

# Sixteen Features of Belief and Practice in Two Movements among Muslims in Eastern Africa: What Does the Data Say?

by Ben Naja

*Editor's note: In a recent issue of IJFM (30:1, pp. 27-29, "A Jesus Movement among Muslims: Research from Eastern Africa"), we presented the background story to the main movement referred to below as well as some initial findings from the author's research. Readers are encouraged to familiarize themselves with that account.*

**I**n a previous article in this journal, I briefly related how a movement to Christ began and then grew over a thirty-year period in a Muslim area of Eastern Africa. I also offered some preliminary findings of an in-depth study that showed how these Muslim followers of Jesus share their faith, meet for fellowship, and relate to the wider Muslim community.

In this second article, I describe sixteen features of belief and practice identified in two movements, including the one documented in the previous article. I then touch on three vital issues I hope will contribute to the ongoing discussion concerning "insider movements."

## *Sixteen Features of Belief and Practice Identified in Two Eastern African Movements*

The following sixteen features derive from my field data, which was obtained using a 70-question questionnaire administered to 390 people in two movements. 322 interviews were conducted with believers from the first such movement that occurred in a particular African country (primary research group). These findings were compared with interview data from 68 believers from a second movement in the same country (comparison group). Where relevant, the findings from these movements have been complemented by other available data of movements around the world (which I reference in my footnotes). Each of these features (except two) was true for at least 50% of those interviewed in both groups, and in the majority of cases, these features in fact reflected the responses of a full two-thirds or more of those interviewed in both groups.

### **Feature 1: Trust in Jesus alone for salvation, forgiveness, blessing and protection**

Salvation through Jesus alone is foundational to any biblical Jesus movement. Four questions addressed this crucial topic and all received clear answers. In both contexts, over 92% of all participants agreed (in response to all related

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questions) that they trust in Jesus for their salvation, blessing, forgiveness and protection.

Compare this to the strikingly low positive response for the other options on the questionnaire. Indeed, less than 7% trust in Muhammad's intercession for salvation; 11% believe that Allah will forgive them because Muhammad prays for them; 4% perform the *salat* to obtain God's forgiveness of their sins; 2% trust in *talismans* for protection; and 2% trust in the local *sheiki's* power to intercede. These findings are all the more significant considering that, for most respondents, these features of popular Muslim piety were likely all part of their pre-conversion practices. Thus, feature 1 is clear testimony to the powerful transformation that has occurred in their lives.

#### Feature 2: Belief that Jesus is the Son of God who died on the cross for their sins

The evidence from Scripture is clear: Jesus is the Son of God, and without the cross, there is no salvation. The customary interpretation of the Qur'an is equally clear: Jesus is not the Son of God, and he didn't need to die on the cross for the salvation of humanity. Two questions addressed this critically important topic and again the response was overwhelming. In both contexts, 95% of Jesus followers hold to the biblical truth that Jesus is the Son of God and 95% also believe that he died on the cross. In response to each of three related questions, over 92% agreed that they are saved, forgiven and loved by God because Jesus died for their sins.

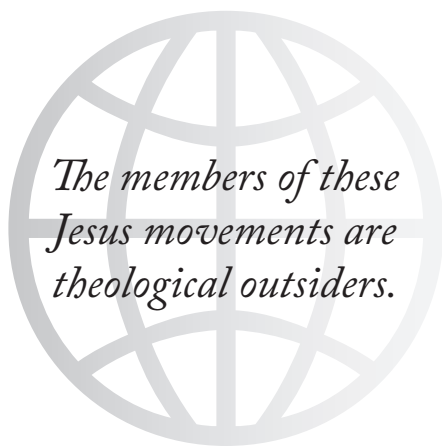
#### Feature 3: Baptism

The overwhelming majority (80%) of all followers of Jesus in both movements have been baptized. Among believers who have been following Jesus for more than a year, over 90% of respondents in the primary research group have been baptized, a full 100% in the comparison group.

#### Feature 4: Pursuit of a dual identity: social and cultural insider, spiritual outsider

This feature has been—and continues to be—one of the most disputed areas in the current debate. According to my research, the followers of Jesus in these two movements are *insiders* on a cultural and social level, but *outsiders* on a theological and religious level.<sup>1</sup> They pursue a dual identity, which is possible for some to maintain but impossible for others.

