslim, as a Buddhist, or as whatever other variety of socio-religious community you might be from. So that’s what we’re talking about with insider movements. It is my understanding that this is not something that was cooked up in a seminary or in a workshop, but this is something that has happened. Those

of us who are engaging with it and talking about it and working to come up with definitions of it, we’re talking about something that has happened and is out there. On the Hindu side, which of course I am more familiar with, some of you might have read the book “Churchless Christianity” by Herb Hofer. I might say it’s a terrible title for the book, but that’s what Herb came up with 20 years ago. He didn’t like it then and doesn’t like the title now, so I am not insulting him. But Herb was describing something that was out there, yet that book is still attacked for what it seems to be “prescribing.” The first paragraph of the book is very emphatic that it is “describing” what has happened and what is happening. In many cases we are thrilled, and in other cases, like the person I mentioned in the case study yesterday, you scratch your head and say “Boy, there are so many strange things going on in the midst of good things.” So, let that provide a quick introduction to our discussion.

So, where is the diversity and how should we view the diversity that is developed and is developing in these insider movements? Who wants to start us off here?

Floor

I was just going to say, I think a lot of it is definition. What does it mean when they call themselves Muslims who follow Jesus? There’s a complicated identity there. They have to unpack what it means. I’ve heard a lot of people argue insider movements one way or the other, and a lot of times they set up straw men to knock down and don’t take the time to really understand what the issues are.

H. L. Richard

That’s true, but is there diversity among insider thinkers and practitioners about how best to live in a Muslim society? That’s really our focus here. This is not primarily apologetic to the Christian world. We are examining the range of our assumptions about the insider per-

spective. I think on the Hindu side that when we talk about Hindus we know what we are talking about. But I don't know on the Muslim side. Do you all know and agree on what you are talking about? Or is there a difference in understanding?

Rick Brown

It seems that what is happening with insider movements in the Hindu culture has a lot of variety in it compared to what we see in the Muslim world. But there is nevertheless some variety in those Muslim contexts where we are finding insider phenomena.

My first encounters with insider believers were shocking to me. I had to get my head around it. One fellow I respect a lot, just an amazing servant and minister, is an Iraqi Shi'ite living outside his homeland. He goes to traditional C2 Christian churches, he's not part of a body of insiders. And there are several like him. He participates in normal C2 traditional church life, but his identity is very much Iraqi Shi'ite. That is his identity. He would never call himself a Christian, because that to him is a cultural identification. In his country the Christians don't accept him, they don't think he is one of them, and he doesn't think he is one of them. All of his sense of identity is with his own ethnic group, and that's Iraqi Shi'ite. That's his ethnic group, and that's who he is culturally and ethnically. But to attend a C2 church he has to do so secretly and live a double life. Few insiders are in a position to do that.

So the first insiders I met were going to C2 churches, perhaps because there was nothing else available, but their sense of belonging was to the Muslim community. When Muslims were getting bad press, they felt bad about it, because those are their people. It's like if you are an American overseas and people say bad things about America you might feel bad. Or if America does something that embarrasses you, you might feel embarrassed. It's the same way with a cultural Muslim.

So insider believers can be found across the C-spectrum of Christ-centered communities, although insider movements only occur in C4 and C5.

His identity is with his birth community. Not his spiritual identity, but his ethnic identity. His spiritual identity is with the Kingdom of God.

You find believers with Muslim identity all the way across the spectrum from C1 to C6. Like the Iraqi Shi'ite brother they easily flow in the Muslim community. They just fit in so obviously and so clearly that they are readily accepted even as followers of Christ. Every single one that I know can easily go to a mosque, engage people in conversations about Jesus, and talk to officials. And it's not just because they retained their Muslim social identity in name, it's because they have retained their Muslim cultural manners and sense of belonging. I could give you story after story. Other Muslims recognize them and accept them in their communities even though they are followers of Jesus Christ. Insiders are able to minister to other Muslims because they have not rejected their community and its valued traditions, so their community does not reject them. So insider believers can be found across the C-spectrum of Christ-centered communities, although insider movements occur only in C4 and C5.

