

The Cultural Insider, Theological Outsider (CITO)

A Conversation with Abu Jaz

A few months ago the IJFM sat down with Abu Jaz on the matter of his (and his group's) identity as Muslim-background believers (MBB). In 2013, Abu Jaz was interviewed in Christianity Today¹ and since then he has looked for an opportunity to bring greater clarity to his philosophy of ministry—how he distinguishes the social, cultural and religious aspects of his group's Muslim context.

IJFM: A few years ago, at the Bridging the Divide consultation, you distinguished the identity of your MBB movement as “cultural insider, but theological outsider,” and coined the term “CITO.” This was your way of contextualizing your faith in a Muslim religious setting. What led you to this expression of your group identity?

It all started about twenty years ago when Jesus came to me in a miraculous way, and I started to attend an evangelical church. I have my own Muslim cultural heritage from my childhood, which is distinct from the greater portion of our national ethnic group, so when I joined the church I encountered a real challenge. As I reflect on that experience, I see it both as a theological challenge, and a cultural challenge. An example of the theological challenge is that right from the beginning I couldn't find the name of Allah in the evangelical churches. The problem was that I didn't experience a continuity of terminology for referencing God even though I was with people from my own language group. Their Christian heritage had given them their own term for God. I was the only one from a Muslim background in the salvation class. Though we were not Arabs, in our context our Muslim identity was a combination of the national, ethnic culture and language, and our heritage is one that mixes Arabic terms into my national language, which had become our mother tongue. So it was natural for me to use the name Allah to address the Creator God. I remember my pastor saying to me, “Abu, you are not to use the name of Allah anymore, because that is the name of an idol. Allah is not the Father of Jesus!” The pastor thought he was helping me to disconnect from Islam, but unfortunately at the same time he was disconnecting me from my own knowledge of the general revelation of the concept of God—Allah, which I knew as the word for Creator God. So you see, at that time when I joined the church, I experienced a discontinuity with the way I previously knew and addressed God.

This was a real theological challenge, but it also influenced me socially, for example in the way I would greet people. This was a cultural challenge, too,

Abu Jaz is a Muslim-background believer who is presently giving leadership to evangelical churches in his region of East Africa by encouraging contextualization of the gospel in church planting and discipleship among Muslim people.

as I see it. When my pastor would ask me, “How are you?” I would say, *‘Alhamdulillah’* (Praise be to God). But then he would say to me: “Abu Jaz, now you are a Christian, and do not use the Islamic name for God anymore!” The next day when he greeted me I wanted to respond the natural way, with “Alhamdulillah.” Although I wanted to be polite and correct according to his advice, I couldn’t use his way of greeting if I had to eliminate Allah. So instead I would greet him in a neutral and secular way saying, “I am fine.” For thirty-three years I had never spoken this “Christian” way and it was so difficult for me, that I could not do it. Now I see that dropping Allah from my speech actually made my speech more secular. He told me to use the new name for God, which was the local tribal language name for God. This was introducing me to a new name and a new concept for God. It would have been better if I could have used the old name for God, but with a new biblical understanding, just like other people groups around the world continue to use their old name for God but with a new meaning when they become believers in Jesus.

IJFM: What were the theological implications as you reflect on that experience?

At this early point in my walk with Jesus, although he didn’t realize it, the pastor was disconnecting me from a general revelation of God. Like I said, his intention was good in trying to disconnect me from the Islamic religion, but practically he was also disconnecting me from a knowledge of general revelation. Because when I said “Allah,” I acknowledged that the supreme God is my Creator, sustainer, provider and the final judge. The term Allah doesn’t only reflect my identity with Islam, but within me he was and is the creator God. So, the term Allah carries both the ideas of the Islamic religion and that of general revelation. When the pastor said “Don’t use Allah,” he was thinking that he could

disconnect me from Islam, but he was also disconnecting me from the theology of general revelation.

Let me say at this point that I thank God for this church, which was filled with such caring, kind and wonderful people. I will never forget the love they showed me and my wife. I often wanted to pull away because of the tension inside me, but because of their love I was able to remain. The challenge was that inside the church, I didn’t find a single word, not even a single letter, that reflected my Islamic cultural background. I can’t express the degree of tension that existed within me over those first few years. I was so hungry to understand and learn more about my newfound faith, that when



the opportunity came, I grabbed at the chance to attend a Bible College.