Some 80% of these disciples identify themselves as Muslims in a qualified sense, namely, Muslims who follow Isa al-Masih. By adding the qualifier "... who follow Isa al-Masih," they already identify themselves as religious



outsiders, for it is not possible to be an insider theologically or religiously and trust in Jesus alone for one's salvation, blessing, forgiveness and protection. Only a small minority identifies as Muslim (13%); an even smaller percentage identifies as Christian (4%).

Thus, while these followers of Jesus define themselves as Muslims in the social and cultural sense, they are clearly religious outsiders since their spiritual identity is in Jesus alone. Nevertheless, not all disciples actually succeed in remaining socially and culturally inside the Muslim community; 51% responded that they are no longer accepted as a member of the wider community. But when asked whether

they still feel part of the wider Muslim community, 59% of those interviewed said yes. This ambiguity may reflect a tension between (1) the new believer's own sense of belonging to the wider community and (2) their perception of acceptance by unbelievers; however, further research is required to clarify this important aspect of their identity.

What the data seems to indicate, then, is that most of these followers of Jesus define themselves as Muslims in a qualified sense, but about 40% no longer feel part of the wider Muslim community.

#### Feature 5: Muhammad is not acknowledged as a true prophet nor do believers in these two movements trust in his power to intercede

To acknowledge Muhammad as a true prophet is part of the first pillar of Islam. My research revealed a clear trend in this regard. Although some major differences do exist between the research and the comparison groups, in neither context do a majority still consider Muhammad a true prophet (only a tiny minority [3%] of the comparison group, and a more significant minority [34%]—but still a minority—in the research group).

#### Feature 6: The Qur'an is no longer considered as the sole and highest authority

Six questions sought to discern the place of the Qur'an in the lives of these followers of Jesus. Only a tiny minority (3% in the primary group, 0% in the comparison group) seeks to follow the Qur'an alone. When asked which book is the greatest, only 8% chose the Qur'an, ten times as many chose the Bible.

Although few hold to the Qur'an as their sole authority, around 60% do read it or listen to it at least occasionally. One cultural feature of the Muslim community is to read or listen to the Qur'an, so it is not surprising that many of these followers of Jesus (being cultural insiders) would do so as well.

As religious outsiders, however, they no longer acknowledge the Qur'an as their sole or highest authority.

Features 5 and 6 confirm the findings in feature 4, namely that the members of these Jesus movements are theologically outsiders—they do not believe in Muhammad as a true prophet nor consider the Qur'an their highest authority.

#### Feature 7: Diverse practices with regard to mosque attendance

I found no clear majorities concerning mosque attendance.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 60% of the research group and more than 40% of the comparison group in these two movements never go to the mosque. Related to this were two questions regarding *salat* performance. Not surprisingly, the data on the *salat* and mosque attendance are similar: more than 40% of respondents in both groups say that they never perform the *salat*.

#### Feature 8: Believers in these movements feel that they are a part of the worldwide family of God

I have already mentioned that many of these followers of Jesus maintain a Muslim identity and feel part of the wider Muslim community (see feature 4). But they also have the sense of being fully part of the worldwide spiritual family of God. My research found that an overwhelming 97% of all respondents feel they belong to God's beloved people.

Despite what some Western writers contend should be the case,<sup>3</sup> these believers apparently do not perceive this dual identity as a harmful, or compromising, contradiction. They feel a sense of physical belonging to their community of birth, which happens to be a Muslim community. At the same time, they feel a sense of spiritual belonging to God's worldwide family in Christ.<sup>4</sup>

#### Feature 9: Participation in weekly or even more frequent *ekkklesia* gatherings

The spiritual sense of belonging to God's worldwide family manifests

**A**mong the believers who have been following Jesus for ten years or more, an impressive 73% have read the entire Bible.

itself in regular attendance at local, visible *ekkklesia* (fellowship) gatherings with other believers from a Muslim background. (Note that for the purposes of this study I am using the term *ekkklesia* to refer to "the gathering of those who follow Jesus.")

In both groups, our research found that over 92% of respondents participate in such gatherings, the majority doing so at least once a week.<sup>5</sup> They come together primarily to pursue four main activities: the reading of Scripture, prayer, worship, and fellowship.

