CITO: A Bridging Conversation

Will the *Umma* Veto SITO?
Assessing the Impact of Theological Deviation on Social Acceptability in Muslim Communities

by Fred Farrokh

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Editor's note: SITO stands for Social Insider/Theological Outsider and represents the author's modification of the original acronym CITO.

In the last few years, identity has emerged as a key facet of the missiological discourse regarding contextualization, insider movements, and interfaith relations in Muslim contexts. This article addresses the identity of Muslims who have come to trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In particular, I will take a look at missiological discussions regarding the important concept of "CITO," which is an acronym for believers in Christ from a Muslim background who are "cultural insiders but theological outsiders."

Three different authors have gone into print either suggesting this CITO model or critiquing it. I will be examining proposals by all three. Gene Daniels and co-author L. D. Waterman tackled this issue in their Summer 2013 piece in the *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* (Daniels and Waterman 2013). The authors suggested that a reasonable outcome would be for these new believers to remain "culturally inside and theologically outside" (2013, 62). They attributed the term to "Abu Jaz," a sub-Saharan African church leader from a Muslim background, whom Daniels interviewed in 2013 for a *Christianity Today* article (see Daniels, 2013).

Daniels writes: "Thus in order to avoid syncretism, followers of Christ will be 'outside' generally accepted Islamic theology" (2013, 63). Daniels suggests that CITO believers may in fact deviate from "Islamic understandings of God, salvation, Jesus, etc." (2013, 66). Waterman adds, "I agree that CITO seems to be the best way forward (at least among options we're aware of at present" (2013, 63). A third author, Ben Naja, who researched East African movements, used similar terminology when he stated that participants in those movements pursue "a dual identity: social and cultural insider, spiritual outsider" (2013b, 156). The term CITO, therefore, appears to be fairly recent in missiological discussion.

But is CITO a viable concept? Will the *umma* (Muslim community) continue to extend cultural/social insider status to those who have become theological

outsiders? And what does it mean to be a theological outsider? A Turkish writer, Ziya Meral, himself a Muslim-background Christian, describes the plight of many Muslim-background TOs (theological outsiders), upon whom apostate status has been conferred by their communities:

> Apostates are subject to wide-ranging human rights abuses including extra-judicial killings by state-related agents or mobs; honour killings by family members; detention, imprisonment, torture, physical and psychological intimidation by security forces; the denial of access to judicial services and social services; the denial of equal employment or education opportunities; social pressure resulting in loss of housing and employment; and day-to-day discrimination and ostracism in education, finance and social activities. (2008, 6)

For these reasons Meral is more than a little skeptical that Muslims who have become theological outsiders can in actuality remain social insiders.

This missiological tension is real and poses valid questions that need answers. Those answers require more data and research, and I wish to introduce my own research as a contribution to this important discussion. I am writing from the perspective of a Muslim-background believer in Christ. I appreciate the efforts of all those who have set out to communicate the Gospel to Muslims, and I believe a closer examination of this CITO identity is a great way to begin.

In all the encouraging uptick of research on Muslim identity, I first of all want to distinguish between the terms "cultural insider" and "social insider." I then want to outline how my research focused on certain variables which I believe are central to this multi-study analysis of identity: Christology, Muhammad, self-identity, mosque attendance, and community perceptions of identity. I then will compare these variables from my own research with new field research by Ben Naja and

J. H. Prenger before offering any conclusions and future considerations

CITO or SITO?

Abu Jaz was, to my knowledge, the first to coin the term "CITO": he described the East African movement (of which he is a part) as made up of believers who are "culturally inside, theologically outside." In the 2013 *IJFM* article, Gene Daniels wisely introduces into the discussion yet a different term, the "social insider" which is a concept I think could prove helpful (Daniels and Waterman 2013, 62). However, he then links "social insider" to "cultural insider" in a way that makes the terms seem almost synonymous.

I want to distinguish between the terms "cultural insider" and "social insider."
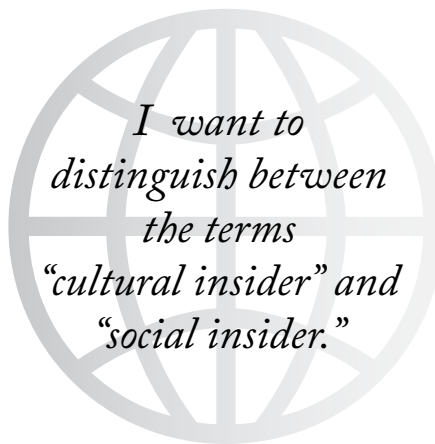
I wish to make, what I believe, is an important distinction between a cultural insider (CITO) and a social insider. Cultural insider status centers on communication issues, whereas social insider status centers on honor-shame issues. A cultural insider is able to communicate effectively in a given context, understanding at a deep level what is going on around him or her, and responding accordingly. A social insider is a person whom the community is honored to call one of its own. For Muslims coming to Christ, the issue is not whether they will be cultural outsiders; they are indigenous people and will remain cultural insiders. Rather, the question is whether their newfound faith in Christ will result

in the community (umma) imputing shame upon them, rendering them social outsiders. Neither term should be confused with the technical term describing "insider movement" believers who "remain inside their socioreligious communities, retaining their identity as members of those communities" (Lewis, *IJFM*, 2007, 24:2, 75).

Furthermore, as anyone can attest who has lived in another country, it is exceedingly difficult as a foreigner to become a cultural insider. Very few foreigners ever learn to speak a target language with the fluency and accent of someone indigenous to that culture. It is virtually impossible for an outsider to convincingly reproduce the idioms, facial expressions, gestures, thought processes, and mastery of spatial relations such that he might "pass" as indigenous. Beyond this are the external appearances that could likely expose someone as non-indigenous—even if he or she were to perfectly mimic all of the other elements of communication which God allowed every child raised in that culture to master with no apparent effort. Cross-cultural workers who have become—at least marginally—cultural insiders have earned my admiration and respect!

