

Muslim Followers of Jesus?

by Joseph Cumming

Believers from Muslim backgrounds are trying to forge new identities in Islamic cultures. The debate over their options has grown furious.

Can one be a Muslim and a follower of Jesus? Tens of thousands believe so, and in this third installment of the Global Conversation, Yale University scholar Joseph Cumming describes the furious debate their example has fueled. The question of following Jesus while remaining within a practicing community of Muslims has great importance in regions where the two faiths contend. It also serves as an important example of a wider challenge. As the gospel moves across cultural boundaries, those who respond will answer its call in different ways. As missions historian Andrew Walls has written, "Conversion to Christ does not produce a bland universal citizenship; it produces distinctive discipleships, as diverse and variegated as human life itself." The gospel must be contextualized, but how far can contextualization go without violating the gospel? And who sets the boundaries? —The Editors

In 1979 my best friend decided he saw himself not as a "Christian," but as a "Messianic Jew." John had come from a secular Jewish background and was actually a practicing Hindu before he met Jesus. Then, for three years he was active in a Bible-believing Christian church. But now John felt called to reconnect with his Jewish roots, join a Messianic synagogue, keep a kosher home, and raise his children Jewish. He saw no contradiction between following Jesus as Messiah and identifying—ethnically and religiously—as Jewish.

Like most Christians in the 1970s, I initially reacted with skepticism, quoting biblical texts I thought rejected *kashrut* (the Jewish dietary laws) as contrary to our liberty in Christ. I gradually learned that those texts could be understood differently, and came to respect the legitimacy of the fledgling Messianic movement—but not before I hurt my friend by my hostility to his effort to explore his identity as a Jewish follower of Jesus.

The wider Jewish community also reacted negatively. Most saw Messianic Judaism as simply repackaging centuries-old efforts to convert Jews, destroying Jewish identity. To them Messianic Jews were not Jews at all. Recently, however, some Jewish scholars have cautiously suggested that Messianic Jews who faithfully observe Torah and *halakha*, who participate constructively in the life of the Jewish community, and who pass on Jewish traditions to their children are in error but must be recognized as fellow Jews.

In the 1980s a similar movement began among Muslims who had come to faith in Christ. These were Muslims who trusted Jesus as Lord and divine Savior, believed Jesus died for their sins and rose again, and insisted this did not make them ex-Muslims or converts to the Christian religion. They wanted to remain within their Muslim community, honoring Jesus in that context.

Reactions from both Muslim and Christian communities have varied widely. On the Muslim side, some have persecuted these believers, while others cautiously accept them within their communities. On the Christian side, defenders see them as "Messianic Muslims" whom we should accept—just as we accept Messianic Jews—as authentic disciples of Jesus. Critics argue that Islam and Judaism are different, that Muslim identity cannot be reconciled with biblical faith.

Mixed Faiths, Mixed Reactions

When Nabil had a life-transforming encounter with Jesus, he remained within the Muslim community, participating in Muslim prayers. As his love for Jesus became known to family and friends, some followed his example, but others actually attempted to murder him. After being imprisoned for his beliefs, he decided he no longer considered himself a Muslim. He saw Islam as the system responsible for persecuting him. Today Nabil considers himself a Christian. But some who followed him in faith still see themselves as Muslims.

Ibrahim was a well-respected scholar of the Qur'an, a *hafiz*. When he decided to follow Jesus, he closely examined the Qur'anic verses commonly understood as denying the Trinity, denying Jesus' divine Sonship, denying Jesus' atoning death, and denying the textual integrity of the Bible. He concluded that each of these verses was open to alternate interpretations, and that he could therefore follow Jesus as a Muslim. Soon members of his family and community came to share his faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Ibrahim was also imprisoned for his faith, but unlike Nabil, Ibrahim still wanted to follow Jesus as a Muslim. Nonetheless, some whom he led to Jesus no longer see themselves as Muslims. Ibrahim and Nabil are friends and respect each other as brothers, though they disagree about their identity.

As Christians from other cultures meet believers like Nabil and Ibrahim, they have mixed reactions. Phil Parshall and John Travis have, between them, worked for more than 60 years among Muslims, and they respectfully disagree with each other. They have published a series of articles in missiological journals, setting forth points on which they differ. Numerous articles by others have followed.

