

# IJFM

Int'l Journal of Frontier Missiology

The Journal  
of the International Society for  
Frontier Missiology

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July–September 2015

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# Clarifying Christian Commitments *in a* GLOBALIZING AGE

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## Probing the Grassroots of Mission in Asia

I didn't immediately notice certain Asian realities when I first encountered them. My roommate during seminary was a brilliant student from a Buddhist family, Hwa Chen, who was preparing for ministry in the Methodist church of Malaysia. I recall how we would pray together for his Buddhist father, and how years later the news arrived that Chen's father had turned to Christ just before he died. I was unable to sit with Chen and confirm any of this before he tragically died in an automobile accident. I now see that Chen's prayers were interlaced with Asian values of family, the role of a father, and realities surrounding the honor given to one's lineage.

Chen's sensibilities about his father, although transformed by his Christian faith, might have resonated with some of the same ethical intensity common to Asian ancestral regard. His brother, Yung, who now serves as bishop of the Methodist church in Malaysia, might have represented Chen's perspective on ancestral veneration when he wrote:

Chinese ancestral rites have both a religious and social significance. To participate in it in its original form does involve a religious act which, as it appears to me, would conflict with the demands of the gospel. But to neglect it all together would rightly incur cultural condemnation of being disrespectful to parents.<sup>1</sup>

Hwa Chen would most likely have experienced the conundrum Yung so candidly illustrates:

...often the [Christian's] lack of overt mourning, within a culture that demands it, has led to comments, actually overheard at a funeral, like: "It is better to die as a dog than as a Christian."<sup>2</sup>

The Asian authors in this issue readdress the realities that persist around these ancestral rites. They want to explore how we might reinterpret the religious, social and spiritual realities behind these rituals. The first installment of David Lim's article gives a concise history of this controversy in Christian mission, which then provides the backdrop for Mantae Kim's bold reevaluation of how these rites are viewed in Protestant Korea. We also include Mitsuo Fukuda's broader perspective on the way we engage the spiritual realities of Japan (p. 139). These three articles were originally presentations at the annual meetings of the Asia Society for Frontier Mission (ASFM), and each stretches our more traditional paradigms—beware the easily offended!

There are good reasons why these ASFM presentations ought to be heard. First, traditional religious rituals are always affected by deeper changes in a society's

*Editorial continued on p. 108*

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The views expressed in **IJFM** are those of the various authors and not necessarily those of the journal's editors, the International Society for Frontier Missiology or the society's executive committee.

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consciousness. The pace of secularization goes unabated in East Asia, evident in the great rise of atheism. The taken-for-granted notions of reality behind these Asian religious traditions are under great stress from a modernizing world, such that we should expect a "struggle for the real" on all religious fronts.<sup>3</sup> There's a common struggle to maintain one's traditional religiosity, yet, alternatively, statistics indicate that there's a rise in participation at ancestral rites over the past few decades.<sup>4</sup> We recognize these reactions to secularization in other current events, how it stimulates violence and catalyzes new fundamentalisms. As secular forces continue to impact the religious consciousness of Asia, they create a gradual drift into less vital "religious-mindedness" or a radicalization of threatened traditions. How Asia responds to this crisis of worldview will determine the grip of any socio-religious ritual like these ancestor rites.

Secondly, fresh "self-theologizing" is appearing in Asia. It was Chen's brother, Yung, who originally called for an exegetical and theological reexamination of the "hidden presuppositions" behind the elite Western theologies transposed

onto Asia.<sup>5</sup> But it's Simon Chan's recent book, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up*,<sup>6</sup> that outlines a new theological method for appreciating the grassroots religiosity of Asian family life, and leads him to reorient how we view the supposed stumbling block of ancestral rites (see Editorial Reflections). All to say, this ferment among Asian theologians runs in tandem with the missiology of these *IJFM* articles.

A third reason is simply that the Asian churches are taking some bold intrepid steps to reach beyond their traditional worlds. Herb Hofer reminds us that we can so easily marginalize the primary communal realities which segment traditional religious worlds (p. 147). It's a timely reminder when considering the value of family at the base of ancestor rites. Paul Pennington reflects Hofer's point in his case study of the church crossing into another religious world (p.129). He offers a new apostolic paradigm which challenges how we have traditionally understood Christian identity within Hindu families and communities. It's a must read, and its original presentation

at this year's ISFM was powerful. Wish many of you could have been there.

We commend the ASFM to you as readers, and their dedication to foster new Kingdom perspective on these old issues (ASFM Report, p. 138). John Kim, the present director, will continue to support a platform that speaks to the unresolved issues of reaching the vast peoples of Asia, and that association will push for missiological paradigms that will bear fruit beyond traditional Christendom. We're blessed by their partnership.

In Him,



Brad Gill  
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?* (Wipf and Stock: Eugene, OR 1997) p. 229.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>3</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed* (University of Chicago Press: 1968) pp. 90–117.

<sup>4</sup> Chuck Lowe, *Honoring God and Family* (Billy Graham Center: Wheaton, IL 2001) pp. 26–27.

<sup>5</sup> Hwa Yung, p. 232.

<sup>6</sup> Reviewed in *IJFM* 31:3 (2014), p. 158.

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The **IJFM** is published in the name of the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, a fellowship of younger leaders committed to the purposes of the twin consultations of Edinburgh 1980: The World Consultation on Frontier Missions and the International Student Consultation on Frontier Missions. As an expression of the ongoing concerns of Edinburgh 1980, the **IJFM** seeks to:

- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate "A Church for Every People."

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, "to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the **IJFM** (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the **IJFM** for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.

# Contextualizing Ancestor Veneration: An Historical Review

by *David S. Lim*

Editor's Note: This paper was originally presented at the SEANET forum in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 2009, and published in their compendium as "Family and Faith in Asia: The Missional Impact of Social Networks" (WCL, Pasadena, 2010), pp. 183–215 (available at [missionbooks.org](http://missionbooks.org)). The paper was revised and updated and then presented at the Asia Society for Frontier Mission (ASFM) meetings in Manila, Philippines, in October 2014. The first section is presented here, with the second part to follow in an upcoming issue.

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*David Lim (PhD Fuller Seminary) is from the Philippines, and serves as President of the Asian School for Development and Cross-Cultural Studies. He previously served as Professor of Biblical Theology & Transformation Theology and as Academic Dean at both the Asian Theological Seminary (Philippines) and the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (UK). He also serves as President of China Ministries Int'l - Philippines, and is a key facilitator of the Philippine Missions Mobilization Movement which seeks to mobilize a million Filipino tentmakers to reach the unreached.*

In many cultures of Asia today, ancestral veneration remains the biggest hindrance in evangelizing their vast populations. As we seek to form Christ-centered communities, we're confronted with how the gospel can be contextualized in cultures that venerate ancestors. Most recently Asian Evangelical/Pentecostal theologian Simon Chan devoted one chapter of his book to highlight ancestral veneration as a key theological issue in Asia (Chan, 2014). Though I approach this issue from my particular ministry among ethnic Chinese in the Philippines, I believe that its relevance extends to ministries among other peoples whose cultures include ancestral beliefs and practices. This could include all other "folk Buddhists" among the Japanese and Koreans, and "folk religionists" in India, Africa, and across the globe.

Chinese Christians have been called "traitors" (bad Chinese) and considered "outcasts" (non-Chinese, or anti-Chinese) by compatriots whose ethnic and/or cultural identities are essentially defined by filial piety as the supreme virtue in their moral hierarchy of human relationships. In Taiwan, as in most overseas Chinese communities, many who are interested in Christianity, but who were raised under a strong Chinese religious influence, have been reluctant to commit their lives to Christ unless they are allowed to retain their ancestral tablets on the altar in the living room. A Japanese minister confessed that he could not win his eldest brother who said, "If I were to become a Christian, all memory of our honored ancestors will perish" (McGavran 1985:314).

Ancestor veneration, with its moral and cultural implications, presents Christianity with a great conflict far beyond the churches. To non-Christians, Christians disrespect their departed family members; they have lost interest in and are disloyal to family traditions. Christians have been criticized and persecuted (and even disowned) by their families, not so much for religious but for moral reasons. It raises the question as to whether Christians can develop

Christ-centered communities that honor their ancestors more than their non-Christian neighbors.

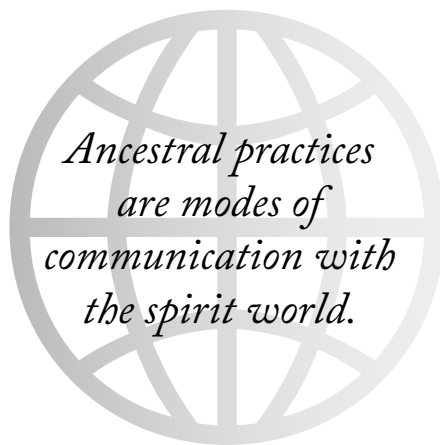
### *Ancestor Veneration Defined*

Ancestor *veneration* may convey a more accurate sense of what practitioners are actually doing than when ancestor *worship* is assigned to these rituals in Buddhist-influenced and Confucian-influenced societies. The translation “worship” is in many ways a misnomer that causes misunderstanding. In English, the word “worship” usually refers to the reverent love and devotion accorded a deity or divine being. However, in these cultures, these acts of supposed “worship” do not confer any belief that the departed ancestors have become some kind of deity. For these cultures, ancestor practices are not the same as the worship of the gods. The purpose of ancestor veneration is to do one’s filial duty. Many of them believe that their ancestors actually need to be provided for by their descendants; and others do not believe that the ancestors are even aware of what their descendants do for them, but that their expression of filial piety is what is most important. Whether or not the ancestor receives what is offered is not really the issue.

Rather, the act is a way to respect, honor and look after ancestors in their afterlives, as well as to insure their continuous good relations with living descendants. In this regard, similar practices exist among many of these cultures and religions. Some may visit the grave of their parents or other ancestors, leaving flowers and praying to them in order to honor and remember them, while also asking their ancestors to continue to look after them as their descendants. However, they would not consider themselves as worshipping them.

Chinese ancestral veneration (*jīngzǔ*; and *bàizǔ*) seeks to honor the deeds and memories of the deceased. This honor is a further extension of filial piety for the ancestors, the ultimate

homage to the deceased, as if they were actually alive. Instead of prayers, joss-sticks are offered with communications and greetings to the deceased. There are eight qualities of *De* (“virtue”) for a Chinese to complete his earthly duties, and filial piety is the foremost of those qualities. The importance of paying filial duties to parents (and elders) lies with the fact that all physical bodily aspects of our being were created by our parents, who continued to tend to our welfare until we became adults, and then even beyond. The respect and the homage to parents reciprocates these gracious deeds in this life and after. This filial piety is the ultimate homage. Thus traditional Chinese ancestral veneration should be



understood as a fusion of the classical ethical teachings of Confucius and Laozi, rather than a religious ritual that worships deity.

Ancestral practices are modes of communication with the spirit world. Food “sacrifices” are offered to “feed” the deceased. It also includes visiting the deceased at their graves, and making offerings to the deceased in the *Qing Ming*, *Chong Yang* and Ghost festivals. All three are related to paying homage to the spirits. For those with deceased relatives in the netherworld (or hell), elaborate or even creative offerings such as toothbrush, comb, towel, slippers, and water are provided so that the deceased will be able to have these

items in the afterlife. Often paper versions of these objects are burned for the same purpose, and may even include paper cars and TVs. *Spirit money* (also called “hell notes”) is burned as an offering to the dead in their afterlife. The living may regard the ancestors as “guardian angels,” perhaps protecting them from serious accidents, or guiding them in their path of life.

How then do we contextualize in such cultures that venerate ancestors? I believe that contextualization must involve three major procedures: First, we need to do historical and cultural research on how the general population and Christians regard this phenomenon. Then, we must do a thorough survey of what the Bible says about this issue theologically and missiologically. And last, we can recommend how contextualization could be helpful in the development of theology and spirituality in this socio-religious milieu. I will focus only on the first of these in this article, by giving an historical perspective on how ancestor veneration has been interpreted in the Christian movement.

### *Historical Differences*

In my historical research, I found that when Christianity was propagated in such countries as China, Japan and Korea, ancestor veneration was condemned as “idolatrous” in most instances. While in earlier times Christian churches may have taken a favorable attitude toward ancestral practices, or seen it as a desirable socio-cultural custom, most missions and churches that came later were very critical and viewed “ancestor worship” as idolatry.

Christianity entered China during the Tang dynasty. According to the Nestorian Monument (erected in AD 781), the Nestorians looked favorably upon Chinese “ancestor worship.” They taught the importance of properly treating the dead and caring for those who had passed away. The limited record shows that their evangelistic efforts brought forth significant fruit.

The Jews entered China during the Song and Yuen dynasties. At that time the city of Kai-Feng had China's largest Jewish population. The Jewish Monument (erected in 1489) shows that worship of heaven was not complete if one did not also worship ancestors. This was done twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall. The Jews believed that one must serve one's parents in the same manner after their death as when they were living by showing respect and offering food and other goods. Another Jewish monument dated 1663 actually described the meaning of the word worship: "the expression of one's uttermost respect and sincerity," or "the expression of one's deep gratitude and desire to repay kindness bestowed upon him." The food offered was clearly intended to express gratitude.

The Jews in Kai-Feng not only worshipped Yahweh, but they also conducted "Ji" worship, and the "Zai" ceremonies of self-cleansing and preparation. The purpose of these practices was to express gratitude to the ancestors. And in addition to the synagogue, the Jews in Kai-Feng erected another building to place ancestral tablets. They made tablets for such ancestors as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. According to Jewish tradition, they offered vegetables and fruits because they believed that meat could be offered to God alone and only at the temple in Jerusalem (Lin 1985:149-150). It appears that Judaism as practiced in China basically accepted the Chinese traditional view of heaven, Confucianism, and certain ancestor practices. They seem to have seen no conflict between Chinese and Jewish beliefs.

### Roman Catholics

When the first Roman Catholic missionaries of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) arrived, mainly identified with the initiatives of Matteo Ricci, they also took a favorable attitude toward the deep-rooted Chinese tradition of ancestor practices. From the beginning of the 17th century this would continue

*The pope viewed these ceremonies as mere expressions of respect for the dead that helped teach a younger generation to respect their own culture.*

for about 100 years, and their churches increased significantly. But from the beginning of the 18th century the church took a critical attitude for the next 200 years, and churches declined and almost disappeared.

This change occurred when the Dominicans and the Franciscans came to China in the mid-17th century. They disagreed with the Jesuit perspective and fought fervently against the Chinese traditional "worship" of Confucius and the ancestors. In 1704, Pope Clement XI approved a decree (*Ex illa die*) which totally forbade ancestor (and Confucius) worship, and this was officially delivered to China in 1715, and then finally translated into Chinese in 1720. Emperor Kang Xi of the Ching dynasty, who had previously held a favorable attitude toward Roman Catholic beliefs, was greatly angered by this papal decree. Earlier in 1692 he had written an imperial decree stating that ancestral veneration is a civic ceremony and not a religious ritual, but now in anger he signed a decree forbidding all Roman Catholic activities in China. All succeeding emperors followed this position. As a result, Roman Catholic work, which had been prospering during the Ming and Ching dynasties, came to a halt. This was the greatest setback since the church's failure to respond to the request of Kublai Khan (conveyed by Marco Polo in 1271) to send 100 "teachers of science and religion" to reinforce the Nestorians.

In 1742, Pope Benedict XIV decreed *Ex quo*, which forbade even the discussion of such matters among believers, and rescinded the "Eight Special Permissions" originally given to the Jesuits. This rejectionist stance lasted for 200 years. Then in 1939, Pope Pius XII reversed and decreed the removal

of *Ex quo*. The pope accepted Chinese traditional "worship" of Confucius and the ancestors, for he viewed these ceremonies as mere expressions of respect for the dead, and he believed that these rituals helped teach the younger generations to respect their own culture. He considered it right for the believers to bow or to practice other forms of rituals before a dead person, an image or tablet of a dead person. This remains the official Roman Catholic position to this day.

In 1979 Cardinal Yu-Bin promoted the "worship" of heaven and the ancestors among Roman Catholic believers in Taiwan. He officiated at large-scale ceremonies, thus eliciting some public positive reaction. Unfortunately, the ceremonial rituals were not fully understood so the actual impact of Catholic mission there remained negligible.

### Protestants

The early Protestant missionaries took a critical attitude from the start, most probably influenced by the rejectionist view of their Roman Catholic contemporaries. Although they produced a good number of conversions, these converts were rejected by the Chinese, especially by the intelligentsia, for they regarded missionaries as imperialistic enforcers of a sweeping disapproval of Chinese culture. And when some missionaries took a favorable attitude, they hardly influenced the stance of Chinese believers.

Those who opposed "ancestor worship" were especially those of the China Inland Mission (CIM), the largest Protestant mission group. They had received basic theological training and brought with them not only their Christian beliefs but also Western social and cultural symbolism. Although the CIM was able to take on the

indigenous appearance of the Chinese, they sincerely believed that only their religious system was appropriate to express the true Christian faith, and they failed to understand the deeper values and orientation of Chinese culture. They simply believed that “ancestor worship” was idolatrous.

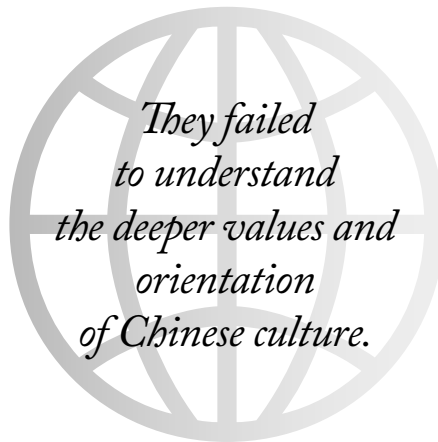
Those who supported “ancestor veneration” included such missionaries as William Martin, Allen Young, Joseph Edkins, Alexander Williamson, Timothy Richard and others, most of whom belonged to an academic study group called Guang Xue Hui. They had received a university education, and thus were more sensitive toward social and cultural realities. They knew that evangelism could not be a mere transmission of ideas and concepts. If Christianity were to be rooted in China, it also must become a vital part of Chinese social structure. If the Christian faith were to truly transform Chinese people for God’s kingdom, it would not only be accepted conceptually, but culturally and socially as well.

Therefore, these Protestant missionaries also sought appropriate forms and symbolism for expressing Christian faith in daily living. They believed that Chinese believers must develop their own sets of meaningful forms and symbols. They saw little contradiction between Christian and Chinese beliefs, considering the Christian faith to be compatible with Confucian teachings and filling the areas which were not covered by Confucianism. These missionaries believed that socio-cultural forms must not become obstacles for the upper class and intellectuals. Therefore, they had greater respect and appreciation for Chinese cultural traditions. These missionaries considered Chinese “ancestor worship” to have two major functions: (1) people expressed their reverence as well as feelings of closeness toward the deceased; and (2) as a nation, China maintained “ancestor worship” as a form of education: veneration of ancestors taught honor

and respect for parents and elders, and veneration of Confucius taught the importance of education.

#### *The Protestant Debate*

“Ancestor worship” was highlighted during the Second Conference of Protestant missionaries in China in 1890, to follow up previous debate at the First Conference in 1877. William Martin presented a paper entitled “The Worship of Ancestors – A Plea for Toleration,” which affirmed the educational and moral values in “ancestor worship,” and suggested that missionaries refrain from speaking against Chinese traditional practices, and instead trust the Holy Spirit and God’s Word to transform the hearts of



Chinese people. The truth would influence them and naturally bring about the necessary changes.

This ignited a big debate. Hudson Taylor (CIM) and C.W. Mateer (Presbyterian) led the opposition. They rejected Martin’s viewpoint regarding the three elements of “ancestor worship.” They pointed out that Martin only observed the aspect of respect and commemoration and failed to detect the element of idolatry. They claimed that if there were an element of idolatry in China, it would surely be found in the practice of “ancestor worship,” and thus insisted that tolerating it would ruin Christianity. They quoted many Scripture verses and totally rejected any possibility of

toleration. Taylor averred that every detail of the “ancestor worship” ceremony was idolatrous.

The conference ended with the overwhelming victory for those who opposed “ancestor worship.” Led by Taylor, almost all the delegates at the conference stood to their feet demonstrating their total opposition to ancestor worship. It must be noted that no Chinese representative was at those two conferences.

Since then, Chinese Protestantism’s mainstream has been officially against “ancestor worship.” After the Communist takeover of China, this issue became irrelevant with the banishing of all religions. No discussion also means that the Protestants of both registered and unregistered churches in China continue to hold the prevailing rejectionist view.

In Taiwan, people were receptive to this early Protestant rejectionist view so that “ancestor worship” was not a problem. But in the 1960s the island nation enjoyed great economic progress, rekindling their national and cultural pride, and this caused a decline in the growth of the church. Facing the decline, church leaders became aware of the importance of the Christian faith being rooted in Chinese culture. This movement called “Searching for Roots” began to re-evaluate the signs, forms, and symbolism used in Chinese folk religion. Once again the issue of “ancestor worship” had surfaced, but again, it had no significant effect on the common rejectionist view.

#### *Recent Re-examination*

There have been recent attempts among Protestant theologians and church leaders to re-examine the rejectionist stance, but unfortunately there has been no significant breakthrough to reverse or modify it. The call for this reevaluation comes from two main sources. First, pastors realize that in spite of official prohibitions the majority of their church members still practice ancestor veneration, albeit in



different degrees and forms. Secondly, researchers have discovered that these practices are still quite prevalent, even in a Japanese village that has had a relatively large number of Anglicans (38.9%) over three generations (1887-1975) (Berentsen 1985b:289-290).

The Asia Theological Association (ATA) sponsored a "Consultation on the Christian Response to Ancestor Practices" in Taipei in December 1983, with 98 participants from nine Asian countries, including those with significant overseas Chinese minorities. They issued a "Working Document" which still reiterated a consensus for evangelical Protestants to maintain the rejectionist view (ATA 1985:3-10), though the papers were more open to contextualization. The Northern Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan also co-sponsored a seminar on ancestral veneration led by scholars and clergy in November 2002, which highlighted the contrast between the Chinese and the Western worldviews in relation to ancestors (TCN 2002:1). There may have been other such conferences, but there seems to have been no significant shift from the official rejectionist view.

There is a general sense that a gradual process of "natural accommodation" happens through both secularization and "Christian influence" (especially through education of the young in Christian schools). It supposes that when the dead and the spirit world fade away from daily significance, so will ancestral veneration fade away as a Chinese tradition. Yet, the "internet age" has achieved the opposite and given birth to new forms of ancestral veneration: for Koreans, "cyber ancestral worship" is available online ([www.memorial-zone.or.kr](http://www.memorial-zone.or.kr)) for descendants to view pictures and videos of ancestors and their graveyards, to listen to their voices, to read their biographies and accomplishments, and to submit commemorating messages.

Today's converts within Protestantism have hardly changed their Chinese worldview and value system.

