IDENTITY ISSUES FOR EX-MUSLIM CHRISTIANS, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO MARRIAGE

By Tim Green[20]

Abstract: This article summarizes a framework for understanding identity in terms of "core identity", "social identity" and "collective identity", and relates these to the identity struggles of Christ-followers from Muslim background. These issues unfold over many years following conversion. The author describes his doctoral research among a group of such believers in a South Asian city, and illustrates their identity dilemmas with particular reference to marriage.

1 Identity, a Critical Issue

1.1 Seeking a new Identity

'Thank you for your presentation and it was like a bullet right in the heart', wrote an Afghan diaspora Christian to me last month. He meant it in a positive way! The issues of identity for believers from Muslim background worldwide, which I had just described in my conference presentation, connected directly with his own experience. He in fact has had to make a double identity migration: from Islam to Christ and from Afghanistan to the West.

Thirty years of friendship with ex-Muslim Christians from twenty countries has convinced me that their search for "identity" is widespread, deep-seated and at times painful. The pain need not be acute; more often it throbs quietly in the background as a dull heartache, a barely articulated longing to "find where I belong". It lasts for years, or decades. It may lead ultimately to a place of resolution, or of sup-

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[20] Tim Green has enjoyed the friendship of Christ's followers from Muslim background since 1979. He worked in a Muslim region of South Asia 1988-2003, and the Middle East 2003-5, with national in-context programs for discipleship and training. These days from a base in Britain, through the Increase network, he assists indigenous programs in different parts of Asia which equip and empower believers through church-based learning groups.

pression, or of return to the Muslim community (for the sake of comfort sake if not from conviction). In some unresolved cases, it leads to schizophrenia.

In Search of Meaning and Identity is the title of Seppo Syrjanen's classic study on Pakistani Muslims turning to Christ.[21] *Longing for Community* is a forthcoming edited collection of studies on former Muslims in a range of countries. 'Community and Identity among Arabs of a Muslim background who choose to follow a Christian faith' is Kathryn Kraft's PhD title.[22] As more and more Muslims worldwide put their faith in Christ, they find that their search for identity and community has only just begun.

Certainly "identity" and "community" are linked. The former is formed in the womb of the latter and sustained by its umbilical cord. Thus the question facing former Muslims is not only "who am I?", but also "who are *we*?" - as a group of Afghan Christians in Canada put it to me. Both questions are critically important for this generation's new believers, and for the health of next generation's churches.

1.2 Terminology
It will have been noted that I use interchangeably the terms "believer from Muslim background", "former Muslim", "convert" and "ex-Muslim Christian". A mix is needed, for no one term is favoured by all. In particular the term "convert", though shunned these days in missiological circles, is normal parlance for sociologists. They in turn would look askance at the missiological label "believer from Muslim background", for in their terms of reference are not Muslims already "believers"?

Is it perhaps time for missiologists too to reclaim the short and simple word "convert", dust off its negative associations, and accept that a person turning from Islam to Christ is indeed "converting"?

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[21] Seppo Syrjänen, In Search of Meaning and Identity: Conversion to Christianity in Pakistani Muslim Culture (Vammala: Finnish Society for Missiology and Ecumenics, 1984).
[22] Kathryn Kraft, 'Community and Identity among Arabs of a Muslim background who choose to follow a Christian Faith', (PhD diss., Bristol: University of Bristol, 2008).

Or is the term so laden on the one hand with hints of *extractionism* (seeking to extract a convert from his or her former community), and on the other hand of *superficiality* (seeking mere conversion not discipleship) that it must be abandoned forever?

Be that as it may, in sociological writings the word "convert" goes unchallenged, and as my own doctoral research is in a secular university I will continue to use it alongside other terms.

1.3. Personal Background & Perspective

I vividly recall the first time I met an ex-Muslim Christian. The year was 1979. "Hussein" (for I use pseudonyms throughout this article) was a gentle, educated man who had previously held a good government job. I was a mere 18 year old on an overseas placement.

Hussein, by the time I met him, had lost his job, his home and his family. The church where he and I both worked had given him a job of sorts (as a lowly gardener) and a home of sorts (in the servants' accommodation). But it had not offered him any new "family".

So he lived all on his own. The other servants on the church compound were nice enough people, but they had their own families and their own support structures. They were busy with their own concerns. Hussein had no one. Lost in the gap between the Muslim and Christian communities, he was lonely and longing for friendship.

That made a deep impression on me as a teenager. Over the years since then, it has been my privilege to meet many who, like Hussein, have left Islam to follow Christ. When they first embarked on this path of discipleship it seemed to them a path of flowers. Only with time did they realize that it was also a path of thorns. So they needed friends to help pick the thorns out of their feet and walk with them on the path.

Friendship with scores of such disciples has taught me a great deal. It impressed on me the cost of their calling, and it alerted me to the common convert issues which bridge their differences of nationality, age and gender.

However, it also showed me that too much generalization is dangerous. In particular, the "insider movements" debate has greatly oversimplified and thereby obscured some extremely important dif-

ferences between different regions of the Muslim world. As one moves from Ghana to Algeria to Saudi Arabia to Central Asia to Pakistan to Bangladesh to Java, not only does the expression of Islam vary a great deal, but so too does the local relationship between Muslim and Christian communities.

2 Making Sense of Identity

2.1 A complex Minefield[23]

Making sense of "identity" can be difficult. This is partly because different academic disciplines define identity in different ways. Psychologists focus on the private self-awareness of individuals, while anthropologists and some sociologists view identity as a collective label marking out different groups. Social psychologists describe "identity negotiation" between individuals and groups.[24] So there is no universally agreed definition, and that is before taking theological perspectives into account!

Moreover, under the impact of globalization, "waves of transformation crash across virtually the whole of the earth's surface",[25] breaking up the old certainties. Travel and the internet expose people to new worldviews; migration and intermarriage create new hybrid identities; pluralizing societies challenge fused notions of religion, ethnicity and nationality.

'The days of closed, homogeneous, unchanging societies are rapidly going and they will not come back', comments Jean-Marie

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[23] Some material in sections 2.1, 2.2, 2.4 and 3.1 summarizes my more extensive treatment of the topic in two chapters I contributed to a forthcoming multi-author book entitled *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?* Edited by David Greenlee, it comprises research studies from different parts of the world on identity of Ex-Muslim Christians. It is due for publication by William Carey Library in late 2012.

[24] Psychologists writing on identity include William James, Erik Erikson, Galen Strawson; sociologists include Lewin and Zerbavel; social psychologists include Henri Tafjel, George Herbert Mead and Sheldon Stryker; sociologists of religion include Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann; but the list is almost endless.

[25] Anthony Giddens 1990, cited in Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," *Modernity and its Future*, Hall et al, eds. (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 275-316.

Gaudeul.[26]   Yet, alongside this globalizing juggernaut and often in opposition to it, collectivist understandings of identity ('We are, therefore I am') are still important especially in non-Western societies.

For all these reasons, the field of "identity studies" resembles a minefield. Nevertheless, we need to make a start somewhere, for this minefield is also a goldmine. To the persevering, it yields treasures of insight on identity issues facing Christ's followers from Muslim background.

2.2 A simplified Framework

To grapple with this slippery concept of "identity", we must clarify some concepts and discern overall patterns.   This provides us with a basic conceptual framework.   Inevitably such a framework will be over-simplified, but clarity must precede nuance, which can be reintroduced afterwards.

My simplified framework takes its starting-point from the work of a psychologist Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi. After surveying definitions of identity from several academic fields he proposes this three-level conceptualization:

> At the top I would place *collective identity*, i.e., identity as defined by the group... In the middle I would place *social identity* labels, as used by the individual and by others to identify him(self). At the bottom or deepest level I would place *ego-identity*, which is privately or even unconsciously experienced by the individual.[27]

The term "ego-identity" is drawn from Freudian psychology. Although it has been widely used by Erikson, Beit-Hallahmi and others, I prefer to use the more readily grasped term "core identity".[28]

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[26] Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Called from Islam to Christ: Why Muslims become Christians* (translated from the French), (Crowborough: Monarch Books, 1999), 225-6.

[27] Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *Prolegomena to the Psychological Study of Religion* (London: Associated University Press, 1989), 96-97

[28] This term 'core identity' was agreed between Kathryn Kraft and myself in June 2012, when we compared and combined our similar tripartite models of identity theory, for presentation at the 'Bridging the Divide' consultation in the USA. This gathering of proponents and opponents of 'insider movements' accepted the tripar-

I have turned Beit-Hallahmi's scheme into a simple diagram, with his three layers of identity stacked above each other:
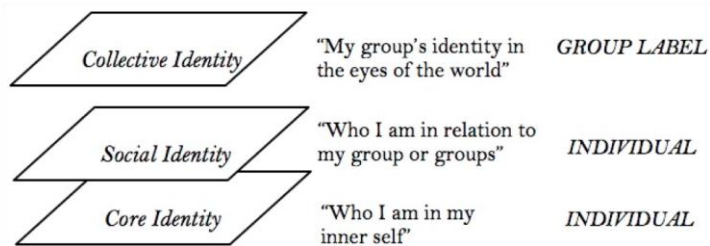

Figure 1. Identity at three levels: a simplified model

The following points about this model are worth highlighting:

a) "Collective identity" concerns the way a whole symbolic group is labelled and distinguished from other groups by its identity markers. Collective identity refers to "*our*" identity as a whole tribe or class or nation.

b) By contrast, "*my* core identity" and "*my* social identity" are both held by the individual.[29] This is why they are shown as a pair in the diagram, separated from the collective identity. A person's social

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tite model as a potentially useful framework for discussing issues of identity, but work on this has only just begun and it remains to be seen whether this model or the terminology will stand the test of time.

