Beyond Interiority in Christian Conversion: Proximity to Jesus as Patron among Muslim-background “Isai” in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Though conversion studies have attempted to move beyond models that “privilege interior states and subjectivities” (Rambo and Farhadian 2014), this article argues, first, that such a step forward has proved difficult. Interiority persists within frequent divisions of intrinsic and extrinsic factors in Christian conversion or is only de-emphasized at the cost of marginalizing converts’ theological or spiritual convictions. Retaining an internal-external paradigm is especially problematic in non-western contexts, where converts may have quite differently-ordered configurations of self-understanding. Second, the article demonstrates the potential of suspending this duality, through an analysis of existing studies of Muslim-background “Isai” groups in Bangladesh. Isai conversion, involving a pivot from Muhammad to Jesus, is interpreted within a patron-client scheme in which intimacy is more fundamental than interiority, indicating that devotional “proximity” might be a way to refer to the transformative conversion experience without reverting to an interior-exterior dichotomy.

Keywords

interiority – conversion – Bangladesh – Isai – Christian – Muslim – devotion – patronage

1 The Persistent Dichotomy of Interior and Exterior in Interpretations of Christian Conversion

How frequently does conversion to Christianity awaken an “interiority” among its new adherents? It is a difficult question for western scholars to tackle objectively because of how fundamental the interior-exterior distinction has been.
since the 18th century for European and American perceptions of what constitutes spiritual and religious transformation. The evangelical conversion narrative, with its concern for the heart, and experiential evidence of inward regeneration, began to emerge with the Puritans and the German pietists, before becoming dominant among the 18th century revivalists.\(^1\) Within European settings that were already Christian in name and institutional allegiance, these conversions were not stories of transformation from one set of religious structures to another, but a conversion of the heart and mind within that setting. This inward change took different forms – for example, the Puritan focus on the stained and then cleansed conscience is distinct from John Wesley and George Whitefield’s later focus on the positive experience of the Holy Spirit’s regeneration.\(^2\) But the key shift was that the sacraments given by church authorities were inadequate; *inward* baptism was the marker of genuine regeneration by the Spirit. Whitfield, for example, told those doubting whether they had received the Spirit to look inwardly and to check for the signs of changed conscience and character.\(^3\) The interior, then, became the locus of both salvation and assurance of salvation. For the revivalists this meant that conversion was to some extent self-authenticating. But for those studying contemporary Christian conversion, care needs to be taken lest interior tropes within conversion narratives are too quickly assumed to be either the central tenet or even what defines whether or not “conversion” has occurred.

Immanuel Kant’s work reinforced this epistemic tendency to look to the individual’s interior as the locus of authentic response. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, the distinction between external and internal is fundamental to Kant’s argument that concepts of time and space exist within inner tuition ‘a priori’, rather than inhering in external objects, and so provide the foundations for thought, understanding and judgments.\(^4\) This move enabled Kant to counter Hume’s radical empiricism by making the observing and reasoning human mind the

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mediator between outward stimulus and objective realities. In his treatise on morality, Kant prioritized these inward processes, insisting that rightness of someone’s actions cannot be determined by outward observation, but only if privy to their voluntary conformity to inner principles. And this strong inner/outer distinction was cemented in Kant’s later publication on anthropology. Kant’s work falls within the trajectory of a longer process by which western modernity adopted a view of the authentic self, shielded from outside structures and forces, described by Charles Taylor as “the buffered self”, as opposed to the earlier “porous self” of medieval Christendom that had been so interconnected with the power structures of the cosmos. While focused on rationality rather than ecstatic experience, Kant’s constructions still run parallel with the Protestant revivalists in that both he and they saw interior judgments as key to the authenticity of an agent’s actions.

When William James and Arthur Nock produced their influential texts on religious conversion in the early 20th century, the process of inner transformation remained central. James, a psychologist by background, was concerned with how conversion “redeems and vivifies an interior world”, particularly as the inward reconciling of a hitherto divided self. Nock’s historical study, though more concerned to situate the convert within the inherited norms of their community, and leaving room for a lesser category of ‘adhesion’ of a second religion onto a first, still explicitly drew from James in defining conversion inwardly, being “the reorientation of the soul of an individual … from an earlier form of piety to another.”

