

## COMMENTS ON THE INSIDER MOVEMENT

*BY MAZHAR MALLOUHI*

### 1 Introduction

A recent book, which is essentially a biographical account of my spiritual journey, characterizes me as a “Muslim follower of Jesus”, a term which I have often used to describe myself.<sup>1</sup> I am certainly not the first or the only person to describe themselves this way, but because of the high profile of the book, the high profile of the Bible translation projects I am involved with, and my long term involvement with missions, I am among those targeted by detractors of the Insider Movement. Since I have never actually publicly commented on this movement (and just realized I am part of it!) I thought it would be appropriate to do so.

An “insider” believer is someone, like me, who comes from a family and country that is Muslim and chooses to maintain their culture after being irretrievably changed by the transforming power of our Lord. Admittedly, my description of an insider is overly simplistic, and it is not my intention to assert that all those who don’t claim to be insiders have abandoned all aspects of their culture. Nevertheless, I would like to comment on what I have seen among believers in Christ who come from a Muslim background.

### 2 Cultural chasm with western Christianity

I don’t think that most armchair practitioners (that is, interested people who don’t actually live in the Muslim world) realize how many unnecessary and harmful cultural changes can be prescribed

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gordon-Chandler, *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road: Exploring a New Path Between Two Faiths* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

when Muslims become cultural Christians. *It is more severe than in any other context.* These changes have nothing to do with the requirements of Kingdom living, but are simply cultural. The well-known evangelical saying, "Being born in a garage doesn't make you a car, and being born in a Christian family/country doesn't make you a Christian", is not something with which Muslim people agree. Being born in a Muslim family *does* automatically make you a Muslim and part of the Muslim community. I am born a Muslim, not a Hindu nor a Christian nor a Jew. Muslims need never publicly or personally appropriate faith as is expected in the Christian tradition of baptism or confirmation; on the contrary, they must take decisive action if they want to remove themselves from the community.

What defines a Muslim follower of Jesus has nothing to do with whether they read the Qur'an, where or how they pray, or what they think of Muhammad. Insiders can be defined as those who affirm that the circumstances into which they were born were ordained by God and played a part in their personal salvation story. They do not see that faith in Jesus as Lord requires them to automatically renounce all they previously learnt about God, or to denounce their culture, community and family as evil. There are actually very few ways to publicly reject my community, but one sure way is to publically embrace Western anti-Muslim politics, polytheism and idolatry, which in Muslim understanding is what people do when they convert to Christianity.

Westerners typically have inherited dualistic Greek thinking about religious and secular life, whereas Muslims do not usually think in this way. So for Muslims all of life is spiritual, including family relationships and matters from daily life, ranging from eating meals together to worshipping together. So to attempt to differentiate between religious and secular culture is from the beginning a non-Muslim way of thinking. More importantly, it is a non-biblical way of thinking. In a biblical worldview, life is viewed more holistically. In this particular issue, it is the Muslim outlook,

not the dualistic Western outlook, that is closer to the biblical model.

Being an insider does not mean that I am free to do or believe whatever I want; it doesn't mean that I am not obligated to refrain from evil or immoral facets of my culture. This is the same for someone born an insider in Western Christian or post-Christian cultures. Many missionaries and churchmen, however, still teach Muslims that they must leave behind all vestiges of Islam including language, dress, hospitality customs, and prayer language. Basically, this amounts to designating everything in their culture as evil!

This approach mistakenly looks for signs of spiritual growth in cultural change, yet it is possible to change all outward signs of faith and culture but not experience ongoing transformation of the heart and mind. I took up this issue with a group of Arab Christian theology students who were initially hostile to the idea of Muslims remaining as believers in their own community. I asked, "Which practices in a Muslim's life may need to be changed once he or she follows Christ?"

We filled a blackboard with all that denotes belonging to a Muslim community. The students listed practices of dress, food, language, marriage, worship, religious practices such as fasting, etc. After much debate, the group arrived at the conclusion (to their surprise) that only two practices were contra-indicated by the gospel: the pilgrimage to Mecca and the testimony (*shahada*). By mentioning this I am not intending to criticize those insider believers who say "Jesus is Lord" and still say the *shahada* or go on pilgrimage, only to show how one Christian group realized they cannot judge the faith of others who are different from themselves.