#### Feature 10: Regular Bible reading

The Bible has a special place in the lives of these followers of Jesus. 88% of them read or listen to the *Injil* at least weekly, with 85% of the leaders indicating they read it even daily. Among the believers who have been following Jesus for ten years or more, an impressive 73% have read the entire Bible.

#### Feature 11: Evangelism

A full 92% of these believers share their faith.<sup>6</sup> Their primary means of evangelism are verses about Jesus in the Qur'an, personal witness, the Bible, and prayer for the supernatural intervention of God (especially prayer for the sick).<sup>7</sup>

#### Feature 12: Numerical growth along the lines of pre-existing social and family networks

In the research group (two-thirds of all cases) and—to an even greater degree—in the comparison group (78% of all cases), respondents had immediate family members who also follow Jesus. The gospel is flowing through their community mainly, though not exclusively, along family lines.

#### Feature 13: Persecution

I include the area of persecution because, while not a clear majority, nearly

half of the disciples of Jesus in these two movements do suffer for their faith (47 percent in the research group, 52 percent in the comparison group). Note that persecution for faith in Jesus seems to be the experience of the majority of followers of Jesus in other Jesus movements around the world, as highlighted by several authors.<sup>8</sup>

#### Feature 14: Experience of the supernatural power of God

These believers have experienced the supernatural power of God in their lives, both before conversion and in evangelism. 41% indicated that a supernatural event influenced their decision to follow Jesus prior to their conversion (31% had a vision of some kind, while 10% experienced a supernatural healing or deliverance).<sup>9</sup>

Possibly because of the role such experiences played in their own conversion process, some include the supernatural dimension in evangelism, with 27% praying for the sick when they share the gospel. Since we don't know the extent of the overlap between these two groups—those having had dreams and visions and those who pray for the sick when evangelizing—it would be safe to conclude that somewhere between 41% and 68% of the respondents have experienced the power of God. This figure is actually much higher in some of the other movements of Jesus followers in other parts of the world.<sup>10</sup>

#### Feature 15: Believers are commonly from a *Sufi* or other non-*Wahabi* background

Different, even contradictory, Muslim movements exist in the wider geographic area of Eastern Africa in question. Although potentially from a number of backgrounds, in neither group (research or comparison) did the

majority belong to any of the various sects with stricter interpretations of Islam, such as the *Wahabi*. Believers from non-Wahabi backgrounds accounted for 77% of the research group and 57% of the comparison group.<sup>11</sup>

### Feature 16: Believers grow into more biblical expressions of faith and practice over time

As time goes on, these disciples grow in their closeness to God through Jesus; their understanding of God and Jesus becomes more biblical;<sup>12</sup> and they share the gospel more frequently. This growth over time is a central feature of both movements.

Mosque attendance and *salat* performance decrease among older believers. Over time, disciples participate more regularly in local ekklesia gatherings and identify increasingly with the worldwide spiritual family of all who confess Jesus as Lord. While the percentage of those still perceived as Muslims by the wider Muslim community decreases significantly over the years, about half are able to remain in the Muslim community. That said, how disciples identify themselves does not change over time. Even after many years the oldest believers still refer to themselves primarily as Muslims who follow Isa al-Masih.

In relation to the Scriptures, the percentage of those who read the *Injil* on a daily basis significantly increases the longer they have been following Christ. Their habit of reading (or listening to) the Bible much more than they do the Qur'an reflects the fact that they no longer consider the Qur'an the sole or even highest authority in their lives. Indeed, only a very small minority still seeks to follow the Qur'an alone.

### *Some Observations about Jesus Movements Based on Empirical Research*

My research provides empirical evidence that Jesus movements are

a God-given way in which many Muslims are coming to saving faith in Christ. In addition, two features of these movements—pursuit of a dual identity and regular ekklesia gatherings within the Muslim community—are not simply theoretical possibilities, but actual reality.

### Jesus Movements as a God-initiated phenomenon

In the literature on insider movements, supporters and opponents are divided as to whether such movements are a modern theoretical construct concocted by Western missiologists or whether they are actually happening as a God-given phenomenon in the Muslim world today. My research on these two Jesus



movements in Eastern Africa seems to suggest the latter. These movements appear to have been divinely initiated and are not the result of a new strategy developed by a few mission strategists from the West. In fact, no Western gospel worker even knew about them at first. Only at a later stage, as more things were happening, were these movements brought to the attention of field practitioners. These practitioners then sought to find biblical guidelines and answers to the missiological questions these believers were asking.