*"Cyber ancestral worship" is available online for viewing videos of ancestors, pictures of their graveyards, and for listening to their voices.*

Attracted by the claim of superior efficacy in Christianity, some Chinese who had been practicing traditional religion turned to Christ in crises, whether due to illness, the identity crisis of teenagers, or the needs of new migrants to cities. Their ready acceptance of Christianity was facilitated by certain similarities between these two traditions. Deities, rituals, and other manifestations of their former religion were consciously rejected, and they devoted themselves to the individual and communal practices of this new faith; but, their acceptance of any Protestant practice was based on and informed by the ideas, categories, conceptual scheme, and value system of the religious tradition they consciously rejected. Their socio-religious worldview continues to be operative in helping them to understand and appropriate the new religious tradition. With regard to healing and exorcism, Jesus is a more powerful and promising deity, a more efficacious alternative to the traditional gods in a world constantly intruded by demons and evil spirits. With regard to morality, they interpret and appropriate Christian moral teachings in a Chinese way, upholding filial piety and family harmony in the same manner as their former religion. With regard to divine-human relationships, they relate to their Christian God with ideas of retribution and reciprocity which are essential elements in Chinese popular religion. All these are not a simple mixing of elements of Protestantism and Chinese religion, nor are these a simple acceptance of one religious tradition and rejection of another (Yip 1985). This "natural accommodation" may be viewed as the actualization of Protestantism in a Chinese worldview. This actualization is not static; it will surely develop new innovations within

the slowly changing boundaries of socio-religious traditions, especially in a day of postmodernism that encourages tolerance and accommodation towards new worldviews and other religious movements.

#### *Reviewing Christian Innovations*

Yet the gap between the socio-religious traditions of Protestantism and Chinese religion remains very wide, and Christians are still perceived as anti-cultural, anti-family, separatist or isolationist. Hence, several suggestions of more deliberate accommodation by Christians using "functional substitutes" have emerged. Many of these have been implemented, but hardly on an official or large scale, and consequently have had hardly any social impact.

Some have sought to transform traditional Chinese funerals into Christian Chinese funerals. For example, in Taiwan, where a memorial table is traditionally established for friends and relatives to show their concern for the mourning family by burning incense sticks for the deceased, some Christians have urged the setting up of a similar table. This is to show respect for the deceased and their love and concern for the family members. The Taiwan Presbyterian Church has endorsed hanging on the central wall a picture of Christ, the Ten Commandments, and Bible verses on large sheets of paper that are carefully framed. An enlarged and framed photo of the deceased is also hung in a prominent place in the house, but not on the spot once occupied by the ancestral tablets.

Traditionally the Taiwanese hire professional mourners for the funeral procession; they regard those who die without people to mourn (and wail) as being most unfortunate. Thus they see Christians as those who "die without

people mourning.” So it has been suggested that Christians should weep and cry at the death and funeral of a family member, but without wailing speeches. They should wail or cry aloud, possibly with such words as “Lord, be with us and comfort us”; “Lord, guide so-and-so to heaven safely and into your bosom”; or “Lord, may so-and-so rest in heavenly peace.”

In Taiwanese tradition the family holds a total of seven memorial services, one every seven days after burial. The purpose of these services is to venerate the deceased, and usually a Taoist priest or Buddhist monk leads the relatives in the rituals. These services serve the purpose of gradually relieving the bereaved of their emotional burden. Thus Christians have been encouraged to also have memorial services during which the family can sing Christian songs and share the message of the Bible, and thus serve evangelistic purposes as well. Usually it takes place once a year on the anniversaries of the day of death, and the local pastor is asked to preside over it. This is also done in Korea, but the form and content are so very “Christian” that non-Christians hardly consider these ceremonies as honoring their ancestor.

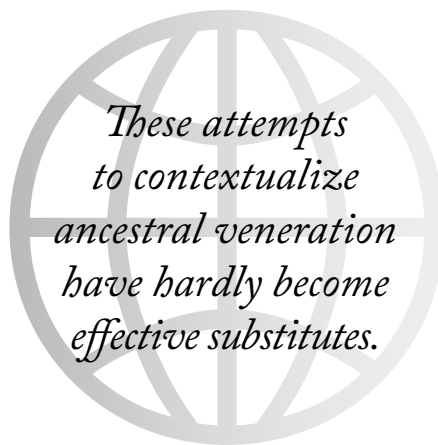
Some Christians say they continue to go to the annual meetings where people of common lineage come together to offer traditional sacrifices to ancestors. Christians do not participate in the sacrificial offerings, but the purpose of their presence is to maintain fellowship with the relatives and to show them that they have not forsaken the ancestors.

Christians are encouraged to prepare their own family records similar to those possessed by clan leaders. One publisher in Taiwan has made blank forms of family records available for use by Christians. Hakka ministers are especially anxious to get Christians to prepare such records in order to show non-Christians their regard for their glorious ancestry. In Taiwan and in the Philippines, some give donations

in memory of the departed loved ones, and these are given for Christian work or to charitable institutions.

Above all, during the *Qing Ming* Festival, Christian families have been encouraged to visit and clean their ancestors’ graves, and the head of the family can lead a Christian memorial service as a substitute for offering sacrifices to the ancestors. With flowers, hymns and short devotionals, Christians can show love and respect to the deceased. The elders in my Chinese church in the Philippines chose to lay flowers on the graves of deceased church members every All Saints’ Day, but not during *Qing Ming*.

Yet these attempts to contextualize ancestral veneration have been



individual and piece-meal, and have hardly become effective substitutes. Invitations to attend memorial services hosted by Christians have been avoided by non-Christian relatives, and some have been threatened with harm. The latter consider Christian funeral rites to be devoid of proper respect and decorum, and thus their dead loved ones are buried “like rats.” This bad reputation before the community is mainly due to Christians trying to contextualize in their own terms and understanding, rather than from the viewpoint of these other contemporaries. The general (and quite accurate) popular perception is that these Christian innovations are no real change from its rejectionist stance.

I believe the pressure of church tradition has made it difficult to successfully contextualize within a socio-religious milieu which prioritizes ancestor veneration. I hope this historical review has sufficiently introduced the kind of pressure any innovation must consider. In the forthcoming installment on this theme, I will offer my own survey of what the Bible says about this issue of ancestor veneration both theologically and missiologically. And then, hopefully, we can recommend an appropriate contextualization of ancestor veneration for future mission efforts. **IJFM**

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# The Ancestral Rite in Korea: Its Significance and Contextualization from an Evangelical Perspective

by Paul Mantae Kim

Editor's Note: This article will be recast in an upcoming book edited by Daniel Shaw and William Burrows on traditional rituals and Christian worship (ASM monograph under Orbis Books). These editors wish to reduce the Western concern for syncretism as a negative result of contextualization and herald hybridity as a more positive consequence, the latter being both necessary and relevant to the local development of spirituality in all its varied manifestations. Their hope in mission is to allow the tender prompting of the Holy Spirit to bring local reflection, assessment, and practical adjustment in applying ancient expressions encapsulated in ritual and ceremony to the reality of worshiping God in all his glory.

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Christian controversy over the Korean ancestral rite has simmered over the last 200 years. The rite persists today and still holds an important place among Korean people. I begin with an introduction of the issue followed by the nature and motifs of the ancestral rite. The rest of the study addresses a relevant evangelical Korean engagement with the rite. My intention is to encourage discussion over the issue rather than to give a definitive solution.

Before proceeding further, let me give a brief historical overview of the issue in Korean Christian history. Christianity first encountered Korean ancestral rites when Catholics came to Korea in the late 18th century. At the beginning, the Catholic mission rejected them and then had to face strong opposition from Korean people (Kim 2005, 317). For this reason, many Catholic missionaries and their Korean converts were martyred. At that time, the Catholic mission considered ancestral rites to be idolatry. In a radical change of their initial position, Roman authorities revisited the so-called “Chinese Rites Controversy” and allowed Catholics to observe traditional Confucian ancestor rites. In a similar fashion, many Korean Catholics practice either traditional ancestral rites or an alternative practice that incorporates traditional elements with their Catholic faith. On the other hand, Protestant missions, which began in Korea in 1884, condemned the ancestral practice from the beginning, just as the Catholics had done (Ok 2005, 219–27). Today, most Korean Protestant churches still disapprove of ancestral rites although they allow a Christian form of memorial service.

## *Significance of the Study*

Why do we need to conduct a serious study of the Korean ancestral rite? How does this study relate to evangelical Christian life in Korea? I see at least

three reasons why this discussion is both necessary and important: (1) Korean Christians frequently clash with their unbelieving family members about the observance of the ancestral rite; (2) Korean Protestants recognize a need to go beyond current Christian memorial services and generate a better alternative; (3) a resolution of the issue is essential to improve the public image of Protestantism in the Korean society. I will expand on each of these.

When I became a Christian, my family had been sincerely observing ancestral rites for generations. At that time, I had a combative attitude toward my parents, and I determined that I would not betray God by attending the ritual. My parents were unhappy about my absence but they were tolerant of me. When my parents later became Christian, my father decided to replace the traditional ancestral rite with a Christian memorial service. After this replacement, regrettably, my uncle and his family never showed up for our new Christian practice regarding ancestors. They gradually disconnected themselves from my family since our adoption of Christian practices for ancestral veneration. Note that this example from my own family demonstrates a problem that is repeated in many other families, one that makes many Koreans reluctant to become Christian, because they do not want to abandon the traditional ancestral rite.

Marriages between Christians and non-Christians can face a serious conflict over observance of ancestral rites. According to a news report, a Christian Korean woman who refused to attend the ancestral rite was divorced by her husband (Kang 2012). When someone converts and becomes a Protestant Christian, and if his parents are not Christian, how should he deal with ancestral rites? Korean Christians need to discover a proper resolution for the problems relating to traditional ancestral rituals in their relationship with unbelieving family members. In

relation to this issue, Chuck Lowe did an in-depth study of how churches should respond to Chinese popular ancestral practices. In this study, he recommends that churches should not ignore the people's social and cultural traditions and that Christian converts should be able to celebrate family occasions and traditional festivals without either offending their relatives or compromising their Christian faith (Lowe 2001, 271).

Korean Protestants increasingly recognize a need to reexamine traditional ancestral rites and to go beyond current Christian memorial services to generate a better alternative. This article is an endeavor to carry that



forward. Moreover, statistical data shows that more than a few Protestant Christians feel their current memorial services are spiritually insufficient. In this regard, 24.8 % of Protestant respondents agreed, 27.9% disagreed, and 47.3% were undecided when asked if they think their Christian memorial services are spiritually satisfying (Hansin University Theological Institute 2005, 229). Furthermore, 36.7% agreed, 33.2% disagreed, and 30.1% were undecided when asked in a survey whether Korean Christianity needs to positively incorporate traditional funeral or ancestor rituals without damaging the essence of Christian faith (Hansin University Theological Institute 2005, 228).

In this regard, Bongho Son, a Protestant Christian ethicist, has stated that Protestant churches urgently need a new memorial service that does not ignore the traditional rite and that retains biblical teachings (Kim 2011). A Korean sociologist, Sungyoon Cho, has shown that Protestant forms of memorial services clash with traditional forms of the ancestral rite. He claims a need to harmonize these two forms and points out that Protestant churches are reluctant to address this issue for fear that they will be condemned as heretical (Kim 2011). Inwoong Son (a well-known Korean pastor), argues that we should not reject the ancestral rite simply as idolatry, but give attention to its essence of filial piety (*Hyo*). He suggests that Protestant churches should have sincere conversations over the issue and search out an appropriate method that avoids conflicts with Korean traditional culture while evangelizing (Ko 2013).

Third, this study may lead to an improvement of the public image of Protestantism in the Korean society. Korean Protestantism experienced a modest decrease in 2005 after the previous few decades of explosive numeric growth, according to national survey results. In concrete terms, the actual number of Korean Protestants decreased by 1.4% from 1995 to 2005, according to a Korean national survey; in contrast, Catholics were reported to have increased by 74.4% during the same period (Cho 2012). This decrease may be attributed in some measure to the decline of the public reputation of Korean Protestantism in society. According to the Korean Ministerial Sociology Institute (2006), one of the major reasons is that many Koreans think Protestantism has an exclusivist stance toward Korean traditional culture. As a result they regard Protestantism as extraneous and prefer Catholicism, which is more accepting of traditional culture.

Statistical research of Korean perception of culture shows that ancestral

rites still occupy an importance place in the lives of Korean people. When Koreans were asked if they agreed with the practice of traditional ancestral rites, 66.5% of the respondents replied positively; 22.1% disapproved; and 11.4% were undecided. On the other

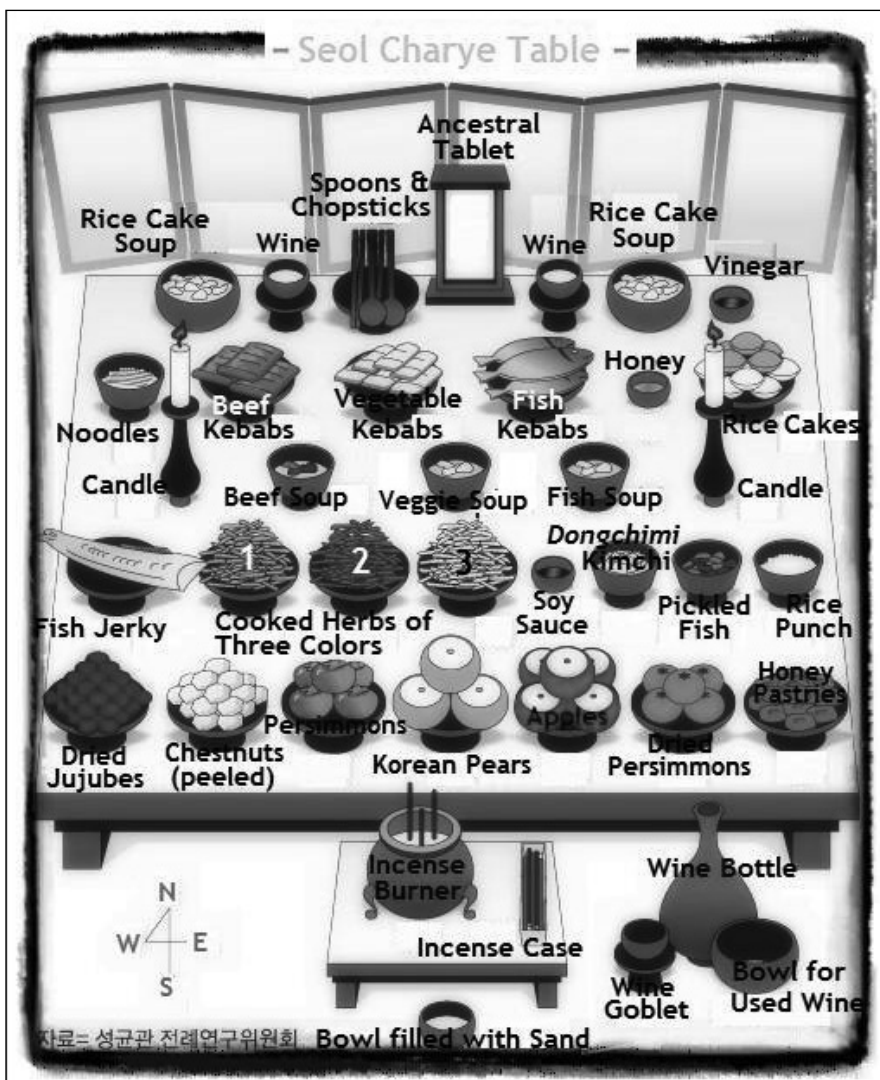
hand, more than fifty percent (50.9%) of Protestant Christians disapproved of ancestral rites, and only 32.7% approved of them. By contrast, the majority of other groups approved of the rites, including Catholics (71.4%), Buddhists (83.3%), persons without

religion (73.4%), and others (66.7%). This statistical data points out that most Koreans attach importance to traditional ancestral rites (Hansin University Theological Institute 2005, 229). Other data indicate that respondents without religion regarded the rejection of ancestral rites as one of the greatest mistakes Korean Catholics made in the past (Kim Jae Deuk, Park Moon Su, and Park Il Young 2004, 54). Ancestral rites hold a most eminent place in Korean traditional cultural practice. Their observance reflects whether or not a person acknowledges Korean cultural traditions. Korean Protestantism cannot disregard the issue of ancestral rites if it wants to be accepted by non-Christian Koreans who comprise about eighty percent of the population.

Figure 1. A Typical Ancestral Rite Table with Objects (Adapted from [http://mydearkorea.blogspot.com/2012/01/korean-culture-new-years-day-5\\_29.html](http://mydearkorea.blogspot.com/2012/01/korean-culture-new-years-day-5_29.html))

A basic set of rules for setting the table:

	MAIN ITEMS	SIDE OF THE TABLE
1 <sup>st</sup> Row	Spoons & Chopsticks, Rice	<i>ddeokguk</i> (left), wine (right)
2 <sup>nd</sup> Row	Beef, Fish, Vegetables	fish (east), beef (west)
3 <sup>rd</sup> Row	Soups	fish (east), vegetable (middle), beef (west)
4 <sup>th</sup> Row	Jerky, Herbs, Rice Punch	fish jerky (left), rice punch (right)
5 <sup>th</sup> Row	Fruits	red fruits (east), white fruits (west) (left to right) jujube, chestnuts, pears



### Description and Motifs of Korean Ancestral Rites

Ancestral rites are offered for up to four generations of ancestors. Today, it is not unusual for Koreans to commemorate only two or three generations of ancestors (Kim 2001, 94). There are some other changes in ancestral practices of today: (1) quite a few families perform the rites in the evening instead of at midnight for their convenience (Kim 2007, 279); (2) some families offer the foods that their ancestors preferred during their life time (Yoon 2005, 331); (3) ancestral couples can be jointly venerated (Kim 2007, 284); (4) more and more women are allowed to participate in the ritual (see [korea4expats.com](http://korea4expats.com)).

Two kinds of ancestral rites are performed at home, one being holiday rites (*charye*) and the other death-day rites (*kijesa*) (Janelli and Janelli 1982, 86). Two holiday rites are performed annually on lunar New Year (*Goojung*) and Korean Thanksgiving days (*Choosok*), and these are offered to multiple ancestors back to four generations (Kim 2001, 94). On the other hand, death-day rites are offered for an individual

ancestor near midnight of the day before he or she died, which is to ensure they occur at the time when he had been alive (Janelli and Janelli 1982, 93). Thus, a typical family conducts ten ancestral rites a year (two holiday rites and eight death-day rites) if they memorialize four generations of ancestors. In this chapter, I explore only the death-day rites (rather than the holiday rites) that are more frequently performed among Korean people. Hereafter, when I speak of “ancestral rites” I am referring only to death-day rites.

### Ritual Objects and Procedure

Ancestral rites are usually performed at home, although they may be held at shrines. The most prominent object in these rites is the table that holds the various objects. All the objects must be put in places designated by ritual codes. Various kinds of food are offered. In the traditional Korean belief system, the spirits of ancestors are believed to come and eat the food. An ancestral tablet is usually attached to a folding screen just behind the ritual table. This tablet is believed to be the place where the ancestor stays during the rite. Wooden tablets (*shinju*, *wipae*) were originally used, although paper tablets are more commonly used today. The tablet contains the ancestor’s name, title, and place of origin written in black ink. Candles and incense are lighted, which are assumed to invite and welcome the spirits of ancestors. (See Figure 1 on p. 119.)

The eldest son of the household presides over the ancestral rite, and only males participate in the ritual

procedures as such, although women prepare food for the ritual table. Male participants follow the direction of the ritual presider, and the ritual itself is usually performed in a master bedroom (*Anbang*). Korean ancestral (death-day) rites have four major phases: (1) inviting and welcoming the ancestors; (2) serving food to the ancestors; (3) seeing ancestors off; and (4) together with one’s relatives and fellow descendants, eating the food that has been offered. (See Figure 2 below.)

The ritual begins by inviting and welcoming the ancestors. The presider (the eldest son) goes to the gate of the house and opens it so that ancestors may enter. He welcomes them by bowing his head to the ancestors who are believed to have returned (as spiritual beings) to visit their descendants on the anniversary of their death (Bae 2002, 292). The household arranges the ritual table and the presider lights candles and burns incense (Kim 2001, 101). The presider executor then offers a glass of alcoholic beverage and bows three times toward the ancestral tablet (two head-to-floor bows and then a light bow from the waist) as an act of invitation (see [korea4expats.com](http://korea4expats.com)). At this time all the male participants greet the ancestor by bowing three times, followed by a male participant chanting a speech written in Chinese with the proper intonation (Janelli and Janelli 1982, 87).

In the second phase, the household serves food to the ancestors. The ritual presider lays a spoon and chopsticks on the foods he wishes to offer them, moving from one dish to another as he

and other males bow to the ancestors. They then leave the room so that the ancestors may freely enjoy their meal, and after an interval the male participants return to provide water for the ancestors.

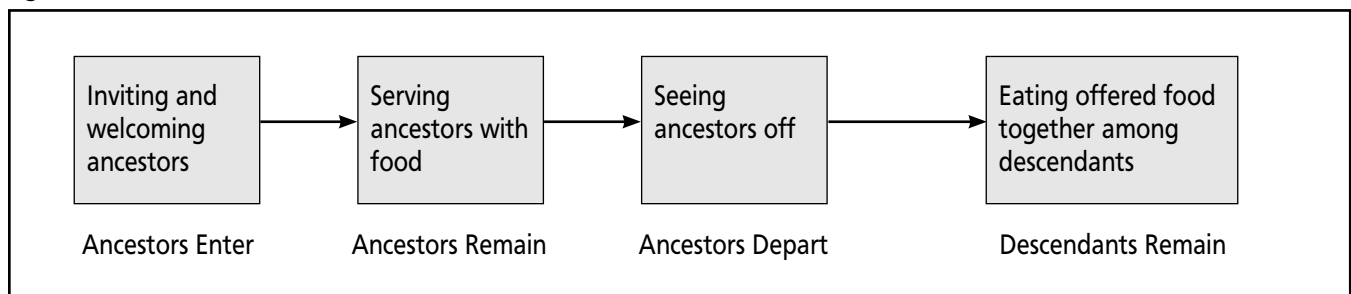
The third phase involves seeing the ancestors off by bowing three times as they return to the world of the afterlife. Finally, the ritual presider burns a paper tablet and a written address, and then participants go to the gate of the house to see them off. When the ancestors have left, members of the household withdraw the table and together eat the food that has been offered and enjoy a time of fellowship as living descendants.

### Meaning and Experience of Ancestral Practices: Interview with Respondents

To learn how death-day rites are interpreted and experienced, I interviewed two Koreans in Los Angeles and Orange County, California, in April 2013. Both interviewees had been attending ancestral rites and showed enthusiasm for the practice. I interviewed each one for about an hour, one in person and the other by phone, using a semi-structured interview method in which three major questions were asked: (1) What motivates you to carry out these ancestral practices? (2) What do you experience during these ancestral practices? (3) How do you think ancestral practices influence your family?

Respondent Jun Kim was fifty-one years old with a wife and three children. (Here and in what follows, I use fictitious names.) He emigrated from South Korea and has been living in the US for about ten years. His mother and three sisters also live in the US.

Figure 2. Structure and Procedure of the Ancestral Rite





He grew up in a Buddhist family and has participated in traditional ancestral rites since childhood. He still practices the rites in the US, although he became a Catholic at the age of thirty. He said that he had somewhat simplified the ritual for convenience.