Likewise, in the same way that non-indigenous persons rarely acquire cultural insider status in another ethnolinguistic group, so too, do indigenous persons rarely lose it. It would take draconian efforts to bring this about, such as: a refusal to speak one's mother tongue for years; or the cultural disconnect from living for decades in a foreign land without visits home; or long stretches of time without much contact with compatriots. In a Muslim community, disowning one's culture could take the form of eating pork products in public, or of completely flaunting accepted dress mores. Short of these extreme measures, an indigenous person will most likely continue to be a cultural insider in the culture in which he or she was born and raised.

I believe what Abu Jaz is really pointing to (as referenced by Ben Naja and with clarification from Daniels) is the prospect of a person being a social insider, as compared to one who is SITO (a social insider, but theological outsider). By social insider, I mean a person who is accepted by and in good standing within the mainstream of that society. Missionaries obviously would not want to unnecessarily precipitate situations in which indigenous persons become marginalized as social outsiders. Nevertheless, it is very possible that cultural insiders might still be socially ostracized and no longer accepted as members in good standing and this might lead to the formation of their own sub-culture.

New Field Research on Muslim Identity

In order to help shed some light on these important questions, I will take a look at three recent field research studies done in Muslim contexts. The first was conducted by Ben Naja and published in *IJFM* in two parts: one in 2013 and the second in 2014 (although officially backdated to the latter part of 2013). Naja conducted his study in an East African country in December 2011 and features a control group and a primary group. The second study of field research data I will evaluate was collected by J. H. Prenger, who published his PhD dissertation in April 2014 on "Muslim Insider Christ Followers." Prenger did his field research in seven (unnamed) countries within four regions of the Muslim world. Lastly, I myself conducted field research on indigenous perspectives of Muslim identity as a part of my own July 2014 PhD dissertation. For my field research in late 2013, I interviewed forty people, all Muslims by birth, who currently reside in Metropolitan New York City, and who hail from eighteen different birth countries. Half of the interviewees were Muslims, including five Islamic scholars, and the other twenty were Muslim-background Christians.

I will highlight these studies in depth in particular because they ask questions

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germane to the viability of SITO.[1] I understand that space limitations make it impossible for researchers to present all the information they may glean on the field, and so I naturally welcome additional evaluations of these new sources of missiological data.

Prior to this windfall of recent studies, the only published field research on Muslim insider movements was that presented by Phil Parshall regarding "Islampur" (see Parshall 1998). This study of 72 Insider Muslim leaders indicated that "96 percent say that there are four heavenly books, ie, Torah, Zabur, Injil and Qur'an (this is standard Muslim belief)" and "66 percent say that the Qur'an is the greatest of the four books" (Parshall 1998, 406). Regarding mosque attendance, "50 per cent go to the traditional mosque on Friday," and "31 per cent go to the mosque more than once a day" (Parshall 1998, 406).

I also understand that new research may have been published very recently or in the lag time from the writing of this article (late 2014) to its eventual publication.[2] I apologize for overlooking any meritorious works in these categories. No doubt they can be addressed later as this important missiological conversation continues.

Scope of the Study

The issue of identity is reflexive—how people, individually and collectively, view themselves and how they are viewed by others. I will review the three field research projects through five questions. The first two deal more with the theological spectrum of SITO, while the final three focus on the social dynamic:

- *Christology:* What do believers in the movement believe about Jesus Christ?
- *Muhammad:* Do the new believers continue to esteem Muhammad as a

bona fide prophet (and therefore the Qur'an as a book of divine origin)?
- *Self-identity:* Do the new believers continue to identify themselves as Muslims, in the present tense?
- *Mosque Attendance:* Do the new believers continue to attend the Islamic mosque?
- *Community Perceptions of Identity:* Does their Muslim community continue to view the new believers as Muslims?

Naja's Research among East African Believers

Ben Naja undertook field research in an East African Muslim context beginning December 2011. Naja and his team conducted

> 322 interviews with believers from a Muslim background from 64 different villages and *ekklesias* (fellowship groups) in several districts. (2013a, 28)

Here are some of his results as they pertain to my five topics.

Christology: Naja reports that among his primary research group at least 95% of those who were interviewed believe that Jesus died on the Cross, that Jesus is the Son of God, and that they are forgiven through Jesus' atoning death (2013a, 28). Based on this data, the East Africans interviewed by Naja appear to be Christologically orthodox.

Muhammad: The majority of the 322 East African interviewees are TOs (theological outsiders, from an Islamic perspective) in that they reject the prophethood of Muhammad. Naja reports that only 34% of his primary research group consider Muhammad a prophet (2013b, 156). Naja also interviewed an additional 68 East African Muslim-background believers as a comparison group, and only 3% of this group affirmed the prophethood of Muhammad (2013b, 156).

Self-identity: Regarding self-identity, Naja states:

> When asked, most would maintain that they are Muslims, but in a qualified sense, namely, a Muslim who follows Isa al-Masih. Still, 93% do identify themselves as "Muslim" in some sense of the word.…A smaller number, 41%, actually "feel" they are still part of the Muslim community. (2013a, 29)

Interestingly, the groups are referred to as *ekklesia*, which is the Koine Greek New Testament term for church. Though Naja mentions that this movement aspires to social insider status, it seems that only a minority (41%) of respondents feel they currently enjoy it.