Whatever their origin, the data make it clear that Jesus movements among Muslim communities are happening; they are an undeniable reality today.<sup>13</sup>

### The possibility of a dual identity

My findings show that many followers of Jesus in these two movements pursue a dual identity. Culturally and socially, these believers are Muslim, while spiritually they are disciples of Jesus. They are still part of the wider Muslim community, even though their thinking diverges theologically and spiritually from that of mainstream orthodox Muslims. Their Muslim communities do not seem to mind that much what these disciples actually believe and practice, as long as they do not bring shame or offense to the community.

Within the wider umbrella of at least some expressions of Islam, there seems to be room for many deviant views, practices, and opinions. This is true not only for members of Jesus movements, but also for the very numerous members of Sufi orders or other Muslim sects.<sup>14</sup>

### The reality of a “visible/invisible” ekklesia

The findings presented here show discreet gatherings of disciples of Jesus within a wider Muslim community to be a reality (and one that can now be carefully documented). The existence of “visible/invisible” informal groups of disciples (ekklisia) who regularly gather in the midst of Muslim communities might be one of the most important findings of my research.

These informal ekklesia are “invisible,” in that they do not actively seek public recognition by displaying Christian symbols or engaging in practices generally connected with Christianity (such as large buildings, loud music, or full-time clergy). But they are nonetheless very real or “visible” fellowships because actual people are meeting at actual times in actual places on a regular, at least weekly, basis.

Structurally, these ekklesias usually follow the lines of natural family and other pre-existing social networks. Rather than extracting members from their networks into an aggregate church, the kingdom of God and its values are implanted into them.<sup>15</sup>

Given the rather authoritarian character of Islam, open or normal ekklesia gatherings do not seem to be an option. Nevertheless, my research shows that—however unlikely on a theoretical level—a new redemptive community within the old is an actual reality.<sup>16</sup>

### *Sixteen Features Summarized*

To conclude, we can see that followers of Jesus in these two Jesus movements in Eastern Africa, share—to a greater or lesser degree—several key characteristics.

Followers of Jesus in these movements:

1. trust in Jesus alone for salvation, forgiveness, blessing and protection
2. believe that Jesus is the Son of God who died on the cross for their sins
3. have been baptized
4. pursue a dual identity (social and cultural insider, spiritual outsider)
5. do not acknowledge Muhammad as a true prophet nor trust in his power to intercede
6. no longer consider the Qur'an as their sole and highest authority
7. pursue diverse practices with regard to mosque attendance
8. feel that they are a part of the worldwide family of God
9. attend ekklesia meetings at least once a week
10. read or listen to the Bible frequently
11. share their faith
12. have family members who also follow Jesus
13. have been persecuted
14. experience the supernatural power of God
15. are frequently from a Sufi or other non-Wahabi background
16. grow into more biblical expressions of faith and practice over time.

I hope that my research and description of the sixteen features identified in two Jesus movements in Eastern Africa will help the mission community to understand more accurately some of the possible dynamics happening

*However unlikely on a theoretical level, a new redemptive community within the old is an actual reality.*

inside such movements. However, this is only a humble beginning. As Jesus movements emerge in many other contexts around the world, more such empirical research is needed in order to better understand what God is doing in Muslim communities today and how we might possibly contribute. **IJFM**

### *Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup> I adopted the term “Culturally Insider, theologically outsider” (CITO) from an unpublished paper written by an East African movement leader. He writes: “In one of the ... case studies, we have a church called People of the Injeel. This group is generally culturally or socially an ‘insider’ church, but especially, religiously or theologically ‘outsider,’ or CITO.... When we use terminology from the Muslim religious context such as the words Allah, Isa, Al Messiah and some other religious terminology it makes us an *insider*. However when we give biblical meaning for Allah as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Allah so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, Isa al Messiah is Lord, Isa died for our sin according to Scripture.... it makes us an *outsider* because we are not interpreting any more Allah, Isa Al Messiah as Muslims interpret or define them... this assembly is generally or Culturally or Socially Insider but Specifically or Theologically or Religiously Outsider CITO.”

