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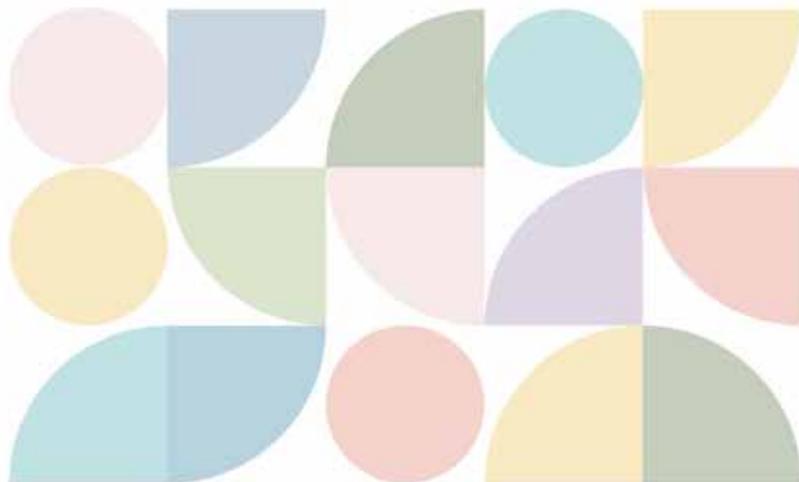
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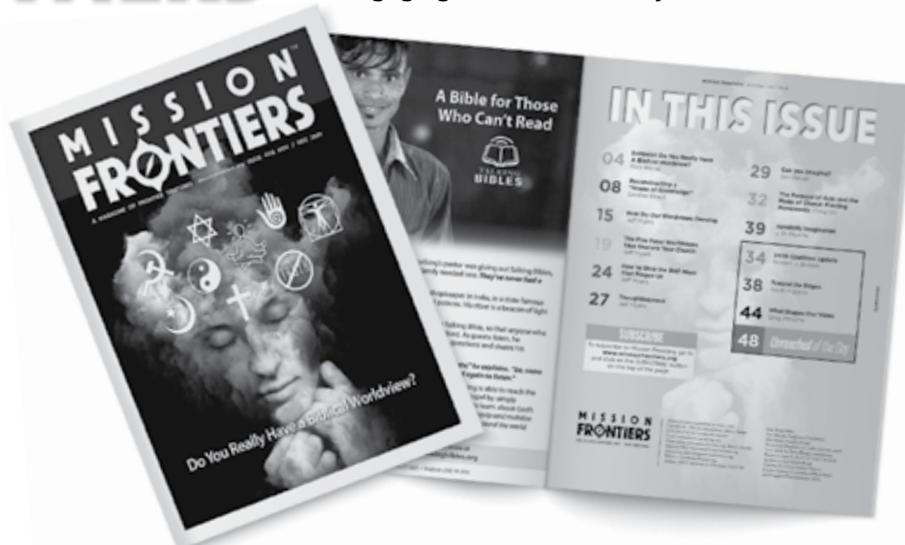
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## Refining Our Religious Sensibility

You may have noticed that this journal is trying to raise our religious consciousness. We live in a secular age, one in which religious phenomena are considered marginal, epiphenomenal, not at the core of what moves people. But religious affinities and dispositions can lie silent and deep, hidden under a cosmopolitan sameness, creating barriers for the gospel.

Our last two *IJFM* installments have addressed this interreligious challenge. *IJFM* 38:3–4 was a compendium of the 2021 RDW Lectureship, with historical reflections on the innovative Christian-Buddhist ministry of Karl Reichelt among Chinese Buddhist monks. Then came issue 39:1 which focused on the “hermeneutical space” created in these interreligious encounters, especially those turning to Christ in a Buddhist religious world. That issue introduced Dr. Kang-San Tan’s concept of “inreligionization,” which served as his plenary address at EMS/ISFM 2021.

This current issue, 39:2–4, continues the same focus. It offers formal responses to Tan’s interreligious proposals delivered at the 2023 Winter Lectureship, “Beyond Contextualization: Crossing Religious and Cultural Boundaries.” This very recent event certainly widened our religious sensibilities, pressing us beyond mere theoretical engagement to a more grounded appreciation of the way people encounter Christ across religious and cultural divides. The reader will find these mature assessments of how and why movements to Christ may or may not emerge amidst Asia’s pluralistic world of Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu.

No one, not even Dr. Tan, seems beholden to the actual neologism in inreligionization, but further probing of the concept itself seemed a fruitful course. Tan’s presentations bookended the symposium, with the introduction of his concept of “inreligionization” in the opening lecture (p. 69) and then a closing perspective on dual religious belonging (p. 117). All presentations by the formal respondents in this symposium—Harold Netland, Brainerd Prince, Anna Travis, and Darren Duerksen—are published here. But this issue falls short of a full compendium, with only a sample of the short responses to the different presentations. Neither were the panel interactions transcribed, where the adept moderator, Kevin Higgins, linked insights from across a wide field of Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu religious worlds.