1. *Motivations for Doing Ancestral Practices:* The respondent has been doing ancestral rites because he used to do it for many years from his childhood. Although Catholic churches provide their own forms of ancestral rituals, he opted to follow the Korean traditions with which he was familiar.
2. *Feelings and Experiences:* When the respondent was young, he did not understand his father's strictness and ways of performing the ritual. However, having raised his own children, he can now understand his late father's heart and mind. He said,
 

When I was young and my father was alive, I was very afraid of him. However, I see myself becoming the same as my father. I now realize that my father was a good person. I respect him.
3. *The Influence of the Practice on the Family:* When the respondent bows down toward his late father during the rite, he says, "Enjoy this food. Please look after and prosper this family," so that his children may hear it. By doing this, the respondent wished blessings upon his family and reminded his children of their relationship with their grandfather. He emphasized that ancestral rites offer a chance for his siblings and their children to gather together and observed that without the rites they would seldom get together. He saw that one of the functions of ancestral rites was to enhance family gathering and fellowship.

The other respondent, Hyun Lee, was forty-five years old. He emigrated from South Korea to the US about

*In contrast to our Christian memorial service, our previous ancestral rites were full of symbolic artifacts and actions, with few spoken words.*

five years ago. He is married with two children. His father lives in South Korea and his mother passed away many years ago. Although his family converted from Buddhism to Catholicism they continue to perform traditional Korean ancestral rites for his late mother. Since coming to the US, his family and his three sisters' families gather together to practice the Catholic form of ancestral practices, which combines Catholic and traditional Korean forms.

1. *Motivations for Doing Ancestral Practices:* The respondent says that he performed the ancestral rites to observe Korean tradition, to memorialize his mother, and to assist his mother's soul to move from purgatory to heaven.
2. *Feelings and Experiences:* The respondent said he believed that his late mother visits the ancestral rituals they perform. He recollects her, sensing her presence during the rituals and feels grateful and remorseful towards her. He and his sisters share a memory of his mother. He comes to understand his parents' heart now that he himself is also a parent.
3. *The Influence of the Practice on the Family:* The respondent believes that ancestral practices positively influence his children, who are reminded of their grandmother, and this enhances family relationships and deepens their sense of belonging. It offers a chance for his children to meet their cousins. The ancestral rites bring his siblings together and sustain their relationship even though they had once had conflicts with one another. The late mother functions as a relational link between her offspring. These practices help them establish their identity as family.

### The Transition from Traditional Rite to Christian Memorial Service: My Family's Experience

My family was Buddhist, and I participated sincerely in its observance of the ancestral rites until I became a Christian at the age of twenty-two. My family practiced these rites no less than eight times a year. Upon becoming a Christian, however, I stopped attending these rituals because I thought that if I continued to join in them I would compromise my Christian faith. My father continued to preside over the rites and was not happy with my absence, although he never scolded me about it and was outwardly tolerant. When he became a Christian, he chose to celebrate a Christian memorial service instead of the traditional ritual, and I was happy about his decision. I realized over time, however, that something vital was missing from our observance of the Christian ceremony in comparison to the feelings that attended the traditional ritual. This led me to reflect on the deeper significance of the ancestral rites and to come to several conclusions about my family's experience.

My first observation has to do with my father's loss of position as the ritual leader. In the past, my father presided over our traditional ritual, while my brothers and I followed his directions. When my father became a Christian, he did not know anything about conducting a Christian memorial service. As a result, I was asked to lead the service, since I was a seminary student. I felt guilty that I, the youngest of the three sons, had robbed my father of his noble position.

Second, I came to reflect on the fact that the exclusion of ritual symbols in our Christian memorial service meant it contained no visual elements. In

contrast, our previous ancestral rites were full of symbolic artifacts and actions and few spoken words. Verbal expressions were dominant in our new memorial service.

Third, I came to be aware of what might be termed the “insufficiency” of the Christian memorial in honoring ancestors. Our Christian memorial service was meaningful in worshipping God and being attentive to God’s will for us, but it did not seem to recognize or honor ancestors sufficiently during the service. We were not remembering and honoring their contributions to the family nor were we paying tribute to them.

Fourth, there was what I call a “shortage of dedication.” My mother used to prepare various foods and other ritual objects from morning till night for the ritual table. My father and his sons showed great respect to our ancestors by bowing toward their photos. My family’s attitudes toward our ancestors as expressed in the rite were expressions of sincerity, politeness, earnestness, and dedication. I felt these emotions had been diminishing in our Christian memorial services, and it was a great loss.

### Underlying Motifs of the Ancestral Rite

I noted above the two main aspects of the Korean ancestral rite (Choi 1983, 89–91). First, I noted that the rites were *religious* and were regarded as “worship” of ancestral spirits. Second, I identified the rites’ characteristic *social nature*. This second aspect of the rites points to filial piety (*hyo*), in that ancestors are honored, respected, and venerated by their descendants in the rites. Some Koreans so emphasize the social character of these rituals as to rule out an interpretation of them as true ancestor “worship.” To these two dominant aspects I suggest adding a third dimension to the rites’ motif—the *psychological dimension*. In so doing, I am noting the deep psychological and emotional attachment that descendants develop and deepen as a result

of performing the rites. In summary, I note that Korean ancestral rites embody and engender three major motifs: religious motifs, social motifs, and psychological motifs, and each of these three main motifs entail sub-motifs.

Traditional Korean ancestral rites are religious in that they presuppose that spirits of ancestors are still alive and present. Descendants venerate ancestors as living beings through the rites and reflect the belief that their ancestors may assist or harm their lives on earth. Thus, they seek blessings and protection from their ancestors by offering food and showing honor to them. Accordingly, the religious motifs of Korean ancestral rites include belief in ancestors as living spirits, veneration



of ancestors, and anticipation of the ancestors bestowing blessings upon descendants. Kim (2007, 57) notes that rituals are used to affirm social orders in the Confucian view of how society should be structured, reflecting the fact that Korea has been greatly influenced by Confucianism over the centuries. Kwanguk Kim (1986, 126) draws attention to the fact that the rites recognize and affirm the special status of the eldest son. And it must be noted that women do not participate in this ceremony as such, but they prepare food for it.

The death-day rites end in family fellowship and a meal that promote family cohesion and solidarity, and one can

legitimately say that the social aspects of the rites include more than just honoring the ancestors and affirming relationship between ancestors and descendants. Instead, they also enhance family solidarity, and reinforce social positions in the family. Wi Jo Kang articulates the significant social meanings of ancestral rites in Korean life:

Thus, ancestor worship became a powerful institution in Korean life and culture. It was a sacred symbol in which all Koreans found meaning and purpose for their lives and the enhancement of their sense of belonging. Without both ancestor worship and family, Koreans lost the sense of meaning of their existence; but through the observance of these rites Koreans maintained the values of filial piety and loyalty which in turn strengthened family life and solidified the fabric of Korean society (1988, 74).

The ancestral rite is the channel through which Korean people express their psychological and emotional attachment to the dead, whose deaths they mourn and whose absence makes them sad. In this context, I have seen my mother missing my father who passed away about thirteen years ago. She has a feeling of sorrow and remorse for my father. On the other hand, my mother usually expresses her gratitude for my late father’s commitment to our family. When Koreans remember and long for their late spouses, parents and grandparents, it’s the practice of ancestral rites that allows the psychological elements of longing, gratitude, remorse, mourning, and remembrance to manifest in relation to the dead.

### Articulating Christian Engagement with the Rite

In the preceding sections, I addressed the elements, procedure, and motifs of the Korean ancestral rite. In this section, I seek to identify a relevant Christian engagement with these rituals.

### Multiple Facets of Ritual

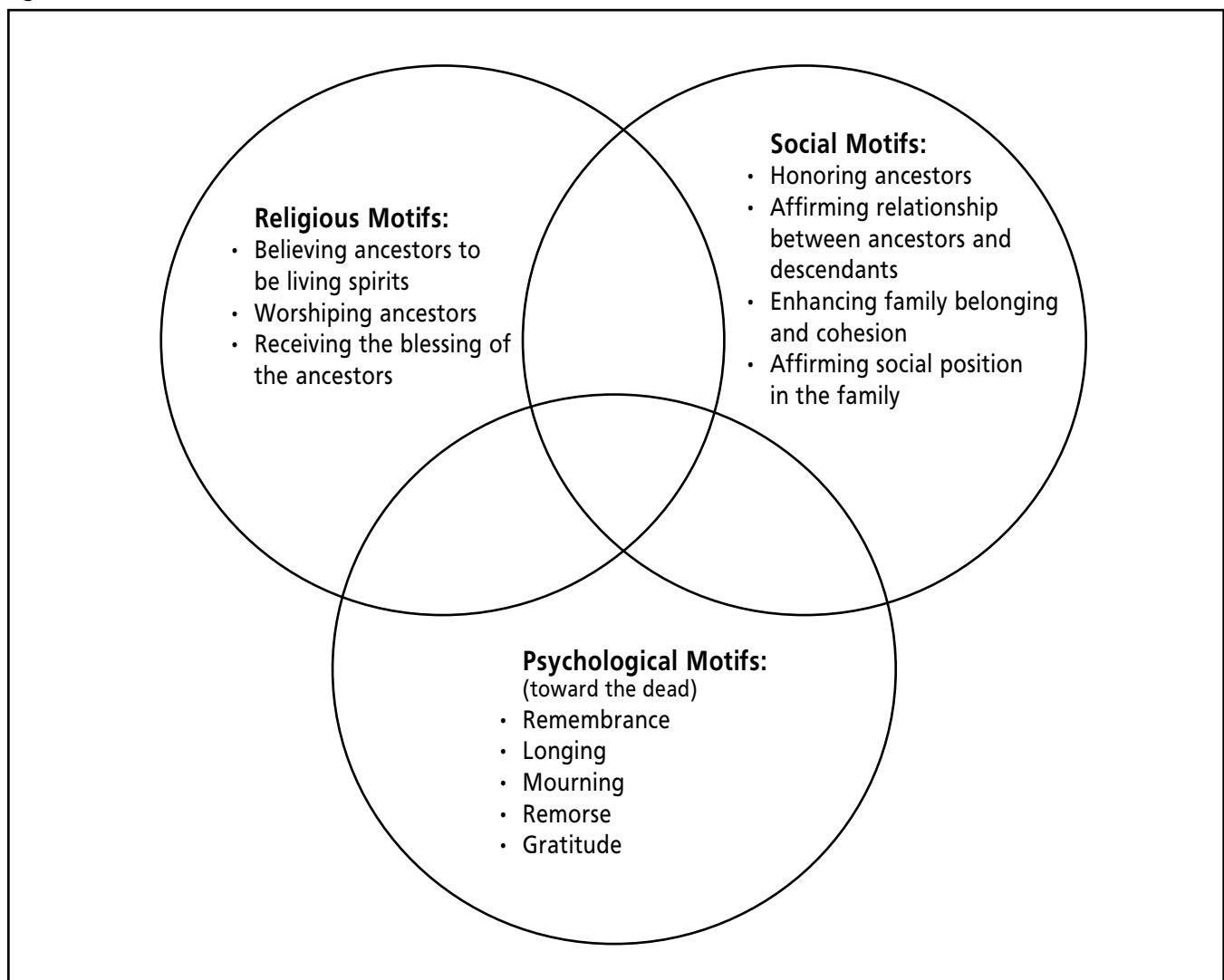
It is important to recognize the multi-dimensionality of Korean ancestral rites as they exemplify the social, cultural, personal and cosmic dimensions of rituals (see Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiéno 1999, 283–84). If we see ancestral rites only from a religious perspective, we will inevitably condemn the rites and exclude them from Christian life. But to come to terms with positive elements in these rites, Korean Protestants must also face the fact that we don't accept the belief that ancestors are present in the form of spirits in this world. Nevertheless, Korean ancestral rites embody other significant meanings that enrich Korean people's lives and social relationships. In abandoning these

traditional practices, we lose the opportunities through which Koreans may enjoy those social and psychological constituent parts which God's word and teachings may allow. At a minimum, criticism should be leveled only after careful study and discernment, for while traditional religious beliefs permeate human cultural practices, a way may be found to maintain socio-cultural values that are compatible with biblical teachings. As a matter of principle, we need to view these practices in their entirety and should not denounce a cultural practice as totally unacceptable simply because it contains un-biblical religious elements. If we do so, we lose the significant socio-cultural values of which the Bible may approve. I have portrayed the motifs of Korean ancestral

rites as displaying religious, social, and psychological levels. A Christian analysis of these rites requires us to denounce anti-biblical elements, while maintaining biblically affirmed elements in our practices. If we determine that there are elements that do not conflict with biblical teaching, may we Koreans not continue to enjoy our cultural heritage without fear we are compromising our faithfulness to God? I will carefully analyze Korean ancestral death-day rites in light of biblical teachings in the next section, but first let me summarize what Korean ancestral death-day rites entail:

1. *Religious Motifs*: "worshipping" ancestors as living spirits who confer blessings on descendants.

Figure 3. Motifs of the Korean Ancestral Rite



2. *Social Motifs*: honoring ancestors, which maintains relations between ancestors and descendants, deepens sentiments of belonging to a family and cohesion within the family, and affirms social positions in the family.
3. *Psychological Motifs*: remembering, longing, mourning, remorse, gratitude.

The question we must ask is *which* of these motifs are compatible with Christian life and teaching. (See Figure 3 on p. 123.)

### A Critical Assessment for Evangelical Christian Practice

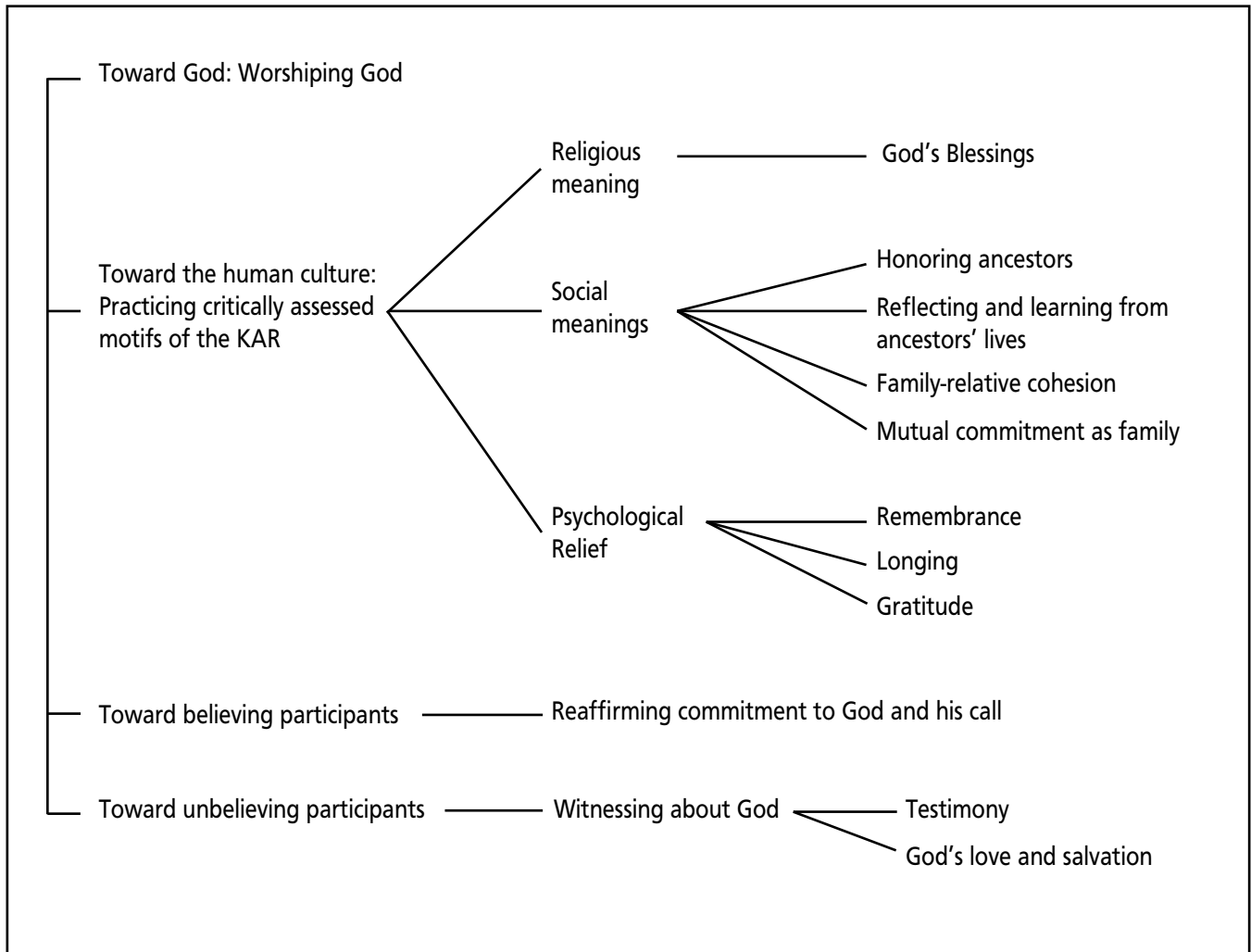
If I am correct, evangelical Christians reject traditional Korean ancestral rites because they entail “worship” of

ancestors and the use of symbolic objects and actions such as food, incense, candles, and prostration. As I noted earlier, on principle we *should* exclude elements incompatible with biblical teachings, while carefully discerning whether it is possible to maintain or transform elements that can be affirmed by the Bible. Paul Hiebert called this approach “critical contextualization” (1985, 186), an orientation that critically examines traditional cultural practices in light of the Bible, and creates new, contextualized Christian practices. To achieve this sort of critical contextualization, we need to deal with both (1) components and (2) manners of expressing requisite evangelical beliefs and practices in regard to ancestors.

### Proposing Components for Evangelical Christian Practice

Evangelical Christian faith centers on the uniqueness of Jesus as Savior and the Bible as the ultimate norm for Christian faith and life. On this basis, evangelical Christians cannot accept believing in and worshiping ancestors as living spirits as practiced in the traditional Korean ancestral rites. The traditional Korean rites presuppose ancestral spirits moving between the afterlife world and this world, affecting their descendants’ earthly lives. By contrast, evangelical Protestant faith holds that people go to eternity after their death and do not further affect the earthly world. This doctrine is exemplified in Luke 16:19–31, a story of Lazarus and a rich man that portrays the state of

Figure 4. Proposed Components for Evangelical Christian Practice



the dead as either at Abraham's side (in heaven) or in hell. In addition, the Bible nowhere teaches us to contact or seek help from the dead. Instead, the Bible guides believers to seek help from God alone (see, for example, Psalms 115:9–11; 121:1–8). Therefore, in my opinion, evangelical practice must renounce the elements of ancestral rites that amount to the worship of ancestors. Accordingly, again in my view, evangelical practice should not offer food to ancestors, because this action presumes the presence of ancestral spirits. In regards to a traditional Korean belief in ancestors' conferring blessings on descendants, evangelical Christians may instead ask for God's blessings.

The social and psychological motifs of the rite, however (that second tier of elements outlined above), do not contradict biblical norms. The Bible emphasizes, for example, the importance of honoring parents and elderly people (Ex. 20:12, Lev. 19:32, Matt. 15:4). Israelites in the Bible remembered and reflected on the lives of their ancestors (Ex. 4:5, Mark 12:26, Heb. 11:1–40). Therefore, it does not contradict biblical teaching to remember and honor ancestors. In regards to the social dimension of Korean ancestral rites, evangelical Christians may express their respect, honor, and gratitude to their ancestors without believing in or worshiping them as living spirits. Descendants may recall and reflect on their ancestors' care and dedication during their earthly lives. They may recognize the importance of learning their ancestors' lives and living harmoniously together. Some Protestant Christians use the photos of their ancestors to better recognize them. They can prepare food to eat together, thereby enhancing their fellowship and sense of mutual belonging.

In regard to our third motif, the *psychological* elements of Korean ancestral rites, participants may express their respect and gratitude for ancestors, for each generation receives much from previous generations. This is the positive

**T***hey feel a Christian memorial service without symbols is insufficient, since their custom was to honor their ancestors by prostration.*

element; in addition, they can be relieved from remorse and regret that they did not serve their ancestors as well as they should have during their lifetimes.

In this vein, a reformulated evangelical alternative to the traditional rites should focus on God, and the eventual goal of the practice should be to worship and thank God for what He did and does within the family. In addition, believing participants need to be reminded of their commitment to God and His call, while unbelieving relatives participating in Christian ancestral rites are given a witness to God. (See Figure 4 on p. 124.)

### Proposing Ways to Express Evangelical Faith

Every religious faith is communicated in particular modes of expression. In this light, we need to devise proper ways to express and communicate the components of the evangelical Christian practice proposed in the preceding section. Each church tradition carries its unique forms of Christian expression. For instance, some churches conduct baptism by immersion while others by sprinkling. Catholics use a variety of symbols, arts, and images while Protestants seldom do so. Instead, Protestants use verbal and written language to express their faith, namely speaking, singing, and written words. They use auditory music rather than visual media, although this is changing. The four major methods of communicating the Christian faith among evangelicals are praising, praying, preaching, and teaching. In contrast, traditional Korean ancestral rites contain numerous symbols with few words.

When non-Christians become Christian, they may feel that the Christian memorial service without symbols is insufficient, since they were accustomed

to honor their ancestors by prostration, and they are not allowed to do so in the Protestant practice, because the second of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament prohibits bowing down to or worshiping idols (Ex. 20:4–5). Rather than seeing prostration as worshiping the ancestors, however, would it be possible to conceive of prostration as a deeper expression of honor than spoken words? In this regard, might prostration be interpreted as a way of fulfilling what is demanded in the fifth of the Ten Commandments, that is to say, “to honor your father and your mother” (Ex. 20:12)? On New Year's Day, many Korean Christians honor their *living* parents by bowing to them. Could they honor their ancestors in the same way? Could we accept bowing as an expression of respect rather than worship? After all, bowing is portrayed in the Old and New Testament as paying respect, honor, and reverence to God, angels, or certain persons. In the Old Testament, people bow down to God (Gen. 24:52–53; 1 Chron. 29:20); to angels (Gen. 19:1; Josh. 5:14); to other gods (Num. 25:2; Deut. 17:3); and idols (Ex. 20:5); as well as to kings (2 Sam. 9:6; 1 Kings 1:23); to parents and elderly people (Gen. 33:6, 48:12, Ex. 18:7, Ruth 2:10); and to high ranking people (Gen. 42:6; Est. 3:2). The New Testament includes many occasions that people bow down to Jesus (Matt. 8:2, 9:18, 14:33, 15:25, 20:22; Mark 5:6; John 9:38). Other than to Jesus, Peter was bowed to by Cornelius (Acts 10:24). The Bible forbids bowing down to other gods or idols, but does not condemn bowing down to honor certain people or to worship God.

Can candles be used in an evangelical practice of ancestral rituals much as they are in Christian weddings? We might also consider using the photos of ancestors to help remember them

and preparing flowers to commemorate them. In so doing we recall that Jung Young Lee (1988, 83) distinguishes between images and idols, pointing out that an image itself is not an idol and that an image becomes an idol only when it is an object of worship. Some Protestant churches allow these elements, but most Protestant churches are unfamiliar with the use of symbols and tend to think such practices wrong or unbiblical. Nevertheless, a Presbyterian Kyoungdong church allows the photo of the deceased, candles, incense, flowers, and bowing in their practice regarding ancestors (Kyoungdong Church Home Ceremony Research 1995, 33–42). Given these precedents, Korean evangelicals would need to define their biblical and theological perspective of symbols in general, as well as Korean traditional symbols in particular.