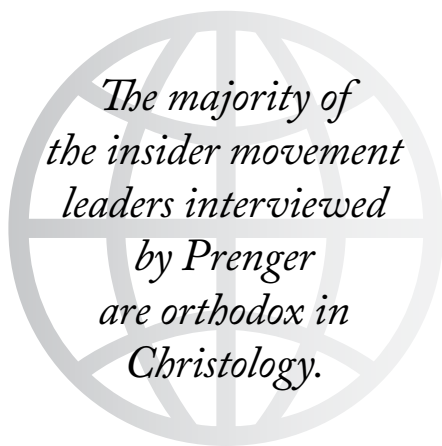*Mosque Attendance:* Regarding attendance at the Islamic mosque, Naja notes,

> Nearly 60% of the research group and more than 40% of the comparison group in these two movements never go to the mosque. (2013b, 157)

It would be interesting to know if those who attend the mosque are those who remain free from the persecutions mentioned below. Similarly, it would be illuminating to know if those who do attend the mosque attend it daily, weekly, or only during annual holidays. Another question that would be helpful would be to probe further into the views and rationales of the apparent cross-section of believers who still attend the mosque yet say they reject the prophethood of Muhammad (since Muhammad is affirmed as a prophet during the call to corporate prayer in the mosque.) However, this information did not emerge from a study that otherwise was chock-full of information.

Community Perceptions of Identity: The next question is how the wider Muslim community views these new believers. Since the movements are new, it is possible many Muslims are not aware of their existence. Indeed, Naja notes, "These informal ekklesia are 'invisible,' in that they do not actively seek public recognition…"

(2013b, 158). Nevertheless, 47% of the primary research group and 52% of the comparison group have experienced suffering for their faith in Christ (2013b, 157).

To summarize my understanding of Naja's findings, the groups in his recent field work in East Africa, as described, can be characterized as biblically orthodox and Islamic theological outsiders. They aspire to be social insiders, and 93% continue to self-identify as Muslims in some sense, yet about half are being persecuted by the Muslim community. In terms of the question posed in the title of this article, "Will the *umma* veto SITO?" more time is needed to evaluate whether the wider Muslim community

> *The majority of the insider movement leaders interviewed by Prenger are orthodox in Christology.*

will continue to confer social insider status on these believers or whether the umma will ultimately withdraw it.

Prenger's Multi-National Study of "Muslim Insider Christ Followers"

J. H. Prenger recently published a doctoral dissertation (in 2014) featuring a multi-national research that surveyed twenty-six "Muslim Insider Christ Followers" and five "alongsider" expatriate mentors. (I will focus solely on the indigenous respondents.) In his study, the indigenous interviewees are identified as members of "insider movements." Prenger's study was conducted in seven different countries within four separate regions of the Muslim world—South Asia, Central Asia, Southeast

Asia, and Africa. His research is the most expansive to date regarding the direct beliefs and practices of followers of Jesus who are part of insider movements. Dr. Prenger is to be commended for providing many direct quotes from the Muslim insider movement leaders.

Christology: The majority of the insider movement leaders interviewed by Prenger are orthodox in terms of Christology. Prenger states: "18 interviewees see Isa al Massih as divine" (2014, 113). Prenger provides direct quotes supporting their views of the divinity of Jesus. For example "Zach" (pseudonyms used throughout) from SE Asia states regarding Jesus:

> Some of the earlier prophets often spoke of the coming Messiah. He begins to take a shape in a human form. From one angle he is seen as fully man. But we also see in the theophanies and other revelations of God in the Old Testament that this figure is also seen as divine. He is 100% divine within the oneness of God. Like two faces of one coin, these are inseparable. This gives us a lot of difficulty in our context here. (2014, 114)

Their orthodoxy, however, is not unanimous and Prenger indicates this.

> Five members of insider movements see the relationship between Allah and Isa al Massih in a way that reflects a low Christology. Table 28 shows how each one of them says in their own words that Jesus is not God.

An example is "Axel" from South Asia:

> I do not believe that Isa and Allah are the same. The Isa that came to earth is not Allah. That is shirk [idolatry]. He was human and you cannot say that a human is Allah. (2014, 119)

In terms of the SITO/SITI discussion, the minority who do not affirm the divinity of Christ are much more likely to be viewed by the wider Muslim community as theological insiders than those who affirm Christ's divinity.

Muhammad: Regarding their perceptions of prophets, Prenger states that "Andy"

> was the only one who explicitly said in response to the question about prophets

in general that he believes that Mohammed was not a prophet. (2014, 85)

However, the direct quote attributed to South Asian Muslim Insider leader "Howard" seems to indicate he also rejects the prophethood of Muhammad, which would perhaps make two such indigenous leaders. Prenger provides helpful verbatim quotes on what these leaders feel about prophets, Muhammad, and the compatibility of the Qur'an and the Bible. For example, a Southeast Asian leader "Drew" conveyed his beliefs through an analogy:

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

Self-identity: My own research (below) indicates that the umma considers affirmation of the prophethood of Muhammad as the indispensable variable for retaining Muslim identity. Therefore, the Insider Movement leaders interviewed by Prenger not only claim Muslim identity through the descriptor "Muslim Insider Christ Followers," but many continue to embrace Muslim identity through affirmation of the prophetic office of Muhammad.

The data presented indicate the Muslim Insider Christ Followers see themselves as Muslims. In fact, at least two of the South Asian groups identify themselves as "Completed Muslims" and urge their Muslims friends to likewise find the fulfillment of their Islamic faith in Christ. "Andy" of South Asia Region A states: "I can challenge the Muslims by saying that they are not complete Muslims if they don't believe in Jesus" (2014, 208). Similarly, in South Asia Region D, Prenger reports that "the chosen identity of insiders are Pro-Christ Muslims or completed Muslims" (2014, 210).