We have added three other articles which illustrate a religious sensibility to the Hindu world. H. L. Richard provides a vivid historical example of interreligious engagement from the life of R. C. Das (p. 127). Elizabeth Walker offers a practical

Editorial *continued on p. 68*

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.

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### Subscriptions (Pay by check or online)

#### USA & Canada (first class)

1 year (4 issues) \$25

2 years (8 issues) \$48

3 years (12 issues) \$69

#### All other countries (airmail)

1 year: \$50; 2 years: \$96; 3 years: \$138

Single copies: US & Canada \$7, All others \$14

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**IJFM** (ISSN #2161-3354) was established in 1984 by the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, an outgrowth of the student-level meeting of Edinburgh '80.

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PRINTED in the USA

orientation to the ceremonial life of Hindu friends (p. 135), and Herb Hoeffler points to the significance of poetry and song in the spiritual devotion (*bhakti*) of Swami Bharati, a Hindu follower of Jesus (p. 143).

Let me suggest how this religious sensibility fits into all that's happening in frontier mission today.

I attended a recent conference where I listened to some of the most astute leaders involved in the growth of disciple making movements today. I was struck by their description of the social dynamics of these movements. Their analysis was beyond mere quantification, for they seemed ready and willing to use social network analysis and diffusion theory. But I noted hardly a reference to cultural or religious distinctives across this analysis. A religious sensibility played a minor role, if any. That's a precipitous judgment, I confess, but the grid seemed to favor social data.

No doubt these movements are rippling through an unreached social landscape in wonderful ways. But one wonders if a shallow religious sensibility may allow certain affinities—like the more

“high-identity” religious populations—to remain hidden at the edges of these same movements. One wonders whether further innovation would emerge where there is an astute religious sensibility.

Thinking biblically for a final moment, I'm impressed that the apostle Paul always appeared to have a religious sensibility. He was constantly interacting with the cosmopolitan religious perspectives of his Greco-Roman world. It wasn't just a social landscape, nor simply a cross-cultural challenge. In particular, he was keenly aware of the significance of religious affinities, rituals, and institutions. This point seems clear without a full biblical review of Jew/Greek/barbarian, the “strong” and the “weak,” the cultic participation in eating meat, the keeping of sacred days, or the “elemental principles of the world.” Paul knew that religious realities tended to divide, and he was sensitive to the boundaries of different religious identities at the edges of that first-century Christward movement.

So, the *IJFM* is grateful for this recent lectureship's venture “beyond contextualization,” and for the further examination of Kang-San Tan's concept of

inreligionization. It's been a privilege to edit and publish these contributions. May they sharpen our interreligious aptitude, especially as we endeavor to see the power of the gospel emerge in the religious complexities of Asia.

The ISFM/EMS 2023 is happening this October 13–14, 2023 (see ad on page 65). Our plenary speaker, Paul Cornelius (Pres., William Carey Int'l University), and the ten breakout sessions will address vital aspects of education and formation in frontier mission. The meeting is a hybrid event, both virtual and on-site at our new venue, Dallas Theological Seminary. Hope to see you there.

In Him,



Brad Gill  
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

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The **IJFM** is published in the name of the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, a fellowship of younger leaders committed to the purposes of the twin consultations of Edinburgh 1980: The World Consultation on Frontier Missions and the International Student Consultation on Frontier Missions. As an expression of the ongoing concerns of Edinburgh 1980, the **IJFM** seeks to:

- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate “A Church for Every People.”

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go, yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, “to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.” (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the **IJFM** (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the **IJFM** for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.

Beyond Contextualisation

# Crossing Religious and Cultural Frontiers: Rethinking Mission as Inreligionisation

by *Kang-San Tan*

*Editor's Note: This article was originally presented at the 2023 Ralph D. Winter Lectureship under the theme, "Beyond Contextualization: Crossing Religious and Cultural Boundaries."*

While the problem of non-Christian religions has been heightened more recently in the West—especially since the 1960s with the rise of pluralism as a celebrated virtue—in Asia the problem of religious plurality has been a fact of life since the first millennium.<sup>1</sup> But today this challenge has intensified for the church in Asia as it faces a revitalization of other religions, witnesses ethnic violence across religious divides, and encounters a growing theological relativism—a clear sign of a postmodern context. These religious dynamics call for a fresh Asian perspective on contemporary interreligious communication, and it has prompted me to frame “inreligionisation” as a contemporary mission approach towards world religions.<sup>2</sup>

