

# On Religious Identity Inside Out Probing Presuppositions among Insider Movements

by Dick Brogden

<sup>a</sup>Lewis: This statement implies missiologists invented “insider movements” and are promoting them as a new technique. In fact, these type of movements started to happen and we are being forced to evaluate if they are biblically legitimate. When Paul and Peter stood before the Jerusalem council, they were reacting to events, not introducing a new “creative missiological” approach to the Gentiles. They were asking “If God is accepting these people by giving them the Holy Spirit, what should our response be?” We are forced by events to ask similar questions today.

<sup>b</sup>Lewis: No communities are value neutral (Islamic, American, or otherwise). All families and individuals are also fallen. History has shown that all new movements to Christ are equally prone to syncretism, whether they remain inside their own culture or adopt a foreign culture. Believers who continue to study God’s word eventually become less syncretistic.

<sup>c</sup>Lewis: I should clarify that I was not the inventor of the kingdom circles, but merely represented them this way.

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Dick Brogden has ventured a response to Rebecca Lewis’ article on Insider Movements from *IJFM* 26:1 (available online at [ijfm.org](http://ijfm.org)). He’s done us all a great service by allowing Lewis to make a running commentary on his article so that this journal can help surface the assumptions lurking beneath this continuing debate for or against the “insider” phenomenon. While contention seems to surround the inappropriate validation of Islamic religion, finer nuances and complexities emerge in this exchange. Rebecca Lewis then formulates a more comprehensive biblical apologetic in the article that follows. This journal hopes this approach will encourage genuine dialogue and reasoned exchange between what are increasingly divided camps.

Insider movements are the current creative missiological rage.<sup>a</sup> According to Rebecca Lewis,

Insider movements can be defined as movements to obedient faith in Christ that remain integrated with or inside their natural community. In any insider movement there are two distinct elements:

1. The gospel takes root within pre-existing communities or social networks, which become the main expression of ‘church’ in that context. Believers are not gathered from diverse social networks to create a ‘church.’ New parallel social structures are not invented or introduced.
2. Believers retain their identity as members of their socio-religious community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

It behooves us to probe one basic presupposition of this ‘Insider Movement’ missiology, for if it is misguided, there is a danger of syncretism. We need to probe the assumption that pre-existing communities are value neutral and that God intends Muslims to remain in the socio-religious community into which they were born.<sup>b</sup>

Evangelical missionaries broadly agree on some aspects of Insider Movement missiology. There is general consensus, for example, that Muslims (Jews, Hindus, et al.) do not have to take on another cultural form of Christianity in order to become followers of Jesus. The ‘Kingdom Circles’ per Rebecca Lewis are sound, fair and accepted.<sup>c</sup> The agreed-upon aspects of Insider Movement missiology are not new; they are indigenous principles repackaged.

## *Principle of God-Given Identity and Community*

The presupposition in question is simply this: Pre-existing communities, such as Islam, are value neutral and God created Muslims to continue within Islamic community.<sup>d</sup> The Insider Movement can be broad; one proponent, Rebecca Lewis, states:

Scriptures seem to indicate that this identity, and the community a person is born into, were determined in advance by God. For example, Paul declares to the Athenians that God “made every nation of men...and determined the times set for them and the exact places they should live” (Acts 17:26). When we encourage believers to remain in their families and networks, and to retain their birth identities, we honor these God-given relationships.<sup>2</sup>

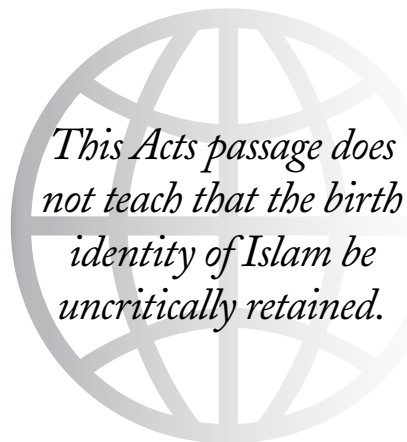
This is an unfortunate twist of hermeneutics on the part of Lewis. This Acts passage does not forbid changing nationalities, socio-economic rise and fall, or geographic change, nor does it stratify or blithely endorse culture. It affirms a sovereign God who created culture and language. It makes no assumed leap that religions with all their excesses and errors are God-endorsed.<sup>e</sup> This Acts passage does not teach that the birth identity of Islam be uncritically retained; it teaches God’s sovereignty regarding birth geographically and the rise and wane of earthly kingdoms.<sup>3f</sup>

The problematic area is not the geographic or social (family) community but the religious identification. The “God-Given Identity and Community” principle is applied across all socio-religious contexts. If the principle is sound, then God must want everyone to remain in the socio-religious contexts into which they were born. Lewis’ point refers to monotheists but it leaves room to apply this same principle to other belief systems, such as Canaanites remaining Baal worshippers, American hedonists continuing in devotion to mammon, or a young girl born to a Satanist family, all willed by