Vocabulary is a big issue in this debate. One such argument commonly brought to my attention is 'Christians shouldn't call God "Allah".' Anyone who knows better can tell you that the only true word for God in Arabic is Allah. Allah is the normal and usual word used by Christian Arabs for God. Even Arab evangeli-

cals who oppose the insider movement use this term for God. It is the word for the one and only God, and shares a Semitic root with Hebrew words for God, *el*, *eloah*, and *elohim*. This is just one example of how weak some of the arguments are. Yet, I have known Muslim-background Christians who abandon their native tongue and talk to their children exclusively in English, because it's more "Christian".

Many people from a Muslim background who become Christians move to the West and seldom return. Often Muslim background believers who study theology abroad never return to their home to live as a witness. It is as if they have come to believe that being in a Christian garage makes you a Christian car. They want their children to be Christians so they must be born in a so-called Christian culture.

Many of those from Muslim backgrounds who become (cultural) Christians are people who are already disillusioned with their country/culture/religion and come to the faith already hating Islam. I myself at one time hated my own culture and resented my background, not because of doctrine or theology or belief, but because somehow I was led to believe that it was ugly, and that only things Western and thus *Christian* were beautiful.

Those who criticize followers of Jesus who want to remain in their largely Muslim culture don't understand the severity of the alternative. My heart breaks for young believers who receive subtle (and perhaps unintentional) messages from Christians that the way of life handed down to them is ugly. They are given the impression that God cannot be in their culture.

#### **4 Theology is not the issue**

For me and others like me, being an insider is not primarily about doctrine and it is not about belief, but rather about attitude. Some Christian friends have called on me to declare my beliefs or answer

for myself in theological terms. “Prove to me that you are orthodox!” or “Show me that you are evangelical!” My burden, however, is to cry, “Show me that you love Muslims! Show me that your attitude is like that of our Lord’s! Demonstrate to me that your actions are rooted in the heart of God and not something else! Show me that you are acting out of love and not out of the emotions that surface when two civilizations collide!”

I have spent the greater part of a long life engaged with the church in the West and involved in the global missions movement. It pains me to say that if more people exhibited different attitudes to Islam, then there would be no need for myself and others like me to distinguish ourselves as insiders. It is attitude, not belief, which causes this distinction.

## **5 Muslims treated unfairly**

I am perplexed by the unfair treatment that Muslim people are given by the Protestant missions movement. There is nothing new about being an insider, but Muslim insiders are unfairly singled out. If I were a Jewish believer continuing to call myself a Jew and remaining inside my Jewish community, I would be lauded by most of the Christian West. My experience is that most Jewish ideology rejects the entirety of the New Testament and often reviles our Lord; yet even with those obstacles, believers that remain inside Judaism do not undergo the same scrutiny by Christians.

My experience in America has made me aware of groups such as Christian motorcycle gangs and Christian hippies, all of whom remain outside traditional church circles and inside their (sometimes questionable) former communities. These groups don’t seem to undergo the same scrutiny either. The unfair and unbalanced scrutiny given to Muslim insiders over other types of insiders suggests to me that this is not so much a missiological issue as it is one of attitude.

Some people are unhappy that I am unwilling to engage in polemics or criticism of Islam. Here is something that most people in the West don't understand: I was born into a confessional home. Islam is the blanket with which my mother wrapped me up when she nursed me and sang to me and prayed over me. I imbibed aspects of Islam with my mother's milk. I inherited Islam from my parents and it was the cradle which held me until I found Christ. Islam is my mother. You don't engage a person by telling them their mother is ugly. No matter how hideous your friend's mother may be, you don't say to him, "Your mother is ugly." Even if he knows she is, his initial reaction will certainly be to fight you. For me, being an insider means that I have an emotional attachment to my culture, which I imbibed along with my mother's milk. Islam is *my* mother too.

