

Some Ways Muslim Followers of Christ View the *Shahada*¹

by Rick Brown

“Muslim” as a Socioreligious Category

From a sociological perspective, Muslims are people who have a social identity as members of a traditionally Muslim community. They may be religiously observant, secularly nominal, or something in between, but they see themselves as belonging to the same socioreligious group, that of Muslims. In this they are much like Jewish people, for whom their identity is more a matter of common heritage than common belief. For many Muslims, being a Muslim is an inseparable part of their self-identity, their background, their family, their community, and their cultural heritage, regardless of what they actually believe about God. It is this everyday sociological sense of the term *Muslim* that is used in what follows.

Biblical and Sub-biblical Muslims

In any new Christ-centered community, it takes time for people’s worldviews to conform to what is taught in Scripture, as God leads them into truth through his Holy Spirit. What is important is that they are moving towards the center, towards greater conformity with a biblical worldview. Until that process has matured, their worldviews (beliefs and values) are likely to be sub-biblical. That is true of all kinds of movements, so we need to distinguish between levels of contextualization in biblical Christ-centered communities, called “C1/2/3/4/5,” and equivalent levels of contextualization in sub-biblical communities, S1/2/3/4/5. It would be less than God’s best for them to remain with a sub-biblical worldview, such as one finds in many worldly-minded S1/2 churches. So it is important to encourage their maturation towards biblical worldviews.

John Travis’ definition of C5 clearly states that he is using the label C5 to categorize Christ-centered communities who reject anything that is “incompatible with the Bible.” Direct participant observation of mature C5 movements and leaders confirms Travis’ description of them as biblical, because they do reject anything that seems incompatible with the Bible. Some of them are growing quite rapidly as well, with little or no outside involvement. But like all C categories, there exist sub-biblical groups with corresponding levels of contextualization, S1-S6, who have views that are incompatible with some things taught in the Bible.

The question, then, is which beliefs, values and practices are incompatible with the Bible? A related question is what role do outsiders have in helping decide this issue? In terms of advice that

¹ Most of this article appeared in similar form as part of Brown (2007), and two paragraphs appeared in Brown (2006). It is presented here with some revisions.

outsiders can give, Owens (2007) offers some useful guidelines for processing such decisions on a group basis. Scott Moreau (2000:924) offers the following guidance.

First he defines syncretism as “the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements.” Then he provides the following guidelines for identifying them:

Because of the convoluted nature of culture, the declaration of syncretism in a particular setting cannot be simply left in the hands of expatriate missionaries. The local community must be empowered to biblically evaluate their own practices and teachings. Missionaries must learn to trust that indigenous peoples are able to discern God’s leading and trust God to develop and maintain biblically founded and culturally relevant Faith and Praxis in each local context. Finally, Christians of every culture must engage in genuine partnership with Christians of other cultures, since often the outsider’s help is needed to enable local believers, blinded by culture and familiarity, to see that which contravenes scriptural adherence to the first commandment.

As he points out, the outsiders can give their perspective, but it is the responsibility (before God) of the local disciples of Christ “to biblically evaluate their own practices and teachings.” Hiebert (1987) offers some general guidelines on how they can do that well.

The *Shahāda* as a Social Boundary Marker: Can It Be Compatible with the Bible?

In modern western countries, to become a citizen one must pledge allegiance to the sovereign, the constitution, or the flag. In most Muslim communities, to become a full member of the community one must say the *shahāda*. This is the Muslim confession of faith that “there is no god but God, and Muhammad is a messenger of God” (where the word *messenger* translates Arabic *rasūl*, meaning “one sent on a mission”). Likewise refusing to say the *shahāda* when so required leads to expulsion from most Muslim communities. In part this is because denial of the *shahāda* is interpreted as a shameful rejection of their customs and heritage, but in many cases it is because the family and community fear that God will punish them if a member apostatizes.

In some countries and provinces the law requires everyone, or everyone born to Muslim parents, to say the *shahada* if challenged to do so by the authorities. In one such country a biblical Muslim evangelist was taken to court and accused of apostasy. He testified that he was a Muslim who followed Jesus and that he encouraged others likewise. The judge told him to say the *shahada* and he did so. The judge then asked him to explain what he meant by it. The man answered by saying that at one time there was no Arab nation. There were just tribes who fought and raided one another and worshipped many idols. Then God in His mercy sent Muhammad to lead the Arabs from polytheism to monotheism and from tribal disunity to political unity. The judge accepted this explanation and acquitted him.