H. L. Richard

Thank you for that. I think the place of diversity that we are trying to focus on is insiders who freely associate with the Christian churches, and many would be horrified by that. Some of my Hindu friends in Christ would say "That is not insider at all. Their going to that church is not possible." Now, they are also humble enough that they would say "if you are saying that is happening then obviously it is possible." It's not possible in our Hindu situation. That may be a place of diversity in comparing these religious traditions, whether an insider can be

associated with the traditional church and still be insider. In many cases that is not possible, for if you go to that kind of church you are rejected in your community.

Floor

As we have trained some Muslim background believers who have come to Christ, one successful thing we have done is to take 20 stories from the book of Acts and just share the narratives and watch the nationals come up with applications. One of the applications was, "Paul went into the temple, surely we can do the same things," and they in turn felt freed up to be that C5 believer.

H. L. Richard

Attitude and approach to the official institutions of the socio-religious community is a place of definite diversity. In the Muslim sphere, we could perhaps bring the question of honoring famous religious figures under that as well. On the Hindu side, how does it relate to the idolatry of the temple. That is probably the biggest problem. Obviously, if you just take the Bible then it's easy. You don't do any of it. But when you look at it sociologically, so much of it is not even religious, it's just traditional. In the Hindu family, half the family members don't believe any of the idolatry related to the temple. But they go through it anyway for the sake of the family and society, not because they believe anything about religion. Then the Christian comes along and is over-conscientized in one sense. I mean, if you are really over-conscientized about those kinds of things then you can't go to India because every plane, every train, is surrendered to some deity.

But you can't live in America because our god of materialism is everywhere;

and not to insult current circumstances, but are we not meeting in an idolatrous temple? Couldn't we find a 1-star hotel to meet in instead of a 5-star hotel? So at some point you have to make your adjustments to reality, and it's complicated.

One of the things I want to get to, and I think is a key thing in the criticisms of the insider movements, is the question of who makes the decisions? What does our Holy Book say about who has the authority to make the decisions? "We've had the book the longest time, we're the bosses around here, and we're going to make the decisions around here." If you want to live in that fiction you can, but no one is going to listen to you anyway so you may as well face the facts that all we have is persuasion, and you only have persuasion as you have relationship; and earning respect by demonstrating a humble and godly spirituality. If we don't have that, passing ecclesiastical decrees isn't going to do anything. Sorry, I got off on my own tangents there.

Floor

What creates this diversity is the experience of those who come to Christ. Some are part of Muslim communities who are on friendly terms with Christians. Others, like in the Shi'ite communities, as one becomes bolder you start to get the reaction. Then there is the experience of the person coming to Christ out of disgust with Islam. He is running from it, and he is going to want something else. Slightly different is another person who is seeking God and didn't find him in Islam but he found him in Christianity, and he is satisfied.

H. L. Richard

The relation of a person to their socio-religious community before coming to Christ will mark dramatically how they view and how they relate to that socio-religious community after they come to Christ. That's a challenge for those who are involved with such people. A lot of us who work from the

insider paradigm would say we need to take the rebel who would say "This is bad and I want out" and we need to teach them otherwise, recognizing exceptions where there is real evil and abuse in some families and societies and one needs to be separate from that particular setting. Generally speaking I would say it is basically a biblical mandate to honor your father, which is just one point for honoring your society, honoring your elders, honoring your social structure. It's a biblical mandate to not spit on your family and your traditions, but to honor



them. The convert who is coming out as a rebel is a complicated pastoral situation, but in their reaction we have to teach them to discriminate. Indeed, there is evil in every culture, as there is certainly in ours, and we obviously don't want to require participation in cultural evils. Thank you for those comments.

Floor

Obviously another distinction would be whether it's an insider movement on its own or an insider movement that is being promoted and financially supported from outside. That is a big difference. Where are the funds coming from? You suggested we only have persuasion, but a lot of times we have funds, too.

H. L. Richard

Very good point. How much outside support for the so-called insider movement is a critical matter of

diversity that can introduce a lot of complications.

Floor

Another point of diversity is what perspective is that person coming from when they are evaluating insiders. Are they coming at this from a prescriptive point of view; trying to identify believers who want to see themselves as within the existing socio-religious community. Or do they see this as a strategic move to plant a church and they think insider movements are the best way to eventually develop a separatist church. That perspective affects also how we see prescriptive vs. descriptive understanding.

