Respecting Hermeneutical Space

January–March 2022

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From the Editor's Desk

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.

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.

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.

Respecting Hermeneutical Space

Contextual Frameworks for Interreligious Communication: an Asian Perspective

by Kang-San Tan

Kang–San Tan (MA, Old Testament, Regent College; DMin, Missiology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; PhD, Theology of Religions, University of Aberdeen) serves as General Director of BMS World Mission. He has served with the WEA Mission Commission and the Lausanne Theology Working Group. He has a forthcoming book with Langham Press.

Editor's Note: This article was first presented as the ISFM plenary at the Evangelical Missiological Society's national conference in October, 2021.

This paper seeks to explore the significance of developing contextual frameworks for communicating the good news of Jesus at the frontiers of world religions,[1] with particular reference to Asian contexts. I want to explore three missional themes in my effort to raise the kind of issues and questions that need to be addressed in our quest for better communication of the good news of Jesus. Although the primary discussion will relate to Asian religions, I hope the issues can also be applied to the contexts of African and Latin American religious traditions, to new religious spiritualities, as well as the pluralistic urban settings of the West.

It's my conviction that the last frontier in Christian mission is the meeting between religions, and the future task of missiology is not limited to the more understood process of inculturation, but also involves "inreligionisation."[2] This notion refers to those Christians coming from other Asian religious traditions

> who believe that it is possible and even necessary not only to accept in theory certain doctrines or practices of other religions and to incorporate them, perhaps in modified form, into Christianity, but also to adopt and live in their personal lives the beliefs, moral rules, rituals, and monastic practices of these religious traditions.[3]

When I speak of developing contextual frameworks on these religious frontiers, I refer to those dynamic interpretive lenses which communities use to frame different ways of understanding truth and interpreting realities whenever such interreligious exchanges occur on these frontiers. For example, missiology as an interdisciplinary study might use the frameworks of scriptural interpretation, their local Christian hermeneutical community, and the teachings from another religion to seek common understanding or insights.[4]

I believe the role of mission studies is to accompany, support, and examine this mission project and journey. I invite your reflections on a global missiology that can develop contextual frameworks within the different civilizational world religions. Specifically, I wish to offer a case study on the challenge and benefit of these conceptual frameworks for the Baptist Mission Society's (BMS)

World Mission learning programme. We're asking fundamental questions: What is the role of academic missiology towards better communication of the good news for Christians within these religious traditions? What changes are needed in our curriculum to inspire a deeper meeting between religions in the contexts of our services? Again, I look forward to your responses and contributions.

Christianity and the Meeting of Religions

Christian mission begins with a Trinitarian God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) whose nature is to love his whole creation, and who invites all people into a loving relationship with him. The church in mission is a community of people that not only experiences salvation, but participates in bearing witness to God's love in Christ for the world. Mission has to do with that aspect of the church that crosses frontiers into a world of globalisation, the poor, and religion. These three frontiers are interrelated domains which present opportunities as well as challenges in communicating the good news.

Of the three crucial frontiers—globalisation, the poor, and religion—it's the meaning, the role, and the context of religion that I wish to highlight. The whole subject of religion is under broad examination from scholarship. Ninian Smart's analysis is used widely, and it can serve us here. Religion is

> a set of institutionalised rituals identified with a tradition and expressing and/or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment and at least partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines.[5]

According to Smart there are three criteria for classification of a religion: 1) a belief in some ultimate reality, whether God or eternal truth that transcends the here and now; 2) religious practices directed toward understanding or communicating with this ultimate reality; and 3) a community of believers who joined together in pursuing this ultimate reality. In popular nomenclature the word "religion" refers particularly to major religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. However, in using religion as a social category, we need to be aware that the religious person is more than a religious being and that interfaith engagement is not purely a religious interaction.

The idealized representations of religion in academic missiology can reveal gaps and create dissonance when compared to the lived realities of religion on these interreligious frontiers. Western missiology is more often interested in what people believe (orthodoxy) than in what rituals people practice. Many Asian religions embrace a certain hybridity, ambiguity, and messiness when speculating about transcendence, a phenomenon which our comparative religious studies might disallow. Especially when the focus is apologetics, Western Christian orientation is too often insufficiently contextual, demonstrating

a preference for the questions they as Westerners might ask, objections they might raise, or points of contact they prefer in their specific beliefs and experiences. Christian apologetics will approach Asian religions through Western ways of reasoning, rather than allow for a reasoning determined by the dialogue partner from a different faith.[6] We are now more aware about the existence of followers of Jesus within these religious traditions (also referred as "insider movements") whose socio-religious identities remained closely linked with these Asian religions. Therefore, we could be thinking of a continuum of contextual exchanges from Western denominations, indigenous Christian communities, followers of Jesus within religions, and adherents of different religions.[7]

The idealized representations of religion in academic missiology can reveal gaps and create dissonance when compared to the lived realities of religion on these interreligious frontiers.

I join with missiologists such as Gerald Anderson, David Bosch, Terry Muck, and Harold Netland in identifying the challenge of religions as one of the most important missiological issues to be explored.[8] David Bosch considered the articulation of a theology of religions as "the largest unresolved problem of the Christian church."[9] Netland asserts:

> One of the more urgent sets of issues confronting the global church today concerns the question of gospel and culture. Responsible theology in the decades ahead cannot afford to ignore the complex and highly controversial debates over contextualization and religious pluralism. Furthermore, given the global nature of the church, serious discussion of these issues must include Biblical scholars and theologians from Africa, Latin America and Asia as well as western scholars.[10]

In turning our lens on the religious predicament of mission in Asia, it's quite clear that for the last 200 years the evangelical approach of trying to replace other religions with Christianity has not been successful. Compared to Christian expansion in Europe, North America, Latin America, and southern Africa, evangelical missions in Asia just don't have any comparable record of conversion. Some writers such as Terry and Frances Muck argue that evangelical missions have a long history of ineffectiveness across this Asian landscape.[11] It forces us to ask the interreligious question. Why have we not been effective in communicating the gospel among more committed Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists across Asia?
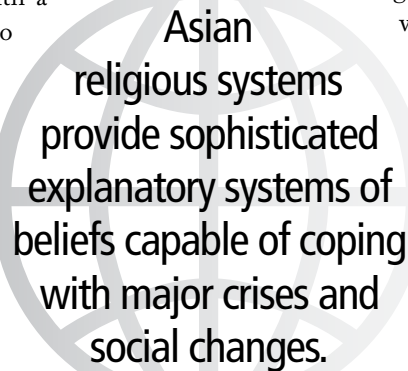
Interreligious Communications at a Crossroads

We must honestly explore the reasons for the relative lack of growth of Christianity in Asia, and especially within the heartlands of Asian religions. Careful analysis of each country and context will yield different results for different reasons. Let me preface my comments with a general historical observation: compared to the colonisation process in Africa and Latin America, European colonial expansion in Asia was not as widespread and dominant. Asian colonial expansions in places such as India, China, Japan, and Indonesia were mostly focused on coastal areas for trade purposes. British and Dutch colonial powers had also discouraged and in some cases prohibited missionary efforts in Asia, especially toward the Muslims and Hindus. Generally, Christians in Asia did not have the advantage of colonial or state power to support or coerce Christian expansion. However, this is not to deny the fact that Christian missionaries benefited from the colonial enterprise in Asia.

Extending our historical analysis raises further reasons Christianity was unsuccessful among the Asian religions. First, part of the difficulty is that Christianity came after most Asian communities had already adopted highly complex trans-cultural religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Unlike animistic peoples, these world religions can withstand new ideological and philosophical challenges. These Asian religious systems provide sophisticated explanatory systems of beliefs capable of coping with major crises and social changes in the world. Secondly, the existence of Asian religions and philosophies became embedded as indigenous wisdom over a very long period—not just centuries, but millennia. Therefore, such belief systems are intricately laced into folklore, myths, parental morality, and societal values.

Some religions, particularly Islam and Christianity, are essentially missionary oriented religions, actively propagating their faiths and seeking conversions across religious boundaries. Other religions, such as Baha'ism or Hinduism, despite the lack of any overt mission impetus, have developed highly defensive apologetics against Christianity over a long history of interreligious interaction.

These historical functions of religion in Asia make interreligious engagement a complex enterprise. Christians cannot engage with another religion without considering these religious realities in Asian societies. To complicate matters, the process of globalisation introduces additional political and economic forces which have added further barriers to conversion. Much of the violence between religions is related to political, economic, and ethnic structures that make it impossible for mutual witness. Since the attacks of 9/11, Christian missionaries have entered religious interactions in a heightened context of distrust and violence. When we treat interreligious engagement merely as a religious activity, without adequate attention to the socio-historical or political factors which shaped interreligious engagement, it is likely that such expansion may not be sustainable in the longer term. I'm merely suggesting here some of the social and phenomenological reasons for the resistance of world religions toward Christian mission efforts. In the next section, I want to explore communication challenges which might have contributed toward the relative lack of success of Christian mission among world religions.

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A Biblical Call to Holistic Communication

Asian mission movements confronted by these communication challenges will do well to return to Genesis. God created humanity, and he blessed humans with fruitfulness and the care for the whole creation. When Eve ate of the fruit in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:6), there was spiritual alienation from God. I further understand there to be four dimensions of brokenness:

- Physical: She ate the forbidden fruit.
- Social: She shared it with her husband.
- Aesthetic: She saw that the fruit was pleasing to her eyes.
- Rationale: Although God said, "you shall not eat," her mind was twisted to rationalise that it was good.

We see these multidimensional natures of sin unfold in Genesis 1–11, when sin grew in societal proportions, from Adam and Eve, to broken families in Cain and Abel, and to brokenness in society in the story of Noah. But here is the point for interreligious communication: just as sin was multidimensional, our approaches and models for communication must be comprehensive and multidimensional as well. When God called Abraham to build a nation, the calling of Israel was not merely to be worshippers of Yahweh but to be a blessing among the nations—to be culture makers. These early accounts in Genesis establish both an ecological dimension of mission (caring for the earth) as well as an economic blessing for society (to be fruitful, to be a blessing among the nations). There is a cultural, ecological, and economic mandate in mission.

Turning to the New Testament, the words of Jesus give us not only the missionary imperative to go, but also models of whole-life discipleship that bear adequate witness

interpersonally, communally, and culturally. To those on the frontiers, where there are growing local churches as well as insider movements within those religious worlds, Jesus says, "as the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). What does Jesus demonstrate in communicating the good news that is relevant for newer mission movements within religious frontiers? Our Lord Jesus has a full agenda: to announce, teach, and baptise (Matthew 28:18–20), and he promises that he will be with his disciples continually through the presence of the Holy Spirit until the end of the age. The geographical (and socio-religious) borders that the twelve apostles had to cross on their initial mission are made explicit in the ever-expanding circles of a universal missionary mandate in Acts 1:8: Jerusalem (M1), Judea and Samaria (M2), and the ends of the earth (M3).

Having preached throughout the eastern region of the empire "from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum" (Romans 15:19), Paul proposes to go to the "ends of the earth," to far-away Spain where the continent ends. For Asian Christians today, the fulfillment of the Great Commission encompasses a complex challenge to be interreligious witnesses in our home nations, as most of us residing there live amidst Asian religions (Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists).

The Communication Challenge of Asian Religions

I see four interreligious communication challenges in Asia today. The first arises when Asian churches *limit the communication of gospel witness to evangelism and the nurture of churches who join the existing church*. They fail to address the complexities of crossing religious and cultural frontiers. Even though Christian mission might be crossing ethnic and geographical boundaries, the focus of communication tends to be driven by preaching communities. This singular focus of communication neglects both a learning from and a meeting between religions, a posture which would allow Christians to remain within those socio-religious traditions as people of faith. Too often the goals of mission are deemed to have had an impact only when these religionists have rejected their traditions and have converted to Christianity. We extract converts from these religions rather than seeing the good news of Jesus become embedded in the socio-religious cultures of Asia.

The second communication challenge is when *Asian churches limit mission to the proclamation of the gospel, focusing on doctrinal debates or spiritual conversion rather than responding to the needs of the whole person in a holistic manner*. The Asian church is a poor church, and they preach the gospel

in a context of much suffering and need. Mission in a post-pandemic context has opened many opportunities amidst a poverty that is not merely a lack of money or resources, but a lack of social, medical, and educational access. Christian solutions must be local, sustainable, and relevant to these socio-economic realities. How will followers of Jesus open up spaces for an intelligent assessment of the problems in Asia? Holistic transformation is needed for the Asian church to function as a witnessing minority among dominant religions.

The third communication challenge relates to *how Asian churches will address the problem of their identity with a Christianity viewed as a Western religion*. Religions exercise a certain ownership of belonging, a watchfulness over the identities of families and individuals. After 200 years of Western Protestant mission endeavours, we have seen major receptivity to the gospel in Africa and Latin America, but not in Asia. It is there—among the historic transcultural religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam)—that less than 1% have turned to Christ. Where we have seen successes in Asia, it has been primarily among tribal communities, South Korea and the Philippines (where due to historical and post-war social factors, Americans were viewed positively as liberators who brought Western progress).

The fourth communication challenge is that *the Asian church needs resources to understand these Asian religions*. This will require specialists from among these religious traditions, some of whom might even be practitioners of dual belonging, who could help the church discover meaningful ways to engage and witness. The Asian church also needs to learn how to receive insight and wisdom from these religious traditions so that the gospel can be incarnated within them. Global missiologists have many opportunities to learn alongside these specialists as we reflect on the challenges of communication and mission.

These dominant Asian religions have sustained Asian civilisations over millennia. We need to go beyond competing on these frontiers of religions, and seek to engage, reflect, and collaborate within these religious worlds as we address these four communication challenges.

Communication Frameworks Among Religions: Three Missiological Themes

As we consider the issue of communication, the approach I have taken is to focus our discussion on the lack of success of evangelical engagement with Asian religions.

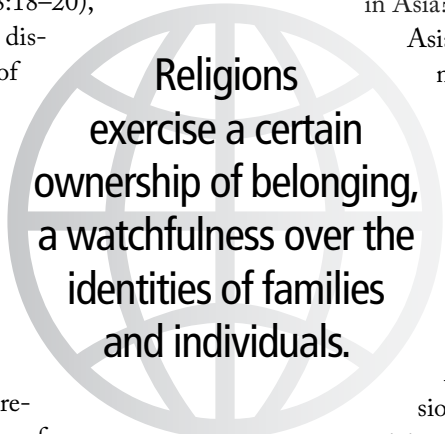> Religions exercise a certain ownership of belonging, a watchfulness over the identities of families and individuals.

While there is evidence of movements today, Christian mission is at a crisis and a crossroads. Conservatives would like to remain faithful to the evangelical traditions and keep the gospel pure. Others are asking receptor-oriented questions about whether followers of Jesus within these religious worlds might raise different issues and insights.

I would now like to propose some mission themes which hopefully offer a way forward. We at BMS are engaging with at least three basic communication frameworks. The first is the *study of scripture* through the lens of local communities within these religions, and the second is a serious *study of culture*—both as external observers and internal participants. I like to think we do these first two as pearl sellers ("selling the gospel") as well as treasure gatherers (finding wisdom within other cultures). The third framework is a more in-depth *study of global missiology* as it relates to our communication of the good news of Jesus. This will require a deeper understanding of how Jesus is confessed and experienced within the lives of other religious adherents over a few generations. This is the unavoidable process of gospel transformation that emerges in the lives of these adherents who function alongside Asian religions. They generate identity markers, articulate new meanings and senses of devotion, and offer alternative solutions to grave societal issues. Asian societies are in search of peace, progress, and positive changes, but they struggle with global social problems such as poverty, over-population, the climate crisis, economic disparity between poor and rich. Other social crises confronting Asia include religious hatred and rising fundamentalism, tribalism, unemployment, global migration, a refugee crisis, and a global pandemic.

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> wisdom within other cultures").

I believe the unfinished task of world evangelisation on these religious frontiers will benefit from the contributions of an interdisciplinary missiology that integrates the disciplines of history, culture, and religion. With these foundational disciplines we seek to identify and develop new frameworks for understanding complex interreligious engagements that could lead to flourishing communities in modern society. To help us, we need multiple frameworks for study: pluralistic religious realities; regional and global studies; and, specialist studies of modern social phenomena, such as migration, diaspora, and the refugee crisis, as well as gender, post-colonialism, and the climate crisis. I don't have answers or specific proposals but only an invitation to contribute from specific disciplines towards this challenge of interreligious communication, where Christ is confessed as Lord for the renewal of all things.

Evangelicals and "Inreligionisation"

Mission frontiers of an interreligious nature usually refer to those socio-religious groups without meaningful local expressions of the good news of Jesus Christ.

> Non-Christians in Asia are more isolated from Christians than in any other continent in the world. At least two factors contribute to this: (1) the isolation of Christian churches in majority Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim cultures; and (2) the relatively fewer Christian missionaries serving within Asia than in the rest of the world. Muslims in Africa have only slightly more contact with Christians than their world average. Christians in the Global South face a formidable challenge in their lack of contact with non-Christians, especially Muslims.[12]

The theology of religion (the study of Christian relationship with other faiths) is a fairly new academic discipline, and evangelical theologians are still developing its key tenets. In this section, I want to consider how a Trinitarian theology *of religion* may help us to change our understanding and approach toward the religions.

Let me begin with theologian and Catholic priest, Raimon Panikkar, who I believe makes a groundbreaking contribution to our subject. He claims that there is a Trinitarian substructure in all religions, but also that there is a Trinitarian structure to reality. He speaks of a "cosmotheandric" principle—the coming together of cosmic, divine, and human, the supreme example of which is the incarnation.[13] Unfortunately, he developed this towards a pluralistic position which affirms that all religions are salvific (leading to salvation). But unlike Panikkar, another Catholic theologian, Gavin D'Costa, developed an inclusivist position through this Trinitarian perspective. He argued that because of "the presence in the world of the Spirit of God . . . there too is the ambiguous presence of the triune God, the church, and the Kingdom."[14, 15] In other words, the Holy Spirit's presence in the world can be found even in non-Christian religions. This means Christians can engage with these religions to learn about the truths of God.

Without adopting a pluralist position, other Christian writers such as Finnish theologian Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen, and American theologians Timothy Tennent, Amos Yong, Gerald McDermott, and Harold Netland, all have developed a variety of Trinitarian positions in order to provide Christians

with a more adequate framework for engaging people of other faiths. For Kärkkäinen, the Holy Spirit invites the church into relational encounters with religions, "Seen from a Christian perspective, other religions are not salvific as such, yet they can help the Christian church to penetrate more deeply into the divine mystery."[16] Based on this concept of the Trinity, Yong argues that the Holy Spirit works within these religious structures. God's Holy Spirit is the life-breath of the *imago Dei* (image of God) in every human being and the presupposition of all human relationships and communities; and the religions of the world, like all else that exists, are providentially sustained by the Spirit of God for divine purposes.[17]

An important assumption of this paper is that the goal of Christian mission is to usher in God's Kingdom on earth by inviting people of other faiths to share in God's love for the whole of creation. The presence of God's Kingdom is understood in terms of bringing all things under the kingship of God. Regarding the function of religions, the presence of this Kingdom involves the transformation of non-Christian religious systems with gospel values. This means

> ## The presence of this Kingdom involves the transformation of non-Christian religious systems with gospel values.

that whenever Jesus is encountered as Lord, instead of a discipleship compromised by other religions, I am arguing for a more radical following of Jesus' model—the ushering in of the Kingdom of God. This is a transformative process I am calling *inreligionisation*. This process conceives the goal of mission as not only evangelism and church planting, but includes a radical worldview transformation of whole cultures and religious life. Jesus is confessed as Lord over every aspect of life, including past religious cultures.[18] In alignment with the Lausanne Theology Working Group's Occasional Paper on the Whole World:

> We affirm the gospel's claim and power to transform any person, culture or religion, and we recognise that such transformation is required also, or especially, *in our own cultures*. (italics mine)[19]

I believe the last frontier for Christian mission in the 21st century is the meeting between religions, and consequently, the most important task for Christian mission is not the challenge of contextualisation but the challenge of inreligionisation. Evangelicals must "ask not only for 'inculturation' but 'inreligionisation,' i.e., not only Chinese Buddhism or Indian

Christianity, but also Hindu Christianity."[20] Beyond the debates of insider movements, "inreligionisation" is the attempt by Christians coming from Asian religious traditions to

> believe that it is possible and even necessary not only to accept in theory certain doctrines or practices of other religions and to incorporate them, perhaps in modified form, into Christianity, but also to adopt and live in their personal lives, the beliefs, moral rules, rituals, and monastic practices of religious traditions other than Christianity.[21]

As evangelical Christians, the way we do this is through "critical contextualisation."[22] There will be truths and practices within religious faiths which need to be rejected. Others will be deemed neutral, even though they were not practised in Western Christianity. But, in this sorting process, we will also be enriched by these former religious traditions.

Nevertheless, once evangelicals are willing to take part in an inreligionisation project as committed disciples of Jesus Christ, we will begin to meet those from other religious worlds and grapple with deeper contextual issues of discipleship within those religious systems. Questions emerge on these religious borderlands:

- How can Christianity meet other living faiths in such a way that there will be a Hindu Christianity or Buddhist Christianity?
- What is the theological value of other religions and how should religious plurality inform and challenge the development of new understandings of Christian witness among living faiths?
- What is the relationship between the gospel, local culture, and non-Christian religions for those who are insiders?
- Should it be—or would it be—possible for evangelical Christians to boldly and humbly move into new strategies of mission which included intentional discipleship amid non-Christian religions?
- To what extent could Asian Christians be given the freedom of experimenting with religious devotional practices which were traditionally identified with non-Christian religions?
- How can we do critical contextualisation Christo-centrically?

I believe these issues continue to be the most controversial and challenging for the church amid increasing pluralism and rising atheism.

Who Is Jesus Christ and How Is He Transforming Worldviews?

Inreligionisation presents us with these two essential questions that determine our understanding of salvation and mission.

- Is Jesus Christ the final revelation of God and the Lord and Saviour of the world, or is he merely a religious leader or teacher?

- How would the church faithfully and effectively communicate the gospel story in a way that millions of people from other religious traditions become persuaded that Jesus is not merely a Jewish figure but also our Saviour promised for all secular and religious people in our contemporary 21st century?

First, who is Jesus Christ? In the traditional enclave of Asian religions, there is a need to develop a more adequate portrait of Jesus Christ as one who is greater than a Western Jesus—one who is both transcendent and immanent in various cultures. Secondly, we should consider how Jesus sought to transform Jewish worldviews. Unlike modern Christian missionary efforts, biblical scholarship suggests we have much to relearn from the way Jesus used relational, subversive, and indirect approaches of storytelling, parables, miracles, and healing, to radically challenge Jewish worldviews.[23]

Our search for an Asian face of Jesus is ultimately an issue of the Lordship of Christ. The issue is not just what non-Christians think of Jesus ("who do people say I am?") but who Jesus is to Asian Christians ("who do *you* say I am?"). This Christological question penetrates the depth of Christian worship, discipleship, lifestyle, mindset, and worldview where one's loyalty to Christ is not confined to prescribed religious boundaries. "Jesus is Lord" cannot be verbalised merely by individuals in the privacy of their bedrooms, nor the safe confines of ecclesial boundaries, but must be reimagined in public spaces. Contextually, our answers to the question of who Jesus is cannot be completely disconnected from those questions about Jesus commonly held by our Muslim and Buddhist neighbours. For Asians, these Christian portraits of Jesus should emerge from the sufferings and heart struggles of Asia rather than a Christology developed in 16th- or 17th-century Reformation Christianity, or within 20th-century Western evangelicalism. Radical discipleship must result in Christ penetrating every aspect of the various socio-economic and political worlds of Asia. "Jesus is Lord" must be lived out in the daily life of business, marketplace ethics, hospitality to migrants, and serving the poor. The Apostle Paul had these deeper dimensions of Christ's Lordship in mind when he proclaimed that

> Jesus Christ is the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. (Col. 1:15–16).

Western philosophies have been deeply influenced by the Graeco-Roman conceptual duality of being and doing. The result is that Christian ethics is more often taught such that its application is entirely up to the individual. Buddhists, on the other hand, are interested in the outworking of doctrines.

