Asian Thresholds

Community vs. Belief:
Respecting Cultural Belonging in Evangelism

by Herbert Hoefer

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I n 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.[1] 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.

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.

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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.[2]

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 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,

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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.[3]

Rev. Paul Schmidt, a pastor who served in Utah for several years, sent me this email message[4] 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.[5] 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.[6]

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.[7] 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.[8] 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.[9] 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.[10]

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

My goal is not to make them into Christians.

the Christ-centered ecclesial communities in the Hindu world.[11] 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.[12]

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.[13] 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.[14] 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. (I Pet. 3:14–16) **IJFM**

Endnotes

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

[2] Tim and Becky Lewis, "Planting Churches: Learning the Hard Way," *Mission Frontiers,* Jan–Feb 2009, p. 18. Available online at missionfrontiers.org.

[3] I developed this issue in more detail in "Church in Context," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly,* April 2007, pp. 200–09.

[4] A conversation on April 3, 2009.

[5] See John Travis, "The C1 to C6 Spectrum," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly,* 1998, vol. 34:4, p. 407.

[6] Lewis, p. 18.

[7] David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam* (Monument CO: WiGTake Resources, 2014).

[8] *International Journal of Frontier Missiology,* vol. 17:4, p. 5.

[9] Herbert Hoefer, *Churchless Christianity* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1991).

[10] Nov–Dec 2014, missionfrontiers.org.

[11] 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).

[12] Naja, p. 29.

[13] See "Roles of 'Alongsiders' in Insider Movements: Contemporary Examples and Biblical Reflections," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology,* 30:4, Winter 2013, p. 161.

[14] See Duerksen, pp. 87–97.