It was there that I started to pursue these questions more thoroughly, and discovered that throughout history there was continuity in the term used for God before and after a people come to faith. And many of those terms for God had been tied to idols. I’m very thankful to the teachers at the Bible College, and the many authors of books I read who helped me in this process. My question all those years, “Why couldn’t I continue to use the name Allah?” was answered and it became clear to me. I discovered that it was a problem of tradition, that those believers did not want me to

continue with my cultural background. Since that time, some sixteen years ago, I have been working to assist the churches to contextualize their witness among Muslims, and this has borne fruit. And as I myself have continued to witness to my family, my parents, my relatives, and my village, I found that they were happy to hear and were more responsive to the message of the gospel with contextualized terminology.

IJFM: Where did this lead you?

Through our work, we found a growing need for a Bible translation, not a “Muslim-friendly” translation, but one which considers those terms that carry the theologies of general revelation. These would be terms from our mother tongue. The mother tongue of our people group is a combination of local words with certain Arabic terms, which we learn from early childhood. When I was born, Allah and other Arabic terms were already in my language, because they are part of our mother tongue. Using this indigenous terminology with biblical meanings is a more useful way to witness and teach Muslims about the new life in Jesus.

Another example was my baptism. I was the only one from a Muslim background in salvation class. They used “Christian culture” terms, and because I couldn’t understand what they were teaching, my baptism was postponed three times. At the end of the class they asked, “Do you understand everything?” and I said “No.” I refused to be baptized simply because I didn’t understand the terms. But after some time, by God’s grace, I finally was baptized. This was very difficult for me, and I didn’t want anyone else from my community to have the same (difficult) experience.

IJFM: How did this lead to cultural insider and theological outsider (CITO)?

When we began successfully witnessing, discipling and church planting with a contextualized worship style, people from the outside would come and say with excitement, “Oh, this is

an insider movement.” Even though I didn’t know exactly what the term “IM” represented, I started using it because I thought it fit us since we were a movement within our community. It seemed for me like a practical and simple way to explain what we were doing. I even became a promoter of the term. But then I started to be rejected by those who had a better understanding of the IM concept. Finally I understood the philosophy behind some of these IM representatives and I could not agree with it. For example, we do not confess the *“shahada”* as the one, profound Islamic creed. We do not omit the filial term for the Son of God and the fatherhood of God as is done in certain “Muslim-friendly” Bible translations.

IJFM: So, you had contextualized certain terms and forms, but your group didn’t fit what others called “insider”?

Yes, our movement didn’t fit with IM. I realized it first when I had a chance to attend an international conference with people from around the world, focusing on working with Muslims. Most of the participants were promoting insider movements. I was there and for the first time I heard someone stand up and say, “I was a ‘Christian,’ but now I have become a ‘Muslim.’” I was shocked that a Christian would confess the Islamic creed, the *shahada*, for the sake of evangelism. That was the first time I heard anything like that and it’s then I discovered our group does not fit with this representation of IM.

During that week, I was asked to speak, and I told them very clearly that, “in our movement we are not saying the *shahada*.” My statement brought me challenges and some hard exchanges over these matters. There I heard a lot of clear testimonies from IM people arguing that Muslims who start to follow Jesus should remain culturally, socially, and religiously “inside.” I knew we did not fit this philosophy and it forced me to ask, “Who am I and who are the people of our movement?”

In urging me to drop the word “Allah” from my speech, he was disconnecting me from the general revelation of the Creator God.

Are we really insiders?” I knew we did not fit the existing mission approach toward Muslims either, which argues that Muslims who begin to follow Jesus should disconnect culturally, socially, and religiously. I call them the Outsider Movement (OMV), because they demand that Muslims who turn to Jesus come out or leave their culture and religion at the same time, and only accommodate to their new “Christian” culture and religion.

I had to really think this through. If Muslims must actually leave their religious beliefs and practices—and it was clear to me that they should—should they also leave their Muslim culture? Of course not, because their cultural context is part of their identity and it is the best point of contact to be a witness and to help them to grow in faith.