I am thankful for this opportunity to address this lectureship, and I look forward to engaging in conversation with different speakers and participants on this interreligious challenge we face in Asia. Indeed, missiologists and theologians have been highlighting this challenge for some time. In his book *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch highlights two crucial theological issues facing the church: (1) Christianity's relationship to secular worldviews and (2) Christianity's relationship to other religions.<sup>3</sup> For Gerhard Anderson, the theology of religions is *the* theological issue for Christian mission in the twenty-first century—“No issue in missiology is more important, more difficult, more controversial, and more divisive for the days ahead than the theology of religions.”<sup>4</sup> Other theologians such as Gavin D'Costa, Jacques Dupuis, Paul Knitter and Harold Netland have also identified the challenge of religions as an important theological issue to be explored.<sup>5</sup>

Gavin D'Costa, Professor of Catholic Theology at University of Bristol, writing from the British context, introduces the significance of Christian engagements with religions as follows:

[It] . . . is difficult to think of a more important question facing Christianity in the twenty-first century. Christianity's very existence in part depends on how it relates to the world religions. This is a matter of survival and more importantly

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a matter of plausibility: how do Christians relate to their tradition, which so many think has related so negatively to the world religions? The questions are not simply theological and pastoral—can a non-Christian be saved?, but also very practical and political—how should Christians relate to the religiously pluralist public square? Should they join with Muslims, for example, to campaign for religious schools?<sup>6</sup>

The field of theology of religions is a fairly new theological discipline, started in the early 1960s. Although the discipline may be emerging, the issues on Christianity's relationship with other religions are not new. In the early twentieth century, John Farquhar authored an influential publication on fulfilment theology entitled *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913), in which he argued that Christ (not Christianity) was the crown of Hinduism.<sup>7</sup> That Hinduism as a religion is to be included in the plan of God's salvation signalled a change in attitude toward non-Christian religions. What had been negatively termed "pagan religion" was more positively designated as "fulfillment of Christianity." In another publication, the German liberal thinker, Ernst Troeltsch, published an essay, "The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions," and William Hocking wrote his widely read *Rethinking Missions* a few years later, in 1932. Their influence was to challenge Christianity's claim of special religious status, that it "should be seen as just one among many equally salvific paths to the divine reality."<sup>8</sup>

Previously, some Christian theology of religions (particularly exclusivism) had a tendency to treat non-Christian religions as tight, separate systems, but more Asian theologians are arguing that such strict and abstract boundaries do not reflect the actual situation in Asia, where the cross fertilization of religious beliefs is a daily faith experience. In a context where identities are hyphenated, do we have theological models that reflect these intersections of faiths? Instead of a total rejection of past faiths, will it be possible to promote both traditions resulting in Chinese-British churches, Christian-Malay worship, and Christian-Buddhist festivals?

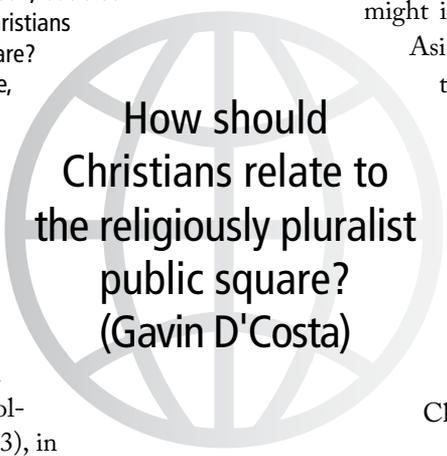
### **Post Conservative Evangelical Theology**

Mission as inreligionisation will be difficult to sustain if one approaches other religions as false and with no capacity for truth. If so, the goal of mission would be to defeat and replace world faiths with Christianity. However, if one believes that God has ordained Christianity as the true faith, but that all religions are a means of grace and potentially have bridges for the Christian gospel, then inreligionisation could be a fruitful mission approach for people of all faiths to follow Jesus.

This does not mean that Christians accept those religions as salvific within themselves without Jesus. Just as many East Asian religions are open to multiple religious identities, might it then be possible for Evangelicals from Asian religious traditions to construct Christian religious identities from a greater range of resources? Through both insider and outsider perspectives, participant observations, and contextualisation, it might be possible to mediate and construct new and hybrid religious identities. This perspective would indicate that the gospel has transforming power not only for the religious other, but for Christians as well.

