

Biblical Muslims

by Rick Brown

"Muslim" as a Socioreligious Category

From a sociological perspective, Muslims are people who have a social identity as members of a traditionally Muslim community. They may be religiously observant or secularly nominal, but they are in the same socioreligious group, that of Muslims. For many Muslims, being a Muslim is an inseparable part of their self-identity, their background, their family, their community, and their cultural heritage, regardless of what they actually believe about God. It is this everyday sociological sense of the term 'Muslim' that is used in what follows.

Muslim Esteem for Scripture and Prophets

Most Muslims are taught the basic doctrines of Islam, namely that they should believe in God, the day of judgment, angels, prophets, and the Scriptures (or else eternal fire awaits them). They are taught that the four main books of Scripture are the Taurāt of Moses (the Torah or Old Testament), the Zabūr of David (the Psalms), the Injil of Jesus (the Gospel or New Testament), and the Qur'ān (in addition to the writings of Abraham and other prophets). The Qur'an itself commands Muslims to profess faith in the Scriptures that God revealed to Jesus and the prophets (*Āl 'Imrān* 3:84; cf. *Al-Baqara* 2:285). Given the importance of believing in these books, it is not surprising that most Muslims can readily name all four. Compare this with the fact that "only half of American adults can name even one of the four gospels" (Prothero 2007). But the average Muslim's "faith" in the Torah, Psalms, and Gospel lacks substance, because they have little or no knowledge of the content of these books. This lack of knowledge is all the more serious given the warning in the Qur'an that those who reject the guidance and verses of the Torah and the Gospel will face the severest punishment (*Āl 'Imrān* 3:3–4). In fact, the Qur'an often says that its purpose is to confirm the previous Scriptures, and in that way it points the reader to the Scriptures that are being confirmed (e.g., *Al-Baqara* 2:97; *Al-Mā'ida* 5:46; *Yūnus* 10:37; *Yūsuf* 12:111).

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Muslims use the term ‘prophets’ to designate people whom God used to call people to faith and repentance, whether by word or example. They describe many of the famous figures in the Bible as prophets: Adam, Enoch, Noah, Job, Lot, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, John the Baptist, and Jesus the Messiah, but they know very little about most of them. The Qur’an mentions many of them as examples to be remembered and followed, and it clearly assumes the listeners are familiar with their stories from the previous books. In Sād 38:42, for example, the reader is told to “remember Job,” who was “afflicted by Satan” and “cried to his Lord.” Job’s story is mentioned again in Al-ʿAnbiyā’ 21:83–84 as something to be remembered, but the story itself is not recounted in the Qur’an. Similarly the Qur’an makes mention of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and the twelve tribes, without clearly describing how they are related to one another; it assumes the reader is familiar with them from the previous books. The Qur’an mentions the disciples of Jesus, but says little to explain who they were. In fact, the Qur’an not only assumes a familiarity with many of the people, stories and themes of the Bible, it refers the bewildered listener to those who study the Bible:

If thou wert in doubt as to what We have revealed unto thee, then ask those who have been reading the

Book from before thee (*Yūnus* 10:94, Yusuf Ali’s translation)

Bible Study by Open-minded Muslims

Encouraged by this guidance from the Qur’an itself, and by the requirement to believe in all of the Scriptures and prophets, a number of Muslims are motivated to read portions of the Old and New Testaments, often in a group. They encourage one another, saying, “There are four books of God, but we are familiar with only one of them; let’s study the others together.”

When they do, they are often delighted to find the information they needed to understand the many biblical allusions in the Qur’an. They also find that the narratives in the Old Testament are full of historical detail, and they see that the prophets were confirmed by many miracles from God. They gain new insights into God and his goodness and holiness, mankind and its fall into sinfulness and death, the creation and its corrupted goodness, and the promises of God’s salvation through a Savior-King, the Messiah, who ushers in an eternal Kingdom established by God.



It is good to start with OT passages. Many say, “I never understood the New Testament until I read the Old Testament.” But when they read the four witnesses to the Gospel in the light of the Torah, they understand and respect the fact that Jesus was truly sinless, that he sacrificed his life in obedience to the plan of God, that he rose from the dead, triumphant over death, sin, and hell, and that he ascended into heaven. Reading Acts, they see that Jesus is active in the world as Lord and Savior of all, guiding, empowering, and protecting his followers as they proclaim his Kingdom to the nations. Then there is Romans. One well-educated Muslim woman said to me recently, “It was not until I had read Romans that I understood the significance of the Gospels.” Then there is Revelation, which is one of the most popular books, because it speaks to them like their dreams do and describes the return of Jesus and the

age to come. Woodberry’s (2007: 27) observation about them is that “as they study the Bible and meet with other disciples of Jesus, these two resources become increasingly important in their spiritual growth.”

