

A FEW INSIGHTS FOR THE MUSLIM BACKGROUND BELIEVER (MBB) OR ISAI MINISTRY

BY 'BABUL' AND REV DOUGLAS SHIN¹

1 Introduction

I have read carefully the articles written by the two gentlemen regarding the pros and cons of the Insider Movement—“*Rethinking the Insider Movement Debate: Global Historical Insights*” by Abdul Asad in the August issue, and “*Observations and Reactions to Christians involved in a new Approach to Mission*” by Edward Ayub in the October issue.² I mostly agree with Abdul Asad although his position betrays his very Western view of our situation here. Let me spell out where I differ from him.

2 Responding to Abdul Asad

First, my initial in-sight as an ‘Insider’ of this movement is that it’s no movement at all. When you say ‘movement’, it means an organized action by a large number of people consciously pursuing a particular agenda. We MBBs (Muslim-background believers or *Isai*’s, a name by which we MBBs call ourselves) in this country do not have any such conscious pursuit, or agenda. We are merely trying to be wise as serpents while spreading the gospel as we are told by our Savior. No wonder the Africans and the Indonesians were like us. In fact, every ethnic group will be so at the beginning of their church history.

¹ ‘My name is Babul (a pen name) and I have been involved in the MBB ministry in my country in South Asia for the last 9 years, myself having been an MBB since 1990. I personally know both Edward Ayub and the other ‘Abdul’ (of The Camel fame), but I am neither well-educated nor fluent in English, as both of them are. Yet, I do speak some English and am working as a freelance translator for foreign tourists and other visitors whenever I can. I can be reached by email at babulmbb@gmail.com.’ For writing this article Babul was assisted by an American-Korean pastor, Douglas Shin, who resides in Los Angeles. Rev. Shin was involved in famine relief mission to North Korea proper and an ‘underground railroad ministry’ for North Korean refugees in China in the past decade. In 2009 he began working as an independent missionary to Muslims.

² For the article of Edward Ayub, see www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/content/view/343/38/
For Abdul Asad, see www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/content/view/319/38/.

If the doctors and masters in Western theology are worried about the possibility that the faith of our fellow MBBs might get mixed with our old faith in Islam—even though we have left our old faith for this new one—how did all those heresies arise in the Western, so-called Christian countries and what are those doctors and masters doing now with their own mess? The Western heresies and cults certainly look like ‘beams’ to me, as compared with the ‘specks’ in the eyes of us MBBs who might still have some nostalgia toward our old faith. The main problem is, as always, that too many people want to be called our Rabbis, and too few are satisfied to be just our brethren.

Second, I’m not sure if I understand Asad’s distinction between Syncretistic C5 and Appropriate C5 correctly, but if he’s saying one is good and the other is bad—if not, my apologies—I want to point out that believers are always learning and growing. They do not stay in one place in their spiritual journey. They move constantly. So it is more likely that they move from so-called Syncretistic C5 to Appropriate C5 in the following manner:

At first, C5 Isais only have fellowship with other believers who are exactly like themselves. They do not want to meet Christians. They do not move toward forming a strong biblical community in their village. They have fellowship but not community. At this stage, they want to stay closer to Islam than the Isais or Christians would do in the C4 or C3 stages. They think of themselves as *Muslim* followers of Isa, and everyone in their village thinks of them as Muslims. They may use the Shahadah or talk about Muhammad and the Qur’an, thinking of the Qur’an and the Injil as equal. And most importantly, they may want to hide their faith in Isa from outsiders to avoid persecution.

As their fellowship with other Isais matures, they begin to want to form stronger biblical communities. They move towards Christians. They desire fellowship with them. They want to move closer to Christ, even if it means becoming less Islamic. They are now known in the village as strange kinds of Muslims. People think maybe they have some bad theology. If they use the Shahada, they reinterpret it or make a new—their own—version. They do not want to talk about Muhammad. They avoid using the Qur’an when the Qur’an makes it difficult to reconcile their faith in Isa. The Injil is now definitely above the Qur’an.

