

How Christians Are Creating Crisis for Muslims

How Christians' response to Muslims is creating a major crisis inside the church

When Elijah Abraham arrived in the United States in 1987, he had every intention of adhering more closely to his Islamic faith. Yet the Iraqi native found his devout pursuit of the Muslim religion left him more frustrated than satisfied, and he reasoned that either God didn't exist or he wasn't, in fact, talking to God when he prayed.

His search for answers led him to a Baptist church in the Midwest, where God began to show His love through other people. Still, Abraham resisted and questioned aspects of the Christian faith that didn't make sense to his Islamic sensibilities—particularly the idea of God coming to earth and having a son. Finally, the message of John 3:14-17 hit him between the eyes.

“Allah didn't love me unconditionally,” Abraham says, noting the message of John 3, which teaches God's unconditional love. “The second thing that hit me was unconditional salvation. The only way to salvation in Islam was to die as a martyr.”

When it comes to evangelism, how are we to best reach other Muslims like Abraham? It's a simple question, yet one whose answer has stirred a hot debate within evangelical circles in recent years concerning not only evangelistic methods, but also the contextualization of certain biblical passages for an Islamic audience.

As Christians wrestled with these issues, a once-small group of believers concluded that because of safety concerns and cultural norms surrounding converts in Islamic nations, Muslim converts should be allowed to remain “Muslim” within their

cultural context—straddling the line between Islam and Christianity. Yet in the past two decades, this line of thought has become full-fledged advocacy for what has become known as the Insider Movement (IM). In its most extreme form, IM proponents declare it permissible for a Muslim to follow Christ yet remain in the mosque and continue identifying with other Muslims.

The movement has also led to the production of Muslim idiom translations of the Bible, which substitute other words for *Father* and *Son* in the Scriptures to avoid offending Muslims who may misinterpret them to mean God had sex with Mary. Wycliffe Bible Translators is one missions agency among many that has distributed these adjusted Bible translations for more than a decade.

Many missiologists support this movement, including faculty at Fuller Theological Seminary, which in the past included such leading charismatics as Vineyard founder John Wimber and prophetic teacher Peter Wagner. Though harsher critics of these translations use words like *heresy* to describe it, Scott Moreau, professor of intercultural studies at Wheaton College, cautions against lumping all IM proponents into an unbiblical camp. In his recent book on contextualization for world missions, Moreau notes that movements are messy and that evangelical missiologists haven't reached a consensus on IM after years of discussion.

Moreau, who served as a missionary to Africa from 1978 to 1991, believes it is possible some missionaries are experimenting with new IM forms without being transparent about their activities. He understands their reluctance, adding that his personal experience on the field taught him that some things take so long to explain it's better to say little about them. Yet he also says this can separate practitioners from the necessary checks and balances operating in the body of Christ.

“Rumors of evangelical missionaries practicing contextualization by changing official religious affiliation or denying cardinal Christian teaching—including the deity of Christ—generate great suspicion for the entire contextualization enterprise,” he says.

And such suspicion is valid, as there have been abuses—as evidenced by a recent statement issued by the Southern Baptist Convention’s International Mission Board, which affirms that converts can follow Christ without abandoning their culture or ethnic identity and should be encouraged to remain in their communities. Even so, the statement cautions there is no salvation apart from belief in Jesus, that the Bible alone is given by the Holy Spirit’s inspiration and that non-biblical religions cannot express faith in Christ.

“Christian cross-cultural workers should never give the impression that they have converted to another religion for any reason, even in order to become insiders in that religious community,” the statement says. “New believers in Jesus should never be taught that their former religion or its books, founders or prophets are inspired by God, although cross-cultural workers may find appropriate bridges through their religious books and prophets to point others to Jesus Christ.”

It’s also worth noting that Southern Baptist missionary Kevin Greeson wrote the book that became the basis for using the Quran in Muslim evangelism.

A Critical Eye

Those critical of IM say they have good reasons for it. One such critic is Adam Simnowitz, an Assemblies of God missionary in Dearborn, Mich.—a suburb of Detroit populated with so many Muslims that even popular restaurants serve *halal* dishes, which conform to Shariah law.

“IM is a Muslim’s dream,” Simnowitz says. “With regard to Muslim culture, it is something to see how ignorant [IM]

proponents are in their conclusions and practices. It's stunning to see how they turn a blind eye."

In recent months, Simnowitz has been meeting with a Muslim convert whom he says another missionary told needn't leave his religious background to embrace Jesus.

"Proponents don't understand what they're dealing with," Simnowitz says. "One Muslim who made one of these 'partial' professions of faith told me, 'We look at you and laugh.' If you think you're going to beat them at their game, you've got another think coming."

Joshua Lingel, founder of the Muslim evangelism training organization i2 Ministries, shares the story of having encountered a missionary associated with the Calvary Churches at a national Vineyard conference who proclaimed he preached at a mosque, said daily Muslim prayers and wanted to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Lingel says IM proponents proclaim Jesus as Lord yet adopt religions such as Islam by reducing it to a culture.

"It is not a culture," Lingel says. "It is a religion with a false god, a false prophet and a false scripture that in turn produces a culture around itself."

Ihsan Ozbek, a Turkish leader in the Foursquare Church, says many persist in distributing Muslim idiom translations of the Bible despite objections from other evangelicals. In 2010, Ozbek, who oversees a 12-nation region in the Middle East, warned that a proposed translation could pose potential dangers to the church's work in Muslim countries.