However, although I am born a Muslim, I am not obligated to practice all of the customs of Islam, nor am I obligated to believe all of its religious doctrines. But the day I reject Islam outright, I disavow myself of my culture, my family, my community and my people. There are many ways to bring the gospel into this confessional home, and as mentioned earlier vocabulary is important: the words I use to describe a life-changing relationship with God through Christ and my attitude will determine how the community understands and reacts to my journey.

I realize that as Christians engaging with Muslims, some may want to act in a way that makes them feel triumphant - like St. Boniface triumphantly cutting down a tree in defiance of paganism - but we do not need to crush the other person in order to share our light and truth.

## **6 My own experience**

I travel all over the Arab world, and when I do I ask the same question: "Where are the second-generation communities among Mus-

lim background believers?” There are a few, but then I am forced to ask the question, “Are there any left that are not tied to Western money?” How can there be second-generation churches when believers are removing themselves from their communities? Our Lord taught by example and command that we should be witnesses within our context. I have received honors and awards from Muslim institutions (not necessarily religious institutions, but those in which members are professing Muslims) that are not allowed to recognize non-Muslims. I have been invited and embraced by Muslim groups that would have nothing to do with Muslims who have been extracted from their culture and have become Christians. Were I not an insider I would not have access to these groups and I would be unable to testify about my Lord in these places. And the only thing that is required of me to stay inside is to not be against my Islamic heritage.

I don't mean to imply that the issues involved are simple. Nor do I mean to suggest that all insiders will necessarily receive favor, or that none of them will be disowned by their families or experience persecution. Following our Lord is never easy. But what I do mean to say is that the kind of witness that will birth productive communities doesn't require us to compromise our beliefs, only change our attitudes.

## **7 Holy Spirit also transforms Muslim Insiders**

Staying inside a Muslim context has not pressured me towards bad doctrine. I have received no temptation as an insider to minimize the deity of my Lord Jesus Christ (His peace be upon us). I experience no enticement to deny the Trinity or elevate the Qur'an above the Bible. This isn't to say that there are no temptations in the predominately Muslim community in which I live, but I can say with certainty that I find far more temptations and negative influences in the materialistic secular culture of Australia. Furthermore, I can't

say that I am doctrinally infallible. One day when I am in paradise, my Lord may show me long lists of errors, but they will be the result of the limits of my mind and the weakness of my character, not because of my unwillingness to reject my heritage.

Muslim insiders are being transformed by the same Holy Spirit that transforms all of us. We read the same Holy Bible that all Christians throughout the centuries have read. Our respect for and familiarity with God's Word varies, but it varies in the exact same way that it varies in other parts of the Church. Shouldn't we allow the Holy Spirit to show us if we need to re-learn how to pray or change our forms and customs? Should we be forced to adopt new forms of worship from outsiders that have special meaning to them, but not us? How can an outsider know the significance of our customs and cultural forms to our hearts? If Muslim followers of Jesus say their religious customs do not negate the faith that is in their hearts, then how can others claim it does?

## **8 In defense of Insider proponents**

I will not naively assume that my description of what it means for me to be an insider fully addresses the controversial aspects of the subject. In particular, I do not have much to say about the issues surrounding "insider proponents". These are the mostly Western cross-cultural workers who advocate more contextualized methods of evangelism. It is difficult for me to comment on insider proponents because the controversy surrounding them is largely doctrinal, and my concern is mostly about attitudes. On the other hand, I believe this controversy is also raging because of attitude rather than doctrine.

I appreciate the attitudes of insider proponents who seek to export as little of their own culture as possible to Muslims who choose to follow our Lord. They go to great lengths to make sure that Muslims who choose to follow the way of our Lord don't feel



pressured to reject their heritage. Furthermore, they make significant efforts to rise above the clashes between Christianity and Islam or Western and Eastern civilization, clashes which encourage many of the Church's negative attitudes towards Muslims. I can empathize with insider proponents as well, because as I observe their opponents attacking them, I notice some of the same unfairness applied to them that I have described above. For example, some of the notions advocated by insider proponents are very similar to decades-old ideas put forward by missionaries working among animist peoples. Insider proponents, however, experience far greater scrutiny than their predecessors. It seems to me that the controversy surrounding them also springs largely from attitude, not doctrine.

