

Beyond Contextualization

What Gets “Converted”?

Reflections on Language and Images of Religious Conversion

by *Darren Duerksen*

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I am grateful to be a part of this seminar on “Beyond Contextualization” and I appreciate Kan-Sang Tan’s call for us to consider and engage in what he calls *inreligionization*. We are trying out various terms and concepts and are motivated, I believe, by a shared sense that we need a distinctly new missiology of religion. This would be a missiology that appreciates concepts and strategies such as contextualization and inculturation, but also recognizes some of the limitations of the ways these have been used.

Conversion and Religious Traditions

For my part today I want to bring into the conversation a question about our understanding of *conversion*, or what the New Testament calls *epistrepho* or *metanoia*, and particularly how this relates to what we sometimes call *religion* or religious traditions. One of the helpful aspects of the term and concept of *inreligionization*, in my opinion, is where it seeks to direct our gaze and enquiry. Contextualization conversations have often focused primarily on the issue of culture. Religion, when discussed, is rightly seen as deeply interconnected with culture, but often the problematic aspect of culture that needs to be sifted out, like chaff from the wheat. How do we do that? It depends in part on how *religion* is understood.

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Some view religions as sealed systems of belief. And because non-Christian religions have at their core certain false beliefs, say in the Muslim prophet Mohammad or Hindu *samsara* or Buddhist dependent origination, then each and every part of that religious system is suspect and guilty by association. Relatedly, many in this camp associate religion with tightly bounded social groups. Because of this, when Christians think of repentance or conversion, we have sometimes taught that the only faithful response to the gospel is to convert from and exit out of that system and community of belief, and to contextualize the more neutral aspects of its culture. Some may seek to nuance this approach, applying Paul Hiebert’s concept of critical contextualization to

religion—where the religious aspects of culture, and particularly the wrong beliefs and practices, are discerned and rejected, and the supposedly neutral aspects are retained and adapted for Christian purposes.

Now no doubt all of this is a bit of a simplification, but I would argue that this is not too far off the mark from the way Christian missions have often regarded and treated religion and religious practices. And though there are some definite strengths to the concept of *contextualization*, I applaud work like Tan’s and conversations such as this that direct us to focus on the ways in which Christ and the gospel might seek to enter *into* a religious tradition, and what begins to occur in those people, communities, and traditions once it does so.

But having said all this, I think the strength of inreligionization is, ironically enough, what I also have the most concerns about. That is, though it helpfully directs us to look at how the gospel interacts with religion, the category of religion itself has some challenges. And though I’m not sure we’ll totally resolve some of these, I want to offer some alternative, or at least additional, ways to think about the religious and how it relates to conversion. I will first discuss some of the well-known limitations of speaking about *religion* and a conversion of religion. I’ll then suggest three alternative ways to think about the religious—namely, religious wisdoms, religiosities, and religious narratives and journeys. For each of these I’ll consider what it might mean for the religious, and religious person, to be converted or turned towards Christ.

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Pba’s Story

But before I continue let me share a story about a Christ follower who turned or, we may say, “converted” to Christ, but ultimately decided to remain in her Buddhist community and tradition. Pba is a Buddhist Christ-follower from southeast Asia. Pba was raised Buddhist and, similar to many in her area, integrated popular animistic beliefs in spirits and ancestors into her Buddhist ritual beliefs and practices.¹ She would regularly visit the temples (or *pagodas*), to pray and ask monks to pray for her, observe popular festivals, and offer incense and prayers at shrines dedicated to certain spirits when she had a particular need. She believed that good actions (or *dana*) such as going to the temple, giving an offering, and honoring an ancestor provided one with merit (or *punya*).

This, in turn, would combat bad karma and improve this and her next life. She also believed that spirits, both good and bad, could protect and improve her life. For this she could offer incense at shrines and also request local shamans to access the spirit realm and make requests of the spirits on her behalf.

In her area she knew about a small Christian church. From her standpoint, however, this group was socially and culturally isolated and followed a deity named Jesus. But Pba and her community gave little consideration to the Jesus deity since they—as well as the Christians—felt that Jesus was the *Christian* deity, responsive only to those who had taken baptism and become Christians.

