

ISSUE 2 | AUG 2019



WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

Department of Theological Concerns

BULLETIN

EDITION: English | Englisch

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Discussing insider movements in the Islamic world

*Theses from the perspective
of the World Evangelical Alliance*



With the Grand Mufti of Lahore

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These theses were presented on Jan. 10th, 2013 in Gießen at a workshop about insider movements and were slightly modified for printing. Evangelikale Missiologie 29 (2013) 4: 171.175.

In my experience in the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the present discussion about insider movements in Islam hermeneutically and dogmatically focusses on two key questions:

- The first key question concerns Christology and soteriology: What does it mean to „believe in Christ“? Is it sufficient to have a „relationship“ with him, which we ourselves can define and which leaves the question open, who Jesus really is? Or is there a basic set of things we have to owe to Jesus? Is there a basic set of doctrinal contents, which one has to consider as true, in order to have a relationship with the real Jesus at all, and not
- just with something called ‚Jesus‘? (Example: A C5-group cannot actually, discernably to others, worship Jesus, without attracting attention.)
- The second key question concerns Christology/soteriology and ecclesiology: Is it possible to believe in Jesus and his salvation, without the Body of Christ materializing – in some form or other – as a church? And what are the indispensable basic requirements and characteristics of such a visible church? (Example: Can a C5-group celebrate the Lord's Supper without turning into a C4-group, because it would attract their Muslim neighbours' attention?) Another question, which always comes up in situations of heavy persecution, plays an essential role here: To what extent can one be a Christian in private and without being apparent

to others, and to what extent is the corporate aspect of the faith and the church of Jesus indispensable?

- Finally, a further question repeatedly comes up: Can „C5“ also be a mission strategy in the realm of orthodox/Arabic Islam, or is not – due to the specific character of this Islam and the corresponding Muslim communities, the goal, to continue to be considered as Muslims by the environment, inconsistent with missionary objectives? That means: Is not in an orthodox Islamic or Arabic environment the same thing doomed to failure, which is quite conceivable in Hinduism, but also in Sufism, in Popular Islam, in Indonesian or Chinese Islam, in certain non orthodox-Islamic communities like the Druze, or in areas of Africa with strong amalgamation of Islam, Christianity and animism?

For a fruitful discussion and for the sake of the common commission, I find it beneficial to consider the following:

- Those who try to understand and to classify insider movements, should steer clear from exuberantly positive categories (like ‚mission strategy of the future‘, ‚more relevant than the reformation‘, ‚the beginning of a new age in church history‘), but likewise from negative categories (like ‚signs of the Last Days‘, ‚self-surrender of Christianity‘, ‚new attack strategy of Islam‘). Judgements such as these may at best stand at the end of a long process of observation; they often anticipate, what really can only be said decades later in retrospection. Apart from that, there is not ‚the‘ insider movement, anyway, but each phenomenon should really be considered separately. In addition to that, there is not yet sufficient information and experience available.
- Those who still want to use such categories, should first of all reveal their hermeneutical, dogmatical and other presuppositions; or else fruitless front discussions are impending, because the differences of opinion do not first arise in the evaluation of insider movements, but are already fixed beforehand.
- Categorizations like the C1-C6 classification, already abrogated by their originator as hardly helpful, are hardly helpful indeed. Within described insider movements the followers or wings range over several categories (say C3 to C6). The movements themselves shift through the categories, as time passes, and, as all young movements, tend toward gradual institutionalization and doctrinal peculiarity. Moreover, the definitions are so airy, that they are often understood in completely different ways and dialogue partners merrily talk at cross purposes. If you describe a movement and have it classified by various experts, you often get various classifications.
- New ideas and movements, which are beforehand prophetically declared winner and model for the future, are thereby usually more impeded than benefitted. In that case one can no longer claim to want the movements to develop themselves, without external influence.
- Moreover, many mission strategies cannot be ‚made‘. Presently it is undisputed, for instance, that many Muslims come to Christian faith by dreams. Only, this cannot be propagated as mission method (even though some people do just that); but one can only observe it, learn from it and rejoice in it. Likewise there is a big difference between gladly observing the spontaneous emergence of movements in the Islamic world, or thinking, these movements could be recorded, planned and effected, and that such – ‚artificially‘ planned – copy-movements should have the same impact.
- At this point I see evidence mainly of strong cultural differences between the US-American way of marketing new concepts as new and surely to become very successful („how to make elephants bigger and better“) – a way, which, due to the heavy dependence of some evangelical groups on American role models, is soon to be found worldwide – and the approach of other cultures with their own strengths and weaknesses (as for instance the German, the Arabic or the Turkish). These differences very much complicate the discussion (the development in Turkey is a case in point.) We wouldn't have to hold our symposium in the first place, if the issue hadn't been brought to market and made a dogmatic yes-no question. We dare not, however, make new movements dance to our tune and describe them the way we would like them to be, or as they would avail our theses. Wherever I had the chance to become acquainted with movements, which others had described previously, I usually found, at least in part, something quite different, and the description turned out to be biased (as surely my experience was also). Many descriptions say more about the author than about the described object – a well known phenomenon in cultural research. Here it is also common knowledge, that each culture, in the process of being studied and described, is thereby also changed.
- There have at all times been Crypto-Christians in great numbers, especially under the pressure of persecution. As a result, many strategies evolved, how to survive in an environment hostile to the