[29] I do recognise that to define core identity as "who I am in my inner self" this is an over-simplified way of expressing it. Is Self an intrinsic entity or is it always developed and defined in relation to the Other? Is there, as psychologists debate, both an 'I' sense of self and a 'Me' sense? What is the relation between self and worldview? And what perspective does a biblical theology of humanness bring to the understanding of self? These are all important questions, but outside the scope of this article. Jens Barnett has done more work on this area, see his chapter in the forthcoming book *Longing for Identity*, ed. David Greenlee.

identity concerns his or her actual social relationships, while the collective identity is a label for the whole group.

c) A person's core identity and social identity are developed throughout life through a constant dialectic between these levels, thus:
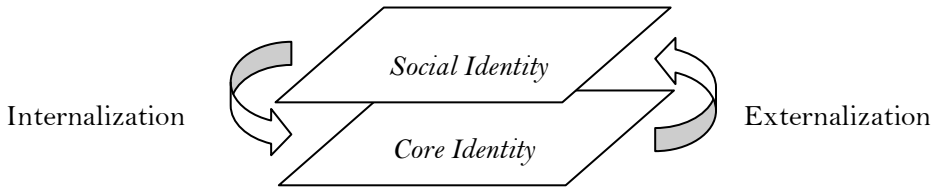
Internalization

Social Identity

Core Identity

Externalization

Figure 2. Interaction between core and social identity

Berger and Luckmann explain how this process begins in early childhood through "primary socialization", in which a child becomes emotionally attached to "significant others" (initially adults in the immediate family circle). Thereby

> the child takes on the significant others' roles and attitudes, that is, internalizes them and makes them his own… the individual becomes what he is addressed as by his significant others. [30]

Erik Erikson traces stages of life throughout which individuals continually develop their core identity, including the stage of adolescence when they typically question their absorbed values and consciously construct their own achieved identity. James Fowler, in his influential but not universally accepted work *Stages of Faith*, draws on Erikson and Piaget to argue that a person's faith development keeps step with their identity development.

All these theories were developed in western individualistic societies. While they make a valuable contribution to our understanding of identity, they do not cover all aspects of identity in more collectiv-

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[30] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.(New York: Doubleday, 1966), 121

ist cultures, where "I" is less clearly distinguished from "we" than in the West.

2.3. Making the model more sophisticated

In outlining this three-layer model I again stress that it is only a very simple starting point. Each layer is merely the setting for a great deal of further sub-division, movement and complexity. We might elaborate the model to make the "core identity" level a stage whereon different worldviews raise their voices like actors, each clamouring to be heard and obeyed.[31] At the "social identity" layer we might draw a series of circles, some overlapping and some rigidly separate, to illustrate an individual's multiple identities and/or roles. We might change the "collective identity" layer into a composite set of layers bonded together like plywood, with the different layers labeled "ethnic", "national", "religious", "socio-economic" and so on.

Elaborating further still, we might change our three layers into a three-floor department store, with each floor having inter-connecting and rearrangeable departments, and with escalators to move ideas continually up and down between the "core" and "social" floors.

Buildings, however, don't move. People move and develop and change throughout life. They leave home, marry, change roles, juggle multiple identities and bring up children in a different environment from the one in which they grew up. Identity change takes place with ever-growing speed in a world where migration and hybrid identities are more and more common.

Therefore no model can adequately depict identity in all its complexity of identity. Even so, models have their place. So long as we recognize its limitations, our tripartite conceptualization of identity will still carry us quite a long way in understanding what it is to be Muslim and what it is to convert.

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[31] See Jens Barnett's chapter in the forthcoming book *Longing for Community* (ed. David Greenlee). I have enjoyed learning from Jens as we interacted on models of identity.

2.4. Muslim Identity at each level

Let us consider each identity layer in turn, as they apply to Muslim people and societies.

2.4.1 The "Collective Identity" layer

Nationality, ethnicity, and sometimes religion are entered on their birth certificates before they have a chance to make any choice for themselves. We call these collective identities and they are ascribed by others, at least initially. In individualistic cultures it is easier to shift from one collectivist identity to another. Of course many Islamic cultures are collectivist, rather than individualist. In many Islamic cultures the ethnic and religious identities are merged—to be a Turk is to be a Muslim, for example. Even in pluralistic cultures the religious collective identity label remains a powerful loyalty test, especially at times of tension between different religious groups.

2.4.2 The "Social Identity" layer

Religious *social* identity is internalized by the Muslim or Muslima from birth on, especially within the family setting. The *shahada* is recited at birth and burial as well, and as Kenneth Cragg points out,[32] an endless inter-penetration of religion and society indoctrinates the young in that identity. Growing up, they pass through no ceremony corresponding to a Christian's public vocalization of family faith at, say Confirmation. Rather, Islam is assumed as the natural religion, the *diin al fitr*, and to be Muslim is part of belonging to their family and society and, in many instances, nation.

In such ways, at the social identity level, does Islam provide a secure and comforting framework from cradle to grave. It acts as a "sacred canopy" and "shield against terror", to use Peter Berger's famous phrase.[33]

2.4.3 The "Core Identity" layer

Evangelicals commonly use the term "nominal Christians" to refer to people who, on a social or communal level only, have a social identity

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[32] Kenneth Cragg, *The Dome and the Rock* (London: SPCK, 1964), 148.
[33] Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

of a Christian but not the core identity. That is, in their own world-view and self-awareness, their Christianity is only tangential; it is not at the core of who they are.

Can we speak of "nominal Muslims" in the same way? Is this a valid comparison when Islam and Christianity (or evangelical Christianity at any rate) have such different emphases on the relative importance of orthopraxis and orthodoxy? Perhaps a better way of putting it would be to speak of "cultural" Muslims, embedded in Muslim majority communities and going with the flow of a religiously legitimated society without necessarily being deeply committed to Islam at a "core identity" level.

However Muslims who live in a non-Islamic context, where their cultural assumptions are not taken for granted by wider society, are thereby prompted to distinguish between social and core identities. It is no longer so easy just to go with the flow of a Muslim social identity. This prompts migrants (or their children) critically to examine their assumptions and to make choices at the core identity level. Some decide to follow Islam in a committed, conscious way, some turn from Islam to another faith or atheism, and some continue to live with the unresolved cognitive dissonance of clashing world-views.

Thus all three identity levels have a religious element. Since Islam lays claim to all these areas in a holistic way, those who leave it face a daunting task of renegotiating each aspect of their identity.

3 Conversion and Identity

3.1. A transformed identity at each level

Our understanding of Muslim conversion to Christianity is assisted by conversion studies, which incorporates insights from such fields as psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, missiology and of course theology. Perhaps the most influential scholar in recent years to write on the topic is the American Lewis Rambo. [34] He sought to

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[34] Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

integrate insights from all these disciplines except for theology, whose methodology he judged to be incompatible with the rest. Rambo and others interpret religious conversion as a profound and radical transformation of identity at all three levels. We will now turn to an exploration, with examples, of what that identity transformation may look like in different instances.

3.1.1 Conversion at the "Core Identity" level

One formerly Muslim friend from Uganda described to me the excitement he felt at his baptism:

> I felt I have died to my old sinful way, I have given myself to God and am now a new person. I am not the Firaz my friends knew, not the one whom Satan knew, but a new Firaz—forgiven, born again, controlled by the Spirit. The old Firaz is dead, the new one is alive in Christ. I came out of the water feeling I am a new person!

To talk of a "new identity" does not mean that that the previous values and way of thinking are instantly obliterated. 'Their old identity is not erased; rather, the new one is overwritten on it.'[35]

Complications emerge at this point, for it often takes a prolonged internal struggle as one's worldview is transformed. An example of this is to value humility above honor, or forgiveness above revenge. The claims of old and new world views compete to be heard and obeyed. This conflict or struggle takes places at the "core identity" level.

Firaz still struggles at times with this. For him and others like him, deep level discipleship means choosing for the new worldview to win out over the old one whenever they conflict. This transformation at the core of his being will take years. But it can and will happen, so long as he has a clear and united core identity as Christ's follower, and keeps feeding that identity day by day and year by year.

3.1.2 Conversion at the "Social Identity" Level

One friend of mine from a Muslim background put "sheepalone" in his email address, and this seemed to me to symbolize his sense of

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[35] Rudolf Heredia, *Changing Gods: Rethinking Conversion in India*. London: Penguin Books (2007), 127.

isolation. Can a believer in Christ survive without joining the flock? Is it only through incorporation into a congregation of believers that a new social identity can emerge—one which will complement and complete the transformation in core identity?

Converts from Islam seek a new social identity, a new "family" to substitute for the old (especially if rejected by their own loved ones), a new role model of what it means to be Christ's follower, and a new pattern of Christian discipleship.