One day, a Christ-follower who was not a part of that church befriended Pba and, over time, invited her to meditate and pray to Jesus. Pba was hesitant, but this particular person was a Christ-follower who shared that, contrary to what Pba had heard and assumed, Jesus was not the deity of a particular religion, nor did Jesus require persons to convert religions. With her new friend’s guidance, Pba began to pray to Jesus and to experience changes in her family, business, and personal life. Pba also began to understand the incredible differences between Jesus and what her community knew and taught about Buddhist deities and powers. The Buddha, she had been taught, was a source of teaching, but was not God, and not always able or willing to help people. Jesus, on the other hand, paid attention to and seemed to really love her and her family. Whereas she had normally practiced rituals like candle- and incense-lighting and bowing to the Buddha image to worship and appease the Buddha, Jesus appreciated and was fine with these things but did not require them. He would listen to people’s prayers regardless of what they brought to him. Also, in the midst of the typical Buddhist petition, she was taught to promise certain gifts, such as a pig’s head, alcohol, or eggs, if her prayer was to be answered. But Jesus, she learned, was not interested in what felt like bribes. In contrast with how she experienced spiritual faith previously, the nature of a relationship with Jesus was characterized by freedom—freedom from bribery and manipulation, and freedom from many of the vices and challenges she had experienced in her family and life.

Religion: A Modern Invention

Pba’s story illustrates a number of things, including the ways in which a focus on religion, and a conversion of religion can be problematic, or at least not always a helpful way of thinking about conversion. Why is this? We know that the word and concept of “religion” itself, as has long been noted, is notoriously hard to define. Religious studies scholars sometimes joke with each other that theirs is one of the only disciplines where no one can agree on what exactly it is that they study! Recognizing this over sixty years ago, Wilfred Cantwell Smith leveled his

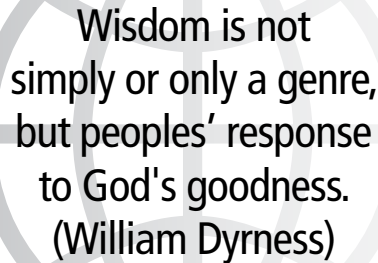
well-known criticism against the concept of *religion* contending that, while people have probably been religious for time immemorial, the systematization of this into what we call religion is a very modern invention.² In addition, no less modern is the organization of systems of belief into so-called “world religions.” Because of this, many agree with proposals such as that of H. L. Richard that, at the very least, we should talk not about religions but instead religious *traditions*—Hinduisms, Islams, and Christianities—to indicate the plural and contextually specific ways these are expressed.³ Still, even the language of religious traditions can evoke the idea of walled and bounded systems and communities. For Pba’s context, like many others, this bounded sense of religions like Christianity added to a sense that the Christ deity belonged only to that community and system.

This is not to say that there isn’t some value in seeking to define and talk about a thing or phenomenon called religion or religious traditions, particularly from a theological perspective. Paul Tillich famously described religion as “the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern . . . which itself contains the answers to the question of the meaning of our life.”⁴ More recently William Dyrness incorporates some insights from religious studies and suggests that religion “represents the practices associated with the human search for God,” and the “culturally embedded responses to the presence of God.”⁵ These scholars also recognize that religious traditions, like all parts of creation, are broken by sin. That is, religious traditions are always and everywhere distorted by sin and peoples’ temptation to rely on their own selves and self-interest. And yet, this distortion does not disqualify religion from God’s overall project of renewal. In fact, they would say that, as partial and broken parts of creation, God wants to take up religious expressions and traditions into his renewing work in creation, particularly through and under submission to Christ.⁶

But here, as Cantwell Smith and others have warned, we need to be careful of our language. For, as mentioned above, to talk about religion or religious traditions can imply tightly bounded systems and communities. Such language may help us teach or talk about religious traditions—for instance, having a class on “Islam,” “Buddhism,” etc.—but the lived reality rarely corresponds to our descriptions. Religious traditions are just too messy to work that way.