They first emphasize *doing*, rather than the giving of priority to the conceptual understanding of doctrines. The credibility of the gospel suffers a serious blow when Christians preach ethics without providing significant pointers by actually practising these ethical teachings. Therefore, the meaning of "Jesus is Lord" among Buddhists has more to do with Christians practising what they preach and demonstrating higher ethical standards in their workplaces. When Buddhists see such radical and self-giving lifestyles, they will be interested to know about such a religion, a religion that works. Upon a closer encounter with the Christ of the Bible, they will stumble upon the mystery of the gospel, a way that it is not about self-fulfilment but rather about following Jesus in the way of the cross.

> "Jesus is Lord" cannot be verbalised merely by individuals in the privacy of their bedrooms, nor the safe confines of ecclesial boundaries, but must be reimagined in public spaces.

Decentering Academic Missiology and Western Mission Structures

There is an urgent need to *decenter* Western missiological frameworks. If we look at other religions and contexts only through a particular theoretical lens, we could easily distort the reality on the ground. For example, if we teach mission studies from a particular discipline and methodology, without sufficient learning and engagement with different religious or non-Western thinkers, there is a danger that we might treat these various religions or cultures merely as data, or, at best, as mere theories to help us look at the world around us. Postcolonial studies have challenged some of our limited and rather antiquated perspectives on Christian mission, which appear to distort other parts of the world. For instance, are we sensitive to the way our methodology and approaches to the study of peoples and cultures are unintentionally creating theological frameworks of power and control? A decentering would certainly alert us to this tendency.

One crucial decentering over the past half century is the way many academics, theological institutions, and Western agencies now recognise that the church in the Global South (or majority world) has become the focus of growth for sending mission workers around the world. But, if this is so, what development is required in theological curriculum? How ought we serve majority world Christians in becoming effective witnesses within their major religious traditions? One emerging

conviction is that the future of world evangelisation depends on well-equipped intercultural mission workers to, within, and from the majority world. This shift—this decentering of our Western missiology and its attendant structures—can potentially foster a greater polycentric contribution in intercultural mission preparation, learning, and capacity building.

Mission departments must reflect on the way this decentering has specific application to their strategy, structures, and terminology. Before I introduce the way BMS is examining appropriate and necessary changes in our overall program, let me outline two crucial shifts.

Two Strategic Shifts
The Shift from Cross-cultural to Intercultural Learning
In certain missiological domains there has been a conscious change of language and tone from speaking of *cross-cultural* mission to *intercultural* mission. Corrie claims that "Intercultural Theology" emerged in the 1970s as a way of expressing theological mutuality and equality between cultures.[24] It was a response to the critique of elements of the cross-cultural mission movement (CCMM) and post-colonial reflections on the overtones of Western Christendom.

Corrie argues that intercultural mission is characterised as ". . . relational, mutual, dialogical, open-ended and creates space within which God's *missio Dei* can be experienced." The trajectory of movement in traditional cross-cultural mission tends to be deductive and driven by strategic goals, whereas, as Corrie explains it, intercultural mission

> . . . implies a process of understanding that is provisional, more open to change, with a journey that is open ended . . . our intercultural aim is a critical dialogue in a listening, self-reflective and learning environment.

This shift in emphasis brings with it a provisionality that may not fit well with measurable outcomes or the strategic interests of a mission agency.

This use of the term intercultural better fits the perspective of the BMS programme than does cross-cultural. Using the term intercultural mission highlights the focus on preparing mission workers for working in both near and distant cultural contexts as well as developing the skills and sensitivities for working alongside other mission workers/local Christians in the location of their mission service. But are we willing and capable of moving from intercultural to interreligious learning? For example, inviting Buddhist, Hindu, as well as Islamic scholars to teach their religious perspective and include religious immersion experiences as part of our own religion, theology, and mission classes? What

about studying the Bible through the lenses of non-Christian religions, alongside the Qur'an, the Analects, the Bhagavad-Gita, and Buddhist scriptures?

The Shift from Partnerships to Polycentrism
The philosophy of intercultural mission requires a polycentric orientation that can provide the necessary methodology. Bendor-Samuel comments: "The term polycentrism is being used to describe this globalising process in which no one centre is seen to dominate the mission landscape." Kirk Franklin and Nelus Niemandt suggest ". . . that polycentrism offers inspiration, models and methods for defining and understanding current and future structures within the *missio Dei* and its global mission contexts."

> Intercultural mission "is provisional, more open to change, with a journey that is open-ended . . . our intercultural aim is a critical dialogue in a listening, self-reflective and learning environment."

Polycentrism is characterised by the shift of power through decentralisation, a movement from established centres to the margins, that embraces equal authority and a revolving leadership within the community of operation.

Polycentric working will mean continued investment in establishing hubs or networks co-owned and co-managed by all participants, of which the Western partner is only one. This polycentrism ensures freedom for hubs/networks to structure their priorities as they collaboratively identify their needs and opportunities. In keeping with this shift in emphasis, consideration should be given to inviting partners to evaluate our performance—as we evaluate theirs—and continue to draw partner representatives into organisational oversight and management.

The BMS Learning Programme
Within BMS we have begun to decenter our mission by prioritizing the following values and objectives:[25]

- To transition BMS from being a UK sending agency towards being a partner in transnational alliances of local mission networks embedded in mutually enriching relationships with majority world Christians.

- To decentralise leadership and management structures within BMS, with influence moving from the UK to other parts of the majority world.

- To embrace a culture of mutuality and learning as part of a polyphonic mission movement, in which we learn to give up power and control, and increasingly appreciate and learn from multiple perspectives outside BMS.

- To develop the resourcefulness of specialists in cross-cultural mission from the majority world, with a clear commitment to a collaborative learning culture which will drive the development of BMS mission personnel and partners.

- To determine an appropriate structure to deliver collaborative learning, with special focus on global missiology and contextual mission.

As to the structure of the programme, it will focus primarily on intercultural mission preparation and capacity building. Below is a diagrammatic representation of the programme with some additional notes.

Figure 1. BMS Learning Programme

Intercultural Mission

At the heart of the programme is the commitment to mutual learning and action in intercultural mission preparation and capacity building, whether in the UK or partner locations, as a contribution to the future success of world evangelisation. The five circles in the outer ring represent the means and areas of work associated with this specific focus on intercultural mission preparation and capacity building.

Global Faculty

Over the next five years we seek to establish a global missiology faculty to augment the capacity of majority world seminaries and colleges with regard to preparation for intercultural mission. The intention is to concentrate on capacity building within existing seminary faculties; it is not about

facilitating visiting lecturers across a range of theological subjects. Members of the global faculty will be required to have a global missiological orientation in keeping with polycentrism.

Research

We will proactively engage in missiological research by drawing on the expertise of experienced researchers and academics (including global faculty) to (1) better equip BMS for future development; (2) contribute to a body of missiological knowledge that can inform the development of resources for churches, partners, and mission workers in intercultural mission; and, (3) to support BMS departments in garnering their learning through internal monitoring, evaluations, and learning activities by commissioning experienced research analysts.

Conclusion

The challenge of engaging with Asian religions is a formidable task, and my assessment is that evangelicals do not have a very good track record. My 'Macedonian call' is to invite contributions of missiology on the question of how the meeting between religions can co-generate new inreligionisation communities that are unashamedly committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the Christian scripture—the only two non-negotiables. This conference theme has focused on issues relating to communication and mission, which can easily assume shallowness and speed. Just as European Christianity took a few hundred years to successfully transform their pagan cultures, so the task awaiting Asian Christianity is to confess Jesus Christ from within and not outside their religious cultures. This is a generational project, one that I expect will take a few generations, and promises a process not too dissimilar from the transformation of European societies.

The decentering of Christianity to the Global South has provided us with new possibilities and directions for our journey. Within Asian Christian communities, there is a need to sustain new movements towards Christ beyond traditional Christian identities. To accomplish such a grand task, we need to retrain mission workers with skills to undertake the task of critical contextualisation, and apply this approach not only to cultural realities, but to religious spheres. Rather than a dualistic separation of religion and secular life, we look towards the transformation of Asian religions as a subversive Christian gospel touches every dimension of these Asian cultures. Missiology as an interdisciplinary study must yield special contributions to this inreligionisation project. Therefore, my hope is that this discussion on communication and mission within Asian religions will raise new issues of critical contextualisation within curriculum development, seminary structures, and global missiology. I expect any comprehensive vision for world evangelisation today will require a new collaboration between training institutions, mission agencies, and indigenous mission leadership from each of the religious traditions. **IJFM**

Endnotes

1 For this paper, I use the notion of "frontiers of religions" as zones of contacts and creative exchanges between adherents of different religions. If these power exchanges remain open and liminal, with no one group being able to establish dominance, these frontiers become possible spaces for new insights and horizons for "sense making" within the fluidity and complexities of this meeting between religions. For further discussion on the concept of frontier zones, see David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religions in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

2 This concept of inreligionisation was popularised by Aloysius Pieris, and then identified by David Bosch in 1991 as an urgent issue within theology of religion. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 478. See also Ravi Santosh Kamash, "Inculturation or Inreligionisation"? *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 39, Issue 2 (April 1987): 173–179.

3 Peter Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 61.

4 Christian contextual frames for doing theology refer to attempts of faith seeking understanding through an integration of four domains: 1. Christian "memory" interpreted in Scripture; 2. Traditions, theology and liturgy as mediated through historical constructions (e.g., an Orthodox faith, or Anglican denominational identity, or new dual belonging identities); 3. Local Christian communities, especially when they function as hermeneutical communities; 4. The social, political and religious contexts of the Christian. I develop these contextual frames further in two publications: Kang San Tan, "Is Dual Religious Belonging Syncretistic? An Evangelical and Missiological Perspective," *Theological and Philosophical Responses to Syncretism,* Patrik Fridlund and Mika Vahakangas, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 190–208; and Kang San Tan, "The Inter-Religious Frontier: A 'Buddhist-Christian' Contribution," *Mission Studies* Volume 31, No 2, (July 2014): 139–156. See also Jonathan Ingleby, *Naming the Frame: Why Christians Need the Bigger Picture?* (Gloucester: Wide Margin, 2011.)

5 For a discussion on the definition of a religion, see Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience* (Hoboken: Prentice Hall, 1981), 15–25.

6 Benno van Toren and Kang-San Tan, *Humble Confidence: Reimagining Interreligious Apologetic* (Downers Grove: IVP, forthcoming).

7 See an excellent treatment by William Dyrness, *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016).

8 "No issue in missiology is more important, more difficult, more controversial, or more divisive for the days ahead than the theology of religions," Gerald Anderson, "Theology of Religions and Missiology," in *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium,* ed. Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 200–208; "The encounter between Christianity and non-Christian religions, and the Christian evaluation of other religions, acts as it were, as an epitome of mission theology," Eric J. Sharpe, "New Directions in the Theology of Mission," *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (January–March, 1974): 14; and "The theologia religionum [or "theology of religions"] . . . is the epitome of mission theology." David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 478.

9 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 476–477.

10 Harold Netland's book review on Kwok Pui-Lan's *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995). Available at: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3817/is_199809/ai_n8819152/ (1 November, 2011).

11 Frances and Terry Muck, *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009).

12 Todd Johnson, David Barrett and Peter Crossing, eds. 2010. "Christianity 2010: A View from the New Atlas of Global Christianity," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research,* Vol. 34, No. 1 (January 2010).

13 See a critical review by Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "How to Speak of the Spirit Among Religions: Trinitarian 'Rules' for a Pneumatological Theology of Religions," in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (July 2006): 122.

14 Gavin D' Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000). See also Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). In this later, more recent book of his, D' Costa has moved his position toward exclusivism.

15 n10, Karkkainen, *How to Speak of the Spirit.*

16 Karkkainen, 122.

17 Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

18 Kang-San Tan, "Transforming Conversion: From Conversion to Transformation of Culture," in *The Soul of Mission: Perspectives on Christian Leadership, Spirituality, and Mission in East Asia,* ed. Kang-San Tan (Kuala Lumpur: SUFES, 2007).

19 "The Whole World: Statement of the Lausanne Theology Working Group," 201, accessed March 25, 2022, https://lausanne.org/content/lop/the-whole-world-reflections-of-the-lausanne-theology-working-group-lop-65-a.

20 n4, David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*

21 Peter Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously,* 61

22 Paul Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *Missiology* 12 (July 1987): 287–96.

23 N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). This is a key line of argument in N. T. Wright's book.

24 John Corrie, "The Promise of Intercultural Mission," in *Transformation,* 2014, Vol. 31, no. 4, (October 2014): 291–302.

25 Part of the following section is adapted from BMS's Intercultural Learning Strategy Paper by David McMillan.

Presentation Responses

Answering the Call to Inreligionisation: A Response to Dr. Kang-San Tan

by H. L. Richard

I must first express great appreciation to Dr. Tan for his stimulating paper. It seems to me that this paper builds significantly on earlier insights he has shared with the missiological community.

Particularly, Dr. Tan wrestled with the personal implications of his Buddhist heritage, and in *Mission Studies* in 2014 wrote that:

> after years of studying and teaching Buddhism, and further reflection on my own conversion to Christ, I have come to realize that one cannot completely suppress past identities and belief systems. Instead, one stage of wholesome growth in Christian discipleship requires a return, retrieval, and reintegration of those appropriate elements from one's socio-religious past. I suggest that this fresh reintegration provides both deep-level transformation and a more holistic development of what usually has been a very compartmentalized faith. (2014, 140)

The careful qualifications in this statement are appreciated, as is the focus on engaging, learning from, and integrating "appropriate elements" from non-Christian traditions into life in Christ.

With his paper, Dr. Tan has moved far from the personal realm of wholesome growth in Christ to the broader realms of paradigms for interreligious engagement, particularly in reintroducing the term "inreligionisation."

Dr. Tan rightly highlights both the importance and the complexity of interreligious encounter. In response to his presentation, I will first quibble with a few points before moving to appreciation. My first problem is one that is perhaps beyond solution for any of us who write or speak in this field. But perhaps constant reminders to each other about the problem will help move us forward. That is, I find Dr. Tan's use of "religion" inconsistent and inadequate. He goes to Ninian Smart for a core definition, highlighting the transcendent, ritual practice, and a community of faith.

The problem with this paradigm is that it simply does not fit with the popular "world religions" paradigm which is also assumed in Dr. Tan's paper. Within each of the world religions, there are multiple definitions of the transcendent, multiple ceremonial practices, and multiple faith communities. Sometimes there is more similarity *across* traditions than there is *within*.[1]

Despite the complexity and confusion around the term "religion," there will have to be some measure of agreed meaning or meanings for inreligionisation to be a useful construct.[2]

These points of objection could be subsumed under Dr. Tan's rightful assertions about the complexity of his topic. More important are his strong calls for reconsideration and redefinition. This body, and many of us as individuals, need to wrestle with inreligionisation. The term sounds novel, and mostly is so despite its use ("enreligionisation") by Aloysius Pieris (1988, 52) with a nod of approval from David Bosch (1991, 477). Dr. Tan suggests that this term brings a focus and clarity that is lacking with the standard terms of inculturation and contextualization. Going into and working within a cultural tradition is contextualization or inculturation. Going into and working within a religious tradition might be considered largely the same thing yet carries some alternative and highly challenging connotations. Inreligionisation brings a focus that is lacking, perhaps glossed over, in the current terminologies.

> Within each of the world religions, there are multiple definitions of the transcendent, multiple ceremonial practices, and multiple faith communities. Sometimes there is more similarity *across* traditions than there is *within*.

Adequate discussion of this term (important) and concept (essential) cannot even begin in this type of response. But I would like to suggest that this term and concept may not be as novel as at first appears. I suggest that inreligionisation is a necessary corollary to Johan Herman Bavinck's central concept of *possessio*, that disciples of Jesus are to take into possession under Christ and for the glory of Christ all of the heritages of the world's cultural traditions (1960, 178–179). The Buddhist heritage belongs to Buddhists who become captive to the glory of Christ, and under Christ "all things are theirs" (1 Cor 3:21–23) and they are called to possess for Christ that rich heritage.[3] This is inreligionisation as foreshadowed by Bavinck (granting that Bavinck himself did not apply his *possessio* approach to Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim realities).

Bavinck's missiological successor in this line of thought, who initiated me into this heritage, Harvie Conn, suggested in his paper on "The Muslim Convert and His Culture," that "turning to Christ is not always seen as also a turning to culture, where the believer rediscovers his human origins and identity" (1978, 105). Conn's statement would perhaps be more accurate had he said "turning to Christ is not *ever* seen as a turning to culture;" at

least I am not familiar with anyone using that terminology. Such a turning to culture certainly includes a turning to the religious heritage of any culture, as anyone familiar with Conn (and even the paper quoted) understands his opposition to bifurcating religion as merely an aspect of a culture. Thus, emboldened by Dr. Tan, we can say that turning to Christ is also a turning to the religious traditions that have shaped a person and society within any given culture.[4]

Bavinck, Conn, Kang-San Tan, and I must not be misunderstood as suggesting a blatant, Christ-decentering syncretism. But inreligionisation is a call to a more positive approach to culture and religion while recognizing, in the words of Bavinck, that "the question of *possessio* leads to the greatest problems throughout the entire world" (1960, 179).

May we dream that in this presentation, Kang-San Tan has set a new direction for current missiology, that there will be a response to his call that impacts the future of evangelical missiology, and the Evangelical Missiological Society? Classrooms, think tanks, podcasts, seminars, and conferences need to wrestle with this theme and move towards transformed thinking and practice at the frontiers of interreligious encounter. Anything less leaves us open to the rebuke of making daisy chains while ignoring the central missiological issue of our time.

H. L. Richard has lived in India for thirty years. He is an independent researcher and author focused on the Hindu–Christian encounter.

Endnotes

[1] For just one example, under the transcendent or philosophical/theological category of Smart's paradigm, note Francis Clooney's account of alliances across boundaries in Hindu-Christian discussions:

> On some points of theological difference, one's allies may be theologians in one's own tradition. On some, one may find closer allies among theologians who belong to other traditions. Christian theologians who agree with the Nyāya logicians on the cogency of the cosmological argument thereby also disagree with many Christian theologians, with Mimāṃsā and Buddhist theologians who do not believe there is a God, and with Vedānta theologians who are skeptical about whether inductions of God's existence can ever be cogent. Similarly, differing views about the meanings of embodiment and divine embodiment will lead some Christian theologians to side with the Śaivas, who reject more material notions of divine body, and others to ally with the Vaiṣṇavas, who favor a more literal understanding of embodiment. (2001, 174)

[2] See my *IJFM* review of Brent Nongbri's outstanding study *Before Religion* (33:3, Fall 2016): 138–9; https://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/33_3_PDFs/IJFM_33_3-BookReviews.pdf, for a summary of helpful modern shifts in thinking about religion.

[3] Particularly in light of a focus on prioritizing those who come to faith from other faith traditions, it is advisable to adjust Bavinck and posit a *mutual possessio*, as arguably the Hindu or Buddhist who turns to Christ is taking possession of Christ and his riches while standing within their historic faith tradition. This mitigates the triumphal and colonial overtones potentially present in *possessio*. I owe this perspective to R. C. Das of Banaras (1887–1976), whose approach I will be publishing soon.

[4] Conn, in unpublished class lecture notes on "Missionary Encounter with World Religions," wrote:

> Christ takes the life of a religious people in His hands. And, using their agenda as the fallen images of God, he turns their religious aspirations in an entirely different direction. He renews and re-establishes the distorted and deteriorated. He corrects and amplifies even the religious agenda. He fills each religious hope, each religious word, each religious practice with a new meaning and gives it a new direction. This is not "adaptation" or "accommodation" or "fulfillment." As Bavinck says, "it is in essence the legitimate taking possession of something by him to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth" (1960: 179). Calvin's ineradicable seed of religion sprouts at last in Christ. (Conn n.d., 114)

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Rethinking Mission in an Asian Context: A Response to Kang-San Tan

by Notto R. Thelle

First of all, I want to thank Dr. Tan for a very stimulating and challenging paper. With only twenty-five minutes at my disposal, I will have to limit myself, beginning with a few comments about the implications of changing strategies and positions, and concluding with some reflections about sharing the Christian message in a Buddhist context.

Rethinking Missions

Reading Dr. Tan's consistent "rethinking missions," I was reminded about the slogan from the 1932 report by the commission led by Harvard professor William Ernest Hocking: *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years.* Traveling through India, Burma, China, and Japan, observing, dialoguing with missionaries and church leaders, Hocking and his team came up with a critical evaluation. Instead of traditional missionary work, they wanted a cultural and religious transformation in the East, suggesting a greater

emphasis on education and welfare, transfer of power from missionary societies to local leadership, less reliance on evangelizing, and a respectful appreciation of Asian religions.

Hocking's review of traditional missionary activities represented a liberal theological position. Dr. Tan's critical evaluation of the missionary impact in the East and his prescription for a transformation of mission represent a conservative evangelical missiology. The radical reorientation, however, has some striking similarities with the findings of the Hocking report nearly ninety years ago. It might be interesting to make a comparative study of the positions, and then to reflect upon the differences.

> I was relieved to see that Dr. Tan defines "frontier" as a zone of contacts and creative exchanges between adherents of different religions, open and liminal, "with no one group being able to establish dominance."

Frontier Mission

In my ears "frontier mission" sounded like an echo of the militant strategies of the past, such as the colonial expansion towards the western frontier in American history, or missionary frontiers in the "Christian occupation of China" and other countries in the early twentieth century.[1] I was relieved to see that Dr. Tan defines "frontier" as a zone of contacts and creative exchanges between adherents of different religions, open and liminal, "with no one group being able to establish dominance." If I have understood him correctly, frontier is almost the same as I describe in my two small books about experiences in Japan: the mutual dialogue and interchange that takes place when people really meet one another in the "borderland between East and West."[2]

The frontier, then, is not a battlefield where other religions are to be conquered and replaced, but an open space of hospitality, where faith is shared in a listening and receptive dialogue. The Christian contribution is clear enough: the message about God's love in Jesus Christ. At the same time, one expects that one's own message may be transformed in the process, just as the other may be transformed by the sharing and somehow integrate our message about the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Paradigm Shift?

If Dr. Tan's paper represents what is happening on the frontier of evangelical missiology, I am tempted to use the term "paradigm shift." It deals not only with changes in strategies and revisions of a few theological viewpoints, but a reorientation that may

well concern every aspect of theological understanding. A few years ago, I made some observations about the changes in missions between the two Protestant mission meetings which took place in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1910 and 2010. I am sorry for the simplifications, but here are some of the central points of difference between the two mission consultations, separated as they were by a century—and admittedly, the earlier one had a markedly higher percentage of evangelicals in attendance.

- *The torment of hell* and the expectation that millions of pagans were doomed to perdition was one of the strongest drives to foreign mission in the early period. This seems to be almost forgotten by ecumenical and World Council of Churches mission leaders, and even by some evangelicals.
- *The eschatological urge* and the conviction that the end will come when the gospel has been proclaimed to all nations (Matt 24:14) does not seem to be important to the ecumenical group at all.
- *The triumphalistic expectation* that Christianity would conquer the world and defeat other religions is gone.
- The *rejection of the East* as barbaric, superstitious, and without vitality is replaced by an openness to the wisdom and religious experience of Eastern religions.
- Conservative missiology represented by Lausanne Movement initially emphasized *exclusivist positions*, but the actual experiences of dialogue and the insights from anthropology and cross-cultural studies have brought a certain nuance to traditional exclusivism with a more open awareness of the divine presence, or as some would say, the witness of the Holy Spirit, in other religions and cultures.

Theological Implications

I for one am convinced that such a rethinking is necessary. Sometimes we forget, however, that new strategies not only imply a new understanding of the context but may lead to a new reading of the text (the message). If strategies and positions were mistaken, perhaps the very foundation of theology was wrong, or at least mistaken. I am glad to see that such an awareness is expressed in the reflections of Dr. Tan and other evangelical church leaders.

In sum, the relationship to other religions is not only something that happens on the periphery of our theology. It goes to the very center and touches every aspect of our theology: the doctrine of God, the theology of revelation, the way we read and interpret the Scriptures, Christology, and the understanding of Jesus as savior, incarnation theology, soteriology, ecclesiology (what is the church?), and the theology of the spirit. All aspects of theology are challenged.

There is a clear direction in the process described in Dr. Tan's paper, but I don't see exactly where it ends. And I think we as missiologists have to accept that such a fluidity and uncertainty is a part of our exploration.

Is Inreligionisation the Last Challenge?

I heartily agree that especially for churches and missions working in the East the religious traditions—including folk religion—are an important context for communicating the message of Jesus Christ. We must be willing to investigate new approaches, allowing Eastern religious insights and experiences to inspire and challenge theological thinking and practice.