Floor

While I'm excited about insider movements, it seems like whenever God creates something fresh, the enemy likes to imitate it. The missions historian Paul Pierson likes to point out that during the Great Awakening, not only were there incredible new things going on in the church, but there were a lot of imitations. And during Finney's great spiritual movement in upstate New York, you also have Mormons and other sects from that generation that took root. Don't we need to be careful as we promote insider movements, to be aware that these movements can be sidetracked by the enemy? So what are the things that we want to do in preventing something from going off-track? Certainly the place of Scripture is one of the key ingredients to distinguish between a Christian sectarian emphasis and a heretical cult. One of the things that we've discovered is that a cult is always changing the Scriptures and has a dominant personality. So, can we say that whenever an insider movement begins to fiddle around with our Scriptures, then that is a great concern. We've always got to be able to say that the Word of God is the Word of God. Likewise, if there is a dominant personality, which is different than a strong leader, we need

to have our eyes opened to how this directs an insider movement.

H. L. Richard

There's a lot of stuff that could be unpacked there. In the Hindu world is the reality of the guru. If I took too seriously some of what you said, most of the church movements in India could just be written off as cultic. The congregations in India want a guru. And the Hindu movement of Subba Rao that I've researched, and which I mentioned yesterday, had a very low regard for Scripture. In some of his writings he made himself into something like a Christ figure in ways that are exceedingly uncomfortable for us. There was a certain point when I was relating to one of Subba Rao's key followers that I felt I had to ask this question of whether he was following Christ as Subba Rao. It was not something I at all felt comfortable to do. Everything I saw were wonderful warm-hearted disciples of Jesus. But because he seemed to be a Christ figure in his own writings, in the songs that they sing, I thought I had to ask the question. So I asked the question and got the perfect response. The man was deeply offended. He said, "We know the difference between Christ and our *guru-ji*." And that was what I expected, that was what I wanted, and then I apologized for asking a rather ridiculous and offensive question. But if we don't get gurus in the Hindu world we're not going to get Christ movements. Thank you for those thoughts. This is a complicated area where we can expect points of diversity.

Floor

It is complicated and I think we need to press the question. Even in our own American culture, we have pastors who are extremely strong personalities, and yet we are able to recognize when a pastor is a strong personality and when he becomes more of a heretical issue. Certainly there are cultural issues involved, but I think we can distinguish between the two.

In that country, which is very strict, with a lot of hot-headed people, he put a cross on the wall of his mosque and preached the Bible to his congregation.

H. L. Richard

We have to try to, anyway. But even more important is to teach others to discern. When we recognize this guy is going off the rails, and he takes a million people with him, it doesn't matter that we recognize it, but those million people need to recognize it.

Rick Brown

I've been asked to share something that really illustrates the core issue with insider movements: that there is no special resistance to the gospel among Muslims, but there is resistance to the cultural and political baggage that comes with it. Persecution of converts from Muslim communities usually has nothing to do with following Jesus, and everything to do with the sense that they have betrayed their community, renounced it, and joined a rival ethnic group or political block. I just want to give you one story that illustrates the significance of insiders serving Jesus only, without the baggage of Western Christendom.

There's a man in an Asian nation, an imam, who like many imams, decided to study the Bible because of endorsements of it in the Qur'an. And through his study of the Bible he came to faith in Jesus Christ. A lot of these imams, when they come to faith and start preaching from the Bible, they don't tell people they are using the Bible. They just tell people "I'm going to tell the story of Abraham" or "Here's a lesson about David" or about Jesus. They give them the story but they don't cite the Bible. This particular imam was quite open and told his congregation he was reading from the Taurat (Torah) or the Injil. He was very open about using the these Scriptures. And he told about the death of Jesus on behalf of our sins and about his resurrection and triumph over death, and his congrega-

tion accepted it, as is the case in many other places. Remember that it's not forbidden in Islam to read the Bible and follow Jesus. It's commonly discouraged, but it's not forbidden. And he continued preaching from the Bible for a long time. He even put a cross on the wall of his mosque. Can you believe that? In that country, which is a very strict, with a lot of hot-headed people, he put a cross on the wall of his mosque and preached the Bible to his congregation. And the congregation kept coming. Now, people were watching him, he was being scrutinized, but he was following Christ and leading people to Christ in the community.