Because of this, we can do with some more careful thinking about how to describe the religious. In addition, we perhaps need to rethink the ways in which conversion relates to the religious. We don’t want to fall into the trap of making religious

conversion—along with the salvation that we then enjoy—a purely personal, internal condition removed from the cultural, religious, and social aspects of life. Rather, and as many have discussed in recent years, a turn to Christ and an experience of Christ’s salvation are both personal and social. That is, it is not only our souls, or our personal lives, that get converted or turned towards Christ. Rather, conversion also involves a turning and reshaping of our social contexts, practices, beliefs, and systems in ways that reflect God’s goodness and shalom.



Wisdom is not simply or only a genre, but peoples’ response to God’s goodness. (William Dyrness)

New Ways of Looking at Religious Conversion

So, what might be some alternative or additional terms to religion and religious traditions, and how might we think in new ways about religious conversion? Let us consider three: a focus on religious wisdoms, on religious expression or religiosities, and on religious narrative and journey.

Religious Wisdoms

The first might be to think about religious *wisdoms*. What is wisdom, and religious wisdom from a biblical-theological perspective, and how might it be helpful? William Dyrness, in his recent book *The Facts on the Ground: A Wisdom Theology of Culture*, explains that wisdom is not simply or only a genre—like wisdom literature, or moral precepts—like proverbs. Rather, in the biblical scriptures, wisdom is peoples’ response to God’s goodness. It begins when people observe and take delight in God’s good creation.⁷ From Genesis 1 and 2 we are told that humanity, made in the image of God, has been created with the capacity to perceive and delight in the goodness and amazing order of God’s creation. But not only that: we can reflect upon, cultivate, and develop God’s creation in ways that helps us live wisely in it. In other words, we as humans have the capacity to not only see and delight in God’s order and work, but reflect upon and develop that creation, and then to pass along this reflection and work to others. Over time this wisdom accumulates into what we can call cultural wisdom. This is an accumulation of ideas, practices, hopes, and aspirations that, again, have their origins in perceiving and delighting in aspects of God’s good creation.

Wisdom can be developed around any and all aspects of God’s creation, from scientific delight and exploration of DNA, to the creation of poetry about life, to the struggle for just laws or social structures. But is there something of all this we could call *religious* wisdom? Here we can recall previous theological ideas about religion as practices through which people search after and relate to God, or to divine beings or powers. In light of this we can perhaps think of religious wisdom as the accumulation of reflections, responses to, and searches for God’s presence in our context and in creation.

But there are two points that we must make. First, and as Genesis 3 shows, humanity not only has the capacity to perceive and multiply the good wisdom of creation, but also to reproduce and multiply evil. That is, while religious wisdom should ultimately move us in the direction of God’s overall design for flourishing and re-creation, persons under the influence of sin can and do create ideas, practices, and ways of being that can alienate and lead ultimately towards death and destruction. Our cultural and religious wisdoms, including even the theologies developed by Christians, will always be diluted or contaminated by our sinful proclivities.

The second point we must make is that God’s wisdom of re-creation is ultimately expressed in and through the life, cross, and resurrection of Christ. As Paul shows in 1 Corinthians, lest we as people become too enamored with our own ideas and formulations, these completely pale and appear as absolute foolishness in light of God’s wisdom through Christ. Though people can and do see what theologians have often called general revelation and reflect on this, Christ offers to us the ultimate and most complete expression of the wisdom of God, and it is only through the grace of Christ that people come into God’s salvation.

Less Bounded

How might religious wisdom be treated by Christ-followers in light of their conversion and turn to Christ? For one, I think a focus on religious wisdom can help us avoid some of the bounded ways we think about religion that I previously discussed, including what it means to convert religions or religious traditions. Rather than exiting or fully rejecting the religious, the Christ-follower views their community’s religious wisdom through the lens and wisdom of Christ. How, they may ask, might these wisdoms reflect and advance God’s good intent for his creation through Christ? No doubt some things called wisdom will now be seen as deviations from God’s intent and plan. But though there is perhaps much that needs to be reinterpreted or even rejected, notice that the Christ-follower’s default is shaped by the belief that their community’s accumulated cultural and religious wisdoms have as their origins, and even continue to in part contain, reflections on God’s goodness and creation. In other words, perhaps followers of Christ are called to re-understand and re-shape their community’s religious wisdoms and practices in light of Christ.

