

**A DISCUSSION OF CONTEXTUALIZATION ISSUES
FOR MISSION PERSONNEL WORKING AMONG MUSLIM PEOPLES**

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1 Introduction¹

In a period that extended almost a year, this paper was written and revised many times in a process that included multiple reviews and feedback by a committee of nine, an international leadership team, a community of over 200 workers among Muslims and, finally, by the company's Board of Directors. It is offered now to other friends in the prayerful hope that it will be a useful tool and will provide helpful insights for ministry among Muslims. It is not intended as a permanent answer to all the issues addressed, but is a statement of how we understand things currently. We anticipate and will celebrate improvements to it in the years ahead as we minister together.

There is obviously much more that could have been said on the subject of contextualization generally, as well as more specifically on contextualization in Muslim contexts. We encourage each reader to engage further with both topics and commend the appendix that is attached to this paper as a good place to start, particularly on the subject of form and meaning. To a large extent the contextualization issues most under debate in ministry to Muslims have to do precisely with those ancient twins.

The questions that arise often boil down to what forms are useful and permissible for the sake of maintaining cultural identification and continuity with one's community, without conveying meaning that is not intended and unbiblical. The underlying commitment of this paper is that in all cases the purpose of using or not using particular forms is to minimize misunderstanding and/or unnecessary offense; it is to convey meaning accurately – not to ensure that any offence, which the meaning itself might evoke, should be removed. The specific affirmations listed below are expressed with this thought in mind, and with a primary goal of upholding a biblical approach to contextualization.

¹ This document is a new version of a company specific one previously done, and may at certain points read somewhat awkwardly as a result. Modifications have been made to make possible its wider distribution and use, something requested by a number of ministry friends.

2 Where the application of generally accepted contextualization principle has resulted in controversy in the context of ministry among muslim peoples

Key Principle: *Whatever is biblically permissible and culturally appropriate sets the boundary for what is acceptable in the contextualization of Gospel communication and church practice among any people.*

The primary source of the differing viewpoints today regarding contextualization in the context of Muslim ministry is the application of this principle. The dividing line is just what is biblically permissible. In years past the lines were drawn quite clearly, but unfortunately they looked far too much like the culture and church practice of the West. As a result, missionary efforts were often limiting Gospel penetration. Too long ignored were the perfectly appropriate and biblically permissible stylistic and cultural patterns that existed among the various Muslim peoples.

With the passing of time the wisdom of more thorough contextualization has become almost universally accepted, and the fruitfulness of the shift seems apparent. More believers from Muslim backgrounds exist today than are recorded in the entire prior history of the world. Though some may disagree, it is not unreasonable to assume that at least part of the means God used to achieve this increase is a more contextualized approach to Gospel communication and discipling. The question now with regard to contextualization is, "How far is too far?"

3 Cautions for discussing the issues

Post hoc, ergo propter hoc -- roughly interpreted, "cause and effect cannot be reversed." Just because a person has been genuinely saved by God, it does not follow logically that the means employed are equally desirable, reproducible, or to be emulated (e.g. Nebuchadnezzar). As it relates to MBBs¹, a

¹ Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) is the term most commonly used to describe individuals of Muslim background who have come to faith in Christ, and whose primary identity is as a follower of Christ. It implies being genuinely born again and results in changed belief and life. Newer terms that some prefer are BMBs (Believers of Muslim Background) and CMBs (Christians of Muslim Background). MBs (Muslim Believers) is a narrower term preferred by still others to describe followers of Jesus who also choose to maintain their identity as faithful Muslims. Some like the term MJFs (Muslim Jesus Followers) for this group. For the purposes of this paper we are using MBBs to describe all believers in Jesus Christ as Savior who come from a Muslim background whether or not they continue to identify themselves as Muslims.

large number of conversions doesn't automatically mean that the strategy is biblically warranted, or that it is sustainable.

While the views of insiders are essential and of great value, some would say, "Only insiders can legitimately weigh in on the conversation about what is appropriate contextualization and application of biblical truth." If this argument were true it would logically follow that no one could disciple anyone coming from a different religious/cultural background.