Reading the Gospel helps them to interpret the Qur’an. For example, most Muslim scholars interpret the vague verse at *Al-Nisā’* 4:157 to say that Jesus was not really crucified, but it just seemed that way. But a minority of Muslim scholars note that *Āl Imrān* 3:55 and *Maryam* 19:33 say that Jesus was sent to die and then rise to God, and so they interpret *Al-Nisā’* 4:157 differently, saying that the Jews killed Jesus’ body but not his spirit. Ayoub (1980), for example, says that “the denial of killing of Jesus is a denial of the power of men to vanquish and destroy the divine Word, which is forever victorious.” When Muslims read the graphic and detailed accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and see that it was a fulfillment of what the prophets foretold and in accord with God’s plan of salvation, they find grounds to agree with the minority opinion. By believing the Bible and letting it be their guide to the interpretation of the Qur’an, they become rooted in the Bible, and we could call them “biblical” or at least “sub-biblical” Muslims. In their opinion, however, they are simply being better Muslims by submitting to all of God’s books and prophets. (The word ‘Muslim’ means one who submits to the rule of God.)

Biblical Themes that Appeal to Muslims

Open-minded Muslims find much in the Bible that is good news:

1. *God’s goodness, love, reliability, and care for his servants.*

These qualities are demonstrated in the stories of Abraham, Joseph, the Exodus, Daniel, Jesus, and the Apostles, among others.

2. *God’s guidance of history towards good ends as he works through events to oppose evil, to train his servants in*

righteousness and truth, and to fulfill his good purposes for his people.

This is clearly seen in the stories of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, David, Jonah, Daniel, Job, and in Revelation.

3. *The portrait of Jesus himself: his kindness, devotion, wisdom, power, and ongoing reign as Savior and King.*

4. *The love and forgiveness exhibited by true followers of Jesus.*

This is prescribed in the Gospels, particularly the Sermon on the Mount, and it can be seen in stories from the Acts of the Apostles and in the lives of true disciples that people meet today. A similar theme is present in the story of Joseph.

5. *The offer of personal forgiveness and acceptance by God.*

This is presented in the Gospels and in Acts.

6. *The offer of assured and complete salvation from hell and acceptance into God's kingdom.*

This is foretold in Isaiah 53, and it comes out in the Gospels, particularly in Matt. 11:27–29; Luke 7:36–50; 10:20; 12:32; 23:42–43; John 3:14–16; 11:25–27; 20:31.

7. *The offer of a personal relationship with the Lord, fully realized in the next life.*

This is seen in Matt. 18:20; 28:20; John 14:16–20; Acts 18:10; Rev. 21–22.

8. *The offer of inner cleansing and renewal through God's Holy Spirit.*

These are presented in segments of the Gospels, Acts, and Epistles.

9. *The offer and example of grace to live a godly life through the strengthening and guidance of the Holy Spirit.*

This is described in the Acts of the Apostles and in some of the Epistles.

10. *Power to resist and repel Satan and evil spirits in Jesus' name.*

In their own opinion, they are simply being better Muslims by submitting to the Messiah whom God sent to guide and save them.

This is found in the Gospels (e.g., Luke 10:17–20), Acts, James, 1 Peter.

Mysteries of the Gospel that Intrigue Muslims

Muslims find much that is enigmatic about Jesus. The Gospels themselves raise questions:

Luke 5:21 “Who can forgive sins, but God alone?”

Luke 7:49 “Who is this, who even forgives sins?”

Luke 8:25 “Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?”

Mar 6:2 “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?”

Mar 10:18 “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.”

Luke 24:26 “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”

They also ponder the amazing things that the Gospels report Jesus saying and doing, asking themselves, “Who is this?”

Jesus declares that he came from God and implies that he is the Word of God.

Jesus proclaims he is Lord of all and has all power on heaven and earth.

Jesus issues commandments on his own authority.

Jesus controls the forces of nature.

Jesus creates matter from nothing.

Jesus restores the dead to life by his own command.

Jesus knows and reveals the thoughts of other people.

Jesus forgives sins.

Jesus bestows eternal life.

Jesus will judge all people on the last day.

Jesus will send people to heaven or hell.

Jesus sits on the throne of God in glory.

Jesus sends and commands “his” angels.

Jesus receives and accepts worship.

Jesus receives and accepts prayer.

Jesus accepts being addressed as God.

Muslims who Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ

As Muslims ponder these mysteries and pray for guidance, it is not uncommon for them to have a dream or vision that confirms the Scriptures and calls them to follow Jesus the Messiah as their Lord and Savior. Thus they become what we could call “Messianic Muslims.”¹ In their own opinion, however, they are simply being better Muslims by submitting to the Messiah whom God sent to guide and save them.

John Travis (1998) classified Muslim believers of this sort as “C5” and “C6,” where C5 groups were open about their study of the Bible and their faith in the Messiah, and C6 believers kept their faith private. (See Appendix A.) In situations where C5 groups are expanding and multiplying across a network of social relationships, they have been described as “insider movements” (see Lewis 2007). In the groups that Travis described, the Muslims rejected or reinterpreted traditional doctrines that were incompatible with the Bible. Woodberry (2007: 24) has studied one rapidly growing movement for many years, and he notes that these Muslims follow Jesus and “believe what the Bible teaches even where it differs from the Qur’an” (as commonly interpreted). It is a cause for rejoicing that Muslims are studying the Torah, Psalms, and

Gospels and are becoming disciples of Jesus Christ.