These Muslim insider Christ followers who attend the mosque have their own reasons and rationales for doing so, which are highly instructive.

Mosque attendance: Regarding attendance of the mosque, Prenger again provides insightful quotes which indicate a significant number of these Muslim Insider Christ Followers continue to attend the mosque. They have their own reasons and rationales for doing so, which are highly instructive.

Several of the Insider Movement leaders adapt something akin to Paul's marriage instructions in 1 Corinthians 7 in continuing mosque attendance. Prenger notes:

> [African IM leader] "Brad" explained their strategy in regard to the mosque system as continuing what you did before. If insiders attended the mosque before they came to faith in Isa, they encourage them to continue going. (2014, 213)

Prenger affirms that one of the South Asian Insider Movement leaders adheres to the same principle:

> Regarding mosque attendance,
>
> "Mitch" supports the idea that someone should not change their attendance habits after coming to faith in Isa. "He can worship in the mosque in the name of Jesus." (2014, 209)

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

A number of the Insider Movement leaders seem eager to promote their movements from within mosques. "Monty" of Southeast Asia boldly states:

> We want to build a believer community inside the mosque. We want to build a Bible college within the Islamic boarding house. (2014, 301)
>
> "Axel" [of South Asia] has since left his Christian group and now operates

as a Muslim insider, with a beard. He attends the mosque and prays with his friends there. Axel said that he actually prefers praying like that over the way they pray in churches. (2014, 209)

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

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

In the case of one leader in South Asia Region D, the believers have withdrawn from the regular mosque and have started their own mosque:

> "Angus" referred to himself and other insiders as sheep among wolves. Their strategy regarding the mosque system is to be a Sufi-style group separate from the regular mosques, within which the scrutiny is high and the tolerance is low towards variations. 2014, 210)

Community perceptions of identity: For the most part, the umma sees the respective Muslim insiders as Muslims. "Homer," an Insider Movement leader in Africa, reports: "We worship together in the mosque but other Muslims are not aware that there is something special with us" (2014, 430). Prenger's research portrays the Muslim Insider Christ Followers as individuals who are seen by their communities in most cases as social, cultural and theological insiders. He summarizes:

Most insiders and even leaders from the second generation down are unaware of a Christian connection. Use of the Qur'an and mosque attendance is normal and insiders seek to be socially active, meeting real needs in their communities. (2014, 263)

Regarding persecution, some of the Muslim Insider Christ Followers have been persecuted by Muslims. "Tyler" of Southeast Asia even reports "many deaths" in his region at the hands of Muslims (2014, 219). Prenger notes,

Insiders face the challenge from Islam of being heretical. They have learned to respond to these challenges by starting from the Qur'an and the Hadith. (2014, 219)

Nevertheless, Prenger considers the church to be a bigger, though perhaps not lethal, threat to the Muslim Insiders:

The main ethical consideration in this study is the vulnerability of the insiders to negative exposure by traditional Christians in the same region. (2014, 46)
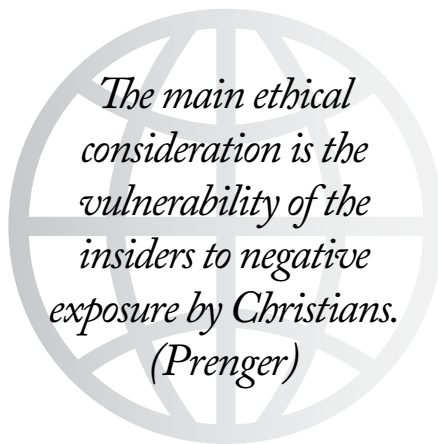
It is interesting to see that many IM leaders mention the traditional church as the main challenge to IM and insiders. (2014, 227)

In summary, the Muslim Insiders interviewed by Prenger most closely match with those that fit the SITI description (both social and theological insiders). For the most part, they attend the mosque, they do not reject the prophethood of Muhammad, and they identify as Muslims. Therefore, the umma naturally views them as theological insiders who are also social insiders (SITI). In several cases, where their heterodoxy to Islamic doctrine was revealed, persecution ensued from the Muslim camp. In other cases, the Muslim Insiders presented themselves as "completed Muslims" who by inference would be the best of Muslims. Existing Christians, as might be expected, were generally non-accepting of the Muslim Insiders, since they, in turn, felt they were theological outsiders (from the biblical perspective) due

to their stances regarding Muhammad, the Qur'an, mosque attendance, and retention of Muslim self-identity.

My Own Research: Indigenous Perspectives on Muslim Identity

I, too, have waded into the deep waters of this controversial topic with my own recent PhD dissertation (Farrokh 2014). My research, like that of Naja and Prenger, also assesses these five topics: Christology, Muhammad, self-identity, mosque attendance, and community perceptions of identity. Like Naja and Prenger, I, too, am involved in ministry to Muslims and cannot claim the pure neutrality that a non-participant might bring to a research project.

The main ethical consideration is the vulnerability of the insiders to negative exposure by Christians. (Prenger)

My research features several distinctives. It is the first missiological doctoral project I am aware of which also interviewed Muslims (i.e., those who might be considered traditional Muslims) regarding the possible retention of Muslim identity among Christ-worshippers. I also was able to capture the sentiments of non-participant interviewees, whom I met by chance; thirty percent of my interviews were conducted among women, which appears to be unique; and lastly, to my knowledge, this was the first PhD dissertation on Muslim identity, contextualization, and insider movements by a Muslim-background Christian.