Current Protestant memorial services take the form of four basic elements: (1) prayer, (2) reading scriptures, (3) delivering a message, and (4) singing praise songs. Meanwhile, I recommend designing the components for the Protestant evangelical practice of ancestral rites in terms of four directions: toward God, toward Korean culture, toward believing participants, and toward unbelieving participants. As a result, the components would employ verbal prayers for God's blessings, reflecting on and learning from ancestors' lives, exhorting commitment to the family, articulating longing and gratitude, reaffirming commitment to God and His call, and witnessing about God. For family cohesion and solidarity, evangelical Christians can prepare food and eat together as is done in traditional Korean ancestral rites.

### *Rethinking Evangelical Attitudes toward Traditional Culture: Concluding Remarks*

As we have seen, the ancestral rite remains significant for Koreans at religious, social, and psychological levels. I urge adopting a point of view that does not totally condemn the rite due to

some aspects that appear incompatible with the Bible. Instead, I suggest, we should recognize the rite's psycho-social importance and then develop evangelical practices that are both faithful to God and respect Korean culture.

I have suggested components and ways of expression for an evangelical alternative to the Korean ancestral death-day rite. The components were designed in four directions: toward God, toward Korean culture, toward believing participants, and toward unbelieving participants. They include the Protestant tradition of oral prayer, praise, and spoken words, as well as the possible use of symbols familiar in Korean society. Korean Protestantism, I have argued, needs to re-evaluate the place of symbols in its ecclesial practice.



In the absence of such appropriate contextualization, many non-Christian Koreans judge that Protestants distance themselves from Korean culture and are reluctant to accept Christ if they have to turn their backs on their cultural heritage. Our commitment to God does not require us to abandon our human culture. Indeed, such rejection of traditional culture leads many Koreans to regard Christianity as unrelated to their own cultural ethos and roots, thereby rejecting Christianity as alien and irrelevant to their lives (Kim 2010, 424–25).

Yes, we must reject cultural elements that contradict biblical truth. But we can maintain aspects of cultural heritage that are compatible with the

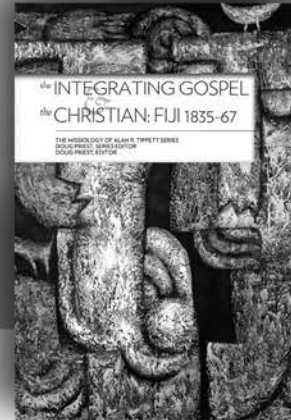
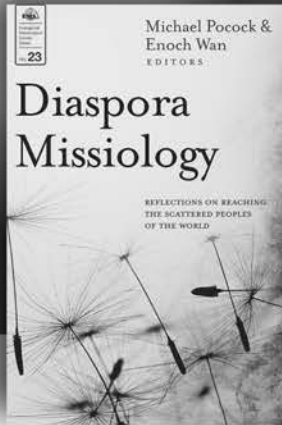
Bible. We honor and worship God, and we anticipate eternal life, but we also live in social relationship with others within history. Protestantism must demonstrate that it values our relationship with other people, as well as with God, and provides proper Christian mechanisms that fulfill such social relationships. In this regard, Eunjung Cha (1999, 122) points out that Korean Protestant worship services are insufficient to fulfill the role of rituals that connect individuals with a community and strengthen communal ties in their life situations. Conversion to Christian faith and living "in Christ" should not mean abandoning social relationships with non-Christian Koreans. On the contrary, we can maintain such relationships in biblically transforming ways. We can honor our ancestors and solidify social relationships in the family through an appropriate Christian alternative for ancestral practices, ultimately focusing on worshipping and glorifying God.

In this study, I have articulated that the Korean ancestral rite can be transformed in ways that offer glory to God and value Korean cultural heritage. When Korean evangelical Christians properly respond to traditional culture in biblical faithfulness and cultural relevance, they will both enjoy God's grace and retain their cultural heritage, making the Christian experience more meaningful and relevant to non-Christians in Korea. **IJFM**

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# Christian Encouragement for Following Jesus in Non-Christian Ways: An Indian Case Study

by J. Paul Pennington

*Editor's Note: This paper was presented on September 19, 2015 at the EMS/ISFM Conference in Dallas, Texas at GIAL*

## Introduction

Last year in October a young couple, Devendra and Pranaya, decided to leave their Christian community and congregation and return to their Hindu family, culture, and community as avowed *Yesu Bhaktas*—disciples of Jesus. Their move was not unique in itself. There are numerous *Yesu Bhaktas* in India. The issues around insider believers are common enough globally that we are debating it as a controversial issue in two separate tracks at this conference.

Christians routinely question or condemn such a decision. Many Christians view “insiders” as inferior, immature believers—“insider,” to them, represents inadequate discipleship. Some Christians judge them to be syncretistic or apostate believers who have departed from the way and life of Jesus in fundamental ways. As a result, those who become “insiders,” usually do so of their own accord with a sense of rejection by the Christian community.

Devendra and Pranaya’s decision was somewhat unique, because the leaders in their Christian congregation and an associated Bible College and Seminary actively walked with them through the decision process. When the time to leave came, most of the Christian leaders encouraged and blessed their decision and continue to do so today. I have been asked to present a case study on how these Indian Christians came to encourage Devendra and Pranaya to follow Jesus in “non-Christian” ways and forms.

Time does not allow me to address all of the questions that arise from such a decision. Many concerns have been raised prior to and during this conference. A number of questions, though, seem to me to revolve around three core issues: Christian Separation, Christian Identity, and Christian Community (Church). This case study will explore how my Indian colleagues and I addressed these three issues.

---

*Paul Pennington spent 13 years as a missionary kid in Zimbabwe, another 5 years there as a missionary, and 17 years as Professor of Urban/Intercultural Studies at Cincinnati Christian University. Paul left university teaching three years ago to partner with Indian colleagues to research and advocate alternative ways of following Jesus in the Indian context that are both scripturally faithful and culturally appropriate. Paul and Margaret, his wife, now spend part of each year exploring these issues in India. The rest of their time is spent helping Western Christians understand the barriers and issues that Western forms and funding create in India, and advocating more scriptural and “swadeshi” (naturally Indian) solutions to India’s challenges. Paul’s first book, “Christian Barriers to Jesus” is in process for publication next year. For more information on Paul’s research into Christianity’s barriers to Jesus, or to discuss the ideas and challenges expressed in this paper, please contact him at paul@journeyservices.org.*

I must say, in the interest of full disclosure, that my wife and I are not neutral observers reporting from the sidelines. We have been active participants in this process since its inception six years ago. This journey of Christian encouragement for following Jesus in “non-Christian” ways is a story of our Indian pilgrimage as much as theirs.

I must also say that this journey did not begin with any deep awareness or advocacy for insider believers—or “incarnational believers” as I prefer to call them today. We were simply exploring the challenge of Christian-Hindu relationships with our dear Christian friends in India. Devendra and Pranaya’s decision arose later from those conversations—last year, in fact, as an outgrowth of this process.

### *Christian Barriers to Jesus in India*

Before our first visit to India in 2010, I was somewhat aware of the challenge that country presents to the good news of Jesus:

- 1/6 of the people on earth live in India (population challenge)
- Less than 5% reached or connected to Jesus in any way (percentage challenge)
- 2000+ unreached people groups—four times as many as anywhere globally (people group challenge)

Those were just numbers to me before we set foot on Indian soil. Troubling, soul-disturbing numbers, yes. Prayer-inducing numbers, yes. But when we arrived in Chennai for a Seminary teaching assignment, those numbers began to take hold of our hearts in ways we had never imagined.

In classes, over meal tables, at tea times, and in countless informal conversations, Christians described how troubled they were at India’s resistance to Jesus. As we repeatedly discussed and explored that resistance, they also shared their experiences and perspectives regarding the causes of such pervasive alienation from Christ.

As they did so, I began to notice an interesting and troubling pattern. Much of the reluctance to consider or follow Jesus, as they described it, arose in reaction to common Christian behaviors, attitudes, customs, and traditions—what we have now identified as the “Christian Barriers to Jesus.” Hindus were not primarily rejecting Jesus, *they were rejecting a complex system of humanly invented Christian traditions loosely justified with Scripture.* These barriers have been described by Christians, Hindus, and Yesu Bhaktas so often in ensuing visits, that I have drafted a book entitled *Christian Barriers to Jesus.* It unpacks and examines these barriers in careful scriptural, historical, and cultural detail to help Christians address them.



These barriers include our insistence on the unscriptural name “Christian” itself (see *Christian Identity* section of this paper), “church” instead of *ekklesia*, and numerous Euro-American and Indian traditions about “gospel” (vs. “good news”), “preaching,” “worship,” “conversion,” “renaming,” “separation,” and resource dependency. Many of these traditions were founded upon an extreme extraction view of Christian separation. Before we could address the bigger complex of barriers, we had to address that one in particular.

### *Christian Separation*

In discussing a number of “Christian barriers,” my Christian friends eventually would refer to 2 Corinthians 6:17,

“Come out from among them and be separate,’ says the Lord, ‘and touch no unclean thing.’” As we discussed other Christian behaviors that alienate Hindus from Christians, Christians would quote this (or commonly associated passages on hating family) as the definitive instructions for Christian-Hindu relationships. This passage had been used time and again to define an extreme separation and isolation from the culture and community around them.

While having these conversations with Indian Christians in general, one day we were invited to the home of Devendra and Pranaya. Many of our Christian friends were 4th, 5th, and 6th generation Christians. Devendra, in contrast, came to Christ directly from Hinduism. Pranaya had a Christian mother, but she had lived a nominal Christian life until meeting the believers at Christian Fellowship (the local congregation). They described first-hand what Christianity had looked like from the outside looking in. And they confirmed many of the barrier stories our more established Christian friends had told us.

Our more traditional Christian friends were concerned about the cultural disconnect between Christians and Hindus that seemed to alienate Hindus from considering Jesus. For Devendra and Pranaya, the barriers were much more personal, however. It was their own family and community who had been alienated by their decision to join the Christian community. Every time they rejected an invitation to a family birthday party or gathering (even if not religious) because they were busy with Christian activities, it represented a fresh insult and rejection to their immediate and extended family. Their Christian rejection repeatedly shamed their relatives in unnecessary ways.

We heard traditional and Hindu-background Christians describe the pain that this “Christian separation” created. Inside, they sensed that this interpretation of Isaiah 52:11 might

not be the defining value for Christian-Hindu relationships. But they were the products of generations of Christian tradition that this is “what the Bible says.” They felt obligated to follow it without any clear scriptural teaching to the contrary.

I felt led to return the following year with some clear teaching to balance this “extreme separation” interpretation. I have become convinced that the “extreme separation” view is rooted more in a aversion to the majority culture, than in what Jesus or the Apostles actually taught. It led to Christians having to take “Christian names,” for example. One of my Christian friends smiled as he explained, “George and Vincent are very popular.” Such practices were rooted more in ethnocentric love for European culture and complete rejection of every aspect of local culture as “evil, demonic” and inferior.

We had to ask a fundamental question about 2 Corinthians 6:17. *Did Jesus, who inspired that verse, and did Paul who wrote that verse follow the “extreme separation” interpretation of Isaiah 52:11 which it quotes. Did they teach or practice extreme extraction, isolation, and separation from the cultures in which they worked?*

The answer to that question is clearly, “Absolutely not!” Jesus rejected that interpretation repeatedly in his own ministry. The Pharisees took “come out from among them and be separate” and “touch no unclean thing” very literally and seriously. In fact, their name meant “Separatist” in Aramaic (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, & Danker 1979, 853; Bromiley 1986, 1246). They defined themselves by “extreme extraction and separation.”

Yet, in spite of their repeated condemnation, Jesus took the opposite stance with tax-collectors and sinners, with lepers, and with Samaritans. Instead of extracting, he engaged. Instead of isolating, he identified. He did it so often that he became known as a “friend (*philos*) of tax-collectors and sinners.”

**J**esus became known as a “friend of tax-collectors and sinners.” In other words, he rejected the “extreme separation” interpretation of Isaiah 52:11.

In other words, Jesus rejected the “extreme separation” interpretation of Isaiah 52:11. And when the Pharisees condemned him, thinking they were honoring God’s holiness and righteousness, unbeknownst to them, their God was associating and eating with the very people they rejected and avoided.

I shared this teaching with my Indian Christian friends and made two conclusions. Whatever Isaiah 52:11 was intended to convey, Jesus did not think it meant “extreme cultural separation.” He instead chose to befriend the people who were avoided by the Pharisees. And if he were living in India today, I suggested, he would want to be known widely as a “friend of Hindus” not their enemy. He would live the same way today that he did back then. In other words, he would incarnate his way and life within culture, not extract and isolate from it.

We then turned to Paul’s example. If he had meant “extreme separation” when he wrote 2 Corinthians 6, then we would have expected him to model such isolationist behavior. He would have “practiced what he preached.” Instead Paul specifically says that he adapted his behavior and lifestyle to those whom he sought to reach. He “became all things to all people” (1 Corinthians 9).

He models engagement rather than extreme separation in his encounter with a “city filled with idols” (Athens, Acts 17:16ff). If 2 Corinthians means what Indian Christians have been told and believed, then Paul should have “come out from among them and been separate.” Instead, he walked into the middle of that idolatrous city and engaged it with the good news of Jesus.

On a walk through the idol-filled city of Chennai one day, the Lord laid on my heart Paul’s specific steps of

engagement in Acts 17. I have shared these three steps of engagement with Christians around the country in every visit since. The initial push-back from Christians to Paul’s approach has repeatedly illustrated how deeply they have adopted the “extreme separation” interpretation of “come out from among them and be separate.”

In Acts 17 verses 16, 22, and 23, Paul’s first way of engagement was to *look carefully*—at their religious atmosphere (16) and their religious piety and practice (22). He examined their objects of worship (23) until he found an inscription that built a bridge from their world to the good news of his Jesus. How did he know what was written on that altar? He had to read inscriptions on a number of altars, shrines, and temples until he noticed that one. Many Indian Christians have been taught that “separation” means you ignore these very things and have nothing to do with them. Paul’s practice as an apostle (and as author of 2 Corinthians 6) runs counter to their understanding of separation. The fact that he read altar inscriptions has challenged them to reconsider their view of extreme separation.

The second way Paul engages with the city filled with idols was to *talk carefully* (17–21). Paul introduced Jesus through dialog (17) and conversation (19–21). These two words imply interaction, not a one-way presentation. Dialog and conversation require that we listen instead of just “talk, talk, talk” as Christians often do when it comes to the gospel. I’ve often shared the idea that Christians also have “two ears and only one mouth”—implying that we should listen more often than just talk. India needs more “story-listening,” rather than more story-telling, if Hindu resistance is ever to be overcome. In addition, the spirit in

which Paul talks reflects Peter's injunction in 1 Peter 3:15 to share our hope "with gentleness and respect." I have heard countless stories from Christians, Hindus, and *Bhaktas* about the harsh and disrespectful way in which "separatist" Christians talk to and at Hindus. Such "witness" continues to drive Hindus away from Jesus before they have a chance to actually meet or consider him, much less follow him. Paul's gentle and respectful conversations built bridges to Jesus rather than barriers.

Paul's third path to engagement has been the most challenging to Indian Christians—Paul also *read carefully* (28). He did not quote a single Bible verse in the entire sermon. But he quoted two Greek poets:

- "In him we live and move and have our being"—Epimenides of Crete, Hymn to Zeus
- "We are his offspring"—Aratus, *Phaenomena*, Opening Dedication to Zeus

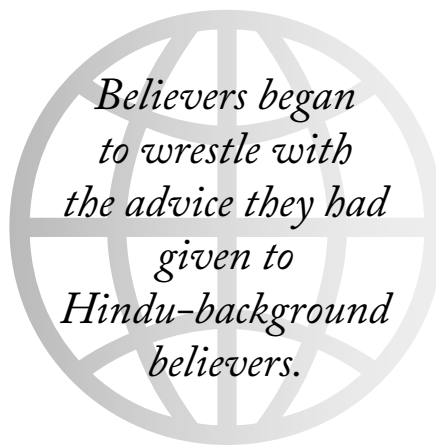
How did Paul know these phrases to quote them? He must have read their writings. Both Epimenides and Aratus were well known to Paul's Athenian audience. So Paul read and quoted material known to his hearers. Both quotations come from poems dedicated to Zeus. So Paul read their religious literature, not just their secular literature. The fact that Paul read and quoted their literature, and religious literature at that, is particularly troubling to "separatist" Christians.

There are too many evangelical Bible colleges and seminaries in India today where you cannot find a single copy of any Hindu religious or philosophical literature. The "extreme separation" mentality requires that Christians avoid any Hindu writing. And yet on those same shelves you can readily find Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, works of Greco-Roman mythology, and the entire philosophical stream of Europe and America. Those non-Christian and even pagan works of literature are "essential" for Indian pastors to read and

understand! But no books can be found on those shelves from Hindu religion or philosophy. And we in the West support and fund schools that practice and impart this "extreme separation."

So the Paul who wrote 2 Corinthians 6 did not practice the "extreme separation" that Indian Christians display. His own behavior demonstrated a holy engagement that followed that of Jesus His master. Neither Jesus nor Paul understood Isaiah 52:11 to require "extreme separation" as Christians often interpret it. They modeled a different spirit. In fact, Paul himself also wrote 1 Corinthians 5:9–10:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral



people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world (ESV).

Paul specifically tells the Corinthians (recipients of 2 Cor. 6) that he did *not* mean for them to disassociate or separate from the people of the world around them, but the extreme separation interpretation makes Paul say exactly that.

Alan Redpath points to a more balanced understanding of 2 Corinthians 6:17 in *Blessings Out of Buffeting*:

Do you know where we have gone wrong, and why we have brought down upon us the scorn of an

unbelieving world? We have laid down mechanical rules and lifted a whole row of things that are taboo. Life is far too complex for that. You cannot lift certain things and make separation from them a mark of Christian discipleship.... Separation such as I am talking about is not a negative thing; it is a positive thing. It is not simply living contrary to the world, as I have said before, putting yourself in a little compartment labeled 'Separated,' and making everybody mad at you. It is living in harmony with the passion in the heart of God for a world that is lost. That is separation. (Redpath, 1965, p. 128)

Jesus and Paul both lived out this idea of engaged separation. They were living holy, separated lives as they incarnated God's grace, mercy, and life within a sinful, broken world.

These conversations about understanding separation in more scriptural ways took place over several visits. They led my Christian friends to re-examine their deep-seated attitudes toward the Hindus around them. Believers began to explore how to engage their neighbors, co-workers, and family members in more respectful, bridge-building ways. They also began to wrestle with the advice they had given to Hindu-background believers to practice "extreme separation" from their own Hindu family and community.

For Devendra and Pranaya, these discussions were not about relating to "those Hindus." They realized that their Christian "separation" had alienated and offended their family not because of Jesus, but because of human tradition. They did not want to compromise their faith in and commitment to Jesus himself. But they began wondering if there was a way to rebuild family relationships and possibly open a door for them to hear the good news.

Two years into the discussions, no one was thinking about insider or incarnational believers. We were all wrestling with the "extreme separation"

misinterpretation and its effects. My Indian Christian colleagues knew that was not the Lord's will, but they now were looking for models of more respectful engagement within the Hindu context that were still faithful to Scripture. Our question turned to legitimate Christian engagement.

### *Christian Engagement*

As we discussed the issues of Christian barriers, separation, and engagement, my Indian colleagues repeatedly expressed two concerns:

- We are so busy with current ministry that we don't have time to explore and filter out legitimate alternatives from all of the possible options. We need help doing that.
- If we make some of the engagement changes that we are coming to understand, our Western supporters and Indian Christians may attack and reject us.

As a missions professor with years of missions connections in different parts of the world, I felt burdened to help address those two challenges. I began to explore different ministry models and approaches in India and elsewhere that might alleviate some of their concerns. And I began talking with Western Christians in the US and Europe about these barriers and challenges in the Indian context.

One of my steps was to order everything available on Hinduism from William Carey Library. When I opened the box of materials, I became acquainted with the writers H. L. Richard and Dayanand Bharati, along with other writers from the Rethinking Forum (Richard, *Rethinking Hindu Ministry*, 2011). At this point I was still trying to address the Indian Christians' question of how to respectfully and appropriately engage their Hindu neighbors.

One book particularly caught my eye—*Living Water and Indian Bowl*, by Swami Dayanand Bharati (Bharati, 2004). I started to read it and found myself often in tears. Swamiji, as he

*If we make some of the engagement changes we are coming to understand, our Western supporters and Indian Christians may attack and reject us.*

is affectionately known, was confirming many of the barriers my Christian friends had already described. But he described and elaborated on them from the Hindu perspective in ways that articulated the pain these behaviors often cause unnecessarily to families and communities.

Bharati has told me several times since we finally met last year that he wishes he could get every copy of the book and burn it. The negative tone of the book troubles him. I have told him that would be a mistake. In order to truly understand how problematic the barriers and "extreme separation" are, Christians need to see them from the Hindu perspective and feel the pain they cause. *Living Water* does that if you read it from an *emic* perspective. Don't pick at every word and phrase and criticism of Christianity. Instead try to sense Swamiji's heart for the Lord and for his own Hindu people. They are often alienated from Jesus because of human religious traditions that do not come from Jesus but from someone else's culture.

*Living Water* provided a way to confirm the conversations we had already had about Christian barriers and separation. It added to what my Christian colleagues already knew and helped them consider more respectful polite engagement. Bharati did point to Yesu Bhaktas (incarnational believers as I call them) in the book, but that was still not on our radar.

On our next visit we gave copies of *Living Water* to the faculty at the College and Seminary and all the leaders at the congregation. I shared what I had learned from it and asked them for their perspectives on how accurate his analysis was and how helpful it might be in considering appropriate engagement.

One of the college faculty members read the book and processed it with us over several visits. He had come directly from a Hindu background. He had been serving as associate minister in a rather traditional congregation in the city and had wrestled with these issues even before our conversations. Within two years, he left that ministry and Sunday church worship. With the college leadership's blessing, he now goes on Sundays to spend the day with a gypsy community near his home. He eats and drinks and socializes with them, slowly building relationships. He helps find donations to provide school fees for children. He helps meet pressing community needs. And he does all this only with his own resources and those donated by Indian friends. He is incarnating the life of Jesus among those people as he engages with them in Jesus' name.

The local congregation where Devendra and Pranaya worshiped began to explore ways to make a difference in and with the community around them. They have done neighborhood cleanups, worked with local community leadership to improve roads and infrastructure, and provided ongoing counseling care for many abused women in a very poor community around them. Believers have become much more intentional about building relationships and engaging in respectful activities through their workplace and neighborhood and family.

For Devendra and Pranaya, *Living Water* meant more. They participated in outreach activities in the neighborhood. But they were increasingly burdened by the separation from their own family and community—a separation that seemed more and more unscriptural and unnecessary the more they examined what Scripture actually says.

*Living Water* introduced the possibility that someone could actually follow Jesus within the Hindu community and culture without being a Hindu religiously.

They raised questions about this possibility with us and with the Christian leadership there. A significant barrier to this consideration involved the question of Christian identity. We had to examine and wrestle with what Scriptures say about the essential experiences and identities of those who follow and belong to Jesus.