Biblical theology and the social sciences alike assert that the new community is essential for providing converts with the social identity they crave. What, however, is to come of their old social identity, the community in which they were born and raised? Will all links with that be cut off? Is it necessary to have only one social identity, or can two be combined at the same time?

In fact many converts from Islam, to the extent that they want to or are allowed to, maintain links of some kind with their Muslim families while simultaneously joining their new Christian "family". Dual belonging is a reality for them, and they seek strategies to combine both social identities. So what circumstances allow coexistence and where is conflict inevitable? When can twin loyalties be held side by side and when do they tear a heart apart? What local contextual variations bear on this, and what theological insights help to chart a way through?

These questions are of urgent relevance to many thousands of Christians from Muslim background today. It is over these questions that converts, national Christian leaders, missiologists and theologians should pool their perspectives, not the old polarized Insider Movements debate which can never move forward until it recognizes the reality of dual social identity. I address this further in section 6.2 below.

3.1.3 Conversion at the "Collective Identity" Level

Collective identities of religion, ethnicity and nationality tend to get fused in traditional societies. So a person changing their religion is seen as betraying their family and their nation as well. Islamic histo-

ry and jurisprudence has confirmed this attitude to apostasy which is traditionally equated with treason

Fatima al-Mutairi of Saudi Arabia, who was martyred at the age of 26, expressed on a website her desire to be accepted as a real Saudi but also a follower of Christ:

> Truly, we love our homeland, and we are not traitors
> We take pride that we are Saudi citizens
> How could we betray our homeland, our dear people?
> How could we, when for death—for Saudi Arabia—we stand ready?
> The homeland of my grandfathers, their glories, and odes—for it I am writing
> And we say, "We are proud, proud, proud to be Saudis"
> ...
> We chose our way, the way of the rightly guided
> And every man is free to choose any religion
> Be content to leave us to ourselves to be believers in Jesus

Her plea was in vain and in August 2008, her father and brother discovered her Christian allegiance and killed her. In response to news of her martyrdom a Saudi woman wrote 'thousand, thousand congratulations for her death. . .and a special thanks to her brother who carried out God's law. . .curse upon the apostate Fatima, curse upon the apostate Fatima.'[36]

Even in the secular West, apostasy from Islam is most always interpreted as a betrayal of collective identity. 'Don't you realize,' a British-born Pakistani friend of mine was told by her relative, 'that by becoming a Christian you have abandoned your roots, your heritage and your family name?'

So to overcome these deep-seated assumptions about collective identity remains a major challenge for converts. It is made somewhat easier in globalizing societies, or in cultures which retain even a

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[36] Mariam al Hakeem, "Saudi Man Kills Daughter for Converting to Christianity," *Gulf News* <archive.gulfnews.com/articles/08/08/12/10236558.html>, August 12, 2008. The poem is available on many websites including <www.strateias.org/fatima.pdf>.The blog was posted originally at <muslmah.blogspot.com/2008/08/blog-post.html>.

distant memory of not being Muslim (Iran for example, or the Ber-
bers of North Africa). It is also affected a great deal by the reputa-
tion of traditional Christian communities within a country, as well as
by the political machinations and military adventures of western
"Christendom".

3.2. Life's Unfolding Journey

For converts from Islam, the issues of identity never really go away.
This is not only because they are so intractable, but also because the
issues themselves unfold during the course of a lifetime.

Suppose you are born under Islam and later choose to follow
Christ. Your life might unfold something like the following hypo-
thetical scenario.

3.2.1 In infancy

Within minutes of your birth your proud father recites in your ear
the words of the *shahada*, 'There is no god but Allah and Muhammad
is his apostle'. Later, in the "religion" column of your birth certifi-
cate, he enters the word "Muslim". Thus is your collective religious
identity *assumed* and *ascribed* before you have any choice in the matter
at all.

3.2.2 Growing up

From your parents and your "significant others" you internalize a
Muslim worldview and way of life which you don't at first question.
Imbibed on your mother's lap and reinforced by your daily routine,
you "know" that it's wrong to put your left foot first when stepping
into the bathroom, or for a woman to walk outside with her head un-
covered. Your social religious identity is *absorbed* as you grow
through childhood.

3.2.3 As a teenager

Later, you begin to choose or *achieve* your identity in a more self-
conscious way. You go through a phase of Islamic zeal, no longer
slacking your way through Qur'an classes but genuinely trying to
live by its teachings. Your core religious identity is being formed in
a more self-conscious way than before.

But this very process prompts questions in your mind about Is-
lam. You bring them to the *imam* but he frowns on your daring to

ask. You stumble across a Christian website; this arouses your curiosity, and you start reading the Bible secretly online. You are opening up to change at the core identity level.

3.2.4 At the age of twenty

You are attracted by the Bible's teaching, meet Christians, pray to receive Christ and are born again into a brand new core identity as a child of God. As your concept of God changes, will you continue to pray to "Allah" but filling the word with new meaning? Or will you call him by another name to express your new identity? Meanwhile, are your core values and worldview beginning to be realigned, and if so is this yet making any difference in your speech and behaviour?

Meanwhile at a social identity level you are still embedded in the Muslim community. For two years you continue to read your Bible in secret and visit Christians in secret. You realize that you can't live an identity contradiction forever, but you are not yet ready to tell your family.

3.2.5 First crisis point: your family finds out

But before you are ready to "come out", you are "outed" by someone else, who tells your parents. (I'm using this phrase deliberately, for it recalls the shock and shame some families feel when they learn their son or daughter is gay).

When they ask 'have you become a Christian?' you have to admit you are following Christ. Your father erupts with rage, your mother weeps 'now how will your sisters find good husbands?' and your uncles want to beat you. What worries them most is the fear that the news will get out. So they urge you to keep it secret and to show yourself as a Muslim.

3.2.6 Life at the Borderzone

So now the real dilemma begins. While hanging on to your core identity as Christ's follower, what will you do at the social identity level? Should you leave your Muslim circle, or cut off contact with your Christian circle, or somehow oscillate between both? The options will depend partly on whether you can keep your Muslim social circle physically separated from your Christian one. But then which Christian group will you link up with: an ethnic church or denomina-

tion (of which there may well be a choice), the wealthy foreigners, or a group of believers from Muslim background? All these are social identity questions.

If you decide to stay in the Muslim circle, will you pray at the mosque regularly, or as infrequently as you can get away with, or not at all? During the prayers will you whisper new Christian words under your breath and are you comfortable with that? Do you tell others you are a "Muslim", redefine its meaning for yourself privately while letting your hearers assume its normal public meaning, or does that feel deceitful? Well, what will you do?

Whichever provisional option you choose, it is not yet final. But five years later the crunch comes. Your parents insist 'now it's time for you to get married! We have arranged your marriage with your Muslim cousin.'

3.2.7 Second crisis point: Your Marriage

Will you agree to marry your cousin? If so, will you tell her[37] of your core identity in Christ before the wedding day, or leave it till later, or never tell her? Or will you instead leave home and seek a bride from the Christian community, or from the convert community if such exists in your country?

This crucial decision will affect the rest of your life, and we discuss it in more detail below. The choice of whom you marry has huge identity ramifications.

Let's fast-forward twenty years in your life's journey.

3.2.8 Middle age

If you married a Muslim, has she turned to Christ, or divorced you, or are you living together in an uneasy truce? And if you married a Christian, have you by now lost touch with your Muslim relatives and been assimilated into a Christian social identity? Do you have a nagging sense of regret at losing your Muslim culture?

Meanwhile, at the core identity level you are still firm as Christ's follower but you realize that swapping your old worldview for His

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[37] In Islampur most unmarried converts are male. In some countries this is the case, while in others (like Britain) more are female.

new one wasn't as simple as you originally thought. After all these years you still find the old values sometimes rear their head, as when you started thinking the other day about taking a second wife. So there is still a tussle in your core identity level.

Meanwhile at the collective level are your children labelled by society as "Christians", "Muslims", "converts" or what? Are they secure or confused in their core identity?

This brings us to the next crisis point in your life journey:

3.2.9 Third crisis point: Your Children's Marriage

Into which community will they marry? They cannot keep a transitional identity generation after generation. Certainly the collective identity of your future family line, and most of their social identity, will depend on this decision. As for their core identity, you can't do much about that now they are adults, but you just keep praying for Christ to work in their lives.

3.2.10 And now in your Old Age

You are approaching the end of your life. In which graveyard will you be buried, Muslim or Christian? It matters to you more than the foreign missionaries realize.

When you started out on the journey of faith, half a century ago, it all looked so simple, and you never realized the long term implications.

4 Conversion and Christianity in Islampur

We transition now from the theoretical to the empirical and from the general to the specific. The rest of this article explores issues of identity faced by converts from Islam in a South Asian city I will call "Islampur". My research into these identity issues comprises my PhD, to be completed in 2013.

The name Islampur is fictitious and to protect my interviewees from the prying eyes of "private investigator Google", I have had to give less specific detail than I would wish.[38] However, all the indi-

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[38] All key incidents are as described by my interviewees, and all quotations are exactly as in their own words, though translated into English. However, interviewees'

viduals described are real people whom I interviewed in 2009. I knew several of them before then and have kept in contact since (till 2012), so there is a longitudinal aspect to this study which traces their evolving trajectory of identity.