Relational Nature

A second and related way in which religious wisdom may be treated in light of a turn to Christ relates to the relational nature of biblical wisdom. The nature of wisdom, particularly as described

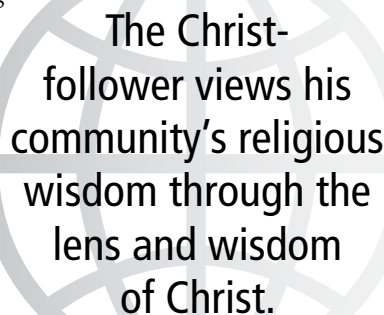
in the Old Testament, is that it should help us relate well to God, his creation, and each other. In other words, true wisdom, including true religious wisdom, is not abstract. It is expressed in and through relationships that reflect God’s purposes for his creation. Here again, the ultimate expression and event of wisdom is Christ, through whom people can enter into a healed relationship with God, and who through the Spirit gives the power for a new way of relating to others. In light of this, a person’s turn to Christ—their conversion—reorients the way they relate to God and others. And through this lens, they can again survey the religious wisdoms of their history and community, affirming those aspects of the traditions that move them towards good relationships, while rejecting those beliefs and practices that do not affirm good relationships or the gospel.

A focus on religious wisdom suggests that, in Christ, we are converted *towards* a new way of viewing religious wisdom, of delighting in God’s creation and multiplying its goodness. Recall how Pba found both continuity and discontinuity between the wisdom of God in Christ and her folk Buddhist wisdoms. In some things she found resonance and value—ways of appreciating and relating to Jesus as Lord, for example, but also things that Jesus challenged—for instance, the *reason* for these practices. It still felt the wise and appropriate thing to bring incense to Christ, but not because Christ needed appeasement. Rather, such practices expressed and enhanced her relationship to Jesus.

As well, as Pba grew in her understanding and practices of following Jesus, she developed new, wise ways to live and to help others live in light of Christ. For example, as a member of the village leadership council she started leading a community health committee and people came to her for advice regarding health issues and other related matters. She also began a group she called “The Savior Club” to help with community and temple events and have discussions about God. Pba chose not to use the name “Jesus” in the club’s meetings so as not to imply that the group was “Christian.” However, as more people became involved with the group, she engaged them individually in book studies and invited them to start praying to Jesus, just as she had done at the beginning of her journey. In so doing many people have become interested in learning more about Jesus and coming into his wisdom.

Religious Expression or Religiosity

A second alternative to a conversion of religion or religious traditions is to focus on religious expression, or what I’ll call *religiosity*. Though on a popular level religiosity can imply an excessive or slavish devotion to a religion, I use it here simply



The Christ-follower views his community's religious wisdom through the lens and wisdom of Christ.

to refer to what religious studies scholar Martin Riesebrodt has described as a person's or group's "subjective appropriation and interpretation" of a religious tradition at any given time.⁸

For example, how often are the ways in which a person, family, or group venerates a deity, offers *salat* (Muslim prayer), venerates spirits, or meditates actually an expression of their religiosity?⁹ A person's or group's religiosity, we could say, is the mix of beliefs, practices, symbols, etc., that they subjectively select and activate, often to pursue certain goods, gain protections, or avoid bad things, for immediate and/or longer term well-being. Because people to varying degrees select and mix their practices, peoples' religiosity is, by nature, a hybrid of influences.

Hybrid Religiosities

The idea of hybridity has recently been applied to missiology in a study by William Burrows and Daniel Shaw. The organic and horticultural analogy of hybridity refers to the process of crossing genetically diverse plants to create a new plant, or a "hybrid."¹⁰ This term is also used in social science to refer to the dialectic nature of culture and cultural norms and to challenge the tendency—particularly on a popular level—to essentialize cultural and religious traditions. Hybridity, and hybrid religiosities, are emergent phenomena that occur as people connect with and appropriate the cultural and religious practices of the past (which are themselves hybrid) within their current context.¹¹ For Christ-followers, this includes the way their understanding of the gospel interacts with their context.

Our religious narratives give us a sense of identity and help root and shape our religious wisdom and practices.

What might a turning or conversion to Christ entail when considering religiosities, and particularly hybrid religiosities? First, a focus on religiosity can helpfully de-center the question of what religion *is* and focus us instead on the ways in which people appropriate and *do things* with the religious. A focus on religiosity, like that of religious wisdom, directs our focus on the ability and agency of people to shape their practices and behaviors, within certain limits. People's behaviors, in other words, are influenced but not determined by their religious contexts. Christ, by his Spirit, empowers people to creatively adjust their expressions in new ways.