It was a critical time to figure out my own and our group’s identity. Thanks be to God that I had this time to think deeply about all these issues, and finally I was able to determine that ours was a movement of “Cultural Insiders, but Theological Outsiders,” which led to the abbreviation “CITO.”

IJFM: Stepping back from this encounter you were able to put this CITO together?

Yes, this is the background. I was trying to deal with both the existing approach which I call OMV, which says “leave your culture, your mother tongue, your lifestyle and become culturally like us” and on the other hand, the IM approach, which says remain as you are—culturally, socially and religiously.

Our movement found a different path when we coined CITO—that is being culturally and socially insiders and at the same time fully theologically and religiously outsiders. When I say we are

“culturally insider,” I mean we continue to use the terms and names for God according to our mother tongue. For example, we use the name Allah, and that identifies us as an insider. But when we come to the attributes and nature of Allah, we do not view Allah as before. We call Allah Father, Son and Holy Spirit, He is the father of *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah), which makes us religiously outsiders. In the case of Jesus Christ, we call him *Isa al-Masih* because we are used to addressing him like that, and it makes us insiders. But we believe *Isa* is the Lord, the Son of Allah, and we believe he died for our sins, was raised from the dead, ascended to heaven and will come again to judge the living and the dead, which makes us religiously outsiders.

IJFM: How did this develop into a philosophy of ministry for you?

When I studied the Scriptures, particularly the book of Acts, I could see the distinction of cultural insider and theological outsider. Also in church history I found that whenever you find true disciples of Christ, you also find the same distinction. It’s actually a part of the church’s cultural and theological foundation. In the case of expressions like worship in the forms of dancing, music, clothing, eating, the “do’s and don’ts,” or the term we use for God, we should reflect the receptive culture as an insider, but we should interpret God and customs in a biblical way, which makes us an outsider. This CITO distinction will force us to examine the parameters of contextualization in our philosophy and strategy of ministry.

I like the way Dr. Rick Love categorized contextualization in the three aspects of the messenger, the message and the church. Let me put it in my own words. When I say that the messenger has to contextualize himself, it means

that he must look for opportunities in the context where he is witnessing. The greatest opportunity in every religious group is the testimony of general revelation, which means that the idea of the creator God resides in all human beings, because they are created in the image of God. And as I said before, the messenger recognizes that Muslims understand “Allah” as the bearer of general revelation. He cannot ignore this because he has the responsibility to find a starting point, that testimony of general revelation. In addition, there are also other opportunities for starting points besides general revelation to be found in the Muslims’ theology.

This is the very teaching that Muslims have taken from us and given it their own image and meaning; but, just because Muslims use common terms such as Allah does not mean that we should ignore them. Yes, it is interwoven with the theology of Islam, but these are the basis of biblical theology of general revelation. Wherever you go, the name of God will carry two theologies: the theology of general revelation and the theology of their respective religion. This duality is all over, in Hinduism, in African traditional religions, and even with Paul among the Greeks. Paul saw both these aspects as he faced an opportunity in Athens and he said, “When I am with you, I found the unknown god.” Paul the messenger was using the opportunity granted him by general revelation, and he knew and understood that every person is created in the image of God and has a concept, a general revelation, of God. Muslims are created in the image of God and they have a concept of God, Allah, as their Creator God, the giver and bearer of general revelation, but at the same time he is the god of their Islamic religion and bearer of Qur’anic revelation.

IJFM: But do some want to distinguish between the general revelation of God within African traditional religion and that of Islam?
Some say that with Islam this doesn’t apply. You ask them, “Why?” and the

reason they give is that the background of African traditional religions is nature. They knew God from nature, but when it comes to Muslims, they do not know God from nature, but know Allah from their revealed book. The source of knowledge is different. They say that if the source of knowledge is nature, you can use that, but when it comes to Muslims their reference is a book. But I offer a challenge to that type of thinking. First of all, it is good to remember that all people are created in the image of God so that they know him as their Creator.

