

Patrick, Muhammad, and "Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up"

In his recent call to "think the faith from the ground up,"¹ theologian Simon Chan has championed the exploration of "grassroots theology." He wants to free theology to hear the cultural themes of Asian folk religions, to integrate and adapt our historic faith to the ecclesial contexts of Asia. Chan frames the subject brilliantly and the authors in this issue of *IJFM* are scouting in that same direction.

One could say that mission forces theology to "look below." At its best, missiology will ground the theological imagination to the grassroots. This can create a wall of suspicion among theologians, however. While today fresh streams of global theology are loosening up our overly categorical Western theologies, it's our encounter with other religious worlds that still activates subconscious brake systems.

But let's consider Jesus. Did he "think the faith from the ground up?" Was he not that surprising prophetic voice who used parable and story to speak into the well-formulated theological world of the Jew? He reached down and used earthy pictures of water, bread, birth, vines, coins, pearls, and sheep gates to frame a grassroots theology. He took possession of his "folk-Judaism" and determined which cultural and religious themes might shape revelation from above.

Re-reading Chan's book reminded me of another historical comparison: Patrick of the Celtic north and Muhammad of the Arab Bedouin south. Both were situated in nomadic regions on the edge of the Roman Empire, where "barbarian" traditions and idolatrous religious practices were the norm. Despite similar contexts, these two theological agents were remarkably different. The type of Christianity that emerged in the Celtic north would "save" Western civilization,² whereas the ethnic monotheism that exploded out of the Arabian Desert would diverge and establish an Islamic civilization. A careful comparison could yield great insight into the contours of a discerning grassroots theology. The renaissance of studies in both of these historical contexts begs for it.

Centuries after a sophisticated Greek theology had emerged at the grassroots of a Greco-Roman world, Patrick dared to think the faith from the Celtic ground up. But when that Greek theology wove itself into the borderlands of Muhammad's folk-religious world, there was no Patrick to be found—no bilingual, bicultural disciple of Jesus who knew the Scriptures and who could

Editorial continued on p. 52

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carefully navigate an Arab-Bedouin worldview. A responsible agent of mission would have seen that the Semitic mind was not inclined to the metaphysical reflection of the Greek. That's the difference between the Celtic north and the Arab south, between the impact of Patrick and that of Muhammad: the presence of a sound and sensitive apostle of grassroots theology. But I defer to historians and their more careful analysis of these two historical contexts.³

So how should we engage in grassroots theology on the frontiers of mission today? The statement of the Lausanne Theology Working Group (2010) offered a starting point for sensitive engagement with other religious worlds:

This phenomenon of following Jesus within diverse religio-cultural traditions needs careful biblical, theological and missiological evaluation. We are well aware that it is a complex phenomenon, drawing conflicting evaluative responses, and we do not seek to take a position on it here. Our point merely is that it is a challenge that affects not only those who become followers of Jesus in the context of what are commonly called "other faiths." The dangers of syncretism are worldwide, and so

are the complexities of careful, biblically faithful contextualization... We need to repent of approaches to people of other faiths that reject or denounce their existing religion as wholly evil or satanic, with no effort to understand, critique and learn, and to discern through genuine encounter, friendship and patient dialogue where there may be bridges for the gospel.⁴

Each article in this issue offers a perspective on what's involved in a theology "from below." As one who ably speaks to an emerging generation, Don Grigorenko breaks down the crucial elements in bridging theology across cultures (p. 63). Alan Howell and Andrew Montgomery highlight a feature of African folk-Islam that they believe should help frame an African Christology (p. 79). William Dyrness, our plenary speaker at the EMS/ISFM conference last year, examines the theological brake-systems in our historic encounter with different religious currents (p. 53). And, finally, Michael Kilgore helps us face how the global alignment or clash of civilizations shapes Muslim identity at the grassroots (p. 69).

Dwight Baker's comprehensive review of David Hollinger's *Protestants Abroad* (p. 90) boomerangs our focus to the grassroots of the American mission. This historical analysis will stimulate similar insight across today's international sending base.

Hope to interact with you further at this year's ISFM/EMS in Dallas (October 12–14). Registration will open June 1st at emsweb.org.

In Him,



Brad Gill
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

Endnotes

¹ Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (IVPress Academic, Downers Grove, 2014).

² A reference to Thomas Cahill's *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (Random House, 1995).

³ Chapter 6 of George G. Hunter's *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Abington Press: Nashville, 2000) is a good place to begin.

⁴ "The Whole World: Statement of the Theology Working Group: Beirut 2010" in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, vol 34 no 3 (July 2010), 200–201.

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.