My research considers the issue of Muslim identity from an indigenous

perspective. The main theoretical question is whether Muslims hold the term *Muslim* flexibly enough to include a person who has come to believe in the biblical narrative regarding the Lord Jesus Christ. In Rebecca Lewis' terms (2007, 75), my research sought to understand whether Muslims felt an individual could retain Muslim identity if he or she came to believe in the lordship of Christ and the authority of the Bible. The second aspect of the research elicited from people who were born Muslim just how they felt others in various Muslim countries would respond to faith deviations by a Muslim—deviations that included coming to faith in the biblical Jesus.

The research instrument and interviewee pool: To implement my research, I asked forty people who had been born into Muslim homes and who hailed from eighteen different nations, to respond to a vignette set in their home countries. I narrated a story to these interviewees in which a hypothetical Muslim strayed from the Islamic faith and came to believe in the biblical Jesus. Eventually that straying Muslim began to fellowship with other like-minded believers. The individual was introduced to the gospel through the internet; no direct missionary involvement was suggested.

Twenty of the interviewees were Muslims, including five Islamic scholars, of whom three were prominent imams. One had represented his country in the international Qur'an recitation competition in Medina, Saudi Arabia. The average age of the Muslim interviewees was forty years, with a mean of twelve years having been spent in the USA. Nineteen identified themselves as Sunni Muslim, and one as a Sufi.

The other twenty interviewees were Muslim-background Christians. Seventeen came from a Sunni background; three had a Shi'ite background. The average age of this cohort was forty-eight years, having served Christ an average of nineteen years,

and having lived in the USA an average of twenty-five years.

Thirty-five of the forty interviewees were foreign-born; all of the US-born interviewees had lived in or had visited their respective ancestral homelands as adults. It is likely, therefore, that such a sample of Muslims and Muslim-background Christians would respond accurately to a situation occurring in their home countries. All interviewees signed a consent form, signaling their understanding that I was a Christian seminarian doing research on Muslim identity.

Since I have lived and ministered in metro New York, I previously had met the majority of the Muslim-background Christians who comprised the interview pool. None of them had prior information about the nature of the interview. (I knew that one of the interviewees had strong sentiments against insider movements; I refrained from interviewing a second who shared those sentiments.) As for the Muslim interviewees, I had met none of them prior to their respective interviews, and fourteen of the twenty were interviewed through chance contact on the streets of Muslim neighborhoods. None of the Muslim interviewees indicated that they were aware of the Christian missiological debate regarding Muslim identity. The Uzbek scholar I interviewed surmised that my research was related to Christian missiology. Exasperated, he stated to me, "Jehovah's Witnesses are coming into my country, and trying to convert everyone to Christianity" (2014, 175).

The self-reported birth countries of the forty interviewees are: Bangladesh (3), Burkina Faso (3), Egypt (2), Guyana (1), Iran (2), India (1), Kazakhstan (1), Jordan (2), Lebanon (1) Morocco (2), Palestine (3), Pakistan (4), Sierra Leone (1), Saudi Arabia(1) Trinidad (2), Turkey (4), United States (5), and Uzbekistan (2).

Christology: In the vignette I narrated, the lead character (Ahmed if the

The interviewees overwhelmingly felt a biblical Christology would violate tawhid *and* shahada, *and trigger the revocation of Muslim identity.*

interviewee were a man, or Fatimeh if it were a woman)

> came to believe the Bible was true and that God visited the earth in the form of Jesus, who died on the cross and rose from the dead.

I then asked the respondents if they considered this to be the same Jesus that Ahmed/Fatimeh had been raised to believe in. Ninety percent of the Muslim interviewees felt this was a different Jesus—and all provided theological reasoning for their opposition. Ten of the twenty respondents (50%) objected to the essence of the biblical Jesus—God visiting the earth in the form of Christ. Eight of the twenty interviewees (40%) objected to the acts of Jesus—his dying on the cross and his rising from the dead. Likewise, all twenty (100%) of the Muslim-background Christian interviewees felt the Ahmed/Fatimeh character now believed in a different Jesus than he or she had believed in previously.

Muhammad: I asked the twenty Muslim respondents one additional open-ended question regarding what a person must do to become a Muslim. Fourteen of the twenty specifically responded, with either English or Arabic wording, that declaring the *shahada* was what a person needed to do to become a Muslim. Their responses indicate that the umma feels affirmation of the prophethood of Muhammad to be a litmus test for obtaining and retaining Muslim identity.

Self-identity: As the interview vignette unfolded, I asked all forty respondents whether they felt a person who had come to believe what the Ahmed/Fatimeh character had come to believe would still be a Muslim. Eighteen of the twenty Muslim interviewees, and all twenty of the Muslim-background

Christians felt such a person would no longer be a Muslim. The reasons provided by these thirty-eight were all theological in nature, with an emphasis on biblical Christology being incompatible with Islam. An imam from Sierra Leone offered a representative comment,

> Anyone whose beliefs contradict the Qur'an and hadith is not a Muslim. (2014, 162)

A Turkish believing man replied,

> What does it mean to be a Muslim? It means [to be] submitted to Muhammad and Islam. (2014, 189)

The interviewees overwhelmingly felt that the adoption of a biblical Christology would be a violation of *tawhid* and *shahada*, and thus would trigger the revocation of Muslim identity.

Mosque attendance: Having established that the lead character had come to believe God visited the earth in the form of Jesus, who died on the cross and rose from the dead, my research vignette continued with the following question:

> Is it right for a person who believes what Ahmed/Fatimeh believes to continue attending the mosque? Why or why not?