Before proceeding to the empirical research on marriage and identity, a description of Islampur's religious context is needed, and of religious conversion within that context.

4.1 Islampur's religious context

4.1.1 Islampur's communities

Islampur lies in a predominantly Muslim region of the Indian subcontinent. Its population of around one million includes the usual socioeconomic mix of older aristocratic families, up-and-coming businessmen, technicians of all kinds, teachers, factory workers, day-labourers and beggars. All urban facilities are at full stretch as more and more landless poor migrate to Islampur; public servants supplement their small salaries through bribes where available; crime is growing; but the city continues to throb with a warm-hearted vibrancy that welcomes foreigners like myself.

Islampur, like many cities in the region, has a mix of religious communities. Muslims range from Sunni to Shia, Brelwi to Deobandi, Islamist to non-practising. Christians form a minority, concentrated in particular areas of the city, where Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations once predominated but now face competition from a variety of newer groupings. Small Hindu, Sikh and Parsi communities complete the mix, though Islampur lives up to its name as a Muslim city overall.

Each day before dawn the Muslim call to prayer penetrates one's consciousness: first from one mosque loudspeaker, then another and another, until the air pulsates with a discordant but confident crescendo of praise to Allah. "God is greater" asserts not only a reli-

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names have been changed, their locations masked, and a few non-important details of their stories adjusted. The description of Islampur is also somewhat disguised. My PhD thesis will include far more details, more quotes and richer biographical detail than in this article. Note that the terms 'thesis' and 'dissertation' in British usage are swapped in American terminology.

gious conviction but also a political declaration that minority religions may be tolerated but Islam takes precedence.

It was not always thus. This region gave birth to Hinduism and Buddhism long before the Muslim armies arrived. For hundreds of years after that the context remained pluralist, with a mix of faiths and with Muslims as a ruling minority. Later under British rule, a people movement to Christ began among outcaste tribes on (or more accurately, below) the bottom rung of the Hindu caste system.

4.1.2 Attitude to Christians

These groups were perceived as untouchable due to the polluting nature of their occupations: skinning hides, cleaning sewers etc. Even after leaving those occupations and/or converting to Christianity, they were unable to shake off this stigma as "sweepers" which persists to this day.

In rural settings discrimination often remains as strong as ever ("Christians are the ones who remove our buffalo dung', I was told), and some Muslims refuse to use the same cups or saucers as Christians. Moreover, some urban Christian neighbourhoods have a reputation for supplying alcohol, drugs or prostitutes.

By no means do all Islampur's Christian families derive from this "sweeper" background. Some trace their ancestry to higher-class converts or Anglo-Indians, while others have gained several rungs on the social ladder through education or hard work. Social discrimination has lessened somewhat in those places where Christians are urbanized, educated, and rubbing shoulders with Muslims in religiously mixed residential areas or workplaces. Even there, however, the two communities lead largely parallel lives with their own community structures, festivals and religious terminology.

Against this general background of mixed *social* attitudes, specifically *religious* intolerance has certainly grown since the 1970s, fuelled by the rise of Islamism. Alongside and even eclipsing the old epithet of "sweeper" is the more recent one of *kafir* ("infidel"). Accounts of specifically religious discrimination, or of coerced conversion to Islam, are growing in frequency. And the wars in Iraq and Afghani-

stan have further complicated matters by causing resentment against the "Christian" West and, by association, against local Christians.

Christians in the region may thus be tarred with a triple brush: as sweepers, as infidels and as traitors. This collective identity has an important bearing on conversion.

4.2 Conversion from Christianity to Islam

Christian literature celebrates conversion *from* Islam but rarely mentions conversion *to* Islam. In Muslim writings, the same is true in reverse.[39]

Yet historically far more people from Christian communities have converted to Islam than vice-versa. This fact is not only honest to acknowledge, but of missiological relevance in places like Islampur where historic Christian communities survive in Muslim contexts. Furthermore, evangelists now planting first-generation churches in Muslim countries would do well to heed lessons of history which are liable to played out in their context too in future generations.

4.2.1 An historical perspective

Why did Christians[40] under centuries of Muslim rule convert to Islam? Factors varied from period to period and from region to region, which is why specific historical studies in specific contexts are important.[41] Different factors held sway to different extents and in different combinations, according to the specific context.

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[39] There are occasional exceptions. Among Christian researchers there is Andreas Maurer, who compared the conversion narratives of ten converts from Christianity to Islam with ten in the other direction. See 'In Search of a New Life: conversion motives of Christians and Muslims', in David Greenlee (ed.), *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way*, (Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic, 2005), 93-108. A rare example from Muslim authors is Mohammad Khalil & Bilici Mucahit, 'Conversion out of Islam: A Study of Conversion Narratives of Former Muslims'. *The Muslim World* (2007) 97:11-124.

[40] I use the term "Christian" here as a descriptive label for any individual born into a community which calls itself Christian. Only some of those, whether today or in times past, are active followers of Jesus.

[41] Philip Jenkins has shown how conversion to Islam, emigration and occasional ethnic cleansing left the once-predominant Eastern churches a mere remnant of their former glory. See Philip Jenkins, The Lost History of Christianity, (New York:

On rare occasions, usually triggered by some prevailing political conflict, forced conversion took place at the point of a sword. More systematic under the Ottomans was the practice of turning Christian child-slaves into Muslims to become troops for the imperial army.

But when does force become coercion, or coercion become mere pressure? The burden of the *jizya* tax varied under different rulers, but in some periods became an oppressive burden, from which the only means of escape was to convert to Islam and pay *zakat* instead. Muslim family law also pervasively fostered a one-way expansion of Islam, in that it permitted people to marry into the Muslim community but not out of it. Thus, even if those wives themselves did not convert, their offspring were automatically counted as Muslim.

Personal conviction certainly played a part in some Christians converting to Islam. Some were attracted by Islamic apologetics,[42] some by Muslims' lifestyle and some by the Sufis' claim to offer blessings and access to God. It seems that Christian populations turned to Islam more quickly in regions where their faith was not firmly rooted in local language and culture; this is one likely reason why the Berber Christians in North Africa, compelled to follow Latin rites under Roman priests, switched to Islam more quickly than did the Egyptian Copts with their indigenous leadership and liturgy.

The "stick" of social discrimination for Christians, combined with the "carrot" of social advancement for converts, was another factor in some contexts. Although the so-called "Covenant of Umar" with its heavy discriminatory burden on non-Muslims was not applied uniformly, yet it reinforced a general sense of *dhimmi* status. Richard Fletcher writes of Christians under Arab rule in Spain,

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HarperCollins, 2008); also Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History.* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979); N. Levtzion, (ed) *Conversion to Islam.* (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1979); works by Bat Ye'or, etc.

[42] Thus it has been argued that some of the Christian apologetics towards Islam in the early Abbasid period was motivated by a desire not so much to draw Muslims to Christianity as to stem the growing haemorrhage of Christians to Islam.

these humdrum pressures to follow Islam, then, might be those of neighbourhood, marriage, the need for patronage or employment, the peer pressure of youth... Conformity with an establishment is comfortable and advantageous.[43]

Last but certainly not least is the gradual Islamization of culture. This all-embracing way of life, with its routines, rituals and relationships, gradually works its influence from the outside inwards, from society through to the individual.[44] Fletcher describes Christian civil servants who

found themselves little by little adopting features of Islamic culture – most obviously, the Arabic language – and becoming assimilated into its routines, customs, dress, diet and entertainments. Bit by bit such people, at any rate very many among them, would slip over the religious divide and embrace the faith as well as the culture of Islam.[45]

Perhaps over the centuries this gradual penetration of society and culture has proved to be Islam's trump card.

4.2.2 Christians converting to Islam in Islampur

To review these historical factors is no digression, for most of them are in evidence today in Islampur and its surrounding region. There, Muslim threats to Christians to "convert or die" are rare but not unknown (if aggravated by other factors). More common is the "stick and carrot" combination of social disdain for Christians and socioeconomic advantage for converts, along with the Islamization of culture which those who lack a firm core identity as Christians may find it hard to resist.

One interviewee Nasim told me how his landless and very poor tribal group was swayed by all these influences:

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[43] Richard Fletcher, The Cross and the Crescent: Christianity and Islam from Muhammad to the Reformation, (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 46

[44] This model of transforming a society *"from the outside inward"* stands in contrast to the *"from the inside outward"* approach favoured by evangelicals. The question arises; which strategy has proved more successful in history?

[45] Richard Fletcher, The Cross and the Crescent, 37

There was pressure on them from Muslims, and persecution from Muslim leaders, and for this reason they gradually became Muslim. And they didn't get the seed of the Bible on time, and this was a reason why they kept on becoming Muslims. And now they have gone on so much [in Islam], that in our tribe there are now about five people who have made the *hajj*. Muslim leaders are sending them on *hajj* from their own money. Also, where they live they are under compulsion, because they don't have a place to live and they are lacking amenities, so to gain those amenities they choose the Muslim religion.

A Christian pastor gave me his perspective on converts to Islam:

It's not that they've seen anything in Islam, it's because of a girl for marriage or for a job or for money. Not for anything else. No other reason.