### *Christian Identity*

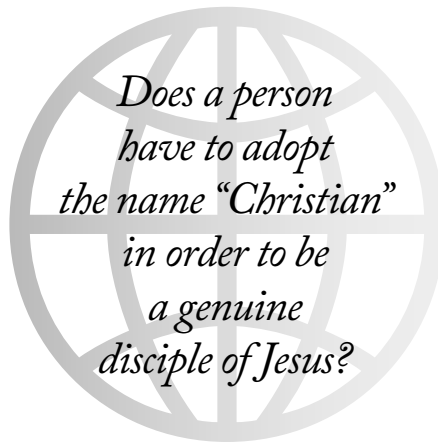
As I was reading Bharati's *Living Water* for the second time early last year, a nagging question arose, "How essential is the name Christian in order to follow Jesus?" Many of the barriers that present themselves to Hindus revolve around "Christian" identity and associated behaviors and customs. We had to ask and address scripturally a fundamental question, "Does a person have to become a 'Christian' (adopt the name 'Christian') in order to be a genuine disciple of Jesus?"

I had been teaching Acts at Cincinnati Christian University for every semester for 10 years. So Acts 11 was a familiar hinge point in the story of Gentile expansion of the gospel. In my own Christian heritage (Christian Church/Church of Christ, Restoration Movement) Acts 11:26 was used to prove that "Christian" is a divinely given name. A widely used college text on the book of Acts states, "the name was given by divine inspiration (through Barnabas and Paul)" (Reese 1971, 332). For years I had believed what my parents and teachers had told me in this regard that Christian is the essential name for the followers of Jesus because God gave it.

The more I read Scripture and history, however, the more problematic I found that assertion. If the name was given through Paul, why did he never use the name for himself or any other believer?

In fact, if it was such an essential name for the followers of Jesus, why did God and Jesus wait for seventeen years (AD 30–47) before deciding that "disciple" was not good enough? And why did no other apostle use the term "Christian" when referring to himself or when addressing other believers (Dear Christians, O Christians, etc)? Peter does not do this. Paul and John never do. Neither do James nor Jude.

The only viable explanation for the name "Christian" in Antioch is that it was given them by the Romans. *Chrematizo* does not mean "divinely named" as Reese asserts. It is widely used in the Greek language to mean "officially designated or named" (Liddell, Scott, & Jones 1940). The name



Christian has a Latin form (*Christiano*) further indicating its Roman, not Jewish nor Greek, origin.

If God had revealed the name as a divine requirement, then believers would have used it for themselves and for fellow believers. It was not an essential identity marker for any believer prior to Acts 11:26 because the name did not even exist. After the disciples were *first* called Christians in Acts 11:26, the term was never used as an essential identity marker for believers in the rest of the New Testament.

So where did we get the idea that in order to become a genuine follower of Jesus you must take the name "Christian"? It does not come from Jesus. It

does not come from Peter. It does not come from Paul. It is not found anywhere in the New Testament. It is a human invention from the second century forward. But it is not a New Testament teaching or practice.

Christians globally who are used to the word, especially Western Christians, argue, "It doesn't matter. We have done it for so long, and it isn't hurting anyone. So it's not wrong to keep using the name."

In a country, however, where the name "Christian" actively pushes nearly 1 billion religious Hindus away from Jesus, we have to rethink our commitment to a non-scriptural name for the followers of Jesus. They were called disciples, brethren, saints, believers, followers of the Way between Acts 1 to Acts 11. They continued to be called by those essential identities after Acts 11:26. But they never took the name "Christian" anywhere in the New Testament.

So in India today, how do we answer this question scripturally, "Does a person have to take the name of 'Christian' to be a genuine follower of Jesus?" In spite of centuries of a Christian answer in the affirmative, the only scriptural answer from the New Testament is "No!" That was not a scriptural requirement for following Jesus. Jesus did not and does not require it. It is a human invention that unnecessarily presents a barrier to the vast majority of Hindus today. We should emphasize the identities the New Testament does and hold to "Christian" with a very light allegiance.

I shared these thoughts with my Indian Christian friends last April at a consultation we held on serving Jesus in the workplace. H. L. Richard graciously attended that gathering at my invitation to talk with my colleagues about respectful approaches to Hindus and the possibility of following Jesus as Yesu Bhaktas.

My original intent in talking about "Christians" was to simply help those

who strongly identify as “Christian” develop a more scriptural understanding of that identity. I wasn’t actively advocating for Yesu Bhaktas.

The Christians at the college and church, though, processed these ideas in conjunction with *Living Water*. They wanted to learn more about engagement with the Hindu community and about Yesu Bhaktas (following Jesus in non-“Christian” ways). At their request, I asked H. L. Richard if he and Dayand Bharati would be willing to come and meet with the believers in Chennai. They agreed to do so and a meeting was arranged for last May.

On a Saturday evening Richard and Bharati met with the congregation’s leadership for several hours to wrestle with the questions of engagement with Hindus and the possibility of Yesu Bhaktas. The next day, Bharati arranged to do a demonstration *satsang* (worship service using Hindu cultural forms and expressions to worship Jesus) for Hindu-background Christians and Hindus. Devendra and Pranaya hosted it in their home. Bharati demonstrated a variety of forms and expressions that could be used. Some of the Christians found the experience troubling and openly criticized Bharati in the gathering. For Devendra and Pranaya, however, the experience showed them what they had been missing for years in the Christian forms and expressions that felt foreign and strange to them.

They began to talk together and with some friends about letting go of their “Christian” identity and just following Jesus within their Hindu community and family. These discussions raised further questions among their fellow Christians about what it means to be faithful to Jesus and to His body (ekklesia). The question of leaving “Christianity” implied leaving “church” also. Since much of Western Christianity teaches that “salvation is in the Church,” Christians questioned whether they could even be followers of Jesus outside of the traditional “church”—outside the Christian community.

“**N**ow we must teach them and help them to learn to worship and pray. We don’t have Sunday School to do it for us.”

### Christian Community

One of the continual challenges that Devendra and Pranaya faced in this last stage of their pilgrimage involved the question of Christian community. How will you have church? How will you have Christian worship? How will you have Sunday School or small groups? How will Hindus know you are different from them if you don’t live as separate Christians in the Christian community?

The questions were voiced, and continue to be emailed to them in different ways. But the underlying assumption is commonly the same. What we know as “church” is the way that God’s people must associate, assemble, and worship. We are told to “not forsake the assembling of ourselves together” (Hebrews 10:25), so how can you follow Jesus, if you don’t attend church?

Some of these are valid questions and others (Sunday School) are obviously more problematic. The previous two sessions in this track have dealt in depth with the ecclesial challenges of insiders and the importance of a believing community. Darren Duerksen has dealt with the community issues in a much more detailed way and I refer you to his research and analysis for scriptural and viable alternatives in a Yesu Bhakta context. You can also read his 2012 ISFM presentation on this subject, “Must Insiders Be Churchless?” (Duerksen, *IJFM*, Winter 2012).

The Yesu Bhaktas connected with Bharati have a *mandali* (fellowship) of believers, some in Chennai and some around Bangalore. Devendra and Pranaya attended a mandali gathering with some other Hindu-background Christian friends to learn more. It provided time for worship, deep and intense scripture study, fellowship and encouragement. They had an

opportunity to meet Yesu Bhaktas from various locations and walks of life. This helped to further confirm that they would have a network and support system once they left the Christian community.

Chennai has a small network of mandali members, so they would also meet up and fellowship with these as time allowed. These too encouraged them in their final choice to leave the Christian community and identify with the *bhakta* community as followers of Jesus within the Hindu context.

As they shared these community opportunities with the Christian leadership, this at least mitigated the concerns about Christian community to some extent. Devendra and Pranaya knew in their hearts that this was the way that Jesus was calling them to follow. Finally in September, the Christian leaders met with them in their home as they presented and discussed their decision. The questions that evening reflected a mature concern for their spiritual well-being and life, while not requiring them to follow Jesus in overtly Christian ways. Most of the group affirmed and encouraged them in their decision. That evening they prayed for Devendra and Pranaya and blessed them as they followed the Lord in this different way.

Ironically, we discussed and shared this experience while a church across the street blared its evening service through external loudspeakers that disturbed the peace of the entire community, including our Christian meeting. Indian Christianity’s disregard for the culture and community at large runs deep.

A few weeks later, Bharati led them through a ritual of *prayaschitta* (atonement) where they apologized for the offense and shame they had

unnecessarily caused to the family and officially declared that they were no longer Christians. They officially announced their return to the Hindu community, but also publicly declared to family in attendance that they were Bhaktas (disciples) of Jesus and Jesus only.

As a result of their return, the uncle who once castigated them at every gathering now welcomes and commends them at every gathering. Devendra and Pranaya just told me in August (2015) that they are slowly rebuilding relationships that were broken and alienated for years. Pranaya described how every morning now she lights a lamp and sits with her two primary age children to worship Jesus for 15 minutes before they leave for school. She said, "Now we must teach them and help them to learn to worship and pray. We don't have Sunday School to do it for us."

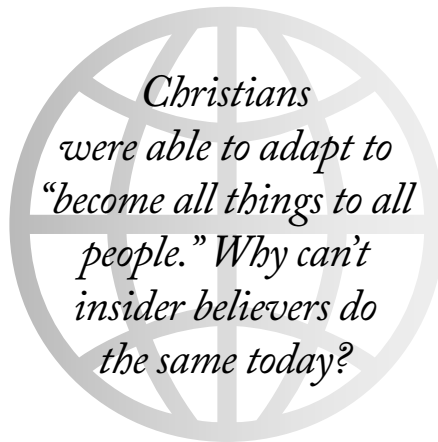
### Closing Observations

So why have I shared this story about Christians encouraging Devendra and Pranaya to follow Jesus in non-Christian ways? Let me close with several observations that arise from our joint pilgrimage to incarnational ministry in the Hindu setting.

In a world that is becoming increasingly resistant to Christianity this journey has forced us to carefully examine where that resistance arises. While Jesus is a stumbling stone, and Satan actively opposes him, Christians must recognize and address situations where their own traditions and customs are keeping people from Jesus. Ultimately we need to represent Jesus in such a way that those who reject him do so because of him and him alone, not our Euro-American or Indian inventions. *The insider believers repeatedly challenge traditional Christians to consider how tightly they should hold to centuries of human tradition when it conflicts with or even replaces Scripture itself.* And they challenge us to consider inventions and practices within Christianity that

originated in pagan traditions, festivals, and practices. If Christians were able to make such adaptations in "becoming all things to all people," why can't insider believers do the same today?

The concerns about Christian community were well-founded. Devendra and Pranaya discovered after leaving that the mandali only met every few months. And the bhaktas in Chennai were often traveling and unavailable for meeting in their early days. This isolation after intense Christian interaction left them floundering for several months. This year we met with them to take stock and they shared the progress they had made, but also the sense of isolation. In an April meeting with Bharati over three days I



shared that sense of isolation. He and the leadership took immediate steps to gather the mandali and develop a plan for 1) more regular meetings as a large group, 2) more frequent visits by bhaktas with Devendra and Pranaya, and 3) more regular gatherings of the Chennai bhaktas. When I talked with Devendra and Pranaya in August, this had led to a much greater sense of community and fellowship. They conduct daily and weekly family worship now in their home and are feeling their way into what devotion looks like in this different context.

Another challenge to and criticism of insider believers is *the lack of "evangelism" and "witness."* They do not go

about presenting the gospel the way we expect or want from our Western perspective. Because they were Christian converts for a time, any quick, overt evangelistic attempts will suggest to their families that they are actually still "Christians" masquerading as Hindus. Since much evangelism training is based on overt, outgoing Western models, they don't know other options. We are working with Indian believers on following the 1 Peter model of living your life and doing your work in a quiet, respectful way as you pray for opportunities. 1 Peter 3:15 provides the model for how to respond "when someone asks you." In a context of persecution and resistance (Peter's day), overt and aggressive evangelism would have just aggravated and intensified the resistance. His quiet, gentle approach is not evasion, it is a faithful witness for Christ. And in India today, not only Bhaktas but even Christians need to be coached in how to follow more of this model.

As a result of this process, the faculty at the Bible College and Seminary has revised the curriculum in order to emphasize a more scriptural understanding of what it means to follow and serve Jesus and to reduce emphasis on traditional Christian approaches. They are actively pursuing ways to encourage Christians to affirm and encourage Yesu Bhaktas instead of questioning and rejecting them. They are working toward an on-going interaction with Bhakta leaders that could help both groups wrestle with scriptural and practical issues in mutually respectful and beneficial ways. And they are encouraging all of their faculty and students to consider the option of helping Hindus follow Jesus in non-Christian ways rather than assuming they must join a Christian community and follow traditional Christian expectations.

One of the interesting side effects of our experience with Devendra and Pranaya has been *American leaders' responses to the issues* that led to it. In almost every conversation or presentation about this,



someone ends up saying, “We are wrestling with those same issues of barriers, separation, and identity here. This helps us think about it in a different way.” I believe that the decision to be incarnational believers is being used by God to shake up Christianity. It requires us as Christians to re-examine what Scripture actually says about following and belonging to Jesus, worshiping and serving him, and sharing him with others. If, as a result, we let go of human, barrier-producing traditions, and become more scriptural followers of Jesus, we Christians just might find ourselves freed from issues that plague much of Western Christianity and church today.

Ultimately Devendra and Pranaya’s experience has led us to conclude that Jesus and his word calls all of us, Christians and Bhaktas alike, to be “incarnational believers”—followers who incarnate the way and life of Jesus within their culture, rather than extract, isolate, and separate themselves from it. Painful and challenging as the journey has been at times, we are closer to the Lord and his will for our lives today because of the process. **IJFM**

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# ASFM 2015 Report

—by B. J. Jeoung

In October 2015 the Asia Society of Frontier Mission (ASFM) convened its annual meeting in Indonesia under the theme “Understanding Insider Movements,” and focused presentations on research and topics related to insider movements. John Jay Travis and Harley Talman, the editors of *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus in Diverse Religious Communities* (reviewed on pp. 152–156), presented an overview of the key themes and principles in this comprehensive treatment of insider movements in Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh and Jewish contexts. A key principle is that as insiders grow in their relationship with God and their biblical knowledge, they will modify and reinterpret the religious teachings and practices of their birth community, and marginalize or reject others they find incompatible with Scripture.

There were presentations on three separate “in-context” movements that are currently developing on three different continents, each which is scripturally-based and functions within challenging Muslim environments. The main principles and process of discipleship were identified from the personal spiritual testimonies of their respective leaders and believers, and these principles are clearly at the heart of these movements as they spread within their communities.

Several leaders of Muslim followers of Jesus from an island in the Indonesian archipelago demonstrated the validity of their worship of Jesus Christ through their *salat* (ritual prayer), their socio-religious musical styles, and the chanting of the Gospel in both Arabic and in their mother tongue.

Kevin Higgins presented a paper offering a sympathetic but dissenting opinion concerning the recent World Evangelical Alliance Review Panel recommendations for translation of the terms “Son” and “Father” in the New Testament. The paper began with five points of agreement, which included a shared passion for the Gospel and a commitment to biblical principles for translation. Higgins then offered six areas of dissent, the most egregious being the failure to include any translators involved in the types of projects under scrutiny, nor any Muslim background believers who had elected to remain Muslim (and who represent the audience which finds non-literal renderings helpful).

Al Harrison illustrated how the wording of verses from the sacred literature of other religious contexts can be a useful vehicle for communicating biblical truth (or pointing people to the truth). One example of specific verses from a particular non-Christian sacred text illustrated its usefulness in drawing attention to the uniqueness of Jesus and what God does for those who follow him.

David Lim presented nine best practices for insider movements. Evangelizing must be relational and culturally

sensitive—friends inviting others to join Christ followers in a spiritual journey. This approach requires a study of the local worldviews, the highlighting of commonalities, and the avoidance of conflicts and differences. Any theological contextualization of Christology requires an appreciative approach in “truth encounter” that emphasizes continuity rather than discontinuity with a people’s cultural and religious background. And for ecclesiology, these believers should be empowered to develop their own transformational spirituality from the bottom up and from the inside out. It should focus on biblical spirituality, develop missional spirituality, and retain simple church structures.

In his presentation “Let the Prince Kiss the Bride: Functioning as a Best Man” (see p. 139), Japanese scholar and practitioner Mitsuo Fukuda used a wedding allegory to introduce the role of the evangelist as that of a “best man.” Just as the goal of a wedding is to unite a bridegroom with his bride, so also the goal of evangelism is to unite Christ with the new believer. Yet with a disregard for worldview and an over-emphasis on cognition, many evangelists (best men) cut in and mistakenly place themselves in the role of bridegroom. The result is that direct communication between Jesus and the new believer is usurped. Presented in the context of Japan, Fukuda gave concrete examples of how understanding and respecting Japanese worldview can pave the way for the bride to meet her groom.

Chris Bauer explored what Buddhists actually reject when they reject “God” and all that is misinterpreted. New terminology is needed in order to properly convey the core message of Christ, but the hindrances in finding such terminology are rooted in certain theological and missiological assumptions. Uncovering those assumptions will enable field practitioners to see how God has uniquely prepared Buddhists to receive the Good News.

A Burmese mission leader explained how Christian communication remains alien to the Burmese Buddhists after 200 years of ministry. Christianity among these Buddhists is still regarded as a “potted plant” transplanted onto the Burmese soil, and it fails to fulfill their spiritual quest. He discussed how to communicate true liberation in Christ through a contextualizing of the gospel among Burmese folk Buddhists on pilgrimage to the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon city.

John Kim concluded the ASFM gathering with two thoughts. First, there should be more focus on field issues and practices (with a Kingdom perspective supported by the UIM book, concrete research results and the witness of insider movements). Second, the ASFM must rediscover the meaning of *oikos* (household) from a Kingdom perspective—how it can encompass a future generation of insiders/outsid-ers/alongsiders, and how it can create a fellowship of followers of Jesus from various socio-religious backgrounds. **IJFM**

*The 2016 ASFM annual meeting will be held in Korea from October 31 to November 4. Please contact John Kim at john\_yoon@psmail.net for more information.*

# Let the Prince Kiss the Bride: Functioning as Best Man

by Mitsuo Fukuda

*Editor's note: This article was originally presented at the Asia Society for Frontier Mission (ASFM) meetings in October 2015.*

Imagine this retelling of the classic story, "Sleeping Beauty." At the end of my adaptation, we see three kinds of people surrounding the beautiful princess in her chamber: the prince, who is her future bridegroom; the fairies, who raised her until she was a teenager; and finally someone who does not appear in the original story, a doctor who was sent from a far country to save her. All are gathered around, expecting the poor, enchanted princess to wake up from her long sleep.

Now imagine that the girl has been getting better, but she is still not completely awake. She can hear the voices of the people around her, but cannot open her eyes. The fairies' voices are the only ones which are familiar to her, and she is glad to be able to talk to them.

However, the doctor is a scientist and is too rational to admit the existence of fairies. He cannot see the fairies himself, and has diagnosed her as being in a state of confusion. He says to the girl, "Don't listen to the fairies. You are suffering from an auditory hallucination. They are not real. Just listen to me. I am the one who can give you a solution."

Then the doctor turns around and asks the prince. "Could you leave the room, please? I am quite an experienced doctor and I have the cure. There is no need to give her your magical kiss." So the prince, who is expected to be the one person most able to solve the problem, is kicked out of the place where his bride sleeps.

## *Who Should You Listen To?*

Let me explain how an unorthodox fabrication of this story speaks to mission in Japan today. The sleeping princess is the Japanese people. The prince is Jesus. The doctor is a Christian worker who practices from an "excluded middle" in his theology, and who fails to acknowledge the activities of an

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*Mitsuo Fukuda is an equipper of disciple makers, and the founder of the Rethinking Authentic Christianity Network, which has provided mission strategies and grass-roots training in Japan and other Asian countries. After finishing the Graduate School of Theology at Kwansai Gakuin University, he received a doctoral degree in intercultural studies at Fuller Seminary. His books include Mentoring Like Barnabas, Paradigm Shift in Contextualization, and Readings in Missiology: Japanese Culture and Christianity.*

unseen spiritual realm here in this world (Hiebert 1982, 40). The fairies are the deities and spirits which exist amidst the Japanese people. The doctor's mission should be to introduce the princess to the prince, but in the end his behavior prevented the prince from kissing his bride.

Christian workers who have a Western theology and worldview are sometimes part of the problem in Asian contexts. They are trained to logically explain the way of salvation to the Japanese people, that they might receive a good response from them one by one. However, in most cases, their persuasion does not work, because the Japanese people will trust more intuitive inputs, even those from the spiritual world, in determining their behavior. For most Asians, conversations with spirits and deities are their normal reality—and even become part of their identity. I believe God is using this Asian paradigm as his point of contact. It is actually an advantage for Asian people to receive messages from the spiritual realm, because God himself is also Spirit.

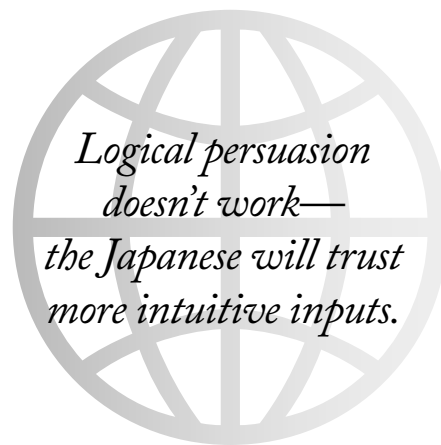
Looking back at the story, Christ is there just beside the princess. Yes, as the doctor said, it is dangerous for the girl to continue listening to the fairies. However, it is also a precious opportunity for the bridegroom to finally be able to speak to his bride. Don't disturb the sweet conversation between bridegroom and bride! As she talks with him, the bride will understand that he is the one that she is to walk with forever, as her husband.

We need to understand the practice of spiritual activities of the typical Japanese worldview in order to find a new approach which paves a way for the bride to meet her bridegroom. Apostle Paul's promise to the Corinthians was "I espoused you to one husband, that I might present you as a pure bride to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:2). Our promise to the Japanese people should be the same.

### *A Princess Who Listens to Fairies*

Saigyō was a Japanese Buddhist priest and poet. One of his best-known poems expresses the spiritually-oriented worldview of the Japanese: *Nanigotono Owashimasukawa Shiranedomo Katajikenasani Namidakoboruru*— "Whatever thing there may be, I cannot tell, but grateful tears overflow." The poet could not define scientifically what there is "out there," but he feels something spiritual gently enfolding him and he cannot stop weeping.

Most Japanese people receive this kind of message from the spiritual realm. They often feel that they are protected by gods, deities, natural forces and spiritual essences. For example, Japanese



people say "*itadakimasu*" before eating. It means "let's eat," but many Japanese will think unconsciously, "I take this meal as a precious gift from someone or something bigger than I." Japanese people sometimes use another phrase, "*okagesamade*." It originally means "thanks to *okage* (shadow)," and is an expression of thanks for being under the umbrella of a spiritual fortune giver. Its usage has been mostly secularized nowadays, but sometimes Japanese people are conscious of the spiritual zone behind everyday events.

Japanese people understand the mystical life-giving powers around them as objects of awe and intimacy. They seek to harmonize themselves

with the world around them and to empathize with it. The cosmos itself is both familiar to them and at the same time absolute. People perform rituals of respect, veneration, propitiation and offering, seeking to gain access to the life-giving powers of spiritual beings. The actions and rituals of Japanese religion largely center on the development and maintenance of harmonious relationships with these life-giving spiritual beings (cf. Fukuda 2012, 87).

Another key concept of Japanese religion is that of "bad fortune consciousness," which provides explanations for their crises. Japanese have a fundamental fear that malevolent spirits might damage the living. It is believed that an unhappy spirit who was not cared for causes hindrances and problems to its kin until the necessary rituals are performed to pacify it. Counter-rituals with strong purification and exorcism themes are performed against the unhappy spirits, so that the hindrances may be removed and unhappy spirits may be soothed.