Some seem to argue that the choice is only between extractionism (taking believers out of their culture) or believers in Jesus continuing to remain Muslims. Many others believe and have shown that there is a middle way that communicates cultural respect and adherence to mores, but does not affirm adherence to Islam. The discussion is properly framed as a continuum of positions.

4 Particular issues

Issue #1: We praise God for his work of bringing many Muslims to faith in Christ, leading them on fresh paths in their journey of faith. We see or hear descriptions of the varied self-identity and theological beliefs of these brothers and sisters in Christ. Our current response is not intended as a judgment on the path that they are pursuing. Rather, it is a guideline to assist in the discipling of Muslims to become Christ-followers.

Issue #2: Cross-cultural workers are people of influence and must realize that they will be asked their views on all kinds of issues, contextualization ones included. It is important that they speak gently but honestly, properly handling the Scriptures, and not leaving the impression that unbiblical practices and beliefs are in fact biblical. This is very different from cross-cultural workers telling Muslim background believers (MBBs) what they must do. MBBs, like all believers, are accountable to God for their own choices and level of obedience. It is important that cross-cultural workers also speak with humility; they need to acknowledge that what has historically seemed biblically clear has sometimes been shown generations later to have been drawn from a very limited selection of Scriptures, and that we have a great deal to learn from our cross-cultural brothers and sisters in Christ.

Issue #3: Many MBBs maintain their identity as Muslims early in their conversion and sanctification process; they continue to participate in all that means (in terms of mosque attendance and faith affirmations) while clarifying Gospel faith issues, and as a means to maintain a platform for sharing the

Gospel with their friends. This is understandable, but we do not believe that this should be encouraged as a normative and permanent state. Those who choose to remain self-identified as a “Muslim”² should be encouraged to communicate verbally and by their actions that their primary identity is as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Issue #4: Transitions toward maturity in Christ may take an extended time, but they should always be in the direction of greater understanding of who Christ is as Lord and what He has done. Such transitions may be either individual or community-wide in nature. As believers grow in their sanctification it will be in the direction of greater confidence in the authority of the Bible as God’s inspired Word. Other venerated books may continue to be used as evangelistic tools to point others to the Bible and the revelation of the Messiah that it provides, but the Bible alone will increasingly be recognized as the authoritative source for truth, spiritual growth and instruction.

Issue #5: Some MBBs may follow Christ secretly and also continue to identify themselves as Muslims because of certain death or severe persecution if they were to reveal their faith in Christ. We are sympathetic to this circumstance, and see a decision to do so as a matter of personal conscience before the Lord. We embrace these brothers and sisters as part of our family in Christ and pray they would be freed from their situation so they can more openly live as salt and light in their community.

Issue #6: Given the intended purpose (as a declaration of common belief) and implied meaning for reciting the *shahada* (or creed) within the context of the Muslim community we do not believe it is biblically permissible for believers to recite it. We believe that the creed elevates one to the status of a biblical prophet and more. This one contradicts biblical teaching in the “divine revelation” he conveyed, especially on the person and work of Jesus Christ. This one is also generally viewed by Muslims as the “seal of the prophets” (the final and most authoritative one), thus raising him to a superior position in his prophetic role to that of the Lord Jesus Christ. While this man was certainly important as an agent of change in Arab and Islamic history, we do not believe he was a prophet of special revelation directly from God, though he communicated some truth.

² Some, for example, argue that “Muslim” means “one who submits” and thus could technically refer to Christians. In most contexts, however, the term would almost universally be understood as one who follows the teachings of Islam.

Issue #7: It is recognized that the mosque is a unique worship/teaching center for Islam. It is recommended, therefore, that apart from truly exceptional circumstances³ MBBs not be encouraged to continue in the mosque as regular participants beyond a transitional time following their turning to faith in Jesus Christ: it no longer represents his/her spiritual commitment. Other Muslims may also observe the MBB's continued participation in the mosque as deception. At the same time, it is understood that some MBBs will choose to continue in the mosque while they are becoming grounded in their biblical understanding and spiritual discipleship, as well as to avoid societal ostracism.