I have some reservations, however, when "inreligionisation" is described as "the last frontier in Christian mission." There are so many other frontiers in Asia, ideological frontiers that change the lives of people much more than traditional religion: communism in various forms, capitalism, consumerism, various types of nationalism, feminism, scientism, secularism. I could mention many other frontiers but leave it just as a question: Are we as religiously concerned people sometimes too preoccupied with religion, and forget the many other frontiers which are shaping people's lives and which we must encounter in friendly and critical dialogue?

> Buddhism has adapted, enabling it to take root in new cultures. Some would say that such adaptation has changed Buddhism so much that it has almost lost its soul.

The Buddhist Frontier

I will have to limit myself to a few observations and comments when it comes to the relationship with Buddhism—my observations are primarily from the Mahayana context, but I hope it is relevant also for other Buddhist traditions.

Buddhist Perspectives on Other Faiths

In Buddhism there are two basic ways of relation to other religions or competing philosophies: rejection and integration, in Japanese *shakubuku* and *shôju*. The first one is the attempt to conquer and subdue others through aggressive arguments and tough criticism. The other one is the generous and tolerant attempt to embrace the other, accepting the differences, with the expectation that the other will be transformed in the process and ultimately integrated. Both positions proclaim the uniqueness and superiority of the specific Buddhist truth but use opposite strategies.

The second one has certainly been the most common, allowing Buddhism to adapt and penetrate new cultures, enabling it to take root in new cultures. On the other hand, some would say that such a form of adaptation in many cases has changed Buddhism so much that it has almost lost its soul.

When evangelical missiology now seems to prefer the policy of *shôju*—the generous embrace expecting transformation—one should be aware of the possible implications. Our Western Christianities have to some extent been so transformed by being integrated in historical contexts that one sometimes wonders whether they have lost their souls. That may also happen in the East.

An interesting case study in this context would be to explore whether the Buddhist *mandalas* in the Mahayana tradition could offer a visual model for describing how Christ—or God in Christ—is the ultimate truth, but still related to all sorts of religious search and longing for truth.[3]

Mutual Attraction and Rejection

The relationship between Buddhism and Christianity has some paradoxical aspects: two seemingly incompatible religious worldviews seem to be drawn towards each other. On the one hand, the relationship arouses contradiction and protest, because the two religions challenge each other's very foundations. At the same time, however, when Buddhists and Christians meet in a trusting relationship, the distance may disappear, and despite all differences they seem to be in a common sphere. They inspire each other, influence each other, and are transformed in each other's presence.

For some Japanese Christians—and I assume similar things are relevant also in other contexts—it may begin with a search for spiritual roots. 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. The search for spiritual roots may result in people drifting away from the church—they don't belong anymore and disappear out the backdoor. It may also lead to a deepening of faith in a process where the past is integrated, and their faith is enriched by a broader vision of God's presence in their own religious past.

It is perhaps more surprising that Japanese Buddhists often have similar feelings about Christianity. It is often expressed as a sense of affinity with the innermost sources of Jesus' life. One example is of one of my friends, an old Buddhist philosopher who in his youth came across the Gospels and was drawn into the magnetic field of the gospel stories. "After reading the Gospels twice," he said, "I had to say to myself: If this is Christianity, then I am a Christian." One of my mentors in Japan, the Buddhist philosopher Keiji Nishitani,[4] has all his life been concerned with the message of Jesus and the Christian faith in its many forms. He could be ruthlessly critical of Christianity but had a loving attraction to Christ and his message. "I can never be a Christian," he said. "At most I can be described as one who is on the way to Christian faith (in German: *ein werdender* Christ)."

I could have mentioned many other cases. Most important and somewhat depressing, however, it is not the Christian church and its preaching and teaching which appeal. It is the gospel stories and the person of Jesus that sometimes challenge Buddhists with an inexplicable attraction. They don't become Christians, but they somehow belong to the invisible community of Jesus' friends.[5]

Jesus

In my own research about Buddhist-Christian relations in Japan, I depicted three different types of images of Jesus: 1) the intrusive and provocative Jesus who is met with deep-rooted animosity; 2) the absurd and unreasonable Christ of Christian dogmas who is met with ridicule and scorn; and 3) the wise spiritual master with Bodhisattva qualities who is like a close friend and companion on the way.[6]

The *intruder Jesus* is described as the messianic preacher whose message is in conflict with the ideals of social harmony, destroying the family and the state. The reason is partly that Jesus came with Western powers that seemed to threaten the Japanese nation and Eastern traditions, partly because his prophetic message had elements of subversiveness: his identification with the downtrodden and his criticism of injustice and the religious and political authorities. The prophetic anger in Jesus' message is disturbing in a country that tends to regard "harmony" as the ultimate goal of the nation, but it also has its attraction as a source of creative unrest. In our relationship with Eastern traditions, we should not forget the subversive and critical element in the prophetic mission of Jesus.

While Christianity may appeal to Buddhists with its message about love and forgiveness, the dogmatic formulations seldom impress them. The story of Jesus' death may appeal as the ultimate sign of selfless love, but the traditional doctrines about atonement and substitutional suffering are regarded as absurd theories about an angry and unpredictable God who is swayed by his emotions, and who is not able to love without seeing blood and suffering. The reaction is a reminder that a one-sided emphasis on certain types of atonement theories is doomed to be misunderstood and will have to be reformulated in new cultural contexts. This is a vital element in evangelical theology that needs rethinking. The theological reformulation has taken place throughout our Christian history, and it needs to be continued also in the Eastern context.

One approach has been mentioned by Dr. Tan, the Bodhisattva way. A Bodhisattva is one who vows to abandon his or her own salvation in order to guide all sentient beings toward the ultimate goal. In the world of mythology, they are the saints who have achieved perfection after endless periods of asceticism and self-discipline, and finally can become divine helpers. They are worshiped throughout the East.

Using the Bodhisattva vow as an important metaphor, the cross of Jesus—or even the life of Jesus—may be described as God's vow to save the world. While the Bodhisattva is putting his own salvation at stake, God is, so to say, vowing by his own existence, putting his own divinity at stake, and emptying himself for the salvation of the world. I have tried to develop the theme in an article some years ago, describing the cross as God's ultimate vow, and I hope others will develop it further.[7]

Most people, however, tend to grasp the point more directly without such complicated reflections. They are moved by the stories about Jesus giving himself for others. Sacrificial love is not a part of Buddhist philosophy, but Buddhist stories, people's life experiences, folklore, and popular traditions, abound in examples of self-abandoning and even substitutional love: animals sacrificing their lives for the flock, Bodhisattvas taking upon themselves the pain of others, people sacrificing the most sacred treasures for the needy. Against such a background, Jesus may become a radiant model of what people have longed for. He was the grain of wheat which bears fruit because it fell into the earth and died. He freely gave his life for the unworthy. He identified himself with the downtrodden. When he was born, the angels sang, "Glory be to God in the highest!" When he died, people could sing, "Glory be to God in the lowest!" His work was fulfilled when he died on a cross. The Christian church and everything connected with it—church buildings and dogmas, ecclesiastical structures and rituals—is often experienced as an imported religion with an alien taste and smell, but sometimes Jesus walks directly out of the pages of the gospel, across the boundaries of the church, and into the religious reality of the East. Perhaps we should have greater expectations about the stories than the doctrinal expositions.

While it may be meaningful to regard Jesus as a spiritual master, perhaps even the ultimate manifestation of divine love, it seems difficult, however, to accept him as the only one, unique and with no one else at his side. That is, perhaps, the challenge for Christians in the East. Will the mutual transformation involve a renewed reflection on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ?

> The Buddhist reaction is a reminder that a one-sided emphasis on certain types of atonement theories is doomed to be misunderstood, and will have to be reformulated in new cultural contexts.

Two Language Worlds—Insight and Relation

There is no time to go into detail about the conceptual worlds of Christianity and Buddhism. Let me just remind you that the two religions seem to operate in two different language worlds, one with a language related to the eye and seeing, and the other related to the ear, hearing, and responding. That may be a barrier for understanding, but also an invitation to see how different types of language can open new insights.

Buddhism is about seeing. Buddha is "the Awakened One." The eightfold path begins with "right view" or "right insight," and continues with "right thought." The entire Buddhist teaching is expressed in terms related to the eye and insight: awakening, enlightenment, awareness, vision, seeing one's nature, understanding, wisdom, illumination, light, and mental clarity. To see, one has to withdraw from the emotional and mental relationships that blind the mind's eye. The Buddhist truth tends to be expressed in impersonal categories.

I am not saying that there is no hearing in Buddhism and no seeing in Christianity. But the core language in Christianity is hearing and responding. God speaks and the human person turns his ear to God. The one who hears is attentive, and the relationship is established. When Jesus was asked for a summary of his teaching, he replied by combining two fundamental relationships: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind . . . and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37–39). The entire Christian teaching is expressed in relational categories: love, justice, obedience, broken relationships and reconciliation, responsibility, sin, guilt and forgiveness, and others. It is no exaggeration to say that the entire narrative and symbolic world of the Bible is incomprehensible without this dynamic relationship between hearing, speaking, and responding in an action of love. God is consequently described in personal terms: father, lord, protector, king, friend.

From such a standpoint, the preference for the language of relationships which is found in Christianity and the Semitic religions is bound not only to seem strange, but to present an open conflict with Buddhism's high appreciation of the withdrawn clarity of the unruffled gaze. One who emphasizes mental withdrawal and non-attachment will not easily understand or accept the passionate commitment to the world, to people, and to God, in Christianity.

I ask myself: how can the eye dialogue with the ear and the mouth? How can the clear and analytic eye of Buddhism even begin to understand Christianity's preference for personal expressions, its anthropomorphic images of God and emotional relationships, with the emphasis on obedience, faith, love, and the yearning for a meeting face to face? And how can Christianity learn to understand how the Buddhist search for mental clarity and the rather withdrawn relationship to the world leads to compassion? A mutual investigation of the two types of languages may inspire Buddhists and Christians to see new dimensions in their respective commitments, or perhaps, rather, to see more clearly dimensions in their own traditions which have been underestimated.[8]

Mutual Changes Have Taken Place
We sometimes forget that Buddhism to a great extent has been changed by the encounter with Christianity. The Christian emphasis on social action, practical love, and concern for the neighbor has inspired modern Buddhism to discover hidden potentials in its very foundation. The Buddhist reform movements from the end of the nineteenth century to the modern types of engaged Buddhists is to a great extent the result of such inspiration and challenge. And many Christian communities have been deeply influenced by Buddhist meditation practices, inspiring them to rediscover aspects of Christian spiritual life that have tended to be forgotten or underestimated.

The challenge for many of us who have been privileged to live on the boundary where faith meets faith, is to investigate further the implications of our insights and experiences. I am grateful for the opportunity to listen to Dr. Tan's paper. My response is a humble attempt to follow up some of the challenges that he has been courageous enough to share.

Notto Thelle, professor emeritus of missiology, University of Oslo, served for sixteen years in Japan, and has published research concerning Buddhist–Christian relations.

Endnotes
1   The expression is used in the national conference of the China Continuation Committee in 1922: *The Christian Occupation of China*, ed. Milton Stauffer, (Shanghai: China Continuation Committee, 1922.)

2   Notto R. Thelle, *Who Can Stop the Wind? Travels in the Borderland between East and West*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010); *Dear Siddhartha: Letters and Dialogues in the Borderland between East and West*, (Oslo: 2005; not yet published in English). It also reminds me of Karl Ludvig Reichelt's vision a hundred years ago, who expected that the Buddhists would one day bring some of their sacred treasures into the sanctuary of Christ.

3   I have suggested some possible models in "Lutheran Theology Between Exclusivism and Openness: Reconsidering the Classical Lutheran Distinctions Between 'Creation' and 'Salvation,'" in *Interactive Pluralism in Asia: Religious Life and Public Space*, eds., Simone Sinn & Tong Wing-Sze (*Leipzig*: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016): 59–72.

4   Nishitani did not want to be identified as a Buddhist, but most readers would agree that his basic way of thinking was primarily inspired by Buddhism.

5   I have written about Nishitani and others in the chapter "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," in *Who Can Stop the Wind? Travels in the Borderland between East and West*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010.)

6   See Notto R. Thelle, "Foe and Friend: The Changing Image of Christ in Japanese Buddhism," in Japanese Religions 12:2 (1982); "Christianity in a Buddhist Environment," *Cross Currents* 35:2–3 (1985).

7   See "God's Vow: A Pure Land Perspective on the Cross of Christ," in *Ching Feng* (New Series) 7.1–2 (2006):153–163, where I have given a detailed analysis of the theme of "vow" in Buddhism and in the Bible and suggested how the cross of Jesus could be understood as God's ultimate vow of salvation.

8   For a more thorough analysis, see the chapter, "Relation, Awareness, and Energy – Three Languages, Three Worlds? An Approach to Mutual Understanding," in *The Concept of God in Global Dialogue*, eds. Werner G. Jeanrond & Aasulv Lande (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005). Several chapters in *Who Can Stop the Wind?* and *Dear Siddhartha* deal with these themes.

# A Fresh Look at the Hermeneutical Process

Seeking Church: Emerging Witnesses to the Kingdom

by Darren T. Duerksen and William A. Dyrness | IVP Academic, 2019

New expressions of church that are arising among Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other non-Christian religious communities have raised intense discussion in missiological circles. The authors address these issues by exploring how all Christian movements are engaged in a "reverse hermeneutic," where the gospel is read and interpreted through existing cultural and religious norms. They examine this process through the lens of emergence theory—the concept that ecclesial communities arise over time in ways that reflect specific historical, cultural and religious dynamics. The different models and markers are illustrated with contemporary case studies.

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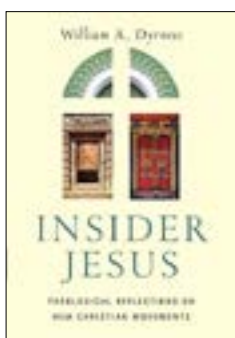
Insider Church: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements

by William A. Dyrness | IVP Academic, 2016

The author brings a rare blend of cultural and theological engagement to uncover how God may be working in Jesus followers within those Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist movements that elude conventional theological categories. He examines the concept of religion in the biblical narrative and how it's been reshaped categorically in the post-Reformation West. He moves beyond contextualization and calls for a more culturally embedded understanding of religion that will demand fresh "hermeneutical space" for these movements as they emerge.

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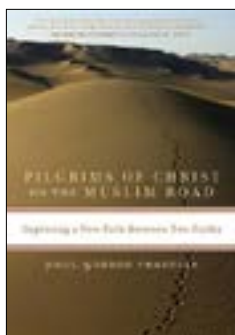
Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road:
Exploring a New Path Between Two Faiths

by Paul-Gordon Chandler | Cowley Publications, 2007

The author presents fresh thinking in the area of Christian-Muslim relations through the life of the Syrian novelist Mazhar Mallouhi, who is widely read in the Middle East. Mallouhi, who is familiar with evangelical Christianity but who self-identifies as a "Sufi Muslim follower of Christ," seeks to bridge the chasm of misunderstanding between Muslims and Christians through his life, writings and witness. In response to the way Muslims identify the Christian faith with the cultural prejudices of Westerners, Chandler boldly explores how these two major religions—which share much common heritage—cannot only co-exist, but also enrich each other.

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Presentation Responses

Assessing the Effectiveness of "Inreligionisation" for Interreligious Communication:
A Response to Dr. Kang-San Tan (Part I)

by Alan R. Johnson

Dr. Tan's paper on interreligious communication focuses on four contextual frameworks, defined as "dynamic interpretive lenses which communities use to frame different ways of understanding truth and interpreting realities whenever . . . interreligious exchanges occur" (5). He proposes that interreligious communication is needed to tackle the issue of how the church on the ground in the Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist worlds can address the lack of success of the Christian mission across these three large religious blocs.

The Problem of Interreligious Communication

The central problematic for the paper is the historical ineffectiveness of evangelical missions among committed Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists across Asia over the past two hundred years (7). He proposes that the reason for this ineffectiveness is "the evangelical approach of trying to replace other religions with Christianity" (6). He suggests that part of the slow response among Asian religions stems from these communities having adopted these highly complex trans-cultural world religions that make proprietary claims of revelation. These belief systems "provide sophisticated explanatory systems of belief capable of coping with major crisis and social changes," and become "intricately laced into the folklore, myths, parental morality, and societal values" (7).

While the paper is on interreligious communication and the use of the contextual frameworks he proposes, Dr. Tan privileges a particular kind of approach to these "creative exchanges between adherents of different religions" in the "zones of contact" that are the "frontiers of religions" (see Tan's Endnote 1). He makes his view explicit in three places across the paper. First, in his introduction he asserts that "the future task of missiology is not limited to the more understood process of inculturation, but also involves 'inreligionisation'" (5). Drawing on a neologism coined by Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius

Pieris, he unpacks 'inreligionisation' as the first of three missiological themes that serve as communication frameworks among religions (9–12). Finally in his conclusion he says:

> The challenge of engaging with Asian religions is a formidable task, and my assessment is that evangelicals do not have a very good track record. My "Macedonian call" is to invite contributions of missiology on the question of how the meeting between religions can co-generate new inreligionisation communities that are unashamedly committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the Christian scripture—the only two non-negotiables. (13)

While the only time he uses the term "inreligionisation communities" is here in his conclusion, his two references to Pieris (5, endnote 2; 10, endnote 20) via Bosch indicate that he is talking about the development of expressions of the Christian faith that can be best described as a Hindu Christianity or Buddhist Christianity.[1] Three times in the course of the paper he talks about the "inreligionisation project" as something that he conceives of as an outgrowth of interreligious communication in the way he is proposing. Clearly inreligionisation is not just one of the frameworks for interreligious communication, but for Tan it serves as the substructure—and the preferred option—for the entire program of communication at the frontiers of religions.

In this response, I begin by exploring how he uses the term "inreligionisation" in the context of the paper itself, offer some critique of the idea, arguing that this approach is not helpful to the Asian church, and conclude by suggesting a pathway for recasting his vision of interreligious communication around the ideas of the translatability of the gospel, drawing from the work of Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls.

> For Tan, inreligionisation serves as the substructure—and the preferred option—for the entire program of communication at the frontiers of religions.

The Inreligionisation Concept: An Overview

First, let me begin by saying that there are a number of interesting and helpful ideas presented in the valuable essay: the contextual frames for doing theology; his analysis of the communication challenges of the Asian church; the ineffectiveness encountered in the history of Christian mission to the Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu worlds; the factors regarding the function of Asian religion; the three missiological themes for communication frameworks; and the numerous thought-provoking

questions he raises throughout the presentation. I particularly appreciate that Dr. Tan's proposal for interreligious communication is addressing the critical questions he raises and is seeking answers to these questions with the explicit goal of making the good news of Jesus known and seeing people within these religious blocs bring their lives under the lordship of Jesus.

I wholeheartedly agree with his assessment that the Asian church needs to do a better job of communicating with the Asian religions they live among, and that further understanding requires more listening and an openness to learn from them. When Dr. Tan says, "the Asian church needs resources to understand these Asian religions," and that "this will require specialists from among these religious traditions," I say, "Amen!" The Asian church not only needs help "to discover meaningful ways to engage and witness," but this church "needs to learn how to receive insight and wisdom from these religious traditions so that the gospel can be incarnated within them" (8).

> The lack of detail
> on this inreligionisation concept
> does not allow the reader
> enough guidance for how working
> "in," "within," and "amid" the
> religions is to be done.

Having said this, I think the "inreligionisation project" he proposes is not the most fruitful way to call the Asian church to the kind of interreligious communication he is advocating. I begin here with an assessment of some of the issues that appear in the paper itself, and then in the next section sketch briefly the reasons why I feel that the proposal is problematic for the Asian church.

I was surprised that the central construct of such a radical call to the existing Asian church—namely "inreligionisation"—was so underdeveloped in this paper. We meet the term in the first few lines of the paper where it is contrasted with inculturation, which is similarly not defined. Dr. Tan cites Bosch's reference to Pieris' notion of inreligionisation as an example of the need for work on the theology of religion.[2] We never actually get to hear the voice of the person who coined the term. There is no discussion of the history of the term and the work of Pieris, nor is there even a paper trail to any of his work other than the single Bosch citation. Following on the heels of this initial appearance of inreligionisation, Dr. Tan then interjects Phan's definition of "religionisation," explaining that some Asian Christians are attempting to believe in the possibility and even necessity of accepting doctrines and practices of other religions and in some way incorporating them

into their lives (10). The reader is left wondering about the precise relationship between Phan's "religionisation" and Pieris' "inreligionisation" and in what way the addition of the preposition "in" changes the concept.

The idea next appears as the first of Tan's three missional themes under the heading "Evangelicals and Inreligionisation." In arguing that mission needs to go beyond inculturation towards inreligionisation, he cites Bosch's reference to Pieris (1986) about the possibilities of a Hindu Christianity that goes beyond an Indian Christianity (10, endnote 20). Dr. Tan then expands further on the concept by citing some of his own work which indicates a more radical goal of seeing "Jesus confessed as Lord over every aspect of life, *including past religious cultures*" (italics mine) (10, endnote 18).

The most programmatic detail on what inreligionisation actually might look like in interreligious communication is expressed in a series of six questions. Dr. Tan poses these questions as part of the process whereby we "begin to meet religions and grapple with deeper issues of discipleship within those religious systems" (10). The questions address:

1. How can Christianity meet other living faiths in such a way that there will be a Hindu Christianity or Buddhist Christianity?

2. What is the theological value of other religions and how should religious plurality inform and challenge the development of new understandings of Christian witness among living faiths?

3. What is the relationship between the gospel, local culture, and non-Christian religions for those who are insiders?

4. Should it be—or would it be—possible for evangelical Christians to boldly and humbly move into new strategies of mission which included intentional discipleship amid non-Christian religions?

5. To what extent could Asian Christians be given the freedom of experimenting with religious devotional practices which were traditionally identified with non-Christian religions?

6. How can we do critical contextualisation Christocentrically?

The lack of detail on this inreligionisation concept in the paper does not allow the reader enough information to imagine how working along these lines is then expressed in one's Christian faith and identity. Neither does it give any guidance for how working "in," "within," and "amid" the religions is to be done, and what is meant by these prepositions. While this particular paper was presented to a missions society with cross-cultural

workers being the primary audience, when he talks about "our Macedonian call," it is as an Asian leader addressing the Asian church. As one who is part of that Asian church, and no doubt aware of its broader ethos, it would have increased the usefulness of the paper to offer historical insight into the concepts. I would have preferred he problematize these concepts in order to find useful practices, rather than take on the whole program inherent in the work of Pieris.

A Critique of the Inreligionisation Concept

While I agree with Dr. Tan's assessment of the problem, I feel that interreligious dialogue framed as "inreligionisation" is not the most helpful route to pursue. It will not advance his goal of an Asian church communicating better with their non-Christian neighbors, nor their doing critical contextualization work. I briefly sketch here four main problem areas: this approach does not fit well with the lived experience of the participants in the potential dialogue; it is offensive to the sensibilities of much of the Asian church; Dr. Tan has taken an original framework that eschews evangelism and has bent it to fit an evangelical vision of mission that would be unacceptable to the originator; and finally, there is no New Testament evidence that the apostolic bearers of the good news endeavored to dialogue in this fashion as part of their mission praxis.

> Despite what is said about non-essentialist views of religion, those in the Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu worlds recognize there are local essentialisms that inform belief, practice, and commitment.

Recognizing Intuitive Essentialisms

The first big issue that jumped off the page in reading Dr. Tan's call to the Asian church, was that the proposal does not adequately take into consideration the daily lived experience of both the Asian religionist and the bulk of Asian Christians. Despite what is said about non-essentialist views of religion—and Pieris' claim that "in our Asian context, religion is life itself rather than a function of it,"[3]—those on the ground in the Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu worlds recognize there are local essentialisms that inform belief, practice, and commitment. These common essentialisms impact communication and relations between non-Christians and their Christian neighbors.[4]

Asian religionists have experiences with spiritual powers, and thus have an intuitive sense that some of these powers are mutually exclusive. They do not "get along." While scholars may cite the eclectic and transactional drawing upon practices from different religious traditions in everyday experience, there is also a strong underlying sense that to be a Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, or Christian actually entails commitment to things that cannot be glossed as "cultural." These realities have worldview functions that are "religious." For instance, how are we to understand when a Thai person is invited to a Christian church service, who then stands outside the building and never comes in, even though the Thai friend who invited him is in the gathering? For those familiar with the Thai setting, there are a number of sociocultural reasons that can create such fear. However, when asked why he did not come in, can we completely discount his explanation that as a Buddhist he felt there was something wrong about participating in another religion's gathering? The notion of multiple religious belonging does not fit well with the way Asians respond to these religious boundaries.