Christian faith. Whether we appreciate this or not, it is first of all a given fact. How these strategies are to be dogmatically and ethically evaluated, is a different kettle of fish and should be very carefully judged, particularly by Christians, who are not being persecuted.

- For sociologists of religion it is quite natural, that there is a large grey or transition area, with all sorts of shades, existing between the two biggest world religions (Christianity and Islam). Here also we need to clearly distinguish between surveying the facts and propagating or combating certain methods.
- We must set apart „syncretism“ between Christianity and Islam from other kinds of syncretism with Christianity, because, on the one hand, there is no materialized idolatry in Islam, on the other hand the outward demarcation of Islam is much clearer than in other religions, so that „hybrids“ between both religions stand out much more than overlappings with, say, Hinduism.
- The evangelical movement has in the course of its history often incorporated fascinating, odd, strongly people-orientated or sectarian movements (in many cases after their founder's death), and has, within its dogmatic core, reduced them to a core consensus, e.g. in soteriology. Here a well-balanced course has to be found between currently necessary dogmatic dissociation and long-term missionary serenity.
- We have to take all Christians in the Islamic world, from C1 to C6, seriously and not prematurely „give scores“ In the World Evangelical Alliance all get their place. We can learn from underground-Christians in Iran as much as we can from the Coptic-Evangelical church in Egypt. Are we in a position to decide, which of the Christian schools of thought are the right ones in the Islamic world? And are we deciding solely according to success? And what is „success“? Many old-established churches in the Islamic world have survived within the Islamic world. Is that really a smaller achievement than current mission successes? Furthermore, many of them experience similar awakenings – in a sense insider movements in the old churches.
- Therefore new mission methods, especially in the Islamic world, must not be propagated in such a manner, that Christians, who have shown courage over decades, are affronted or even made responsible for the low growth of their churches. Contextualization is a matter of course in mission, it

can take ever different forms and must not be dogmatically straitened. In no culture we find only one true contextualization or inculturation, but these can happen in different ways.

- Mission history is more multifarious than we often think. Nobody dare pretend that earlier generations tenaciously only wanted to save the individual and were immune to contextualization. It strikes me that hardly any persons proficient or interested in mission history, are involved in the discussion about insider movements, hardly any persons who are well informed about the history of Islam, of the churches in the Islamic world and of the missionary enterprises in the Islamic world. There have been, time and again, periods and areas, in which awakenings, even great awakenings within the Islamic world were recorded. In these churches/movements of all categories from C1 to C4 were involved (Indonesia and Egypt are cases in point here).
- The unity of the worldwide mission movement and of the World Evangelical Alliance is a precious asset. The Evangelical Alliance was founded in 1846 (just as later the Ecumenical Movement), because the division of Christianity was regarded as one of the greatest obstacles for evangelisation and world mission. He who endorses world mission, shouldn't, as to questions of mission strategy, trigger and feed debates with highly scismatic potential, but, for all search for the best ways, emphasize that we have this assignment for mission together and that we can only fulfil it, if we together submit ourselves to the Lord of mission.
- On issues of contextualization we have to distinguish between contextualization as a mission strategy (which often starts from the outside) and longterm contextualization (which only native Christians can accomplish). Not every adaptation to the audience in the opening phase must of necessity apply for the resultant church. But on the long run the church needs a contextualization also of theology and its language. Thus the doctrine of the Trinity must, on the long run, be formulated directly from Scripture within the culture, and cannot always have to detour via history of theology and the successive study of Greek, Latin, German and English language. This contextualization of Biblical theology ought to be done in great unity, and not in small separate groups, and we should contribute to such unity among Christian in the Islamic world and not split them up even further by importing western concepts.



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