He included inter-religious marriage as a factor. Whereas in the past young men and women had little opportunity for unsupervised social contact across the sexes, let alone across the religious divide, modern urban life lowers both barriers. Muslim and Christian young people meet each other at college, in the workplace and on the internet.

Where romance flourishes the question inevitably arises 'can we have a religiously mixed marriage or must one of us convert first?' If the boy is a Muslim and the girl a Christian, she could in principle retain her core faith, though most of her future social identity will be among the Muslim family she marries into. However, it is out of the question for a Muslim girl either to marry a Christian boy or to convert to his faith. He must convert to Islam, not her to Christianity. And in either case, the children will grow up with a Muslim identity. Thus, when it comes to inter-religious marriage in Islampur, the playing field is decidedly tipped in one direction.

In light of all these factors, it is rather surprising that only a very small percentage of Islampur's Christians have till now converted to Islam. But it seems to be a slowly growing trend. My interviewees informed me that every year in Islampur many Christians embrace Islam, by reciting the Muslim creed in front of an *imam*. These conversions are often reported in the local press, and at a guess might amount to several hundred a year.

It seems ironic indeed that in this article I have to disguise the identities of a small number of former Muslims for their protection, while the larger number of former Christians is celebrated openly in Islampur's newspapers.

4.3 Conversion from Islam to Christianity

In view of the unequal social factors in Islampur and history's verdict in other regions, it is hardly surprising that some Christians are converting to Islam. More remarkable, because humanly counterintuitive, is that some Muslims convert to Christianity.

Yet at least some conversions to Christ have been taking place for over 100 years, and these days in slightly greater numbers than before.[46] I am struck by four trends in particular.

Firstly, conversion to Christianity is taking place not in the hope of gain, but despite heavy loss. Those turning to Christ in Islampur, instead of gaining money or friends or status in so doing, are likely to lose all three. They disprove sociological theory on conversion, as well as the persistent Muslim myth that conversion is achieved through the offer of girls or overseas visas.

Secondly, accounts of divine intervention occur quite frequently in conversion accounts to Christianity. Some of my interviewees in Islampur described dreams and visions, or more rarely a healing, as forming part of their conversion experience. Others however, rather than reporting anything miraculous, found in Christianity an answer to their search for truth or salvation.

Thirdly, compared with 20-30 years ago when converts in Islampur were single young men, now there is a growing proportion of convert families. This trend should not be exaggerated, since there always were a few families and there are still now plenty of single men, but nevertheless there may be the beginnings of a more stable

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[46] It is beyond the remit of this paper to investigate reasons for this. One factor among others is probably growing discontent with the excesses of Islamism. Compare a similar rise in conversions during a previous Islamizing period in Warren Larson, *Islamic Ideology and Fundamentalism in Pakistan: Climate for Conversion to Christianity?* (Lanham, USA: University Press of America, 1998), and compare with another region in Abu Daoud "Apostates from Islam" in SFM 3(4) March 2008.

convert community than previously. Perhaps "network" is a better word, as they all do not live in one location or have tightly-knit relationships.

Finally, it is truly noteworthy that almost all of the Muslims finding Christ in Islampur are doing through local Christians, despite the very negative image of Christians described earlier. Of the 32 converts I interviewed, it seems that only two had been guided in their conversion by a foreign missionary, both in the 1960s. All of the converts since then, without exception, had found Christ with the help of local Christians.

This finding, if typical of a wider trend, is surprising. One would expect such a despised group to have little influence on Muslims, and that their very reputation would discourage Muslims from joining them. It was for this very reason that nineteenth century missionaries in Islampur had initially sought to reach the influential classes first, and to avoid baptizing outcastes, until the weight of numbers made them change that strategy.

Yet, contrary to expectation, at least *some* of Islampur's local Christians are clearly being effective in reaching at least *some* Muslims. I realize that the "some" on both sides are not typical, and that exceptions do not prove rules, but nevertheless it does at least throw a challenge to those missiological strategies which seek to bypass the national church altogether.

4.4 My Research in Islampur

4.4.1 Research Setting

For my doctoral research I sought to investigate what issues of identity are faced by ex-Muslim Christians in Islampur, how they seek to resolve those issues, and the relevance of my findings to wider identity theory.

Most converts in Islampur relate to a greater or lesser extent with members of the local Christian community. They may be regular or irregular in church attendance but they are likely to have some Christian friends, and usually one or two particular Christian mentors. Some have also married into the Christian community.

There is not yet a definable convert community, but there are several loose networks or groupings of converts who gather or a regular or irregular basis to pray, study the Bible and discuss issues of concern. Once or twice a year a larger gathering draws several dozen of them together for a celebration and meal, e.g. at Christmas time and perhaps at Easter. This might represent up to half the total number of converts in the city, but no precise statistics are known.

A few of those who at one time were known converts later announced their return to Islam, for a variety of reasons. Some had married back into the Muslim community, some turned bitter against Christians, some could no longer bear the long-term psychological stress of being misfits in society. They are now Muslim so far as their collective identity is concerned, and mostly in their social identity, while maintaining covert relationships with a few Christians. In their core identity it seems that few of them are convinced Muslims; most retain a secret nostalgia for Christianity or endeavour to cling on however precariously to their faith in Christ.

4.4.2 Research Sample

I conducted interviews with 22 individual converts and four convert couples or families[47]. This made a total of 32 adult "first generation" converts. I greatly appreciate their willingness to trust me with their stories. I also interviewed two Christian spouses of converts, seven Christians with experience in mentoring converts, and one each of the second and third generation convert community. Interviews were supported by prior acquaintance in many cases and was supplemented by informal conversations with nearly twenty other converts from Islampur and other cities.

My sample of "first generation Christians" included mostly those who had converted as adults. Four of them were adults who had in childhood followed a parent in converting but who could still remember a time when they self-identified as Muslim. I did not count

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[47] I only interviewed adult family members of families. Additionally children were present in some interviews but were neither interviewed themselves nor included in the data.

as "first generation" those who were born after one or both parents converted.

The 32 first generation believers were from a mix of social backgrounds, mostly lower middle class or working class, though with a sprinkling of professionals. Correspondingly their educational background varied from illiterate (in one case) to high school (the majority) to masters (a few), though many of them evidenced powers of critical reflection much higher than their formal education. In my sample 75% were men and 25% were women, which I estimate as fairly close to the overall proportion of men and women converts in Islampur, though perhaps my sample slightly over-represents women.

4.4.3 Research Methodology

I used anthropological research methods, not in any way to devalue a theological perspective, but to explore additional insights inaccessible to theology alone. The two approaches use different methods to ask complementary questions.

My field research employed a triangulated mix of participant observation, semi-structured interviews and life histories with individuals, group interviews with adult convert families, and further interviews with Christian spouses or mentors of converts, to gain complementary information and perspective on convert issues.

I seized any opportunity to interview converts in their home settings. This added an extra richness of interpretation, allowing me to observe their apparent socio-economic level, the nature of their neighbourhood, their intra-family relationships and whether they openly displayed any Christian identity symbols.

4.4.4 Interview technique

In the interviews I wanted to hear believers express their own insights and concerns about identity. However, notions of identity are complex, abstract and largely subconscious. They do not simply open up to a direct question like 'what is your core identity, social identity and collective identity?' Other keys are required to elucidate such deeply-held realities.

Such keys include concrete examples, analogies, case-studies, pictures, and life histories. They yielded much more fruitful results than abstract questions would have done. In addition to my planned questions, a good deal of unanticipated material emerged as interviewees opened up with their joys and sorrows.

4.4.5 Research Significance

My study seeks to make a modest contribution to the under-researched field of convert identity, in the following ways:
- to *hear the voices* of Christian converts from Islam on issues of identity, for this has rarely been done before in academic studies;
- to provide an *ethnographic sketch* (not a full ethnography) of a community of Christian converts from Islam in an urban setting;
- to *apply identity theory* to the field of religious conversion, drawing comparisons with studies on converts to Islam, and on issues of migrant identity;
- to offer to the current missiological debate on *"insider movements"* an alternative framework which may assist progress.

4.4.6 Research Findings

Analysis of the interview data is currently underway and will be written up over the next few months. In this present article I describe a few tentative and interim findings on just one topic, the topic of marriage. This and other topics will be explored in much more depth in my forthcoming PhD thesis.

5 Marriage: a critical Identity Issue

5.1 Dilemmas for believers from Muslim background

I described earlier how the first convert I met, Hussein, lost his wife and children when he turned to Christ. He faced growing old alone. Since then I have met many like him who faced tough dilemmas in the area of marriage.

Some were *already married to Muslims* at the time of their conversion. In some such cases their spouse subsequently joined them in their new faith, in others they divorced, and in others they continued to live together but with a long-term tussle between their different

faiths, priorities and values. And which path would their children follow?

Others were single young people (almost all men) when they converted. In a society where to stay unmarried is almost unheard of, they faced the dilemma of *whom to marry.* Would it be a fellow-convert, a local Christian, a foreign missionary or a Muslim bride arranged by their parents? The first three possibilities depended on availability; if they didn't work out, or if parental pressure was too great, the fourth would become the default option. That too, however, would create a string of long-term problems.

These very dilemmas faced by Islampur's converts are in fact widespread across the Muslim world. Converts and their mentors alike cite these issues as critical ones affecting both themselves in the first generation and their children in the second.