3 In defense of Isai church planters

I agree with Edward Ayub in that there probably isn't any 'Isai Mosque' (or mosque-turned-Christian church) in the city where he lives, and if there were any such claim by Isais around him, maybe the motivation was for the money. However, I strongly disagree with the extent of abuses that he attributes to Isai Church Planters. He seems to think that most, if not all, of Isai Church Planters are working more for material gains and that greed is our main motivation. He gives an illustration where some of these Church Planters are charlatans who show Western supporters pictures of people taking baths as foolproof evidence of baptisms that took place. I have not seen such fake pictures, but the pictures I have taken or seen taken by others during baptism all show one man standing in the water and another man more submerged, and/or one man's hand on top of another's head as the two are in the water. I don't know how such pictures can be confused with people taking a bath—with their clothes on, for that matter.

Now the points he makes against Isai Muslims—as distinguished from just *Isais*: I do agree with them mostly, especially with respect to the persecution. We should not be overly concerned about persecution if that's the price we have to pay for our salvation. I am an Isai and I, for one, do not deny my faith in Isa for fear of losing my life, or even the lives of my family members.

Many Muslim-background 'Christians' are almost exactly like Isais except for one thing—there are far fewer of them than there are Isais. According to Ayub, we Isais are playing this 'numbers game'. Maybe we are, but not for the money, as he argues. I know a few big names among the Muslim-background Christians—some of them insist only on this 'Christian' title while we Isais don't mind being called Christians sometimes—who think only pastors with degrees in theology can give baptism. They seem to believe that these degrees, not our faith in Him, give them the power to baptize, and without the degrees one should not be allowed to baptize others. They also don't mind even if it is only one person per year that is baptized. I certainly don't agree with them—I will elaborate on why later on—but I also don't mind them either because that one soul is important to God. In any event, that's why there are so few of them.

Then Ayub goes on to give some examples of deceit and false identity, such as a woman who sought the forgiveness from the Allah of the

Muslims for having been baptized, and certain local people, when asked what they thought about Christianity, who told the questioning pastor that they thought Christianity was a sect of Islam and Christians are therefore Muslims. I don't think such examples depict reality. There are far more genuine Isais in his country than Ayub thinks and, as far as I know, they are just like other Christians, but baby Christians, if there's any difference. When their faith is nurtured, they will become full-grown believers, and I am reminded of the following Scripture.

And He gave some to be apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry, and for the edifying of the body of Christ, until we all come into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we henceforth be no longer children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the sleight of men and their cunning and craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things, who is the Head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, makes increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. (Eph 4:11-16)

I therefore submit that we should try to embrace these weak brothers with no questions asked, rather than trying to devise difficult test questions mainly aimed at failing them for lack of 'true' faith or theological knowledge. Just remember that they consciously *left* their old faith for the new one, being fully aware that this new faith is Christian faith.

Meanwhile, Hindu-background believers are slightly less prone to outright persecution and hence they tend to call themselves Christians more easily and attend the traditional churches more openly. It's just a fact of life dealt to us by our Creator.

4 What do the indigenous church planters in my country need most?

Now, a few further thoughts of my own regarding my own MBB ministry. We need to make ourselves some general rules, and ultimately a system which will help us to be more organized, accountable, and

transparent, as these are the weakest links for the MBB Church Planters in my country. For example:

1. **Prioritize:** Concentrate all human and material resources in the existing ministry on replicating Church Planters.
2. **Reproduce:** Encourage believers to reach out to their circles of influence and bring new believers to the church; select the Evangelists of the Month (“Evangelism King”, “Evangelism Queen”) and reward them amply with most precious materials in front of the whole congregation; groom and swiftly dispatch Church Planters from among the best evangelists in the Mother Church to build Son Churches, giving them needed resources to do the job; repeat the same process to produce Grandson Churches, Great Grandson Churches, etc.
3. **Simplify:** Reduce the message to the very essence of the good news that can touch and heal broken souls; always remind newborn believers of the importance of sharing the good news with similarly situated people in their circles of influence.
4. **Minimize the administrative chores:** Break down financial support to the smallest unit possible; connect the donors and the receiving churches directly, with CC to the overseer, if needed so that the overseer doesn’t get tied down by time-consuming, transparency/accountability-undermining, non-essential business.
5. **Spiritualize the ministry:** Limit the hand-outs for needy believers to emergency needs only.