The same internal-external division can be made out in Protestant reflection on the world mission project during the colonial era. The logic of the soul’s revival proceeding outwards to a transformation of behavior was applied to

5 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 608–612.
6 Immanuel Kant, Groundlaying toward the Metaphysics of Morals, 2nd ed. (Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1786), 407.
7 Immanuel Kant, Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, trans. and ed. Robert B. Louden (1798; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). The work is structured under the headings (1) “On the way of cognizing the interior as well as the exterior of the human being,” and (2) “On the way of cognizing the interior of the human being from the exterior.”
visions of whole societies being transformed. Mission, according to Gustav Warneck, “aims principally at a change of the sentiments, a renewal of the heart.... But with the change of intention [there goes] a change of civilization, with the change of the inner life a change of the outer life.” Pietist categories were in evidence at the Edinburgh World Mission Conference in 1910, where Christianity’s numerical progress was repeatedly measured in units of “souls,” and large numbers of conversions were described in terms of “awakenings” and “revivals” (terms also used for the growth of other religions too).

All of this is to draw attention to an established European and American pattern of making interior processes central to conceptions of Christian conversion. Over the last century, several philosophers have critiqued this instinctive division between interior and exterior in human subjectivity, for instance Wittgenstein’s later work which de-privileged the “first person” perspective by repositioning it within a social epistemic setting, and Merleau-Ponty’s re-embedding of consciousness within the tissue-like milieu of nature. While the expanding field of conversion studies has identified the problem of assuming the priority of the interior, and recent conversion models have deployed concepts and terminology that move away from it, I want to point to how the epistemic interior-exterior division is not so easy to shake off, and still implicitly shapes some recent approaches.

Analyses of networks in conversion since Lofland and Stark (1965) have decentralized the explanatory role of inward subjectivities, but in putting forward networks as an alternative explanation they have contributed to the notion of a divide between “external” and “internal” factors. The need to isolate and identify empirically significant conversion factors led, at least in the first

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12 For example, “During a single year recently about three thousand souls in the south-east portion of the Nizam’s dominions placed themselves under Christian instruction,” John R. Mott, *World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, 1910: Report of Commission I: Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World*, 38. ‘Souls’ was used repeatedly by John R. Mott throughout the report.

13 *Report of Commission I: Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World*, “revivals”: 36, 37, 77, 94, 146, etc.; “awakening”: 12, 38, 166, 178, 355. For application to non-Christian traditions: 15, 16.


generation of network analyses, to strong distinctions being drawn between
prior dispositions and motives of individuals on the one hand, and the rela-
tional and organizational structures that impinge on them from the ‘outside’,
the two being evaluated as competing causes.\(^{17}\) Later network studies became
more integrative, after Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin identified what
had become an “ontological dualism” of the structural and cultural, which
on the structural side “drains [network] relations of their active, subjective
dimension and their cultural contents and meanings.”\(^{18}\)

Studies of Christian conversion that draw on multiple disciplines (sociology,
anthropology, history, theology), though, have tended to revert to this same
duality as a shorthand for ensuring the structural is balanced with the subjec-
tive, reifying the sense that conversion is a matter of the exterior and interior.
Robert Hefner’s classic 1993 essay on conversion identified the problem of pro-
jecting an “interiorist bias” onto a process that may emerge from various social
and intellectual milieus, and then advised a dual approach:

For students of religious conversion the challenge in this controversy is to
strike a balance between the two extremes of intellectualist voluntarism
and structural determinism. Even if politically imbalanced, conversion
encounters are always two sided, and the social and intellectual dynam-
ics of each camp affect the outcome. Rather than overemphasize intrin-
sic or extrinsic variables in conversion, then, we should explore the way
in which the two interact and expect that the relative importance of each
may vary in different settings.\(^{19}\)

\(^{17}\) Max Heirich, “Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories about Religious
Conversion,” *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 3 (1977): 653–680; David A Snow,
Louis A. Zurcher Jr., and Sheldon Ekland-Olson, *Social Networks and Social Movements:
A Microstructural Approach to Differential Recruitment,* *American Sociological Review*

\(^{18}\) Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin, “Network Analysis, Culture, and the Problem of
Agency,” *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 6 (1994), 1427–1428. For ways in which the
ideological and experiential struggles of converts illumine network processes rather than
compete with them, see David Smilde, “A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of Conversion
to Venezuelan Evangelicalism: How Networks Matter,” *American Journal of Sociology* 111,
no. 3 (2005), 758–759.