Issue #8: We recognize that legalism is common in Muslim belief and structures with salvation ultimately based upon good works, the adequacy of which is determined by God himself. We do not affirm this and firmly believe that salvation for anyone, including Muslims, comes solely by grace through faith and trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We would agree that anyone who puts trust in him for salvation should be warmly received as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Issue #9: We recognize the reality of new believers embarking on a process that will lead them to a fuller understanding of biblical truth. The true change will begin in the heart and true believers will proceed to evaluate and adjust their cultural habits and worldview beliefs as necessary. This will often result in an outward identity that ties them to the surrounding Muslim culture and community in unique ways – still seen as authentic members of their culture and community, but different because of their trust in and obedience to Jesus Christ. Their identity should progressively and necessarily include a close identification with other followers of Christ around the world. Fellow Christians should not be overly critical as this transitional process takes place in another believer's life, but should graciously accept them as brothers and sisters in the faith.

Issue #10: Due to the great diversity of the Muslim world, a single approach toward the self-identity of Muslim background believers simply cannot be recommended for all contexts. Historical coexistence with Christianity, legal requirements, national attitudes toward religious pluralism, and the wide range of Muslim attitudes toward Islamic orthodoxy are all factors greatly af-

³ This might include those very rare situations, for example, where the mosque is little more than a community center and there is little expectation that all would participate in the usual Muslim worship rituals, or where an Imam has become a believer in Christ and is now teaching the Gospel.

fecting the feasibility of believers in Jesus Christ being able to faithfully follow him and still call themselves “Muslims” in some fashion. There is, likewise, no overriding necessity for anyone to use the term Christian or Christianity to identify himself/herself if that misleads hearers as to what one truly believes or how one lives.

Issue #11: Some recent Bible translators for Muslim languages have decided to use, or are debating the use of dynamic, meaning-based and receptor-oriented translation of *ben elohim* and *huios tou theou*; this is instead of traditional, literal translation as has been used in most English Bible translations which render these as "son of God." We acknowledge that the intent of such new approaches in translation is to assist readers to actually understand the original meaning, but we strongly encourage translation of the phrase as literally as possible because: (1) there is a depth of theological meaning in the phrase that could otherwise be lost; and (2) the term “son of God” is already known worldwide and such a change may be viewed as changing the very Word of God, which Muslims have historically accused Christians of doing. In light of this we think it far better that a footnote or a preface be used to make clear the attendant meaning of expressions like “son of God” within the text². In the event that our company is engaged in a translation project with other Evangelical organizations in which the majority believe an opposite tack should be taken (replacing a literal “son of God” equivalent with another term), but still explaining the usage choice in a footnote or preface, participation and/or endorsement will be at the discretion of regional leadership.

Issue #12: It is a matter of high priority that a believer’s words and actions should always take into account how the people in the context are likely to interpret them.

Issue #13: Meeting together regularly for worship and fellowship is one of the essentials of healthy spiritual life, and greatly enhances a follower of Christ’s sense of identity. We encourage all believers to actively participate in this practice.

Issue #14: Participation in biblically permissible Muslim practices (e.g. avoiding pork and alcohol, no dogs in homes, fasting during Ramadan) is an option that MBBs and cross-cultural workers will often want to avail themselves of as a means to identify and maintain good relations with the wider Islamic

² In the case of audio presentations of the Scriptures explanations will likewise need to be incorporated.

community.³ However, one should seek to communicate, as appropriate opportunity arises, that it is not about earning salvific merit with God.

Issue #15: Distancing oneself from the stereotypic and non-Christlike excesses of nominal Christianity is of course understandable in Muslim contexts. However, religious identity is also a statement of community belonging. We therefore think it is deceptive, unethical and not biblically permissible for Christians to convert to Islam in order to win Muslims to Christ.