Reverse Hermeneutics

Second, and relatedly, a focus on converted religiosities may point to the *processes* whereby people make sense of the gospel through their own practices and symbols. Christ-followers develop their responses to God, their religiosities, through

what William Dyrness and I have described as a "reverse hermeneutic." That is, persons interpret and express the gospel always and everywhere through the lenses of the cultural context.¹² These are not just abstract understandings of the gospel but lived out interpretations expressed through their practices.

Religious Narrative and Journey

I have thus far talked about two alternatives to a conversion of religion or religious traditions: religious wisdoms and religious expressions or religiosities. A third alternative is what I'll call religious narrative and journey. I use the word narrative, or we could say *story*, to refer to the larger stories of a person's or a peoples' religious journey, and the way they locate themselves in it. Our religious narratives give us a sense of identity and help root and shape our religious wisdom and practices. Social scientist Erin Dufault-Hunter says that religious narratives "provide a superstructure" and an overall "plot, descriptions of characters, and general guidelines for how to enact it." In addition, religious narratives provide us with the stories of mentors who inspire us and give us examples to emulate. They also encompass a pool of rituals through which we become participants in a larger community which regularly reaffirms our religious identity.¹³

Our overarching, meta stories root us in a wider story and journey as a people. From a Christian perspective think of the meta story of creation-fall-redemption-new creation that encapsulates the story of biblical scripture and our part in that story as God's people. Or we could think of the stories of Muhammad and his followers among Muslims or the tales of the Buddha and *bodhisattvas* in some Buddhist communities. But though these religious stories have structure, they are also always interpreted, adapted, and even modified, personally and corporately. This is particularly the case when people relate these narratives to their own cultural context and their own stories.

For our purposes, there is no doubt that biblical scripture provides the compelling and truthful narrative of God's intention and work in his creation. This is, we could say, a master narrative that organizes, and re-organizes other religious narratives, practices, and wisdom. Often, we see the story of God's people, ourselves included, as a people on a journey with God. Similarly, some writers of the New Testament liken the story of God's people to a journey. This is, for example, a characteristic of the writer of Luke/Acts. In Luke 3, John the Baptist calls the Jewish people to repentance (*metanoia*) and uses Old Testament imagery of "the way" or "road" of the Lord. God's purposes and his journey with his people, John is saying, can be likened to a road or pathway, and God's people need to repent and turn to stay true to it. Luke later evokes similar imagery, calling God's renewal movement "the way" (Luke 20:21, Acts 9:2, 19:9), identifying the gospel as a "way of salvation" (Acts 16:17), and "the way of the Lord" (18:25, 26). The picture throughout is one of God, through Jesus,

calling his people to join him on a journey towards his ultimate re-creation, and one that, in the meantime, would profoundly reshape them and the way they lived in the world.

Reshaping One’s Existing Narrative and Pathway

What might a turn or conversion to Christ mean for one’s religious narrative and journey? First, perhaps a turn to Christ might be seen as a reshaping of a person’s and community’s *existing* religious narrative and pathway. That is, perhaps God is calling people to remain on, but also reconstruct, their existing religious pathway.¹⁴ This is certainly the case in the transformation story of Saul/Paul in Acts 9. After his blinding experience, Saul receives the ability to physically see along with the ability to perceive more deeply the work of God for him and all people. But notice that Saul is *not* called away from his religious tradition. Instead, he is called to re-understand what had previously been shrouded to him—God was indeed present and working in and through the Jewish people, but through Christ, the history and trajectory of this work now took on new meaning and expression.