\(^{19}\) Robert W. Hefner, “World Building and the Rationality of Conversion” in Robert W. Hefner
ed., *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological perspectives on a great trans-
Similarly, Lewis Rambo’s multiple stage conversion model, which centers on a Crisis (Stage 2) that leads to a Quest (Stage 3), makes a strong distinction between internal and external crisis-inducing factors, emphasizing the former in order to move away from past descriptions of conversion that have made the convert “primarily passive.” More recently, in their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, Rambo and Charles Farhadian, while advocating for a broad, multi-disciplinary approach that goes beyond “Protestant Pietistic understandings”, endorse as exemplary Marc Baer’s definition of conversion which, while thoughtfully multivalent, makes a strong distinction between “internal” beliefs and “external” actions.

This shorthand division, though intended as a conceptual summary of many kinds of research, risks cementing the sense that converts themselves have a dual interior-exterior makeup. At the level of analysis, “external factors”, despite their relational character, risk being interpreted as unilateral and non-personal inputs, while on the other hand an individual’s crises and theological seeking, labelled as “internal”, may be conceived as a private, inward journey, cordoned off from the networks and structures in which these convulsions play out. This “buffered” interior, if understood by the researcher as the place shielded from outside networks, could either be marginalized as causally insignificant or uncritically reinstated as the locus of authentic response – neither of which serves an integrative approach.

The task of moving beyond interiority in descriptions of Christian conversion means finding other (i.e., not interior) ways to describe spiritual and theological aspects as integral to what is taking place. Both Henri Gooren and Ines Jindra have highlighted the need for conversion models to better include the content of religious beliefs, which have been downplayed in sociologies of

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21 Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 47–58. The internal/external division is made explicit in Rambo’s table (47), which then corresponds to the list of first various experiential causes (48–54) followed by a summary of “externally stimulated crises” (54–55). An example of Rambo’s emphasis on the internal at the crisis stage is that the missionary/advocate, though conceded at this point as a potential source of crisis, is situated and elaborated on later in the sequence, at the end of the Quest phase (68ff). While Rambo’s reference to structural and religious “availability” (17) begins to undermine such an internal-external distinction, this idea is left underdeveloped.
religion. But when theological convictions are included in these more general analyses, such as in Jindra’s model, the challenge remains for them to be integrated rather than appearing as a causal factor that competes, say, with network theory, rational choice or religious market place explanations. More specific ethnographic accounts, which look for continuity and rupture in relation to the convert’s inherited spiritual traditions and cosmologies, may offer ways to explore the role of theological beliefs in relation to, and even embedded among, the social, economic and cultural dimensions of conversion. In principle, if not yet in practice, moving beyond interiority as epistemic starting point should open up ways of attending to the convert-perceived roles of divine agents and divine agency.

When considering Christian conversion in non-western contexts, there are added reasons to move beyond frameworks which posit “interior” and “exterior” – to avoid imposing western epistemic structures onto what might be quite differently-ordered configurations of self-understanding. Talal Asad has objected to Jean and John Comaroff’s use of “consciousness” as the object of struggle in religious conversion among the Tswana in Southern Africa, on the grounds that:

We cannot know how African converts really thought and felt, but we know something of what they said and did. To the extent that “consciousness” is a discursive object, talk about it belongs to bourgeois culture.

For Asad, it is better to start at the concrete level of converts’ words and actions, and discern “what new possibilities for constituting themselves these subjects now encountered.” In fact, after preserving it as an open question, Asad then suggests that the Tswana, in converting to Christianity, were indeed drawn into a western subjectivized epistemology.