Disciples in the two Jesus movements would keep their Muslim names; wear their Muslim clothes; follow Muslim dietary regulations; follow Muslim customs; participate in Muslim ceremonies; and identify themselves as Muslims or Muslims in a qualified sense; read the Qur'an; and occasionally attend the mosque. But they would not hold to Muslim doctrine or theology when it contradicts the Bible. Some examples of this include the fact that they define Jesus not only as prophet, but as Saviour and Son of God; they do not consider the Qur'an as their highest authority; they do not believe in Muhammad as the final and greatest prophet; and they believe that Jesus died on the cross for their sins.

<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s, researchers from Fuller Theological Seminary studied an insider

movement in South Asia. Regarding mosque attendance, their findings differ considerably from my Eastern Africa data inasmuch as, in their context, almost all respondents attended the mosque regularly, and in that the majority of the believers still regularly practiced *salat*.

<sup>3</sup> Two examples of such writers are Dixon (2011) and Nikides (2009).

<sup>4</sup> Mazhar Mallouhi, a prominent Muslim background believer from the Middle East, vividly describes how this dual identity manifests itself in his life (2009).

<sup>5</sup> The percentage of regular ekklesia participants is very similar in South Asia (according to the Fuller study).

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller description on how these believers come to faith and evangelize, see my article, “Welcoming Muslim Neighbors into God’s Kingdom in East Africa,” *Mission Frontiers*, July/August 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Kim, describing a movement to Jesus in “Anotoc,” mentions the same four factors that led many Muslims to Christ. (Kim in Greenlee, 170).

<sup>8</sup> For example, Travis in Reisacher 2012, Jameson 2000, and Ali and Woodberry 2009.

<sup>9</sup> The four main factors that are part of their conversion journey are, in order of importance, verses about Jesus in the Qur'an, demonstrations of love and verbal witness, supernatural experiences, and the Bible.

<sup>10</sup> Other Jesus movements in other parts of the world where the supernatural factor seems to be present, if not predominant, include Jameson 2000, Travis in Reisacher 2012, or Daniels 2013.

<sup>11</sup> As there was no similar data available from other Jesus movements in the world, it is not possible to make further comparisons at this point. In my study, at least, it seems that Jesus movements are more likely to emerge in contexts where popular Muslim piety or Sufi expressions of Islam predominate.

<sup>12</sup> Feature 16 specifically refers to faith practice and less to theological understanding. I added understanding here because it seems clear that these believers grow into a more biblical understanding of God and Jesus over time. Abu Jaz (see footnote 1), in describing a Jesus movement, summarizes this well: “They progressively understand

him, from prophet and messenger to Savior and then to Lord. But this takes time and the Holy Spirit, as it also did for Peter” (Abu Jaz in Daniels 2013, 26). Although I do not have empirical data to prove this point, there is much anecdotal evidence for this progressive understanding of Jesus.

<sup>13</sup> Garrison clearly confirms this.

According to Garrison, by the end of the twentieth century, there had only been ten movements to Christ among Muslims. However, “In the first 12 years of the 21st century an additional 64 movements of Muslims to Christ have appeared. These 21st-century movements are not isolated to one or two corners of the world. They are taking place across the Muslim world: in sub-Saharan Africa, in the Persian world, in the Arab world, in Turkestan, in South Asia and in Southeast Asia. Something is happening, something historic, something unprecedented.” (Garrison 2013, 9)

<sup>14</sup> Green mentions several other examples of sects and reform movements that have emerged within Islam, such as the Alevi, the Druze and the Ismailis. Although each of these are deviant, they are counted as Muslims and tolerated as Muslim sects under the wider umbrella of Islam (Green in Greenlee 2013).

<sup>15</sup> The Grays highlight the importance and effectiveness of the transformational model over the attractional model of church planting and base their argument on the Fruitful Practices research. They found that worldview and identity issues are more decisive than contextualization (Gray 2009a, Gray 2009b). The findings of my research confirm their argument in that church planting mainly happens through transformation from within pre-existing social networks and that the gospel usually spreads along family lines.

<sup>16</sup> Based on his global research, Garrison found that in more than sixty separate locations in at least seventeen countries new communities of Muslim-background followers of Christ have emerged over the past two decades (Garrison 2013). It seems therefore safe to say that ekklesia gatherings inside Muslim communities are not a phenomenon unique to the Eastern Africa context.

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