5 About persecution in general and danger of witnessing to strangers

Witnessing in Muslim-background neighborhoods is neither so dangerous nor so difficult for indigenous Church Planters, although it may seem so to foreign eyes. Contrary to some misconceptions apparently widespread among Western Christians interested and informed in Muslim missiology, the resistance an evangelist faces when he tries to witness to strangers in a Muslim neighborhood—mostly urban poor or rural—is relatively mild.

Hence it is being done everyday on a large scale by many indigenous MBB evangelists in my country, with about 40 percent of people

positively responding and 60 percent rejecting the initial efforts to reach out to them. (These 60 percent are made of those who have been warned previously by the imams at the mosques not to talk to strangers trying to preach religion other than Islam, and those who are not interested in spiritual matters whatsoever.) Out of those 40 percent, two thirds eventually lose interest in the gospel and only one third remain open to it and are subsequently led to the weekly Friday service at the local Jamaat (church for Isais).

One foreigner, who met with one of those MBB evangelists and was shown these facts in such a neighborhood, was very much surprised at the absence of immediate danger or persecution which he had thought one must face when trying to evangelize in a Muslim neighborhood.

We can, and many of us do, even distribute on the streets the tracts written specifically for Muslim audiences. One of my colleagues has his mobile number printed on these gospel literatures and goes out to meet total strangers when they call. Of course, he does not respond to all the callers in the same bold way; he tries his best to make sure the caller is genuinely interested in what he is offering, not in what he is not ready to offer yet—his own life and security. So he asks questions like, “What’s your business with me? I gave you these materials and now do you want to meet me to learn more about Isa al Masih (Jesus the Messiah), or to stop me from doing what I do, or even to kill me?” As most people do not know Internet here, mobile phone is the best way to follow up on these tracts. This method has been quite fruitful so far. My friend, by the way, is still alive!

6 About the role of foreign missionaries as evangelists in my country

Missionaries brought the good news to us and still are working hard in many ways to help my people. We thank God for their sacrifice. While I think there are many roles they could play more efficiently to expand the kingdom of God in my country, I strongly think the time has come for them to hand over their mantle as the main player in the Church Planting Movement to us local field workers. Several reasons, on which I will elaborate one by one, have brought me to this conclusion. I will also illustrate from the case of another local evangelist be-

fore I propose the desirable model of an indigenous Church Planting Movement:

1. **Independency:** I have personally experienced—before I became an independent Church Planter—and watched very closely my fellow local evangelists who still work as paid employees of foreign missionaries; there is a sad syndrome of gradually deteriorating into the serfdom of hired hands rather than remaining a true shepherd of our kinsmen as we usually were at the beginning of our spiritual journey.
2. **Denominational walls and other undesirable factors of competition among the missionaries:** As missionaries must fulfill their duties to maintain their own funding as well as their denominational loyalty, we sometimes become confused about all the tensions among different factions of Western Christianity that are strange to us and difficult to understand. Sometimes this also leads to a situation where the issue of money seeps into the ministry, and makes us MBBs in this country open to the criticism of being “bought off” by foreigners³.
3. **Efficiency:** Missionaries who can speak the local language fluently sometimes let go all the indigenous field workers and try to work the field all by themselves. This is an extreme case, but I generally wonder how many local souls the foreign-born missionaries can truly reach and touch when they are at the helm, as opposed to leaving the lion’s share of important work to us indigenous evangelists.

Around the end of 1984, two paid local workers hired by an Australian missionary brought a tract to one named S. A. who was in his mid-20s. The tract aroused his spiritual curiosity, and S. A. visited a nearby Catholic Father from the U.S., who in turn said that he could not accept a local Muslim into his fold, but suggested that he go to see a local MBB he knew. S. A. and his friend visited this man in another county who said something like, “I don’t make Christians, but if you want to know about Isa al Masih, I can tell you a few things.” The next sum-

³ For example, when we change our affiliation from one mission organization to another, the missionary from the former will complain to the latter about his “taking (or *stealing*) my man away”. Things can get particularly ugly when one pays more than the other.

mer, S. A. and nine others were baptized by this man. Two months after the baptism, S. A. dreamed of Jesus who came to his home and hugged him. Over the next few years, S. A. was able to baptize over 300 villagers and plant 13 Jamaats in the same number of villages. MBBs kept increasing by leaps and bounds in his county.