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Given that each conversion setting has its own intricacies, aspects of Christian conversion often lumped together as interior processes – such as sin, cleansing, spiritual experiences – might be reconfigured or refracted unconventionally from a Euro-American perspective. For example, Roger Lohmann, in his field study of first-generation Christians among the Asamano in New Guinea, found that the Asamano expressed their conversion as a turning of the stomach rather than of the heart or mind. This organ, for the Asamano, was the seat of volition, yet it was far from a direct mapping of one western concept onto another: the Asamano Christians related the Holy Spirit’s decisive redirection of their bellies to a complex spiritual matrix in which each person had two souls, not one, and continued in relation to multiple spiritual beings, some malevolent, others good. Lohmann’s analysis concluded that more attention needs to be paid to changes in relationships to supernatural beings, because these changes may be more constitutive of conversion than changes of belief or religious affiliation. Such an insight is possible because Lohmann does not reduce spiritual indwelling to something only “internal.”

Whether Christianity introduces a bifurcation of the interior and exterior is related to, yet risks being subordinated to the question of whether Christianity introduces a “modernizing” individualism in the non-western societies to which it spreads. Older traditions of self-attentive spirituality, such as Augustine’s attention to desire, or medieval asceticism and the journey of the soul toward God, are a reminder that not all Christian interiority amounts to modern individualism. Nor should all individuation associated with the vari-

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31 See Gavin Flood’s study of “inwardness” in the history of Christian (and Hindu and Buddhist) thought. Flood attempts to show that in medieval Christianity “the theme of inwardness plays a crucial part in even apparently exterior forms of religion in that underlying these forms is a world view in which the human person is integrated into a broader cosmos and subjectivity pervaded by forces beyond the self.” However, the patterns he traces of personhood emerging from within these larger liturgical frameworks and cartographies of the cosmos do not seem best described by his term “inwardness”, but rather by two other terms he uses: “personalism” and “subjectivity.” Gavin Flood, The Truth Within: A History of Inwardness in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism (OUP Oxford, 2013), 31, 45–47.
ous diversions and ruptures of Christian conversion be immediately equated with it either.

On the limitations of combining interiority too quickly with individualism, I want to look critically at a substantial recent article by Joel Robbins, Bambi B. Schieffelin, and Aparecida Vilaça, who observe Christianity bringing a common transformation of selfhood among three different cultural groups that had been missionized by evangelical forms of Christianity. Robbins, Schieffelin, and Vilaça start with a broad concept of “self” associated with Protestant Christianity and the work of Marcel Mauss, and, anticipating a fracturing of the concept in comparing it across contexts, distinguish between three elements: inner locus (including thought, feelings and motives), bounded identity, and a person’s setting within a matrix of social and cosmic relationships. They found that among the Amazonian Wari’, and the Bosavi and Urapmin of Melanesia, the transformation of self-exhibited a common pattern in which the “heart”, the inner locus, became central and the body more marginal. Given these groups all encountered a Protestant evangelical form of Christianity, even granting for a diversity of engagement across contexts, the authors look for ways this engagement might be constrained by a common set of problems to do with “self.” Their observation that in all three cases Christianity brought an interiorization of the self, even among the Bosavi who had not previously connected the heart to self at all, makes an important contribution towards the question of whether Christianity brings about an interiority that was not there before. But this order of beginning with a fairly rigid and western conceptualization of self and interiority prior to comparison leaves little room for these receptions of Christianity to challenge such traditional conceptions. In this case, the authors confine the heart to the larger concept of self, and move quite quickly from the interesting observation that Christianity has intensified the relationship of the individual to God as compared to other social relationships, to the conclusion that this reflects both increased interiority and individualism. I am arguing here for a cautionary preliminary step: that our analyses of non-western conversion suspend the


distinction of interior and exterior at the outset, so as to more subtly detect the kind of changes conversion brings, and then be better positioned to assess whether language of “interiority” is suitable to describe it, and if so, to allow room for such interiorities to be related in unconventional ways to the self, spiritual experience or attention to divine beings.

2 Muslim-Background “Isai” Groups in Bangladesh

To demonstrate the potential of eluding interior-exterior categories in non-western conversion contexts, I want to turn to the example of Muslim-background “Isai” (“people/followers of Jesus”) groups in Bangladesh. These groups provide an interesting angle onto the issue of subjective change because they represent an apparent conversion of spiritual allegiance to Jesus without a decisive break from Muslim social and religious structures. Drawing from three existing studies – though constrained by using data that has already been interpreted with different concerns to my own – I will argue that the Isai’s conversion is not straightforwardly described as inward, as it hinges on an extensive re-structuring of social and spiritual relations around a newly established spiritual patronage.