Asian protestations that religions are "all the same" and "teach us to be good" often have more to do with a social cosmetic that relieves a potentially stressful encounter than it does actual beliefs. When you scratch below the surface, there is something they will consider more "true" or "real." They are more likely to identify the religious other in terms of their own religious worldview roots. My own experience of living and interacting with Buddhists and Muslims for decades does not align with those who assert multiple religious belongings. I resonate more with Daniel Strange's comment on religious worldview:

> Given the systemic/organic totalitarian nature and function of worldview, there is simply no liminal space for the dual belonger to occupy which does not fatally compromise their two or more "belongings."[5]

My argument would be that eclectic religious practices are not evidence of "multiple belongings" as much as they reflect a religious worldview that can incorporate other powers into their system. (God and Jesus would be just two examples.) Thus, they do not see themselves as "belonging" to alternative religious systems, but rather draw upon another source of power while still remaining in the metaphysical big picture worldview of their birth religion system.

In trying to learn more about Pieris and his original concept of inreligionisation, I came across a helpful article by Devaka Premawardhana and a series of responses. It examines Pieris' view of multiple religious belonging and contrasts it to four other proponents of the idea. It is interesting that even Pieris

sees distinct differences in religious traditions that do not disappear. Premawardhana, commenting on Pieris' use of essentialist terms like religion, traditions, and identity, says:

> To the extent that he has used reified labels, he has revealed that, despite his professed distaste for intellectualism and academicism, he too is not averse to linguistic conventions indispensable for indexing where one stands in relation to others. Moreover, his terminological recognition of different religious traditions—Buddhism as distinct from Christianity—reflects his conviction that each is meaningfully different from others. He has even written, again in a more recent essay, of "the non-negotiable differences between Buddhism and Christianity."[6]

The idea of doing something *within* another religion is automatically going to raise all kinds of red flags for most Asian Christians.

At the academic and scholarly level, a comparative theological work[7] that seeks to operate from inside the perspective of the other religion may be possible, but it is much more difficult for everyday people who see "meaningful difference" between their different traditions to feel comfortable engaging in such an endeavor. Any proposal to help the Asian church communicate better with its non-Christian neighbors needs to appreciate the power of local essentialism if lay practitioners are going to be doing the actual interreligious communication.

The Unfeasibility of Mixing Allegiances

A second related point grows from the first. Dr. Tan's proposal underestimates Asian Christian identity as having been forged in contradistinction to the majority religion from which it has emerged. There is a strong sense, in both the person in the pew and church leadership, that a critical Christian distinctive is one's forsaking of idolatry and one's sole allegiance to Jesus Christ. Therefore, the idea of doing something *within* another religion is automatically going to raise all kinds of red flags for most Asian Christians. The spatial metaphor will cause many people to see this as an exercise that is fraught with opportunity for inappropriate mixing of allegiances. Phan himself recognizes this fact and indicates that it raises questions for the whole project:

> …even if multiple religious belonging is a fact of life in Asia and in Asian Christianity—a statement regularly and stridently rejected by a large number of Asian Christians themselves—it is still necessary to inquire if this is something theologically feasible and, if so, desirable.[8]

Bending the Original Concept

A third issue is that Dr. Tan has appropriated the inreligionisation framework in a way in which Pieris as the originator would disagree. Kenneth Fleming's summary of how Pieris views the program of inreligionisation gives insight as to what motivated this approach.[9] Fleming notes that Pieris parses the problem of a small Christian presence in Asia as the result of the metacosmic religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism subsuming the cosmic religions (Pieris' term for primal or traditionalist religion) before Christianity appeared.[10]

> The way forward for Christian mission, he therefore argued, is not in a forlorn attempt to woo Asians to Christianity, which still seems like a foreign import from the West to them, but to appreciate and work "within the soteriological perspectives of Asian religions."[11]

Fleming says that Pieris saw inculturation as attempting to "adopt and adapt appealing ideas from Asian religions," complaining that "merely taking attractive philosophical concepts from other religions—as Western theology did with Greek thought—without reference to the soteriological basis and religious life behind these amounts to 'theological vandalism.'"[12]

In Pieris' view of religion, as explained by Premawardhana,

> the idea of inserting "the Christian religion minus European culture" into an "Asian culture minus non-Christian religion" is untenable. Inculturation would therefore be wisely recast as "inreligionisation," Pieris's intriguing neologism that entails "developing a new Asian identity within the idiom and the ethos of another metacosmic religion such as Buddhism."[13]

Fleming interprets Pieris' inreligionisation approach as participation in the other's religious world to appreciate its own inner dynamics with the goal of dialogue being to "access the liberative core of the other religion."[14]

An extended quote from Pieris reveals how radically different his views are on the proclamation of what God has done in Jesus Christ:

> Let us disinfect our notions of baptism, nations, and disciples from the venomous zeal for proselytism. Did not Jesus criticize and even ridicule proselytism or conversion from one religion to another in Mt 23:15? Jesus' call was to change one's ways (metanoia, shub) and not to change one's religion. He invites all to abandon slavish dependence on creatures (idolatry) and to enjoy the freedom that comes from sole dependence on God, our Maternal Father. This beatitudinal spirituality of Jesus is, naturally, couched in a strongly theistic idiom, whereas Buddhists and Hindus, for instance, have a non-theistic version of it in alpecchatā and vairāgya. In either case, it is our rejection of every form of idolatry that constitutes conversion. Those who renounce the worship of creatures are his disciples. The Kingdom belongs to the Poor.[15]

By contrast, Dr. Tan has a clear goal in his advocation of interreligious dialogue—to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ. It appears to me, however, that he has drawn upon Pieris' framework in a way that Pieris himself—and other Asian theologians who advocate dialogue as a move away from evangelism—would not find acceptable. Thus, Dr. Tan has had to bend another framework designed to be non-proselytizing to his own evangelical mission vision of the Lordship of Jesus Christ among all peoples.

There is no indication in the New Testament that there was any attempt on the part of those who took the gospel cross-culturally to work inside pagan religious systems.

The Lack of Biblical Precedent

Finally, and most compellingly for evangelicals, there is no indication in the New Testament that there was any attempt on the part of those who took the gospel cross-culturally to work inside pagan religious systems. Certainly, as Dean Flemming shows, there was contextual work being done, adaptations of terms, practices and forms being made, but nothing that would look like a Christianity tailored to one of the existing cults of Greco-Roman deities.[16] The apostolic call to repentance and to turn from idolatry was a call to faith in Jesus Christ. While this call is considered inappropriate by theologians like Pieris, there is a significant and growing number of Asian people, born into Asian religions, who have found new life and liberation in Jesus and who want to make Him known to their people.

I have explored here some reasons why I think that an "inreligionisation project" is not the best way to solve the problem of poor communication between the Asian church and their neighbors. This is not a framework that fits well with the ethos of an evangelical commitment to call people to faith in Jesus Christ. Yet the problem that Dr. Tan addresses is a reality and cannot be ignored. We must explore a framework for better communication and sensitivity to the religious other which emerges from our biblical texts, one that legitimates such an exploration on the part of the Asian church.

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Endnotes

[1] Aloysius Pieris, S. J., "Inculturation in Non-Semitic Asia," *The Month*, no. 1420 (1986): 83. In Dr. Tan's paper, this citation from Pieris is noted as being in David J. Bosch's *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 9th ed., vol. 16, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991): 478 citing Pieris, 83.

[2] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 477–78.

[3] Aloysius Pieris, S. J., *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, *Faith Meets Faith Series* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 90.

[4] N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Vol. 1 in the series *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), xiv–xv. N. T. Wright makes a similar observation when he challenges the assumption that all monotheists believe in the same god. He goes on to say,

> It may or may not be true that any worship of any god is translated by some mysterious grace into worship of one god who actually exists, and who happens to be the only god. That is believed by some students of religion. It is not, however, believed by very many practitioners of the mainline monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) or the non-monotheistic ones (Hinduism, Buddhism, and their cognates).

[5] Daniel Strange, "'There Can Be Only One': The Impossibility and Idolatry of 'Dual Belonging,'" in *Buddhist–Christian Dual Belonging: Affirmations, Objections, Explorations*, ed. Gavin D'Costa and Ross Thompson (London: Routledge, 2016), 74.

[6] Devaka Premawardhana, "The Unremarkable Hybrid: Aloysius Pieris and the Redundancy of Multiple Religious Belonging," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46, 1 (2011). https://www.academia.edu/753846/The_Unremarkable_Hybrid_Aloysius_Pieris_and_the_Redundancy_of_Multiple_Religious_Belonging.

[7] For an excellent example of a careful, comparative theological work see Amos Yong, *Pneumatology and the Christian–Buddhist Dialogue: Does the Spirit Blow through the Middle Way?* Studies in Systematic Theology (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[8] Peter C. Phan, "Responses to Devaka Premawardhana's 'The Unremarkable Hybrid: Aloysius Pieris and the Redundancy of Multiple Religious Belonging,'" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46, no. 1 (2011).

[9] In trying to track down the paper trail on the inreligionisation concept, I was unable to find the Pieris article that Bosch cites, but I did find digital copies of some of Pieris' other work, and a doctoral thesis by Kenneth Fleming examining the theologies of three Asian theologians, one of whom was Pieris. See Kenneth Fleming, "Asian Christian Theologians in Dialogue with Buddhism: A Study of the Writings of Kosuke Koyama, Choan-Seng Song, and Aloysius Pieris" (PhD, University of Edinburgh, 2000).

[10] Fleming, "Asian Christian Theologians," 184.

[11] Fleming, 184.

[12] Fleming, 184.

[13] Premawardhana, "The Unremarkable Hybrid."

[14] Fleming, 184.

[15] Aloysius Pieris, S. J., "Ecumenism in the Churches and the Unfinished Agenda of the Holy Spirit," *Spiritus* 3 (2003): 65.

[16] Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IV Press Academic).

References
Same as the References after Johnson Part II, see page 34.

Further Resources on the Hermeneutical Process
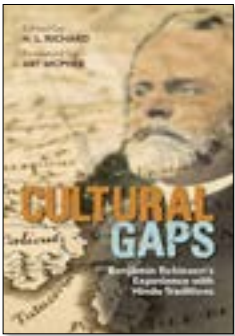
Cultural Gaps: Benjamin Robinson's Experience with Hindu Traditions

edited by H. L. Richard | William Carey Publishing: Littleton, CO, 2020

Differences between Hindu and Christian traditions account for an uneven reception of the gospel of Christ among Hindu peoples, and these difference call for a deeper understanding of intercultural hermeneutics. In *Cultural Gaps*, H. L. Richard brings a forgotten nineteenth-century pioneer back into this conversation by reviving his memoir, with a new forward, extensive footnotes, and a new introduction. Robinson's experiences in south India in the 1880's remain relevant, particularly his attempts at authentic interreligious encounter and his struggle to adequately integrate into the Hindu context.

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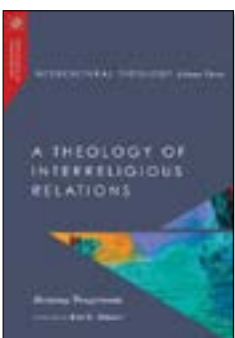
Intercultural Hermeneutics (Vol. 1, Intercultural Theology)

by Henning Wrogemann | IVP Academic, 2016

In Henning Wrogemann's first of three volumes on intercultural theology, this leading missiologist of religion brings together religious studies, missiology, social science research and Christian theology in a fresh investigation of what it means to understand another cultural context. As one who represents the emergent German emphasis on intercultural hermeneutics, the author surveys different hermeneutical theories and concepts of culture as he addresses the difficult questions of syncretism, inculturation and identity. This is a textbook for understanding the hermeneutics underlying the development of Christian diversity across time and space.

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A Theology of Interreligious Relations (Vol 3, Intercultural Theology)

by Henning Wrogemann | IVP Academic, 2019

In this third volume of his three-volume Intercultural Theology, Henning Wrogemann proposes that we need to go beyond currently trending theologies of mission to formulate both a *theory of interreligious relations* and a related but methodologically independent *theology of interreligious relations.* Amidst the ongoing religious pluralization in societies that were once more religiously homogenous, the author addresses the fallacies of different theology-of-religion models and identifies the most pertinent factors at play when those from different cultural and religious traditions come in contact in real-life situations. Wrogemann provides a masterful scope to the study of interreligious relations.

https://www.amazon.com/Intercultural-Theology-Three-Interreligious-Missiological-ebook/dp/B07MTS6X25/ref=sr_1_4?crid=3EWCFB38UVB0B&keywords=henning+Wrogeman&qid=1653675802&s=books&sprefix=henning+wrogemann%2Cstripbooks%2C77&sr=1-4

Presentation Responses

Recasting Interreligious Communication Around the Notion of Translation: A Response to Kang-San Tan (Part II)

by Alan R. Johnson

My recent opportunity to engage Dr. Kang-San Tan's presentation on the subject of "inreligionisation" has provoked further reflection. The interreligious challenge that exists today for the Asian church demands we welcome and entertain new modes of communication. While I do not join Dr. Tan in pursuing interreligious dialogue in an inreligionisation mode, it does pose a question: What might be the alternative ways to improve the relationship between the Asian church and the non-Christian cultures in which it finds itself?

Dr. Tan wants to get the players at the frontiers of religions communicating with each other. We can only speculate on the variety of possible motives or influences that would provide an impetus for Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus to engage in interreligious dialogue with their Christian neighbors. However, we do know that on the Christian side of this dialogue there is a significant amount of biblical, theological, and historical material that shapes engagement with neighbors of other religions. Fresh material is also emerging, especially on the processes of local appropriation happening in world Christianity.[1]

> **Religious frontiers by their very nature are spaces that require translation to create understanding between participants who hold vastly different conceptual universes.**

Broadly, my argument here is that the impetus to engage "the religious other" is inherent in biblical faith and the redemptive trajectory of Scripture. If this is true, then the breakdown in communication Dr. Tan notes is best approached by seeking to be more faithful to our own texts and mission history. It is getting inside and listening to our own story first that will open the church to constructive relations and dialogue with our non-Christian neighbors. The well-documented critiques of attitudes and practices in the modern missionary

movement[2] and the resulting foreign forms of faith that characterize much of the Asian church are best tackled by reinvigorating our work from biblical texts and theological work. How can an Asian church that has emphasized separation from its non-Christian past become one of the players at the table of interreligious dialogue? This church will be more open to a call to the task of critical contextualization and to dialogue with the non-Christian if they understand this call as coming from the Bible that they hold dear.

Religious frontiers by their very nature are spaces that require translation to create understanding between participants who hold vastly different conceptual universes. This is significant and more hopeful, for as Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, and other missiologists remind us, translatability is at the very heart of the gospel. This means that rather than distancing ourselves from the religious other—or demonizing them—Christians come into any social and religious setting knowing that by the power of the Spirit working through his people, Jesus is fully able to be translated into, understood by, and experienced in that social system.

For Walls, the Christian faith is essentially vernacular in nature, and rests

> on a massive act of translation, the Word made flesh, God translated into a specific segment of social reality as Christ is received there. Christian faith must go on being translated, must continuously enter into vernacular culture and interact with it, or it withers and fades.[3]

In the incarnation of Jesus, "Divinity was translated into humanity, as though humanity were a receptor language."[4]

For Sanneh:

> It seems to be part of the earliest record we possess that the disciples came to a clear and firm position regarding the translatability of the gospel, with a commitment to the pluralist merit of culture within God's universal purpose.[5]

The divine initiative in the Word becoming flesh is carried on by the Spirit working through God's people in an ongoing process of translation in word and deed. This translation shows what it means to follow Jesus as Lord such that non-Christian neighbors can see him and encounter him. It speaks to the local church level, to a fellowship of believers rooted in a specific religious community, that calls for "the acts of cultural translation by which the Christians of any community make their faith substantial within that community."[6]

My proposal is that a recasting of interreligious communication as flowing from Jesus—the living Word who became flesh and dwelt among us—will then provide the Asian church with a theological basis for communication at their religious frontiers. It will establish this act of translation as a legitimate part of their calling as witnesses of all God has done in Jesus.

Sketching a Translation Approach

What would it look like if the existing Asian church took an intentional "translation" approach—one generated from biblical texts, missional theology, and mission history—when relating within their Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu settings? What follows is a brief sketch of some of the perspectives that could be drawn upon to help local churches and their leaders feel biblically legitimate in considering new ways of relating to their non-Christian society.

Both Dr. Tan and I are speaking in broad strokes when assessing the Asian church. While a contrary example could be offered for any particular statement we make, in general it is accurate to say that there is a social and conceptual distancing from the local religion and a corresponding lack of engagement by the church in Asia. The sharing of the good news can often be reduced to an invitation to cross the divide and come into the Christian place of worship, or in a worst-case scenario, it degenerates into an unpleasant encounter where the non-Christian is told how wrong his religious beliefs are.

Changing the way existing church movements conceive and practice their faith is not something that will happen by simply telling people to change or giving them something to read. Coming to see that the Bible legitimates learning from our non-Christian neighbor is best accomplished over time and in dialogue with a friend who walks with them on a journey of discovery in the Scriptures as they personally interact with those of another religion.

The material that follows is illustrative and offers tools which can be drawn upon by those who want to come alongside and be a friend in this journey of discovery.

1. The Ethos of the Translation Approach: Humbly Bearing Witness

The divine initiative in the incarnation of Jesus as an "act of translation" is the foundation of the Christian impetus to reach out to the non-Christian neighbor. Chris Wright's detailed walk-through biblical monotheism[7] reminds us that the living God wills to be known throughout his whole creation as Creator, Ruler, Judge, and Savior[8] and that it is "through Jesus that God will be known to the nations. And in knowing Jesus, they will know the living God."[9]

God's initiative in this act of translation has four profound implications for the church living among its non-Christian neighbors. First, the living God who loves the world and has designated his people to be his witnesses initiated the translation process. He did not wait for humans to seek him out but moved to make himself known. This means that the church is always turned to the world to make Jesus understood. Second, translation also means that we have to intimately understand the language and worldview of the receptor, which puts the church constantly in the position of learning. Third, we enter this dialogue to bear witness. As Newbigin reminds us, "Christians go to meet their neighbor

of another religion on the basis of their commitment to Jesus Christ."[10] We do this knowing that our partners in the dialogue also have a faith that "provides the basis of his or her own understanding of the totality of experience and, therefore, the criterion by which other ways of understanding, including that of the Christian, are judged."[11] Finally, the translation process should remind us that there are always new insights gained in new contexts, and that our understanding of God's truth is never complete.

> The divine initiative in the incarnation of Jesus as an "act of translation" is the foundation of the Christian impetus to reach out to the non-Christian neighbor.

2. Learning to Discern between Mission as Diffusion and Mission as Translation

Sanneh's observation that there are two ways of gospel transmission, mission as *diffusion* and mission as *translation*, provides a frame for parsing the problems of interreligious communication that Dr. Tan observes, and I believe it provides a way forward. With mission as diffusion, the missionary culture becomes the inseparable carrier of the mission, and "religion expands from its initial cultural base and is implanted in other societies primarily as a matter of cultural identity."[12] Alternatively, mission as translation makes the recipient culture "the true and final locus of proclamation, so that the religion arrives without the presumption of cultural rejection."[13]

Analyzing the poor communication of the Asian church through the lens of diffusion provides helpful perspectives on two key problems in gospel transmission that Dr. Tan has identified in his paper. First, the experience of a diffusion process by the recipients of the gospel explains the ongoing perception that Christianity is the faith of the Western foreigner. Whether imposed or unconsciously imported, gospel transmission as diffusion fossilizes the message, its framing, and its forms in the life of God's people with the *version* of faith from the sending culture.[14]

Second, this diffusion also sheds light on why the Asian church has struggled so much in connecting and interacting sensitively with the non-Christians of their own societies. The church's ongoing diffusion of a cultural identity which was originally passed on from the Western message bearers becomes a barrier to an effective interreligious dialogue. Terry Muck sees this dialogue as a "sustained conversation among parties not saying the same thing and who recognize and respect contradiction and mutual exclusions among their various ways of thinking."[15] In diffusion this dialogue is ignored, and the church uncritically accepts and reproduces both the theology and attitudes from the original missionary culture.

In my experience, Christians hold their particular expressions of the Christian faith as the right way, not as one of many ways to follow Jesus. These expressions, a blend of the Bible and their local culture, are inextricably woven together into beliefs and practices. As a shorthand for referencing these configurations, I find it useful to talk about *versions* or *modes* of faith. It is natural for people who come to faith in a local setting, who are then socialized into that version of faith, to assume that what they believe and how they practice their faith is based on the Bible. Their version of the faith is dear to them and when others come to faith it is natural for them to think that these people should follow Jesus the way they do. They rarely interrogate the origins or the cultural nature of the forms their version of faith employs. They simply understand them to be mandated by the Bible.

When we learn that our version of faith is not the *only* version of faith, but one that is historically and culturally conditioned, it creates space to allow others to respond to Jesus in ways that are meaningful to them. We don't require them to enter our version. The Asian church wants its non-Christian neighbors to join them in their version of faith—which seems foreign to these unbelievers. When the Asian church can rejoice in its version of faith and at the same time long for and create opportunity for non-Christian neighbors to develop a different version of faith, interreligious communication will be strengthened. For those moved by the Spirit to respond, new communities of faith will be formed.

3. Tools for Thinking about the Bible and Human Culture

The translation process cannot begin until people see that the Bible itself actually reveals that they can use local cultural forms to convey biblical truth. The biblical materials not only give us a final *product* but also model the *process* of people doing theology in context—engaging cultures and giving fresh articulations of the gospel.[16] I have found it helpful in working with local Christians to use the metaphor of a toolkit for increasing the ways in which we see how God's people relate to local culture. Most people have only one tool in their toolkit to deal with gospel and culture; they tend to reject whatever is local because it is tainted by religion. The following material is not an exhaustive list, but it provides key starting points for any discussion on the relationship of God and his people to human culture.

a). God Communicates through a Human Symbolic System

Hesselgrave and Rommen point out that when we come to Gen. 1:27–28 where God blesses and speaks to humans created in his image "contextualization, culture, and theology all have a simultaneous beginning…the silence was broken by the voice of God. Communication commenced between God and man."[17] This is a very profound point: the living God was communicating with humans in a human symbolic system, and not a divine one. There is no single heavenly language by which He communicates with humans, but instead every human language

is capable of being the vehicle through which God communicates about himself to us. We always meet God through the mediation of human symbolic systems of language.

There are many implications for this reality, but primarily it can help people think about the Bible and human culture. It becomes natural to expect different versions of faith as people in different cultural settings work out what it means to live and obey God.

b). God Communicates through Common Cultural Forms

When we come to the Old Testament, we see a multitude of ways in which God communicates with his people through commonly known cultural forms in the Ancient Near Eastern world. Brian Petersen's look at Old Testament precursors in the Pauline mission can help people appreciate the use of local cultural forms in the story of God's people.[18]

> ## Most people have only one tool in their toolkit to deal with gospel and culture; they tend to reject whatever is local because it is tainted by religion.

c). God Expects Cultural Diversity.

I have already mentioned Dean Flemming's careful work in providing biblical material that illustrates "how the gospel revealed in Scripture authentically comes to life in each new cultural, social, religious and historical setting."[19] Special attention needs to be paid to Acts 10 with Peter's interaction with Cornelius and Acts 15 with its rejection of the need for proselyte conversion. Newbigin reminds us that:

> We often speak of this as the conversion of Cornelius, but it was equally the conversion of Peter… It is true that Cornelius was converted, but it is also true that "Christianity" was changed. One decisive step was taken on the long road from the incarnation of the Word of God as a Jew of first-century Palestine to the summing up of all things in him.[20]

In the apostolic council of Acts 15, Walls reminds us that the apostles and elders "agreed that followers of Jesus the Messiah, even if not ethnic Jews, had indeed entered Israel. They did not need the traditional signs of Jewish religious culture, circumcision and Torah-keeping."[21] The critical decision that sees followers of Jesus as converts and not proselytes[22] "marked the church's first critical departure from Jewish tradition and experience. It built cultural diversity into the church forever."[23]

What does all of this mean for local Christians living among non-Christian religions who fear that interacting with local culture and religion will in some way be an inappropriate mixing of Christian faith with a non-Christian one? This biblical material indicates that God uses "things cultural"—meaning those shared symbolic systems that we utilize

to navigate social life—to communicate truth. By extension this means that every human language and social system can serve as a conduit for God's truth. This then helps us to see that our own version of faith and the forms we employ to worship and serve God are of necessity culturally embedded. Even more importantly, if the living God used local culture to communicate truth about himself, that opens up the possibilities for us to find local forms that can adequately carry God's truth to people.

