CITO: A Bridging Conversation
The Complexity of Insiderness

by Warrick Farah

The term "Cultural Insider, Theological Outsider" (CITO) was first coined by Abu Jaz, himself a Muslim-background believer (MBB), to describe the way he and fellow believers integrate their lives and ministries as MBBs who remain inside an Islamic context (Daniels and Waterman 2013).[1] Like others, when I first heard it, I thought it was a helpful nuance in the discussion of contextualization and insider movements.

Most disciple-makers would agree that we want believers from any and all backgrounds (MBBs, HBBs, and CBBs, etc.[2]) to remain as salt and light inside their communities—culturally similar yet with a different, gospel-centered faith and worldview.[3] This is a biblical goal that is both healthy for the new believer and strategic for the kingdom. The CITO concept is also reminiscent of Andrew Wall's famous indigenizing and pilgrim principles, which few would contest (1996a). Dean Flemming states that "this tension between 'at-homeness' and prophetic transformation is the consistent pattern of biblical contextualization" (2005, 23).

Yet as we know in frontier missiology, the nature of tight-knit, traditionalist communities in unreached contexts makes faith change highly problematic, even for those who consider themselves insiders. But when we say "insider," what do we actually mean? Inside what? Their religion? The term "religion" is vexingly elastic and creates misunderstandings nearly every time it is used in the insider movement debate. For example, in Abu Jaz's interview in this issue of the *IJFM,* I can easily imagine others missing his point when he says certain Muslim "religious" customs are "just culture."

While CITO is helpful and biblical, it is still too simple to bypass the category "socio-religious insider." I propose that there could actually be four types of CITOs, all significantly different from one another (see chart below). All five of the aspects I'm using to describe the aggregate nature of insiderness (cultural, social, communal, ritual, theological) intimately interact with one

Warrick Farah, DMiss, serves with International Teams (www.iteams.us) in the Middle East, training leaders in discipleship and coaching community transformation facilitators. He blogs at Circumpolar (muslimministry. blogspot.com).

another. Reality is nowhere near as neat and clean as the chart suggests! But lest we make the (unfortunately) common mistake of thinking all insiderness is the same, I will try to outline how some insiders express their insiderness differently than others.[4] I will also attempt this with minimal reference to "religion," since the term clouds the issue rather than clarifies it.

The Danger of Sterile Debates

Sometimes it can be beneficial to use categories to make complex phenomena understandable (e.g. the Parable of the Sower). Models are approximate maps which cannot fully explain the actual terrain of reality itself, but are still helpful to

> outline complex phenomena to make their multifaceted nature more manageable in understanding the broad picture while providing direction for deeper investigation into nuances of the modeled event or system. (Trull 2015, 5)

However, I am extremely hesitant to provide an opportunity to perpetuate "sterile debates" in missiology which may be "virtually meaningless" (Accad 2009) to the lives of real people described. I do not intend to offer a new model that one could use to stereotype or objectify MBBs into distinct classifications. Neither am I advocating or promoting any type of insiderness. This is a descriptive exercise, not a prescriptive strategy. The examples I

share are types of believers who *already exist* in the Muslim world, and are not a hypothesis for different kinds of "insider movements."[5] Instead, what I aim to demonstrate is that there are layers of complexity embedded in the basic CITO idea. I believe this nuance is needed for our missiological discussion on insiderness to move beyond some of the unproductive (and often irrelevant) disputes of the past.

Five Expressions of Insiderness
0. Exile (or Refugee)

Before talking about insiders, it is important to remark on the existence of many "exiled" MBBs. This most often occurs in Muslim contexts where there is a previously existing Christian church. Sometimes new disciples may leave (or be pulled out) from their context because of a particular view of Islam or conversion.[6] But more likely, at this expression of insiderness, new Christians are ostracized from their communities through acute persecution or extenuating circumstances.

One example of this would be a Muslim who comes to faith and openly declares himself to be a "Christian." As life-threatening persecution comes (in this specific case), he flees to a nearby region where he may take a Christian name and may attempt to integrate into the Christian-background believers (CBB) church. In this instance, he must learn and use a new cultural system in his new context. Virtually all

ties to his natural social networks are severed, at least for a season. He becomes an "outsider" believer in Christ in all the aspects I have suggested on the chart (although after a period of time he may begin to develop insiderness in his new context).