Bangladeshi Isai groups trace a recent history, emerging in connection to highly contextualized models of Muslim evangelism proposed in American evangelical circles in the mid-1970s and put into practice by the early 1980s. In Bangladesh these Isai groups grew rapidly – at least in the first two decades – and according to the World Christian Database had grown to 118,000 members by 2015. I am distinguishing them in the broad sense as Muslim-background Bengalis who have a primary spiritual allegiance to “Isa” rather than “Christianity” per se. But these groups are not uniform: they vary in the manner and extent to which they have remained within Muslim religious structures and retained Muslim identity, and while some groups are linked

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38 Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, World Christian Database (Leiden: Brill, 2021), accessed 14th September, 2021. The database lists these groups as “Jamaat (Messianic Muslims).”
together in terms of leadership and training, others operate as more isolated entities.

The sources used for this analysis of Bangladeshi Isai conversion are, firstly, Jonas Adelin Jørgensen’s Dhaka-based study of “Isai Imandars” (the “Jesus faithful”), which included interviews and observation of 44 persons (6 women and 38 men) in 2002 and 2004, as part of a larger dissertation. Secondly, Peter Kwang-Hee Yun’s interview-based doctoral work exploring the religious identity choices of 48 Muslim-background believers (3 women and 45 men), who belonged to various Isai jama’ats (assemblies) in an anonymous rural location in Bangladesh. And third, the dissertation of John Stephenson (a pseudonym), who observed and interviewed 45 (3 women and 42 men) “Isai lok” (“Jesus people”) in an anonymous rural location in Bangladesh, focusing on their lived theology. A complimentary source consists of two articles by missionary Tim Green, on the nature of identity choices of Muslim-background believers in Bangladesh and Pakistan. With the exception of Jørgensen’s study, the sources do not specify locality within Bangladesh out of safety concerns. Some caution then is required in using the different sources in parallel as though they add detail to the same specific groups. Yet the groups appear to share a formative missionary encounter with a similar form of Christianity: there is no record of such Isai groups existing in Bangladesh before the mid-1970s, and all three studies refer (though briefly and without specific detail) to initial missionary encounters in the mid-1970s and early 1980s.

 Jonas Adelin Jørgensen, Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas: Two Case Studies of Interreligious Hermeneutics and Identity in Global Christianity (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008), cf. 136.
 Peter Kwang-Hee Yun, “An Exploration of the Social Identity of Muslim Background Believers in a Muslim Majority Community in Bangladesh” (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Chicago, 2016.)
 Peter Kwang-Hee Yun refers to a joint initiative by local Muslim-background believers and missionaries in the mid-1970s, while Stephenson refers to a group that began in the early 1980s: Yun, “An Exploration of the Social Identity of Muslim Background Believers,” 12; Stephenson, “The Messiah of Honour,” 92. Jørgensen (131–133) does not refer to the mission history of his study group, though implies their connection to the contextualization methods pioneered by Phil Parshall in the 1970s, and later taken further by other missionaries.
specific time window connects them with the contextualization initiatives associated with faculty and graduates of Fuller Theological Seminary in the United States.\(^\text{44}\)

Members of these Isai groups have shifted their fundamental spiritual loyalty from Muhammad to Jesus, and rather than either a discrete change of social network\(^\text{45}\) or a privatized decision, this has involved a difficult social and religious re-alignment. Yun’s study found that each of the Isai had adopted one of three distinct approaches to socio-religious identity: ‘Christian/Isai’, ‘Isai/Isai Muslim’, and ‘Isai Muslim/Muslim’. As conveyed by Yun’s nomenclature, each approach itself varied between two self-referents depending on whether the Muslim-background believer was in a Muslim or Christian setting. Those classed as “Isai Muslim/Muslim” tended to participate in the major \textit{Eid Roza} and \textit{Qurbani} festivals, and half of them also attended Friday Mosque prayers.\(^\text{46}\) They also continued to view Muhammad as a prophet and upheld the Qur’an’s status as one of the four holy books (along with the Tawrat, Zabur and Injil), though functionally not as important as the other three. Those who were “Isai/Christian” did not participate in festivals or mosque prayers, nor regard Muhammad as a prophet, but still saw Muhammad and the Qur’an positively and as serving to introduce Muslims to Jesus and the Bible.\(^\text{47}\) None of the three identity approaches were unproblematic or fully resolved; members of the Isai \textit{jama’ats} have chosen a liminal status belonging to small communities that sit between the Muslim and Christian communities, causing strains in regard to employment, education, marriage and funerals.\(^\text{48}\) Some conventional categories of conversion that might normally apply to a Christian-Muslim encounter do not fit easily onto this divergence. Though they have experienced significant rupture, most of the Isai have not disaffiliated from their Muslim community,