The Muslim responses varied widely. A younger Bangladeshi man stated,

> No. People will not let him in the mosque. (2014, 167)

A Sufi Punjabi man from Pakistan took the opposite position:

> It's OK. If he wants to go to the mosque, he can do whatever he wants. (2014, 167)

Many of the Muslim interviewees felt that the wayward Muslim might find guidance back to Islam in the mosque. A young Saudi woman of Indian ethnicity stated,

Yes. She can go there to pray that Allah will guide her to the correct knowledge. (2014, 167)

A Moroccan Berber man replied,

If he goes to mosque, he may learn that there is only one God and that Jesus is not God. (2014, 168)

A Palestinian *hafiz* (someone who has memorized the entire Qur'an) stated,

He should continue attending the mosque to get the right information. But if he prays to Jesus, his *salat* (ritual prayers) will not be accepted by God. (2014, 168)

Others were less tolerant. A Jordanian man replied,

No. Maybe he is confused, but it would also be confusing to people in the *masjid* [mosque]. You're talking about a very confused person. (2014, 168)

Another Palestinian man rebuffed the idea:

No. He doesn't believe God. Why should he pray? He is a hypocrite. My Qur'an says Jesus is not God. (2014, 168)

In summary, some of the Muslim respondents were hopeful that attendance at the mosque might provide the Islamic re-education necessary to bring the straying person back to Islam. Others felt that the straying person was a hypocrite or deceiver for continuing to attend the mosque.

The Muslim-background Christian interviewees cautioned the lead character from continuing to attend the mosque. None of them condoned the practice. They also stated that continued mosque attendance would constitute spiritual compromise. One West African said that "Ahmed" would not have a choice about mosque attendance if he were young. (The story I related mentioned that the person was in his early twenties.) A Lebanese woman, in answer to a question about mosque attendance, said,

No. She is going on a new way. The old ways have to change. Even the Muslims will tell her, "Get out of here; it's not your place." (2014, 195)
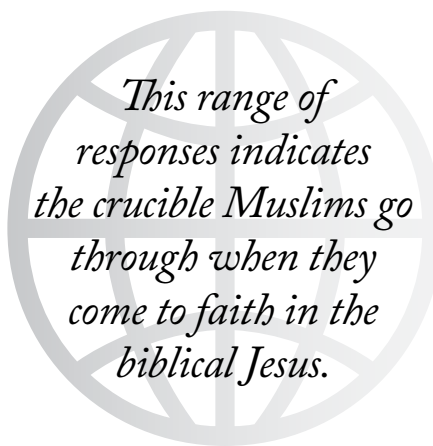
An Iranian woman stated,

No. She has to choose to honor the Lord and not deny Him by going to the mosque. You cannot serve the devil and serve God. (2014, 195)

A Pakistani man gave his theological rationale in this way:

No. He should no longer be worshipping a god he no longer believes in. (2014, 196)

Finally, a Turkish man said,

No. This person (Ahmed) will never grow in the faith! In the mosque, the imam reads a small portion of [the] Qur'an, then [of the] *Sura Fatiha.* Then he declares the *shahada,* and the people all say *"Ameen"* [amen]. Ahmed cannot say *ameen*

> *This range of responses indicates the crucible Muslims go through when they come to faith in the biblical Jesus.*

to Muhammad and *ameen* to Jesus. (2014, 196)

Several of the respondents articulated the travail facing a Muslim who comes to believe in the biblical Jesus. A Bangladeshi American woman stated,

She might spare her life in doing that, especially if she has no other options, like another place to go, if she breaks with Islam. However, at some point there are going to be some contradictions she is just going to have to face by staying in the mosque. I can understand her being consciously silent. I wouldn't judge her. It might be her only way of surviving. (2014, 195)

A Pakistani-American man suggested that Ahmed take the following course of action:

I would encourage him to develop an exit strategy. He should transition out. If he has an intentional missional mindset, I could understand him staying in the mosque as a covert witness. But witnessing in the mosque brings up a lot of grey areas. When the people in the mosque ask him about Jesus, he would have to make sure he was not being deceptive. I don't think there is something inherently wrong with doing prostrations, as long as he is praying to Jesus and praying for the people around him. But this is the exception to the rule. Normally he should transition out of the mosque. (2014, 196)

This range of responses indicates the crucible Muslims go through when they come to faith in the biblical Jesus. These new believers certainly need our prayers.

Community Perceptions of Identity: My research format looked at this question from two vantage points. First, the vignette described the Ahmed/Fatimeh character as coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. As stated above, thirty-eight of the forty Muslim-born interviewees felt such a person was no longer a Muslim. I then followed up with this question:

Though he or she has come to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord, God and Savior, Ahmed/Fatimeh continues to state that he or she is a Muslim–telling people he or she is submitted to God through Jesus Christ…Do you think Ahmed/Fatimeh is right to continue identifying himself or herself as a Muslim? Why or why not?

This was effectively a nuanced form of the previous question as to whether the protagonist was indeed still a Muslim.

Only two of the respondents felt that the Ahmed/Fatimeh figure was justified in continuing to self-identify as a Muslim. One of the imams, an Indian, explained the reasoning of the majority:

We consider him not a Muslim in the technical sense of the word, even though he may consider himself a Muslim in the general sense of the word. However, he would not have the same privileges as a Muslim. He would get

no inheritance from Muslim relatives, while a Muslim would. He will not have a Muslim funeral. (2014, 164)

A leading Palestinian imam gave a linguistic explanation as to why Ahmed would no longer be considered a Muslim:

Anybody can say he is a Muslim through Christianity or a Muslim through Judaism. If I am an English speaker, then anyone will have to say that they are submitted to God. However, words like Allah and Muslim are not translatable… I think the problem is with translation. In English you say the word Muslim and then say it means submitted. In Arabic the word submitted is coming from the same word for Muslim. (2014, 165)