It is true, of course, that God revealed himself to, and interacted with, the Jewish community in a unique way. And yet it is not only Jews who are encouraged to follow Jesus via the religious pathway of their heritage. In speaking to Gentiles in Acts 14 and 17, for example, Paul draws on starting points common to both his and their traditions—God as creator of “the world and everything in it” (17:24), including all persons and nations (14:15–16). In addition, in Athens Paul references a local shrine to “the unknown god” and quotes the wisdom of poets familiar to his audience. Paul is decidedly *not* telling them that he is bringing a new story.¹⁵ God’s path is not one that simply parallels or has nothing to do with their tradition’s stories. Rather, as Mary E. Hinkle says regarding Acts 14, “Paul and Barnabas argue that their (Jewish) story is the Lycaonians’ story too, even if it sounds at first like new information to them.”¹⁶ In other words, to have faith in Jesus does not require people to follow a new path or tradition, but to see that God is and has already been *on their path*, albeit in ways they had not previously seen. As they reassess and reinterpret their religious narrative, the disciples of Jesus will see the ways those paths were in some ways “crooked” and in need of God’s redirection, but also how God’s Spirit was perhaps moving in and seeking to bring direction to the tradition and community all along. In a sense these Christ followers begin to *re-story* their community’s past and tradition via their experiences and insights regarding Jesus.

Reorienting in a New Eschatological Direction

Second, the conversion of a religious narrative journey would mean that it gets reoriented towards God’s eschatological purpose. Christ-followers are called to not only reshape their existing pathways and to *re-story* the narratives and traditions of the past, but to also move in a new direction, towards

the culmination of God’s kingdom and re-creation. As such they see how God, through Christ, wants to redirect the community’s religious pathway and story.

For example, some Muslim Christ-followers—those who follow Christ but choose to stay on and re-orient their Muslim journey—largely retain the Muslim vision of an afterlife (*jannah*) created by God for those who follow him and his ways. However, they learn to regard Christ as the pathway, the means and criteria, by which God will allow them to enter *jannah*. Some Sufi Muslim Christ-followers in south Asia, for example, see Jesus as the one who “takes his own” to heaven. In this, they draw on the teachings of some Sufi groups that on the day of judgement, Muhammad and perhaps some Sufi masters will act as a mediator. But from their readings of biblical scripture, they realize that it is Jesus who will intercede and secure a place for his followers on the day of judgement, and not Muhammad or a master. Because they have a new and elevated vision of the person of Jesus, they re-vision both their own and their community’s future. A focus on a conversion of religious narrative and journey thus allows them to consider the ways in which God may seek to enter and transform their own religious community and the ways they understand and *re-story* their community’s religious history and trajectory in light of the gospel.

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Are Border-Walkers the New Prophets?

As I conclude, I have been suggesting that it can be helpful to view the biblical idea of *metanoia* (conversion or repentance) in relation to the religious, but particularly if it is understood via different language. Rather than only thinking of conversion *from* a religion, I suggest that a turn to Christ may call persons to discern and view in a new way their community’s wisdoms, religiosities, and narrative journeys. Those who sense Christ calling them to do so could operate as what Makoto Fujimura calls “border-walkers”—that is, those Christ-followers in God’s kingdom whose transformed religious wisdoms, expressions, and narratives cause them to walk the borders between religious and cultural communities. Rather than converting out of a religion, these converted border-walkers become God’s agents for staying in and re-shaping their religious pathway. And as they do so, perhaps they provide new, prophetic ways for others of us to see the ways God is at work in and through his creation.

Perhaps these religious border-walkers are the new prophets within their contexts. And perhaps we are not only learning what this looks like in their contexts, but in our traditions as well. I hope we can continue to listen and consider what they can teach us about conversion, this metanoia, and how it can reshape people's lives and the religious aspects of their community's traditions. **IJFM**