Japanese religious rituals are intended to ward off or decrease any misfortune, and to secure or augment the cooperation of the spiritual essence in promoting the happiness and peace of the individual and the community. Shrines and temples are recognized as the places where dangerous, polluting spirits are soothed, transformed or removed. Japanese need to cope with vast myriads of spirits and deities (*yaoyorozu no kami*), and to calm troublesome spirits and deities (*kami*) who have been offended by some impurity (Picken 1980, 53).

People in Athens in the Apostle Paul's era had a similar pantheistic worldview to today's Japanese. There were around three thousand public altars in that classical setting, and many private ones. This worldview is evident when Paul started to preach to philosophers on the Areopagus:

So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: "Men of

Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: 'To an Unknown God.' This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about." (Acts. 17:22-23)

Why did the people of Athens need to have one more altar when many deities were already represented in their city? They assumed that a god which had been offended and caused them a disaster was not any of the known gods of Athens, but one yet-to-be-known god (Richardson 1984, 9-25). Paul asserted that this God is Jesus. Although he did not accept the way in which the Athenians were spiritually manipulated, he used their fear of being attacked by a deity omitted from their worship as his point of contact.

The apostle did not blame the Athenians for their idolatry, but instead invited them to worship the true God who was at that time unknown to them. It is vital that the missionary to people with an animistic worldview not make a hasty challenge to cut off their relationship with their gods, but rather to invite them to start a new conversation with the true, real God. Once they feel that this new God is more faithful, powerful and wise, they will know the difference between him and their familiar deities.

It is easy for Japanese people to communicate with Jesus as Spirit. In the beginning stages, they might think of Jesus as simply one of their deities. We must run the risk of syncretism. It's reflected in the writing of Japanese author, Ryunosuke Akutagawa, when his main character says to a Catholic missionary: "Your Lord could also very well become a native of this land. China and India did. The West must change" (Akutagawa 2015). However, if the Japanese really have a conversation with Jesus, many will gradually come to realize that Jesus is unique and different from the other deities. We need to trust in Jesus who is

## *If the Japanese really have a conversation with Jesus, many will gradually realize that Jesus is unique and different from other deities.*

searching for his prodigal sons. We must take this risk and entrust the Japanese people to the love and power of Jesus who is able to speak with his loving children.

Returning to the princess in the fairy tale, the fairies' voices are familiar to her and listening to them is part of her identity. The doctor intended to stop her listening to them, but he didn't need to stop her at this stage. The most important step for the princess is to listen to the prince's voice. Once the channel of conversation with the prince broadens, other channels will fade away.

### *Failing to Understand the Bride and Bridegroom*

The Apostle Paul taught Timothy about who God is using these words:

He alone can never die, and he lives in light so brilliant that no human can approach him. No human eye has ever seen him, nor ever will. All honor and power to him forever! Amen. (1 Tim. 6:16)

No human can approach him or see him, much less bargain with him.

Sometimes, to the contrary, people treat God like a vending machine, assuming that they can manipulate him. They expect to receive good fortune from God by giving money and service. Can we buy blessings by our tithes and offerings? Can we control God like a programmer instructing a computer to execute a command? Japanese people bribe their gods so as to receive health, success, safe baby delivery and good marriage. Is the Creator God the same as the Japanese deities?

The Apostle Paul was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city of Athens because he understood

the ignorance and arrogance of the idol worshipers. The transcendent God will do what he will do whenever he wants to. Every creature's fate is in his hands. He is the King with absolute control over the whole universe. "Should the thing that was created say to the one who created it, 'Why have you made me like this?'" (Rom. 9:20) A mere human being cannot argue with God.

Paul knew both God's incomparable nature and the Athenian misunderstandings, but he did not despise and criticize. Rather he searched for a point of contact and showed it to them, quoting the words of their own poet. His tone was not "Don't do it," but "Here is the better way to go." He did not show them a new approach to God, but rather God's approach to humans. He asserted that the real God has been with them all along (Acts 17:27-28), so that they can feel and touch him, if they respond to God's approach to them.

On the other hand, the doctor in the fairy tale cannot allow the princess to converse with the fairies, because he did not understand the transition period from animistic belief to Christian belief. Most seekers cannot cut themselves off from their old beliefs at a stroke. Many of them need a step-by-step process that narrows their polytheistic paradigm down to monotheism. The procedure which allows them to affirm the uniqueness of Creator God is the work of the Holy Spirit. The doctor did not need to stop the conversation with fairies by force, but rather to open up opportunities for the prince to talk with the princess.

Why couldn't the doctor understand this process? The reason is that he had no experience with fairies, miraculous healing, magical rites, sleeping curses, gods, deities, ancestors, evil spirits,

charms, or amulets, even though he understands the transcendent realm of the creator God. He wanted to start by teaching about the one and only non-negotiable God beyond the universe, someone whom the animists had never truly imagined. If an animist cannot understand the concept of an absolute sole God, he/she will not understand sin as rebellion against that God, nor the concept of salvation he offers from sin.

The doctor also did not understand two of the princess' primary emotions. First, there was her fear of spiritual attack, and secondly, her anxiety of losing her old identity. His method of treatment cannot stop her from listening to fairies, because it has been so natural for her to talk with them for such a long time; but, if he could somehow disconnect her from this intuitive communication, he would lose the point of contact. And if he succeeds in stopping her for a long time, at best he could convert her into a little Westerner. She would stay in her bed and dream about the life to come after she wakes up, but she wouldn't stand up and follow the prince.

This doctor's first and basic problem is his belief that he has no problem—only the patient has a problem. He assumes that his role is to diagnose the patient's problems and solve them. He does not have to learn from the patient. He has authority based on his studies in medical school as well as his medical license issued by the state, and so he thinks he is capable to diagnose the patient. Once he has found the problem and prescribed medicine, he can send the patient back to his home and have no further input in the patient's life, because he is neither the patients' friend nor their family member. He is a professional in the area of medical treatment. He doesn't have to share his life with the patient, and the private life of the patients, such as how they relate to their spouses, is not his business.

The doctor's effort is not only futile, but a stumbling block as well. The doctor is not the savior—the prince is. The doctor's desire to save the princess

is admirable, but if he really wants to help her, he needs to take off his white coat and, as a friend, prepare the way for the bridegroom. He needs to treat her fear by describing the prince as a stronger protector, and to soften her anxiety by sketching out her new identity as the wife of the prince. The happy end of the story is brought about when, through the kiss of the bridegroom, the bride will arise and leave with her husband. The doctor should not intercept what is between the prince and the princess. His existence will cause codependency with the princess and he will become an obstacle to her full and independent cleaving to her husband.

Let me share my story. Some years ago, I participated in a theological research



meeting in Japan. It was a frustrating experience, sitting there in a lecture hall at that venue. The principal of a theological school recalled the life of one Japanese pastor 100 years ago. That pastor was an apostolic figure, and his passion was leading him into frontier ministry in proclaiming the good news. He asked a senior western missionary if he could withdraw from his role as pastor in a local church. The answer of the missionary was negative. The eventual result was fruitlessness in the local church, and many Japanese lost the opportunity to hear the Gospel.

Hearing the presentation, I was angry at the inflexible church system, both then and now. When I got out of the

lecture hall, I met with a young theologian outside, who asked me how the lecture was. In spite of myself, I replied quite aggressively,

It was total nonsense! I was really disappointed. The church is a disaster for the Kingdom. The church ought to be a means of expanding the Kingdom, but in reality it has become an end in itself. It kills the Apostles and stops their apostolic works.

That very night Jesus told me, "Don't blame my bride." I repented and replied to him,

I am sorry, Jesus. I said a stupid thing. Blaming the bride makes the bridegroom lose face. I will never say bad things to your bride again. However, looking at your bride, she can neither walk nor eat by herself. She cannot even breathe without tubes. Allow me to fight against the forces weakening your bride.

I have not received permission to fight against them, but after this conversation, Jesus continued to encourage me to speak the truth. The following words resonate in my heart:

What I tell you now in the darkness, shout abroad when daybreak comes. What I whisper in your ear, shout from the housetops for all to hear! (Mt. 10:27)

### *A Bridegroom Who Stands at the Door*

The passage in Revelation 3:20 is often used in an evangelistic setting:

Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.

Jesus is outside the house knocking and calling. I myself remember using this verse to invite non-Christians to open the door of their hearts and let Jesus in the house to start an intimate conversation together. However, the reality is that the person in the house is not a non-Christian, because this letter is addressed to the church in Laodicea. This means that Jesus is not

in the church and he is asking the Christians to let him in. How poor the church is! Jesus is not in the church.

Why is Jesus taking such a soft approach of knocking? He is the King. He could command the people or the door itself to open and let the people come out. I believe that at an appropriate time, Jesus himself will judge God's household. Peter wrote:

For the time has come for judgment, and it must begin with God's household. And if judgment begins with us, what terrible fate awaits those who have never obeyed God's Good News? (1 Pet. 4: 17)

Now is the grace period. Jesus is humbly calling the church to repent and inviting her to walk with him and to work together for his Kingdom.

What does it mean for us to work "with" God? Jesus is the almighty God. He is the person who caused the world to come into existence just with one word. Does he need our help? Perhaps there are times when we try to help but actually we cause a lot of trouble. But here is a story to show how Jesus enjoys working with us.

Once upon a time there was a pastor who loved gardening. One day as he was working, his young son said, "I'm going to help, too!" and he came into the garden. So they began to garden together, but the boy treated the plants so roughly that sorting them out after him meant that everything took twice as long. When they had finished everything, the boy ran back into the house and said to his mother, "I did it all!" But the man said to his friends later, "I really enjoyed working in the garden with my son" (Fukuda 2011, 51-52).

In the same way, by his mercy, Jesus invites us to help, and so we also can enjoy working with him. I believe that Jesus is knocking on the door today and inviting the church to work with him.

However, the wedding day of this bride and bridegroom will come. The

**T**he most important factor in the culmination of this fairy tale is that the prince is already there and is ready to kiss the princess.

virgins will stand before the bridegroom, and he will ask some of them, "Why did you call me Lord, Lord, and did not do as I said" (Mt. 7:22-23)? The church needs to prepare for that day, praying and watching like the five prepared virgins. On that day, Jesus will no longer be knocking at the door, but the door will be locked before the sleeping virgins are able to come back to the gate (Mt. 25:10).

Wolfgang Simson, author of the *The Kingdom Manifesto*, insists that the vast majority of Christians do not follow Christ's law and the constitution of the Kingdom.

They essentially follow the laws and principles of the world, particularly in the areas of money, sex, power, religion. Most Christians have been taught and raised in churches to do what their churches told them to do: visit services, pay taxes and tithes, and participate in religious programs, none of which Christ has told anyone to do. They dutifully look up to their "leaders," pastors, founders, set-men and their own board of directors, just like Israel looked up to the Saul they had elected themselves. And this is how the same thing happened in Christianity that happened with Israel. Humans are on the throne, while God is denied to rule his own people. (Simson 2015, 4)

The church must discern the times and obey everything Jesus commanded the disciples (cf. Mt. 28:20). The doctor in the fairy tale needed to obey what the prince commanded him to do. But, actually, he kicked the prince out of the room and tried to apply his own remedy to the situation. His action and his existence are not a solution, but rather he is part of the problem. In the future, he will have to face the prince again who stands ready to judge everyone, both the living and the dead (cf. 1 Pet. 4:5).

### *The Instructions for the Doctor*

The most important factor in the culmination of this fairy tale is that the prince is already there and is ready to kiss the princess. The bridegroom is speaking directly to the bride, calling her himself. We are moving into the climax of the story. I believe the new season has come since 2011 in Japan, too. Lots of Japanese people have already met the bridegroom in visions, dreams, miracles and healings.

The disasters which hit the Tohoku region on March 11, 2011 changed the physical landscape of Japan. But it is becoming clear that they also marked a change in the spiritual landscape of the country. A man showed up at the house of some Christians who moved there right after the disaster and said, "Jesus appeared in my dream and told me to come to you." Another man, when he talked about his experience, said that God pulled him out of the water when he got swallowed by the tsunami. As he said the word "God," he pulled out a necklace that he had on. It had a cross. The combination of "God" and the cross is extremely unusual in Japan. Obviously, he recognized that the God who pulled him out of the water had something to do with the cross (cf. Yoshimoto, Cozens, Fukuda et al 2014, 1).

How can we respond to this new environment? The traditional assumption of evangelism is that missionaries know the truth, and their task should be to explain the truth to the unbelievers. But if Jesus is there and he is speaking to the unbelievers directly, might not the missionaries' explanation be a hindrance to direct communication between Jesus and the unbeliever?

The one who should repent is not the unbeliever but the missionary. A similar story is found in the Acts of

Apostles chapter 10. Before Apostle Peter arrived at Caesarea, Cornelius had already met Jesus (or an angel) and he received this message: “Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your gifts to the poor have been noticed by God!” (Acts. 10: 31) Luke reported that “even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message.” (Acts. 10: 44) Cornelius had no need to repent, but Peter did. Peter needed to repent of his favoritism.

The first thing that missionaries need to do is to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit who is leading them to repent. Missionaries tend to think that people repent as a result of their message. In many occasions, both the content of the message and the method of delivering it are beside the point.

The instructions that Jesus gave his 72 disciples when he was sending them out to all the towns are excellent guidance for correcting missionary misunderstandings. Let’s imagine that those who were sent in pairs by Jesus are missionaries to Japan—or even Japanese Christians—with an excluded middle paradigm, and that the “person of peace” is a local non-Christian leader, the ‘sleeping beauty’ in this paper.

The first instruction is:

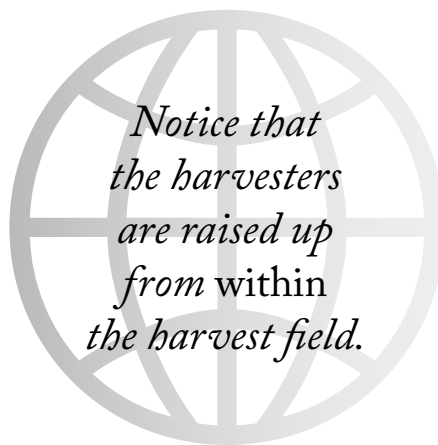
The harvest is great, but the workers are few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields. (Luke 10:2).

Notice that the harvesters are raised up from *within* the harvest field. The local leaders are needed to initiate the project, and it is they who are in charge of the harvest. The missionaries are cheerleaders and encouragers. Through this first instruction, Jesus led the 72 disciples to focus on the workers inside the community. What the locals put their heart and soul into needs to be respected.

The second instruction is: “Now go, and remember that I am sending you

out as lambs among wolves” (10:3). The disciples are heading to dangerous places where enemies are watching for an opportunity to kill them. They are expected to follow the King at the risk of their lives. No heavenly help, no survival. The disciples are learning how to depend on God, not on themselves in their mission fields. If they don’t depend on spiritual guidance, but lean on the rational theories that they learned at their theological schools, the Japanese field will become their graveyard. They’ll end up saying “Japan is too hard a soil to plow” at their farewell party.

The third instruction is: “Don’t take any money with you, nor a traveler’s



bag, nor an extra pair of sandals. And don’t stop to greet anyone on the road” (10:4). Again, notice that the resources for the missionary enterprise already exist in the mission field, so the disciples did not have to bring anything with them. Missionaries should not bring any baggage from the culture of their classrooms; in fact, their former experiences and studies will not transfer to the new field. The disciples must concentrate simply on what Jesus is saying to them. They have no time to greet anyone on the way and must stay focused on this mission alone.

Fourth, “Whenever you enter someone’s home, first say, ‘May God’s peace be on this house’” (10: 5). Just

as Paul was very upset to see the city of Athens full of statues of gods, we can anticipate elements within the house that can be judged or criticized. However, the disciple’s role is not to look down on them, but to bless them. As Paul recommended,

Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. (Phil. 4:8)

As the house receives the peace, these negative things will eventually fade away, just as darkness disappears when the light comes.

Fifth,

Don’t move around from home to home. Stay in one place, eating and drinking what they provide....Eat whatever is set before you. (10:7-8)

Concentrate on one family. Don’t distribute tracts to all the houses in the town. God provides this house as the first piece of the domino effect. Eating whatever is set before them means accepting their culture and their current existence. It is an expression of becoming part of their core fellowship. It is not adopting an academic approach to them. Eating is life. In this life-sharing community, the locals will share what they really feel. Listen to the emotions of the people. If you want to help them, be quiet and listen (cf: Sirolli 2012, xv).

Finally, “Heal the sick, and tell them, ‘The Kingdom of God is near you now’” (10:9). The disciples can exercise the authority of the Kingdom. The disciples are followers of Jesus who turn from their selfish ways, take up their crosses daily and follow Jesus (cf. Luke. 9:23). The power for healing does not come from the disciples, but from heaven. Healing is a sign of the Kingdom’s power. It is like an invitation into the Kingdom for the household of peace. If they accept the invitation, they will experience fuller power of the Kingdom.



### *The Doctor as Best Man*

The main characters of the fairy tale are the prince and princess. I have introduced the doctor as a supporting actor. The doctor needs to know his role and he should not play the leading actor. He should not stand in the main actor's way. If this doctor discerns his role and performs it faithfully, he will be rewarded by the creator of the story.

So in this final section, I wish to give the reader an illustration of a new approach that clarifies this role. I will share how I am supporting those people in Japan who have begun to make conversation with Jesus.

A lot of Japanese business persons are now accepting Christ as a result of being guided to make conversation with God. Many of them are eager to know their "*tenmei*," their mission from heaven. We sometimes ask them if they want to know their mission from heaven, and most say "yes."

Then we challenge them to receive spiritual guidance from Jesus who will give them their mission and lead them to fulfill it, and we ask them if they want to open the channel to Jesus. Most say "yes."

After that, we would explain about Jesus for 15–20 minutes from Genesis to Revelation and ask them again,

Jesus died for your sin on the cross and to show you a way to get to know your mission, guide you and give you a new true identity. Do you want to receive this invitation and enter into the way?

Many say "yes," and confess to follow Christ as Spirit.

Maybe they will listen to other spiritual voices in their initial stage, but this is fine, because they will discover the difference eventually. If the missionary prohibits them from listening to other spiritual voices at this initial stage, they will stop listening to Jesus as the Spirit. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

**W**e challenge them to receive spiritual guidance from Jesus who will give them their mission and lead them to fulfill it.

We provide three pieces of guidance for them immediately after this step of conversion. The first guidance is to open the channel of conversation with Jesus. It is a very simple 10-minute exercise and most of the new converts begin to talk with Jesus from that day on (Fukuda 2014).

The second piece of guidance is to share their experience with others. We ask them how they felt the previous day, and how they feel after talking with Jesus. There must be a difference. For example, one lady said to me, "I wanted to blot out my own existence, but now I want to know myself more." I gave her one biblical word: "You are precious to me. You are honored, and I love you (Isa. 43:4)." I trained her how to share her experience of Jesus in 90 seconds, including that biblical passage. Then I encouraged her to share it with others.

The third piece of guidance is to become part of a life-sharing group. We don't explain the entire system on their first day of conversion, but just appoint them to participate in an existing group or start a new group. When they become a member of a group, they will know what to do in and with the group.

The idea is to enlarge the channel of communication, so that the new converts know Jesus personally. We need to trust Jesus who is the parent, the coach *par excellence*, and leave the new converts in his hands.

I have a friend who met Jesus personally without going to church or reading the Bible. She actually had not yet met a Christian when she encountered Jesus. She said,

The heavenly information was downloaded from Jesus to me for some minutes and after the download, I understood immense things. Then Jesus told me to go to my mother-in-law to apologize for my inappropriate attitude to

her. So I went to my mother-in-law in a hurry and said to her 'I am sorry,' so she forgave me and now our relationship has been transformed. Then Jesus told me to share my experience with my husband and two children. I followed this guidance and they are now following Jesus with me.

Until this point, no Christian had helped her. Jesus alone had been guiding this lady. I expect that soon we will hear stories like this all over Japan.

However, Christian workers have something to do. First, their job is to encourage the Japanese to listen to Jesus more; secondly, to make a graceful exit, so that the ministry can flow from the new converts—that is, to train them to witness about their new life in Jesus; and thirdly, to connect them to the Bible and to the Christian community so that they understand their personal experience as part of the larger biblical narrative, as just one of the stories in the lives of fellow Christ followers.

My earnest wish is to be at the wedding ceremony of two Js: Jesus and Japan. As a Japanese, I myself am part of his bride. But I hope to have another function at that ceremony along with my loving fellow Christian workers (which includes many missionaries from all over the world). That function will be the role of the best man.

John the Baptist is our model.

"'I am not the Messiah. I am only here to prepare the way for him.' It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the best man is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy at his success. He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less." (John. 3:28–30)

What a privilege the best man has! Take off the white coat, abandon the status of a doctor and, as the best man, let us prepare the way for the bridegroom! **IJFM**

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Asian Thresholds

# Community vs. Belief: Respecting Cultural Belonging in Evangelism

by Herbert Hofer

*Editor's Note: This article is updated from its initial publication in Missio Apostolica: Journal of the Lutheran Society of Missiology, May 2010 (pp. 30–35).*

In the years since I wrote this article on “Community vs. Belief,” there has been an increasing recognition of the sociological dimensions of the “insider movements” phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Donald McGavran pioneered the use of sociological tools to understand and guide the church growth movement in missiology. Now these tools are proving helpful in understanding the dynamism and spontaneity of insider movements.

## *Religion as Community*

For me, the light went on when I was teaching a course on “Issues between Islam and Christianity” for which I have a Muslim come several times to respond to students’ questions. The last time I taught it, the two Muslim men who came wanted to spend some time with me after class. Toward the end of our discussion, our major speaker asked me what was really on his mind, “What would it take for you to become a Muslim?” I was taken aback, of course, but I responded, “That Jesus didn’t actually rise from the dead.”

It was his response to my question in return that prompted new reflections. I asked him, “What would it take for you to become a Christian?” He simply said, “My community.” I suddenly became aware of some fundamental differences between the nature of the Christian faith and the Muslim faith. In fact, these differences are true between Christianity and almost all other religions. Recognizing these sociological realities is crucial to our mission approach.

A religion is a function of the society. The problems of the society are problems in the life of the church as well, whether it is sexual promiscuity in the West or tribalism in Africa or casteism in India. When missionaries have gone from our individualistic society of the West to witness among religions abroad, we have tended to approach the faith the way we have known and practiced it at home.

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Since the Enlightenment, Christianity in the West has been primarily a matter of individual *belief*, while religions elsewhere are primarily a matter of *corporate identity*. What are the beliefs required to be considered a true Muslim or Hindu or Jew or Buddhist or animist? They are very minimal, if any at all. Islam is the only other religion that mandates a confession of faith, but that confession is very minimal: "There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger." Even where corporate allegiance is required of a faithful member, as in Roman Catholic and Orthodox communities, the focus remains on belief (in this case, belief in the divine character of the institution), rather than on identification with the church as one's social community.

A second difference, then, is that Christianity for us is primarily a matter of vertical allegiance, while other religions elsewhere are primarily a matter of horizontal allegiance. The emphasis in Western Christianity is a personal relationship to God in Christ. In other religions, however, the commitment is to one's sociological community. It is through the community that one relates to God. One is a God-pleasing Muslim or Hindu or Jew by being a loyal participant in one's religious community.