In another country, where saying the *shahada* is a legal requirement for all citizens, the leader of a house church was arrested and told to say the *shahada* or die. He said it, but he reminded the

police of two Islamic principles: (1) saying the *shahada* is valid only if the person says it with sincerity (*niya*), and (2) only God knows if a person says it with sincerity. The police were angry at this reply and beat him, but they also had to let him go. As a result of his wise response, he was able to stay alive, continue living in the community he loved, and continue his ministry among them.²

Most Muslims never face a situation where they are required to say the *shahāda*. It is the outspoken biblical Muslims who face the possibility of being challenged by opponents on this issue, and some missionaries are very concerned about how they respond. A variety of Muslims study the Scriptures and follow Christ, living in a variety of cultures and situations, and consequently they vary in regard to their policies on saying the *shahāda* when circumstances demand:

1. Some Muslims say the *shahāda* with the traditional interpretation of Muhammad's mission, a practice regarded by most Christians as incompatible with belief in Christ as one's Lord and Savior.
2. Many nominal, biblical, and secular Muslims view the *shahāda* as a customary sign of social solidarity rather than as a conviction, especially when this is recognized as such by their peers.
3. Some biblical Muslims say the *shahāda* with an interpretation of the mission of Muhammad that they believe is compatible with the Torah and the Gospel, such as one that is comparable with God having sent King Nebuchadnezzar and anointed King Cyrus.³ Brother Noah has written a statement on how he explains the prophethood of Muhammad. It might be noted that Messianic Jews do the same thing when they participate in the synagogue liturgy: they interpret the eighteen benedictions as a request for the Messiah to come, not for the first time but for the second, and they interpret the curse on schismatics as not pertaining to Orthodox Jews who believe in Jesus as their Messiah.
4. Some biblical Muslims say the *shahāda* only under duress or obligation to a legal requirement, recognizing that under Islamic law, an attestation of sincerity is not required and a coerced confession is invalid. 5. Some biblical Muslims decide not to say the second half of the *shahāda*. For example, a Muslim clan in Africa became followers of Christ, and eventually they decided as a group, not as individuals, to refrain from reciting the second half of the *shahada*.

Brother Noah, the leader of an insider movement, makes the following comment (spelling corrected): "Normally a Muslim will not say the *shahāda* out loud at any time. A Muslim will not ask another Muslim to say the *shahāda*. So this is not a Muslim question; it is a Christian question to a Muslim who believes in Isa Al-Masih."⁴ On the other hand, biblical Muslims may be asked what they think of Muhammad, either by Christians or by other Muslims.

² These two events were reported in Brown (2006).

³ God calls Cyrus "his anointed" in Isa. 45:1. As it happens, they also wrote scripture. Nebuchadnezzar wrote all of Daniel 4, and Cyrus wrote Ezra 1:2-4.

⁴ Note: While this applies to Brother Noah's culture, it is not the case everywhere.

Some critics regard Muslims as if they had only a binary choice in their cultures, either believe in the full orthodox view of Muhammad or reject him completely, but this simplistic view is not the case. Modern educated Muslims have a spectrum of views on Muhammad. The most striking evidence of this is the verdict of the judge in the apostasy trial mentioned above. It is not simply playing with words for them to have a modern viewpoint of Muhammad's mission.

While it is up to the local believers to decide how God would have them deal with this issue, what advice can missionaries give them? Which of these practices are compatible with the Bible and which are not? We cannot answer these questions with armchair speculation. As Scott Moreau indicated above, it requires honest, open-minded interaction with experienced leaders within the movements themselves. It also requires some serious research, based on participant observation. An example is the long-term study done by J. Dudley Woodberry and published in various articles and books.⁵

Some Dubious Assumptions about the *Shahāda*

Further research needs to be done on the issue of the *shahāda*, and it is not my intent to argue whether each particular policy is biblical or sub-biblical. There are some assumptions, however, that need to be questioned, and some claims which need to be investigated further. Corwin (2007: 11), for example, gives the following objection to participation in the salat prayer:

Whether one is saying the Lord's Prayer while going through the motions of the Salat, or rationalizing the many meanings of the term "prophet" while one is declaring Muhammad is Allah's prophet in the *shahāda*, the message communicated by the very action to all those around is a declaration of adherence to the doctrines of Islam.

The assumption here is that since the ritual prayer often concludes with an affirmation that Muhammad was sent from God, it thereby affirms the orthodox view of Muhammad, and that affirming Muhammad affirms the Qur'an, and that affirming the Qur'an affirms the common interpretations of the Qur'an, and that affirming those interpretations affirms a denial of the lordship, saviorhood, and deity of Jesus Christ. The testimony of both nominal Muslims and biblical Muslims is that this chain of assumptions is not the case. Just as many liberal Christians attend church services without affirming a belief in Jesus' deity, and many evangelicals attend Catholic and Jewish funerals without affirming a faith in their theologies, so it happens that many Muslims perform prayers in the mosque simply to worship God. And some of them, such as Wahhabis, say nothing about Muhammad in their prayers.

This raises several questions, however, that need further investigation. If there is a funeral or holiday, and everyone joins in prayer, does one's participation really communicate adherence to

⁵ See Woodberry 2007 and his books on Amazon and other sites. Another study has been underway for many years but is not yet published.