God to remain in such socio-religious networks. I would contend that there are antithetical and mutually exclusive ideas, networks and religions.<sup>5</sup>

Biblical history is replete with examples of men and women born into religious communities from which God willed their escape:

- The Acts 15 passage is quoted rightly in defense of Insider Movements to show that Gentiles (Muslims) do not have to become Jews (Cultural Christians) to follow Jesus. An attending truth, however, that is



often overlooked is that religious change was directly asked for. “Abstaining from things offered to idols, blood, things strangled and from sexual immorality...” (Acts 15:29) were all direct socio-religious practices of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. There had to be a turning, a ceasing from these socio-religious elements.<sup>4h</sup>

- Jesus expressly told Peter that all meat was permissible to eat in a direct breach of his socio-religious heritage (Acts 10). It can be argued that all the Apostles, even Paul, steadily moved away from their socio-religious heritage of Judaism to an inclusive identity centered on Christ. Temple visits faded, Jewish socio-cultural practices became marginal, and Christ identity became primary.<sup>1</sup>
- Some religious practices are abominable to God. God does not want his people to continue in the religious contexts

<sup>d</sup>Lewis: *What is being presupposed is that Jesus movements within any culture or religious structure, no matter how fallen, will be able to transform it. That the gospel is the power of salvation not just to the Jew and to the Greek but also to the Muslim continues to be an amazing revelation to us all!*

<sup>e</sup>Lewis: *Neither the quote selected nor the article referred to assume that “religions with their excesses and errors are God-endorsed.” The only thing stated as God-given is the family and community relationships God sets a person into by their birth, no matter how fallen they are. God’s stated intention (through Abraham) is to bless all these “families of the earth.” Families are blessed and redeemed when the gospel leads to relationships being restored between father and son, mother and daughter, not replaced by family-like relationships with a new church community.*

<sup>f</sup>Lewis: *I agree with this statement completely. NO culture or identity should be uncritically retained. They should be critically retained. Paul saw the faults of both Greek and Jewish religious systems (see Romans 1-3). Yet he admonished Greek believers not to adopt the Jewish cultural/religious forms, but to remain in their own context and vice versa. His point was that God has the power to save within both fallen systems.*

<sup>g</sup>Lewis: *Paul argued that the Gospel had the power to save the Greeks even if they kept eating food offered to idols, making it an issue for their own conscience, not the conscience of the Jewish believers (Romans 14, I Cor. 8). Only those brothers who were “weak” still feared the power of idols if they ate food sacrificed to them. A person can remain within a socio-religious context while looking only to God through Christ for salvation. So the Greek believers did not have to leave their idolatrous socio-religious context (similar to Hinduism today) and become Jewish-style believers in order to put their faith in Jesus Christ and receive freedom from demons, sin, death and hell. What they did have to leave was worshipping idols and practicing immorality. Likewise, American believers continue to have material things while putting off the futile thinking that money will fix our own or anyone else’s true problems.*

<sup>h</sup>Lewis: *Note that before the end of the New Testament era, all of these restrictions except sexual immorality had been lifted on the basis of idols being nothing and a person being responsible before God to abide by their own conscience.*

<sup>i</sup>Lewis: *While I agree that Christ-identity became primary (and does in insider movements as well, if we acknowledge that Christ-identity and Christian-identity are not the same), there is no biblical reason to believe that the Jewish believers gave up their kosher law-keeping ways except when they were in cross-cultural contexts (e.g., eating with Gentile believers).*

that are abominable to him. Deuteronomy 12:29-32 contains several crucial truths:

- a) Some socio-religious aspects are to be cut off and disposed (v. 29).<sup>j</sup>
  - b) Christ followers need to be careful not to be ensnared by how others follow false gods for there are wrong ways to worship the true God (vv. 30-31).<sup>k</sup>
  - c) There are socio-religious practices that the Lord hates (v. 31).<sup>l</sup>
- Naaman's famous request to "bow down in the temple at the hand of my master" is an allowance (an exception), not an endorsement for daily practice. Naaman himself quickly realized that his religious practice would have to drastically change. The fact that he asked for an exemption reveals that he knew the practice to be wrong.<sup>m</sup>

The presupposition that Islam is a God-given community is dangerous.<sup>n</sup> The statements that follow need explanation, verification and qualification. They are stated here in opposition to the presupposition that Islam is spiritually neutral and that God wants those who were born in Islam to stay in Islam while following Jesus:<sup>o</sup>

- Islam is antithetical to biblical Christianity.<sup>5</sup>
- Islam is incompatible with biblical faith in Jesus.
- Islam was birthed in, usually spread by and often upheld currently by deception and coercion.<sup>6</sup>
- Islam is a religion first and a culture second; it is possible (though difficult) to make the distinction.
- Islam as a religion is not redeemable;<sup>7</sup> Muslims are.
- Islam can be denounced;<sup>8</sup> Muslims must be loved.
- Islam has a binding effect upon its followers; Islam is a spiritual bondage.
- Islam must be abandoned.<sup>9p</sup>

