

Listening to Phantom Pain

I've seen it more than once in my experience. A Muslim who comes to faith in Christ, who in the tension between two religious worlds, is divorced from his traditional life. Belatedly, after decades of an evangelical experience, he tries to regain some sense of place in his lost religious world.¹ The convert is motivated by a “phantom pain”—those cultural and religious nerve endings that are still alive even when the limb has been amputated. Notto Thelle speaks to this pain from the Buddhist world of Japan.

When they converted to Christianity, they got a new identity that had no room for past experiences and religious insights. But after many years, some Christians begin to feel rootless and restless. They have phantom pains in the part of their spiritual bodies they had cut away. They feel the need to rediscover their spiritual roots. Buddhism had been a part of their lives, and somehow, they have to integrate their past. (18)

In recovering his Buddhist past, Kang-San Tan appears to be on a similar journey. Now an evangelical mission leader, he is facing the interreligious tension of communicating into an old world from which he has been displaced. That desire—that mission—quickened an intuitive search, one that wrestles reflexively between two religious experiences, seeking greater intellectual understanding and personal integration. His earlier writings and dissertations addressed the possibility of a “dual belonging” in these two religious worlds. More recently, in his presentation to the ISFM 2021 (5), he borrowed the term “inreligionisation” as a way to objectify this engagement with other religious worlds. For him, it's personally driven, but this kind of intuitive and intellectual process is fundamental to reaching the least-reached of Asia.

Bill Dyrness would identify this process as a kind of “hermeneutical space.”² Tan has intentionally entered a process of trying to re-identify with a religious world from which he was displaced. Dyrness would suggest that Tan's displacement is at least partially the result of a modern evangelical view of religion that emerged from the Reformation. We tend to extract, essentialize, and compartmentalize religion even though it's deeply embedded in cultural settings. Our abstraction of religion has “lost sight of the deep rootedness of religions in their cultural and historical situations and their contingent and fluid character.”³ We conceptualize religion as “radically disconnected from any sense of place.”⁴ Tan has dared to press against this evangelical tendency in his own efforts towards re-emplacement. He is helping us all reimagine religion as we address the religious pluralism of Asia.

Editorial *continued on p. 4*

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Editor

Brad Gill

Consulting Editors

Rick Brown, Darrell Dorr, Gavriel Gefen, Herbert Hoefler, R. W. Lewis, H. L. Richard

Copy Editing and Layout

Elizabeth Gill, Mike Riestler, Marjorie Clark

Subscriptions and Distribution

Lois Carey, Laurie Rosema, Angela Clark

Publisher

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Len Barlotti, Larry Caldwell, Dave Datema, Darrell Dorr, Brad Gill, Steve Hawthorne, David Lewis, R. W. Lewis, Greg Parsons

Web Site

www.ijfm.org

Editorial Correspondence

PO Box 41450
Pasadena, CA 91114-8450
(734) 765-0368, brad.gill@ijfm.org

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Tan's contribution at ISFM 2021 is actually part of a broad and ongoing conversation on the Buddhist world. It began for some of us with the Winter Lectureship in February 2021.⁵ Two of those participants, H. L. Richard and Notto Thelle, offered formal responses to Tan at ISFM 2021 (15 and 16). This ISFM event also drew on the innovative approach of the Winter Launch Lab, specifically the hermeneutical process that Claire Chong and Tep Samnang have initiated with the evangelical leadership of Cambodia (37). These interreligious issues, which for so long have been framed by a missiological focus on the Muslim world, are now benefiting from this infusion of Buddhist-Christian perspective. And we would be remiss to ignore the annual contributions from the SEANET conference on issues in the Buddhist world (ad, 35).

Tan's idea of inreligionisation should not proceed without appraisal, a feedback Tan actually welcomes. At ISFM 2021, Alan Johnson offered a critique of Tan's approach from his decades of involvement in the Buddhist world, particularly his involvement

with the grassroots ecclesial experience of Thailand (22). We also welcomed Johnson's afterword on the alternative of a translation approach, an approach which leans on the historical perspective of Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh (see Johnson's Response Part II, 28). We should note that they were spokesmen for an African missiology that values the voice of indigenous recipients deeply embedded in the primal religious world of Africa (54). Ron Klaus also speaks from Africa by offering some perspective on the institutionalization of movements to Christ in Ethiopia (43).

Evangelical missiology must come to terms with the hermeneutical space which Tan's venture requires. The issues that surface around his inreligionisation promote a vital hermeneutical process. Claire Chong and Tep Samnang have guided a similar process—a sensitive and respectful reappraisal of Buddhist rituals in the Cambodian Buddhist context. They are proving that our missiology can press beyond the usual frame of intercultural communication by introducing a fresh hermeneutical process. But like Peter in Acts 10, this

may require an uncomfortable journey down an unclean and taboo-ridden path. It will require we reassess our interreligious categories and suspend an automatic verdict of syncretism. Like Barnabas in Acts 11, we will need the capacity to both “see the grace of God” in emerging movements to Jesus and allow them to venture in their own hermeneutical space.

In Him,



Brad Gill
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

Endnotes

¹ Paul-Gordon Chandler, *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road: Exploring a New Path Between Two Faiths*, (Lanham: Cowley, 2008).

² William Dyrness, *Insider Jesus* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 101.

³ William Dyrness, 101.

⁴ Dyrness, 101.

⁵ *IJFM* 38:3-4, available at [ijfm.org http://ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/38_3_4_PDFs/IJFM_38_3_4-EntireIssue.pdf](http://ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/38_3_4_PDFs/IJFM_38_3_4-EntireIssue.pdf).

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- ☞ 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.