Exiles are incredibly diverse in their faith journeys and in how they relate to their contexts, but they all typically pay a high price when they choose to follow Christ. As a result, their stories of faith are often quite remarkable and inspiring. They deserve our utmost respect as fully equal members of the body of Christ. The church needs to do a much better job of becoming a new family for them and utilizing their unique gifts.

1. Cultural Insider

The vast majority of new believers, however, do not necessarily leave their culture as they come to faith—indeed, they *cannot*. In this case, I am referring to culture in the absolute broadest sense, as the language, values, and behaviors that distinguish one people group from another.[7]

For example, a North African comes to faith in Christ but does not leave the context where she was raised. Desiring fellowship, she joins the North African church's social network and leaves her own social network behind. But she has not ceased being North African. Her new faith is expressed in culturally familiar ways. Since her church would be filled with other

Figure 1. Five Expressions of Insiderness

	Five Expressions of Insiderness	Cultural	Social	Communal	Ritual	Theological
	0. Exile (or Refugee)	o	o	o	o	o
	1. Cultural Insider	i	o	o	o	o
Movements	2. Sociocultural Insider	i	i	o	o/?	o
	3. Dual Belonging Insider	i	i	i	?/o	o
	4. Reinterpreting Insider	i	i	i	i	o
	5. Syncretistic Insider	i	i	i/?	?	i
i = insider; o = outsider; ? = occasional exception or ambiguous						

people culturally like herself, she could join without experiencing culture shock (depending on the church!).

This kind of cultural insider MBB (actually, there are endless variations[8]) would clearly also be a theological outsider (CITO), but would also be a social outsider, a communal outsider, and a ritual outsider. We will cover other types of CITO believers below.

2. Sociocultural Insider

In this issue of *IJFM,* Fred Farrokh makes a helpful distinction between a cultural insider and a social insider. In general, new believers should not and could not be expected to repress their cultural backgrounds as they come to faith in Christ. The issue is rather, can they remain social insiders (SI)? Is SITO a more accurate representation of the insider phenomenon than CITO? I welcome Farrokh's desire to distinguish social and cultural, but I believe the reality of insiderness is still more complex than either of these acronyms express.

At the sociocultural expression of insiderness, these new MBBs are able to remain in their own social networks in some contexts. They cease to identify as "Muslims," but certain contextual factors allow them to create the social space necessary to develop a Christian identity without resulting in harmful stigmatization from the broader Muslim society (e.g. Hefner 1993). They are cultural and social insiders but are not thought of as "Muslims" by other local Muslims.

Additionally, because they remain in their social networks, there are rare times when these types of insiders may take part in practices that would generally be classified as "Islamic." For example, members of the emerging church in this expression, even with a Christian identity, sometimes fast during Ramadan, either for relational solidarity with their neighbors or to show that they practice the spiritual discipline of fasting as well, albeit for a different purpose.[9]

*B*ecause they remain in their social networks, there are rare times when these types of insiders may take part in practices classified as "Islamic."

They integrate many parts of their faith (possibly including Islamic terminology for spiritual terms) with their society, and they are known generally as Jesus followers (but not Muslims) who remain socially inside their contexts. However, they are still theological, ritual, and communal outsiders.

3. Dual Belonging Insider

In this expression, insiderness is expressed at a deeper level than the sociocultural. Dual belonging insiders have a clear identity "in Christ" at the core level of their personal identity. But at the social level of identity, they maintain some sort of belonging to their Muslim community as affiliate members while *simultaneously* belonging to the body of Christ as full members. Dual belonging insiders have a communal insiderness[10] with the local Muslim community, even though they also belong to a local (house) church. They relate to the body of Christ and witness to other Muslims in ways that appropriately identify themselves with Jesus in that context (Green 2013).