Both the African traditionalist and the Muslims have a preexistent belief in the existence of God, for both are created in the image of God. When



people are created in the image of God, they receive general revelation, and this produces a search for God. Acts 17:27 explains that they will search for Him that they might find Him, and when people think they find him, there you have religion. So religion is their answer in their search for God. This is the knowledge of God from general revelation which is prior to the giving of special revelation. Whether they have a book or no book, God judges them by their religious practice. Both move away from God, for where there is no book there are oral traditions that carry a lot of wrong theology about God. This forms the God of their African traditional religion, the bearer of their oral tradition’s

concept of God. People have religion and start worshiping because they know there is a God deserving worship. For both people from the tradition of a holy book and people from an oral tradition follow their knowledge of God.

People will often ask me if there is already a local/tribal name for God, and if so, why does the Muslim in that particular people group not use that existing tribal name. They wonder why Muslims prefer to use the name Allah from the Arabic language. You can see from their question that their reference is language, the Arabic language. My point is that it is not a linguistic issue, but it is theology! Most people who use Allah to refer to God do not know it comes from the Arabic, since it’s the first and only word they know to refer to God in their mother tongue. When you ask them a question that is related to the theology of general revelation, like who created heaven and earth, or who sustains the universe, or who provides for the needs of the people, they will automatically respond with passion, “That is Allah!” Please understand that this general revelation is not sufficient for salvation, but it is sufficient for judgment (Rom. 1:18, 2:12).

IJFM: Doesn’t the concern seem to be that the terms like Allah carry other meanings?

Yes, our usual concern is first the concept of general revelation. Not only this, but also there are other opportunities in Islamic teaching. Muslims have taken Christian teaching and given it Islamic meaning. But even if they misuse it, at least a portion bears a certain truth. Some of their theologies are not originally Islamic. For example, they believe that Allah created heaven and earth, and created Adam and Eve (*Harwa*) and that he gave them the command not to eat the fruit. And parts of the stories of Noah (*Nuh*), Abraham (*Ibrahim*), Joseph (*Yusuf*), Moses

(*Musa*), David (*Daud*), and John the Baptist (*Yahya*) are taken from the Bible and are helpful if we use and handle them properly. This is especially true of the story of Jesus Christ (*Isa al-Masih*) in the Qur'an, who was born without an earthly father, of the virgin Mary, is sinless, a miracle worker, is coming again a second time, will kill the Antichrist, and will rule as judge over the world. This is a biblical teaching, but sometimes they give it proper meaning and in some cases they don't. Some aspects are correct, but others have been given their own Islamic meaning, like that Isa did not die on the cross for our sin, or that he is not the son of Allah. But I would see these Islamic terms and concepts, although all is not really biblical, as another opportunity to share truth.

IJFM: It seems you are talking more about contextualizing the message than the actual messenger?

I would see the contextualization of the salvation message as going beyond this choice of terminology. I like to point out that in John 16:9-12 Jesus speaks of the benefits of the Holy Spirit coming and that He will convict the world of three things: sin, righteousness and judgment. About sin "because people do not believe in me," and about righteousness, "because you will not see me for I am going to the Father." But for Muslims, I like to point out that the Spirit will convict us of judgment, "because the ruler of the world has been judged." When we do mission we expect the Holy Spirit to convict in these three ways, but which one of the three do we expect to be more vital? Often with Muslims if I begin by saying that their sins will be washed by the blood of Jesus, they might think I am foolish, because of the theology of atonement of sin that they hold. From both Jesus' teaching and our own experience with Muslims we have found that they will listen attentively when we start by presenting Jesus' role on the Day of Judgment, that he will return as the sign of that

Another thing really opened my eyes: the vital importance of acceptance. The evangelical community said, "We accept you as brothers."

day, and that he will kill the Antichrist and be the final ruler and judge of the whole world.

So, as a rule I have found that an emphasis on sin is more easily acceptable *after* I tell them that Jesus is the sign of the Day of Judgment. When I preach Jesus as Ruler and Judge, the one who will kill the Antichrist (*Masih ad-Dajjal*), it allows the Spirit to convict Muslims of judgment, because they are so afraid of the Day of Judgment. They more readily accept Jesus as their Savior from judgment than their Savior from sin. They accept the judgment part, and I find the conviction of sin follows automatically when they have accepted Him as a savior on the day of judgment, and the sense of righteousness as well. This is the biblical basis for expecting contextualization by the Spirit in different contexts.