By definition, Islam cannot be a God-given community, for Islam is abhorrent to God as a false religion. Islam

is full of self-righteousness and lacks an understanding of sin as offensive to the nature of a holy God. Islam places Mohammed above Jesus. Islam teaches that religious duty grants favor with God. Islam rejects the divinity of Jesus and his sacrificial death. Islam, even in its gentler strands such as Sufism, is an effort to unite with God out of human strength. These attitudes and understandings permeate everything Muslims do and are the basis for their religious activities. These attitudes and understandings and practices are all aberrant; they are all abominable to God.<sup>q</sup>

What are not abhorrent to God are the social practices of Muslims that reflect God's nature and are inherent in Muslim pre-Islamic culture. For example, honor and hospitality are Arab virtues, which predate Islam. These virtues are foreshadowed in the behavior of Lot, himself a Semite and uncle to Ishmael, the father of the Arabs. Lot welcomes strangers into his home (hospitality) and then offers up his daughters (honor) to protect his hospitality. Lot loved his daughters; their violation was his social and emotional demise. The Western mind finds his behavior inexcusable, but Lot was caught between his two non-negotiable values, honor and hospitality. He had to make an impossible choice. Honor and hospitality reflect the image of God; they are Arab cultural characteristics that can be retained even as Islam is rejected.

Muslims do not have to become Christian in an alternative culture in order to follow Jesus. Society and family are not to be shunned or intentionally insulted. Christians in all cultures are to live at peace with all men, "as much as it depends on us." Muslims who follow Jesus should make every effort to remain connected to family and society while being careful not to affirm Islamic doctrine. In the end the gospel does offend Islamic religion.<sup>r</sup>

Great injustice to missiology is done when society and religion are lumped together. Missionaries must advocate

<sup>j</sup>Lewis: *True, there are practices incompatible with the Gospel, and untransformable (like the Aztecs ripping out people's beating hearts, for example, or the Americans ripping living babies from their wombs to preserve our "quality of life").*

<sup>k</sup>Lewis: *I agree.*

<sup>l</sup>Lewis: *All true, not the least of which is the belief that specific religious practices themselves can save people.*

<sup>m</sup>Lewis: *I did not mention Naaman, which some would use as an example of a Muslim believer going into a mosque. However, bold witness and perceptive witness, as Paul models when speaking in the philosophers' forum in Athens, quickly dispels any misconception that the believer still thinks exactly the same. Paul said, "Let me tell you more about the creator God that you have been worshipping without realizing it." Likewise Muslim believers say, "Let me tell you more about the God of Abraham that we have been worshipping but without full knowledge, and about His plan for salvation through Isa al Massih."*

<sup>n</sup>Lewis: *Let me be clear, I never said, "Islam is a God-given community." What I said was that God places people in families and communities and this network of relationships is God-given and their God-given responsibility.*

<sup>o</sup>Lewis: *The highest acknowledged Islamic authority, the Qur'an, states that any questions about its content should be cleared up by reading the other scriptures (Old and New Testaments). Therefore, Muslims have a right, within Islam, to challenge centuries of Islamic interpretation and affirm the true role of Jesus as the Messiah (whose status the Qur'an upholds). In other words, the Qur'an itself gives the Bible the "right of interpretation" or authority over itself. Who are we outsiders to deny these insider believers the right or chance to reform their own Islamic religion and communities, bringing them in line with the truth of scripture? These believers exist and they are doing this already and do not need our permission. This is not a mere missiological idea. Let the gospel take its course among the Muslims and Hindus as it did among the Jews and the Greeks, like yeast in the dough. That process will reveal both the mystery and the power of the Gospel.*

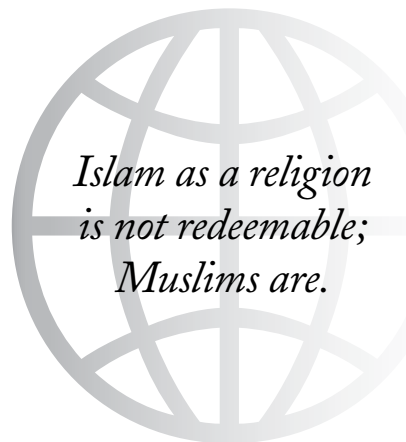
<sup>p</sup>Lewis: *Religions are not redeemed, people are, families are, communities are ("I will set apart a people for Myself."). The insider movements in the early church within Judaism or Greek philosophical socio-religious culture did not redeem those religious systems, but did transform those within them. Likewise, the power of the gospel for salvation to all people groups will be revealed by the transformation of whole families and communities that remain in the Muslim context as true followers of Jesus Christ. In fact it is already happening as fellow Muslims say, "Why is your husband now faithful to you? How were you able to forgive your step-mother? What is different about your relationship to the one true God?"*