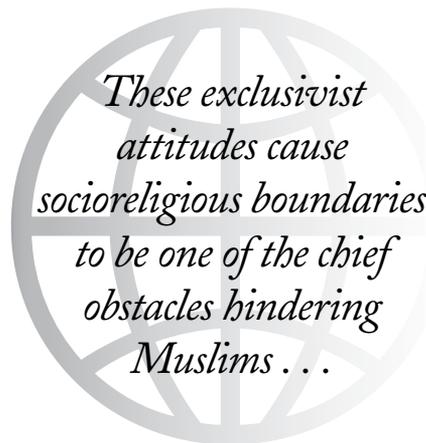
Obstacles that Hinder Muslims from Studying the Bible

Several things discourage Muslims from reading the Bible. One is the Muslim belief that Jews and Christians have distorted these books, based on statements in the Qur'an (2:59, 75; 3:78; 4:46; 5:13). Muslim scholars disagree, however, whether this corruption involves the text of the Bible itself, which raises theological problems, or whether it refers to erroneous interpretations by Jews and Christians, which is what the Qur'an seems to say. Muslim readers take heart, however, from the sayings of Jesus that his words will never pass away (Mark 13:3; cf. Matt. 5:18 re the Torah).

Many Muslims fear that the Injil has been altered to teach people to worship many gods: Allah, Mary, and Jesus. They find relief from this worry in Mark 12:28–30, where the greatest commandment involves affirmation of the oneness of God and a commitment to love him totally. Most of all they fear terms like 'sons of God', because many have been indoctrinated since childhood, on the basis of the curse in At-Tawba 9:30, that if they say or consent to any statement that someone is an offspring of God, then God will damn and destroy them. They regard the term itself as an earth-shaking insult to God, because it implies that God had sexual union with a woman in order to get children (see *Al-An'am* 6:101; *Maryam* 19:35, 88–92). (For discussion of this issue, see Brown 2005a-b and Brown 2007b.)

Finally, Muslims fear that Bible study, especially if done with a Christian, could be an effort to get them to deny their own Muslim heritage and join a church, usually at the cost of being expelled from their family or community. John is a Christian who has been living in Southeast Asia for many years. He and his wife like to read the Bible with a few Muslim friends, sometimes including one or two who have already become followers of Jesus the Messiah. Most of

their friends and neighbors, however, declined their invitations to join them, in spite of their assurances that they were not proselytizing them. John and his family left the country for six months. When they returned, they found that one of their believing friends had started a weekly Bible study group, and this had grown to the extent that several different groups were now meeting in the area, each on a different day of the week. Teachers of Islam from two different schools have now become followers of Jesus as a result of the witness of these groups. The main attractions are the



transformed lives of those who have been studying the Gospels, the stories of the prophets, the gripping encounter with Jesus Christ in the Gospels, and the fact that God now answers many of their prayers. When John asked one of the participants why he would not participate in a Bible study with him earlier, he explained the reason: "You are a Christian, and we thought your invitations were a scheme to get us into a church some day. But while you were away, we saw that Muslims were studying the Bible themselves, without going to a church or becoming apostates, and we felt safe joining them." So John kept his distance from the Bible study groups, not wishing to interfere.

This fear of apostasy is amplified by socioreligious factors. From a cultural and sociological perspective, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and their subdivisions constitute social groups, each of which has many "boundary-marker" customs that

are shared within the group but not outside. Muslims view Islam as a complete culture, with its own historical heritage, art forms, greetings, holidays, books, customs, ethics, politics, values, and beliefs. They view Christianity the same way, not as a relationship to God through Christ but as a contrasting socioreligious grouping, with its own historical heritage, art forms, greetings, holidays, books, customs, ethics, politics, values, and beliefs. And indeed, Christianity in its various forms does exist in the world as a collection of closely related socioreligious groups, such as Roman Catholic, Orthodox (of various sorts), Protestant, and within that Evangelical, etc. So although the Qur'an guides people to the Bible, Muslims typically identify the Bible as belonging to the Christian socioreligious group rather than to themselves. This discourages them from reading the biblical books, especially if they come from overtly Christian publishers, bookshops, websites, or radio stations.

If a Christian invites a Muslim to study the Bible with him, the Muslim often becomes suspicious of the Christian's motives, thinking he wants to draw him away from the socioreligious community of his birth and "win" him to a "Christian" socioreligious identity. This is especially the case if the Christian wants the Muslim to read the Gospel of Jesus, because Muslims tend to view Jesus as belonging primarily to the Christians, in spite of Muslim traditions that affirm him. Indeed, both parties might view the matter as a contest between members of competing socioreligious groups. These exclusivist attitudes cause socioreligious boundaries to be one of the chief obstacles hindering Muslims from engaging with the Bible and with the claims of Christ. On the other hand, there are other Christians who view the "Great Commission" as a call to "make disciples of all nations" rather than to convert them to their own socioreligious group. Muslims find such Christians less threatening to their social identity, and they are more receptive to studying the Bible with them. By respecting the socioreligious identity and heritage of

Muslims, these Christians lower some of the boundaries and remove these obstacles. Nevertheless, for a Bible study to develop into a “back-to-the-Bible” movement among Muslims, the Muslims need to be meeting to study the Bible on their own, inside their own community, without the presence of non-Muslim outsiders.