In 1990, Islamic authorities in his village finally noticed the swell of MBBs and held a meeting to stop this trend. They first began by passing out hand-bills banning this new foreign faith, which had a certain chilling effect among the believers. As their efforts to clamp down on the Christians escalated, they convened a large open-air rally in front of a primary school one afternoon. That morning, S. A. got wind of things happening in his village and summoned another believer to go with him to visit the county chief at his office. In response to their pleas to stop the illegal persecution, showing him the hand-bills and informing him about the imminent mass rally, the county chief asked S. A. and his friend something like this: “Why did you come to believe in this foreign religion? Was it for money or any other material benefit?” They answered, “No! It was because this faith could save us.” By late afternoon, the rally had amassed around ten thousand people and was almost getting out of hand for the authorities. Finally, the chief relented, called the village magistrate and told him to stop this public rally, suggesting a milder solution—the mullahs were to summon the MBBs and talk them out of their faith one by one. The crowd subsided and praise was given to God by the relieved MBBs.

The following is a rough sketch of what transpired during the next day or so—as best as S. A. can remember—when five mullahs questioned ten MBB’s who answered the summons:

Mullahs: Why did you become a Christian?

MBB: I saw many good things in Isa al Masih’s life.

Mullahs: Did the Christians tell you to eat pork?

MBB: No!

Mullahs: Will you come back to Islam?

MBB: No!

Mullahs: Why not?

MBB: Because the Quran also says good things about Isa and he is my Savior.

When S. A. showed some verses in the Quran that talked about Isa, the mullahs realized that he was not ignorant of the Quran, and the in-

terview didn't last long after that. Persecution died out, and for the next several months all was quiet on the frontline and S. A. could gradually resume his evangelism.

The next year, another local worker who was working for the Assembly of God asked S. A. to refer eighteen youths who were being sent to the AG Bible College in the capital. When S. A. complied with the request, he found that most of the eighteen came from the crowd of 10,000 who had gathered to persecute the believers. They were part of the thirty or so new believers who came to the Lord since that time of persecution.

In 1992, S. A. took eleven believers—four were from the old congregation, including himself, and eight from the new—to an old foreign missionary from SIM named P. T. They went through one week of training every two months for one full year. After that, P. T. left the country and was replaced by a New Zealand lady who started an adult school during 1994~1995. During this time, about 110 new believers were baptized.

With the departure of this New Zealand lady and no successor filling her place, the school had to be closed at the end of 1995. Since then no sizable harvest has been made, although S. A. and other believers kept meeting together and celebrating festivities such as Christmas. It was never like the first few years after his salvation.

—According to his estimate, over the span of five years, S. A. had changed the lives of about one half of one percent of his county's population of 100,000. If there were 40 evangelists like him in the county—S. A. currently knows four other such men just in his village let alone the entire county—20 percent of the county's population would have received salvation. This is even without considering the multiplication effects of believers begetting believers—both horizontal and vertical. When you factor these figures into calculation, the time span would have been much shorter. An example of these figures is as follow:

1. Horizontal reproduction: I can idealistically estimate that, given proper care and support, five-fold multiplication of the congregation size—the old believers bringing new believers to the church—takes about 2 weeks (1 member to 5 members), 4 weeks (5 members to 25), and several months (25 to 125), respectively (but when the congregation reaches the size of 40, it should split into a Son Church for safety and other practical reasons);

2. Vertical reproduction: Likewise, generating the next generation—Church Planters from a Mother Church Planting Son Churches thereby multiplying the number of MBB churches—usually takes about 2 months (1 church to 2 churches), another 2 months (2 churches to 4), and yet another 2 months (4 to 8), respectively.

But this is just a mathematical model. In reality, the two groups of MBB churches—30 and 80 Jamaats each—planted by two men under someone I know have an average of 10 members per Jamaat, and a third group of 30 churches has about 50 believers per Jamaat. The latter has a bigger congregational size because the Planter is a traveling salesman of modern medicine and has a far bigger circle of influence.

