

SIDENOTES ON INSIDERS

By Iskandar Tee

1 INTRODUCTION

'Reaching Muslims' is being bombarded with new ideas about contextualization and insider movements¹. This is received with hype by some, confusion for many, and opposition by others, and much in between by a lot of people who wish they could make up their mind. Do we have to make up our mind on what God is doing everywhere? Many do interact with these issues first or second hand and need to be in step with the Spirit facing them. In this article we discuss some of the big-picture issues arising from ideas proposing insider movement principles as a way to reach Muslims. The stream of articles defending methodologies used by insider-proponents is growing². Here I want to focus more on the forest than on the trees. A big-picture view has the danger of stereotyping and exaggerating parts to make a point and I trust the reader can go beyond these and can see some of the issues such an approach brings to light. If there are issues with the 'principles', how much more messy things will be in real life.

I am writing from many years of experience with Muslim work in Asia and am very sympathetic to the struggles contextualizing the Good News brings. It probably also skews some views, and I may not be informed by things happening elsewhere. I find many teams and organizations wanting to come to grips with the insider movement concepts amongst an Islam that is rather diverse. Too quickly one worker from one context judges how another worker does things in a different context – while both reach Muslims. Even the local use of the word

Muslim can have different connotations from one Islamic ethnic group to next³. There is a lot of criticism based on incorrect assumptions. Assumptions valid in my context may not be valid in the next unreached people group. In some contexts an insider-like approach is much more straightforward than in another. I have recognized the image of Jesus amongst insider movement proponents. But that does not mean that they or I know everything. Something new always receives opposition, and we need wisdom to know which criticism to take seriously.

2 POSTMODERN PRAGMATISM

Why do we have insider movements in our present missions tool bag? It is pretty hard to imagine these discussions happening within the missions world e.g. 50 years ago. The pragmatic spirit of the age certainly makes us more tolerant and accepting of new things such as insider movements. This is not an age of rigid rules and pat answers that solve anything. That does not mean insiders is wrong, nor does it necessarily mean that it is a great new revolution God is beginning in missions. The point here is just the correlation with the times in which we live. That insider movements happen does not prove, nor contradict, that they are good or bad. It needs a stronger correlation or foundation to something else.

For example, in contextualization we have become pretty pragmatic in our choice of terminology, even on the mission field. We discredit the word 'Christianity' because of its negative cultural-historical baggage. However,

we're keen to adapt the term 'Islam', enabling our conscience to give it a meaning we can work with (the literal meaning of 'Islam' of submitting to God), but which is probably not the only or most important meaning most Muslims give it (they could include the brotherhood, rituals, world view, ethnicity etc. in their meaning of the word). Are we assuming that the receiving Muslim will be as pragmatic as we are, and if not, do we call him hardened?

Unspoken differences in meanings cause lots of confusion in discussions, e.g. the pragmatic interpretation we use for words such as apostle, religion (focusing on the cultural aspect only and not on worldview or spirituality), shahada, the cross, prophethood, prayer, church, jema'at, etc....

This pragmatism on the mission field is not limited to pushing limits in contextualization, such as in insiders. Most workers (in the Muslim context with which the writer is most familiar) use a similar pragmatism, being tentmaking missionaries in the creative access nations where we reach Muslims. There, too, is a spectrum between genuinely doing what one's visa says one should be doing and just having a visa to cover up evangelism. Integrity itself is used pragmatically. And integrity is what is at stake in the insider movement discussions.

This is not to say that pragmatism is necessarily wrong – missions and the Christian life have it everywhere – but it should be freedom in Christ, thoroughly weighed against Scripture, not choices based firstly on 'what works', 'how to reduce persecution', 'how to be successful and please ourselves, our organizations or supporters', or other good or not-so-good reasons. Outside Christ, pragmatism is lost and we don't know where one may end up.

3 DIVIDING WALLS

In the countries where I have experience, there is a relatively large group of pro-insider people, and another that is more C4 or less contextual. The wall between C5 and C4 proponents is quite noticeable in local missions circles, and information flow and fellowship between the two is minimal. One group withholds information from the other for security reasons. Another finds error or is uncomfortable with the biblical basis of the other. This dividing wall is, at this stage, rather different from doctrinally disagreeing on various views of baptism, predestination etc. At first sight, security drives this wall high, but looking closer it is a completely different value system. It immediately affects trust, fellowship and values of ministry; often covered up with a spiritual sounding, 'God bless you; it is (possibly) great what you try to do, but that is not what we are about'.

When in a group or organization where both C4 and C5 are accepted, it makes in-depth fellowship much harder, and unity becomes based on tolerance, and leadership on pragmatism. A close team with both C4 and C5 proponents becomes virtually impossible. A local team needs to make its choice on where it stands, with all the implications as to church planting or networking and sharing resources.

