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Book Review: Muslim Conversions to Christ

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Greenham, Ant and Ayman Ibrahim, eds. *Muslim Conversions to Christ: A Critique of Insider Movements in Islamic Contexts*. New York: Peter Lang, 2018. 532 pp. By Matthew Bennett.

Must Muslims leave “Islam” to follow Jesus?¹ The answer to this question—though it may seem obvious to evangelical Christians—has been something of a sticky-wicket in the missiological world. Writing in favor of what has become known as the Insider Movement (IM) strategy, a vocal minority of missiologists argue that Muslims may remain “inside” their socio-religious communities, retaining their Islamic identity and practices while following Christ faithfully. For example, a Muslim who comes to faith in Jesus might continue to refer to himself as a Muslim, attend ritual prayers in the mosque, read the Qur’an, and revere Muhammad insofar as the message can be reconciled with the Bible.

Though the contextualization conversation began long before the phrase “Insider Movement” came into parlance, the last two decades have played host to many discussions within evangelical circles as to whether IMs are biblically faithful and missiologically fruitful. Troublingly, IM advocates often present something of a moving target for critique in that they appeal to a wide variety of disciplines—from theology to sociology—in order to side-step the critiques leveled against their methods. Likewise, though IM provides a conceptual umbrella for highly contextual strategies, IM describes more of a family resemblance than an actual definition. Thus, when one critiques an aspect of IM methodology, one might face an accusation of creating strawman arguments that do not represent a particular individual’s approach.

¹ This question is a direct reference to the title of an article by John J. Travis, “Must All Muslims Leave ‘Islam’ to Follow Jesus?” pp 668–672 in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, eds. Ralph Winter and Steven Hawthorne, 4th ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2009), 668. This article in *Perspectives* is a reprint of the original which appeared in the journal, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34: 3 (October 1998).

With this unwieldy conversation in mind, the reader is primed to see the necessity of a treatment of IM that assesses its biblical assumptions, its sociological claims, and its missiological appropriateness. Thankfully, Ayman Ibrahim and Ant Greenham have provided the missiological world with such a treatment. As both contributors and editors, Ibrahim and Greenham have produced a volume which includes wide-ranging essays drawn from the expertise of more than thirty different authors in the book, *Muslim Conversions to Christ: A Critique of Insider Movements in Islamic Contexts*.

Among the many strengths of this volume is the fact that one finds advocates of IM writing alongside critics. Though the volume at large is critical of IM, Harley Talman and Kevin Higgins—both proponents of IM strategies—contribute significant articles to the book. Talman, a consistent and prolific advocate of IM strategies, contributes an article in which he argues that many evangelicals struggle to endorse IM because they view Islam from an essentialist perspective. Such a perspective assumes that there is a common, identifiable set of beliefs which determines whether one is part of the group. Talman argues that, though this may be true of evangelical Christianity, it is not how most people identify themselves and others. Rather, according to Talman, most of the world's population—especially Muslims—are communal in their orientation, making their identity dependent upon acceptance by the community rather than by their adherence to a set of common beliefs (124). On this basis, Talman contends that Insiders can participate in Islamic practices that are in keeping with the community expectations while redefining what they mean in light of biblical teaching. This allows believers to retain their communal identity, connections, and networks while affording them the chance to re-appropriate Islamic forms to serve Christ.

Talman's article provides a good representation of the arguments made by IM proponents, and its inclusion in this book is a real service to advancing the conversation. It allows the reader

to consult the work of one of the most prolific IM advocates while also reading a number of criticisms of his work within the same volume. For instance, immediately following this article, Ayman Ibrahim presents a theological and exegetical critique of Talman's chapter. Ibrahim's title asks a probing question, "Who Makes the Qur'an Valid and Valuable for Insiders?" (139–157). Throughout this chapter, Ibrahim convincingly argues from his expertise as a scholar of early Islam that the Qur'anic interpretations used by IM proponents to cohere with biblical teaching are untenable. Regarding the supposed "christocentric reading" of the Qur'an proposed by Talman, Ibrahim concludes,

This is no more than an invented paradigm offered by some insiders who interpret the Qur'an in complete isolation from its broader textual evidence and historical Muslim exegesis. . . . Talman is actually redacting twelve centuries of Islamic claims regarding the Qur'an, and applying a sledgehammer to classical and modern Muslim exegesis and jurisprudence (145).

If, then, IM use of the Qur'an is invalidated, Ibrahim concludes that the whole approach crumbles.

In addition to Ibrahim's exegetical and theological critique, a later chapter also addresses Talman's argument from the perspective of sociology. In combination with Ibrahim's article, Joshua Fletcher's chapter, "Insider Movements: Sociologically and Theologically Incoherent," lays out what I believe to be one of the most devastating critiques of IM to date (179–208). Fletcher begins by defining the sociological categories of essentialist and nonessentialist identity used by Talman to sustain his argument. In so doing, Fletcher demonstrates that IM strategies are incoherent based upon their own self-description, writing,

It must be noted that the (misunderstood) non-essentialist perspective is *only* applied to the other religion by Talman. Problematically, *for someone to consider themselves a member of a religion exclusively by appealing to non-essentialism as the authoritative basis for that membership, one in fact claims to be part of a religion while intentionally remaining agnostic as to its truthfulness and outside its authority structures.* Non-essentialism is

actually the view of the *outside* observer and cannot legitimate “*Insider*” status for “Insiders” themselves (185).

In other words, when the sociological categories to which IM proponents appeal are rightly understood, the argument that a non-believing performer is an “insider” is invalidated.

As a test case, Fletcher considers the continued recitation of the Shahada, showing that the gospel is incompatible with the Islamic declaration, “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.” Yet, as this declaration is an essential feature of Islamic faith *and* practice, Fletcher demonstrates the incoherence of IM, writing, “If ‘Insiders’ can so dispense with the Shahada then Islam is clearly not perceived as authoritative to the ‘Insider.’ By denying the authority of Islam they then prove therefore that they are not ‘Insiders’ at all. If they cannot dispense with the Shahada then they may be in danger of ‘preaching another gospel’” (187). Concluding this careful deconstruction of IM strategies, Fletcher states baldly, “To put it charitably, despite the decades of experience and kingdom vision espoused by IM proponents, the sociological and theological framework for the IM position cannot be considered as anything less than incredible” (199).

Space prevents me from adequately treating several other excellent articles within this book. Ant Greenham, for instance, marvelously investigates the difference between communal solidarity and the concept of brotherhood in the New Testament, showing these realities to be distinct (247–264). Likewise, M. Barrett Fisher insightfully probes into the confusing implications for discipleship within IM strategies that retain a place for the Qur’an (345–362). And, lest one miss the importance of Adam Simnowitz’s contribution due to its placement in the book as an appendix, the material presented is of such value that anyone involved in the discussion surrounding Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT) of scripture must read this incisive chapter.

Simnowitz demonstrates the egregious theological compromises made by these translation efforts in the name of translatability.

Though the level of scholarship varies from chapter to chapter, the variety of approaches and perspectives is worthy of consideration even while some chapters are more editorial in nature than academic. The simple fact that former Muslims, missionaries, historians, and theologians all express concern over the issues presented by IM should give advocates reason to pause and consider their claims.

Overall, the missiological world owes a debt of gratitude to Ibrahim and Greenham for their work on this volume, which should be paid by devoting careful attention to its contents. As editors and contributors, they have advanced the scholarly discussion and produced a book that demands consideration by thoughtful practitioners on both sides of the debate. While the price-point may make this book out of reach for the average lay person, any library that aims to equip missiologists and missionaries must include this book in their holdings.

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