The Great Commission: Christian Religion or Discipleship to Christ?

Drawing on mathematics and philosophy, Paul Hiebert (1994) distinguished these two missiological viewpoints in terms of “bounded sets” versus “centered sets.”² Hiebert applies this to believers in Jesus Christ. Bounded-set Christians define themselves as people who meet the boundary criteria of assenting to the same doctrines (and terminology) and performing the same religious practices.³ As Hiebert notes, people with this view work hard to maintain conformity to the criteria and reject non-conformists as non-Christians or heretics. Centered-set Christians define themselves in proximity to the central exemplar, which is the ideal follower of Christ, a model provided by Jesus himself. So their chief concern is fostering greater conformity to this model. Another way to put this is that traditional bounded-set Christians define themselves in terms of a recognizable socioreligious category, whereas centered-set Christians define themselves in terms of discipleship to Jesus Christ, which is gradable, and membership in his Kingdom, which is binary but socially invisible. In more popular terms, this corresponds to a distinction in focus between “religion” and “spirituality.” Hiebert’s point was that the New Testament presents a centered-set view of mission and holiness, in which the task of mission is to call and disciple people to Christ rather than to prove that other religions are false.

This difference leads to misunderstandings and conflicts in missiology. Some missionaries see their task as assisting the expansion and strength of their boundary-defined socioreligious group

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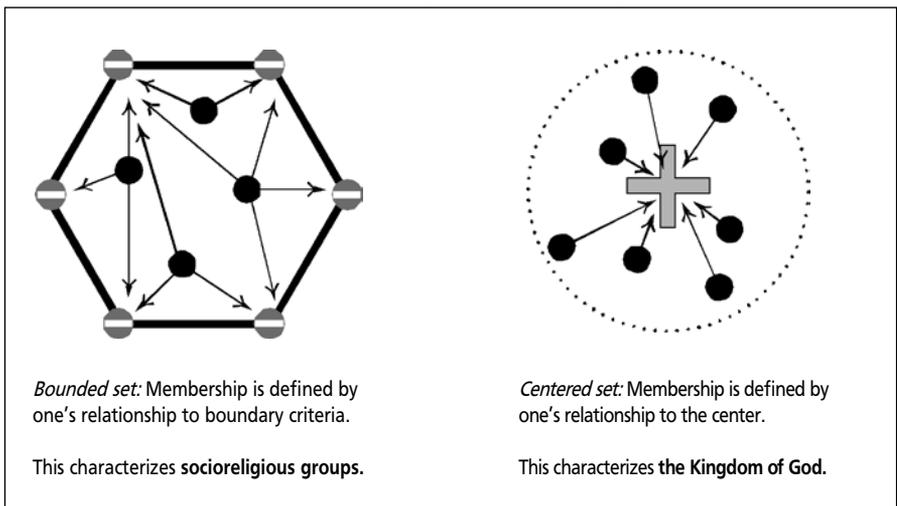
while others see their task as assisting the growth of God’s Christ-centered Kingdom. While both groups can speak in support of contextualization, they are contextualizing different things. One group is seeking to contextualize their brand of Christian religion,⁴ while the other is seeking to contextualize collective discipleship to Christ. So each sees the other as deficient and sometimes as threatening. Personally, I think there is a place for both in God’s plan, but the bounded-set approach often leads to conflict and recrimination between socioreligious groups and to suffering and shame within families. Even extracted, long-standing converts feel the pain of this competitive socioreligious approach. Mary has been a believer for seven years and is known as a convert. Yet she is hurt when Christians speak disdainfully of Muhammad and Islam. She feels they are insulting her culture and its most important historical icon. “Jack” is another convert. He works for a bounded-set mission that constantly denigrates Islam in their publications and broadcasts. He wants to see his people come to faith in Christ, but because of his work with this mission he says, “I feel like a traitor to my people.” “Joseph”

converted over thirty years ago and even managed to change his legal religious identity to “Christian.” But because of his apostasy from the Muslim community, his highly respected family lost their position and their honor, to the extent that they could not find husbands for their daughters or good jobs for their sons. After thirty years Joseph returned and apologized to them for all the heartbreak and disgrace he caused them, saying he should have remained in his family and community as a Bible-believing Muslim who follows Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

Biblical and Sub-biblical Muslims

In any movement to Christ, it takes time for people’s worldviews to conform to what is taught in Scripture, as God leads them into truth through his Holy Spirit. What is important is that they are moving towards the center, towards greater conformity with a biblical worldview. Until that process has matured, their worldviews (beliefs and values) are likely to be sub-biblical. That is true of all kinds of movements, so we need to distinguish between *biblical* C1/2/3/4/5/6 and *sub-biblical* C1/2/3/4/5/6. It would be less than

Bounded Sets and Centered Sets (see Hiebert 1994)



God's best, however, for them to remain with a sub-biblical worldview, such as one finds in liberal (C2) Christian groups, Mormons, and the like. So if there is anything one can do to encourage their maturation towards biblical worldviews, then it would seem desirable to do so.