for Muslims who follow Jesus to make every effort to remain in their society even as they abandon Islamic religion.<sup>5</sup> This requires delicate surgery on some points. Let the manner and modes employed in following Jesus be neither religiously Islamic nor culturally Christian. If Western cultural Christianity is fatally flawed, then Islamic religion is no less so. Neither should be embraced. There are few cultures now under geographic control of Islam that are younger than Islam. Islam is only 1,400 years old. Almost every single culture now dominated by the religion of Islam has a vibrant and layered culture that predates Islam. Islam has fed parasitically on culture for centuries. Missionaries must not be afraid of the hard work of distinguishing between Islamic religion and host culture.<sup>†</sup>

### *Distinguishing God-Given Identity and Community*

What I am essentially saying is that theology must guide anthropology when determining missiology.<sup>11</sup> Missionaries must seriously consider the reservations of theologians who objectively question whether Insider Movements are straying toward syncretism.<sup>10v</sup> The probing questions of theologians like John Piper have been dismissed because he does not live among Muslims. I have lived among Muslims in the Arab world for 17 years. All of my neighbors and many of my friends are Muslims. Both my love for Muslims and my disrespect for Islam continue to grow. I am not immune to emotion and proximity clouding my thinking. Theological reflection is not invalidated by distance or by its dispassionate nature; rather theological objectivity and incarnational familiarity can be complementing strengths. Missionaries themselves are not immune to the “Stockholm Syndrome” (i.e., from being too close to the forest to see the trees). To reject the input of theologians just because they do not live among Muslims can be injudicious.<sup>12</sup>

I am claiming there has been a wholesale capitulation of terms. Some missionaries have surrendered terms rather than working to correct misrepresentation. Meaning is in people, not in letters or words. Some missionaries contextualize terms to accommodate Muslims when it is behavior, beliefs, and creed that are inflammatory. Weary of constantly contextualizing terms, some missionaries have begun to change belief (opting for the path of least resistance) by affirming the falsehood that Islam is a God-given community.<sup>x</sup> There are instances when



words and forms are irredeemable. Today the use of the phrase “gay and bonny” on a blog guarantees misunderstanding by most. Missionaries should be careful with terminology, but merely changing terminology is not the root issue. The root issue is the meaning assigned to the term. Many Biblical terms are unavoidably inflammatory,<sup>y</sup> and Christians are unfaithful to the Lord if avoiding of offense is the primary goal in proclamation.

For example, consider this hypothetical byline: “Missionary Reports That Muslim Friend Converts to Christianity.” It is currently in vogue to disavow Christianity, missionary, and the word ‘convert’. Some missionaries have moved from (1) agreeing that God converts (missionaries do not) to (2) individuals are converted to Christ (not to Christianity) to (3) claiming that conversion is not necessary. Why such embarrassment with the term “Christian” without any parallel embar-

<sup>9</sup>Lewis: *Though not everything you list above is true, it is all irrelevant. All throughout history, God has successfully redeemed a people for Himself from among people groups with even more horrific beliefs and practices, like the Greeks with their widespread infanticide, slavery, and prostitution. Yet Paul recognized that many Greeks were coming to Christ, and receiving the Holy Spirit, and being morally transformed without converting to purifying laws of Judaism. The same thing is happening today: some people groups are turning to the Jesus (through dreams, scripture and witness) for salvation and receiving the transforming power of the Holy Spirit without joining our religion (God-given though it may be).*

<sup>10</sup>Lewis: *The gospel offends any solution to life's problems other than Jesus Christ.*

<sup>11</sup>Lewis: *Unfortunately, what American Christians will hear you saying is that Muslim believers must abandon Islamic religious forms and take on Christian religious forms. Also, you seem to believe that religious forms are easy to separate from cultural forms. Even in our own culture we have forgotten how many of our cultural forms were formerly religious (like the days of the week named after Viking gods, or the tree god of the Saxons adorning our Christmas celebrations, or the egg fertility symbols at Easter, a holiday named after the goddess of fertility). But if you mean that former religious beliefs must be purified by biblical beliefs, I am fully in agreement.*

<sup>12</sup>Lewis: *However, pre-Islamic cultures were animistic or pagan, so returning to them is equally problematic. Most of the “folk Islam” practiced today merely reveals the pre-Islamic culture/religion. It is virtually impossible for missionary outsiders, often syncretistic themselves with secularism and materialism, to become the gatekeepers of which cultural/religious practices are acceptable or not. It is better to focus on preaching the gospel and teaching all of Christ's commands, letting the Holy Spirit guide insider believers.*

<sup>13</sup>Lewis: *My opinion is that missiology must be based on seeing what God seems to be doing and evaluating that in the light of scripture (copying the apostolic process in Acts 15).*