Issue #16: The Gospel has both personal and societal implications, and cannot therefore be viewed in only personal transformation terms. We encourage MBBs to have as much involvement as possible in bringing the light of Christ to address the larger spiritual and social needs of their community.

³ It would also be important to make sure MBBs are aware that these practices are matters of Christian liberty, carried out in order to remove unnecessary barriers to the Gospel in that context, but not commanded in the Bible.

APPENDIX

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

The issue of contextualization among Muslim-background followers of Jesus can best be addressed within a wider discussion of how to approach contextualization in general. *Contextualization* here refers to how believers in Jesus Christ think, express themselves and live out their faith within their own particular context. A *context* is the unique and complete socio-cultural environment that surrounds every human being. It includes culture, religious/theological background, economic, social, and educational background, gender, the historical era and each individual's personal circumstances. A context can be very broad (e.g. the "African" context), but can also be narrowed to any level of specificity (e.g. Ethiopia, Ethiopian Somalis, Ethiopian nomadic Somalis) to the point of speaking of the context of each individual (e.g. a particular Ethiopian, Somali, nomadic woman). Contextualization touches every aspect of a person's living faith: formal theology and confessions of faith, ethics, rituals such as worship and music, methods of instruction, language and translation, and outward religious symbols (e.g. church architecture, wearing a cross). Contextualization should go deeper than believers' outward behaviors and symbols, penetrating all the way to their worldview.

Evangelical Christians in general, and our members in particular⁴, believe that the Bible is God-inspired Scripture and is their ultimate source of authority. It is the primary basis for both their beliefs and how they live out their Christian faith within their context (i.e. the Bible is their primary source for contextualization). The Bible not only claims to be God's Word, his revelatory message to the people to whom it was addressed, it also claims to be God's revelatory message for all peoples in all cultures in all historical eras (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:6, 11; 2 Tim 3:14-17). As such, it is more than a collection of "successful local theologies" of God's people in the past. It was written so that people from all contexts can understand its essential truths and to provide the primary source for belief and behavior for all believers in all contexts today (2 Pet 1:3). No one context is particularly privileged in its ability to understand the truths of Scripture; all can have adequate understanding, but none will have exhaustive understanding of any of the truths of Scripture.

⁴ See company Statement of Faith.

Though believers from all contexts can understand the essential meaning of Scripture, readers of Scripture will inevitably be affected by their contexts. Context increases awareness of some aspects of the text and decreases awareness of other aspects of the text. Context also shapes the way readers will understand and express the truths of Scripture. Because no individual believer or Christian community will have an exhaustive understanding or perfect expression of biblical truth, it is important that believers from all contexts humbly and continually learn from one another. Believers from younger churches can learn from older churches, but believers from older churches can also learn from younger churches.

Though they can learn from older churches, all believers—including followers of Jesus from younger churches, such as those in Muslim contexts—have the right and privilege of studying the Bible for themselves and finding their own ways of expressing biblical truth in their lives and worship. It is important that they understand how the universal church has understood and applied Scripture in the past, such as in the creeds and confessions of the church. However, these communities of believers can and should shape their own biblically-based theologies (while remaining congruent with the theology of the universal church) using language and forms most appropriate to their context. These theologies may even, in the end, use fresh terms and models to describe core theological concepts, such as the nature of the triune God and the person of Jesus Christ. They will also, if they are truly biblical, make clear that Islamic faith and Christian faith are two very different and largely incompatible religions. Islam as a religion does not reflect biblical belief or practice in following the one True God.

The process of contextualization regularly wrestles with issues of form and meaning. What should believers in the new context do with the old cultural and religious forms and symbols? Should they be retained, filled with new meaning, adapted into some new-but-familiar form, or completely discarded? For example, should Muslim followers of Jesus continue to call themselves “Muslims?” Should they continue to bow in prayer five times a day? Likewise, to what extent should the forms of the Bible or the churches in other contexts be adopted, or to what extent should believers look for new, more culturally appropriate forms? For example, should Muslim followers of Jesus refer to God as “the Trinity?” To answer these questions, we must understand the varied relationship that forms can have with their underlying meanings.