4. Respect and Openness to Learn from Neighbors of Other Faiths

In the diffusion process of gospel transmission, the sending culture provides the ways to believe and practice following Jesus which were developed in its own sociocultural setting. The translation process builds upon the old and works with what is present in local culture, turning it toward Christ.

Walls, in an essay on the missionary movement and Africa observes:

> …Christianity was first accepted in terms of traditional worldview and in relation to traditional goals. It is impossible for any of us to take in a new idea except in terms of an idea we already have.[24]

Similarly, Sanneh points out:

> In the classical world, mission subsisted on the signs of vitality in ancient life and reconstructed from the old materials an achievement that simultaneously advanced the Christian cause and revitalized the best in the old.[25]

Walls sees this translation process as "less about content than about direction. It involves turning the whole personality with its social, cultural, and religious inheritance toward Christ, opening it up to him. It is about turning what is already there."[26]

The incarnation of Jesus and the apostolic example of seeing new Christ followers can open the Asian church to a profound missiological insight—that it is not required to reject everything in the local culture. The local cultural system, which includes religion, can be drawn upon to express Jesus to their social setting. Dialogue, relationship, and learning are inherent in the translation process. The old cultural inheritance is the grist from which a new life under the Lordship of Jesus is built. Such an understanding legitimates listening and learning, seeking understanding in order that communicating Christ in word and deed may be understood. It also demands a completely different way of relating to our non-Christian neighbors. Instead of rejection, separation, and condemnation, God's people seek to imitate Jesus—the one who came into our world—by entering the world of their neighbor.

At a methodological level, believers need to be exposed to the apostolic example of gospel sharing in Acts and the Pauline letters. The NT record of evangelism challenges us by holding practices and attitudes together that have often been seen as mutually exclusive. The apostolic impulse to proclaim Jesus as the way of salvation for all peoples, in Newbigin's words, "begins with a kind of explosion of joy. The news that the rejected and crucified Jesus is alive is something that cannot possibly be suppressed. It must be told."[27] The news we proclaim is centered in what God has done in Jesus: "He is the Way, the Truth and the Life," (John 14:6); "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12); and this good news "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16).

> ## Dialogue, relationship, and learning are inherent in the translation process. The old cultural inheritance is the grist from which a new life under the Lordship of Jesus is built.

Having said this, as we read the record of bold proclamation and the exhortation of apostles to these new churches there is no evidence that this was carried out with a militant triumphalism, cultural arrogance, a coercive approach, or by demeaning non-Christians and their cultures. While it is true, as Chris Wright notes, that Christians in different eras have indeed been infected with these viruses, he reminds us that mission flows "from the roots of our faith in Old Testament Israel and their belief in the God, the only true and living God, whose mission of love for the world had led to the election of Israel and the sending of the church."[28] When Christians through the ages have conducted themselves in this way—with arrogance and a self-righteous superiority—they are not being faithful to their own texts.

It is also important to note that the NT's critical stance toward idolatry and the work of Satan in blinding unbelievers does not translate methodologically into mission that condemns or demonizes the other. Paul's reminder to the people in Lystra about the kindness of God in bountiful provision (Acts 14:17–18), his familiarity and use of Greek poets in Acts 17, his concern to be all things to all people (I Cor. 9:19–23) and to please others and seek the good of many "so that they may be saved" (I Cor 10:33), his reminder to Timothy that the servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be kind and gently instruct (II Tim. 2:24–25), Peter's instruction to give reason for our hope with gentleness, respect, and a clear conscience, and the frequent exhortations in the NT letters to live good and honorable lives before their non-Christian family and neighbors, are unambiguous guidance to shape our encounter with non-Christians in a respectful manner.

Beyond examples and instructions in specific texts that show a respectful, humble, and learning attitude towards the non-Christian, there are theological resources from the Bible that shape

our encounter with religions as well. Dr. Tan broaches this in his communication framework on inreligionisation when he looks briefly at Trinitarian theology and points out that there are many evangelical theologians who do not take a pluralist position, but who see God's Spirit at work in all of human culture, and that includes religious culture (9). Unfortunately, he does not expand on these ideas and unpack how this biblical data relates to working on the inreligionisation project. In my view, this is a strategic error, for the Asian church needs biblical and theological tools to help them see how God's work in human cultures legitimates their learning and listening from non-Christians rather than only having rejection as their single tool.

What begins as an act of translation becomes a discovery of a new dimension of Jesus (Newbigin)

As examples here, I draw from Gerald McDermott and Lesslie Newbigin who bring helpful perspectives that can demonstrate to Asian Christians that a learning stance toward the religious other is biblically modeled. McDermott argues that the translation process inherent in the Christian faith means that God chooses to "unfold his truth gradually through time" and that he has used "other religious and philosophical systems to help unfold and interpret his reality."[29] He says that there is abundant evidence in the history of redemption that "God redeems not only individuals and nations but the wisdom of the nations."[30] He illustrates this borrowing, baptizing, and reconfiguring from other faith traditions "into Christ by relating them to, and reconfiguring them in, the larger vision of God's revelation in Christ" from the use of Mesopotamian, Persian, and Hellenistic practices and thought which we see across the entire span of the OT and the NT.[31] He concludes that while:

> . . . there is no new revelation behind or beyond the Triune God, there is, nevertheless, new development in the history of revelation as Christ makes himself more fully known by the progressive illumination of the Holy Spirit. What begins as an act of translation becomes a discovery of a new dimension of Jesus Christ. The attempt to transmit faith in Christ across linguistic and religious frontiers reveals that the Spirit of Jesus Christ has unveiled meaning and significance never known before. In this unveiling, there are new glimpses of the Trinity's glory.[32]

Newbigin draws on John 1:1–5 where Jesus is the light that gives light to every person,

> to affirm that the presence and work of Jesus are not confined within the area where he is acknowledged. John also says, in the same breath, that the light shines in the darkness

> and that the darkness has not mastered it…the light shines in the darkness to the uttermost; this is not the point at which light stops and darkness begins.[33]

Newbigin draws a powerful implication from this text which can shape the attitude of the Asian church toward their non-Christian neighbors. Our confession of Jesus as Lord does not involve the denial of the reality of God's work in the lives of those outside the church— "it ought to involve an eager expectation of, a looking for, and a rejoicing in the evidence of that work."[34] Newbigin provides the needed balance for emphasis on God's work among non-Christians by acknowledging the dark side of the human project. He recognizes "our capacity to take the good gifts of God and make them into an instrument to cut ourselves off from God, to establish our independence from God."[35] But Newbigin's theological underpinning of God as the Father of all, and Jesus as the light that shines in the darkness, leads to an eagerness to listen, learn, and receive even what is new and strange; in our meeting with those of other faiths "we are learning to share in our common patrimony as human beings made by the one God in his own image."[36]

This quick assembly of biblical texts and theological work indicates that respect, humility, and openness to learning from non-Christians and their religions is something generated from the Bible itself. Such a position does not mean we must forsake the clear proclamation of Jesus as Savior and Lord. This attitudinal orientation is foundational for evangelicals who hold to the uniqueness of Jesus and salvation in him. Our sharing of good news does not have to be accompanied by a negative attitude towards the cultural inheritance of the non-Christian, nor should it make dialogue with the non-Christian impossible.[37]

5. Critical Contextualization: Cultural Acts of Translation that Make Jesus Real

Dr. Tan has suggested that the critical contextualization process as developed by Paul Hiebert would be the way to develop his five frameworks for interreligious communication. My observation is that intentional contextual processes are not normally undertaken by local church movements. They do not see the need since they understand their "version" as the right way to follow Jesus. Neither do they feel that the Scriptures legitimate their exploration of local culture—and particularly local religion.

Contextualization is often mistaken as the work of the cross-cultural worker who needs to try and figure out how to make Jesus understandable in a new setting. (This, of course, is absolutely essential for cultures with no existing fellowships of believers.) Rarely is contextualization viewed as the communal work of existing church movements and non-Christians in their society. It is they who need to go back and interrogate the forms of their version of faith, to critically assess whether these

forms are helping them fulfill biblical functions in their setting. Thinking in terms of "mission as translation" makes Hiebert's rubric a perfect vehicle for a communal dialogue. It encourages the existing church and the non-Christian to examine both scripture and culture to find ways to communicate Jesus clearly.

> The critical contextualization process does not require the church to go "in" the other religion, nor should the goal be the development of "inreligionisation communities."

The critical contextualization process does not require the church to go "in" the other religion, nor should the goal be the development of "inreligionisation communities." Rather, the aim is a church that has listened deeply, learned from their non-Christian neighbors, and wrestled with Scripture, both as a faith community and with their non-Christian neighbors. This is the critical contextualization process in which the church finds ways that express Jesus in cultural idioms, attitudes, dispositions, and practices that allow the non-Christian to see and experience him.

Conclusion

Helping the Asian church to see that the impetus to engage and learn from the non-Christian world around them stems from their own scriptures, and legitimates this process, will be a crucial step in creating understanding and ownership that will lead to actual change in the practices by which they relate to their societies. These historical, biblical, and theological materials can help local Christians frame their relationship with non-Christian neighbors and their religions in ways that will lead to the better communication that Dr. Tan is seeking without feeling that they have to back away from their commitment to proclaiming the good news of Jesus or having to exist inside another religion.

Dr. Tan has helped us all by highlighting the problem of poor communication and relationship between the Asian church and the Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu societies within which they find themselves. He challenges the Asian church to address the reality that they are perceived as followers of a Western and foreign religion. I have suggested that his proposal of pursuing interreligious dialogue through an inreligionisation approach is problematic for much of the Asian church. In my view, a mission-as-translation approach rooted in the incarnation of Jesus will find much greater acceptance in an Asian church that holds to the authority of the Scriptures and a commitment to proclaiming the good news about Jesus. A translation approach can provide perspectives and tools rooted in the Scriptures that

frees the church to engage their non-Christian neighbors. They can enter a communal process of critical contextualization that will lead to a social connectedness and loving relationships with family and community for the sake of the gospel. **IJFM**

Alan Johnson has served for three decades in Buddhist Thailand. He is an associate professor of anthropology in the Intercultural Doctoral Studies program of the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary.

Endnotes

[1] John G. Flett, *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 285.

[2] Kenneth Fleming, "Asian Christian Theologians in Dialogue with Buddhism: A Study of the Writings of Kosuke Koyama, Choan-Seng Song, and Aloysius Pieris" (PhD, University of Edinburgh, 2000), 33–34, 45–46; Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017).

[3] Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 29.

[4] Andrew F. Walls, The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 27.

[5] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 1.

[6] Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 13.

[7] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grover: IVP Academic, 2006), 75–135.

[8] Wright, *The Mission of God*, 127.

[9] Wright, 122–123.

[10] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, 2 ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 168.

[11] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 169.

[12] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 29.

[13] Sanneh, 29.

[14] Sanneh, 36.

[15] Terry C. Muck, "A Theology of Interreligious Relations," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 44, no. 4 (2020): 323.

[16] Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005), 296.

[17] David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 28.

[18] Brian K. Petersen, "A Brief Investigation of Old Testament Precursors to the Pauline Missiological Model of Cultural Adaptation," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24, no. 3 (2007).

[19] Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament*, 13–14.

[20] Newbigin, 182.

[21] Andrew F. Walls, "Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 1 (2004): 4.

22 It is important to clarify here that Walls is using the term convert in a specific and technical sense and not in the way the term is used in conventional speech. English language dictionaries will often make "convert" and "proselyte" synonyms. In addition to this, in some parts of the world local people understand "convert" and "conversion" in terms of communal change. Thus, a person who converts to Jesus is leaving their birth community and becoming a part of Christendom with all of the negative connotations that this carries in much of the majority world. Walls is using the term convert in juxtaposition to Israel's missionary tradition "whereby Gentile proselytes were welcomed to the fold of Israel" by males taking circumcision and taking on the lifestyle of Torah-keeping, devout, observant Jewish believers ("Converts or Proselytes?", 5). To capture the impact of the Acts 15 decision to not have Gentiles live as Torah-keeping Jews, Walls uses the term "convert" not as communal change but rather to remain in community and to bring Hellenistic social, family, and intellectual life under the influence of Jesus as Lord. He unpacks what he means by calling these Greek "converts" in this way:

> It was their calling to open up the ways of thinking, speaking, and acting characteristic of Hellenistic society in the Roman East Mediterranean to the influence of Christ. Those ways needed to be turned to him—converted, in fact—until he was enfleshed there, as securely at home in the Hellenistic East Mediterranean as he had been in Jewish Palestine. ("Converts or Proselytes?", 6)

He goes on to say,

> Converts have to be constantly, relentlessly turning their ways of thinking, their education and training, their ways of working and doing things toward Christ. They must think Christ into the patterns of thought they have inherited, into their networks of relationship and their processes for making decisions. ("Converts or Proselytes?", 6–7)

In this sense, to convert is not to join an existing foreign Christendom culture, but to live within their culture and work to bring all its aspects toward obedience to Jesus.

23 Walls, "Converts or Proselytes?", 5.

24 Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith,* 90.

25 Sanneh, 26.

26 Walls, "Converts or Proselytes?", 6.

27 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 116.

28 Wright, 134.

29 Gerald R. McDermott, "What If Paul Had Been from China? Reflection on the Possibility of Revelation in Non-Christian Religions," in *No Other Gods Before Me? Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions,* ed. John G. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 21.

30 McDermott, "What If Paul Had Been from China?", 22.

31 McDermott, 22.

32 McDermott, 25.

33 Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission,* 174.

34 Newbigin, *The Open Secret,* 175.

35 Newbigin, 176.

36 Newbigin, 183.

37 It is interesting to me that writers like Bosch, (1990, 483–489), Newbigin (1995, 160–189), and Yong (2001, 57–58) who have very nuanced and sophisticated ways of looking at interreligious dialogue do not see it in any way as being incompatible with evangelism.

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# Ministry Amongst Buddhists
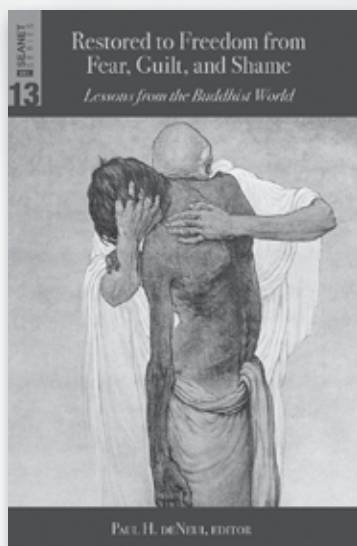
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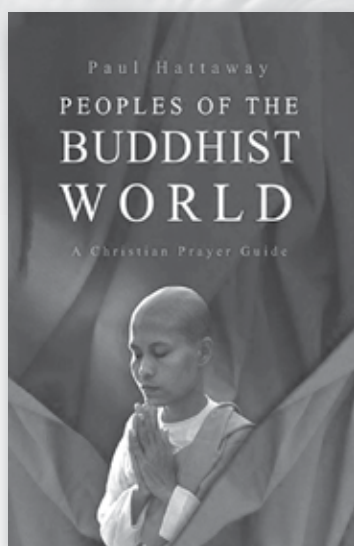
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Respecting Hermeneutical Space
Can Cambodian Christians "Worship" their Parents?
A Hermeneutical Dialogue

By Claire T. C. Chong and Tep Samnang

Tep Samnang worked at Phnom Penh Bible School as a Faculty member, Head of Field Ministry, Academic Dean, and Principal from 2003–2015. He then left to become Executive Director of the Evangelical Fellowship of Cambodia from 2015–2021. Currently, he serves as Lead, Community and Survivor Voice, with the International Justice Mission.

Claire T. C. Chong served as a missionary in Cambodia for 15 years. She presently serves with the Singapore Centre for Global Missions as a Research and Training Associate and is studying for her PhD with Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. She co-leads the "Christ in Theravada Worlds Transformation Collaborative Lab" of the Winter Launch Lab, serves on the steering committee of the Asia 2021 Congress, and is a member of the lead cohort for the WEA Mission Commission. She and her husband, Dr. Kevin Lowe, and their three children live in Singapore.

Communicating and expressing the gospel in a meaningful way is not an easy task in cross-cultural contexts. There are several barriers of communication, and contextualisation has been heralded as a way to overcome some of these obstacles. However, the gap between theory and practice that Darrell Whiteman alluded to more than two decades ago does not appear to have significantly closed. At three separate forums, in the beginning of this year, Asian thought leaders were still appealing to mission practitioners in Asia to do contextualisation.

This presentation is a reflection on some promising activities in Cambodia in the last few years. By creating communities of dialogical practice, the Cambodian church is inching forward in crafting a distinct Khmer Christian identity. It is hoped that this report may encourage others to persevere in exploring and experimenting with new localised expressions of faith for the sake of the Gospel.

I shall turn this time over to Pastor Tep Samnang to share about what our research team is doing in Cambodia.

Can Cambodians Bow to their Parents? A Grassroots Study (Tep Samnang)

My name is Tep Samnang. In 2016, during my service as the Executive Director of the Evangelical Fellowship of Cambodia, we started a "Faith and Culture Committee," a group which consists of heads of denominations, principals of seminaries, and leaders of Christian organizations. We do research on contextual theology and organise forums in different provinces to engage with pastors all over Cambodia. Recently, we just completed our research on "The Christian Wedding Ceremony according to Cambodian Culture" and have just published it in a book. We are currently doing research for Birth and Death Ceremonies.

Today, I would like to present another research project, one I conducted with Rev. Lun Sophy and Rev. Prak Vuthy, along with Ms. Claire Chong. It involves the Khmer tradition of bowing to parents and asks: Can Cambodian Christians bow to our parents?

According to Khmer customs, Cambodians ritually demonstrate our respect to our parents, and also to royalty and monks, by bowing to them—this ritual act is called *tvaibongkum*.

However, among Christians, the Cambodian word tvaibongkum is translated into English and understood as "worship." This poses a problem. Prohibiting Cambodian Christians from "worshipping" or bowing to their parents is a stumbling block for the Gospel.

Our research team spoke with several elders of our community and also with Buddhist monks and temple leaders. We also discussed this problem with several church leaders.

We recognised that the word tvaibongkum in the Khmer language and according to Khmer thinking means to pay respect. In the Khmer-English dictionary tvaibongkum is defined as "to greet; say hello to; to pay respects or homage, venerate, make obeisance."

To better appreciate this, we need to understand the structure of the Cambodian language. The Cambodian language operates on a social-linguistic register; this signifies that one meaning is represented by different words depending on with whom you are talking. For example, there are at least ten Khmer words for 'eat' depending on with whom you are speaking.

Similarly, there are different Khmer words for "respect." In Khmer thinking, the word and act of tvaibongkum does not mean worship in the Christian sense. Tvaibongkum is an example of how a word can have two different meanings in different contexts.

Our research team also found that some Christian leaders in Cambodia think that it is all right to bow before our parents. I will cite three examples of how different leaders do it.

1. In one church, the pastor taught the youths the Khmer tradition of tvaibongkum and explained to them that while this is the cultural way of demonstrating respect, as Christians we worship only one God.

2. In another church, Christians go on their knees and present gifts to their parents or elders of the church. They *sompiah* (hands together in prayer position) but do not bow three times.

3. In a Christian school, the children are taught to kneel before their parents and wash their parents' feet. The non-Christian parents greatly appreciate what is being taught at this Christian school.

In all three case studies, the leaders of the churches and school are well-respected godly men and women with thriving and vibrant ministries. These examples are models of contextualised practice and show us that it is possible to uphold Khmer traditions as Christians.

However, the linguistic explanation and models of contextual practices were not sufficient to persuade Cambodian pastors. So we studied Scripture and did a word study of the Hebrew word *shachah*.

The Bible clearly teaches us that we are to shachah (worship) God and God alone, and that we must not worship (shachah) idols and pagan gods.

However, and very interestingly, the same Hebrew word shachah is also used numerous times in reference to other humans, and not only to God. Brother bowed to brother, subjects bowed to kings, friend bowed to good friend, and so forth.

Children bowed to parents. Joseph shachah before his father, Moses shachah before his father-in-law Jethro, a Midianite priest, and King Solomon shachah before his mother.

This word study shows that shachah is used in two ways: as an act of worship to God and also as an act of showing respect to people worthy of respect. This renewed biblical understanding gives the Cambodian church strong justification that it is permissible to bow to our earthly parents and elders and that this act does not equate to worship of God.

In this contextualisation effort, we learned that the Khmer practice of tvaibongkum is similar to the Hebrew practice of shachah: While contemporary Christianity understands worship in only one way, in the Hebrew and Khmer life worlds, the act of bowing can be used as a reverential salutation and also as an act of worship to God. This is an example of how Cambodian Christians are trying to do contextual theology.

I shall pass this time back to sister Claire.

A Relational Hermeneutic (Claire Chong)

Thank you very much *Lokru* (teacher)!

Having had the privilege to participate in the discussion on the practice of *tvaibongkum*, I'd like to share some reflections on the process of the hermeneutical dialogue. The central point we would like to submit in this presentation is that contextualisation is not merely a linguistic and theological exercise. It is more than just translating a message in terms that are comprehensible to the listeners. Rather, contextualisation

> The linguistic explanation was not sufficient to persuade the Cambodian pastors. So we studied Scripture.

is a social phenomenon, a complex relational negotiation of social dynamics. Because of the intersubjectivities that are involved in contextualisation, certain postures are critical and these postures can influence linguistic and theological decisions. In this presentation, we describe six postures that were identified by analysing the Cambodian case study and comparing it with the classic example of contextualisation in Acts 15.

An Emerging Asian Manner of Contextualisation: Six Postures (6Ps)

1. Participatory

First, the Cambodian pastors adopted a participatory approach. According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Cambodians may be described as collectivistic. Cambodians thus do not conceive contextualisation as the work of an individual theologian; rather, it is carried out communally. A communal and participatory approach is inclusive; it seeks to involve others and esteems another person's opinion, even if it is different from ours. The account in Acts 15 also demonstrates a participatory approach. A sharp dispute between two competing views on circumcision had broken out (Acts 15:2), and to resolve the issue, the Jerusalem Council was convened before the church and also the party of Pharisees (Acts 15:4, 22). Verse 7 in the same chapter mentions that there was "much discussion" before a carefully negotiated response was crafted (Acts 15:7). Similarly, in the Cambodian case study different "stakeholders," regardless of his/her ideological position, contributed to the contextualisation dialogue. Our research team also spoke with non-Christians, including Buddhist monks. A participatory and inclusive approach is not just to ensure rigorous discussions, but more importantly, so that a shared decision may be collectively crafted and owned. Such a communal approach of contextualisation also builds and establishes positive relationships.

2. Practical and Pragmatic

Second, the Cambodian contextual approach is practical and pragmatic: practical in that it deals with concrete life situations rather than theories; pragmatic in that it deals with issues using simple and manageable, rather than complex and abstract, ways. One of the most striking features of the Cambodian contextualisation endeavour is that the whole theological project pivots around rituals—weddings, birth and death rituals, and customary rituals. The theological debate in Acts 15, similarly, revolved around a ritual—circumcision.

Faith practice among Cambodians is not based on what Stanley Tambiah calls scripturalism. Critical textual analysis, abstraction, and formulation of doctrinal concepts is not the way Cambodians conceive of religion. Ritual, on the other hand, is a Khmer way of faith and life; it is the heart language of the Khmer people. Through its unique language, people learn through enactment, and embody morality and truth. Ritual is also the centre of gravity of communal life where belonging and identity are forged. Unfortunately, ritual is the very aspect of faith and life that Protestant Christians have conventionally ignored, or rather, scorned, because we evaluate it solely through the tenets of religious dogma. We Westernised Christians tend to see ritual purely as a religious category, segregated from all other aspects of life. However, this reductionist perspective does not reflect what ritual means to the Khmers, who view ritual as integral to the whole person and to his or her life *in* community.

Doing contextual theology through ritual may be regarded as an Asian epistemology. A lot of contextualisation currently done revolves around theological and doctrinal theses—possibly a product of the European Enlightenment tradition privileging mind over body, and reason over experience. The primacy of doctrine over ritual may be one explanation for the failure of the contextualisation project in Asia: we could be using the wrong tool for the job.