<sup>14</sup>Lewis: *We Western Christians set ourselves up as “watch dogs” of syncretism in other movements to Christ, but we often react negatively to their critiquing our own syncretism asking questions like: “Why do you allow abortion, divorce, fornication, drunkenness, gluttony, and self-indulgent living in your churches?” We emphasize believing the right things over “obeying everything that Jesus commanded,” which must also be considered a form of syncretism.*

rassment about the term “Muslim”<sup>22</sup> Muslims to date have not replaced their ordinal terms (Muslim, Islam) with new nomenclature; rather they respond to the black eye given to Islam by Muslim extremists by working overtime to redefine and clarify existing terms instead of discarding old ones. Despite embarrassment about the terms “convert,” for example, then, the truth conveyed remains. Conversion is biblical and necessary. One can change the terms but the requirement remains.<sup>23</sup> The discovery now appears that it is not really the term that is offensive; it is the belief and practice. My sister’s best friend and her husband were missionaries with a reputable, conservative, large mission board in Central Asia. Finding much Christian terminology offensive, this couple decided to discard all offensive terms, even biblical ones. They decided to live as “insiders” and embrace Islam as a social-religious context. They publicly said the full ‘shahada’, joined a mosque and placed their children in Islamic schools. The husband is now studying to be an Imam. They no longer believe Jesus is divine.<sup>24</sup> In C. S. Lewis’s book *The Abolition of Man* he warns:

You can hardly open a periodical without coming across the statement that what our civilization needs is more ‘drive’, or dynamism, or self-sacrifice, or ‘creativity’. In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.

### ***On Religious Identity: Integrating the Old and New***

“We should also remain alert to the fact that a simple substitution of the culturally new for the culturally old is neither sufficient nor possible when the mental and moral fabric of a society is torn; or when people must live in different worlds of discourse at the same time; or when they are faced with moral and social obligations which belong to different orders, and when those obligations conflict with each other; or when they believe (or half believe) in different universes of power. If there is to be no wound, if people are to make clear moral choices and do so in the faith of Christ, they must be able to integrate their worlds, to knit together the new and the old.”

Andrew Walls, “Origins of Older Northern and New Southern Christianity,” in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 75

## ***To stay within the socio-religious context of Islam means to follow the example of the Muslim Prophet.***

Some of the most outspoken critics (as well as supporters) of Insider Movements are Muslim Background Believers (MBB) themselves.<sup>11</sup> These voices are too often dismissed as “brain-washed followers of narrow-minded and colonial missionaries.” Those who were birthed and raised under the essentials of Islam should be listened to carefully. Many of them, especially from the Arab heartland of Islam, speak strongly for nomenclature that overtly both connects their identity to Christ and separates them from Islam.<sup>12</sup> It was an Arab Muslim Background Believer in the context of Insider Movements who first shared this Islamic proverb with me: “Al Munafiqin Akaab min al Kaffir” (Hypocrites are worse than Apostates).

I am claiming that biblical belief indubitably includes radical allegiance to Jesus Christ. To be Muslim is to generally base everyday life, habits and interactions on those of Mohammed. To stay within the socio-religious context of Islam means to follow the example of the Muslim Prophet. There are exceptions such as Muslim atheists who remain Muslim but do not consciously follow the ‘sunna’ of Mohammed. Allegiance and emulation of Mohammed is proclaimed from the simplest child’s book and the periodicals of the brightest Islamic scholar. To stay within Islam is to retain allegiance to Mohammed, to do as he did whether brushing one’s teeth, going to

<sup>11</sup>Lewis: I agree, but theologians also benefit from being forced back to the Bible like the rest of us, and perhaps the rise of insider movements help this to happen. As during the Reformation, we may find some theologians re-affirming the sufficiency of grace alone, apart from “the church” as they know it, and others appealing to traditional church interpretations.

<sup>12</sup>Lewis: People’s birth-community relationships are God-given, no matter how fallen their communities might be. Even cannibalistic tribes have been transformed by Christ. Avoiding extracting people from their birth communities is not a matter of expediency, but a matter of faithfulness to biblical principles, where the gospel is most effective when it is planted like yeast into the dough of a non-believing community.

<sup>13</sup>Lewis: When the meanings are completely misconstrued, significant explanation is required, like when the term “Son of God” is widely interpreted by Muslims to mean sex between God and Mary. Clarifying the true meaning is the goal of all of us.

<sup>14</sup>Lewis: In the Muslim country I worked in, the term “Christian” applied to all the Europeans who visited for prostitution and drugs. To say “I am a Christian” whether as a foreigner or as a Muslim convert meant much more about culture, political allegiance, drinking alcohol, and sleeping around than it did about faith. A thousand years of meaning attributed to a name is not easily expunged, so we must clarify that we are not asking them to become “Christians” (most of whom do not follow Christ) but disciples of Jesus Christ.