5.2. Summary of converts' marriage situations
The table below shows the 32 first generation Christians whom I interviewed, in relation to their marital circumstances.

Name	Gender	Marriage situation
Abdallah	male	married Christian after conversion
Abd ul Masih	male	married Christian after conversion
Abd ur Rahim	male	married Christian after conversion
Ahmad	male	married Muslim before conversion
Aisha	female	not married (till time of interview)
Ameen	male	married Muslim after conversion
Amjad	male	married Muslim before conversion
Bashir	male	married Christian after conversion
Fatima	female	not married (till time of interview)
Iftikhar	male	married Muslim before conversion

Imran	male	married Christian after conversion
Khadija	female	married Muslim before conversion
Khadim	male	married Christian after conversion
Mazhar	male	married Christian after conversion
Mona	female	husband converted first, then she did
Mubashir	male	married Muslim before conversion
Mahmood	male	married Christian after conversion
Munir	male	not married (till time of interview)
Mushtaq	male	married Muslim before conversion
Nabila	female	married Muslim before conversion
Nasim	male	married Muslim after conversion
Nazir	male	married Muslim before conversion
Parveen	female	already divorced before conversion
Pervaiz	male	married Muslim after conversion
Qasim	male	already divorced before conversion
Riffat	female	husband converted first, then she did
Ruhama	female	married Christian after conversion
Sajaad	male	married Muslim before conversion
Salma	female	married Christian after conversion
Shabbir	male	married Muslim after conversion
Shafiq	male	not married (till time of interview)
Yusuf	male	married Muslim after conversion

Table 1. Marital circumstances of interviewees

It is tempting to provide an additional column showing the outcomes to these marriages: no change, divorce or the spouse's conversion. However, such a bald summary would be misleading. It would mask the individual factors, marriage stresses, compromises and breakthroughs which continued to evolve in these marriages from their inception up till the interviews and indeed since then. Moreover, my sample is not necessarily representative, so any generalizing conclusions should be made with caution and explanation.

For now, in a preliminary and provisional way, for each identity level I will present just *one* sample issue, set against a little relevant theory from the social sciences, and illustrated with a few selective quotes from my data.

6 Marriage's Impact at each Level of Identity

6.1 Impact of marriage on converts' core identity
My chosen identity issue here is of a spouse's contribution to "reality maintenance".

6.1.1 Relevant social science theory
We saw earlier that core identity describes a person's individual sense of self, and that this is moulded by one's interaction with "significant others" in infancy and childhood.

By the stage of reaching adulthood a psychologically healthy individual will have achieved a fairly stable core worldview. However this still needs constant topping up (so to speak) through the "reality maintenance" provided by an environment which endorses those worldview assumptions. "Religiously legitimated" societies do this by reinforcing a monolithic worldview, as Peter Berger writes.[48] It is to a great degree in this manner that traditional Islamic societies maintain their members in Islam.

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[48] Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion. (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, 'it takes severe biographical shocks to disintegrate the massive reality internalized in early childhood'.[49] Berger and Luckmann argue that

> to have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing is to be able to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility… "Reality maintenance" for a convert is only possible through continuing conversation with the new significant others in the new plausibility structure; by such procedures "backsliding" tendencies are arrested.
> Significant others occupy a central position in the economy of reality maintenance. They are particularly important for the ongoing confirmation of that crucial element of reality we call identity. To retain confidence that he is indeed who he thinks he is, the individual requires … the explicit and emotionally charged confirmation that his significant others bestow upon him. [50]

Conversely, continue Berger and Luckmann, a convert's confidence in the reality of his faith may be undermined by negative comment from significant others, particularly a non-believing spouse.

In Islampur, society as a whole is indeed "religiously legitimated" in favour of Islam and against apostasy. Therefore for converts to swim against the tide, "reality maintenance" through the support of "significant others" would seem essential to bolster their core identity as Christ's followers. To the empirical research we now turn.

6.1.2 Evidence from Islampur

6.1.2.1 Converts who later married Christians

As one would expect, believing Christian spouses constitute a strong source of affirmation and "reality maintenance" for converts in their core identity as Jesus-followers. Bashir had high praise for his wife:

> I was sometimes disheartened, and I thought 'rather than staying alive, it would be better for me to commit suicide, or to go back [i.e. to Islam]… When there was great pressure and no support was visible, then this wife proved to be a great source of blessing to me. With her love and care she guided me in every way… If I had married a Muslim rela-

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[49] Berger & Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 131
[50] Berger & Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 131, 146

tive, my ministry would not have been effective… also I could not have made progress in Christ. So this marriage was a cause of spiritual growth for me.

Bashir (recently deceased) was bold and effective as an evangelist among Muslims and pastor of ex-Muslim Christians. He and his family paid dearly for this ministry, having to move home several times because of persecution. Bashir's wife Susan was a tower of strength in this and greatly contributed to his core identity in Christ. When I interviewed her separately she told me that

one time Bashir was angry. He had had an argument, not with me but with [a named missionary]. He threw the books and even his Bible on the floor and said 'look after your own Jesus!' Even then I was not upset… Every morning I used to open the Bible and gave Bashir a short message. In the same way after one week he came back to his old enthusiasm for the Lord.

Abdul Masih has been following and serving Christ (note his own choice of pseudonym which means 'slave of the Messiah') for more than 40 years. He told me

I thank God for giving me a wife who looks after me. The time when difficulties come is when a husband and wife prove their love… She is bold and keeps me steady, we support each other.

These and others, who decades after their conversion are still secure in their core identity and active in Christian service, owe much to their Christian spouses for providing "reality maintenance".[51]

6.1.2.2 Converts already married to Muslims

What, however, comes of those who were already married to Muslims before they chose to follow Christ? In such cases my interviewees had typically kept their faith hidden from their spouse for a considerable period. 'I was very afraid', said Mubashir. 'I didn't want to tell my wife because she was very rigid… I didn't tell her for one year.' In Ahmad's case it was two years, while remarkably Nabila

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[51] I have not given any examples of female single converts marrying into the Christian community, as there was only one such in my sample, and she was stronger than her husband.

managed to keep her faith hidden from her husband for 14 long years to allow her space to bring up the children in the faith. Her stratagem worked, for she and the children are now strong Christians.

6.1.2.3 First possible outcome: the threat of divorce

When the spouses of Mubashir, Ahmad and Nabila eventually learned of their conversion, all three threatened divorce on the grounds that in *sharia* law the marriage of an apostate is annulled. Ahmad is now divorced and Nabila is separated from her husband.

Mubashir told me that at first his wife responded in the same way:

> At once my wife's reaction was very bad and she immediately asked me for a divorce. She said 'You can't touch me, you are no longer my husband; this thing [physical intimacy] is finished'... She told her parents and from there a lot of problems began for me.

For Mubashir to be told by his closest "significant other" that 'you are no longer my husband' must have deeply shaken him.

6.1.2.4 Second possible outcome: a spouse's conversion

However, in Mubashir's case it did not end in divorce:

> These things all kept on happening, but thank God my wife was meanwhile influenced too... [Four months later] she agreed to listen to me, though she declared that 'I'm not becoming a Christian, it's for finding out about it'. [A week after that] she too accepted Christ.

Amjad's wife Mona was similarly upset when he told her he had received Christ. This, in her words, is what ensued between them:

> I said 'are we to leave our religion and go off into another religion? Is our religion wrong, or are our parents wrong, that we should leave our religion?'
>
> In that way every night there would be dispute... Then one day he said 'we will have a [contest]. You pray to Muhammad and I will pray to the Lord Jesus Christ. The one who is alive will himself come and give an answer'.
>
> In this way we started to pray, and it didn't take long, 12 days. On the 13th night the Lord Jesus Christ met me... in a dream. He said, 'my daughter, get up. I have chosen you and your husband to give witness'. I got up and told [my husband] that the Lord Jesus Christ met me, and that day I received him, and from then up till now we are following him.

The two of them later had to face crushing pressure from their relatives. They lost their home and business, and nearly their lives. But Amjad, with Mona sitting beside him, said about the difficulties, 'We face them together. We daily take up our cross.' This is Berger's "reality maintenance" in action.

6.1.2.5 Third possible outcome: an uneasy truce

Nazir told me how his wife too had reacted very angrily to news of his conversion:

> My wife said 'No, he has changed his religion, he is not worthy of us". [Later] I received permission to come home, but for many months my wife didn't speak with me.

Nazir's wife, as well as undermining his core identity with such criticisms, has also curtailed his opportunities for Christian growth. She restricts his personal prayer time, has torn up his Bible and makes it hard for him to attend church:

> If I want to go to church I have to say I'm going somewhere else, because if I ever say I'm going to church she will never let me. For this reason I say my wife is a hindrance. I try to go weekly, but sometimes I can't go for 2-3 weeks if my wife needs me to go somewhere.

They remain married but, after nearly twenty years of this wearing treatment, I doubt if Nazir could have maintained the core reality of his Christian faith had he not continued to meet almost daily with Christians outside the home. They, in place of his wife, provided his "reality maintenance".

6.1.2.6 Converts who later married Muslims

Some of the male converts I married had gone on after their conversion to marry Muslims, but without telling them of their Christian faith. In such cases, her shock in discovering she had married an apostate was compounded by a sense of betrayal. 'She thought I had cheated her' said Ameen. 'Had she known she would not have married me', was Pervaiz's comment.