3. Pastoral

Doing contextualisation is not just about acquiring and applying yet another new set of methodological techniques; rather, it is about nurturing a pastoral posture which emanates lovingkindness and compassion—cherished Khmer virtues. In this context, lovingkindness and compassion are expressed as empathetic understanding and sincere appreciation of another culture.

> # Ritual is also the centre of gravity of communal life where belonging and identity are forged.

In the Cambodian contextual approach, exegeting culture is more than intellectually analysing the doctrinal meanings and functions of ritual acts. One needs to intuitively capture the affective meanings as well—the psychological, familial, social, and moral implications. Contextualisation is not a rationalistic and evaluative exercise, assessing "right" from "wrong," whether it follows the Book or not. Rather, it calls for a pastoral disposition toward the other, seeking to appreciate and affirm "whatever is true, noble, right, pure" (Matt. 11:29, Phil. 4:8).

The Jerusalem Council exemplified this pastoral and compassionate posture. In Acts 15, they noted that circumcision made it "difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (vs. 19), because it "troubled and unsettled the [Gentile] minds" (vs. 24). It is apparent that they empathised with how the Gentiles thought and felt about the ritual practice of circumcision. Love superseded orthodoxy.

Similarly, tvaibongkum is a profoundly reverential and honourable way of demonstrating respect, gratitude and affection to one's parents and family elders. Not to do so is an unthinkable behaviour. Cambodians cannot NOT tvaibongkum their parents.

4. Perceptive

Fourth, contextualisers should be perceptive or discerning of God at work. One of the key points of Barnabas and Paul's persuasion in the Acts 15 debate was the evidence of the Presence of God among the uncircumcised Gentiles (vs. 12). Although the Gentiles were not conforming to the religious expressions of Jewish Christians, the Holy Spirit was undeniably moving among them (vs. 7–9, 13, 15, 17, and 28). Similarly, in the tvaibongkum project, we see godly men and women of vibrant churches creating innovative ways to redeem the traditional custom of demonstrating reverence to parents. God is at work and doing a new thing; the Christian faith is blossoming in new ways in Khmer soil. Contextualisation involves not only textual analysis, but prayerful discernment of God at work in unfamiliar yet life-giving ways. It invites us to exercise restraint from too quickly labelling something different as heresy or syncretism.

In Buddhist epistemology, perceptive intuition is not an invalid way of knowing. Perceptive intuition is a holistic form of cognition that comes from in-depth contemplation and intuitive reading on lived experiences, resulting in profound insights. This contrasts with Western epistemology which privileges the mind over heart, body, and soul. Interestingly, in Acts 17:27, Paul invited the Athenians to "feel their way toward [God] and find Him." It is apparent that in the philosophical tradition of the Age of Reason, perception has been dismissed as a bona fide pathway of cognition.

5. Pro- and Co-creative

Fifth, we should approach our mission with an attitude of anticipation, expecting something new to be birthed. Contextualisation should be pro-creative and co-creative. The Jerusalem Council saw that God was doing something new among the Gentiles, and what they saw renewed their hermeneutical paradigm and transformed their theological interpretation

Re-reading an old prophecy in an illuminating new way, James redefined what "people of God" meant: from one that was exclusively referring to Israel as God's chosen, to one that includes "the rest of mankind" and even "all the Gentiles" (Acts 15:17). Similarly, Paul transformed the old interpretation of the doctrine of circumcision. Emphasizing the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law, he criticized the legalistic demands of physical circumcision and preached on the circumcision of the heart by the Spirit (Rom. 2:25–29).

Instead of imposing predetermined theological conceptions, James and Paul allowed God to transform their long-established theological ideas and renew their doctrinal interpretations. The hermeneutical process that we see here is one that is co-dependent on text and context, one that is deeply rooted in the Word and yet sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit in the present and God's continued authorship in writing history.

With this posture and by re-reading Scriptures through Khmer eyes, Cambodians noted with delight how the godly prostrated before their elders and 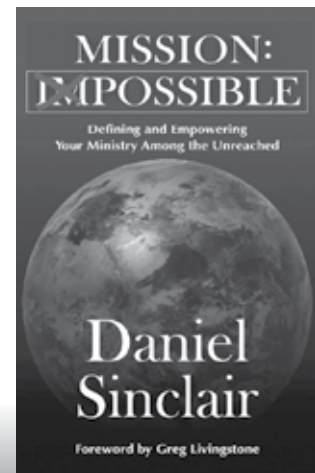how the Khmer tradition of tvaibongkum parallels the Hebrew practice of shachah. This Spirit-inspired and biblically-founded interpretation holds profound significance for Christian expression in Asian contexts.

> In the Cambodian contextual approach, to exegete culture one needs to intuitively capture the affective meanings as well— the psychological, familial, social, and moral implications.

6. Peaceable

And finally, blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons and daughters of God. In Acts 15, the Jewish Council did not just "repeal" the law of circumcision for the Gentiles, they negotiated a holistic and peacebuilding response. They recommended that the Gentiles follow certain purity codes, so as to maintain the unity of fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. The Council exercised the principle of 1 Corinthians 10:32–33 of not being a stumbling block to Jews, Gentiles, or the church of God. Contextualisation is not merely a theological exercise, it is a relational endeavour, involving an intricate negotiation of relationships among various people, for the purpose of establishing *shalom* in the community.

The core Khmer value of harmony and conflict-avoidance is prominent in the Cambodian contextual process. It leads toward peace-building relations by honouring indigenous socio-cultural norms:

a) First, deference is given to Christian elders. It took more than a year to seek the endorsement of certain senior pastors. The contextualisation endeavour in Cambodia is owned and led by mainstream players; it is not a fringe activity of a maverick, or a young leader who has been groomed in foreign methods and manners.

b) Second, honour is given to the Buddhist community. Christian pastors in the *tvaibongkum* project engaged with Buddhist monks and elders in the community, and even explained the Christian dilemma, and sought suggestions from them.

c) Third, respect is also given to the governing authorities. Khmer pastors are keenly aware of the importance of developing positive relations with the local governing authorities. The book, *Christian Wedding Ceremony according to Cambodian Culture*, was presented as a gift to the Ministry of Cult and Religion to demonstrate Christian cooperation to "Khmerise" Christianity.

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Envisioning Communities of Relational Hermeneutical and Dialogical Practice

This Cambodian case study provides some nuanced insights for an innovative practice of contextualisation. Building on the concepts of critical contextualisation passed on to us by Paul Hiebert, we have described here a manner of contextualisation that focuses on relational dynamics. Together with pastor Tep Samnang, I submit this for your prayerful consideration, believing that this manner of contextualisation may be helpful for doing mission in Asian contexts. **IJFM**

Respecting Hermeneutical Space
The Model is the Message

by Ronald and Carolyn Klaus

Ron Klaus is a professor of engineering turned pastor, and Carolyn Klaus is an internal medicine physician. They have worked alongside movements to Jesus in Ethiopia since 2004 and have observed the natural development of these movements under various conditions among Protestants, Catholics and Muslims. Both have taught in Ethiopia's largest seminaries and have mentored leaders of rural movements in starting hundreds of small interactive discipleship groups.

For several years I (Ronald) taught a course in Small Group Discipleship at one of Ethiopia's leading seminaries. The small group model had become fundamental to the growth of movements we were involved with in that region. But I was challenged in conveying it in a more traditional learning context. How I taught the material seemed crucial to conveying what I taught.

I gave out an extensive set of notes, with daily reading assignments and three thought-provoking questions for the students to answer in writing every day. There were no exams. Instead, grades were based on attendance, punctuality, the quality of the written responses to the three questions, class participation, and one term paper. I started every period by facilitating a class-wide group discussion about the assigned questions. Students were encouraged to share their own stories and raise further questions. I responded by sharing anecdotes to illustrate the principles we had talked about.

In every two-and-a-half-hour session, I broke the class down into small groups of five to six in which they could actually experience what they were learning. The students took turns leading the groups. This was followed by a debrief time in which both leader and group members reflected on their experiences.

I shared the break time with any students willing to have coffee with me because I wanted to get to know them more personally. This was a conscious part of the teaching. I wanted to model something of how small group leaders should relate to their participants. Leaders are not there merely to lead meetings. Their job is to love and influence people and pastor them along their journeys toward transformation. I closed each class with a short, motivational presentation that introduced the next set of materials and helped them see why it was important. The students' anonymous reviews of the course were always very positive.

One year I was unable to teach the course because of other commitments. I recommended an Ethiopian friend, someone I had mentored, who had implemented one of Ethiopia's best small group models in his local church.

He had also read even more widely on the subject than I had. The seminary refused to appoint him because he did not have a PhD.

To make matters worse, the American PhD who replaced me had never been in a small group herself, let alone taught about it. She was very grateful to have my notes. She used them to lecture her way through the course. The seminary never saw anything wrong with this. However, she was modeling the exact opposite of what the students should have been learning by seeing it in action. Instead, the lecture-only model undermined the value of the course. Without realizing it, she taught them that they could train other small group leaders through lectures alone. This may be an extreme case, but it illustrates that we teach not only by talking about the subject we want to convey but also by the structures we use to convey it.

> We have observed that in missions the *model of ministry,*
> rather than the material presented,
> is often the message
> that people absorb.

Marshall McLuhan and a Disclaimer

Our paper's title is a take-off on Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message,*[1] first published in 1967. He was a visionary, far ahead of his time. The book shows that the way we send and receive information is at least as important as the information itself. With this insight, McLuhan predicted the impact that the internet, social media, big data collection, and other technologies would have on the world decades later.

Over the last two decades, we have had abundant opportunity to observe that in missions the *model of ministry*, rather than the material presented, is often the message that people absorb.

First, a disclaimer. Astute readers will soon realize that the way we are communicating here violates the very principles we are trying to bring out. Lecturing through Zoom and written material is not the best way to model ministry. However, in the context of COVID and the limitations imposed by the conference structure, we thank God and you for this opportunity to share our concerns, and also allow you to hear some of our colleagues in Ethiopia speak for themselves.

Our Learning Model Becomes Our Message

Fikadu Endale, overseer of the Western Shewa movement in Ethiopia tells us:[2]

> I am Pastor Fikadu from Ethiopia. I've been working with Dr. Ron and Dr. Carolyn for the last sixteen or seventeen years. We work in Western Shewa. These people were from an animistic background. We started working with transformational small groups in that area. People sit together in a small number and study the Word of God, especially Discovery Bible Studies whose leaders are trained by us. They come to love Jesus, their family is transformed. Their family comes to know Christ, and their community is transformed. They stop drinking and abusing their wives. They start sending all of their kids to school. Now some of their kids are college students and some of them are college teachers. They discovered all these new ways from their transformational small groups and the Discovery Bible Study.

Right from the beginning, Fikadu and his closest disciple formed these animist people into small groups for personal sharing, inductive Bible study, prayer, accountability, and mission. They discovered for themselves what the Bible had to say, figured out together its application to their lives, and held one another accountable for doing what they were learning.

Once, when we were discussing the problem of illiteracy with him, one of his leaders overheard us and interrupted us to offer us a solution they had already devised. Those who couldn't read sat on either side of someone who could. The literate member held the Bible between his illiterate friends and ran his fingers along the text as he read aloud. Because their printed language is completely phonetic, his companions quickly associated the characters and combinations with the sounds of their language. Before long they were reading—without the help of "literacy experts."

At one point some small groups spontaneously began talking about their problems with alcohol. On their own, they began to daily call on those with the problem to see how they were doing. Every week they celebrated everyone who had had an alcohol-free week. They prayed for those who continued to struggle. Over about six months, alcoholism completely disappeared among them—without any sermons about alcohol. This same process led to the end of wife abuse, female circumcision, poor work habits, etc. We wonder what would happen in the West if instead of only preaching to large audiences, our pastors would train ordinary people to facilitate change, just as the people in this movement are learning to do.

In these small groups, their members also got practice in praying for healing, doing exorcisms, and discerning false prophecy. At one baptismal service we witnessed, we were amazed at the confidence and competence with which these new believers handled a woman manifesting demonic activity. This

same confidence has led to their planting about fifty congregation-size groups which now include approximately 10,000 people in hundreds of small groups. Though their congregational units also meet weekly for worship and teaching, they view the small groups with trained leaders as the essence of the church, the cutting edge of the transformational process. The larger groups exist as supplements and encouragement for people to join the small groups.

They also tell us that they hardly have to "evangelize" in the way we usually think about it. They say that unbelievers come in—often first to one of the small groups—not because someone invited them but because they have seen the difference in the members' lifestyles. "Whatever you have," strangers say, "we want to learn more about it." It is what we have come to call "city on a hill evangelism."

This is not to say that preaching doesn't have a role. It is useful for vision-casting, for inspiration, and for communicating new information that people could not dig out of the Bible themselves. It complements, rather than replaces, inductive study.

But if preaching is not intentionally integrated with structures through which people can process what is being preached, the preaching model itself communicates undesirable messages. It communicates that it is enough to hear information, whether or not one remembers the information, let alone does anything as a result. If there is no accountability for what one hears, obedience must not be important.

Small groups spontaneously began talking about their problems with alcohol.
Over about six months, alcoholism completely disappeared among them— without any sermons about alcohol.

If we are interested in *character development*, there is no substitute for Fikadu's self-discovery in small groups with accountability. It is the *only* way we will develop people who *always* return good for evil, respond graciously to criticism, give needed criticism with gentleness, want others to share in the limelight, want the best even for their opponents, and live modestly. It is the *only* way that we will develop people who *never* flirt with unhealthy sexual attractions, cheat on their finances, steal people from other ministries, or resent the success of others. Such small groups are the *only* place where people can share their struggles and develop better habits,

which are the only means through which character develops. If we don't develop methods that can guarantee such outcomes, then we are either saying that character development is not important or else we are naïve about how it happens.

Then there is the issue of *skill development*. In nearly every field besides the Church, people learn skills by practicing them in the presence of a mentor until they are proficient. That, of course, requires a lot of skilled mentors.

In sports, our favorite team of 53 players has 24 full-time coaches. All for the glory of getting a piece of leather across a goal line. In the trades, young people apprentice themselves to experienced craftsmen until they can demonstrate competence in all of the skills required for their trade.

In my (Carolyn's) becoming a doctor, five of my seven years of training consisted mostly of being mentored by my seniors in the care of real live patients and mentoring those who followed me.

Perhaps my (Ron's) best experience in seeing people acquire the skills they must have to function effectively in difficult situations was my brief brush with the US Army. I was very impressed with the training's nature, quality, and transformational power. They took their challenge seriously. They had to convert mostly unwilling recruits into effective fighters who could win wars. They understood how hard that process was and invested heavily in training models that could do that. There were lectures, but by far, most training was through in-the-field experiences followed by evaluations and detailed records of proficiencies. No training with a weapon stopped until you were proficient in using it, as verified by officers who watched you and scored you.

This transformation was possible because of the army's leadership structure. Every single person in the US Army reports to an officer who commands no more than ten people directly (sometimes up to twelve at the squad level). Everyone above that level commands no more than five or six. In the entire army, every person is known *personally* by his or her commanding officer, who can evaluate him or her and make sure they get all the training and practice they need to become effective, no matter how long that takes. They do this by having layered units— squads, platoons, companies, battalions, regiments, divisions—and layered commanders— sergeants, lieutenants, captains, majors, colonels, generals. At every level of leadership, each leader receives specific, well-thought-through, and tested training to prepare him or her for the next level of leadership. Everyone gets ongoing training, support, supervision, and evaluation. This reminds us of the structure that Jethro recommended to Moses in Exodus 18.

Contrast this with what we do in churches. Rarely do laypersons get any systematic ministry training at all, let alone very much accountability for any ministry they have been trusted to do. Pastors and missionaries usually get only hit-or-miss training after they graduate from seminary or Bible school. Few receive help to develop into church planters, mentors of other pastors, or mission leaders; most remain in static positions all their lives. As a result, the Church has very few mentors compared to the number required if every member were to have a mentor who knew them and made sure they were growing.

We are not endorsing the military or its goals. However, winning wars requires the structures that armies have developed. What does it say about us when we, who are involved in the greatest cosmic battle of all times, use learning models that human armies would consider woefully inadequate?

> ## What does it say about us when we, who are involved in the greatest cosmic battle of all times, use learning models that human armies would consider woefully inadequate?

Our Training Model Becomes Our Message

The next colleague from whom you will hear was once the director of missions for a large denomination in Ethiopia. Over time he came to believe that their traditional model of missions was not working well enough. About nine years ago he came to us and asked us to help him start a different kind of movement toward Jesus among people from another Abrahamic faith who had been hostile to Jesus.

We began with ten men whom he had evangelized. After several years of trust-building and secret training, we believed the time had come for outreach to begin. We covenanted together with these brothers that this emerging movement would be contextualized, that they would stay within their communities no matter what the opposition or persecution, and that they would not accept either teaching or money from outsiders. The Jesus followers who were religious leaders began to share about Isa al Masih from their own holy book. When people became interested, they met with them privately for further study and discussion.

Our colleague visited them monthly. At times we joined them outside of their region for more concentrated training and discussion. At first, this effort was very much underground, and those who started to follow Isa suffered some persecution. However, everyone admired their exemplary lifestyles and their helpfulness to their community. An important turning point came when the Jesus-following leaders were able to make peace with a neighboring tribe that attacked them and killed some of their people.

People then started to become followers in larger numbers. The Jesus followers are now routinely called on to resolve village conflicts. The entire area has opened to the good news, and there are Bible studies in all of their twenty-six villages. Our colleague was recently made an honorary member of the tribe. He is also coaching leaders in another rapidly expanding movement in a similar cultural group in another part of the country. Here is what he has to say about how he trains.

> In the south and western part of the country, I train only the top leadership of the movement. In this training I help them understand about prayer, having fellowship with the Lord, reading the Bible, and studying it among themselves. They also learn to solve problems by themselves. In the west, when there were rumors and some problems within their movement, they brought them out and discussed and solved them by themselves. In the south, when there was tribal violence, their top leaders were able to make peace. They became famous for being able to make peace in their communities. They are also growing vegetables and other crops. They are, therefore, growing strong economically. What they have experienced, they pass on to others and, therefore, grow in number.

Our colleague's training model has been entirely based on relationships, with intense discussions in small groups about God's word and its application to their local situations. Because of that, the movement members find it logical for them to pass on the Good News in the same way. There are no Bible Schools and no full-timers. Yet these are among the healthiest movements with which we work in Ethiopia. Their fervor and willingness to sacrifice are amazing, and they are entirely lacking in dependency.

Bible Schools and Seminaries

Again, our traditional training models communicate powerful messages about which many of us rarely think. To begin with, in these models a person can decide for him- or herself to have a *career* as a pastor without any evaluation of their spiritual maturity or gifts. Anyone can get into Bible school or seminary if they apply. There is no requirement for proven ministry as a non-professional. In situations where there is high unemployment, being a pastor can be a good path to a respected career with a guaranteed salary.

A second dangerous message is that the mere existence of outside training schools can communicate that ministry requires advanced training. Ordinary people can't do it. If only specialized training qualifies a person for ministry, this kills the priesthood of all believers. If a church wants to train its leaders, it should do it locally, so that attendees can continue both their local ministry and their jobs through which they support their families.

> An important turning point came when the Jesus-following leaders were able to make peace with a neighboring tribe that attacked them and killed some of their people.

A similarly dangerous message is that what qualifies a person to minister is the information he or she gains, not their own walk with God. Many seminaries and Bible schools offer relatively little training in spiritual formation.

I was once invited to teach a course in spiritual formation at a leading US seminary. I did it by having students write personal journals, submit them at every class session, and receive my written feedback at the next class session. After a slow start, they finally started amazingly deep written conversations. I spent about twenty hours a week responding to their journal entries. Their entries— only a few months before they would be ordained—contained doubts about the Bible's truth and whether God loved them. Some reported unresolved conflicts with spouses and leaders of their ministries. Some confessed lack of spiritual vitality. One of them seemed to have a serious mental illness.

The students were very grateful for the experience. No one had ever asked them about such things before. They reported their enthusiasm to the seminary administration and requested that this course would continue. But the seminary never asked me back. After this one experience, they dropped the course.

Churches

Churches also communicate strong, unintentional messages when only ordained ministers share ministry on Sunday mornings. Except for occasional dramatic testimonies of healing or deliverance, most churches rarely allow anyone else to share spiritual insights or exhortations in a service. Non-professionals quickly learn that their role is to do the church chores, take care of children and youth ministry, prepare the refreshments, and manage the finances. Spiritual matters are left to the professionals. This is a loud message that the priesthood of all believers is obsolete.

Our Model of Community Becomes Our Message

Here is what our colleague Mezgebu Tsemru has learned about community.

> We used to preach and think that we were a community. But practically we were not. At one time we sent out messages to find out how our people were doing because we did not have a small group ministry at that time. We found that we didn't know our people. One of our leaders visited one of our members and found out that he died a year ago. It showed that we didn't even know whether our people were dead or alive. That showed that what we thought we were and what we were saying about ourselves did not match the reality on the ground.

As Mezgebu has testified, churches made of large passive audiences communicate that intense relationships between people are not necessary. "Community" means that we bring meals to one another when we are sick and perhaps help one another pack boxes when we move. This is not bad but falls far short of what biblical community means.

The typical church "fellowship hall" is a place where people chat over coffee or food, but where a deep conversation is highly improbable, if not impossible. Few people know each other's vulnerabilities, let alone engage with them.

Producing a real community requires many leaders who are willing to take the time to engage with the real issues of people's lives and are trained well enough to be helpful. It also requires that church leadership be willing to cut out enough of the church activities so that everyone can be in a group in which they have deep relationships focused on their personal spiritual growth. Not doing this communicates the message that we don't have to practice the 59 "one anothers" in the New Testament. Our practice says, in effect, that these are optional.

Our Payment Model Becomes Our Message

This is the contribution from our colleague Shimeles Dejene, who has experienced several models of payment for ministry.

> I'm Shimeles Dejene from Ethiopia. For twelve years I was a full-time minister with a denomination, and then for eleven years, I was full-time with a parachurch missions organization. Five years ago, I resigned and began a disciple-making movement in Addis Ababa and the surrounding towns, particularly focusing among the rapidly multiplying condominiums. I have been supporting our family from a small shop that sells milk from our cows and from my salary as a part-time administrator for a small medical college. Here is what I have learned about payment for ministry. When I was being paid by the church and mission organization, it

was difficult to implement fully what the Lord had called me to do. In fact, sometimes I had to compromise in order to speak out about problems. Now that I am financially independent, I can freely say whatever God is giving me to say. When I was being paid regularly by others, it was hard for me to tell those I was discipling to trust God for their finances. It was also hard for me to convince them that they did not have to be full-timers to be fruitful in ministry. Now that others see that I do ministry even though I also have secular work, they have become bold to do ministry in their off-hours. Therefore, I encourage others to do the same for better ministry success.

In addition to what Shimeles shared, our training models that include Bible schools and seminaries have created an entitlement mentality around the world. Much of the Church has been taught to believe that those who have been through such schools deserve full-time financial support.

In our early days in Ethiopia, we worked with a church planting movement that told us they had about 200 young men waiting to be "sent." Our first thought was that this was an amazing example of dedication. But then we realized what was going on. Either they were unemployed or they wanted to get away from the difficult work of farming. Someone else was raising the funding. They were looking for jobs.

Instead, we should be communicating that anyone wanting to do ministry should start immediately while they earn their own financial support. They should first aim to disciple five to ten people and teach them to form and disciple their own small groups, something a person can do while still working a full-time job. Only when they are successful at that should they be considered for any further training. When their off-hours ministry is so fruitful that their elders believe that doing it full-time would multiply it *and* when their converts and mentees are tithing enough to support them, then they could become full-timers. If we don't accept that model, the world will never be evangelized. We will never have enough full-timers to do it. World evangelism awaits a huge army of self-supporting skilled disciple-makers.

Our Lack of Commitment to Long-Term Mentoring Becomes a Message

Our primary Ethiopian colleagues are very gifted apostolic leaders who were fruitful disciple-makers before they met us. From the beginning of our relationships, they saw the value of the model of small group shepherding that we taught. Through it, they learned to be more

effective themselves and were able to train and raise up others. However, our role as alongsiders continues to be helpful to them even after seventeen years.