In technical terms this is known as the "C4-C5 debate," drawing on a scale designed by Travis to describe various Christ-centered communities (Cs) with which Muslim-background believers in Jesus (MBBs) identify, and the ways they understand their identity:

C1: MBBs in churches radically different from their own culture, where worship is in a language other than their mother tongue.

C2: Same as C1, but worship is in the MBBs' mother tongue.

C3: MBBs in culturally indigenous Christian churches that avoid cultural forms seen as "Islamic."

C4: MBBs in culturally indigenous congregations that retain biblically permissible Islamic forms (e.g., prostrating in prayer), investing these with biblical meaning. They may call themselves something other than Christians (e.g., "followers of Jesus"), but do not see themselves as Muslims.

C5: Muslims who follow Jesus as Lord and Savior in fellowships of like-minded believers within the Muslim community, continuing to identify culturally and officially as Muslims.

C6: Secret/underground believers.

The most vigorous disagreement is between C4 and C5 advocates. To help readers understand the issues, I'll set forth concerns expressed by C1-C4 advocates troubled by C5. Then I'll summarize responses from C5 defenders. These concerns and responses are in quotation marks to make clear that these are others' views, not necessarily my own. Then I'll add my own comments.

C4 concern: "Scripture (e.g., 1 Kings 18:21; 2 Kings 17:27-41) condemns syncretism. Trying to be both Muslims and followers of Jesus is syncretistic."

C5 response: "This is not the syncretism Scripture condemns. C5 believers live under the authority of the Bible (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:19-23; Acts 16:1-3; 21:20-40), reinterpreting or rejecting anything contrary to Scripture."

Comment: Both sides of this discussion have done serious exegetical work in Scripture, which they believe supports their view. It is impossible to do justice to either side in this article. Readers would do well to examine articles in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* and the *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, where the biblical issues are set forth.

C4 concern: "Islam and Judaism are different: one cannot compare 'Messianic Islam' with Messianic Judaism. The Hebrew Scriptures are recognized by Christians as inspired; the Qur'an is not. The mosque is pregnant with Islamic theology that explicitly denies biblical truths."

C5 response: "Islam and Judaism are different, but both are monotheistic. Islam recognizes the Torah and New Testament as Scripture alongside the Qur'an. Rabbinic Judaism sees as authoritative not just the Hebrew Scriptures (*Tanakh*) but also the Talmud, which, like the Qur'an, contains a mixture of material compatible and incompatible with the New Testament. Traditional synagogue liturgy also seems to repudiate New Testament teachings, but both liturgies can be reinterpreted, and attendance at prayers does not necessarily mean affirming every word of liturgy."

Comment: The term "Messianic Islam" is unhelpful. For Jews the messiahship of Jesus is a watershed issue, whereas Muslims recognize Jesus as Messiah but raise other objections to Christian beliefs about Jesus. Most Muslims believe the text of the Bible has been corrupted, but some Muslim scholars disagree. C5 believers affirm the Bible as God's Word. Sacred texts must be examined closely, considering whether proposed interpretations are legitimate and honest.

C4 concern: "The C5 approach is deceitful. How would you feel if Muslims showed up at your church claiming to be Christians, then tried to convert your people to Islam?"

C5 response: "It is not deceitful if C5 believers are transparent with the Muslim community about who they are and what they believe. C5 believers honestly see themselves as Muslims, not as Christians pretending to be Muslims. They are *not* seeking to convert Muslims to Christianity"

Comment: Remember, Travis's scale describes how believers born and raised as Muslims understand their identity, *not* how people raised as Christians describe themselves.

C4 concern: "The Muslim community won't tolerate such aberrant Muslims within their ranks."

C5 response: "It's too soon to be certain of that." Comment: The Muslim community can speak for itself. When I have discussed this with Muslim leaders, their primary concern has been whether these people continue to *practice* the moral and ritual requirements of the Muslim community with which they identify (i.e. what *madhhab* they follow). They also assert that all Muslims follow Jesus as Prophet and Messiah, just not in the terms Christians draw from the New Testament.

C4 concern: "To call oneself Muslim is to affirm Muhammad as a true prophet of God. That is incompatible with the Bible."