Yusuf, by contrast, had told his fiancee of his faith before they entered the marriage arranged by his mother. After twenty years his

wife has still not converted, but at least she does not accuse him of deceiving her.

6.2 Impact of marriage on converts' social identity

Here my sample identity issue is of "dual belonging" and how this is affected by a convert's marriage choice.

6.2.1 Relevant sociological and missiological theory

Recall that "social identity" concerns the question 'who am I in relation to my group or groups?' Berger and Luckmann affirm the importance for converts of joining a new social group of those who share their new faith.

> Socially, this means an intense concentration of all significant interaction within the group that embodies the plausibility structure… The plausibility structure must become the individual's world, displacing all other worlds… This requires segregation of the individual from the "inhabitants" of other worlds, especially his "cohabitants" in the world he has left behind. Ideally this will be physical segregation.[52]

What these authors advocate corresponds to the 'extraction' model of evangelism, whereby in order to strengthen a convert's core identity in the new faith, he or she is entirely transplanted from the old social identity into a new one. By contrast, some advocates of "Insider Movements" prefer for new believers to remain entirely within their old social identities which, they believe, will gradually be transformed into communities of Jesus-followers.[53]

Both these models, when presented in their most extreme form,[54] posit a "single social identity" for converts. One urges them to join exclusively the new social identity of *ekklesia*, the other tells them to

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[52] Berger & Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality, 144-146

[53] See for example Rebecca Lewis, 'Insider Movements: Honoring God-given Identity & Community', International Journal of Frontier Missiology, 26:1, Spring 2009, 16-19

[54] I realise that not all proponents of "insider movements" would support the idea of Jesus-followers being indistinguishable from the Muslim community, nor would all opponents advocate total extraction from the community; these are but the two extremes and I do not wish to stereotype the many whose position lies between them.

remain in the old social identity of *ummah*.[55]   These two options, Christ's community vs. the Muslim community, are then pitched against each other in stark dichotomy.

Theologically it is helpful to contrast *ekklesia* and *ummah*, as Chris Flint has done in a carefully-researched masters' dissertation.[56] Yet this is not and cannot be the whole story. In real life, including real life in the New Testament era, nearly all converts have to relate to the "world" as well as to the "church". Only cults completely sequester their converts from wider society, but this is not the picture we find in Acts and the Epistles.

Therefore even in terms of biblical theology, let alone sociology, it is reductionist to insist that believers must opt for only one social identity. For "witness" is the church's witness in the world. Without the community of believers there can be no witness. But without believers' involvement in the world there can be no witness either. Witnessing Christians, and especially first generation witnessing Christians, inevitably have a dual social identity. They did in the early church and they do today.

Thus converts who continue to relate to their Muslim friends and family are not in principle different from converts who continue to relate to their Hindu, atheist or postmodern friends and family. However, the extent to which dual belonging proves straightforward or problematic depends on a number of factors, including two in particular. The first is the degree to which either social group tolerates an individual belonging to the other group at the same time, and this varies a good deal from place to place in the Muslim world. The second factor is the extent to which the two social identities make conflicting claims on a person's loyalty at the core worldview level; here again membership of the *ummah* demands more in some contexts than it does in others.

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[55] meaning broadly, "local and global church" and "worldwide Muslim community" respectively.
[56] Chris Flint, 'A Comparison of a Christian View of Ekklesia and a Muslim View of the Mosque as part of the Ummah and an Analysis of the Missiological Implications of these Views', *Saint Francis Magazine*, forthcoming.

Equal loyalty to both groups is not usually realistic. But to be a *member* of one group and simultaneously an *affiliate* of the other is often possible. This in fact is the solution many converts achieve: not always a comfortable solution, but survivable.

It seems clear to me that studies on social identity offer relevant insights to the dilemma of dual belonging so often faced by Muslim background Christians. It is by exploring different "dual social identity" solutions, with all their ambiguity and their variety from context to context, that both sides in the Insider Movements debate can move beyond their stereotyped insistence on either of the extreme "single identity" options.[57]

In this article much must be left unsaid about the fascinating but complex issues of *multiple identity* for Christ's followers from Muslim background, *hybrid identity* for their children and *collective identity labels* for their new communities. A good deal of research has been carried out on the analogous question of how first generation immigrants learn to fit in with their new host community while simultaneously belonging to their old ethnic one, and on why this creates "cognitive dissonance" in some circumstances and not in others. Studies also investigate how migrants' children go on to incorporate elements of both social identities while transcending both, to form a hybrid "third culture". Parallels with TCKs ("third culture kids") are obvious.

6.2.1.1 A clarification

However, in a (probably unsuccessful) attempt to avoid being labelled as "for" or "against" Insider Movements, let me clarify three things about my position.

Firstly, I am not taking sides, but am simply proposing new tools to help the debate move beyond its present polarised stalemate.

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[57] Indeed, some progress is already evident when Insider Movement advocates accept that "insider" believers should form a community of Jesus-followers in parallel with belonging in the Muslim community, or when their opponents clarify that they are not necessarily arguing for extraction. But neither side has yet publicly explained how "dual social identity" would work on their model.

Secondly, a dual social identity is more easily maintained than a dual core identity. The latter is called schizophrenia and is not to be recommended!

Thirdly, I do not argue that sociological approaches should replace theological ones. Rather, both are valuable and both are complementary. Theology is *normative* ("what should converts be doing?") while the social sciences are *descriptive* ("what are converts actually doing?).

6.2.1.2 Evidence from Islampur

I showed my interviewees a simple diagram of two circles, depicting different identity options at the social level. I asked them 'In the diagram below, in which position do you find yourself: A, B, C or what?'
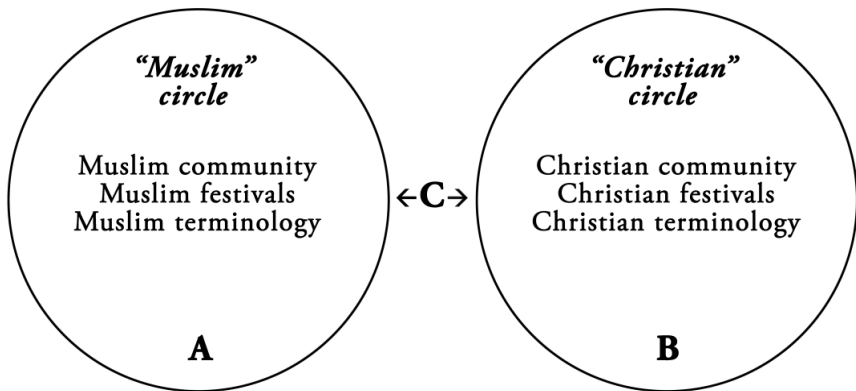

Figure 3. Two social identities

In interview after interview I noticed how readily they identified with this diagram. It made immediate, intuitive sense to them.

Interviewees described to me how their social identity had evolved over different stages of their life in Christ. This will be ana-

lyzed further in my PhD thesis, but I focus specifically on how marriage has affected their social identity options.

6.2.1.3 Those already married before their conversion

Converts who had married Muslims before conversion found themselves, by force of circumstances, in position "A". Nazir, who despite being opposed by his wife has a strong core identity in Christ, would love to be able to express it at the social identity level also. But until his wife turns to Christ it is impossible to do so fully. Nazir felt that for someone like him,

> if he is married with a family, then he has to stay in this [Muslim] circle. He can only completely enter that [Christian] circle by leaving his wife and children. But Christ never said to do that.
> If I was still a Muslim I might have divorced her 12 or 15 years ago. But because Christianity does not permit this I am bound not to do that. But God can bring a time that if she is converted then I would move to [a named Christian neighbourhood]. I have often thought about that.

Therefore he has stayed with her for many years, trapped in a Muslim social identity at home. But his employment in a Christian organisation, and his freedom to visit his many Christian friends, puts him as much in position "C" as "A". He continued,

> The greatest wish in my life is for God to make my wife a Christian. The day that happens, it will be for me like celebrating Eid or a festival which makes a person happy, or celebrating a child's birth. When my wife comes to Christ I will be so happy! Everything is possible which seems impossible to me today. What seems like a mountain can become just dust.

I suspect that Nazir's passion for his wife to find Christ stems not only from his desire for her salvation, but also because he sees it as his only hope to integrate at last his core and social identities.

6.2.1.4 Those who converted before marriage

These were typically young adults who began their Christian life in position "A", living as secret believers within their Muslim families. They also ventured out to meet with Christians at a safe distance from home, which introduced an element of position "C". Young men working in the city, living away from their families but visiting them,

could occupy position "C" quite successfully, oscillating between Muslim and Christian social identities while never combining them.

However time marches on, and for all these single converts (nearly all male in my sample, and one female), the question of marriage eventually loomed. At this point they were typically torn between their own desire to marry a believer and their parents' wish to marry them to a Muslim relative.

What would they decide about this critical question? They could not sit on the fence forever, in position "C". Marrying a Christian would place them thereafter in position "B" and most of their social contact would be with Christians. Conversely, to marry a Muslim would bring them back into position "A" and their social identity would be with Muslims.