<sup>15</sup>Lewis: In the early church context, Paul repeatedly clarified that he was not preaching a message of conversion to Judaism but of allegiance to Jesus Christ. Likewise, we must also clarify that it is not changing religions that saves, but a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

<sup>16</sup>Lewis: It is important to clarify no insider movement that I know of involves any Western Christians becoming Muslims, nor has ever recommended such practices.

<sup>17</sup>Lewis: I know many such MBB’s and love them dearly. They are like the first century Greek believers who chose to become circumcised Jews in order to follow Christ, thus escaping their idolatrous culture of origin. There is nothing wrong with that choice unless they make it a requirement of salvation for others. Paul is abundantly clear on this point.

the toilet, or going on pilgrimage. It is impossible to follow Christ in every detail of daily life and also follow Mohammed. While people can have numerous human mentors, there can only be one master; there is only one we can follow in all things who will not disappoint or fail us.<sup>12dd</sup>

I am claiming that followers of Jesus are defined just as much by what they do not do, as by what they do. The Ten Commandments have two “Thou Shall...” and eight “Thou Shall Not...” Many biblical injunctions are framed only in the positive (John 13:34-35); still contemporary apostles who in the spirit of Acts 15 lay out the religious practices that need to be abandoned are needed.<sup>ee</sup>

I am claiming this presupposition that Islam is value-neutral, that God created Muslims to continue within Islamic community, is tragic and wrong. Missionaries must not ask Muslims to pass through another cultural Christianity on their way to the Kingdom; but neither can missionaries encourage them to stay within Islam. Can Muslim Background Believers stay within their social communities? Yes, where biblically allowed (all societies are errant on some points). Can they stay within the religious community of Islam? No. Encouraging Muslim Background Believers to stay in the socio-religious context of Islam is to do them and the Gospel a disservice. It ultimately “remove[s] the organ and demand[s] the function.” Islam in any form cannot lead to eternal, spiritual life.<sup>ff</sup>

Insider movements mitigate against mission. By focusing on those “not gathered from diverse social networks to create a ‘church,’” a disastrous unintended consequence can result. A common missionary mistake has been to relegate mission (cross-cultural evangelism) to second-tier teaching presented at a later date. Richard Foster tells of the calling of St. Francis of Assisi as related by a messenger sent by praying friends: “[God] wants you to go

about the world preaching, because God did not call you for yourself alone but also for the salvation of others.”<sup>13</sup> All people are called to witness to all people. Insider thinking counters outward focus. Muslim Background Believers are not exempt from the Great Commission. They too are called to make disciples of all the nations. To encourage a non-diverse community from the outset is unconscionable. Missions is inclusive and cross-cultural. Inclusion and diversity are essential at the formative stages of any community of Christ.<sup>gg</sup>

If the presupposition that Islam as a God-given community is wrong, and yet missionaries persist in encouraging believers in Jesus to stay within Islam, then they are indeed unwisely advising Muslim Background Believers and should not be surprised at their sterility. There might be quick results (curiously difficult to verify) but missionaries will have done a long-term disservice to the Kingdom. Castrated geldings will never sire strong stallions. MBBs not fully freed from the chains of Islam will never be able to free others similarly bound.<sup>hh</sup>

Islam sanctions deceit in three instances: reconciling friends, pacifying a spouse or misleading an enemy (Sahih Muslim Book 032, Number 6303). After 13 years in Sudan I have learned Muslims are more angered by duplicity than by missionary activity. Muslims often tolerate missionaries; they never tolerate deceivers. I have striven in this radical Muslim community to clarify and to use terms that have Biblical origin (such as missionary, Christian, church, and conversion) rather than to abandon those terms while retaining the behavior that those abandoned terms support.<sup>ii</sup>

It is vitally important for missionaries to Muslims to have integrity of spirit and speech that is unimpeachable. It is just as crucial for Muslim Background Believers, even as they

<sup>dd</sup>Lewis: Dudley Woodberry's article on *Reusing Common Pillars of Islam* explains that Mohammed himself got his recommendations from early Christian sources, so we do not need to be afraid if believers continue to fast, give alms, abstain from alcohol, and pray five times a day, etc., while depending solely on Christ for their salvation.

<sup>ee</sup>Lewis: Yes, and I would recommend that we actually use the Ten Commandments and other such biblical commands as our guide to what we are encouraging Muslims to do or not do, not coming up with our own lists.

<sup>ff</sup>Lewis: Again, there are no value-neutral societies even our own. However, both the Bible and history have shown repeatedly that the gospel can go into pagan, violent, hedonistic, or legalistic socio-religious contexts and, through several generations, bring total transformation. My own exceedingly violent ancestors, the Vikings, unwittingly took in the seeds of the gospel by kidnapping women from Christian regions, and the message of Christ began to work its way through their society.