Islamic doctrine? Or does it primarily communicate social solidarity? Or piety? Does it really communicate a denial of the biblical concept of Jesus? If one stays home instead of attending an event where prayer will happen, does this communicate non-adherence to Islamic doctrine, or will people assume adherence anyway? And if one attends a funeral and refuses to join the prayer, how will that be interpreted? As non-adherence or as non-solidarity or as impiety or as apostasy? And if one joins the prayer at the funeral, and afterwards shares a passage from the Gospel and shares his faith in Jesus, as some biblical Muslims do, does this not clarify what one believes about Jesus? Of course it does, and because of the stereotypes that Muslims have about Christians, the person's spoken testimony expresses his faith and theology more accurately than does the symbolic gesture of never entering a mosque.

If traditional, unbiblical Muslims viewed the continued participation in prayer by biblical Muslims as incompatible with their faith in Christ and the Bible, then one would have expected them to say as much. But the experience of biblical Muslims is that most traditional Muslims don't view the prayers or even the *shahāda* in the way that Corwin presumes.⁶

Corwin (2007: 16) also raises a more serious objection:

Likewise, the record of the New Testament and subsequent church history is that those mature in the faith would rather die than allow their testimony to cloud the message that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord and that the Triune God alone must be the object of our worship.

Evidently he is referring to saying the *shahāda* or participating in the *salat* prayers. It seems to me, however, that the situations are not analogous. The term *ho kurios* "the lord," was used absolutely in the first century to mean the top ruler, the lord of all, who was subject to no one else but God or the gods. The Romans used it of Caesar, as in Acts 25:26, where Festus refers to Caesar simply as "the lord,"⁷ meaning the one man who was lord over everyone else. Roman citizens were expected to show their unreserved allegiance to Caesar by saying "Caesar is lord" and offering a sacrifice to him. The statement was exclusive. To say "Caesar is lord" implied that no one else was lord. If one refused to say it, or if one affirmed someone else as lord, then one could be executed. Christians preached that Jesus is Lord, implying that Caesar was not lord, so this brought them into conflict with the law, much like the Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to pledge allegiance to the flag or the king. Polycarp and many other Christians died rather than say "Caesar is Lord."⁸

The *shahāda*, however, does not have such implications. There is nothing at all exclusive about *rasūl allāh*. It literally means "one sent on a mission by God," and Muslims confess Jesus as *rasūl allāh* as well. But a Muslim's refusal to say the *shahāda* is construed as a complete denial of Muhammad's mission. I know Muslim followers of Jesus who are prepared to die before they would

⁶ See Corwin 2007a: 12.

⁷ Literally translated, the sentence says, "About whom I have nothing definite to write to the lord." I could not find a single English translation that rendered it literally, with the definite article.

⁸ See the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. He was martyred in 155 AD.

deny that Jesus is Lord, but they are not willing to die over the question of whether God had a mission for Muhammad, as some missionaries advocate. Missionaries and local Christians are careful not to denounce Muhammad to a Muslim community, so it is hardly laudable for them to demand that biblical Muslims do so.

Some Christians claim that saying the *shahada* breaks the commandment not to lie in Exodus 20:7, because the *shahada* says that God sent Muhammad, and this they say is a lie about God. While anyone would agree that people should speak the truth about God, insofar as they know it, it is hard to see how this principle applies to any of the policies mentioned above.

1. If a Muslim of any kind says the *shahāda* in all sincerity, with a traditional interpretation, is he lying about God and taking his name in vain? Even Christians have diverse concepts of God, and some of them have to be making statements about God that are not actually true. So are they taking the Lord's name in vain? And what about Orthodox Jewish statements about God?
2. If nominal Muslims say the *shahāda* as a customary sign of social solidarity rather than as a statement of conviction, and this is recognized among them, then is it an assertion at all? And if the nominal Muslims are not making an assertion, then how can they be making a false one? What about Christians who recite the Nicene Creed in church as an act of worship, not realizing the viewpoints they actually hold are contrary to the creed?
3. If biblical Muslims say the *shahāda* sincerely with an interpretation of the mission of Muhammad that they believe is compatible with the Bible, then how can they be lying?
4. If biblical Muslims say the *shahāda* only under duress, recognizing that an attestation of sincerity is not required and that coerced confessions are not valid, then are they asserting anything at all or just repeating the words as required?

Personally I think Muslim believers in Jesus should avoid saying the second half of the *shahāda* whenever possible. But as an outsider I am not immersed enough in these situations to judge accurately what the impact of saying it would be. I know godly, biblical Muslims, highly blessed in their ministry, with 24 to 42 years of experience, who think saying the *shahāda* has no negative consequence. Until I see a compelling argument to the contrary, I am inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt, especially when in most societies they will never be asked to say it. I would not bind the Gospel to Muhammad as some Christians do, not allowing it to go forth unless it carries an anti-Islamic agenda alongside it. The Gospel, after all, is about Jesus Christ, not Muhammad, and about the Kingdom of God, not geopolitics.

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