One day, a visitor in his house found a book that was a Christian publication. And it had been stamped in the front, showing it was from a Christian mission. When the visitor told others about this, the imam was chased out of town and never allowed to return. So you see, he could preach the Bible, he could preach Christ, he could put a cross on his mosque, but he could not have a link to a traditional Christian mission, because of all of the geopolitical things that that implies, all of the associations with ethnic and global rivalries. That's why insider movements can prosper as long as they stay inside the community and distance themselves from the traditional ethnic rivalries that exist between cultural Muslims and cultural Christians.

H. L. Richard

Again, illustrating the diversity point that came in earlier. There are insider movements that get some outside help, usually at least a bit surreptitiously, but sometimes a bit more openly.

Floor

That brings up the matter of how insider movements deal with the rest of our Christian community. It's a question of ecclesiology. For me, the church is whoever is a part of the body of Christ. That means an insider movement is a church, meeting at the mosque or whatever. I notice that several of those who attack insider movements point out that it's absolutely critical that believers identify with the historic Christian church. So it is an ecclesiastical question, isn't it?

H. L. Richard

That is a major point of diversity in views toward insider movements, what ecclesiological views we hold, what sacramental practices are encouraged or discouraged, and then their relation to the traditional churches. I feel that from the perspective of the Hindu world that this is perhaps the main problem, that an insider movement is not associated with the historical churches, and that is offensive to many. What really disturbs me is when Baptists get upset about that, and I say, I don't mind Anglicans with their view of sacraments being upset about that, but why Baptists would be upset about that I find pretty inconsistent.

Floor

I've been thinking a lot about this over the years. One of the things I see developing is confusion over identifying Christianity as a religion, versus what does it mean to follow Jesus. Does that make sense? Sometimes a lot of the tension comes over people who want to convert people to traditions which are culture-bound, versus allowing the gospel to grow into new traditions in the new culture. Sometimes people are allowed to retain the cultural identity and the label for that is "Muslim" or "Hindu," but their heart allegiance has most certainly shifted to Jesus. It's hard for us to grasp how our own tradition is not being reflected in this new environment.

H. L. Richard

I think that's very true, and I think most people agree with that. The problem is, we can't agree on what is tradition and what is good biblical exegesis. And so some will say, "Baptism is tradition, we can do away with it" and others will say "No, no, no, Baptism is not tradition, but any way you want to do it is fine," but still others think the Bible insists on baptism being done in one particular way. And so when an understanding of the Bible comes in, everyone will agree we shouldn't bring in our



traditions, but what we don't agree with is just what our traditions are versus what actually are the teachings of Scripture.

Floor

This narrows down to the difficult issue of hermeneutics. We all say, of course, that the Bible is our basic revelation of God's character. But how we see that obviously is different because one's worldview has cultural lenses.

H. L. Richard

Applying this last comment to the previous concern that insiders don't line up with historic traditions of the church, could we get an agreed basis with those who are "anti-insider"? Can we all agree we don't want to impose our particular traditions? Don't we all have to agree that we all have different views? I mean, if every one of us listed our top 100 points of theological belief, we probably wouldn't get 2 matching lists, would we? Hopefully if we put

our top 5 we would agree, but 100? No. How do we deal with diversity among ourselves on insider issues? What is our basic attitude?

I have to say that the attacking attitude is very troubling. That straw men are being set up and torn down is very problematic. But I think fundamentally most of us would say these decisions are going to be made by the insiders. And what authority do those opposing insider movements actually think we have, what do they really want us to do? I am not leading any insider movements and I don't think I'm involved with any insider movements. I'm involved with inside individuals and hoping and praying and dreaming of movements. It's those individuals who have to work out these things. I was just on the phone with a guy in a complex insider situation who was asking me "What do I do about this?" I said, "You and I can't do anything about that, but you need to teach this guy to wrestle with these things, and he has to make the decisions." Don't expect me to make a decision for some guy I have never met. I think I have some perspectives for him to think about, some of them biblical, some of them from other experiences and from history and so on. But if we are going to produce strong disciples, they have to be people who wrestle with the Bible and with situations and cultures and come up with their own answers, and then finally what it comes down to is that they have to live with the consequences of those decisions.

Floor

I was just thinking, with opposition to insider movements, it's because of our own ethnocentricity. I'm not talking about the true gospel, but as you see discipleship forming within the insider movement, there's probably a maturity that comes in with Christ; at least I would hope so. Seeing ethnocentricity without hatred; allowing them to work it all out in love. IJFM