<sup>gg</sup>Lewis: This paragraph misses the point entirely, as our own cultural expressions of Christianity are very ingrown and that does not preclude us from being cross-cultural evangelists. Likewise for the early Jewish Christians. One insider movement has spread into at least three neighboring people groups and another is sending believers into other countries.

<sup>hh</sup>Lewis: Where the believers are winning others to Christ so boldly and quickly that it has become a “movement,” it is offensive to call them “sterile” or “castrated” believers.

<sup>ii</sup>Lewis: It is not deceptive to preach that Jesus is not just the savior of the Christians but of the Muslims as well, indeed, the savior of the whole world. What is deceptive is to preach that Jesus is insufficient to save unless people join our expression of faith in Him.

conditionally<sup>14</sup> remain within their familial and social contexts, to have no trace of hypocrisy or misdirection. Islam is not spiritually neutral. God does not intend for Muslims to remain within Islam. God does intend for Muslim Background Believers to live within their societies as proclaimers of the good news. **IJFM**

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**W**hen Muslims come to Christ, there must be dynamic transformation to the extent that they leave Islam.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Rebecca Lewis, “Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, Issue 26:1 (Spring 2009): 16-19.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid, 17.
- <sup>3</sup> The Geneva Study Bible notes the focus is on commonality [all mankind from one blood, one stock] not on separation. *The People’s New Testament* notes that set times are chronological; Athens had its day, but now its day is done. Wesley’s *Notes* speak against a narrow interpretation and encourage us to look on all men as brothers and that the assigned boundaries were geographical in origin not religious. Jamieson-Fausset-Brown *Bible Commentary* states, “The apostle here opposes both Stoical Fate and Epicurean Chance, ascribing the periods and localities in which men and nations flourish to the sovereign will and prearrangements of a living God.” Matthew Henry’s *Concise Commentary on the Bible* states that this sermon is to heathens who worshiped false gods and were without the true God in the world saying: “The Lord had long borne with idolatry, but the times of this ignorance were now ending, and by his servants he now commanded all men every where to repent of their idolatry. Each sect of the learned men would feel themselves powerfully affected by the apostle’s discourse, which tended to show the emptiness or falsity of their doctrines.” Richard N. Longenecker writes, “Contrary to the Athenians’ boast that they had originated from the soil of their Attic homeland and therefore were not like other men, Paul affirms the oneness of mankind in their creation by the one God and their descent from a common ancestor. And contrary to the ‘deism’ that permeated the philosophies of the day, he proclaimed that this God has determined specific times for men and ‘the exact places where they should live’ so that men would seek him and find him.” (Richard N. Longenecker, “Acts,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 9. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981, 476) “The point of this passage is not to emphasize that people should remain in where they were born into, but to show that people should not boast about their particular socio-religious

group (e.g., Islam) but seek God and find him. Paul clearly states that God commands people everywhere to repent. The word used is *metanoein* which literally means ‘to think differently, to have a change of mind.’ This means as people encounter this living God, something really needs to change. This change begins in the mind, but the whole Bible is full of evidence that a change of mind always translates into a change of outward behaviour. Paul states that in the past ‘God overlooked such ignorance,’ referring to the worship of images, but now time has come to repent. The questions this passage poses are these: In which way do Muslims need to change their thinking (*metanoein*)? What outward results will such a change have? Is it possible that the proponents of Insider Movements are in effect perpetuating the ignorance Muslims have been living in, rather than bringing that ignorance to an end?” Reinhold Straehler, Quoted in e-mail to Dick Brogden, Khartoum, Sudan, March 15, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> “Diabolical in this matter; and indeed this is the case; the truth of the matter is, it refers to a practice among the Heathens, who fancied that blood was the food of the demons, to whom they sacrificed; and therefore when they sacrificed to them, they took the blood of the beast and put it into a vessel, and sat down by it, and round about it, and ate the flesh; imagining that whilst they ate the flesh, the demons eat the blood, and by this means friendship and familiarity were contracted between them; so that they hoped to receive some advantage from them, and be informed of things to come....” John Gill, “The New John Gill’s Exposition of the Bible,” Crosswalk.com, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/Commentaries/GillsExpositionoftheBible/gil.cgi?book=ac&chapter=15&verse=20> (accessed 24 September 2009). “All four of these prohibited practices were a common part of the heathen rituals in which these new believers once participated.” Bob Definbaugh, “The Great Debates: Acts 15:1-41,” Bible.org, <http://bible.org/seriespage/great-debates-acts-151-41> (accessed 24 September 2009).

<sup>5</sup> D. J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications), 86-87. Hesselgrave quotes and agrees with Edward Perry’s exclusivist statement that

religion is made up of indivisible wholes and that all religions—human schemas—draw men away from the God of Gospel faith. Perry states that “since the Gospel alone brings men to this God [one true and living God], all other faith systems and claims lead men away from him.” Religions are systems of Satan and are used to predispose adherents to disbelieve in the Christ of the Biblical Gospel.