Tennant (2006), Corwin (2007a), and Waterman (2007) rightly criticize the idea that it could be a reasonable ministry goal to encourage C5 groups to remain sub-biblical indefinitely. Unfortunately they give the impression that all or most C5 are sub-biblical, whereas Travis' definition of 'C5' clearly states that he is using 'C5' to describe groups that reject anything that is "incompatible with the Bible." Direct participant observation of mature C5 movements and leaders would have confirmed Travis' description of them as biblical, because there are indeed biblical C5 communities who reject anything that seems incompatible with the Bible. Some of them are growing quite rapidly, with little or no outside involvement.

The question, then, is which beliefs, values and practices are incompatible with the Bible? A related question is what role do outsiders have in deciding this issue? Some have taken the role of denouncing these movements as syncretistic, because they remain within the boundaries of a Muslim socioreligious category and fail to match all the boundary criteria for a "Christian" socioreligious category.⁵ This bounded-set approach, however, is unsympathetic and ultimately unhelpful. Owens (2007) offers some useful guidelines for processing such decisions on a group basis. Scott Moreau (2000:924) offers the following guidance. First he defines syncretism as "the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements." Then he provides the following guidelines for identifying them:

Because of the convoluted nature of culture, the declaration of syncretism in a particular setting cannot be simply left in the hands of expatriate missionaries. The local community must be empowered to biblically evaluate

their own practices and teachings. Missionaries must learn to trust that indigenous peoples are able to discern God's leading and trust God to develop and maintain biblically founded and culturally relevant Faith and Praxis in each local context. Finally, Christians of every culture must engage in genuine partnership with Christians of other cultures, since often the outsider's help is needed to enable local believers, blinded by culture and familiarity, to see that which contravenes scriptural adherence to the first commandment.

As he points out, the outsiders can give their perspective, but it is the responsibility (before God) of the local disciples of Christ "to biblically evaluate their own practices and teachings." Hiebert (1987) offers some general guidelines on how they can do that well. These guidelines, however, are unsatisfactory for bounded-set missionaries, because they view a mixture of socioreligious boundary criteria to be a form of syncretism (regardless of the believer's actual beliefs and values). Even phrases like "Messianic Muslim" and "Biblical Muslim" seem oxymoronic and syncretistic to them.

The Shahāda as a Social Boundary Marker: Can It Be Compatible with the Bible?

The major boundary criterion for being accepted into a Muslim community is saying the *shahāda*, the Muslim confession of faith that "there is no god but God, and Muhammad is a messenger of God" (where 'messenger' translates *rasūl*, meaning "one sent on a mission"). Likewise refusing to say the *shahāda* leads to *expulsion* from most Muslim communities. In part this is because denial of the *shahāda* is interpreted as a shameful rejection of their customs and heritage, and in part because the family and community fear that God will punish them if a member apostatizes. Most Muslims, however, including biblical Muslims, never face a situation that requires them to say the *shahāda* out loud. It is the outspoken biblical Muslims who face the possibility of being challenged by opponents on this issue, and some missionaries are very concerned about how

they respond. Since there are a variety of Muslims who study the Injil and follow Christ, living in a variety of cultures and situations, they consequently vary in regard to their policies on saying the *shahāda* when circumstances demand.

- (1) Some Muslims say the *shahāda* with the traditional interpretation of Muhammad's mission, a practice thought by many Christians to be sub-biblical.
- (2) Many nominal Muslims view the *shahāda* as a customary sign of social solidarity rather than as a conviction, especially when this is recognized as such, but it is not clear whether this is the case with Messianic Muslims.
- (3) Some biblical Muslims say the *shahāda* with an interpretation of the mission of Muhammad that they believe is compatible with the Torah and the Gospel, such as one that is comparable with God having had a mission for Nebuchadnezzar and for Cyrus "his anointed."⁶ It might be noted that Messianic Jews do the same thing when they participate in the synagogue liturgy: they interpret the eighteen benedictions and the curse on schismatics in a way that is compatible with the New Testament.

- (4) Some biblical Muslims say the *shahāda* only under duress, recognizing that an attestation of sincerity is not required and that in any case a coerced confession carries no weight. An example is presented in Brown 2006: 132.
- (5) Some Muslims do not say the *shahāda*, a practice that is clearly compatible with the Bible.

Brother Noah, the leader of an insider movement, makes the following comment (spelling corrected):

Normally a Muslim will not say the *shahāda* out loud at any time. A Muslim will not ask another Muslim to say the *shahāda*. So this is not a Muslim question; it is a Christian question to a Muslim who believes in Isa Al-Masih.

In Appendix B one can find Brother Noah's explanation of how he understands the prophethood of Muhammad.