On the one hand, insisting that a particular form always carries the same meaning across culture and time reflects a naïve view that cannot be maintained in real life. For example, a kiss, walking hand-in-hand, a wink, or

comparing a person to a particular animal all carry different meanings in different contexts. On the other hand, maintaining that any form can freely be substituted to communicate the same meaning is equally simplistic: it ignores the historical connection between forms and their meaning and the control that social groups maintain over symbols. For example, wearing a ring on the fourth finger of the left hand is a form that, in the North American context, carries the meaning that a person is married. It would require a major shift in historical direction and social expectations for this form to take on a different meaning (e.g. that a person was simply wealthy or liked jewelry) or to substitute a different form to communicate the same meaning (e.g. that all married people wear a certain color of clothing). “The relationship between meanings and forms varies according to the nature of the symbol.”⁵

Paul Hiebert has suggested that the relationship between form and meaning is best understood in terms of a continuum.⁶ At one end of the continuum, form and meaning are sometimes *arbitrarily linked*. This is, perhaps, best seen in linguistic forms. The sounds to represent the idea of a canine mammal may be “dog” (in English), “perro” (in Spanish), or “wesha” (in Amharic). There is nothing that inherently connects any of these sounds to the idea of a canine mammal; the connection is purely arbitrary. Sometimes form and meaning are *loosely linked*. Some connection exists between the form and the meaning, but the link might be disconnected, especially in cross-cultural communication. For example, many agricultural societies link land and fertility with being female and link battle and violence with being male. However, these connections would not be made in every culture. Sometimes form and meaning are *tightly linked*. Though the two are not completely equal, it would be difficult to discard the form without in some way affecting the meaning. Bowing or falling prostrate is closely associated across cultures as signs of submission or reverence. Finally, form and meaning are sometimes *equated*. For example, when a minister in the USA says, “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” or when the vows are exchanged in certain other contexts, the words spoken (the form) actually create a new relationship between a man and a woman.⁷

⁵ Paul Hiebert, 1989. “Form and Meaning in the Contextualization of Theology.” In Dean Gililand, Ed. *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today* (Dallas: Word, 1989), p. 109.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The preceding two paragraphs are adapted from Steve Strauss, “Creeds, Confessions and Global Theologizing: A Case Study In Comparative Christologies,” In Eds. Harold Netland & Craig Ott, *Globalizing Theology* (Baker: Grand Rapids, MI: 2006), pp. 143-144.

Understanding that the meaning of symbols can be connected in different ways has several implications in contextualization. First, before old cultural or religious forms are maintained or filled with new meaning by followers of Jesus, they must understand both the meaning of the form in the local context and how tightly the form is connected to that meaning. If it is tightly connected, it may not be possible to give the form new meaning, but if it is loosely connected, it might be possible for the form to take on new meaning. For example, in some contexts it might be possible for Jesus followers to continue to call themselves “Muslims” or worship using forms that are used by the Muslim community, but still fulfill biblical imperatives for belief and behavior. However, in another context the connection between the form “Muslim” and its original meaning might be so close that believers in Jesus could no longer use that name and retain their distinctive as Jesus-followers. Second, before new forms are introduced from other cultures, it is important to understand how closely the form and meaning are connected in Scripture, and what the meaning of that form would have in the new context. For example, describing God as “Trinity” in a Muslim context may imply that there are three gods, and that one of them is the Virgin Mary. However, the word “Trinity” is never used in Scripture, and there might be superior ways of describing the biblical truth of the “three-ness” and oneness of the Godhead that would more accurately communicate biblical meaning in a Muslim context. Finally, understanding the varied relationship between form and meaning affects issues of translation. Translators must understand both how closely connected a particular biblical form is to its meaning and the implications of any form used in the target language. For example, before translating *huios tou theou* into any language, the translator must understand the meaning of the term in the original biblical context and the possible understandings of any proposed translation (“Son of God,” “Messiah of God,” “Child of God,” etc.) in the target language.