8 A desirable Church Planting model

8.1 The money issue

When we have many local evangelists working in the fields, the first and foremost issue may turn out to be ‘money’. In order not to allow this ‘root of all kinds of evil’ to corrupt our ministry as well as the personal integrity of those who handle the ‘bag’, donations should be very small and should be handed to the field workers directly from the foreign sources, and not through one so-called HQ that would receive and distribute them centrally. This way, it may take a long time to have numerous workers connected to the many foreign donors. Once the system is set up, it would be much healthier in several aspects and, most importantly, recession-resistant. I learned this the hard way from my personal foreign supporter who could not continue his support after the economic crisis of 2008.

The right amount needed to maintain a tent-making, part-time evangelist in a rural neighborhood of my country—as it is being doled out currently by someone I know to three such workers under him for a total of 140 Jamaats—would be \$60 per month per evangelist. This usually covers his traveling expenses and a few cups of teas to open conversation with the people he meets every day.

In the end, due to the transaction cost, many of these small, individual, foreign donations may have to be consolidated—at least once, for the international fund transfer—before redistribution domestically.

This shouldn't be viewed as tantamount to HQ distribution of one large fund for the countrywide operation. As my country is being rapidly wired up, the magic of internet and email can still keep the merits of one-on-one relationships between the donor and the worker. The two will remain connected on a regular—(bi)weekly or monthly—basis via email with CC or BCC to the translator somewhere in the country who would also be an individually supported local worker⁴. Such a relationship will hardly be the same as that of employer-employee, which is close to the current situation of one person at the top holding the 'bag'.

8.2 Deliver the good news to as many people as possible, as quickly as possible

Most of the people I and my colleagues can share the gospel with through our efforts in the Church Planting Movement in my country are either illiterate or have a minimum amount of formal education; they are engaged in farming in the village or unskilled labor in the city. They do not need, nor will they be able to digest, any 'hard food'.

At the same time, they have very little hope in their lives and do not experience much love shared one with another or even within their own families. I have this vivid memory of my childhood that might represent quite a good portion of our society where children are fed, not because the parents truly love them but mainly because doing so is their duty and foregoing this duty invites shame on them.

I believe the gospel needs to be shared with these simple people in a simple way, with more emphasis on the love and healing power of our Savior than on any doctrine or theology. The good news must be shared with as many people as possible, and as quickly as possible.

8.3 Baptism

If necessary even a new believer who has delivered good seeds to as many souls as possible can baptize any new soul who wants to be baptized. The saving faith in our Isa al Masih is the most important thing

⁴ Internet-illiteracy among field workers is not a big problem: we have a system of the proprietor of a one-computer internet café in most of our larger villages helping out illiterate customers with the technical support of opening emails and/or writing replies for a small fee in addition to the time charge. If one is concerned about security, sensitive subjects can be discussed on the side by mobile phone. We all have mobiles and they do not require any technical support.

in my ministry. The second most important thing may be early baptism because the Bible clearly says so. The Ethiopian eunuch had just met Philip, yet when they came to some water on their way, he said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” (Acts 8:36) I also say, “Why not?” Preparing for baptism with long sessions of Bible study and catechism may sound reasonable, but it certainly is not fully Biblical.

8.4 Filter out the bad seeds—i.e. the heresies

I have not personally experienced this problem in my country yet. That doesn’t mean I will not keep my eyes open and exercise utmost discernment to protect His sheep from wolves.

8.5 Filter out bad deliverers—i.e. the corrupt workers⁵

About a year ago, in the rural township where one of the best Church Planters I know was living, a team of roving Muslim preachers who had come from the capital saw a house with a sign that spelled ‘Isai Jamaat’. It was between a madrassa and a mosque where they were teaching. The sign alone—there was no cross—angered the mullahs who asked the local Muslim leaders, “Who brought Christianity here?” They demanded that the house be destroyed. The sign as well as the entrance to the Isai Jamaat were severely damaged by the local Muslim public who caused a lot of violence throughout the town. Roughly 300 believers whom this Church Planter had brought to the Lord had to hide or flee the town for as long as three weeks while the mob distributed accusatory hand-bills and blared out threatening messages on the loudspeakers throughout the town. Soon the police came to the Church Planter’s home to bring him to the police station for questioning. He had decided to stand for his faith and refused to hide. He showed the police a notarized affidavit that read, “I am so and so, and I have changed my faith to the Isai faith”. Upon seeing the seal of the government notary on the document, the police went away and this Church Planter was saved from any further trouble.