\(^{46}\) Peter Kwang-Hee Yun, “An Exploration of the Social Identity of Muslim Background Believers in a Muslim Majority Community in Bangladesh,” 232 (Table 11).

\(^{47}\) Yun, “An Exploration of the Social Identity of Muslim Background Believers,” 185–186.

\(^{48}\) Yun, “An Exploration of the Social Identity of Muslim Background Believers,” 232.
nor intensified their Muslim faith, nor joined the Christian community.\textsuperscript{49} Yun concludes that for the Isai, their relationship to Jesus represents a primary loyalty to a centered (not bounded) set, with adherence to the bounded norms of the Muslim and Christian communities a subsequent problem to be negotiated (and often re-negotiated).\textsuperscript{50}

But is this new loyalty to Jesus a conversion that centers on the believer’s interior? The nature of Isai conversion gives hermeneutical appeal to the idea that the change has been internal since the Isai have changed spiritual allegiance while remaining in many of the same social and institutional religious structures. Jonas Jørgensen notes both the Isai Imandar’s repeated description of their iman (faith) as the fixing of one’s heart and mind on Jesus, and their change of engagement with the daily namaz prayers from being an outward ritual to the most important element being a less formal, personal connection to God.\textsuperscript{51} In both cases, he interprets this data as reflecting a change that is fundamentally inward.\textsuperscript{52} Yun notes a tendency for his respondents to distinguish between inner and outer change in their experience of following Jesus, particularly in relation to being made clean from sin, and interprets this as a transformation that begins with the inner person before altering outward behavior.\textsuperscript{53} And in all three studies, members of the Isai groups often described their new faith in Jesus in terms of the heart, accompanying feelings of peace and joy, and, more occasionally, with language of “inner” or “inward” change.\textsuperscript{54}

Yet it is not necessary to siphon the whole content of these statements of personal transformation into categories of interior and exterior. A more logical hermeneutical step is to relate them to the more prominent theme of the Isais’ pivot from Muhammad to Jesus. This turn of allegiance is not an abstract one – rather the Isais connect their newfound peace with Jesus’ capacity to personally provide for them in several pressing spheres of engagement. In all three studies, for example, interviewees point to Jesus’ power to intercede for them at the final judgement. In Jørgensen’s study, the interviewees articulate a theology of Jesus’s superior prophethood based on his birth by the Spirit and

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50 Yun, “An Exploration of the Social Identity of Muslim Background Believers,” 229.
54 E.g., Yun, “An Exploration of the Social Identity of Muslim Background Believers,” 194: “I say to them that I don’t go to namaz. If they ask the reason, I reply with another question: if you do namaz, do your all [sic] problems disappear? Don’t we have to change our inner being first?”; or Stephenson’s interviewee who elaborates on Jesus’ teaching on sin emerging from inside in the heart in Matthew 15:31 and Mark 7:35 (Stephenson, “The Messiah of Honour,” 167, ft 596. Cf. Jørgensen, \textit{Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas}, 204).
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his sinless life, enabling him to keep his followers safe on judgment day, unlike Muhammad who, in their reading of the Qur'an, did not even know himself whether he would be saved on judgment day.55 Similarly, interviewees in both Yun’s and Stephenson’s studies referred to Jesus as supārīśkārī – one who “recommends” them to Allah, with regard to safe entrance to heaven on the day of judgment – a role Bengali Muslims usually assign to Muhammed.56