Others questioned the purpose behind the protagonist claiming to still be a Muslim. A Bangladeshi Muslim woman sat up in her chair, pointed her finger, and warned:

I will catch her! She is not honest. She is trying to manufacture the Bible and our Muslim stuff into one thing. (2014, 164)

Her compatriot, a Bangladeshi Muslim man, added:

No. He is not pure. He is holding out one thing, and believing another thing. That is never the sign of a good man. (2014, 164)

A Moroccan Muslim man responded:

We have *mu'minin* [believers] and *non-mu'minin* [non-believers] who are not strong in their hearts. But they are still Muslims. Ahmed is not a Muslim. He is a *munafiq* [hypocrite]. I don't know what you call it in English. He mixes religions… He has lost his way. (2014, 164)

Some of the Muslim-background Christians had gone through a similar situation as the protagonist. A young Malenke woman spoke about her conversion in Burkina Faso:

I was doing this for three or four years—telling people I'm a Muslim who believes in Jesus, not Muhammad. They said I was crazy. They

*T*he Muslims were slightly more optimistic that a theological outsider could retain social insider (SITO) status than were the Muslim–background Christians.

said if you are a Muslim you have to believe in Muhammad. If you do not believe in Muhammad, then you are not a Muslim. (2014, 192)

Nineteen of the twenty Muslim-background Christians felt the lead character was making a mistake by continuing to identify as a Muslim. A young Pakistani believer explained it this way:

This is about semantics. He thinks he is a Muslim by his own interpretation. I would not agree with him doing this because he's disguising himself as a Muslim. He does not want to deal with the repercussions the Muslims are going to give him. He is trying to maintain allegiance to two different Gods. Fundamentally, the God of the Bible and the God of the Qur'an are not the same. (2014, 193)

The second vantage point of my research was the indigenous perspectives (specifically solicited) on how various Muslim communities deal with faith deviation. As noted above, I asked each interviewee to envision a hypothetical situation taking place in his or her home country. The vignette began with the lead character becoming interested in the Bible and Jesus through the internet. No missionary or indigenous church activity was mentioned. At that point I asked how the friends, and then family, of the lead character would respond. Supposing the friends and family had not found out, the interview progressed with the lead character coming to believe God had visited the earth in the form of Jesus who died on the cross and rose from the dead. Again, I asked how the friends and family would respond if they found out at this point. Finally, the vignette progresses (again with the assumption the friends and family have not found out) to the lead character now fellowshipping with

others who have the same beliefs he or she has come to hold. (Note: the terms church, Christians and Christianity were not used.) Once more, each interviewee was asked to project the reactions of his friends and family.

I then classified the responses into fifteen types, before grouping them into three major categories. (See Figure 1, page 78)

In terms of the SITO/SITI/SOTO discussion, Non-Negative responses seem to present hope that an individual (and his or her group) could retain social insider status after being discovered to be a theological outsider. The Shepherding responses were attempts by the Muslim family members and friends to bring the straying protagonist back into the fold of Islam without permanently severing the relationship. In actual practice, this meant that the umma would downgrade the offender's social insider status to that of "threatened," and then completely withdraw social insider status if the offender were to continue unrepentant. In the case of the Punitive/Expulsive responses, the protagonist would become a social outsider immediately.

Because of space limitations in this article, I must simply summarize the dissertation results below. I have excluded responses when the lead character was merely researching biblical web sites, since these merely reflected interest in the gospel rather than changes in beliefs or actions. The responses in Figure 2 (page 79) capture the stages when the lead character comes to believe the biblical narrative regarding Jesus and then fellowships with others who hold those beliefs.

Worth noting in this comparison is that the Muslim respondents were slightly more optimistic that a theological outsider could retain social insider

Figure 1. Responses to the Social Acceptability of Theological Deviation

Categories of Response	Type of Response	Description
"Non-Negative" Responses (Positive or Neutral)	Positive	Friends/family promote or encourage the protagonist's actions
	Condoning Exploration	Claim Islam allows Muslims to explore other religions
	Indifferent	Statements that the friends/family won't care, or they will respond indifferently, to what the protagonist is doing or believing
	Don't know/Unsure	Self-explanatory
"Shepherding" Responses (Negative and Concerned)	Critical Questioning	Friends or family question the protagonist about his/her notions in a non-affirming way
	Islamic Re-education: Informal	Friends or family members present Islamic doctrines/teachings in an attempt to bring back the straying protagonist
	Islamic Re-education: Formal	Insistence by the friends/family on Islamic counseling by an Islamic teacher, or recognized *sheikh* (elder)
	Verbal Warnings & Threats	The use of ultimatums or severe argumentation to bring the protagonist back into the fold
	Limiting Access to the Forbidden	Disallowing the protagonist to leave the home, go to meetings, access the computer, etc.
	Mocking	Friends/family ridiculing or laughing at the protagonist
"Punitive/Explusive" Responses (Negative and Destructive)	Arrange Punitive Marriage	Marrying off an apostate woman to a staunch Muslim man
	Ostracize	Marginalizing and excluding the protagonist from the social circles of family and/or friends
	Physical attacks	Beatings or other physical abuse
	Expel/Excommunicate/Disown	Expulsion from the family or the *umma.* In the latter case, this is known as *takfir* (imputation of infidel status)
	Killing the apostate	Self-explanatory

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Figure 2. Comparison of Muslim and Muslim-background Christian (MBC) Responses ("Belief" and "Fellowship" Stages)

Category of Response	Muslim Responses		MBC Responses	
Non-Negative	28	26%	14	12%
Shepherding	58	54%	46	38%
Expulsive	22	20%	61	50%
Totals	108	100%	121	100%