A third difference is that Christianity has placed great emphasis on developing and maintaining doctrinal correctness. However, for other religions, doctrines are important and are argued over, but those differences do not generally disqualify them from being considered a member of the faith. Rather, one is disqualified if one fails to carry out one's social obligations: in Hinduism one's dharmic duties, in Islam one's support of fellow Muslims, in Buddhism one's compassion toward all living things, in Judaism one's observance of the traditions, in animist societies one's reverence for ancestors, etc.

Finally, there is a great difference in the meaning of religious festivals.

Except in countries where the Orthodox Church or the Roman Catholic Church is predominant, Christian festivals are events primarily confined to the church building. Among Protestant churches, festivals themselves are very infrequent, and really only Christmas is celebrated extravagantly and socially.

In other religions, religious festivals are community events. They take place primarily out in the open, and they may go on for several days. I recall one person who decided not to convert from Hinduism to Christianity saying, "I just can't give up all my festivals." He enjoyed and thrived on the community celebrations of his religion.



### Three Examples

I would illustrate this phenomenon of religion as community in three ways: invitation, self-identification, and communalization.

When Muslims invite someone to convert, they say, "Would you like to become a Muslim?" When Christians invite someone to convert, they say, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 16:31). Likewise, when one converts to Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, for example, one becomes a "Hindu," "Jew," or "Buddhist." Many believers in Christ around the world, however, are very comfortable when speaking of their new faith as being "followers

of Jesus," "Messianic Jews," or "believers in Christ." In these other religions, conversion is joining a specific sociological community. In Christianity, it is espousal of a specific personal belief.

A second illustration: If you ask American Muslims "Who are you?" they will answer, "I am a Muslim." If you ask American Christians, they will typically answer, "I am an American." The Christian's self-identification is with his nationality; the Muslim's is with his religion. The Muslims' social identity is with their religion. The Christians' social identity, on the other hand, is with their nationality or tribe. A Christian is an American or German or Hutu or Masai who happens to be a Christian by belief.

Thirdly, take the example of the Christians of the organized churches in a communalized society like India. If you ask them "Who are you?" they will say, "I am a Christian." They are in a land of communal identity according to one's religion, so Christianity in the organized church also has become communalized. The India Constitution and legal framework place everybody in some communal group. Christians of the organized churches, then, are an officially recognized separate community, with their own civil laws. When one is baptized and put onto church rolls, one legally changes sociological communities.

If you ask Hindus in India "Who are you?" they will typically answer by their social community also: "I am a Brahmin or a Nadar or an Oriya." If you ask, "What is your belief?" they would respond "I am a Hindu." Those who are *Jesu bhaktas* (devotees of Jesus) within Hinduism would say, "I am a believer in Jesus." In India, Christianity has become communalized as a function of that society.

### Christianity as Faith

What are the implications for our evangelistic work? Humans are social creatures. Most people dry on the vine

when their connection to the whole is fractured. This is especially true in non-Western societies, where one's whole identity is determined by one's place and family of birth. What do we do when we know the church will not become a new community for the convert? I remember one of our Muslim missionaries in India stating in exasperation over the plight of a few Muslim converts, "Until we can provide a community for people, we should not try to convert them."

In an article reflecting on their evangelistic work in the Muslim context of North Africa, Tim and Rebecca Lewis relate how their evangelistic work made no progress as long as they attempted to extract converts from their natural community:

After 15 years, we had learned the hard way that—in communal cultures—we couldn't plant a lasting church by gathering random believers into new groups. It didn't matter if they were contextualized or not, multi-cultural or mono-cultural, after a few months or years, these groups would fall apart.<sup>2</sup>

Potential converts in these major religions realize very well that conversion will mean the loss of their community—as was expressed by our Muslim speaker. In all of these religions there is a great respect for Jesus Christ. There is great respect for the social ministries of the church as followers of Jesus. There is great respect for the power of prayer in Jesus' name. There is great respect for the saints of the church, both historical and local. However, the great stumbling block to conversion is the loss of one's community.

Theologically, this is a concern which we are compelled to respect and honor. God himself is a social being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He created us as an expression of himself, and intended us to be a community of love, as he is. Theologically, we recognized that the structures for such love and support are expressed in all of society,

*These structures are to be honored and preserved, and we should not impose a form of church that undermines God-ordained structures.*

not just in the church. In another classical theological concept, God is at work for good in both the Kingdom of the Left (government, courts, business, etc.) and the Kingdom of the Right, the church.

Recognizing in our fallen world that all people need structures to promote community and restrain disharmony, God has lovingly ordained the "orders of creation," which are expressed in different ways in different societies. But every society has some form of marriage, family, government, court, social mores, etc. These structures are to be honored and preserved in their various forms, and we should not seek to develop or impose a form of church that violates or undermines other God-ordained structures.<sup>3</sup>

Rev. Paul Schmidt, a pastor who served in Utah for several years, sent me this email message<sup>4</sup> after reading a draft of this article:

I spent some years in Salt Lake City and noted that Mormonism is also a community-based religion. The contractor that built our church told me he disagreed with his church and believed that people are saved by faith in Jesus Christ and not by following the ordinances of the Gospel. "Anyone who reads St. Paul would understand that!" he told me. When I suggested that he ought to join the Lutheran church, he said, "Oh no, I could never do that. It would destroy my whole family."

The great possibility for evangelization of Mormons, I believe is from within. The gospel is there in the music, in the Bible Study, and even in their bread and water sacrament. Whatever we could do to encourage the proclamation of the biblical gospel within the LDS church ought to be done.

Christianity does not claim to be a new social community. It claims to present the way for people to enter into a personal, saving relationship with God, within their cultures. Christianity affirms God's creative work in all cultures, and this is to be celebrated and preserved. We also recognize that all cultures are ridden with sin and need redemption. Christianity is at its essence an incarnational religion.

Christianity, then, is not a religion that details social obligations. It simply says, quite vaguely: "Love God; love your neighbor." In all this, the convert who leaves a communal religion feels totally at sea: Where is my community? What are my duties? To whom am I accountable? Who will be there for me in my needs? Who will take my daughters in marriage?

Indeed, there are amazingly strong individuals of faith who withstand all the pressures and uncertainties. However, we cannot expect such heroism of new converts—sacrifices far beyond what mature Christians have to experience. When others see how difficult it is for new converts, they also will strongly hesitate and warn others.

### *Faith within Community*

In my own experience, I've only seen these obstacles overcome in two ways. One is through mass movements. In these instances, whole communities come into the church and form a sizeable portion, if not a majority, in their communities. Historically, the vast majority of conversions have come in this way (most often a result of military conquest). Of course, the community approach is what Donald McGavran advocated for many years in mission outreach. All of these social obstacles are overcome, and people can feel free to follow the leading of

their hearts. The church, then, becomes a function of the community. This is the case with Christianity in India, especially among the Dalits (outcastes) and tribals, as mentioned above, where there were mass movements.

These churches are comfortable with foreign partners, and we are comfortable with them. They look and act a lot like us, and they often want to imitate our ways. They welcome us into their communities and sometimes even want us to provide leadership. Of course, our caution as foreigners is to remain in a secondary role, as encouragers and cheer leaders.

The second way has been through insider movements. These are the “C5” believers, who remain in their sociological settings, even though they are a small minority.<sup>5</sup> They continue to call themselves “Buddhists” or “Muslims” or “Hindus” in the sociological sense. They participate in all activities—including the social aspects of the religious events—as responsible members of the society. For them, being a disciple of Christ is not joining a different social community but being a witness within the community.

For foreign missionaries, as well, this approach facilitates access. Once again, Tim and Rebecca Lewis relate their experience:

We had never thought of looking for people who would invite us *into* their family or community to talk about Jesus! But Jesus and the disciples had planted churches this way.<sup>6</sup>

Recent research has demonstrated that the Holy Spirit is working mightily within these religious communities. David Garrison published the results of a three-year study on the movements to Christ within the Muslim world.<sup>7</sup> Rick Love has estimated that more Muslims have converted in the last 25 years than throughout the last 14 centuries, and research has shown that this includes Insider movements.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, in the Hindu world, only

an isolated few upper-caste Hindus have joined the Christian community over the centuries, but we now find hundreds of thousands of caste Hindu believers in Christ outside the church.<sup>9</sup> As I have met or corresponded with secret missionaries in Buddhist societies, they see their small number of followers of Christ also remaining “Buddhists” in their social identity. A recent issue of *Mission Frontiers* addresses the perspective of what is happening in the Buddhist world.<sup>10</sup>

Ben Naja has been helpful in researching not only the numbers of people in a Muslim insider movement but also the characteristics of their beliefs and practice, similar to what Duerksen has provided in his accounts of



the Christ-centered ecclesial communities in the Hindu world.<sup>11</sup> Naja summarizes the conclusions of his research at the end of his 2013 article:

Most striking is the high degree of faithfulness to biblical beliefs and practices and the high percentage of members who regularly meet in ekklesia gatherings, and who share their faith. Also remarkable is the high percentage of people in the movement who see themselves in their context as a type of Muslim and that almost two-thirds of the members feel that they are accepted as full members within the Muslim community despite the fact that they hold non-Islamic beliefs. Sheikh Ali and many of these believers are perceived by their wider community as

Muslims; however, they have joined us in the wider family of God by truly trusting in Jesus for their salvation and following him as their Lord.<sup>12</sup>

### *Relation to Wider Church*

We of the established churches might not be comfortable with this development. But we must be open to following the lead of the Spirit who blows where he will (Jn 3:8) and where we have been unable to go effectively. We must heed Jesus’ warning to the Pharisees, who “tie heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.” (Mt 23:4) St. Paul also gave that same caution:

Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way...Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food... We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. (Rom 14:13, 19, 15:1)

As I have moved with Muslims and high caste Hindus, I have clearly told them that my goal is not to make them into a Christian (i.e., a member of a different sociological community). I tell them that I pray they would become a follower of Christ as a Muslim or a Hindu (sociologically). I have found that they easily understand this distinction, and they begin to drop their guard because they already have a very high regard for Christ from within their own religious tradition. Their primary hesitation is not because of a change of faith but a change of community.

We of the church offer ourselves as “alongsiders” for these inside followers of Christ.<sup>13</sup> Heresy and reversion are real possibilities. As we prove ourselves capable, respectful partners, they comfortably approach us and seriously consider our counsel. I have also felt accepted when I’ve initiated counsel or warnings.

We keep ourselves a bit distant. I recall one of the Christian *sanyassis* (“holy men,” in Hindu terms) who had set up a small *ashram* (retreat center) for

his disciples. I was interested to see it and asked if I could stop by when I was in the vicinity on one of my trips to India. He clearly stated, “No, please don’t come to my residence. We can meet in town in a restaurant for coffee and discuss.” He also has been quite adamant not to receive any foreign funds for his work, but only donations from his disciples. He wants no misunderstanding that his ministry is run by Western support or influence. Even among anti-Christian circles in India today, this approach is appreciated and accepted as authentically spiritual.

These are people of orthodox Christian faith. They are not compromising or secret believers. Everybody in the general community knows their spiritual convictions, and they respect them for it—as long as they also are respectful and responsible members of the community.<sup>14</sup> They judge them not on the basis of their allegiance to Christ but on the basis of their allegiance to the community. They demonstrate that one will become a better son or wife or community member as a follower of Christ.

People know *who* reigns in their heart. They make the faith respectable, acceptable, and attractive:

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Pet. 3:14–16) **IJFM**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the new publication *Understanding Insider Movements* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), and more particularly the literature review and emergent sociological analysis in the recent publication by Darren Duerksen, *Ecclesiastical Identities in a Multi-Faith Context* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Tim and Becky Lewis, “Planting Churches: Learning the Hard Way,” *Mission*

*Frontiers*, Jan–Feb 2009, p. 18. Available online at [missionfrontiers.org](http://missionfrontiers.org).

<sup>3</sup> I developed this issue in more detail in “Church in Context,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, April 2007, pp. 200–09.

<sup>4</sup> A conversation on April 3, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> See John Travis, “The C1 to C6 Spectrum,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 1998, vol. 34:4, p. 407.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam* (Monument CO: WiGTake Resources, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, vol. 17:4, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Nov–Dec 2014, [missionfrontiers.org](http://missionfrontiers.org).

<sup>11</sup> Ben Naja, “A Jesus Movement among Muslims: Research from Eastern Africa,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 30:1, Spring 2013 (also in 30:4, Winter 2013); Darren Duerksen, *Ecclesiastical Identities in a Multi-Faith Context* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Naja, p. 29.

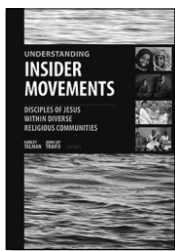
<sup>13</sup> See “Roles of ‘Alongsiders’ in Insider Movements: Contemporary Examples and Biblical Reflections,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 30:4, Winter 2013, p. 161.

<sup>14</sup> See Duerksen, pp. 87–97.

# Book Reviews

*Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities*, edited by Harley Talman and John Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015, pp. 679)

—Reviewed by Michael Pocock, Senior Professor Emeritus, Dallas Theological Seminary.



Very few readers of *IJFM* need to be persuaded that God is doing a remarkable thing in calling thousands of individuals and families in distinct socio-religious communities to a wonderful new life in Jesus. These followers of Jesus are experiencing the transforming impact of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Through their own reading and reflection on the Holy Bible, they are being changed, finding fellowship and worshipping among like-minded followers of Jesus, all without departing from their traditional communities of faith, whether of Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism. But there are many Christians who have heard of this phenomenon known as insider movements (IMs) and who want to understand it more fully in order to resolve serious questions it raises for them. This is exactly how this book will help those readers.

At almost 680 pages, this is a large book. As an edited work, it constitutes an anthology on the topic of insider movements. One of its great strengths is the representativeness of its contributors, almost a hundred percent of whom have enjoyed many years of life and ministry in Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Jewish communities. The work includes fourteen detailed testimonies or articles by indigenous Jesus followers from the Majority World who have lived or continue to live connected to their sociocultural religious communities. There are chapters by veteran missiologists currently serving in fourteen North American, European and Majority World academic institutions, as well as by others who have gone on to their reward.<sup>1</sup> And there's a variety of denominational affiliations represented by those writers who fellowship in traditional church communities. So this work is representative. It deals fairly with objections that have been raised on various elements of the "insider movement paradigm" (IMP), although it does not contain chapters by avid detractors or critics of the movement. Its tone throughout is irenic.<sup>2</sup>

*Understanding Insider Movements* is helpfully divided into seven parts, each followed by discussion questions which makes this a valuable textbook:

1. Setting the Stage
2. Examples, Testimonies and Analysis
3. Biblical and Theological Perspectives
4. Contextualization, Religion and Syncretism
5. Approaches in Witness
6. Concerns and Misunderstandings
7. Matters of Identity

Let's look at each of these parts, albeit selectively in terms of individual chapters.

## *Setting the Stage*

This is a crucial read for understanding exactly what is meant by an "insider movement." It fleshes out terms or concepts that will be used throughout the book, and includes the historical development of IMs by editor Harley Talman and a FAQs section by editor John Travis and Dudley Woodberry. Joseph Cumming examines the whole question of whether there can be, or actually are Muslim followers of Jesus, and myths and misunderstandings about IMs are treated very helpfully by Higgins, Jameson and Talman. Len Bartlott urges us to deal with the reality that our own theological lenses, presuppositions, partiality and provincialism may affect our objectivity when dealing with newer developments like IMs.

Intrinsic to this whole discussion of insider movements is the recognition and description that what in fact is happening are spontaneous acts of the Holy Spirit<sup>3</sup> within previously resistant peoples. IMs are not a strategy or "silver bullet" developed by outsiders (primarily Westerners) in order to penetrate established religious communities. IMs are "happenings" that can be appreciated and encouraged by outsiders. As Higgins, Jameson and Talman assert: "It is fair to say that without foreigners affirming the legitimacy of retaining socio-religious identity, the movement probably would not have happened to the same extent (44)." Unfortunately IMs can sometimes be stifled or limited by the opinions of foreigners. The book later deals with the role of these "alongsiders" in more detail (John and Anna Travis, 455–466).

Controversy about IMs may seem like a singularly Western phenomenon, whether appreciative or judgmental in nature. Most of those who are MFCs (Muslim Followers of Christ) are often unaware of these controversies swirling about, but they in turn may be subject to criticism by traditional Christians who have left their communities under some form of pressure or persecution. These MFCs are simply and gladly following Jesus without seeing a need to separate themselves from their socio-religious community. Whether



**M**acnicol's biography of Pandita captures the essence of the genuine follower of Christ, for "her soul was in its texture Indian and in her we see what such a soul may be under the control of Christ."

this is a transitory stage (short or long), or a permanent reality, may vary contextually.<sup>4</sup> Both in the New Testament and since, there have been movements which originated within synagogues or other established communities and which had no thought of leaving. Although eventually they were forced to leave, they did have a significant impact on their existing communities for a time

### *Examples, Testimonies and Analysis*

This is a fascinating section revealing the experiences of those who have become Christ followers and yet continue in their Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist socio-religious contexts. Timothy Tennant has elsewhere estimated some 160,000 *Jesu Bhakta* followers of Jesus in India, and 200,000 Muslim Followers of Christ who continue in Muslim communities.<sup>5</sup> The authors cite 5.9 million followers of Christ within the context of their own religious and cultural traditions (xxxv). In this section, we have seven testimonies or interviews with insider followers of Jesus, which may seem like a small sample of the many thousands cited, but the nature of their experiences is enlightening.

One of the most fascinating cases is of an earlier follower, Pandita Ramabai (1868–1922), daughter to a Brahman father. In a historical analysis of her life (143–148), H. L. Richard cites Nicol Macnicol's biography of Pandita, who captured the essence of a genuine follower of Jesus who remains within the context of a Hindu socio-religious community: "Her soul was in its texture Indian and in her we see what such a soul may be under the control of Christ."<sup>6</sup> The same could be said for other past and present believers cited in this section who are following Christ within their own communities. Their testimonies bear the ring of authenticity.

### *Biblical and Theological Perspectives*

Twelve chapters explore and apply Scripture and lay the theological basis for a positive evaluation of insider movements. Anthony Taylor first takes the kingdom of God as the biblical paradigm for mission (173–180). Taylor is clearly aware of Christopher Wright's emphasis on God's mission and kingdom, and he sees the church and Christian practice best in the light of the broader kingdom motif rather than in the particularities of denominations. This has significance for IM believers gathering as ecclesial communities yet without extracting their fellowships from their socio-religious communities.

Taylor begins by referencing those Europeans who upon coming to genuine faith in Christ, left the German

*Landeskirche* (state church) for what were considered more biblical "free" churches. Taylor's point is that they could have stayed within the "state" church, and I would suggest that this path has been taken historically to a considerable degree. Taylor's perspective has stimulated my thinking about those *gemeinschafte* (special, mutually committed groups of true believers) that have remained within larger established Western church traditions, where most members are quite nominal in their faith. But should we encourage Jesus followers in IMs to follow this pattern that we have witnessed historically of early Methodist "classes" that remained Anglican, or those European Pietists who were found among Lutheran churches?

Throughout church history there have been movements that were considered out of step with the "parent" group, but nevertheless stayed connected to them as long as it was possible. It could be argued that the vast movements of African Initiated Churches (AIC) were historically insider movements to their culture. They are considered completely African, with some marks of traditional religion still in them. They have persisted and grown, and now in some cases (e.g., the Zionist churches of Southern Africa) welcome deeper Biblical teaching from those who can come alongside in a more positive and uncritical manner than was previously the case.

It has been argued however, that there is a big difference between a *gemeinschaft* that remains connected to some type of church tradition and a new type of Jesus fellowship that remains connected to a Muslim community. This type of emerging movement within other religious worlds is further explored in the Hindu sphere by Darren Duerksen in his article "Ecclesial Identities of Socioreligious Insiders" (157–165).

The section continues with extensive treatments of Old Testament and New Testament examples of true believers who continued within their original socio-religious community, and who were apparently able or permitted to do so. Examples include Melchizedek, Naaman, Nebuchadnezzar and the Samaritans of John 4. The point remains that while both the OT and the NT inveigh against idol worship and evil practices among pagan gentiles, there are those who evidently lived within those communities without contamination, and were not condemned by Jewish or Christian contemporaries.

The essential convictions of an IM believer should be, and generally are, Christ-centeredness, biblical orientation, and Spirit dependence. Of these, Scripture is probably the most

**W**e must ask ourselves whether we have become the proprietors of Christ rather than simply the propagators . . . we need to give room for others to come to him in the ways the Spirit leads.

important since that is how we know of Christ, the Spirit, and the nature of ecclesial gatherings. Talman concludes:

The Scriptures alone should be the standard for evaluating and expressing theological truth, but each cultural context requires local theologians to express biblical truth indigenously so it can be meaningful and transforming. Nonetheless, self-theologizing should include dialogue with the global and historic body of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

### Contextualization

In a sense, contextualization goes beyond the particular study of insider movements, and addresses the whole question of what Christianity looks like throughout history. In what Philip Jenkins has famously called “The Global South,”<sup>8</sup> doctrines and practices familiar to northern Christendom are re-cast, and some biblical phenomena and practices almost forgotten in traditional Christendom have found new expression. Certainly the enormous AIC and other indigenous forms of Christianity in Latin America and Asia show both continuity and discontinuity with the traditions of Northern Christianity. I believe IMs are an extension of this phenomenon. So in this section of *Understanding Insider Movements*, the authors have introduced articles that deal with the question of how we are to distinguish between legitimate and biblically true contextualization and prevent any tendency toward syncretism. It deals first with the question of whether Christ needs to be “liberated” from the grip of historic Christianity. Historic Christian communities have defined the nature of Christ, his deity, and his relationship to the Father; according to Archbishop Gregoire Haddad, they have acted

like the only institution that owns Christ . . . Christ has become a captive of the churches, like a hostage they have locked up, and no one can get to him except through them. (302)

Haddad’s charges are really disturbing, but he forces us to ask ourselves whether we have become the *proprietors* of Christ rather than simply the *propagators*. If we are not the proprietors, then we need to give room for others to come to him and understand him in the ways the Spirit leads them. New believers and communities can do this in what Paul Hiebert has called “the hermeneutical community.”

Mark Young (317–326) points out that Western Christians are actually “bounded sets,” in Hiebert’s terms. Their emphasis has been on maintaining borders of sound doctrine and practice so that they know who’s “in” and who’s “out.” This creates closed systems, and is probably why Christianity today exists not only in different groups, but in mutually exclusive groups. Instead, a better way to categorize or

simply to understand the religiously responsive, is whether they have turned and are “headed towards (in)” and no longer “headed away (out).” This is what characterizes “centered sets,” where the essential center of a biblical faith is clearly Christ himself. Whether a person or a group is moving towards him or away from him is perhaps a more helpful way to understand a Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist follower of Christ. I rejoice with those moving toward Christ, and I try to help in any way I can, getting rid of as many obstacles as possible, and I go after the one headed away to see if there is any way I can turn him back toward the center. This orientation captures the essence of contextualization, and it is what the authors of this section explain most ably.