This experienced proximity to Jesus (as Stephenson describes it) is difficult to confine to an interior realm, as Isai jama‘at members describe it in dynamic and practical terms: such as getting onto a bus that transports them through life or a guide who takes them by the hand – two metaphors used by the Isai. Their close connection to Jesus gives them safety in the domestic and economic spheres as well as the spiritual.57 When they do distinguish between their internal and external transformation it is not clear that their change of mind or heart is prior, either in causation or importance, to their change of behavior towards others.58

A prominent theme (in Jørgensen and Stephenson) that does point to an individualizing turn is that Isai decidedly prefer devotion to God that is freed from the rigid patterns prescribed by Muslim structures and institutions. A number of Jørgensen’s interviewees critiqued Muslim traditions that tied worship to specific buildings, clothes, times and rituals, contrasting it with their experience of God’s constant availability to them and their own multi-faceted obedience (‘surrender’) to him.59 Those Stephenson interviewed drew attention to the ineffectiveness of ritual washing and the Qurbani sacrifice in making them clean from unholiness or securing Allah’s blessing; rather, Isa Masi (Jesus Messiah) had cleansed them with his blood.60 Both Jørgensen and Stephenson latch on to occasional reference to “inward” or “outward” language to interpret this critique of religious structures through interior and exterior categories, though Jørgensen also reads it through Victor Turner’s depiction of communitas, in which the Isa jama‘ats form an anti-structure, seeing themselves as a liminal but authentic parallel religious community.61 Protestant evangelical

58  See Yun, “An Exploration of the Social Identity of Muslim Background Believers,” 134–136. Note the extended quote from interviewee So1, who explicitly intertwines inner and outer change, in relation to speech and disposition.
59  Jørgensen, Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas, 213–214.
tropes of law and grace, and the kindling of inner flames in the face of lifeless religious facades, would seem to fit some of the Isai statements, but this should be allowed to provoke more questions. In this preference for less structured devotion, how influential have been established Sufi, including Baul, streams within Bengali Islam? How influential have been readings of certain Pauline passages in the Bangla New Testament translations? And how influential have been the theology and informal worship patterns of American evangelical missionaries, such as those associated with Fuller Theological Seminary? Further empirical research is needed – for example on the oral and written liturgies of these groups, and the history of missionary transmission – to better distinguish between these influences.

As for a hermeneutic that moves beyond the category of interiority, it is Stephenson’s analysis of Isai conversion as a switching of loyalty from Muhammad to Jesus as patron *par excellence* that offers the most promising way forward. The patronage motif is prominent in Bangladesh. The society, Stephenson suggests, is broadly characterized by what Harry Triandis has termed “vertical collectivism”, in which power is accepted as being unevenly distributed, and those who wield it expected to make decisions on behalf of their respective groups. Drawing on existing studies on hierarchies in Bangladesh, Stephenson points to the patron-client system as the key way in which resources are secured and distributed: those in positions of power grant *doya* (“downwards grace”), that is favor and access to resources, in return for loyalty and service. This extends to Bengali Islam, which has traditionally emphasized Sufi *pirs* and holy men as carriers of spiritual power (a feature in continuity with Islam’s initial transmission to East Bengal by charismatic Muslim pioneers who cultivated and settled the jungles of the eastern delta.) At the top of a hierarchy of *pirs*, holy men, dead saints and prophets is Muhammad himself, who is considered by Bengali Muslims to enjoy the highest position of honor that Allah bestows. Bengalis look to spiritual patrons for protection from malevolent forces, guidance, health and financial prosperity and, most of all, intercession and deliverance on final judgment day.66 Bengali

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62 A whole subsection of Stephenson’s interviewees identified with Sufism; see Stephenson, “The Messiah of Honour,” 129. For evidence of the influence of the Baul tradition at least the devotional style of the Isai *Imandar* gatherings in Dhaka, see Jørgensen, Jesus *Imandars and Christ Bhaktas*, 144, 148, 175.
Muslims, in practice, tend to rely on Muhammad to recommend them to Allah on that day.\textsuperscript{67} On this landscape, the spiritual realm is not cordoned off from a non-spiritual one: an invisible Muhammad, for example, is seen in continuity with living \textit{pirs}, and the spiritual anxieties of the heart are closely related to the practical task of finding a resourceful patron or patrons.