This expression of insiderness highlights an important point that has been made recently in missiology in regards to identity (e.g. Greenlee (2013)). In reality, all people everywhere experience multiple belonging at the social level of identity. We all simultaneously relate to different groups in different ways, and we belong to many at the same time. Multiple belonging becomes an issue for Jesus followers when the groups to which we belong seek to create a competing, incompatible ideology at the core level of our "in Christ" identity. We must continually ask ourselves, is there something in this group I belong to that challenges my allegiance to Jesus or my integrity as a disciple?

Dual belonging (*not* dual allegiance) insiders believe they can be loyal to Christ and his body while also being active members in the local Muslim-majority milieu. They might not change their language or dress to express their spirituality. Because they are followers of Jesus who obey the Bible, they do not believe in the prophethood of Muhammad nor in the inspiration of the Qur'an. And perhaps like many other nominal Muslims in their context, they may never perform *salat* prayers nor attend the mosque.

However, their dual belonging means that they may be present at many situations such as a funeral or a ceremony where customary Qur'anic recitations take place, or the *shahada* is invoked ritually. In this case, they might alter the second part of the *shahada* and say, "Jesus is the Son of God" under their breath as the community prays together. But ultimately, while they maintain a sense of communal insiderness with their Muslim community, they are still theological and ritual outsiders.

For these insiders, their social label (i.e. "Christian" or "Muslim") is not an area of great concern for them (others who do know them well may even think of them as Christians). Of greater concern is the way they pass on their faith to the next generation, including challenges relating to marriage and parenting (Green 2012). In any case, these are believers who have an established core identity "in Christ," and for various contextual reasons have been able to negotiate a communal identity that is represented by dual belonging; in some sense a "Muslim" and yet also a biblical follower of Jesus. I hesitate to go into more detail because there are many contextual variations of dual belonging insiderness.[11]

4. Reinterpreting Insider

Often, the first thing many think of when they hear the word "insider" is this expression of insiderness. But I hope I have demonstrated that there are three other layers of insiderness that are expressed differently than this one. Reinterpreting insiders are most commonly referred to as MFCs (Muslim Followers of Christ) who could, in general, agree with a standard evangelical statement of faith, making them theological outsiders from the broader Islamic community. What makes this expression unique is that they also take part in common Islamic rituals, reappropriating them and filling them with new meaning.
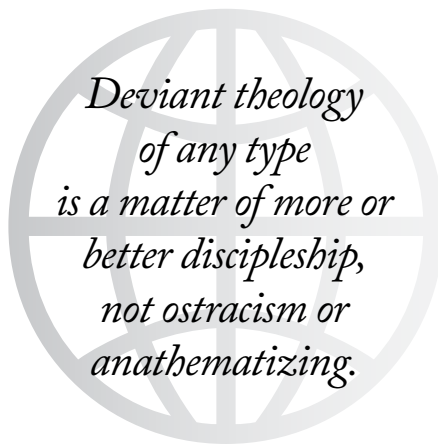
Their ability to reuse rituals is possible because they also have a theology of Islam that reinterprets essential Islamic doctrines instead of rejecting them. For example, there are ways some MFCs refer to Muhammad as a "directive prophet" (e.g. Talman (2015)) and hold him in high esteem. They may frequent the mosque for evangelistic and social reasons, and have Holy Book studies where the Injil is read side-by-side with the Qur'an (which is not seen as special revelation but a helpful spiritual text), using whatever truth they find to point people to Jesus. *Salat* prayers are performed in line with other Muslims, and the *shahada* is recited but only as a cultural marker, in their view. For them, the real markers that identify a follower of Jesus are the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22ff), not a label like "Muslim" or "Christian."

Some in the global church accept their local theologizing, while others do not.[12] Regarding the local Muslim community, however, their reinterpretations would at best be simply tolerated by those who do not accept them. However, throughout the Muslim world "orthopraxy is more important than orthodoxy" (Ess 2006), so theological insiderness might not be as essential of an issue as ritual insiderness in some Muslim communities.

The ultimate goal for some reinterpreting insiders could be to start some sort of reform movement within Islam, or instead to start a local transitional movement that ends with indigenous home fellowships. These CITO believers are very different from both sociocultural and dual belonging insiders.