IJFM: Please speak to how all this forms the church in a Muslim community.

This is where we need to reflect the CITO approach. All that I have been saying about these terms, about general revelation, and about these opportunities, should not be taken simply as a transitional bridge, but should be permanent in the church. The heavenly nature of the church has not been changed or adapted when we use these terms, but the earthly nature of the church allows us to adapt terminologies according to cultural values for local use. Truth must be expressed contextually. When a group gathers they come with Allah, with Alhamdulillah, with Isa al-Masih, with familiar food, with their cultural issues, and their own way of social interaction. This means the church becomes indigenous, it's from the land of the people, and it should reflect the cultural values of that people; otherwise, it will be foreign. At the same time, the church

must also relate to the larger body of Christ, to the rest of global believers, to Christianity, and not just to its local context. This raised for us the important question of how our church could contextualize locally and yet identify itself globally. And, again, this is where the concept of CITO is helpful to us.

IJFM: Can you give us an example of how you find your way with these two dimensions of the global church and the local Muslim context?

I'd like to answer this with a case study of how we chose to proceed with a new Bible translation for Muslims among our people. I am presently in charge of Christian and Muslim relations for the umbrella organization of the evangelical churches in our country. We felt a need for a new Bible translation, which used the terminology I have been advocating here, but the translation had to relate to this organization. I initiated the new translation because Muslims were coming to Christ who needed their own Bible. Those who come to the Lord through this contextualized approach need their own translation so the Bible will be clear and useful to them. When a Muslim turns to Christ and goes to the existing evangelical church there is a tension and a struggle. I pointed out how I had this struggle to find anything that reflects our Muslim background and culture in the existing evangelical churches. A Muslim will struggle to translate himself into the culture of the evangelical churches. So, as this Bible translation project was proceeding very well, there came a request to stop it by some in the evangelical community, because it was creating some problems. We agreed to stop the translation, and to make a long story short, we are now working together with a national committee on contextualization.

IJFM: That must have been very difficult.

Yes. Here I was in the process of trying to restore my own cultural identity as a MBB, and helping other MBBs so that a translation would be more natural for them, and this happened. Because of misrepresentation, I really felt rejected, and I wept, but God knew my reasoning behind it all, that my motivation was to reach my people. I really want to thank all those who wept and prayed for me and gave encouragement and comfort. And God really helped me and things became clear. Two things actually happened with this decision to stop the translation. First, a national committee was formed among the evangelicals to pursue contextualization. And it was this committee that took the step to develop a booklet that speaks to Muslims of the story of God from Creation to the second coming of Christ, using their own terminology and cultural concepts in a contextualized manner. Another thing that happened really opened my eyes: the vital importance of acceptance, and it's what lies behind this booklet. It's the evangelical community saying, "we accept you as brothers and sisters... we trust what God is doing among you." This approval creates a spirit of unity, something that comes automatically with acceptance. If the booklet was wrong theologically, they would not offer this booklet with their official logo on it. It tells us that behind the booklet there is theological acceptance. It's like that point in Acts 15 where the council in Jerusalem, the Jewish brothers in the church, sent a letter to the Gentile brothers and sisters to affirm their faith and establish a sense of acceptance. I thank God and our evangelical leaders for their wise decision.

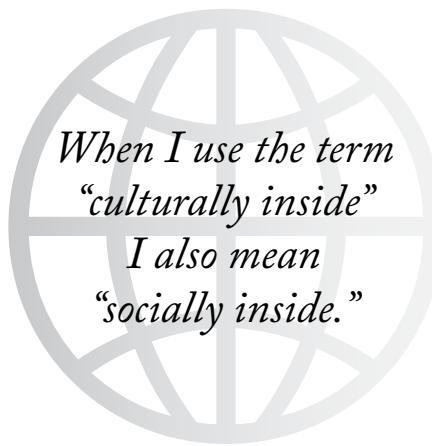
IJFM: How does the booklet replace the function of a Bible translation?

When Muslims have spiritually accepted Jesus, certain issues come up immediately, like the issue of identity—who are we in relation to other Christians? When we disciple them with a Bible that uses the other term for God

from the national language, and not the term "Allah," while we use the term Allah with them, they think it is cheating. They think our use of Allah is some kind of fake. So, this booklet helps to answer this immediate concern. Another function of the booklet is these believers will have a chance to get biblical teaching in their own indigenous terminologies from their mother tongues.