Critics insist on a binary choice, either one believes in the full orthodox view of Muhammad or one rejects him completely, but that is simplistic and artificial. The fact is that modern educated Muslims have a variety of views on Muhammad. The most striking evidence of this is the verdict of the judge in the apostasy case cited in Brown 2006: 132. It is not playing with words for them to have a modern viewpoint of Muhammad's mission.

While it is up to the believers to decide how to deal with this issue, what advice can missionaries give them? Which of these practices are compatible with the Bible and which are not? We cannot answer these questions with armchair speculation. As Scott Moreau said, it requires honest, open-minded interaction with experienced C5 leaders. It also requires some serious research, based on participant observation. The use of questionnaires in shame cultures is unreliable for any kind of topic, much less this one, because respondents customarily give answers that avoid approbation. Statistics are also subject to misinterpretation, and in the case of C5 practices and beliefs, naïve misinterpretation has been the rule rather than the exception. The most reliable research that has been conducted and published is the long-term study done by Dudley Woodberry.⁷

Questionable Objections to the *Shahāda*

Further research needs to be done on the issue of the *shahāda*, and it is not my intent to argue that particular policies are biblical or sub-biblical. There are some assumptions, however, that need to be questioned, and some claims which need to be investigated further. Corwin (2007a: 11), for example, gives the following objection to participation in the *salat* prayer:

Whether one is saying the Lord's Prayer while going through the motions of the *Salat*, or rationalizing the many meanings of the term "prophet" while one is declaring Muhammad is Allah's prophet in

The use of questionnaires in shame cultures is unreliable for any kind of topic . . . because respondents customarily give answers that avoid approbation.

the *shahāda*, the message communicated by the very action to all those around is a declaration of adherence to the doctrines of Islam.

The assumption here is that since the ritual prayer usually involves saying the *shahāda*, it thereby affirms the orthodox view of Muhammad, and that affirming Muhammad affirms the Qur'an, and that affirming the Qur'an affirms the common interpretations of the Qur'an, and that affirming those interpretations affirms a denial of the lordship, saviorship, and deity of Jesus Christ. The testimony of insider leaders is that this is not the case.

This raises several questions, however, that need further investigation. If there is a funeral or holiday, and everyone joins in prayer, does one's participation really communicate adherence to Islamic doctrine? Or does it primarily communicate social solidarity? Or piety? Does it really communicate a denial of the biblical concept of Jesus? If one stays home instead of attending an event where prayer will happen, does this communicate non-adherence to Islamic doctrine, or will people assume adherence anyway? And if one attends a funeral and refuses to join the prayer, how will that be interpreted? As non-adherence or as non-solidarity or as impiety or as apostasy? And if one joins the prayer at the funeral, and afterwards shares a passage from the Injil and shares his faith in Jesus, as Brother Yusuf does, does that not nullify any implication of adherence to doctrines that might be incompatible with the faith he shared? Does not the spoken witness over-ride the alleged tacit denial?

If traditional, unbiblical Muslims viewed Brother Yusuf's continued participation in prayer as incompatible with his faith in Christ and the Bible, then one would have expected them to say as much. But the experi-

ence of Brother Yusuf and the people he shepherds is that Muslims in his country don't view the prayers or even the *shahāda* in the way that Corwin presumes.⁸ On the other hand, Corwin's experience is further west, so his statement might well describe a situation where Muslims join in prayer only if they adhere to Islamic doctrine and where nominal Muslims never participate.

Corwin (2007a: 16) also raises a more serious objection:

Likewise, the record of the New Testament and subsequent church history is that those mature in the faith would rather die than allow their testimony to cloud the message that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord and that the Triune God alone must be the object of our worship.

Evidently he is referring to saying the *shahāda* or participating in the *salat* prayers. Waterman (2007:59) makes a similar comparison between the *shahāda* and saying that Caesar is lord. It seems to me, however, that the situations are not analogous. The term *ho kurios* "the lord," was used in the first century to mean the top ruler, the lord of all, who was subject to no one else but God or the gods. The Romans used it of Caesar, as in Acts 25:26, where Festus refers to Caesar simply as "the lord,"⁹ meaning the one person who was lord over everyone else. Roman citizens were expected to show their unreserved allegiance to Caesar by saying "Caesar is lord" and offering a sacrifice to him. The statement was exclusive. To say "Caesar is lord" implied that no one else was lord. If one refused to say it, or if one affirmed someone else as lord, then one could be executed. Christians preached that Jesus is Lord, implying that Caesar was not lord, so this brought them into conflict with the law, much like the Jehovah's Witnesses who refused

to pledge allegiance to the flag or the king. Polycarp and many other Christians died rather than deny that Jesus was Lord.¹⁰ The *shahāda*, however, does not have such implications. There is nothing at all exclusive about *rasūl allāh*. It literally means “one sent on a mission by God,” and Muslims confess Jesus as *rasūl allāh* as well. But a Muslim’s refusal to say the *shahāda* is construed as a complete denial of Muhammad’s mission. I know Muslim followers of Jesus who are prepared to die before they would deny that Jesus

is Lord, but they are not willing to die for the sake of denying that God had a mission for Muhammad, as some missionaries advocate. Missionaries and local Christians are careful not to deny Muhammad to a Muslim community, so it is hardly laudable for them to demand that biblical Muslims do it.