5. Syncretistic Insider

Interestingly, "most American evangelicals hold views condemned as heretical by some of the most important councils of the early church" (Emmert 2014). We must be cautious about applying standards of "doctrinal purity" to new believers on the frontiers of the kingdom that don't exist in our own churches established in Christendom.

> *Deviant theology of any type is a matter of more or better discipleship, not ostracism or anathematizing.*

Each of us, including other MBBs at various expressions of insiderness, have unconscious weaknesses at some point in our worldview (we all have blind spots): the real issue is whether the *telos* of our lives points towards ever-increasing conformity to the Truth (Jn. 14:6; 2 Cor. 3:18).[13] This is the process of discipleship.

However, there are unfortunately some insiders who hold to beliefs that are clearly beyond standard Christian orthodoxy. Whether it is consciously done or not, their unorthodox theology usually makes it easier for those from their background to accept their message. For example, certain MFCs (not all!) have a theology that more closely

matches a Unitarian understanding of God, and they believe that Christ is not God incarnate or ceased to be divine at the incarnation.[14] This would make them closer to theological insiders, since they may also implicitly affirm the Islamic doctrine of *tawheed* which teaches that God is a singular monad.

Even though syncretistic[15] insiders might not completely align theologically with their Muslim community, the point is still that there is clearly an aspect of unhealthy theological insiderness at this expression. Of course, there are some who contend that the other kinds of insiderness described in this article are harmfully syncretistic as well. However, my classification of this expression is intended to describe what I believe a broad consensus among evangelical missiologists would identify as a negative form of syncretism. Insiders in this level are not theologically "outside" enough of their context to be biblical disciples of Jesus. We may disagree over what constitutes negative syncretism at other expressions of this model, but not on this one.

Other examples may include groups who believe that only the four Gospels are inspired and who also believe in the inspiration of the Qur'an. Another group of syncretistic insiders with an anemic ecclesiology would only gather for worship in (Bible-less) mosques with other non-MFCs, thus affirming their full belonging inside the *ummah*.

Syncretistic insiders do not necessarily have to be practicing Islamic rituals, and they might not be making any attempt to belong to the body of Christ. It is difficult to predict whether syncretistic insiders will likely transition into biblical movements—they could remain as they are, or be absorbed back into the local Muslim community, or they could turn in a healthy direction.

How syncretistic insiders are discipled is a very delicate subject. Deviant theology of any type is a matter of more or better discipleship, not ostracism or anathematizing. Inadequate discipleship

might encourage them in their syncretism or patronize them as children. It is imperative for some disciplers to remain in close relationship with them to help them with their hermeneutics and doctrine, among other issues.

Dynamic Transitions

Movements can be found in three kinds of insiderness indicated in the chart: sociocultural, dual belonging, and reinterpreting insiders. The cultural insider (who is not also a social insider) usually does not have the kind of relationships with unbelievers to see multiplication happen, and so movements have rarely been observed at this expression.[16] In any case, it is helpful to see the distinctions between different kinds of insiders lest we think they are a monolithic phenomenon.

As the chart may convey, insiderness is not a static concept. It is possible for groups of MBBs to move through various levels of insiderness over time. Like a movement, insiderness is dynamic and fluid. Yet,

> we have to ask whether it is fair to expect a movement to survive only as a movement. Either the movement disintegrates or it becomes an institution, this is simply a sociological law. Every religious group that started out as a movement and managed to survive, did so because it was gradually institutionalized. (Bosch 1991, 52)

This refers to a syncretistic insider movement as well.

Yet while movements are transitional in nature, insiderness can settle for a time. The vast majority of disciples of Jesus around the world obviously have some level of insiderness. There are even different insiders with different insiderness in the same context, so we need to be aware of the variety of expressions.

In all fairness, it often takes a thorough understanding of the specific insiders *and* their context to discern which insiderness they describe, but even then it might still be fuzzy due to the limitations

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of the model itself. Yet my intention here is not necessarily to classify insiders but to grapple with insiderness which is complex and dynamic.

Diverse Contexts

In the incarnation, the Son of God became an insider. Christ expressed insiderness in his context, yet without sin.