4 PRAGMATIC FOUNDATIONS

Some authors have been able to find 'biblical foundations' for insider movements and come to conclusions that biblical scholars have never come to over the centuries. Some hermeneutics seem to imply that in the New Testament there would have been 'Aphroditic Jesus-followers' in Corinth or 'messianic polytheists' in Athens

(my hyperbole). Contextualization must have biblical principles, but we should not make it sound that C5 (or other) is a biblical principle. Recently, some authors have put up red flags against such exegesis, e.g. Basil Grafas⁴ and Waterman⁵. There is need for this, and we should not be afraid to have more biblical scholars amongst those giving input to our work. Too quickly theologians are waved off by saying they don't know the reality of the work.

However, many workers on the field seem little interested in a solid foundation, as long as their conscience does not bother them and what they do shows results. All feels fine when what they do does not clearly contradict Scripture, and, when Scripture is not openly talking on the subject, there is little to contradict. Practical results seem to dictate what is being done⁶. With so few workers and believers on the mission field, it is much easier to go on trying out your own thing without others looking over your shoulder or to whom to be accountable.

5 OUR PICTURE OF THE CHURCH

How big and biblical is our picture of the body of Christ? What do we believe God can answer in Jesus' prayer in John 17, about unity within the church⁷? Field workers and strategists must ask, 'Will Jesus share his glory with another religion?'. Should we plan a part of the body of Christ where Christ shares his glory with another world view? Would Christ set up part of His body as a sect within another world religion, as some pro-insiders hope to see,? Would that bring His greatest glory? Can't Jesus do any better in a Muslim context? Because that sometimes happens, it should not make it prescriptive! Are insider-movements only transitional or the end-vision of what God has in

mind for His glory amongst a people group?

We also must evaluate our attitude towards what is called 'church' and 'Christianity' in the world today. There is so much context where Jesus Christ is mentioned but where he is not honored. Often, nearby the Muslims we want to reach for Jesus, we see a Christianity of which we are ashamed – or, at least, it seems irrelevant. Our individualism (or is it egoism?) just wants to set it all aside and start something new (our own) and pure (yet ignorant of our proneness to make the same mishaps). Is that an unspoken attitude? Should we not first grieve and repent that the name of our Lord and Savior is dishonored, and be burdened for His glory before we tinker with something new? The Western influenced missionary (and Christian) does not have the concept of the corporate guilt of those who carry His name. Contrast this with a Moses or Nehemiah praying and confessing for their people, even for sins they have not committed themselves, an attitude similar to that which many Muslims have in their sense of being a brotherhood. We cannot fix all of these mishaps of Christianity before we plant local churches amongst Muslims, but we can and must put the glory of Christ and His church first, and take into account how the name of Jesus is already known. This makes it difficult and forces us to rely on Him. Field workers are in dire need of a glorious vision of the body of Christ.

6 WHERE DO WE GO WITH INSIDERS?

A less mentioned but very practical and real reason for having insider movements is the reality of persecution. If there is no opposition within the host religion and culture of a people

group, what kind of church would we plant? Why would we do things differently? Is our vision for a healthy church within that culture, dealing with persecution issues as it is being planted, or do we plant a less healthy church which is more persecution proof from the beginning? These are theoretical questions (persecution can be part of the culture!) but how we answer will reveal our attitude.

A key principle for insiders is staying in context. Thus we have developed the helpful or unhelpful concepts of 'Messianic Muslims', 'New Buddhists', 'Hindu Christ-followers', etc... Can we have 'Messianic Mormons', 'Jesus Wiccans', 'Animist believers', 'Satan Church followers of Christ'? Please forgive the blasphemy; I do hope you feel indignant. Some we may tolerate and find realistic; others we'd reject adamantly. Why? The question is, where and how have we gone overboard? In each we can probably find contexts and groups of people who would give contact opportunities for sharing and where we could remain. In each, we will find people with God-given longings who want answers. Does being insiders give the solution to finding a way to present the gospel and disciple? When and how is the real church 'called out' (the meaning of ekklesia)? We want a movement to fit the local culture, but it cannot be based on an extrapolation of a non-biblical worldview of that culture.⁸ Cultural and sociological guidelines are useful, but we do need spiritual discernment from the Holy Spirit. Overall, we must have the Builder of the Church as Lord.

When thinking about insiders, we also assume growth of the movement within that homogeneous ethnic unity. What impact will and can the gospel have on that unit? How

will it change the status quo of bondage to sin in that community? Do we assume too much that, especially in the beginning, an insider movement will not have much impact on the community? Do we tell God not to do too many miracles and let lives not be too visibly changed so that the gospel can spread to a larger group in a quieter way, away from those who would cause persecution? Can the whole village or town or people group know that Jesus has done a great thing among them? Are we dictating limits on what God can do when introducing insider (or other) principles?