Waterman (2007:59) claims that saying the *shahāda* constitutes “false statements about God and his work” and that “Scripture calls us to speak only the truth about God, lest we take

his name in vain (Ex 20:7).” While anyone would agree that people should speak the truth about God, that is not an implication of Ex 20:7. In any case, it is hard to see how this principle applies to any of the policies mentioned above.

(1) If a Muslim of any kind says the *shahāda* in all sincerity, with the traditional interpretation, is he lying about God and taking his name in vain? Even Christians have diverse concepts of God, and some of them

Appendix A: Generic criteria for distinguishing categories C1 to C6

There is a range of ways in which communities of believers express their faith and worship. Although there are no strict boundaries between their styles, to facilitate discussion of this topic it has been convenient to classify them, a service rendered by John Travis (1998). John provided a description of the different kinds of Christ-centered communities in which he found believers with a Muslim cultural background. In the chart below I have distilled the principal differential criteria from his work and have presented them in generic fashion, applicable to any multi-religious situation. It is important to note that no theological differences are assumed in the categories below.

C1	Believers are open about their new spiritual identity as disciples of Jesus Christ and citizens of God’s eternal Kingdom. They also have a new socioreligious identity as converts to a Christian social group. They follow primarily outsider religious practices. They use an outsider language and terminology in their meetings.
C2	They are much like C1, except that they use insider language, usually with outsider terminology.
C3	They are much like C2, except that they use many insider terms and many religious practices that seem compatible with the Bible, although not ones that are particular to the socioreligious community of their birth.
C4	They are like C3, except that they seek a distinct socioreligious identity that is neither the insider identity of their birth nor the identity of a convert to Christianity.
C5	They are like C4, except that they retain the socioreligious identity of their birth and might use insider terms and practices particular to the community of their birth, as long as they seem compatible with the Bible.
C6	They are usually like C5, except that they are secretive about their new spiritual identity.

This range of expression can be illustrated with a chart:

Distinguishing features of different Christ-centered communities	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6
indigenous socioreligious identity; practices compatible with the Bible yet particular to an indigenous socioreligious identity					Y	Y
non-convert socioreligious identity				Y	Y	Y
indigenous religious practices compatible with the Bible but not particular to an indigenous socioreligious identity			Y	Y	Y	Y
indigenous language		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
open spiritual identity as disciples of Jesus Christ	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	

have to be making statements about God that are not actually true. So are they taking the Lord's name in vain? And what about Orthodox Jewish statements about God?

(2) If nominal Muslims say the *shahāda* as a customary sign of social solidarity rather than as a statement of conviction, and this is recognized among them, then is it an assertion at all? And if the nominal Muslims are not making an assertion, then they are not making a false one.

(3) If biblical Muslims say the *shahāda* sincerely with an interpretation of the mission of Muhammad that they believe is compatible with the Bible, then they are not making a false statement at all.

(4) If biblical Muslims say the *shahāda* only under duress, recognizing that an attestation of sincerity is not required and that coerced confessions are not valid, then are they asserting anything at all or just uttering words?

Personally I think the second half of the *shahāda* should be avoided whenever possible and said only under duress with an interpretation that is compatible with the Bible. But as an outsider I am not immersed enough in these situations to judge accurately what the impact of saying it would be. I know godly, biblical Muslims, highly blessed in their ministry, with 24 to 42 years of experience, who think saying the *shahāda* has no negative consequence. Until I see a compelling argument to the contrary, I am inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt, especially when occasions that require the *shahāda* arise only rarely. (One can do the ritual prayer without the second half.) If I had the choice (as only God does) between seeing a growing movement to Christ in which biblical Muslims were willing to say the *shahāda* under duress with a biblical interpretation or seeing no movement at all, I would prefer to see the movement to Christ. I would not withhold the Gospel just because those proclaiming it did not refuse to say the *shahāda*. It is hard for me to under-

stand those who abhor the *shahāda* so much that they would rather see no movement to Christ at all among Muslims than see biblical Muslims following Christ without refusing to say the *shahāda*.

Final Thought

In Brown 2007a I related the story of Brother Jacob. Jesus appeared to the leader of a large Sufi sect and sent him to a distant house where he had never been, to meet Brother Jacob whom he had never heard of, with the assurance of Christ that Brother Jacob would show him the way of salvation. Brother Jacob was (and is) the leader of a large insider movement, but he had kept a very low profile. At the time of this event there were many missionaries in the country, and there were a number of C2, C3, & C4 churches that they had started. Jesus didn't send the Sufi leader to any of them. Jesus sent him to Brother Jacob, the C5 leader, and God started another insider movement through him and the Sufi leader. That does not mean that Jesus disapproves of C3 or C4; but it does demonstrate that he works in a variety of ways, and that one of those ways is C5. We would do well then to support them all, insofar as Jesus is guiding them in this way, and let Jesus lead them into the future he has for them, a future that we cannot yet see.