<sup>6</sup> Christianity has been spread and upheld by coercion in some contexts; that is beyond the scope of this paper. The primary difference is that the NT makes no allowance for coercion; the Koranic text repeatedly sanctions evangelistic violence. Christians are ordered by their Lord to abstain from coercion by a progressive revelation from OT sanctioning of violence to NT prohibition of it. In the Koran, the Muslims’ Lord orders otherwise. Historical Christian violence directly disobeys progressive Biblical revelation; Islamic violence is obedient to the text.

<sup>7</sup> “Even those parts of another religion which might appear to be lofty and uplifting prove to be parts of a whole that is under the judgment of God,” notes Hesselgrave, quoting Hendrik Kraemer (1962). Hesselgrave, 90.

<sup>8</sup> “Conflict therefore must ever be an essential element in the life of the church so long as this age lasts.” G. E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (London: Paternoster Press, 1959), 121.

<sup>9</sup> “God is about the business of transforming the world to fit the shape of the gospel.” C. J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 534. When Muslims come to Christ there must be dynamic transformation to the extent that they leave Islam. Making the gospel relevant is the wrong question.<sup>jj</sup>

<sup>10</sup> A warning to Insider Movements, drawing on the tragic history of the “hidden Christians” of Japan (*akure kirishitan*), Philip Jenkins tells of the inevitable tendency of isolated movements to become ingrown and syncretistic. The movement “strayed far from the mainstream...and many of its practices made it look almost like a Shinto sect... They knew nothing of the wider church, believing themselves to be the world’s only true Christians.” Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, and How It Died* (New York: HarperOne IVP Academic, 2008), 36.

<sup>11</sup> Mazhar Malouhi is a Syrian Muslim Background Believer (MBB),

publicly known since the publication of his journey in Paul Gordon Chandler’s book *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road: Exploring a New Path Between Two Faiths*. In August 2009, I read a letter by Mazhar defending himself for his involvement in Insider Movement practices. Though he does not claim to be a theologian and prefers the term “incarnational ministry” to “Insider/C5”, Mazhar, a supporter of Insider theology, does criticize missionaries from the West for pushing agendas onto MBBs and states that MBB voices should be the loudest in the debate.<sup>kk</sup>

<sup>12</sup> It should also be noted that it is difficult, if not impossible, to follow Christ without the input of others. This applies mono-culturally and cross-culturally. Richard Foster writes: “...The knowledge of the direct, active, immediate leading of the Spirit is not sufficient. Individual guidance must yield to corporate guidance. There must also come a knowledge of the direct, active, immediate leading of the Spirit together” (218). Foster even calls Jesus an *outsider* to his own people (220) and speaks of a glorious, heaven-sent, unified commitment to reject cultural religion and to hold on to the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ—in reference to Acts 15 (221). Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 218–221.

<sup>13</sup> R. J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 223.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 19:9 (NKJV): Paul “departed from them and withdrew the disciples” from the synagogue in Ephesus. He did not wait for expulsion. He intentionally, preemptively left the religious gathering place of his day.<sup>ll</sup>

<sup>jj</sup>Lewis: *Samuel Moffett’s History of Christianity in Asia reveals both the strengths of Eastern Christianities and their fatal weakness, lack of scriptures in their own languages.*

<sup>kk</sup>Lewis: *No one is suggesting that insiders do not need to learn from the Bible or outsiders. In fact, in speaking with two insider believer leaders last week, I found that they had gone through over 10 systematic biblical training sessions with outsiders.*

<sup>ll</sup>Lewis: *Paul did not withdraw these believers from the synagogue because it was impossible for believers to follow Christ in a synagogue context (as that was happening in other cities) but because the majority of that particular synagogue rejected his message. Both before and after this event, the apostles continued to preach in synagogues.*

## On Religious Identity: Sorting and Sifting

“Problems arise only when we use the terms “African religion” and “Christianity” as though they were self-conscious, self-explanatory alternative systems, adopted as a whole, like suits of clothes that can be taken off and changed. Actual religious experience, actual lived religion is not like that. There is a case to be made in theory (less easy to demonstrate in practice) for regarding Islam as such a self-contained, self-consistent system; but Christianity, of its incarnational nature, offers no such analysis. It does not make sense to try to separate out from unified experience what is “really” Christian and what is “really” African, as though the identification of one set of aspects somehow invalidates or undermines the other. African Christianity is a new development of African religion, shaped by the parameters of pre-Christian African religion as was the Christianity of the Jerusalem church of the Acts of the Apostles rooted in the religion of old Israel...African Christianity is also a new development of the Christian tradition produced by the interaction of that tradition with the life and lore of Africa, as complex and distinctive in their way as those of the Greco-Roman culture that determined so many of the features of Western Christianity.”

Andrew Walls, “African Christianity in the History of Religions,” in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, p. 116