(SITO) status in Muslim contexts than were the Muslim-background Christians. Indeed, one in four responses fall in this Non-Negative category for the Muslim respondents, while only one in eight responses fall in this category for the Muslim-background Christians. Two factors may explain this discrepancy. First, the Muslims knew they were talking to a researcher from a Christian seminary, and it is possible they wanted to portray a more tolerant face of Islam, especially since the interviews were done in a diaspora setting. Second, all of the Muslim-background Christians had gone through some version of the hypothetical vignette, and therefore could answer based on first-hand experiences, while many of the Muslims were shocked that a Muslim could even come to believe the biblical narrative regarding Jesus Christ. Also, there were no significant differences based on geography when I controlled for Islamic "heartland" versus "non-heartland."[3]

In summary, a small minority of responses—forty-two of 229 (18%)—lend viability to the SITO paradigm. To the contrary, eight of the forty respondents (20%) predicted that the lead character would be killed for his or her beliefs and actions. These responses came from eight different interviewees, who envisioned such a killing happening in Jordan (2 interviewees), Pakistan (2 interviewees), Burkina Faso, Kazakhstan, Palestine, and Yemen. A Palestinian Muslim interviewee invited me to sit in his SUV for the interview, perhaps to make sure others would not hear his answers, as

he smoked a cigarette and thoughtfully responded to my questions. He broadened the scope of his response beyond Palestine:

> It varies from people to people and from town to town. But they will beat him up real good; he might die. In Saudi they will kill him right away. In Egypt, the [Muslim] Brotherhood would kill him. (2014, 158)

My research confirms Ziya Meral's assessment that a Muslim who comes to believe the biblical narrative will likely be viewed by the umma as a theological outsider, and, as such, will have a difficult time retaining social insider (SITO) status. In summary, 18 of the 20 Muslim interviewees stated that a Muslim who comes to believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, God and Savior is no longer a Muslim. Several expressed indignation that such a person would continue to claim Muslim identity. As for the Muslim-background Christians, a Turkish woman seemed to sum up the cohort's views of a person claiming simultaneously to be a Muslim and a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ: "You can't have it both ways" (2014, 192).

Assessing the Viability of SITO in the Muslim Context
Based on the data above, the implementation of SITO should not be considered simple or seamless in most Muslim contexts. The problem stems from the point of view of Muslims themselves—and specifically how they treat theological outsiders. Furthermore, most Muslim contexts are of the

Eastern, collectivist variety in which there is no separation of church, state, and society. Therefore, while attaining SITO status is a commendable missiological goal, it remains to be seen if the expulsive nature of Islam will allow Muslim-background theological outsiders to maintain their prior social insider status.

Gracious behavior, a discreet and tactful witness, and an exhibition of a life transformed by Christ may help delay the expulsion that often awaits apostates from Islam. Nevertheless, these actions may not ultimately enable the aspiring SITO to remain permanently as a social insider. It is difficult for a person who has experienced the discrimination and ostracism that Meral describes to be a social insider—at least one with whom others would want to associate.

Conclusions and Future Considerations
Daniels and Waterman indicate that the SITO paradigm (socially inside, theologically outside) may be preferable to other paradigms, such as the SITI paradigm (socially inside, theologically inside). Nevertheless, in light of the research above, it appears unlikely that the umma at large will tolerate, let alone embrace, believers in Christ as social insiders. It is therefore likely, at least in the near future, that Muslim-background believers in Christ will continue to endure some forms of social ostracism. In the parlance of this article, they would be considered by the umma as SOTO (social outsiders and

theological outsiders). This is based on the Islamic Law of Apostasy, which has influenced most Muslim countries and communities—even those which are not technically under *shari'a* law. Prayers should continually be made that God would provide these new believers with spiritual strength and courage.

Another ray of hope is beaming into the Muslim world in the form of a collective rejection of the prophethood of Muhammad. Each Muslim who receives and confesses the biblical Savior Jesus simultaneously weakens the grip of Muhammad over a community. From a wider perspective, some Muslim communities, such as Iran, are collectively beginning to reject the role of Muhammad as life's ultimate guide. (If so, they could begin to be evaluated as possibly post-Islamic.) This may open a different door for those who become theological outsiders to remain social insiders. In other Muslim communities, there is a polarization happening as some people react negatively to the actions of Salafi and Jihadi practitioners who vow they are literally fulfilling Muhammad's commands. This dynamic might create disaffection with the Islamic theological position regarding Jesus Christ, and might open up more people to becoming theological outsiders. Prayer and patience are continually needed as these trends continue to develop. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1] I want to alert readers that there are several other recent research projects which may be of interest to them. As cited above, a Turkish Christian of Muslim background, Ziya Meral, has written on the topic of apostasy from Islam in an important 2008 piece titled, *No Place to Call Home*. In this short book, Meral focuses on the Islamic theological underpinnings of current apostasy laws, and how this impacts those who have left Islam.

[2] Tim Green recently wrote an article on how Muslim-background believers in Christ have navigated marriage issues (see Green 2012). Green then applied that research to the identity issue. Kathryn Kraft recently completed her own PhD dissertation on identity issues by interviewing Muslim-background believers in Egypt

and Lebanon. Kraft's 2012 book *Searching for Heaven in the Real World* is also recommended reading. Finally, David Garrison has contributed a popular survey on happenings in nine "windows" or regions of the Muslim world with his recent *A Wind in the House of Islam* (Garrison 2014).

[3] By Islamic "heartland" I am referring to the Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East proper, not including North Africa nor East Africa. The non-heartland interviewees were from Bangladesh, Guyana, India, Sierra Leone, Trinidad, USA and Uzbekistan.

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