Appendix A: Generic criteria for distinguishing categories C1 to C6

See page 72 opposite.

Appendix B: Brother Noah's Explanation of the Prophethood of Muhammad (spelling corrected)

What makes a person a prophet? How do we accept a person as a prophet? A prophet is one who calls people to God, who calls people to repentance, who calls his people to turn away from sin to God. John the Baptist came and called all the people to repent and turn to God. He proclaimed the coming of

the Messiah. In one Gospel John the Baptist introduced the Messiah to the people. We see the result of his call. People came and were baptized by him as preparation to receive the Messiah.

Muhammad was born in Arabia, where people used to worship 360 gods and goddesses. They were idol worshippers. They were a nation who lived side by side with the people of God, who worshipped the God of Abraham. This Arab nation knew that they were also children of Abraham, but they did not know the God of Abraham. Muhammad in his time called his people to the God of Abraham. He told them that these 360 gods are not the true God, that they have no power, and that we need to worship the true God, the God of our ancestors Abraham and Ishmael. He introduced Isa Al-Masih to his people. Muhammad told his people that Isa is the Messiah, He is the Word of God, He is the Spirit of God and he is a miracle and sign to the world. We see the result of his call even today.

John the Baptist proclaimed the coming of the Messiah to his people; and Muhammad introduced the Messiah to his people. John the Baptist called his people to repent and turn away from sin and turn to God; Muhammad called his people to repent and turn away from sin and turn to the true God, the God of Abraham. He also said there is only one true God, the God of Abraham. Who can call the nations to the true God and be successful if he is not instructed by God?

Saying that Muhammad is a prophet does not mean that Jesus is not the Messiah and the Lord. It also does not mean that Muhammad is Messiah or Lord. Muhammad never claimed that. So someone can say the *shahāda* and at the same time can believe in Jesus as his Savior and Lord. **IJFM**

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Endnotes

¹ Waterman (2007), following on Corwin (2007a), argues at length that Islam is significantly different from Judaism, and that this makes the term 'Messianic Muslim' a misnomer. It seems to me, however, that Muslims become "Messianic" by believing the Bible's presentation of Jesus the Messiah and becoming his disciples. Differences between Islam and Judaism are wholly irrelevant to the fact of their faith. Their roots are in the Scriptures, and their foundation is the Lord Jesus Christ.

² Since the time of Rosch (1973), however, cognitive scientists and linguists have distinguished these as "bounded categories" (or "classical categories") versus "radial categories" (or "prototype categories" or "exemplar categories"). Radial categories are found to be the normal cognitive process. Members of a bounded category are assumed to be uniform with regard to certain properties which also distinguish them from members of other categories. Most bounded categories are defined as such by human convention, such as being a citizen of Australia or a member of the Roman Catholic priesthood, although a few are natural, such as being a female (as opposed to a male). In radial categories (or centered sets), membership is determined by the degree of similarity a member has to the central exemplar. Since there are degrees of similarity, there are degrees of membership (or "typicality"), and the boundaries are fuzzy rather than sharp. Common examples of radial categories are "chairs" and "birds," with some members

of the category being similar to the central exemplar, while others are more distant (bean bag chair; penguin or kiwi).

³ Boundary criteria are criteria for membership in a bounded set. They are called "boundary markers" as well.

⁴ Whiteman (1997: 2) defines contextualization as the attempt "to communicate the Gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people's deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture." There are differences, however, with regard to the kind of church that people contextualize. For example, many Baptist missionaries seek to plant "baptistic" churches, which are contextualized versions of the Baptist churches they came from. There are also differences with regard to allowing people to "remain within their own culture," with some missionaries demanding that Muslims reject the social identity and boundary criteria that would allow them to remain.

⁵ Muslim cultures have many boundary markers, such as avoiding pork, wearing a skull cap, wearing a hijab veil, greeting with *salām 'alaikum*, etc. Corwin (2007b:55) notes several socioreligious boundary markers: saying the *shahāda*, performing the ritual prayers, acknowledging Muhammed as God's *rasūl*, and "identifying oneself by one's actions and words as a Muslim in terms of faith commitment," where "faith commitment" is not defined. According to him (2007b: endnote 2), these practices involve "religious syncretism" and should be avoided by believers. Clearly the intent is to separate believers from Muslim socioreligious boundary criteria, with the additional assumption that these cultural forms cannot be redeemed and reused for Messianic functions. Perhaps so, but this is for the believers themselves to decide.

⁶ God calls Cyrus "his anointed" in Isa. 45:1. As it happens, they also wrote scripture. Nebuchadnezzar wrote all of Daniel 4, and Cyrus wrote Ezra 1:2–4. For an example of giving a purely historical interpretation to the *shahāda* in court, see Brown 2006: 132.

⁷ See Woodberry 2007. Another study has been underway for many years but is not yet published.

⁸ See Corwin 2007a: 12.

⁹ Literally translated, the sentence says, "About whom I have nothing definite to write to the lord." I could not find a single English translation that rendered it literally.

¹⁰ See the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. He was martyred in 155 AD.