"They went on to publish the translation despite our warnings and received an even harsher, negative reaction," Ozbek says. "All of the known Turkish churches ... are opposed to the Insider Movement."

The idea of contextualization isn't bad in and of itself, says

Mark Hausfeld, director of the Center for Islamic Studies at Assemblies of God Theological Seminary and director of Assemblies of God World Missions' global initiative to reach Muslims. However, problems can arise when missionaries attempt to gain credence with Muslims by using a phrase as simple as "I am a Muslim" because that phrase means "one who is submitted to God or to the will of God." Hausfeld says residents of predominantly Muslim regions interpret that phrase to mean the speaker agrees with their creed—that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is his prophet. Such statements also symbolize wholehearted acceptance of the Quran as God's Word and an identification with the global Muslim community.

"The problem is, IM weakens the position of Christ," Hausfeld says. "Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life.' It isn't 'Jesus, maybe.' It isn't 'Jesus, no.' It's 'Jesus, yes—and the only way.' Our Christology is what everything hangs on, especially when you're dealing with Muslim people. The fulcrum issue between Christianity and Islam is, who does Christ claim to be? I think IM waters down the gospel and the work and Person of Christ."

Changing God's Word

Lingel especially objects to Muslim idiom translations of the Bible, as they substitute such terms as *beloved Messiah* for *Son* and *supreme Guardian* for *Father*. He says it's crucial for Christians to grasp the importance of this "Bible Islamization."

To put the concern in perspective, Lingel recently asked a group of International House of Prayer leaders to choose what they believe is the most crucial issue among the following: 1) abortion, 2) gay marriage, 3) anti-Israel issues or 4) changing God's Word. The leaders chose the last, as has every other leader Lingel has ever approached with the question.

“It is not a reactionary issue alone,” says Lingel, who in 2009 started an annual conference to review translations and other IM problems and who served as co-editor of *Chrislam*, a collection of critical essays on IM published in May. “It is an appropriate response to resist Islamization in our generation.”

Lingel’s comments reflect the growing concern about Muslim idiom translations that has sparked in recent years among various denominations and missionaries, a handful of whom severed ties with Wycliffe in protest. Objections from the field grew serious enough that leaders from the AG and Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) asked to meet with Wycliffe in 2011.

After the decentralized PCA recommended in a 2012 report that its members “regularly evaluate” contributions to translation projects to discern their faithfulness, one of its flagship churches eliminated support for Wycliffe. In 2012, the AG also issued a report emphasizing the need to retain *Father* and *Son* terminology in translations but withheld a decision about breaking with Wycliffe while the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) mediated the dispute.

In April, a team of scholars from the WEA issued a series of 10 recommendations, the first of which called for *Father* and *Son* to be translated with the most directly equivalent familial words within the recipients’ linguistic and cultural context. In May, Wycliffe’s sister organization, SIL International, issued similar standards for its translations. These reports satisfied the AG World Missions executive committee, which in June announced its decision to continue its relationship with the Orlando-based translation ministry.

It’s a relationship that extends more than 25 years, with cooperative ventures pre-dating a formal agreement. While the numbers fluctuate, more than 30 AG missionaries are presently affiliated with Wycliffe.

“We are thankful that a resolution to this process has been reached and that AG World Missions can continue its longstanding working relationship with Wycliffe,” says Greg Mundis, executive director of the missions agency.

Wycliffe’s chief operations officer, Russ Hersman, says all translations—including the 30 to 40 Muslim idiom translations put on hold in 2011—will soon undergo an audit to make sure they comply with the new standards.

Though some critics grumbled that the WEA report left Wycliffe with “wiggle room,” Hersman doesn’t see it that way.

“If you look at the first recommendation, they make it clear you have to use a familial term in all cases,” he says. “We see the WEA recommendations as having narrowed the boundaries, not expanded them. It set us a direction going forward.”

To a certain extent, Hersman feels that Wycliffe has been caught in the crossfire of a larger debate about the Insider Movement, saying that although the two issues intersect, they aren’t necessarily the same. The ministry executive says he has heard from people working in other parts of the world that face a complex challenge—that of connecting the sonship of Christ in a way that captures His eternal relationship with the Father but doesn’t put people off from the start of any discussion.

“In some of the languages with terms for *Father* or *Son*, there’s immediately some connotation of a biological, sexual relationship, and they refuse to read further,” Hersman says. “So in some cases, [Muslim idiom translations] actually opened up opportunities for people to hear the truth and either accept or reject it on the basis of truth rather than on the basis of an Islamic interpretation of [that] relationship.”

A Need for Vigilance

Although an AG spokesman declined further comment on the

situation, Lingel intends to keep a close eye on translations and IM advocates. He was in South Korea when the AG announced its decision and says IM proponents are active there and prompting complaints from other Christians.

Though he lauds Wycliffe for its policy change, the i2 Ministries founder would like to see past translations destroyed and never reprinted, a step he encourages churches to support. He voices concern that other organizations continue their work with Muslim idiom translations, mentioning one organization that distributes a Turkish version and another in Bangladesh that reprinted 10,000 copies of a Bible that had removed *Father* and *Son* language, according to evangelical leaders there.

“This need to stop all [Muslim idiom translations] that excise familial terms for *God* is an important area,” Lingel says. “The church is going to need to stay vigilant in the future. It needs to keep an eye on individual translators as well as personal agendas by ‘experts’ and the projects they supervise to make sure we protect the very words of God in other languages.”

*A freelance writer in Huntington, ., **Ken Walker** wrote Charisma’s June cover story on how God is moving in Egypt despite the chaos and persecution in that nation.*

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