



The Main Question Is Identity

by John Azumah

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A Response to Joseph Cumming's 'Muslim Followers of Jesus?'

To facilitate a truly global conversation, we ask Christian leaders from around the world to respond to the Global Conversation's lead articles. These points of view do not necessarily represent *Christianity Today* magazine or the Lausanne Movement. They are designed to stimulate discussion from all points of the compass and from different segments of the Christian community. Please add your perspective by posting a comment so that we can learn and grow together in the unity of the Spirit.

C5 believers are defined as Muslims who follow Jesus as Lord and Savior. From Cumming's paper and more recent writings of proponents of the Insider Movement, the point is made that C5 is a divine initiative of God reaching Muslims. The Muslim-background believers (MBBs) so reached then independently and of their own free choice decide to remain within the Muslim community and to be identified officially as Muslim. The testimony of Ibrahim in Cumming's piece makes this point clear.

The main issue has been identified as *identity*. As an African MBB, I have always described myself as one with Muslim blood, a Catholic heart, and a Protestant head. The glue to all of these being the African DNA. I have read criticisms of C5 and felt that some of the critics come at the issue with deep-seated prejudice, disdain, and even hostility toward anything Islamic and toward Muhammad in particular.

That said, I believe C5 advocates bear some responsibility for the animated and sometimes acrimonious discourse. In his earlier writings, John Travis appealed to Christians that "much of our missiological energy should be devoted to seeking a path whereby Muslims can remain Muslims, yet live as true followers of the Lord Jesus." (See "Must All Muslims Leave Islam to Follow Jesus?" by John Travis, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 34 (4), 1998, pp. 411-415.)

Some C5ers speak of "encouraging" or "urging" MBBs to remain within the Muslim community as "Insiders." Others have urged and even required their missionaries to officially become Muslim in order to be effective. In several articles C5ers have devoted

their missiological energy to demonstrating from the Bible that leaving one's religion of birth ("extraction") is unbiblical, and that Jesus and the apostles were all "Insiders," thereby suggesting that the existence of the church in its present diverse traditions (C1 to C4) is an aberration.

Some critics of the movement, however, are certain that "C5 is a reflection of intentional Western missiology, Western training, and often a great deal of Western money. Mission agencies expend a great deal of effort to promote 'Insider' methods." (See "Evaluating 'Insider Movements': C5 (Messianic Muslims)" by Bill Nikides, St Francis Magazine, No. 4, March 2006, at [\[imbed this link\]stfrancismagazine.info/issue4/francis4007.pdf](http://stfrancismagazine.info/issue4/francis4007.pdf).) Nikides goes on to talk of how money is used as inducement and other forms of pressure are applied to quarantine MBBs, in some cases against their will, in order "to prevent contamination of the movement" from the rest of the Christian community. Others with many years of ministry and research experience in Asia question claims of an "Insider Movement." All of this has left many confused as to the truth about C5.

My own take on the issues is as follows. To start with, I think Cumming is stretching the argument too far when he attempts to draw parallels between being an American and being Muslim. Ibrahim is right that: "To be a Muslim is to identify with a particular community, not only to subscribe to certain theological tenets." In other words, to be Muslim involves a community but also *includes* subscribing to specific theological and religious tenets. I do not think to be American one must subscribe to any particular theological or religious tenets.

Indeed, Cumming rightly states that "the prophethood of Muhammad is non-negotiably essential to Muslim identity." Yet when the question of Muhammad is raised, C5ers think it is "unimportant." It is true that "Muslim" means different things to different Muslims. In several communities in sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, the term "Muslim" is a *specifically* and *exclusively* religious designation. Jesus is called "Muslim" in the Qur'an as part of Islamic replacement theology. The Muslim Jesus is deliberately set in opposition to the Jesus of the New Testament. To accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, as C5ers do, automatically puts one beyond the pale of such a Muslim community.

When discussing the issue with Muslim leaders, Cumming says their primary concern has been whether C5ers continue to observe the moral and ritual requirements of the *madhhab* they follow. One wonders what the Muslim leaders will say if they are told that these "Muslims" regard Jesus as Lord and Savior and have formed "Christ-centered fellowships in which they study the Bible, pray, and celebrate baptism and the Lord's Supper." The task C5ers have set themselves is like a player trying to convince fans of the New York Giants and New York Jets that he plays for both teams at the same time.

Furthermore, in Islam God reveals his *will* not *himself* as in Christianity. The Qur'an contains God's will, expanded in the Sunna, explicated into law and administered by the various *madhhahib*. Law is to Islam what theology is to Christianity. The question is how can someone *truly* follow Jesus of the New Testament and *truly* remain Muslim?

That said, I fully endorse pleas that Christians should be mindful of the way we proceed, and avoid hurting each other. We should let God be the arbiter in such matters. However, we should not stifle the discourse with suggestions that questioning C5 amounts to "working against God." If indeed C5 is God's initiative, then the advocates should leave God to go about God's business. By playing midwives, sheep dogs, and, some would say, guard dogs, of C5 believers, Western, mainly American, mission agencies could with all the best of intentions be muddying the waters in which God is fishing.

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