How will the gospel spread beyond that community, especially cross-culturally? How will an insider Muslim witness to a nominal Christian or Buddhist he may meet on a business trip? Or should he just not witness at all? To what kind of fellowship will he invite that person? What will obedience to the Great Commission look like for this people group? Should the wider body of Christ look like pockets of believers within different religions (including Christianity) where in some cases, even geographically close, they may not know of or be in touch with each other because of security issues?

We must begin with the end in mind. However, in a context of centuries of resistance to the gospel and the reality of persecutions, our strategies are based on only anticipating small success, not on a vision of a blossoming church. Just to have a tiny group of new believers meeting seems already too wild a dream when looking at the current situation of a staunch community. Yet, if God gives us the vision and faith and grace for 'church planting movements'⁹ we could find ourselves training people of our people group for cross-cultural ministry in less

than five years (even if we may not see a church yet). Does starting with insider strategies allow this to happen? How can it end up in Great Commission action by those today being reached or disciplined as insiders? Missions amongst a people group ends when that people group takes up the Great Commission, and we must ask if our mission strategies will foster the multi-cultural character of the church.

7 GOD HAS HIS WAYS

It is unusual for anyone to condemn the Christian founding fathers of the USA for not staying in Europe as insiders, but instead beginning a new community with religious freedom in the New World. I read that, during the last century, Muslim background believers on the island of Java, Indonesia, decided to form Christian villages in order to have a place where they could raise Christian families. That stalled the 'movement' phase, but Christianity now has a place amongst the Javanese which, needs to be used in new ways to proclaim the Good News to the millions of unreached Javanese outside. But how easy it is to make a strategy judgment. God has new things in mind and we must not be led by prescriptive and recipe-driven methods, including insiders. We must be sensitive to His leading as He may lead us to principles He has used in other movements, whatever the limitations may be. It boils down to fully trusting and walking with Him who builds His church.

I hope that many questions raised above will help us think through what we do. A paper will not dictate what we should do - or we would not have to rely on God anymore!. Sometimes the church needs to go outside; sometimes it will have no other way but to stay. Sometimes it has a choice. How will it best grow? Can

it grow and multiply under the possibility of persecution, reaching out and raising Christian families, as an insider movement? One model does not fit all. Sometimes a solution is 'temporary' until the Spirit brings winds of change. As outsiders it can be very tricky to say beforehand how a movement will grow among an unreached people. As we work with indigenous new believers, it is paramount that they and the worker are in close touch with The One building His Church. He promises to lead! Am I as prepared as a holy channel to facilitate this? We must obey Him, even when outsiders criticize. Let us prayerfully ask ourselves the difficult questions and have His glory and glory in His Body before us untainted. The bottom line remains that Christ will build His church, and we must remain in Him, intimately. Let that remain our greatest effort in all we do.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ I am assuming the reader is familiar with the basic ideas of 'insider movements' and the contextualization scale C1 to C6 as proposed by John Travis ('Must all Muslims Leave Islam to Follow Jesus?' *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34(4): 411-415, 1998). C5 contextualization brought into a movement is called an 'insider movement'.
- ² E.g. see the April-June 2007 *IJFM* 24:2 issue and all the references made there.
- ³ This is written from a background where people working in different diverse Muslim ethnic groups discuss how to do contextualization, and often would like to see one way of doing it.
- ⁴ Basil Grafas, *Evaluation of Scriptural Support for Insider Movements: Critique of John Ridgeway's 'The Movement of the Gospel in New Testament Times With Special Reference to Insider Movements'*, *St Francis Magazine* Nr. 4 Vol. II (March 2007) - www.stfrancismagazine.info.
- ⁵ L.D. Waterman, 'Do the roots affect the fruit', in *International Journal for Frontier Missiology (IJFM)* 24:2 - Summer 2007)
- ⁶ Remember I stereotype and hope a dialectical approach sharpens what we do!
- ⁷ Here 'church' is used as the body of Christ, locally

manifested as local churches which, in most Muslim contexts I am familiar with, are house churches. Because of the connotation with other existing contextually irrelevant, and sometimes even dead churches, others prefer to use terminology such as local fellowships of believers, communities of faith, etc. for local churches.

⁸ This is why we have a solid foundation for Messianic Jews and not for Messianic Muslims (as insiders promote).

⁹ See e.g. David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements, How God is Redeeming a Lost World* (WIGTake Resources, Midlothian, VA, USA, 2005)