### Approaches in Witness

For some this may be the most important section of the book, because it gets down to the question of how we live and share the good news with those who don’t know Jesus. Every writer in this section, as with most authors in this book, has lengthy experience on the field, but the emphasis on indigenous people as the most effective evangelists and leaders raises a question about the role of foreign workers. John and Anna Travis introduce the role of the “alongsider” (455), a role they believe requires a couple of characteristics beyond a sense of calling, an understanding of the Word and the maturity of field experience: these alongsiders need to be “*kingdom-centered* rather than *religion-centered*, and they need to be willing to minister in obscurity” (455–56). I, personally, have certainly seen this to be true. Sometimes I almost weep at the *incredible significance* of what some alongsiders do which remains unknown to anyone but God and those among whom they minister. It is so very true, that “unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). The Travises outline seven roles for alongsiders, all of it essential reading for those who hope to minister among those who have hitherto been unreached peoples.

### Concerns and Misunderstandings

Here’s where many of the criticisms leveled against the Insider Movement Paradigm are answered. Many readers will be aware of John Travis’ C1–C6 spectrum which was first introduced in 1998. His treatment of the issues surrounding this spectrum fifteen years later is very helpful, and especially when readers realize that each place on this continuum is a *descriptive observation* of particular realities of Christ-centered communities rather than a “bad to good” (or “good to bad”) evaluation. The spectrum is not a contextualization spectrum per se, although that is certainly involved

**J**onathan Edwards showed that a genuine movement of God will manifest surprising things which in themselves do not discredit the movement. If they are not of God, they will pass away.

in how these communities operate. Travis does a good job of clarifying many issues surrounding these designations which I believe remain helpful for our understanding of particular ecclesial groups. It's clear that no one place on this spectrum is considered a recipe or silver bullet for effective ministry.

The authors address questions as to whether the names and titles of supreme beings in other socio-religious groupings can be utilized legitimately by Christians. In particular, there is the question of whether Allah is equivalent to God in the Bible. Wheeler takes up the question, and his position is backed by many believers in Arab contexts, and asserts that indeed Allah is the God of the Bible and is the term appropriately used when speaking of God in Christian Arab and Muslim contexts (517–119). Many may have an inadequate view of his characteristics, but Allah is simply the Arabic word for the supreme being of the universe.

Talman takes up the question of whether a genuine believer in Jesus can remain in a Muslim context and honestly say the *Shahadah* (501–516). Having surmounted the obstacle of referring to God as Allah, there is still the question of Muhammad's identity, which is asserted in this confession. Can we say that he is a prophet? Is he *the* prophet, apostle or messenger of God? The answer involves a lot of historical consideration. The difference between declarations in the *Hadith* (traditions) and those of the *Qur'an* need to be examined and Talman does a thorough job pressing forward this inquiry. I will not go into that here, but it's essential reading for anyone before they consider saying this Muslim confession honestly in any particular context, or judging another because he or she feels she can honestly say it.

One area which the editors may feel has been adequately addressed elsewhere, and which, for that reason, they may have sidestepped, is the matter of the translation of familial terms (e.g., "father" and "son") in Muslim idiomatic Bible translations. This has caused a great deal of concern for Wycliffe Bible Translators and other translation teams across the globe. It was more recently resolved to the satisfaction of many when the World Evangelical Alliance stepped in and helped bring a greater rapprochement between those who disagreed with each other (the WEA statement is in the Appendix).

I have a concern that the authors allowed to go unmentioned: the Muslim will assert that the New Testament (*Injil*) has been changed (corrupted), and it appears we are guilty as charged if we begin to alter these familial terms in order to be more compatible to the Muslim mind. Muslims historically have had difficulty accepting what they perceive to be a "corrupted" *Injil* at those points where it compares to the *Qur'an*,

and they therefore dismiss biblical assertions that Jesus was the Son of God, or that he was crucified for our sins; but, are our recent attempts to adjust the "stumbling blocks" of familial terms a bit of the same? Any theological consideration on using these terms in Muslim contexts has been debated in a growing literature beyond the contents of this book.<sup>9</sup>

### Identity

Writers in this text continue to deal with significant issues like the self identity of Muslim followers of Christ, and also of Christian workers among Muslims. Very much worth reading for those who doubtless will be asked, "So who are you? Are you Muslim?" The different dimensions of identity are introduced, and one's normal questions in the discipleship of new followers of Christ in other religious spheres are supplemented with new questions as to the contextual constraints of social and corporate identities.

By the end of the book the reader will admit that insider movements involve many thousands who are discovering and being dramatically changed by Jesus, yet who have been misunderstood by many across the global church today. Let's remember that Jonathan Edwards, who was a great preacher and exponent of the Great Awakening in America, had his detractors. In spite of the transformation in the religious landscape of the colonies, Edwards, Whitfield and the Wesleys had skeptics who questioned the validity or genuineness of their movement. Edwards had to explain and defend this awakening in two famous publications, *A Treatise on Religious Affections* and *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*. He was still addressing this concern in his commencement address at Yale University, Sept. 10, 1741. In these works, Edwards showed that a genuine movement of God will manifest many surprising things which in themselves do not discredit the movement. If they are not of God, they will pass away. But he warned his readers and listeners not to commit the unpardonable sin of attributing this work of the Spirit to the Devil. He asked if it is not pride, or the lack of spiritual vitality, that causes the critics to assail this movement. In the same vein, any of us who are quick to criticize these emerging insider movements, or these Jesus followers in such different contexts, would do well to think on Edward's words. And I commend this book to you in the same spirit.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Henry Riggs, 1875–1943; E. Stanley Jones, 1884–1973; Ralph Winter, 1924–2009 and considerable reference to and appreciation of Paul Hiebert, 1932–2007.

<sup>2</sup> An example in addition to Part 6, “Concerns and Misunderstandings,” is Appendix 3, Brad Geer’s review of Douglas Coleman’s “Theological Analysis of the Insider Paradigm from Four Perspectives,” in the *EMS* dissertation series. Objective, irenic.

<sup>3</sup> Amazingly, the spontaneous multiplication and growth of Christian believers, with less control by foreigners and more dependence on the Spirit of God was a plea by Roland Allen on the basis of his Anglican service in China laid out in his *Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962. First published 1927. Allen’s observations are truly helpful in grasping the concept of IMs today.

<sup>4</sup> H. L. Richard, “Myths and Misunderstandings about Insider Movements,” p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Tennant, “The Hidden History of Insider Movements,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 57, no.1 January 2013, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Richard, “Pandita Ramabai and the Meanings of Conversion,” *UIM*, p. 147 citing Macinol, *Pandita Ramabai. Builders of Modern India*. London: Student Christian Movement, 1926. No page cited.

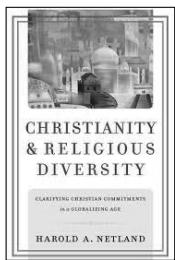
<sup>7</sup> Talman, “The Supremacy of Scripture,” p. 279.

<sup>8</sup> *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> See Scott Horrell’s treatment in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 172, No. 687, July–September, 2015, pp. 268–298. (Part one of two, the second to appear in No. 688.)

*Christianity and Religious Diversity: Clarifying Christian Commitment in a Globalizing Age*, by Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015, pp. 290 + xiii)

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard



This is an excellent book by a preeminent Christian scholar of the theology of religion. Harold Netland provides helpful insights into issues related to religion on the frontiers of mission today while also presenting a nuanced and compelling case for Christianity. His apologetic is sensitive to various religious traditions and to the ferment stirring

the world of religious studies. Such numerous such strong points will be noted in this review, but, as this is a missiological journal, it will also be pointed out that an apologetic orientation undermines missiological concerns and leaves the cross-cultural practitioner with unanswered questions.

A major feature of Netland’s book is to expose naive thinking about religion and religions. In his introduction he says,

Current discussions in theology of religions are sometimes problematic because they are based on flawed understandings of the concept of religion itself, the relation between religion and culture, or the nature of particular religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam. (x)

No one can read this study and come away with simplistic assumptions about religion/religions. Yet a consistent paradigm for thinking about religion itself is not developed and maintained. Netland finally falls back on the supposition that there is an *essence* to every world religion; “we must distinguish between beliefs or teaching that are essential to a religion and those which are not” (185). But this is not a sustainable idea, as Netland himself acknowledges in relation to Hinduism: “given the diversity within Hinduism, it is difficult to identify a set of core claims that all Hindu traditions embrace” (189). This statement on Hinduism is highly appreciated, for it represents the actual complexity of religions, but it is just glossed over and does not influence Netland’s overall discussion.

Modernization and globalization have compounded our problems in thinking about religion, and Netland’s extensive and helpful discussion in chapter two illustrates his point that “few subjects are as complex or controversial as religion in the modern world” (42). Particularly there is extensive discussion on Buddhism, which was integral to the author’s primary field experience in Japan. He introduces the various meanings of that term (chapter three), and the definition Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891, founder of Theosophy) provided is illuminating:

When we use the term Buddhists, we do not mean to imply by it either the exoteric Buddhism instituted by the followers of Gautama-Buddha, nor the modern Buddhist religion, but the secret philosophy of Sakyamuni, which in its essence is certainly identical with the ancient wisdom of the sanctuary, the pre-Vedic Brahmanism. (88–89, quoted from *Isis Unveiled*, Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1972, 2:142)

Blavatsky’s perspective was influential in the development of modern ideas about Buddha, and Netland reviews and critiques other modern interpreters of Buddhism like D. T. Suzuki as well. In light of such modern Buddhist apologists, Donald Lopez’ statement rings true: “The Buddha that we know was not born in India in the fifth century BCE. He was born in Paris in 1844.”<sup>1</sup> This surely should lead to a conclusion that speaking about Buddhism as a single tradition or religion is highly misleading; but, as already noted in regard to Hinduism, that is not the direction that Netland takes in his study.

The complexity of Christianity is noted throughout the book, particularly in the second half of the book which is focused on “Christian Commitments in a Pluralistic World.” Christianity is not just a set of beliefs or ideas.

Religion includes the social, cultural, and historical patterns of religious communities so that in speaking of Christianity we cannot entirely separate the gospel from the lived realities of actual Christian communities in particular times and places. (166)

This perspective leads towards Netland’s helpful statement that

the command is to make disciples, not to make Christians or to convert people to the religion of Christianity. In Christian witness, the most important thing is not the religious labels or

*However much sensitivity one employs, there still seems to be a fundamental “clash of civilizations” paradigm in place. This is where an apologetic focus will fail, and a more comprehensive missiological perspective is needed.*

categories that one adopts but rather becoming an authentic disciple of Jesus Christ. (236)

But the matter of “changing religion” is never really raised; it seems to be assumed that a follower of Jesus will change religions to Christianity, even though, as Netland states, that is not the mandate Jesus gave us.

The penultimate section of the book (“Apologetics and Religious Diversity,” 242–48) makes numerous helpful and necessary points.

Apologetics can take various forms and degrees of sophistication, and it should be adapted to fit varying cultural contexts. But whatever its form, it should always be faithful to the biblical witness, intellectually responsible, and culturally sensitive. (243)

Those engaging in interreligious apologetics must study other religious traditions carefully, making sure that they understand other religious worldviews accurately and are not merely addressing simplistic caricatures. This requires much time and intellectual discipline, mastering the requisite languages and literature and engaging intellectuals from those traditions in serious dialogue. Responsible interreligious apologetics must be fair in its treatment of other perspectives, willingly acknowledging what is true and good in them even as it points out what is false or otherwise problematic. (247)

The attempt to persuade religious others to change their fundamental beliefs and accept the core Christian claims as true can easily be perceived as an inappropriate exercise of power, especially if the Christian is associated with significant cultural, economic, political, or military frameworks of power. Any activity that is manipulative or coercive, or otherwise infringes upon the dignity of the other, must be rejected. In certain contexts historical factors make interreligious apologetics especially sensitive. (248)

The final section of the book is on civic virtue, and it is appropriate that this book would end with exhortations to sensitivity; but, however much sensitivity one employs, there still seems to be a fundamental “clash of civilizations” paradigm in place. This is where an apologetic focus will fail, and a more comprehensive missiological perspective is needed.

For followers of Jesus as revealed in the Bible, there is no doubt that “theology” or worldview or intellectual ideas are of great importance; what one thinks and believes about Jesus, God, creation, etc., is of utmost significance. The standard “world religions” perspective assumes this about all religions, that they likewise must have some essential beliefs. But this easily becomes a simple projection of biblical thought onto other traditions. (And even within “Christianity” there are such different views of Jesus that

some Muslim and Hindu views of Christ are closer to historic Christian teaching than are modernist Christian teachings!) An apologetic approach focused on “world religions” makes these uncomfortable truths avoidable, and this book is weaker for the omission.

In the end, this book is a case for Christianity argued from within an orthodox Christian worldview. Harold Netland presents a compelling case for Christianity, and his apologetic is alert to the ferment in both religious traditions and religious studies. It is probably necessary and good to have a well-reasoned presentation of the case for Christianity in the midst of religious diversity; but frontier missiology needs to move beyond this mindset.

Does biblical conversion necessarily involve a “change of religion”? What does “change of religion” even mean in faith traditions that do not put theological ideas in a central position? When there are clearly multiple worldviews within each of the major world religions, how does a shift to a biblical worldview impact religious belonging? These are just a sampling of questions compelled by experience on interreligious frontiers, questions that shift the theology of religions away from apologetics and towards sensitive cross-cultural understanding. Netland’s case for Christianity is needed in areas of the West where Christian faith is threatened, but a deeper engagement with issues involved in interreligious encounters is needed in frontier missiology. We can only hope that Harold Netland will direct future attention to the challenges facing people who are impressed by Jesus but perplexed (if not repelled) by Christianity in its many current expressions. Ambassadors for Christ on religious frontiers cannot afford the distractions that often accompany apologies for Christianity; new paths of discipleship need to be developed that focus on Jesus as a relevant figure among all the so-called “religious traditions” of the world. **IJFM**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>p. 84, quoted from *From Stone to Flesh*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 3; the work of Frenchman Eugene Burnouf lies behind this statement.

# Editorial Reflections

## *Ancestor Veneration: The Debate Continues*

The *IJFM* usually offers a further selection of recent “others’ words” either online or in print on subjects of missiological interest. In this issue we have collected some perspectives on the subject of ancestor veneration—as a short primer for those unfamiliar with the varying perspectives on these rites.

Lim (p. 109) references certain historic consultations which have debated ancestor veneration, and prominent among these was the 1983 “Conference on the Christian Response to Ancestor Practices” convened by Bong Rin Ro. This was an effort to generate “functional substitutes” for Christians who wished to maintain public honor for their ancestors. The Asia Theological Association assisted Ro in publishing a monograph under the title *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices* (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1985). Included in that volume is Donald McGavran’s “Honoring Ancestors in Japan” (pp. 303–318).

Chuck Lowe, who served with OMF and as a professor at Singapore Bible College, did a thorough study of Christian participation in ancestral practices under the title, *Honoring God and Family: A Christian Response to Idol Food in Chinese Popular Religion* (Billy Graham Center: Wheaton, 2001). In this volume Lowe provides a study of II Corinthians 8–10 and the subject of eating meat offered to idols, but he does so by comparing the Greco-Roman folk religious world of Paul’s Corinth with the Asian folk religious (shenist) world with their ancestor rites. Lowe builds a case for the remarkable parallels of the rituals in these two societies, and his conclusion is that one should abstain from food or meals offered around the ceremonies (a more prohibitive approach). Nevertheless, his is an exhaustive study and one that respects the broad range of Christian perspectives on these rites, and for that reason we wholeheartedly recommend this publication. Although Lowe includes references to anthropological perspectives, readers might suspect that Lowe sees almost a one-to-one correspondence between modern Asia and classical Asia Minor, and his applications may appear automatic and a bit too reductionist for the anthropological reader. But on this score, Lowe recognizes three typical *contextual* orientations to the realities

of ancestral rites in Asian societies: the philosophical elite tend to interpret them more rationally; the bureaucrats treat them more pragmatically; and the masses view them from a perspective of Spiritism.

On the matter of finding functional substitutes for Christian faith, we commend a chapter in the book by Mark Mullins, *Christianity Made in Japan: A Study of Indigenous Movements* (Nanzan Library of Asian Religion and Culture, University of Hawaii Press, 1998, p. 129), in which he discusses how indigenous movements in Japan have reframed their approach to ancestral altars in the home. Mullins makes it clear that these more radical expressions of faith choose to maintain a greater respect for the liminal nature of the dead in the traditional Japanese worldview. And we commend as well the article by Alex Smith, “The Struggle of Asian Ancestor Veneration,” in which he offers a quick review of the cultural and religious constraints on generating Christian substitutes for ancestral rites (*Family and Faith in Asia*, ed. Paul De Neui, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2010, pp. 161–182).

Simon Chan’s *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (InterVarsity Press Academic: Downers Grove, IL, 2014) takes this subject in a fascinating theological direction. Chan critiques the elite and more remote paradigms of Asian theologians and finds them insufficient for advancing mission in Asia; fortunately for us, his background in Pentecostal studies makes him sensitive to the grassroots religiosity of the Asian masses. He outlines a methodology that should allow Asian theologies to blend historical theological resources of the church with efforts at Asian contextualization. He views the religiosity surrounding these ancestral rites from the vantage point of our historic affirmation of the “communion of saints,” and calls us to reconsider our theology in relation to the Asian family’s bond between the living and the dead.

Chang-Won Park’s recent publication, *Cultural Blending in Korean Death Rites: New Interpretive Approaches* (Continuum Int’l Pub: London, 2015) provides a framework for interpreting ancestor practices among Koreans as a “total social phenomenon,” and appreciates all the interrelationships involved in three rituals: the funeral rites (*at* death); the ancestral rites (*after* death); and, his inclusion of a third ritual of Bible verse copying *before* death (practiced by Christians). Park’s contribution makes it clear that further research is refining our Christian understanding of the entire ancestral phenomenon. **IJFM**

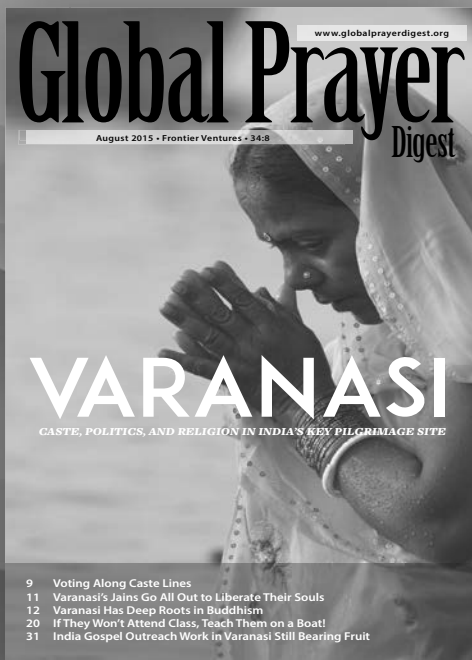


Whether you're a Perspectives instructor, student, or coordinator, you can continue to explore issues raised in the course reader and study guide in greater depth in **IJFM**. For ease of reference, each **IJFM** article in the table below is tied thematically to one or more of the 15 Perspectives lessons, divided into four sections: Biblical (B), Historical (H), Cultural (C) and Strategic (S). *Disclaimer: The table below shows where the content of a given article might fit; it does not imply endorsement of a particular article by the editors of the Perspectives materials.* For sake of space, the table only includes lessons related to the articles in a given **IJFM** issue. To learn more about the Perspectives course, including a list of classes, visit [www.perspectives.org](http://www.perspectives.org).

Related Perspectives Lesson and Section

Articles in **IJFM 32:3**

	<i>Lesson 6: The Expansion of the World Christian Movement (H)</i>	<i>Lesson 7: Eras of Mission History (H)</i>	<i>Lesson 10: How Shall They Hear? (C)</i>	<i>Lesson 11: Building Bridges of Love (C)</i>	<i>Lesson 14: Pioneer Church Planting (S)</i>
<b>Contextualizing Ancestor Veneration: An Historical Review</b> David S. Lim (pp. 109–15)	X	X	X	X	X
<b>The Ancestral Rite in Korea: Its Significance and Contextualization from an Evangelical Perspective</b> Paul Mantae Kim (pp. 117–27)		X	X	X	X
<b>Christian Encouragement for Following Jesus in Non-Christian Ways: An Indian Case Study</b> J. Paul Pennington (pp. 129–37)			X	X	X
<b>Let the Prince Kiss the Bride: Functioning as Best Man</b> Mitsuo Fukuda (pp. 139–46)			X	X	X
<b>Community vs. Belief: Respecting Cultural Belonging in Evangelism</b> Herbet Hoefler (pp. 147–51)			X	X	X

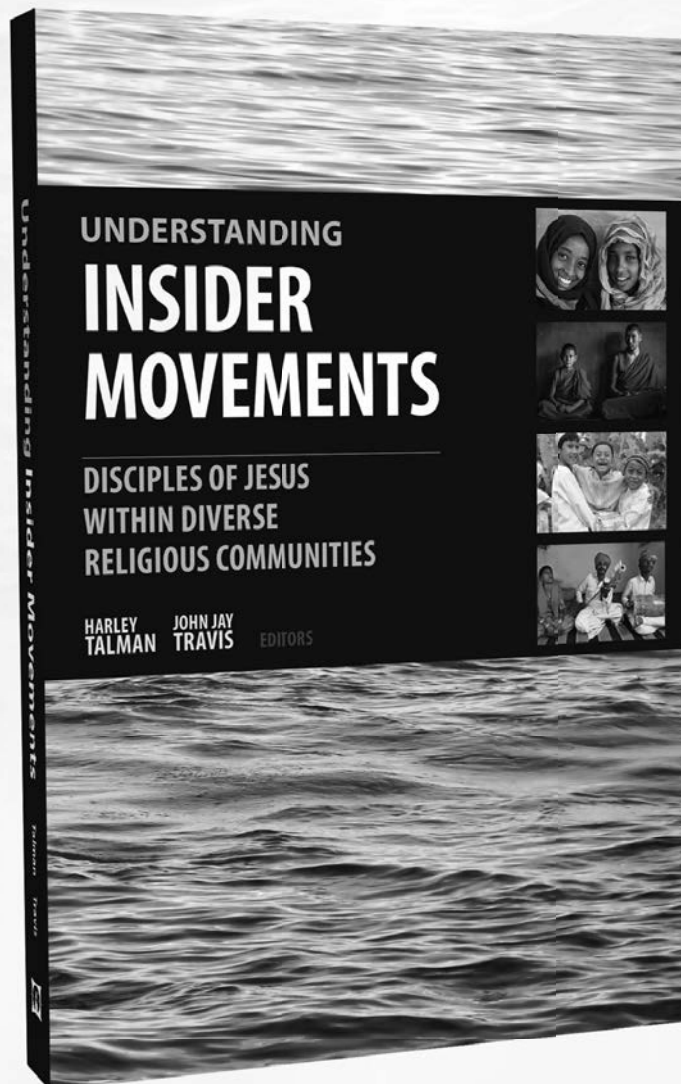


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# UNDERSTANDING INSIDER MOVEMENTS



## **Understanding Insider Movements** Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities

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For the first time in history, large numbers of people from the world's major non-Christian religions are following Jesus as Lord. Surprisingly for many Western Christians, they are choosing to do so within the religious communities of their birth and outside of institutional Christianity. How does this work, and how should we respond to these movements?

This long-awaited anthology brings together some of the best writings on the topic of insider movements. Diverse voices explore this phenomenon from the perspectives of Scripture, history, theology, missiology, and the experience and identity of insider believers. Those who are unfamiliar with the subject will find this book a crucial guide to a complex conversation. Students and instructors of mission will find it useful as a reader and reference volume. Field workers and agencies will discover in these chapters welcome starting points for dialogue and clearer communication.



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