First, they were at the beginning stage of a movement model that we had already experienced in the US. We were in a place to give some guidance as they encountered pitfalls and problems that we had already encountered. Just as the apostle Paul discovered that the foundation of some of his early churches later required fixing and strengthening, we have also found that our colleagues' movements sometimes started in ways that were not ideal 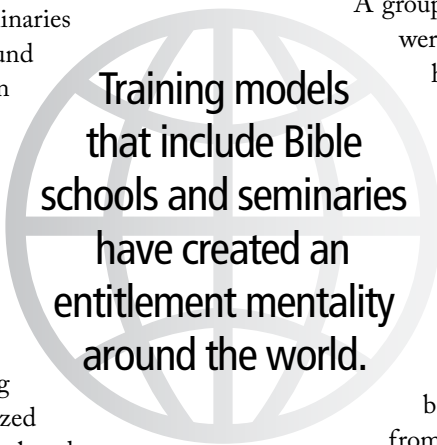and sowed problems that cropped up afterward. A group of Argentine brothers whose movements were about five years ahead of ours in the US helped us anticipate and thereby navigate the problems that we encountered. We have tried to do the same for our Ethiopian brothers.

Second, our colleagues' movements have encountered new challenges as their environments have changed. A few years ago, it was *jihad*; now it is COVID, drought, and civil war. We have been able to connect them with resources from other parts of the world to help them deal with these things.

> Training models that include Bible schools and seminaries have created an entitlement mentality around the world.

Third, our colleagues have repeatedly required strong encouragement as they have encountered more and more opposition. The pressures from surrounding traditional churches, let alone from those outside their movements, have been enormous. We need to understand this and plan for increasing support to fruitful leaders as they become targets for our enemy. He attacks them more severely as they begin to succeed. They also have had to learn to pass that encouragement on to people they oversee, who have faced the same trials. At their levels of leadership, our apostolic colleagues don't have many people to talk to about their issues, both personal and ministerial. Our being available to listen and provide such encouragement and counsel to them may have been our most important contribution to them over the years.

Fourth, apostolic leaders have to grow in their thinking and training skills as they have more levels of leaders they must train and oversee. Leading a grass roots small group is different from coaching small group leaders, coaching coaches, overseeing entire congregations, or overseeing groups of congregations. Churches that have planted other churches that have planted others up to several generations, face challenges in keeping their movements vital that younger churches do not yet face. The US Army recognizes the need for ongoing training for all officers specific to their level of leadership.

Even the high-ranking officers who have large commands must go to the US Army War College to develop skills on a strategic level.

If the church were to develop such a mentoring structure, it would communicate that every person, whatever their place in the body of Christ, is worth investing in because they are destined to play an important role in God's army. It would be saying that every individual should be continually growing, should have specific opportunities to move to their next level of competence, and should be expected to change the lives of others in positive ways. It would say that every person should get whatever help they need to overcome whatever obstacles keep them from fruitfulness. This kind of layered networking with ongoing training would eliminate or at least delay the corruption of movements that have occurred throughout church history.

However, if our model of ministry does not assure this kind of long-term mentoring for every believer, we are behaving like parents that don't care whether their children advance in school. We are saying that individuals neither are valuable in themselves nor have the potential to become significant in God's kingdom. We are saying that it is acceptable for discipleship to get watered down as movements institutionalize over the generations. We are denying the seriousness of our ongoing real war with the devil. We are promoting the illusion that people can meet his challenge without continued growth in their character and skills. In other words, we are setting ourselves up for failure, saying that God will have to wait for another generation to demonstrate his kingdom to all peoples.

Churches that plant generations of churches face challenges in keeping their movements vital that younger churches do not yet face.

Conclusions

We have tried to offer a fresh awareness beyond a singular focus on the content of our communication. We must understand how our models of ministry can undermine the content we teach, that it will require we review our models of learning, training, community, payment for ministry, and commitment to long-term mentoring.

Thank God that many kingdom movements blossoming throughout the world today generally model some of the key messages we've been talking about, and especially during their beginnings. They espouse not only the idea but the practice that learning from God's word is for everyone, not only those who have had specialized training. Ministry is for everyone.

But tragically, apart from persecution, abundant evidence from history shows that most movements that start well will, over time, devolve into larger institutions that abandon the very methods that made them successful at their beginning. We plead with the missions community to consider how their models of ministry may contradict the very things they are trying to teach. This may point to the need for some radical changes in the way we structure our relationships, meetings, and training programs in the body of Christ. Our failure to pay attention to these things could delay the progress of the kingdom of God in our generation. It will leave to those following to take more seriously the challenge of our enemy's relentless warfare against God's kingdom. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1] It's interesting that the book was actually called *The Medium is the Massage* due to a mistake by the typesetters. McLuhan felt his popular notion "the medium is the message" had become almost cliché, and when he saw the error in the book's title, he loved it and kept it as it was typeset.

[2] These are actual quotations from the video presentations made by some of our colleagues during the presentation of this paper.

Editorial Reflections

Inreligionisation: Reconsidering that Most Vital Hermeneutical Space

On the coining of terms there seems to be no end, and for missiology there appears to be no exception. Dr. Kang-San Tan's deployment of the term *inreligionisation* at the recent ISFM 2021 meetings on "Communication(s) and Mission" will likely unsettle our evangelical missiology, for the term plays with our settled notions of religion. This neologism—*in-religion-isation*—is a spatial term ("in"), as Alan Johnson points out (23), one that calls for a more radical residency of the gospel within Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu contexts. The connotations provoke and challenge our religious categories. They smell of religious mixture. I'd recommend we check our reflexes, for any quick pronouncement of syncretism may obscure the positive aspects of Tan's proposal. And this provocative term itself may catalyze a very crucial conversation.

Tan came to Christ from a Buddhist home, is trained in the theology of religions, now leads a prominent Western mission agency, and retains a grassroots lens on the religious pluralism of Asia. He wants the Asian church to "grapple with deeper contextual issues of discipleship within those religious systems" (10). Inreligionisation is a broad missiological reorientation that "involves the transformation of non-Christian religious systems with gospel values," one that will require "a more radical following of Jesus' model—the ushering in of the Kingdom of God." (10). Alan Johnson's assessment is that the Thai church will not cope with such a radical reorientation towards their Buddhist world. Such resistance is very understandable, but perhaps a bit too unilateral, for there are some positive signs in adjacent Cambodia (37) that Tan's proposal is not completely unreasonable. Chong and Tep are witnessing some initial success in assisting Cambodian pastors and leaders through a reconsideration of certain Buddhist rituals, somewhat reminiscent of Tan's emphasis on rituals, practices, and entire community concerns rather than doctrines and texts (6). There appear to be legitimate conversations taking place in Asian contexts.

First, by way of personal disclaimer: My partiality towards Tan's inreligionisation began during my early years in North Africa among Muslims. My conversations over frequent cups of coffee with one of my mentors, Mazhar Mallouhi, forced me

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to reinterpret many of the religious stereotypes I had carried into those interreligious encounters. This Syrian gentleman had a long resume of Christian experience, and I had intersected his journey when he seemed to be retracing his steps. You might say he was on a path of inreligionisation, trying to reconstruct and reembrace what he had lost years earlier in his conversion on those borderlands of the Muslim and Christian faiths. I recommend his biography as a more concrete portrayal of a disciple of Christ finding a way home through Sufi Islam.[1] (See the ad for Paul-Gordon Chandler's biography of Mazhar Mallouhi, 21.) He explores a new path between two faiths—a pilgrim of Christ on another religious road. His life seems to personify a certain type of inreligionisation and for me it tipped the scales towards a more positive view of the concept.

My reflections settled on three propositions, certain elements of inreligionisation that could be addressed in any future conversations. And I couldn't help but notice the way Tan's development of the concept resonates with other missiological contributions, so permit me to synthesize these with Tan's proposal.

> Tan is not addressing the mechanics of contextualizing our gospel communication, but rather the relocation of message and messenger within other non-Christian religious contexts.

Inreligionisation Requires that Gospel Communication Respect Other Religious Identities

It is obvious that Tan's proposal goes beyond our normal attempts at cross-cultural communication. His resume of personal, academic, and organizational experience has led him to a more radical proposal—to re-contextualize our gospel communication through a process of inreligionisation. He is not addressing the technicalities or mechanics of contextualizing our gospel communication, but his proposal requires a relocation of message and messenger within other non-Christian religious contexts. He begins with Peter Phan's definition of the term:

> . . . inreligionisation is the attempt by Christians coming from Asian religious traditions to "believe that it is possible and even necessary not only to accept in theory certain doctrines or practices of other religions and to incorporate them, perhaps in modified form, into Christianity, but also to adopt and live in their personal lives, the beliefs, moral rules, rituals, and monastic practices of religious traditions other than Christianity." (10)

Tan is proposing that gospel communication should happen in a space of religious identification, dialogue, and participation. In previous writings and dissertations, Tan has proposed a path of *dual-religious belonging*, a participation within both his Christian and Buddhist worlds.[2] This could also be the case for many believers in Asia whose Christian identity has divorced them from the religious communities of their birth. Dual identification might allow for a more effective exchange and contextualization of the gospel. How that is to take place is not as clear from Tan's short EMS presentation.

Robert Schreiter offers another way of understanding what Tan is saying about religious identity and intercultural communication. He points out that speakers and hearers

> have different goals in the communication event itself. The speaker is concerned with getting the message across the cultural boundary with integrity and lodging it in the world of the hearer in such a way that it will be understood. The hearer, on the other hand, is concerned with finding a place for that message within his or her own world in such a way as to enhance the hearer's identity . . . whereas the speaker has a preoccupation with the integrity of the message in the communication event, *the hearer has a preoccupation with identity.*[3] (emphasis mine)

Our abstracted view of religion lacks a grassroots religious consciousness . . . it fails to see that for most people in Asia, religion is culturally embedded, etched into the values, the codes, the norms, and the rhythms of everyday life.

Tan is addressing this same preoccupation of the hearer with identity—that is, religious identity. Tan has an intuitive grasp of identity amidst the religious pluralism of Asia, but he also recognizes that Christian communicators have typically been focused on the integrity of the gospel as they interpret the Scriptures within those religious worlds. Despite his own concern lest syncretism distort the truth of the Word of God, Tan is encouraging us to try to better understand the disciple of Jesus who is struggling to fit the message into his or her Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu identity. Again, in Schreiter's differentiation, "the speaker is on the watch for syncretism; the hearer is struggling for synthesis."[4] Inreligionisation, then, appears to be Tan's way of insisting that any communication respect the way hearers in other religious worlds are trying to align the message with an identity.

Inreligionisation Addresses the Strategic Loss in Religious Displacement

A deep sense of loss propels Tan's imaginative thinking about inreligionisation. Notto Thelle referred to this as a kind of "phantom pain"—that residual sense of a past that has been severed (18). Tan's turning to Christ led to this type of rupture with his Buddhist past, and his search for that lost sense of place drives this venture. His writings and dissertations over the past couple of decades reflect on this predicament, and he sees this same displacement in the Asian church. Inreligionisation is his effort to reverse this personal and strategic loss and restore a vital witness.

John Flett and Henning Wrogemann speak to this social displacement of the Christian community as

> . . . the dissociation that often occurs between this new community, their history and heritage, and their wider community. To lose one's history is not to change one's identity—it is to be set adrift without an identity. This results in the local community becoming dependent on the identity of another community foreign to the context, surviving only in a relationship of dependence. It is the very opposite of the notion of conversion and the reconciliation of one's own history and identity to God in Christ.[5]

Tan believes this loss—this social and religious disembedding—is related to how Christians understand religion. Reflecting on the more abstract Christianity which has prevailed throughout his experience, Tan claims that

> Western missiology is more often interested in what people believe (orthodoxy) than in what rituals people practice. Many Asian religions embrace a certain hybridity, ambiguity, and messiness when speculating about transcendence, a phenomenon which our comparative religious studies might disallow. (6)

He claims our "idealized representations of religion" are dissonant with "the lived realities of religion on these interreligious frontiers" (6). This abstracted view of religion lacks the grassroots religious consciousness that integrates belief (ideas), ritual (practices) and community (sacred spaces). It fails to see that in Asia, religion for most people is culturally embedded, etched into the values, the codes, the norms, and the rhythms of everyday life. A unilateral religious displacement will automatically trigger the almost-complete loss of familiar social and cultural realities.

In his recent book, *Insider Jesus*, William Dyrness interacts with Tan's Buddhist-Christian journey and speaks to this same displacement. He notes that a modern view of religion has

> . . . become radically disconnected from any sense of place. Thus, we have lost sight of the deep rootedness of religions in their cultural and historical situations and their contingent and fluid character. . . . This abstraction of religion from any particular

setting has become so normal, especially for Protestants, that we do not see in the long history of humanity, and even among the varieties of Christianities, how unusual this is.[6]

One is reminded of Willie James Jennings' piercing indictment of the modern Christian imagination in his study of African displacement, where the process of conversion to Christ was understood as a type of creation ex nihilo and a total extraction from the believer's context.[7] The problem, he claims, is deep within our religious imagination.

Dyrness responds to this modern tendency by canvassing our Scriptures for a way to reimagine religion. His survey culminates with a focus on Acts 17 where Paul addresses the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill. It's here, he believes, we are able to exegete Paul's view of religion.

> In his address on Mars Hill Paul stressed that God had allotted to each people group times and spaces, "so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him" (Acts 17:27). Religion, then, in its basic sense represents the practices associated with the human search for God, and the times and spaces they employ in this search. . . . I find it telling that Paul should underline that God allotted to people places and times because this puts forward an essential dimension of all religions. That is, *they grow out of and express the texture and feel of places people call home.*[8] (emphasis mine)

Tan's inreligionisation can be understood as an effort to retain or regain the texture and feel of places people call home. This home, this time and place where people seek God through culturally embedded religious forms, is an identity that should be retained. As Dyrness suggests:

> Religion for most people is an expression of identity tied to the traditions of a particular place, and often expressed in stories, legends, aesthetic artifacts, and rituals. [It calls] for a more holistic understanding of religion that includes all these dimensions. . . . Wherever the gospel goes, if it will be understood at all, it must be framed in the imaginative logic and the social and aesthetic patterns that make that place into a home. . . . If it is true that religion represents the core both of people's identities and of their sense of place, then the news about God's love in Christ must be framed in terms of that religion—that is, in terms of the search after God by which they frame their identity.[9]

Tan speaks to the way Christian mission typically seeks to *replace* this original identity, that we should resist inappropriate disassociation and displacement. But identity studies today face a new complexity. Tan recognizes that we're in an age of globalization and chooses to focus singularly on the religious frontier. He would agree that today's Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or Christian is not just negotiating interreligious borders, but each must face an increasing pluralism, secularism, and social hybridity. If this conversation on inreligionisation continues, I would want to hear Tan address how this interreligious process of mutual belonging

and personal integration might happen in such increasing socio-religious complexity. Any concept of inreligionisation must address the impact of globalization on religion.

Tan's inreligionisation can be understood as an effort to retain or regain the texture and feel of places people call home— where people seek God through culturally embedded religious forms

Inreligionisation Allows for a Fresh Hermeneutical Space

In review, Tan's redefinition of an older, ecumenical term, inreligionisation, can perhaps be understood as a response to an unfortunate social displacement of the church in Asia. The term is repurposed for a new path of religious identification that promises more effective communication of the gospel. In his presentation Tan attempted to develop a framework for entering and interpreting these other religious contexts.

> When I speak of developing contextual frameworks on these religious frontiers, I refer to those dynamic interpretive lenses which communities use to frame different ways of understanding truth and interpreting realities whenever such interreligious exchanges occur on these frontiers. (5)

When Tan speaks of "dynamic interpretive lenses," he's respecting the hermeneutical process that is operative in inreligionisation. In any interreligious encounter each participant brings his own contextual frameworks, his own interpretive lenses, to that exchange. This communication is a hermeneutical exercise, a gradual process of grasping, comprehending—even empathizing with—another religious reality.

It appears that Tan is aligning inreligionisation with the emerging field of intercultural hermeneutics. I'd suggest that his dynamic interpretive lenses are fleshed out more comprehensively by Henning Wrogemann in his recent volume on intercultural hermeneutics.[10] This interdisciplinary field of mission studies assumes that any concept of understanding (hermeneutics) is interdependent with one's concept of culture and religion (intercultural)[11]—an assumption I hear deep within Tan's use of inreligionisation.

Hermeneutical Space
Again, I refer to Bill Dyrness, who has captured much of this process in what he describes as a "hermeneutical space." He exegetes this hermeneutical process in the first century

biblical account, and he identifies this same kind of sacred and reflective space in peoples who have turned to Christ down through the centuries. But he also addresses specifically the emergence of more contemporary insider movements among Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu populations. He adds a richness and depth to Tan's "interpretive filters" and "contextual frameworks." I would sum up Dyrness's description of this hermeneutical space as follows:

- It is an interreligious space where other culturally embedded religious practices are respected, simply because they reflect man's need and search for God.
- While these practices do not constitute the full way of salvation, they reflect the local hermeneutical tools which are indispensable to these spaces.
- These are generative spaces, where a new diversity is an opportunity to work out new and emergent meanings of the biblical story.
- Since they are places of new integration, they can be fraught with tension. They are not culturally neutral, but rather are locations where different reigning perceptions collide and very distinct linguistic and cultural categories are contested.
- It involves a hermeneutical process, one which grants the Spirit of God the freedom to create something new.[12]

This kind of interpretive space—so resonant with Tan's understanding of inreligionization—is evident throughout the history of world Christianity. Admittedly, I am conflating two distinct experiences in this same hermeneutical space. Dyrness is speaking directly to those grassroots movements where believers remain inside other religious worlds, be they Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu. While Tan's inreligionisation includes these insiders, he also includes those who have been displaced from their original religious world and who are attempting to re-identify and communicate in that world. The former, the insider, *remains* in that world; the latter is trying to *regain* that world. One is at the grassroots and intrinsic; the other more reflective and extrinsic. They each operate from different vantage points, and they should not be confused. But Tan includes them both in his proposed inreligionisation. Both are similarly trying to establish their identity in the religious pluralism of a globalized and hybridized Asia. And both ask similar questions of synthesis.

- What is the theological value of other religious traditions?
- Can this interreligious encounter inform the development of a gospel witness?
- What is the relationship between the gospel, local culture and religion within the place I call home?
- How is one discipled and nurtured in this non-Christian religious context?
- What freedom is there to experiment with non-Christian religious practices? (10)

Dyrness presents examples of this hermeneutical space among Jesus followers remaining inside their original religious worlds,[13] but more come to mind who are trying to reassess and regain a prior identity. I would hope this random selection might be considered in any further conversations.

It is an interreligious space where other culturally embedded religious practices are respected, simply because they reflect man's need and search for God. (Dyrness)

The African and Primal Religion

Over the latter part of the twentieth century, a hermeneutical process has been developing in African missiology. Mission scholars, like Lamin Sanneh, Kwame Bediako, and Ogbu Kalu, not only insisted that we hear the African voice, but that we understand the critical function of an African hermeneutical process. Like Tan, their reappraisal reflected back on their African experience and on those African movements to Christ. This is the hermeneutical process that Alan Johnson appeals to in his assessment of Tan's inreligionisation (22 and 28). He cites Sanneh's claim that Bible translation was the critical agent in fostering these grassroots movements. Johnson was also helpful in citing Sanneh's observations on an opposite process of "diffusion," in which a foreign cultural imposition has historically alienated the church in Africa from its immediate religious world—one that both Tan and Johnson describe in Asia:

> The experience of a diffusion process by the recipients of the gospel explains the ongoing perception that Christianity is the faith of the Western foreigner. Whether imposed or unconsciously imported, gospel transmission as diffusion fossilizes the message, its framing, and its forms in the life of God's people with the version of faith from the sending culture. (29)

Johnson asserts the role of translation as an alternative to being "in" or belonging to another religious world (inreligionisation). But I would venture to say that any further discussion with Tan may turn on what Sanneh understands to be the "interpretive religious vocation" of the African recipients of the gospel.

> The new interest in creating vernacular Scriptures for societies that had no Scriptures of their own ushered in a fundamental religious revolution. . . . One of the most dramatic changes was undoubtedly the popular, mass participation

of Africans in this process. It began to dawn on the African populations that *missionary adoption of vernacular categories for the Scriptures was in effect a written sanction for indigenous religious vocation.*[14] (emphasis mine)

These local translators wielded hermeneutical tools from their primal religious worlds. Their tools (language, methods, models, codes, logics) helped foster new meanings, created new integrations, and allowed for vital new forms to emerge. One senses that Tan is in tandem with Sanneh, but he presses further into the nature of local participation. As in translation, inreligionisation allows for vernacular *religious* categories, which then sanctions local participation in the actual hermeneutical process.

<blockquote>
Makoto Fujimura,
a Japanese-American artist,
raised to a popular level
a fresh intercultural hermeneutic for
understanding the historic resistance of
the Japanese to Western Christianity.
</blockquote>

A Japanese Process

In the case of Japan and the gospel, we might inquire as to the relevance of Tan's version of inreligionisation. Makoto Fujimura, a Japanese-American artist, raised to a popular level a fresh intercultural hermeneutic for understanding the historic resistance of the Japanese to Western Christianity. Fujimura reached as far back as the 17th century Tokugawa era of Japan to begin understanding Christ's presence in Japan. In his interpretive study of Shusaku Endo's famous novel, *Silence*,[15] Fujimura attempted to exegete the Japanese values of suffering and beauty etched into the early Catholic movement by the devastating persecution of the Tokugawa shogunate.[16] Fujimura's unique reinterpretation is counterintuitive to typical evangelical and missionary perspectives of that same history. His artistic intuition and bicultural experience enlighten his biblical interpretation as well. In his most recent book, *Art and Faith,* he calls artists "border stalkers" in a cultural ecosystem. "They cross tribal norms to see the whole, to navigate in between the walls erected to protect the tribes."[17] Fujimura is in that hermeneutical space which Dyrness has described so well. His Japanese sensibility guides the questions and highlights those portions of scripture which are most relevant—the Genesis creation account, II Corinthian 5:17, and Jesus at Lazarus' tomb, for example. It's a generative process, one that promises new insights, reconciliation, and conversion.

An African American Hermeneutic

Shifting contexts again, Esau McCauley proposes a new African American biblical hermeneutic. In his book, *Reading While Black*, he reminds us how easy it is to submerge grassroots ecclesial voices. In this globalized age, the subaltern voices of the marginalized are being heard across the world, and they bring their own local interpretive tools. He makes explicit a grassroots method of Black ecclesial interpretation that has arisen from southern roots. From "an unabashedly located reading" it raises new questions and perspectives for the biblical text.[18] He characterizes this hermeneutical process in the following way (my edited summary):

- Unapologetically canonical and theological
- Socially located, in that it clearly arises out of a particular context
- Willing to listen to the ways in which the Scriptures themselves respond to and redirect issues and concerns
- Willing to exercise patience with the text trusting that a careful and sympathetic reading of the text brings a blessing
- Willing to listen to and enter into dialogue with opposing critiques of the Bible in the hopes of achieving a better reading of the text

I believe Tan would applaud McCauley's hermeneutic of the African American ecclesial experience. Both recognize that the interpretive process involves more than simply drawing meaning from Scripture. It also involves what Duerksen and Dyrness call a "reverse hermeneutic"—a process "in which the cultural situations interpret the gospel in their own terms, providing both illumination and obfuscation."[19]

Yet Tan would most likely be restless with McCauley's almost singular focus on *textual* hermeneutics. As mentioned above, Tan states that too often a Western hermeneutic focuses entirely on belief—the core propositions, the dogma, the cognitive affirmation, the essentials of faith—and dims the significance of an inreligionisation that involves participation in ritual and belonging to community. In another forum on religion McCauley might articulate a more holistic sense of religion among the African Americans ecclesial experience.

Buddhist Ritual

The respect for a more holistic view of religious life is apparent in a recent Cambodian effort. Claire Chong and Tep Samnang, in a working group with two other leaders, Rev. Sophy and Rev. Vuthy, have given primacy to ritual in their facilitation of a dialogue between the Cambodian church leadership and their Khmer Buddhist world (41). Chong suggests that in Asia any interreligious dialogue must first recognize a different epistemological orientation.