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Endnotes

- ¹ This testimony is based on the interviews in Marie Bauer, "What Happens when Buddhists Follow Jesus? A Peek into the Transformed Lives of Southeast Asian Women," *Resonance: A Theological Journal* 4, no. 1 (2018).
- ² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).
- ³ H. L. Richard, "Religious Syncretism as a Syncretistic Concept: The Inadequacy of the 'World Religions' Paradigm in Cross-Cultural Encounter," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 31:4 Winter (2014): 211. For this reason I will most often reference *religious traditions* rather than *religions* per se.
- ⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Future of Religions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 3. In a similar way William Dyrness calls religion an "inbuilt longing for God—the spaces humans construct to look for and even find God." William A. Dyrness, *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 101.
- ⁵ William A. Dyrness, *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 101, 07.
- ⁶ Dyrness, *Insider Jesus*, 51.
- ⁷ William A. Dyrness, *The Facts on the Ground: A Wisdom Theology of Culture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), 31.
- ⁸ Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation*, 76. Riesebrodt and Smith prefer the term *religiousness*.
- ⁹ See also Christian Smith, *Religion: What it is, How it Works, and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 47.
- ¹⁰ William R. Burrows, "Theological Ideals, Cross-Cultural Realities: Syncretism and Hybridity in Christian Culture Crossing," in *Traditional Ritual as Christian Worship: Dangerous Syncretism or Necessary Hybridity?*, eds. R. Daniel Shaw and William R. Burrows (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), 27.
- ¹¹ Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman, "Introduction: Hybridity Today," in *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-Colonial Studies in Transition*, eds. Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 3.
- ¹² See Darren T. Duerksen and William A. Dyrness, *Seeking Church: Emerging Witnesses to the Kingdom* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 28–29, 71–73.
- ¹³ Dufault-Hunter, Erin Elizabeth, *The Transformative Power of Faith: A Narrative Approach to Conversion* (New York: Lexington Books, 2012), 78.
- ¹⁴ Joel B. Green, *Conversion in Luke-Acts: Divine Action, Human Cognition, and the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).
- ¹⁵ Mary E. Hinkle, "Preaching for Mission: Ancient Speeches and Postmodern Sermons," in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, eds. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 99.
- ¹⁶ Hinkle, "Preaching for Mission," 96.

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Response

Response to Dr. Darren Duerksen

by Anna Travis

I greatly appreciate Dr. Duerksen's exploration of how Jesus followers could navigate new life within their birth religious identity—their interpretation of their group's wisdom, practice and story of their journey.

I also resonate with Dr. Duerksen's deeper look at the biblical implications of "conversion." This will help us set aside the typical, often unhelpful assumptions about what "conversion" should look like. We will be able to look at the context of the passages where we find words that we typically translate as "convert."

Dr. Duerksen asks, what is changing (what is getting "converted") when a person in a particular religious tradition comes to faith in Christ? How is the experience of the follower of Christ affected by the fact that there is hybridity in any given religious expression? Adherents may not recognize this hybridity, nor the history of how it developed. Adherents are living out this hybridity yet are viewing it as a pure expression of their religion.

Adherents may not recognize this hybridity, but they are living it out and viewing it as a pure expression of their religion.

I was chatting with a Muslim lady who was explaining to me what happens when people die. She said,

We Muslims drop everything when news comes of a loved one's death. We travel quickly to be with the family, since the body must be buried before the next time the sun goes down. We Muslims ask forgiveness of the person as we come close to the body. And we Muslims throw flower petals on top of the wrapped body as it is placed in the ground and is then covered with soil. We Muslims don't put the body in a box, because that would inhibit what must happen—the body must return to the ground and become part of the dust of the ground.

To my friend, this is the pure expression of Islam. Yet, in other Muslim contexts, the expressions could vary widely. Pre-Islamic traditions are woven into the lives of many Muslims resulting in a hybridity which is not acknowledged by them for the most part.

I am familiar with only a small part of our own hybridity of religious expression—as twenty-first century Evangelicals. As of late, I've been reading the *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* with my regular Bible reading (Zondervan). This hybridity Dr. Duerksen talks about is well documented in this commentary.

Dr. Duerksen says, "Perhaps God is calling people to remain on and also reconstruct their existing religious pathway." What a fascinating alternative to leaving their religious pathway altogether and joining a different and unfamiliar one. They could continue on their religious path, even as they re-frame it.

We could assume that the religious narrative has already been fixed—that adherents of a world religion would not have the possibility or permission to form a new and creative articulation. We could think that there are already religious schools of thought, already set interpretations. I resonate with Dr. Duerksen's hope for creative re-framing. We've seen this happening in person with Fatima and friends, as well as with other groups of Jesus followers. They are not first asking permission of the "higher-ups"—their re-framing of their narratives is growing out of their own experiences as groups. May it continue. May God protect these re-framing processes. May there be a growing variety of new expressions in following Jesus within existing religious communities, until we find that God is working in a way that is beyond what we could imagine. As Dr. Duerksen says, "God is and has already been on their path, albeit in ways they had not yet seen." **IJFM**