There are so many questions like this that arise at this early point in the discipleship... so many, many questions.

IJFM: So the picture we have is that you have brokered Muslims coming to faith with the evangelical churches. Doesn't this cut them off socially from your community of birth?



Actually, as I mentioned above, when we say we are socially inside, we are not total insiders; rather, we are both socially inside and socially outside. I am speaking here of the interaction between people, and the effort to maintain their social network. This would be their family, their friends and their significant groups in the community. There are some values and Islamic norms that they should respect, even if those issues are not necessarily fundamental to their new belief in Jesus. For the sake of belonging to the community they should maintain some customs of dress, of interaction, in attending funerals and public events, in respecting what is *ballal* and *haram*

(prohibitions). These will keep them socially attached to their communities.

IJFM: So they are still culturally and socially part of the community?

Let me clarify that when I use the term "culturally inside" I also mean "socially inside." I use them synonymously. But I don't want to indicate that by being "inside" that everything is acceptable to the unbelieving Muslim community because they are not identical in every aspect or activity. What makes them an insider is that they reflect and represent the culture they are from. That reflection should be seen in the CITO gathering of believers. It does not mean that they bring all their former culture into their new life in Christ. They develop their own CITO identity with their new social network. At the same time they may or may not preserve their old collective social network. The CITO churches will try to respect and maintain the social interaction with the Muslim community. To do this, they need to preserve the traditions that do not relate to their salvation. Though they have a social connection with the larger, unbelieving community, like the Jews in the early church, they are not identical with their culture. They are similar in customs, they are indigenous, but in the religious issues they are distinctly different. In CITO a cultural bridge is maintained for others who wish to come into the fellowship of the believers, the church.

IJFM: So they maintain a social connection even though they are theological outsiders?

Yes. But we do not do contextualization just to avoid being kicked out of the community. Actually, we see this [getting "kicked out"] as a normal part of the life in Christ. This effort at contextualization is primarily for the believer to sense and understand his true and biblical identity in Christ, and by doing so we also provide an indigenous way for Muslims who wish to come to Christ to hear the salvation message. That is a culturally comfortable and receptive context for Muslims. They

find a sense of home with familiar terminologies as they take on a new faith identity. They can maintain a cultural manner of thinking, or the way they socially greet, and can maintain the religious terminology from their non-believing Muslim community. When persecution comes, they have that solid and biblical identity in their own collective mother tongue, and this allows them to stand strong and to continue with the CITO form of church and their new identity in Christ.

IJFM: Speaking of those coming to Christ, are these MBBs expressing themselves culturally in similar fashion?

There is a wonderful unity and diversity in our country across those who are coming to faith from the Muslim community. There is a freedom for those who are ministering among Muslims in how they are witnessing, doing church planting and discipleship. We certainly do not want to bring another form of bondage. Some from a Muslim back-

When persecution comes, they have that solid, biblical identity in their own collective mother tongue—this allows them to stand strong.

ground will want to maintain certain cultural values and customs, but due to an overall freedom of expression, not all who come to faith will choose the same way regarding Islamic customs. A percentage will want to join the existing evangelical churches, and this may hinder or stop their social interaction with their [unbelieving Muslim] network. For us it is very important to consistently maintain indigenous terminologies because they are part of our mother tongue, and their usage maintains continuity with new biblical meaning. If they choose to continue to dress or look like Muslims, to a certain extent it will not hinder or stop their social interaction with their [unbelieving Muslim] network, but they must know it will not

bring them any special spiritual blessing, because it's just culture. The woman who is comfortable wearing certain dress is free to do so, but it might not carry the same religious meaning. This type of freedom allows for diversity and a healthy unity across the many Muslims coming to faith. It is what God is granting us in these days as we see a movement of Muslims now turning to Christ. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Gene Daniels, "Worshiping Jesus in the Mosque: What it's like to follow Christ embedded in Muslim Culture. An Interview with a Muslim Follower of Isa," *Christianity Today*, January 14, 2013, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/january-february/insider-movement-islam-wheres-jesus.html?start=3>.

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