C5 response: "Actually, 'Muslim' means different things to different Muslims. C5 believers have a variety of views about Muhammad, including: (1) one can be culturally Muslim without any theological affirmation about Muhammad; (2) Muhammad was a prophet, but not always infallible (cf. 1 Thess. 5:20-21 and Caiaphas in John 11:51); (3) Muhammad was a prophet for Arabs, but not for other peoples; (4) Muhammad was a

true prophet whose words have been misinterpreted; (5) this question is unimportant either way."

Comment: For the overwhelming majority of Muslims, the prophethood of Muhammad is non-negotiably essential to Muslim identity. But the word *Muslim* (literal Arabic meaning: "submitted to God") does mean different things in different contexts. The Qur'an calls Jesus' first disciples "Muslims" (Q3:52). In some societies, "Muslim" and "Christian" refer more to ethnicity than to religious beliefs.

C4 concern: "C5 MBBs retain Muslim identity to avoid persecution for the cross of Christ."

C5 response: "That's an unfair judging of motives. The issue is religio-cultural identity, not the cross of Christ, which C5 believers affirm."

Comment: If C5 believers are trying to avoid persecution, it isn't working. Many have been terribly persecuted, suffering imprisonment and worse for their convictions.

C4 concern: "What about the church? Do C5 believers see themselves as part of Christ's body?"

C5 response: "C5 believers form Christ-centered fellowships in which they study the Bible, pray, and celebrate baptism and the [Lord's Supper](#). These are *ekklesia* in the New Testament sense, though they may look very different from what Christians usually call 'churches.' "

Comment: Studying and obeying Scripture helps local fellowships be holy and apostolic. But Scripture also calls fellowships to recognize the unity and universality of the worldwide body of Christ. Some C5 fellowships, and some workers partnering with them, have very negative views of or broken relationships with non-MBB churches. Other C5 fellowships have healthy attitudes toward the wider church.

C4 concern: "I have heard some C5 groups have sloppy Christology. This alarms me."

C5 response: "Some C5 believers do have fuzzy Christology, but so do many ordinary Christians everywhere. What matters is C5 believers' direction of movement: toward Jesus Christ. They pray in his name, worship him as Lord, and experience his supernatural working in their lives. Their Christology keeps moving higher."

Comment: That seems reasonable for new believers. But as this movement grows and its leaders mature, one hopes those leaders will understand sound Christology and articulate it in terms intelligible to their flock. Sensitivity to direction of movement is right, but only with clarity about the ultimate destination of that movement—toward Jesus Christ, not only as Savior and sin-bearing Lamb, but also as eternal, uncreated *Logos*, God manifest in human flesh.

Thoughts Regarding Identity

C5 believers like Ibrahim challenge assumptions about what it means to be Muslim or Christian. We all have more than one identity and community. For example, most American Christians assume one can be both a patriotic American (loyal to that community) and a faithful Christian, though they may disagree with some things their fellow-Americans do or teach. Believers like Ibrahim seek to be both authentic Muslims (loyal to the community of their birth) and faithful disciples of Jesus, critically evaluating what their fellow-Muslims do and teach in light of the teachings of Christ – sometimes accepting, sometimes reinterpreting, sometimes disagreeing. Do such disagreements require American believers to repudiate American identity and community, or require C5 believers to repudiate the Muslim community and their Muslim identity? How can believers best be "critically loyal" to the community of their birth and to their family heritage, respectfully critiquing what is unscriptural, while upholding God's Commandment to "Honor your father and mother"?

Ever since the Wesleyan revival and the Great Awakening of the 18th century, evangelicals have insisted that what matters most to God is not one's identity as "being a Christian," but rather whether one has a life-transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. David Brainerd was expelled from Yale University in 1742 for remarking that a certain faculty member (a loyal "Christian") had "no more grace than this chair," because he did not have a personal relationship with Jesus.

Does it follow that it is totally unimportant for believers to call themselves Christians? With Messianic Jews, the evangelical community mostly accepts that the label "Christian" is not essential. Is the same true for C5 believers, or is Islam too radically different? If the latter, then what specific differences between the Jewish and Muslim communities prompt us to accept one and reject the other?

Let me close with a plea from my heart. In recent months this debate has grown acrimonious. Muslim-background believers like Nabil and Ibrahim are mostly unable to participate directly in the discussion, because doing so would expose them to further persecution. Instead, Christians from non-Muslim backgrounds are holding a debate without them, anathematizing first Ibrahim, then Nabil. But Nabil and Ibrahim themselves respect each other as brothers and are able to disagree in love.