> Jesus our example was an insider who never relinquished his outsider status that challenged people to see their world from an entirely new perspective. (Flemming 2005, 23)

This reflects how Paul saw his ministry of becoming all things to all people (1 Cor. 9:19ff), while avoiding harmful syncretism (2 Cor. 6:14ff). In this basic CITO tension, it is absolutely crucial to keep context in mind. Jesus' Jewish setting was different from Paul's Gentile mission, so we are not surprised to see them with different expressions of insiderness.

It is true that some reinterpreting insiders are trying to stay inside Islam for missional or theological reasons. However, it is incorrect to assume there is one entity called "Islam" that *all* insiders are trying to stay "inside."[17] It is much closer to reality to recognize that most insiders are simply trying to bear faithful witness to Jesus within their context, following in the footsteps of those in the New Testament.

And since every context is different, we cannot assess all insiders with broad strokes nor evaluate all insiderness with the same criteria. What we say in hermeneutics also applies in missiology: "context is king."

Conclusion

Here is a brief analogy of the main point in this article: if you want to join different cells of a table together in

Microsoft Word, simply click on a button called "merge." Much of the insider movement debate, including discussion concerning contextualization,[18] becomes obscured when different kinds of insiders and insiderness are *merged* together. Herein I have attempted to disentangle important concepts blended together by ideas like CITO. It should also be evident that the terms "insider movement" and "insider proponent" are vague and may create misunderstandings.

Significantly different expressions of insiderness exist for believers where the church of King Jesus is emerging today. Hopefully this article helps us communicate respectfully around the actual issues and embrace the insiderness complexity on the frontiers of the mission of God. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1] This does not mean that culture and theology are divergent categories. All theology is contextual and expressed culturally (Netland and Ott 2006).

[2] I use examples from the Muslim world in this article. However, the same expressions of insiderness could apply to Hindu or Buddhist contexts as well, perhaps even a specific secular-progressive North American context.

[3] Unfortunately, the "inside/r" word itself has taken on a negative connotation for some in missiological circles. Yet insiderness cannot be talked about in a binary construct: something you're either for or against. As Don Little says, effective discipleship for new MBBs should "express uncompromisingly bold and culturally appropriate witness for Christ that remain inside Muslim communities" (2015, 125).

[4] Higgins (2006) and Waterman (2014) have done something similar in previous articles. It could be possible to link the "levels" in this article with certain portions of the C Spectrum (Travis 1998), but I believe doing so would make it overly complicated. I'm trying to be simple without being simplistic.

Jens Barnet insightfully remarks that while we need to develop better models to deal with the multifaceted, tangled, and layered nature of identity today, he is concerned that many of our approaches are still using the same kind of enlightenment thinking that failed to describe the complexity of reality in the first place (2015). (It is important to note however that I am not dealing with "identity" but "insiderness.") To the point that I might be steeped in dichotomist or modernistic thought, I enthusiastically welcome criticism and improvements of my proposal here. This is the exciting nature of missiology.

I want to thank Jens Barnett, Abu Daoud, Abu Jaz, Gene Daniels, Brad Gill, Tim Green, and L. D. Waterman for their help in formulating ideas and crafting this article. Any errors or weaknesses though are ultimately my own.

[5] I have learned about these believers through my own research, ministry experience, and also as a member of the Bridging the Divide Network (http://btdnetwork.org). The academic discipline of evangelical missiology would be strengthened if there were more empirical studies on specific communities of insiders that specifically examine their insiderness. However, recent empirical studies that provide examples of insiderness in this article can be found in the research projects of Kraft (2007), Green (2012), Oksnevad (2012), Naja (2013), and Miller (2014). Garrison also has many anecdotal examples (2014).

[6] An individualistic understanding of evangelism and faith change often drives this 'extractionist' approach to ministry. See L. D. Waterman's important insights in this issue of *IJFM*.

[7] I do not intend to suggest that the other variables of insiderness in this schema are independent from culture. For example, rituals are part of every culture.

[8] Additionally, Duane Alexander Miller has noted instances of Iranian MBB communities who left Islam and embraced Christianity in order to be "inside" their culture, because Islam was seen as Arabizing and Christianity was seen to affirm their own historical and ethnic peculiarity (2014, 189). In this case, Miller comments that Islam could be the "outsider."