> Critical textual analysis, abstraction, and formulation of doctrinal concepts is not the way Cambodians conceive of religion. Ritual, on the other hand, is a Khmer way of faith and life; it is the heart language of the Khmer people. Through its unique

language, people learn through enactment, and embody morality and truth. Ritual is also the center of gravity of communal life where belonging and identity are forged. Unfortunately, ritual is the very aspect of faith and life that Protestant Christians have conventionally ignored, or rather, scorned, because we evaluate it solely through the tenets of religious dogma. (39)

The hermeneutical dialogue of Chong, Tep, and their team has spotlighted the central Khmer rituals of marriage, death and ancestor veneration. Tep points out that any reinterpretation of these Buddhist rituals involves a process of scriptural interpretation; yet I'd suggest the priority given these rituals involves a reverse hermeneutic—a process that listens to the values, meanings, and realities of a more grassroots religious ritual.[20]

Some of these rituals represent a long history of anguish for the Asian church, which is particularly the case with ancestor veneration. The Asian theologian Simon Chan is convinced this practice should cause evangelicals to rethink aspects of their very own creeds. The article in the Apostles' Creed which states, "I believe in the communion of saints," should be reexamined from a Christological perspective.

> Those who have died in Christ can be called the living dead. Just as the traditional ancestor is believed to exist in solidarity with the living, the communion of saints includes both saints on earth and saints in heaven united in one church in Christ . . . the serious defect of Protestantism is that its ecclesiology is largely sociologically constructed; it has no doctrine of the church as an ontological reality.[21]

In Asia, where the family and the "living dead" are given such unsurpassed value, "the juxtaposition of the doctrine of the communion of saints with the Asian practice of ancestor veneration could become *mutually enriching*."[22] I am suggesting Chan's perspective on ritual because it clearly indicates the kind of interreligious dialogue that Tan posits with inreligionisation. It weaves together ritual, scripture, participation, mutual reciprocity, and religious identity in a hermeneutical process that anticipates growth and maturation.

Conclusion

These quick reflections on Tan's venture with inreligionisation are simply to suggest the benefits of a broader interface with other missiological perspectives—something Tan is calling for. Other voices need to be represented at the same table, and inreligionisation is just the kind of proposal that can catalyze such a conversation. It might force us to reimagine our categories of religion and identify crucial elements in this hermeneutical space. There is a kind of a *synthesis* happening in this space (Schreiter[23]), something *emergent* (Duerksen/Dyrness[24]), something vital at the *ecclesial grassroots* (Chan[25]), something that will expose the *barriers* we create with these other religious worlds (Pennington[26]). The interreligious frontiers in Asia require we step back from our communication and recognize the vital role of this hermeneutical space. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1] Paul-Gordon Chandler, *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road: Exploring a New Path between Two Faiths*, (Lanham, UK: Cowley Publications, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007).

[2] Kang-San Tan, "An Examination of Dual Religious Belonging Theology: Contributions to Evangelical Theology" (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 2014).

[3] Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local*, (MaryKnoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 35.

[4] Schreiter, *New Catholicity*, 69.

[5] John G. Flett and Henning Wrogemann, *Questions of Context: Reading a Century of German Mission Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 223.

[6] William A. Dyrness, *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 101.

[7] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and Origins of Race*, (New Haven: Yale University, 2010).

[8] Dyrness, *Insider Jesus*, 101.

[9] Dyrness, 104–5.

[10] Henning Wrogemann, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, vol 1 of Intercultural Theology, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

[11] Wrogemann, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, 38–44.

[12] Dyrness, 58, 67, 90, 97–98, 101, 114, 117, 128, 139, 145.

[13] Dyrness, 68–99.

[14] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 159.

[15] Shusaku Endo, *Silence* (Tokyo: Monumenta Nipponica, 1969; rereleased, New York: Picador, St. Martin's Press, 2016). This book was made into a major motion picture by Martin Scorsese, and released in December 2016.

[16] Makoto Fujimura, *Silence and Beauty: Hidden Faith Born of Suffering*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 15.

[17] Makoto Fujimura, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

[18] Esau McCauley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 17.

[19] Darren T. Duerksen and William A. Dyrness, *Seeking Church: Emerging Witnesses to the Kingdom*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 25.

[20] Henning Wrogemann, *A Theology of Interreligious Relations*, vol III, Intercultural Theology, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 334f. Wrogemann claims that the popular idea that Buddhism is primarily a religion of meditation is inaccurate. Ritual has primacy even with 95% of Buddhist monks.

[21] Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 117.

[22] Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 190.

[23] Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 34–35, 68–73.

[24] Darren Duerksen and William Dyrness, *Seeking Church: Emerging Witnesses to the Kingdom* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 59–81.

[25] Chan, 27–35.

[26] J. Paul Pennington, *Christian Barriers to Jesus: Conversations and Questions from the Indian Context* (Denver: William Carey Publishers, 2017).

From the Editor: Our journal recently published a missiological critique of the book Bhojpuri Breakthrough *(WIGtake Resources, 2019), authored by Victor John and Dave Coles. While the reviewer, H. L. Richard, generally affirms that God is inspiring and directing new movements to Christ in our day, we allowed his review to focus particularly on the weaknesses of this remarkable movement. While the reviewer's experience in India is deep, and very resourceful, an author's disappointment in this letter indicates our lack of foresight as to the consequences of this critique. We regret that a journal is such an inferior genre for any protracted dialogue it may provoke. This conversation will require another more appropriate missiological forum. Yet, despite this apparent setback, our readership can find great missiological value in this letter. The exchange between the author and the reviewer highlights four crucial issues that may determine the effectiveness of any further witness among India's unreached populations.*

Disappointed in H. L. Richard's Review of *Bhojpuri Breakthrough*

To the Editor,

I appreciate the contribution of critical voices concerning movements, as these have in the past, and can in the future, help clarify and deepen the missiology of movements and point to places where more qualitative research would be helpful. However, I was disappointed in reading H. L. Richard's review of *Bhojpuri Breakthrough,* as it said very little about the Church Planting Movement itself or its dynamics. The reviewer mainly picked a few items to criticize, rather than engaging the book's contents as a case study of a large and fruitful Church Planting Movement among a number of unreached groups.

Looking only at the review, potential readers would never see that Community Learning Centers have provided creative and effective access in a wide variety of unreached locations. They would not know how a primarily rural movement managed to spread effectively in urban areas as well. Nor would they see that a holistic approach to ministry has transformed families, villages, and slums, and how leadership is nurtured to sustain a movement into dozens of generations of churches planting churches. Potential readers would miss how the movement has empowered women, low-caste people, and illiterate people for ministry. They would remain ignorant about how disciples in

the movement have responded to persecution, and how the Bhojpuri movement has inspired the launching of movements among other groups, both in India and beyond.

Other than caste, the review never addressed any key issues in the movement itself or the significant kingdom advances taking place at that frontier of missions. The consistent negative tone of the review seemed rooted in antagonism toward the whole idea of movements, as reflected in the phrase "current fads over movements" in the review's penultimate sentence. And the criticism that "very little missiological analysis is present in the volume" reflects that the book author's purpose differed from the preferred genre of the reviewer—hardly a problem for which the author should be faulted.

The opening sentence of the review conveys antagonism toward the book, hinting (without evidence) at some dishonesty on the author's part: "a parachurch group that claims to be the originator and main support of the Church Planting Movement." I'm mystified why anyone would choose such accusatory phrasing, since for more than twenty years anyone well-informed about this movement has acknowledged the key role played by the "parachurch group." The reviewer also falsely claims that the contributors to the book are "all local parachurch employees." Rather than argue every detail of the review's attack, I prefer to focus on four key issues raised in the review.

Money Issues

First, the issue of money: the review complains of "multiple passing references to money throughout the book." This shouldn't surprise anyone familiar with the challenges of church planting in India, since financial problems and misuse of funds have damaged and destroyed countless ministries in that context. *Bhojpuri Breakthrough* attempts to convey honestly the nuances of what they have discovered to be wise and helpful uses of money, contrasted with unwise and unhelpful uses. The references cited in the review fit a pattern of discerning use, which the reviewer might do well to study more closely in the context of movements. An explication of nuanced differentiation in use of funds can be found, for example, in the article "Use of Funding in Catalyzing Movements," which appeared in the Jan/Feb 2022 issue of *Mission Frontiers.*

Ironically, after griping that "There are multiple passing references to money throughout the book," the very next sentence complains about "a church meeting of three to four hundred people in a community learning center; whether that building is owned or rented and who is paying the bills is not mentioned." It appears that, for this reviewer, the book is deficient when money is mentioned and simultaneously deficient when money is *not* mentioned. The reviewer also treats readers to speculative accusations, with no evidence: "One doesn't have

to read very far between the lines to know that such financial policies and practices produce tension, resentment and division." One might wish the reviewer could stick to what was written rather than expounding on his claim to "know" relational dynamics within the movement based on his capacity for reading between the lines.

The following sentence asserts, "Such topics are not helpful in promotional literature," thus again scorning the book by painting it as something it never intended to be. The authors intended it as an extended case study of an ongoing great work of God. The goal is not promoting any organizations or leaders, but rather seeking to accurately describe a great move of God. But while some of the reviewer's scorn might be caused by his classification of the Bhojpuri movement as part of the "current fads over movements," his larger grievance appears to be the mention of a web link for those who want to know "How can I contact you if I want to support the work or come and get involved directly?" This was included in the FAQ as a real question that many people have asked about the Bhojpuri movement. The reviewer focuses only on the word "support," as if funding were the only possible type of support. Support can mean funding, but can also mean prayer and expertise, and (as mentioned) direct involvement. This narrow focus fits the book's answer into the reviewer's paradigm of American funding as prima facie problematic. We can agree that "Promotion in America often harms the cause of the gospel," but "often" does not equal "always." We believe widespread evidence also shows that funds handled wisely can help *advance* the cause of the gospel. The reviewer seems to be offering judgment based on his general narrative of a destructive pattern, rather than evidence found in the book or in the Bhojpuri movement itself.

The Bhojpuri Bible

The second issue to address is that of the Bhojpuri Bible. Responding to his own not-quite-accurate portrayal, "it is suggested that the movement really began when the Bhojpuri New Testament was released," the reviewer argues:

> But, in fact, Bhojpuri is traditionally a spoken rather than a written language. Even now, Bhojpuri churches use Hindi Bibles for preaching rather than the Bhojpuri version. Serious research is needed into the effectiveness and impact of the Bhojpuri Bible.

This reflects a shortage of understanding of the role of oral Scripture among oral learners. Among oral learners with very limited income, heart language Scriptures are most useful in *oral* form. We can agree that serious research into the effectiveness and impact of the Bhojpuri Bible could play a useful missiological function. Thankfully, one researcher has already identified this as a topic for exploration. But the goal of the research would not be to answer an outsider's implied accusa-

tion that the leader of the movement has misunderstood or misrepresented the dynamics of growth in the movement. The goal of useful research would be to better understand the role of heart-language Scripture (both oral and written) in a large multi-generational Church Planting Movement.

Caste

Third, the review highlights:

> Perhaps the most astonishing claim in the book . . . : "If the high caste in our area are only 2 percent or 10 percent of the population, that same percentage is also reflected in the churches. . . . God is at work in all the castes."

Attributing to the statement a level of specificity not intended ("Has any church anywhere in the world ever achieved what is claimed here, a perfect cross section of every strata of society?"), the reviewer concludes this must be false. As proof of likely impossibility, the reviewer cites a study from 1933. It is astonishing to see the reviewer claim a 90-year-old study without any current evidence as critical refutation.

It seems that rather than reflecting a desire to better understand what's happening in frontier missions, the reviewer chose to critique the book's descriptions of a movement, based partly on a paradigm from a previous century. On an encouraging note, though, the review stated (about the claim of the caste percentage reflected in the churches), "If this could be documented and demonstrated it would be revolutionary to all church growth and church planting movement thinking." As with the disputed claim about the Bhojpuri Bible, a researcher has already identified this as a topic for more extensive research: research to be conducted on the ground, rather than through unsubstantiated accusations.

A Larger Concern

A fourth and final note of concern seems appropriate to raise. Twenty-first century missiologists have recognized the vital importance of listening to non-Western voices: those born in majority non-Christian contexts who now serve on the cutting-edge of frontier missions. For more than two decades, many of us have heard rumors of significant movements happening among the unreached. However, those directly involved in these movements often felt reluctant to share much with outsiders about what was actually happening, especially in any public forum. Some of this reluctance is due to very real security concerns. Another reason is that describing what's happening in a movement opens the door to attack from a wide range of directions. One of those is caustic criticism by Western "experts" who see (or at least suspect) that something about the movement doesn't meet their standards of theological or academic rigor. I would have hoped that *IJFM* would welcome a non-Western leader's open presentation of a sub-

stantial movement case study, rather than joining those who attack movements based on prior missiological biases. Writing a review with lack of evidence, numerous misrepresentations, and personal biases, ironically does not meet any standard of academic rigor.

As already mentioned, I look forward to the fruit of further research on topics such as the dynamics of caste within movements in India, and the use of heart-language Scriptures such as Bhojpuri. I see great potential in groups such as the *Motus Dei* Network for helpful research related to movements. I hope we can encourage interaction on such topics in ways that build up and encourage God's work at the frontiers of mission.

Sincerely,

Dave Coles

Dave Coles has served in Southeast Asia for twenty-four years and today encourages and resources church-planting movements among unreached groups. He is co-author of Bhojpuri Breakthrough *and is widely published (under a pseudonym) on topics related to contextualization, ministry to Muslims, and the nature of the church. He serves with Beyond (beyond.org) and has served as Lead Facilitator for the Bridging the Divide network since 2011.*

A Reply to Dave Coles

To the Editor,

I am disappointed that Dave Coles did not respond to the correctives I offered to his text. But he is disappointed that I did not hit the main points of his text, and probably will be disappointed with this response to his response.

One of the local informants behind my review wrote this in response to Dave's letter:

> I think the writer of the letter assumes you live in USA and judge from there. He needs to understand you have spent substantial time in India, and you are in touch with people who are close to the situation in Bhojpuri area. There are several other missions working in that area, and they (not you) don't accept the claims of the book. The question remains for the readers, who is more authentic of the two groups!!

I share this because I think it is largely valid, but also to comment *against* the "two groups" of the conclusion. My review was not from an anti-movement or cynical perspective, and trying to define "camps" and argue from "in" and "out" groups will not serve the kingdom of God. Better research, which includes better listening and better acceptance of critical evaluation, is the way forward for all of us.

Sincerely,

H. L. Richard

H. L. Richard is an independent researcher focused on the Hindu–Christian encounter. He is widely published on the history of contextual ministry among high-caste populations of India.

In Others' Words

"When War is Waged, People Go Hungry"
The Breadbasket of the World?

One of the global results of Russia's war in Ukraine has been the destruction of global food security.

> Russia and Ukraine supply 28% of globally traded wheat, 29% of the barley, 15% of the maize and 75% of the sunflower oil. Russia and Ukraine contribute about half the cereals imported by Lebanon and Tunisia; for Libya and Egypt the figure is two-thirds. Ukraine's food exports provide the calories to feed 400m people. The war is disrupting these supplies because Ukraine has mined its waters to deter an assault, and Russia is blockading the port of Odessa. ("The Coming Food Catastrophe," *The Economist,* May 19, 2022)

The confluence of war and severe drought in multiple places has hundreds of millions on the brink of starvation. "The WFP [World Food Programme] chief said 276 million people are struggling to find food, and 49 million in 43 countries are 'knocking on famine's door,' which results not only in death but 'unmatched migration,' which destabilizes societies." The UN Secretary General put it even more bluntly,

> "When war is waged, people go hungry. Some 60 per cent of the world's undernourished people live in areas affected by conflict, . . . no country is immune." Last year, most of the 140 million people suffering acute hunger around the world lived in just ten countries: Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Haiti, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. ("Food Insecurity Threaten Societies: No Country is Immune," *Modern Diplomacy,* May 21, 2022).

The Selling of Children to Avoid Starvation

In Afghanistan, as many as 95% of the population is facing extreme food shortages. World Vision, a major global humanitarian agency, has announced a Global Hunger Response, one of only two such global efforts of this magnitude in its history, the first being a response to the COVID pandemic. Asuntha Charles, World Vision's National Director in Afghanistan, commented that:

> I have been heartbroken to see that families are willing to sell their children to feed other family members. Day by day, the situation is deteriorating in this country, and it is especially children who are suffering.

Betrayed by Brothers

For some background on what may have triggered the Ukraine war, check out a blog by Don Fairbairn, a professor of Early Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary about the religious traditions and heritage of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is linked to Kiev: https://www.gordonconwell.edu/blog/attentiveness-ukraine/. Despite this strong historic bond between the Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox churches, a great deal of tension has emerged over the Russian Orthodox Church's strong commitment to Putin. Read the article in *Christianity Today* that looks at another group of believers, the Protestant evangelicals in both Russia and the Ukraine, and the differences of opinion expressed by them. Some Ukrainian evangelicals, like some Ukrainian Orthodox priests, are feeling betrayed by their brothers in Russia. ("How Russian Christians View the 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine," *Christianity Today,* April 22, 2022).

"Nobody is Safe in a System of Lies"

It's a long read, but well worth it. In a striking interview published online, Archbishop-Metropolitan Borys Gudziak remarked that:

> . . . There is a lot of disinformation. There are a lot of lies out there. The lies are specific lies like the [Russian] minister of foreign affairs, Sergey Lavrov, a few days ago in Istanbul saying, "We didn't invade Ukraine. We're not invading." Or the general lie, which is becoming law in Russia, "It's not a war, it's a special operation." Or, "We're working against the Nazis led by a Jewish president." They're very specific lies, but there's the deep lie of the system, the corruption, the oligarchic kleptocracy that is led by an authoritarian ruler who has nostalgia for empire and wants to recolonize. That's a lie because it very explicitly negates the value, the dignity of other persons, other cultures, other histories. . . . Nobody is safe in autocracy. Nobody is safe in a system of lies. ("The Spiritual Dimension of the War in Ukraine," *Comment,* March 24, 2022)

A New Promise of Growth in India

For an analysis of changing economic growth in India, don't miss the entire May 13, 2022 issue of *The Economist:*

> . . . a new pattern of growth is visible, unlike anything you have seen before. An indigenous tech effort is key. . . . Alongside that, global trends are creating bigger business clusters. The IT-services industry has doubled in size in a decade, helped by the cloud and a worldwide shortage of software workers. Where else can Western firms find half a million new engineers a year? . . . These changes will not lead to a manufacturing boom as big as those in South Korea or China, which created enough jobs to empty the fields of farmers. They do not solve deep problems such as extreme weather or clogged courts. But they do help explain why India is forecast to be the world's fastest-growing big economy in 2022 and why it has a chance of holding on to that title for years. ("The Indian Economy is Being Rewired. The Opportunity is Immense," *The Economist,* May 13, 2022)

And this is all taking place despite the devastating toll taken on India by the pandemic:

> [it] killed between 2.2m and 9.7m people. Lockdowns caused the economy to shrink temporarily by a quarter and triggered the largest internal migrations since partition in 1947 as city workers fled to their villages. ("The Indian Economy is Being Rewired. The Opportunity is Immense," *The Economist,* May 13, 2022)

When Religion Becomes Politicized and Ideological

Simultaneously with this rosy forecast for economic growth in India comes the threat of increasingly violent religious riots. The article entitled, "How Narendra Modi Is Remaking India into a Hindu State" (Saffron Nation) gives not only an account of religious confrontations but also a history of how this animosity developed (*The Economist*, May 14, 2022). Unfortunately, most of the victims of these large-scale Hindu-Muslim riots have been Muslims (the largest minority in India, making up about 15% of the population, close to 200 million people) or Christians (who make up 2% of the population.)

> An Amnesty International report found that after months of peaceful protests against a citizenship law seen as discriminatory toward Muslims turned violent in 2020, the police in New Delhi arrested "Muslims on a mass scale immediately after the riots even though the minority community bore the brunt of the violence" and the report had accused officers of "torturing people." ("'Perpetual Violence': India's Dangerous New Patterns of Communal Tensions," in the *New York Times,* May 11, 2022)

Hindutva Watch, a newsletter and website that tracks religious violence in India against minority and marginalized communities, has some links to very informative articles. For an example of violence against Christians, see "I'll Keep Serving God Till My Last Breath." Also, don't miss the eloquent opinion in the *LA Times* on August 15th, the 75th anniversary of India's independence, "As a Hindu, I Can't Stay Silent about Injustices in India—Committed in the Name of our Faith." (*Los Angeles Times,* August 15, 2022)

The Russian Orthodox Church: Entwined with Nationalism?

The Catholic journal *First Things* looked at this religious tension from a broader angle in "The Russian Path Not Taken" (*First Things*, May 4, 2022). It brings up the topic of how a church becomes entwined with ugly nationalism and how that entanglement silences any prophetic voice it might have had. Examples are drawn from Russian Orthodoxy, but many of the principles and conclusions could apply to other Western countries where religious denominations have almost become voting blocs.

Philip Jenkins takes on the issue of Ukraine's history and looks at past and present Russian empire-building. He also throws some light on the validity of Putin's claim that Ukraine—and

Kyiv in particular—are essential to Russian Orthodoxy and Russian nationalism. See: https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2022/05/making-ukraine-and-how-empires-invent-geography/.

Recent Missiological Publications of Interest

Ever since the first publication by Ralph D. Winter of his historical framework for the study of missions called The Three Eras, people have been suggesting a fourth era. Warrick Farah's post on his missiology blog *Circumpolar* commends four aspects that characterize what might be called a Fourth Era, one of which is the burgeoning movements happening across the globe. Don't miss "A Movemental Turn in Missions: Thoughts on New Eras and New Wineskins" (April 27, 2022). In this blog, he also links to an article where Bob Priest regrets that in 2006, Winter was persuaded away from revising his Three Eras to include a Fourth Era that was more holistic (once in the document, go to page 294). In a July 2022 blog post, Farah very helpfully gives us a link to an article he wrote on the history of Church Planting Movements published in *Missiology* but available for free here: https://www.academia.edu/80063140/The_Genesis_and_Evolution_of_Church_Planting_Movements_Missiology.

The *International Bulletin of Mission Research,* Vol. 46, no. 2 (April 2022), includes two excellent review articles: Joel Carpenter's treatment of Kwame Bediako's major theological themes ("Kwame Bediako Makes an Offer") as recounted in a new book by Tim Hartman entitled: *Kwame Bediako: African Theology for a World Christianity*; and Terry Muck's review article ("Questions of Context: Reading a Century of German Mission Theology") of John Flett and Henning Wrogemann's book by the same name. (See also Brad Gill's review of the same book in IJFM 37:3–4, 3rd book review) Both of these *IBMR* articles bring up major missiological themes of great importance to frontier missiologists.

Amid the swirl of hybridity studies in missiology today comes David Earl Datema's article in *Missiology* Vol. 50, No. 2, entitled: "The Universal Particularism of Panta Ta Ethne: A Biblical Case for the Continued Viability of the People Group Concept in Mission." Its cogent advance of the people group concept is remarkable and compliments—not necessarily contradicts—the insights that emerged on hybridity and culture at the 2021 conference of the American Society of Missiology (https://www.asmweb.org/annual-meeting-videos). The Winter Lectureship in Pasadena, CA, also focused this year's theme on "Homogeneity and Hybridity: Revisiting the HUP" (Homogenous Unit Principle), and we look forward to their future publication of those presentations in this journal. **IJFM**

IJFM & Perspectives

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, visit www.perspectives.org.

Articles in IJFM 39:1

	Related Perspectives Lesson and Section			
	Lesson 10: How Shall They Hear? (C)	*Lesson 11: Building Bridges of Love (C)*	*Lesson 13: The Spontaneous Multiplication of Churches (S)*	*Lesson 14: Pioneer Church Planting (S)*
Contextual Frameworks for Interreligious Communication: an Asian Perspective Kang-San Tan (pp. 5–14)	X	X		X
A Response: Answering the Call to Inreligionisation H. L. Richard (pp. 15–16)				X
A Response: Rethinking Mission in an Asian Context Notto R. Thelle (pp. 16–20)				X
A Response: Assessing the Effectiveness of "Inreligionisation" for Interreligious Communication (Part I) Alan R. Johnson (pp. 22–26)				X
A Response: Recasting Interreligious Communication Around the Notion of Translation (Part II) Alan R. Johnson (pp. 28–34)	X			X
Can Cambodian Christians "Worship" their Parents? A Hermeneutical Dialogue Claire T. C. Chong and Tep Samnang (pp. 37–41)	X			X
The Model is the Message Ronald and Carolyn Klaus (pp. 43–49)		X	X	
Inreligionisation: Reconsidering that Most Vital Hermeneutical Space Brad Gill (pp. 51–56)	X	X		X

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