In Islampur, after marriage most of people's socializing takes place among their relatives. Henceforth they will attend social occasions, celebrate festivals and help financially members of the family they have married into, whether Muslim on the one hand or Christian on the other.

However, although marriage determined interviewees' main social circle it did not necessarily preclude all contact with the other circle on a permanent basis. Abdallah was one of those. His Muslim parents refused to attend his wedding to a Christian, or to meet her for another seven or eight years. He said

> There was some danger, I thought, that they might give her poison…They accepted me but I wasn't sure about their accepting her.

Eventually however his parents came to visit, drawn (as often in such cases) by their longing to see their grandchildren.

Khadim too married a Christian, but although his parents did not attend his wedding, they came to visit just a few weeks later, bearing gifts. He and his wife are totally uncompromising in their Christian stance, but they continue in social contact with his relatives. 'They come to me, and I go to them with my children.'

Yusuf, on the other hand, married a Muslim. He is in position "A" and his social interaction is now mostly with his Muslim relatives

and friends. Though still able to go out and visit his Christian friends, he is not able to invite them home.

I conclude that marriage to a Muslim woman restricts social identity options for male converts, without curtailing them altogether. However, female converts who marry into a Muslim family will have far less opportunity to meet with believers outside the home, since their movements in public are so much more restricted.

6.2.1.5 A third social identity option

For a convert, in addition to the options of marrying a Christian or a Muslim, there is a possibility of marrying a fellow-convert. My interviewees discussed pros and cons of such a marriage, though none in my sample had done it themselves. The mentors varied in their opinion as to whether this was a good idea or not. Some felt that two converts could support each other well, as they would understand each other's background. Others thought this could leave them without family backing from either side.[58]

6.3 Impact of marriage on converts' collective identity

Here my sample identity issue is of how marriage determines the collective label of the ensuing "family line".

6.3.1 Relevant social science theory

In the Indian subcontinent, collective identities matter a great deal. The Hindu caste system carries this to extremes, but in all South Asian communities people tend to introduce themselves according to their clan, religion, parentage or ethnic group. A person inherits her collective identity as "Muslim" by religion or "Punjabi" by ethnicity or "Rajput" by caste, even before drawing her first breath!

In such a society, to change one's religion as an individual is to challenge the social order itself. Rudolf Heredia explores the implications of this in the context of India where religious conversion has become a symbol of identity politics:

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[58] Recall that in Islampur the convert community is not yet large enough to form its own "circle". In other countries where thousands have converted, a new convert community is a reality and marriages are taking place within it.

> Conversions can destabilize the life of a people, unsettle painfully bal-
> anced boundaries, scramble carefully constructed identities…In situa-
> tions of sharp and hostile religious boundaries between communities,
> conversion represents the ultimate betrayal.[59]

Therefore, for all religious groups in South Asia (not just Mus-
lims), for an unmarried young adult to convert to another religion
marks a betrayal of his or her collective identity.

However, the situation is in principle redeemable up to the point
of marriage; parents hope that their rebellious son or daughter might
see the error of their ways, return to the fold, and through marriage
be reabsorbed back into their original community. The collective
identity will continue with the family line, and the "conversion" will
have caused only temporary dishonour.

6.3.2 Evidence from Islampur

My research confirmed that marriage tends to "lock in" the collective
identity of converts, either to their new Christian community or back
to their old Muslim one. In discussing this topic, I was struck by
how often interviewees spoke not about getting married "*to*" an indi-
vidual but getting married "*into*" a community.

Those who marry back "into" Islam do not by that action change
their core commitment as Christ's followers, nor need they necessari-
ly lose all social contact with Christians, though to keep both those
identities strong in the long term is not easy. But what does defini-
tively change on marriage is the collective identity of their "family
line", which will henceforth be set as either Christian or Muslim.

Interviewees who married "into" the Christian community there-
by secured their family line as Christian, more or less.[60] This greatly
displeased their Muslim relatives, which came as no surprise to me.
But what did surprise and intrigue me was a finding which emerged
unbidden from my interviews.

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[59] Rudolf Heredia, *Changing Gods in India*, 2-3
[60] I write "more of less" because a convert, even after marrying into the Christian
community, will often still be viewed as somewhat different, suspect, "not quite one
of us". Their children too, though integrated into the community, still carry a self-
awareness of belonging to a "convert family".

Take the case of Mazhar. He converted from Islam way back in 1962 and married a Christian woman, Sadia. Mazhar's parents accepted her quite well and in time even came to appreciate her more than their Muslim daughters-in-law, for she served them with kindness. Mazhar and Sadia had five daughters who, growing up, enjoyed a good relationship with their paternal grandparents. But then came the time for the eldest daughter's marriage, to a Christian man. At this Mazhar's Muslim family were furious and completely cut off all contact for the next fourteen years. I wondered why their reaction was so strong when they had tolerated Mazhar's own marriage to a Christian?

Then there was the interview with Ruhama, the only woman in my sample who had converted before marriage. Several male interviewees had gone on after conversion to marry Christians without incurring dire wrath from their parents. Why then in Ruhama's case did her marriage to a Christian man cause her parents to react in such violent fury that they sent thugs to beat him up and leave him with severe injuries?

A chance comment from a third interview showed me what lay behind this. After Nabila's Muslim husband left her, his relatives came to put pressure on her and her children. Her adult son told me,

> They tried to pressurise us. They said 'No, the boy can go where he likes and get married, we won't let the girls go. Our family line will be spoiled'.

Then it all made sense. It was all about patrilineal concepts of the "family line", reinforced by *sharia*. Girls are given in marriage while boys are retained. Therefore even if a son converts and takes a Christian wife, and to all appearances they belong firmly in the Christian camp, this does not permanently rupture the blood-line in the eyes of his Muslim family. Their son retains in some sense a Muslim collective identity; and since he has probably not been able to

change his Muslim identity card,[61] his children will inherit this "Muslim" label too.

But for a daughter or granddaughter to be taken in marriage by a Christian man is another matter altogether. She thereby is lost to the Muslim community, spoils the blood-line and brings shame on her whole extended family.

This explains not only the violent reaction of Ruhama's parents to her marriage, as a first generation female convert, but also why the female offspring of a male convert still face problems a whole generation later. It explains therefore why Salma's relatives were so angry when she and her sisters married Christians, even though it was her parents who had converted years before. It just shows how the ramifications of marriage can rumble on in the realm of collective identity even to the next generation.

7 Implications for the Insider Movements debate

7.1. Summary

In this paper I have sought to demonstrate that issues of identity for Christ's followers from Muslim background are too complex to be condensed to a one-dimensional line called the C-spectrum. Reducing options still further to the stark polarity of "C4 vs. C5" or "Insider Movement vs. Historic Position" has led to an impasse which will not and cannot be broken until the model itself is changed.

I have proposed the beginnings of an alternative model which takes identity seriously and which proposes an analysis in terms of core identity, social identity and collective identity. There is nothing sacrosanct about these categories, though they are widely recognised in the social sciences and this allows for comparisons to be drawn and for helpful insights to inform the debate. Nor is there anything special about the three-layer diagram of identity, though I believe it allows for more options than the single-line C-spectrum, especially if

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[61] Identity cards are a massive issue for converts in many Muslim countries. Even if a convert manages to get by with "Muslim" on the identity card, (s)he cannot shake off the ramifications for marriage and for the children's identity.

further complexity is added to the model to account for fluid, multiple, and hybrid identities.

I believe that understandings of identity derived from the social sciences need not conflict with those drawn from biblical theology. The Bible brings an added dimension of humans in relation to their Creator, but this links directly with their core identity, while biblical descriptions of people in their communities are compatible with notions of social and collective identity. Thus, at least so far as analysis of human phenomena is concerned, I have not till now found a clash between biblical and sociological perspectives. I do realise however, that while the social sciences aspire merely to describe and analyze, the scriptures go further by also offering instruction and guidance.

7.2. Suggestions

My studies in identity for Christ's followers from Muslim background are ongoing, and my conclusions as yet provisional. At this stage I venture the following suggestions:

- In the realm of *core identity*, true disciples of Christ will know themselves to be securely and unambiguously rooted in him (whatever terminology they use for that), will seek to prioritize his values over all rival values, and will increasingly demonstrate this in their speech and behaviour;

- In the realm of *social identity*, most believers will relate to both old and new communities simultaneously even if not equally. To expect them to retain just one social identity, whether Muslim or Christian, is neither realistic nor biblically appropriate;

- In the realm of *collective identity*, however, dual belonging is not normally possible. Whether they like it or not believers from Muslim background may be forced into one label or the other, "Muslim" or "Christian", until their numbers grow sufficiently for them to form a new collective identity of their own. They know their own available options and should be given space to try to find a way around the formidable constraints of such issues as identity cards and community labels;

- These considerations of identity, by disentangling previously fused issues and examining them from a new perspective, may perhaps provide a way for proponents and opponents of Insider Movements to step out of their dug-in positions and seek constructive ways forward;

- Crucially, both sides should examine carefully the factors that vary from one Muslim context to another, particularly with respect to the local relationship between Muslim and Christian communities, rather than assuming all situations are alike;

- Ex-Muslim Christians form a stream of growing significance in the world Christian movement and should be allowed to make their contribution to it without being patronised or "owned" by either side.