

# **Toward a Healthier Contextualization Among Muslims: A Biblical Evaluation of the Insider Movement and Its Lessons**

**Wonjoo Hwang**

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**Publisher, Date & Pages:** Pickwick Publications, 2019, 231 pages.

**Cover Description(s):** Various ministry approaches have been utilized in Muslim nations in the past in order to lead lost souls into God's Kingdom. One noticeable trend in recent years in the ministry is an increasing emphasis on contextualization. While the evangelical missiological community searches for more effective contextualization models, some ad hoc proposals have complicated the issue. One representative case is the Insider Movement among Muslims, whose advocates contend that Muslim followers of Isa (Jesus) can remain within their own Islamic socio-religious community while continuing in Islamic religious practices.

What is urgently needed in the contemporary discussion on contextualization is to develop a comprehensive analytical framework based on a sound biblical-theological foundation for evaluating any missiological model. After reviewing the historical development of Muslim evangelism models, this study provides such an analytical framework for developing a healthier contextualization model among Muslims and applies this framework to the Insider Movement by critically evaluating the biblical interpretations and missiological reasonings of the Insider Movement advocates. The writer calls for a healthier contextualization model among Muslims that is biblically authentic and culturally relevant.

**Endorsements:** Georges Houssney, President, Horizons International and Joshua Lingel, President, i2 Ministries; Biola University and Talbot School of Theology.

**Comments:** Georges Houssney: “Daring, comprehensive, and profoundly biblical. Mr. Hwang tackles the controversy surrounding Contextualization and the Insider Movement and their practical implications in ministry to Muslims. His historical background helps the reader understand the way the undergirding concepts have developed and provides a reasoned analysis and critique in light of the Scriptures. This work is a step in the right direction as the missionary community tries to find ‘healthier’ approaches to culture and missions.”

Joshua Lingel: “Wonjoo Hwang has written thoughtful critiques of many areas of Insider Movements and presents a better way forward. People should listen to him in being more critical – and above all, biblical – in our contextualization of the message, messengers and churches we establish overseas.”

## **Table of Contents**

Foreward by Keith E. Eitel

Preface

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

1. Introduction
2. Historical Developments of Muslim Evangelism and the Insider Movement
3. An Analytical Framework for Contextualization Among Muslims
4. An Evaluation of the Biblical Interpretations of Insider Movement Advocates
5. An Evaluation of the Insider Movement through an Analytical Framework
6. Conclusion

Appendix: Comparison of Muslim Evangelism Models

Bibliography

**Rating on a scale of 1 to 5:**

1. Not a good use of your time
2. Okay, but not that useful
3. Satisfactory, not great – but a good read
4. Loved reading it
5. Impactful, highly recommend

**This book: 5**

**“Recommendation” Statement:** In the introduction – the author states: “While most discussions on the IM have been confined to a limited number of components, the lack of a comprehensive analysis has caused more confusion than clarification among evangelicals. The lack of objective criteria for evaluating contextualization models has left evangelicals defenseless against many radical assertions based on pragmatic reasoning in favor of the IM. It is within this context that this study develops an alternative and unexplored method to evaluate the IM by employing an analytical framework that will yield comprehensive evaluation grids and play the role of objective criteria derived from a sound biblical and theological foundation.”

The author then covers the historical development of the IM, provides a definition of the IM, and addresses the main features of the IM. Next, he discusses the foundational assumptions or contentions that are commonly held by IM advocates:

- (1) They contend that the greatest hindrance in Muslim evangelism is not theological, but one of culture and religious identity. They contend that Muslim Insiders should be able to maintain their Muslim identity by practicing most Islamic cultural and religious practice because ‘being a Muslim’ is perceived as a cultural term in the minds of Muslim Insiders.
- (2) They argue that Muslim evangelism should not aim at Muslims’ changing their religion from Islam to Christianity.
- (3) The only way for Muslim Insiders to remain within the Islamic community is to practice all the Islamic religious practices and use Islamic ritual forms except in the matters explicitly incompatible with biblical teaching. Thus, in the process, they either reinterpret some of the major Islamic doctrines or privately modify them. For example, some advocates contend that even the prophethood of Muhammad can be acknowledged, not in an orthodox Islamic theological sense, but in

the sense that he was a messenger from God to accomplish a social reform among Arabs by transforming pagan Arab tribal society into a monotheistic Islamic society.