In Stephenson's study, the emphatic change of allegiance from Muhammad to \textit{Isa al Mosiho} (Jesus Messiah) represented a rearrangement of the patron-age hierarchy of honor. All interviewees held \textit{Isa} above any other human; fifteen of forty five even equated him with Allah, while the others assigned him a status of close to that of Allah.\textsuperscript{68} Yet this was a re-ordering rather than an obliteration of what was before: Muhammad was moved down the hierarchy.\textsuperscript{69} Here the picture is consistent across all three studies: Muhammad is demoted to the status of other biblical prophets, and the \textit{Injil} (New Testament) with the wider \textit{kitab} (including the Torah and Psalms) promoted above the Qur'an as having power to interpret it.\textsuperscript{70} One way to interpret the different positions taken by Isai in relation to the Muslim and Christian communities is to see it as an extension of this renegotiation of patronage; members of Isai \textit{jama'at} need to secure resources for employment, education and marriage; even as their supreme recommendation now comes from \textit{Isa Mosiho}, they have decisions to make about which of the two \textit{somaj} (religious communities) to gravitate toward further down the hierarchy in these specific spheres. The patronage motif here ties together the social and theological convulsions that are occurring, which might be split apart in a scheme that divided interior from exterior. Perhaps the adoption of new supreme patron might still be read through the lens of a change in “core identity”, but this would seem a step removed from Isai conversion statements that are oriented toward Isa as provider more than toward the renewed self.\textsuperscript{71}


\textsuperscript{70} E.g., Yun, “An Exploration of the Social Identity of Muslim Background Believers,” 182–183, 194.

\textsuperscript{71} Take, for example, the following statement where the focus on provision leads more to theological reflection rather than identity-reflection: “We have seen, \textit{Īśā Alai Salam} has shown us by doing all these in this world. So we know that he himself is Allah. Because except for Allah, no one can give anyone those things: birth, death and after that money and property. But we have seen these things in \textit{Īśā Mosiho}.” Stephenson, “The Messiah of Honour,” 119.
3 Conclusion: Interiority and Intimacy

This article began by highlighting the well-established and now ingrained pattern of viewing Christian conversion through an epistemic division of the internal and external. In the second part, with the case of Bengali Isai, I have offered a way of moving beyond this structure by insisting that the theological and spiritual ruptures of conversion be interpreted within the relational networks and performative settings in which they play out. Taking our cue from Assad’s query, “what new possibility for constituting themselves have these subjects now encountered?” members of the Bengali Muslim-background Isa groups have perceived, in the message of Jesus, an opportunity to gain intimate proximity to one higher than Muhammad in power and status, one who will provide for them even to giving an impeccable recommendation to Allah at the judgment. The scheme of adjusted spiritual patronage avoids unnecessarily splitting the invisible and spiritual from the material and practical; the subsequent headaches of securing lines of provision through church or ummah networks are not an outworking from internal to external but are the multilateral processes necessary for Isais to re-align under their new Patron.

Suspending interiority as a hermeneutical category like this leaves space for a subsequent step of assessing whether interiority nevertheless surfaces in the data as a feature of Christian conversion, even in non-western contexts. The path towards a credible general assessment is one of comparison: comparing different sets of converts and looking for overlaps with previously observed aspects of interiority, be it internal crisis, inner cleansing, personal repentance and so on. Concepts of Christian conversion should not be tied so tightly to context that observing similarities becomes impossible.72 But these comparisons need to allow for the idea of interiority to be re-shaped beyond the strictures of Pietist theology and Kantian philosophy. For the Bengali Isai, the frequent reference to feeling assurance and joy of the heart in relation to the Messiah points to an interiorizing dimension to their conversion. Yet their case raises a question about the scope of “interiority” itself: is a transformative “devotional intimacy” with the Christian divinity the same thing as interior transformation? If such a concept of experienced proximity to God only partially overlaps with interiority, might it not be the more elementary factor behind the individuating effects of Christianity on its converts?

72 As argued by Robbins, Schieffelin, and Vilaça, “Evangelical Conversion,” 559–565.