[9] Notice on the chart that this level is marked with "o/?" on the ritual column. One weakness of my categories is that reality is indeed much more complex and fuzzy than I'm suggesting here. The point is that while this group is clearly recognized by others as

ritual outsiders, they still have the flexibility to do an "Islamic" practice such as fasting, even during Ramadan, although it might not be in the exact same manner.

[10] There is a weakness with the term "communal identity" because "the term implies that Hindus and Muslims identify only with a community of Hindus and Muslims. Although some Indians may embrace and propagate such an identity, few Indians live with such a singular self-understanding. Overreliance on the communal notion is akin to examining identity with a very narrow view…. many Hindus and Muslims do not live within discrete and distinct religious worlds but practice faith lives that obscure clear identity boundaries" (Gottschalk 2000, 39). (I want to thank Barnett for sharing this insight with me.)

[11] The phenomenon of the "secret believer" (C6 on the C Spectrum) is probably found most commonly at this expression (even though they do not attempt to relate to the body of Christ or are unsuccessful in safely doing so), yet could be at other levels as well. As we know from experience, there are many new believers like this in frontier contexts, yet analysis on secret believers is outside the scope of this article.

[12] Barnett offers a helpful observation on the dynamic of syncretism: "Cultural change in a community is not instantaneous, nor is it uniform. Since transformation of a culture will *always* involve the contesting of cultural symbols, pockets of confusion in the initial stages seems, to me, unavoidable. If we define syncretism semiotically, as the association of a non-biblical meaning to a symbol or form, then some degree of syncretistic confusion may well be a normal stage on the way to good contextualization" (2015). This partially explains how some insiders could eventually transition to different expressions of insiderness, and thus we might appreciate or comprehend why these levels of insiderness exist for a period of time, even if it may be confusing or even troubling.

[13] Still, there is much theological diversity within evangelical orthodoxy.

[14] While the deity of Christ is obviously a huge stumbling block to Muslims, it is also a strong factor facilitating the faith journeys of MBBs. In my own study of MBB conversions, many Muslims are actually drawn to Jesus by his majestic position as the Lord God (c.f. Farah 2013, 17). I believe this reflects a central way Jesus himself made disciples: "he manifested his glory and his disciples believed in him" (Jn. 2:11).

[15] There are different ways the term syncretism is used in missiology (Farah 2010). I am primarily using it as an evaluative term to describe deviation from the broad consensus of historical Christian orthodoxy.

[16] Rodney Stark remarks that one of the criteria for the success of new religious movements is that they remain "an open social network, able to maintain and form ties to outsiders" (1996, 142).

[17] The essentialist fallacy is committed when an evaluation is made of an "insider" or MBB on the basis of some supposed "real Islam" and not on the basis of how the specific believer relates to the particular context, including his or her local Muslim community. Both insider proponents and traditionalists may sometimes commit the essentialist fallacy.

For persuasive cases against viewing Islam as a monolithic, coherent entity, see Ramachandra (1999, 13–46); Marranci (2008); and Jung (2011). I believe it is best to view "Islam" as simply being what people who profess it actually believe and do (Bates and Rassam 2001, 89). Biblically-based ministry in the Islamic world is not about engaging *Islam*, but rather about engaging *Muslims*. Romans 1:18ff does not refer to systems such as Islam, but to humankind. It is people who "suppress the truth by their wickedness" and thus need to be the focus of the gospel (Walls 1996b, 66).

So whether or not the Islamic State, Saudi Sunnis, or Hezbollah represent "real" Islam should not be a major concern. As ministers of the gospel, we start with people in the complexity of their contexts. It's not our job to define Islam, but to present biblical faith. Yet the complexity of people in their contexts must be embraced without resorting to reductionistic oversimplifications which often lead to the type of decontextualized approaches to Muslim ministry that can be commonplace in evangelical missiology.

[18] For many of the same reasons, I also think it is important to show differences between workers' approaches of contextualization. See "The 'W' Spectrum: 'Worker' Paradigms in Muslim Contexts" (Farah and Meeker 2015).

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