(4) Even in the process of discipleship, IM advocates contend that outsiders, either missionaries or national leaders who are not Muslim Insiders, should leave Muslim Insiders in such a way that they can grow in the Word of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

(5) The way Muslim Insiders can remain as Muslims relies on the assumption that the term 'Muslim' is considered a 'cultural term.' IM advocates argue that there is no ethical problem for Muslim Insiders to claim to be Muslims because there is a wide spectrum of Muslims in the world, from fundamentalist groups to nominal groups.

(6) IM advocates claim that it has been proven to be a fruitful approach in various Muslim countries, especially in South Asian countries.

The author carefully covers the main "biblical interpretations" of IM advocates. He addresses Acts 2-3, the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, Paul at Athens in Acts 17, I Cor. 7:17-24 – the issue of "remaining in the condition he was called", I Cor. 9:19-23 – the issue of "I have become all things to all men" – and other lesser-emphasized passages re "holy pagans", including Naaman in 2 Kings 5, Melchizedek, Job, Jethro, Balaam, the sailors in the book of Jonah, the pagan magi, and Cornelius. Other important issues addressed have to do with general revelation and epistemology. Each main IM issue is analyzed from:

1. A Philosophical perspective
  - The Authority of Scripture
  - General Revelation
  - Epistemology
2. A Theological perspective
  - Theological Orientation
  - Orthodoxy and Historic Creeds
  - Plurality of Theology
3. A Hermeneutical perspective
  - Hermeneutical Circle
  - Hermeneutical Method
  - Historical Precedent in Hermeneutics
4. An Anthropological perspective
  - Theology of Culture

- Theology of Religions
  - View of Islam and Muhammad
  - View of the Quran and Its Use in Muslim Evangelism
5. A Communicational perspective
- Receptor-Oriented Communication
  - Form and Meaning
  - Dynamic Equivalence and Bible Translation
  - Common Ground versus Point of Contact

In his conclusion the author makes the following statements:

Two main critical evaluations were employed to evaluate the IM as a contextualization model. First, from a biblical perspective, it was demonstrated that the IM could not pass the test of biblical validation because key assertions and biblical claims of IM advocates stood upon exegetically flawed interpretations of key biblical passages. Second, when a comprehensive analytical framework incorporating the five perspectives was applied to the IM, many of its features turned out to have deviated from evangelical parameters of contextualization. The roots affect the fruits. Since the IM has unhealthy roots in its theology of missions, it is likely to induce syncretistic results in its ministries to Muslims.

Other conclusions:

1. The origin of all the problematic features of the IM starts with instrumentalist epistemology which denies the normative, objective propositional truth of the Gospel. This epistemology elevates human experiences and new encounters in cultural contexts to an extent that they play a deciding role for interpreting the meaning of biblical revelation. Consequently, the authority of Scripture is substantially minimized, and the Bible is taken as a casebook which can be used to answer contemporary contextual issues through an analogical interpretive method.
2. Theology is relativized and every theology is claimed to be contextual in essence. Since they do not accept the existence of a normative theology, all historic creeds and orthodox Christian doctrines are understood to be contextually defined expressions

of biblical truth and thus do not hold universal values for churches in different contexts. IM advocates do not accept the notion of an objective meaning of biblical texts because every person is culturally conditioned and thus subjective in his perception of truth.

3. From a communicational perspective, the IM promotes practical ministry proposals and assertions by incorporating several facets of modern communication theories. The fundamental flaw, however, comes from their postmodern presupposition of instrumentalist epistemology in which meaning is claimed to be found in persons.

*Note: The above excerpts are but the tip of the iceberg. There is much, much more – too much to try and put in this review.*

In light of the increasingly influential IM missiology, especially in the Muslim context, it is refreshing to have a book like this. If you desire a resource to help you understand the complexities of the IM issue – I highly recommend this book. And there is a lot of material here that could be incorporated into your teaching materials.

Hwang's book – along with the book *Muslim Conversions to Christ: A Critique of Insider Movements in Islamic Contexts* (edited by Ayman Ibrahim and Ant Greenham), are probably the two best current books on the subject of Insider Movements. Both are now in the GI library.

**Reviewer:** J. Bennett, June 14, 2019