⁵ This happened to some men under a very gifted and successful local Church Planter in my country, creating many false, inflated reports of ghost churches and ghost believers. He does not live in the capital and still has a large number of churches planted by himself and those good men under him, ever growing and expanding His kingdom.

The source of all these persecutions, the Isai Jamaat house, was built by another Christian group because that Church Planter never built any house of worship that was conspicuous to the suspecting mullah's eyes. This house was remodeled to look like a church by a rich Christian fund-raiser in the capital who paid a small retainer to a man in the house who was called a 'pastor' by the fund-raiser alone. No-one in the town called him pastor because there was neither a congregation nor any real worship service in this 'show-window'. When the heat was on, the 'pastor' fled before the storm came and only the good men had to suffer the consequences.

8.6 Build up and strengthen the seeds after the delivery so they can bring forth much fruit

When believers gather together, we pray a lot and sometimes read from the Scriptures if there's a Bible available. Many times we do not meet at home but outside under a tree, inside a boat, or on the river bank. We then sing praise songs and hear from one another if there is anything to share. There are not many occasions when rural MBBs could hear the kind of sermons that traditional church-goers are accustomed to.

However, whenever there is someone among us who is burning with a desire to know more about God, we can easily send him or her to the capital or other cities for formal training at the Bible colleges, theological seminaries and/or discipleship training centers. There are several institutions in my country that offer not only full scholarships and free room and board, but also travel expenses and some stipend, to any student who wants to come and study with them. They are run mainly by foreign missionaries. Therein lies the most desirable role the foreign missionaries can play and are now playing in my country. We, indigenous evangelists, will plant the churches knowing that there are always good hands to nurture them.

8.7 Become a great tree that will not be uprooted by a cyclone.

Most of my kinsmen show their interest at first and remain interested in the good news because they believe it will bring them a life—a way out of the abject poverty they are in. This means that the church must provide for the material wellbeing of the believers as well, while their faith lasts. Otherwise, the care of this world will choke their faith.

Sadly, too many believers expect the church—to be more exact, the rich foreigners they assume exist behind the church—to be an endless provider of their daily bread. Such a role is neither possible nor desirable for the church. We should, therefore, limit the hand-outs believers almost always expect when they ‘join’ our faith, to the bare minimum and only to emergency needs, preferably supported by an internal fund.

Instead of having individual Jamaats perform charity works, there should be another solution. I picture something like a ‘Faith Center’, ideally in every district seat⁶ in our country. This ‘church for our body’—as opposed to that for our soul—should be able to do two things. Besides studying to show themselves approved unto God, as a workman that need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth, believers who have a burden to help alleviate poverty should also be able to train to become agricultural experts, since we are a predominantly agrarian nation. For this purpose, the Faith Center should have facilities to teach different know-how on cash-crops, intercropping techniques, fish-farming, etc.

The second thing this Center should do is to provide a safe haven and bulwark against the coming persecution. We do not have that kind of persecution yet because there aren’t that many MBBs. But when, say, twenty percent of our entire population shall be saved, before the fire moves on further westward a strong cyclone of persecution will most certainly blow all over the country. The Faith Centers in every district seat should then be able to shelter those who need protection and also band together to form a strong party to fight against the persecuting force, guarding the future path of faith here and beyond.

9 Conclusion

When we come out of this furnace as pure gold, the tens of millions of MBBs in my country will become a harbinger of the things to come before our Lord returns to earth. The one-billion or so Hindus and the many Muslim nations west of us will all hear the good news, and that will be when the gospel of the kingdom shall have been preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come.

⁶ District is an administrative unit that is one tier above the county. Typically it has a two to three million population.