I don't share the fear of some that somehow insider proponents are advocating a form of post-modern relativism that threatens the fabric of orthodox belief. I don't understand that why such an approach should warrant such a strong reaction. For one hundred years, Protestant missionaries have been pushing the envelope and we have largely left them alone because they are willing to go where the rest of us aren't, but as soon as they apply their creativity to the Islamic world the rules change. That is how I see it anyway.

## **9 Muhammad**

Insider proponents receive a great deal of criticism for their views of Muhammad. Often the criticism is about the issue of whether or not he can be considered a prophet. This is a good example of how insider proponents and their detractors talk past each other. Insider proponents are not suggesting that Christian missionaries or Christian Arabs need to declare Muhammad to be a prophet. Rather, this issue relates to people from Muslim backgrounds who have come to love our Lord because of what is written about him in the Qur'an. Insider proponents argue that if something written by

Muhammad leads some people ultimately to The Truth, then why shouldn't these insiders have a positive view of Muhammad as the one who led them to Christ? I have not heard any insider proponents speaking of Muhammad as a prophet equal to Christ.

But insider proponents are actually being judged because of what they will *not* say about Muhammad, rather than what they are saying. Many insider proponents will not denounce Muhammad or criticize aspects of Islam simply because they do not want to be "anti-Islam", but would rather be "for Christ". Unfortunately, detractors/critics of insider proponents insist on making the assumption that their silence means they believe the opposite. The point is that insider proponents (along with myself) want the emphasis placed on what Christ is, and not what Muhammad is not.

I notice in some of my Christian brothers and sisters almost a sense of betrayal if anyone says something positive about Muhammad. Many insider proponents have a high view of Muhammad. This is not to say that they speak of him as a prophet, but from an historical point of view they often can comfortably cite the positive aspects of his life and consider him a reformer. This tends to make many Christians very uncomfortable, if not highly alarmed. They usually argue something like, "We also have to be honest about the negative aspects of Muhammad's life."

Why is this so important? I am allowed to say good things about Oliver Cromwell without being reminded that he chopped off the king's head. I am allowed to speak positively about Thomas Jefferson without incessant interruptions that he impregnated his slave. Do people think that we are somehow admitting defeat, or dishonoring Christ, if we focus on the positive aspects of Muhammad or the religion that he founded? Muhammad actually spoke of Christ more than of himself. I do not think that an opinion about a man who lived long ago can somehow damage the Good News of our Lord. If I have to choose between honoring someone I disagree with, on the one hand, or dishonoring him on

the other, thereby showing an attitude that is not from our Lord, then the choice for me is easy.

## **10 Conclusion**

I am an insider because I was born into a Muslim context and I don't wish to reject my heritage. Islam is my heritage and Christ is my inheritance. I am not an Insider proponent because it seems to me to be a mostly Western thing, and because it strikes me as being about ideas and strategy, while I am mostly interested in attitudes and people. I am not a "C5" advocate, because I think that the incarnation needs to be our model for ministry, not the "C-scale". And I optimistically (and perhaps naively) believe that all of us who follow the ways of our Lord and Messiah Jesus (his peace be upon us) are capable of agreeing on a common goal of seeing the emergence of groups of Jesus-followers in Muslim communities: groups that are authentic, indigenous, reproducible and not dependent on Western money.

Additionally, I long for the day when we can go about our work while erring on the side of preferring one another in honor and respecting one another, while resisting the temptation to search out heresy every time someone disagrees with us or challenges the status quo.

Furthermore, I am convinced that Christians aren't required to dislike Islam in order to engage it. Finally, I would like to encourage my friends, acquaintances and fellow laborers from the West to earnestly and honestly ask themselves how much of their attitude towards Muslims is a result of political opinions, xenophobia, a post cold-war clash of civilizations, or being caught in the trap of dueling religions. Even as my brothers and sisters commit to this sort of self-introspection, I also pledge to search out the planks in my own eye. May the Peace of our Lord be upon us all.

1. A monkey passed by a pond and found a fellow monkey pulling fish out and hanging them in a nearby tree. He asked, "What are you doing?" The monkey replied, "They were drowning and I saved them".

2. Would anyone consider transplanting planting banana tree shoots to Alaska, expecting they will thrive there?