I expect different theological positions would yield different results as Christians approach mission as inreligionisation. I will argue that post conservative Evangelical theology is best able to sustain inreligionisation, namely, through its demonstration of the following characteristics:

1. A discontent with the traditional ties of evangelical theology to the "evangelical Enlightenment," and especially its discontent towards "common sense realism." A rejection of the "wooden" approach to Scripture, in favor of regarding it as "Spirit-inspired realistic narrative."
2. A more open view of God, in which God limits himself and enters into a genuine responsive relationship with humans, taking their pain and suffering into himself. God is a risk taker, not one who controls everything so that nothing contrary to his desires can occur.
3. An acceptance, rather than a rejection, of the realm of nature. Nature, although fallen, is never abandoned by grace, but rather is still pervaded by it.
4. A hope for a near-universal access to God's grace unto salvation. God has not left himself without a witness in all cultures, sufficient to bring people to salvation if they earnestly seek it.
5. An emphasis in Christology on the humanity of Jesus, while still retaining belief in the divinity of Christ. This emphasis would be thought of more in relational than in substance and person categories.
6. A more synergistic understanding of the divine and human in salvation. These theologians are, overall, more characteristically Arminian than Calvinistic.
7. A rejection of triumphalism with respect to theological truth-claims. Post conservatives are critical of any presumption of epistemological certainty and dogmatic theological systems.<sup>9</sup>



**How should  
Christians relate to  
the religiously pluralist  
public square?  
(Gavin D'Costa)**

## *Religion as a Contested Term?*

Having a universal definition of religion can be problematic because—like culture and society—religion is a modern term that may not fit neatly into the dynamic and changing religious realities of our global cosmopolitan world.<sup>10</sup> Assuming that the religions of the world are multifaceted and responsive to changing contexts, certain questions arise: What is our understanding of the term “religion”? Is religion a subset of culture? Is there something essential in religion?

The earlier essentialist definitions of religion (such as German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher’s “feeling of absolute dependence,” Paul Tillich’s “ultimate concern,” or Mircea Eliade’s “experience of the sacred”) emerge and evolve in our modern era of Enlightenment thinking. Increasingly, the essentialist approach toward understanding religion is being taken over by functionalist approaches. Christopher Partridge discussed three approaches to defining religion (religious, naturalistic and agnostic), pointing out the limitations or failure of each approach in taking into account other facets of religions (i.e., a problem of breadth).<sup>11</sup> Instead, following the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), some scholars are working on the concept of “family resemblance” whereby religion (like game theory) is a network that shares overlapping similarities or common characteristics.

**Some scholars are working on the concept of “family resemblance” whereby religion (like game theory) is a network that shares overlapping similarities or common characteristics.**

Adopting a family resemblance model in classifying religion would be useful for our project when referring to humanity’s *belonging* to distinct religious traditions. This idea of resemblance is helpful conceptually when using the term “religious belonging,” for it implies not only a theological category but functions as a descriptive term that is operative, applicable and recognisable in the real-life situations of Asia. It can reshape our presuppositions about the religious other.

Our categories for understanding the religious other are largely influenced by a modern set of Protestant Western cultural assumptions, more often focusing on textual and doctrinal aspects as a basis for interreligious encounters. If we are self-critical and open to the lived practices of people, we will

experience a dissonance with the idealized representations of religious traditions from the classroom. Typically, we ask, “What do you believe?” when we should be employing the concept of lived religion.<sup>12</sup> Meredith McGuire points out the messiness of religion and the differences between elite institutions (with their organized systems) and the practice of individual members. Instead of looking at textual or organisational affiliations, we should focus on “individuals, the experiences they consider most important, and the concrete practices that make up their personal religious experience and expressions.”<sup>13</sup>

Evangelical theologians, McDermott and Netland, acknowledge that:

Many today contend that the ways in which we typically think about and study religion are fundamentally flawed. Critics claim that our contemporary concept of religion—and of the religions as distinct, clearly definable entities—is a modern construction that emerged with the dissolution of Christendom in Europe, the growing secularization of European societies, and the repercussions from European colonialism and Christian missionary activities in Asia.<sup>14</sup>

In answering this contention about our modern categorization, I would suggest a more descriptive and sociological sense of religious community. Griffiths considers it to be “any group of persons that would, severally and collectively, acknowledge themselves to be members of some community that is recognizably religious.”<sup>15</sup> Such sociological boundary markers, albeit porous and liminal in certain stages, enable demographers Johnson and Grimm to define religion as,

an organised group of committed individuals that adhere to and propagate a specific interpretation of explanations of existence based on supernatural assumptions through statements about nature and workings of the supernatural and about ultimate meaning.<sup>16</sup>

Although religions today may be identified as providing comprehensive worldviews which then can be used as a political tool that defines group-belonging sociologically, we must note to the contrary a more real fluidity in which people negotiate religious identities.<sup>17</sup>

If contextualization remains an important mission concept, and if religion and culture are intimately linked and not to be easily separated, then a more integrated and contextualized approach toward the convert’s past religious traditions will be needed:

If the common feature of Jesus of Nazareth and the theological idea of the incarnation are taken into account, the most vital tenets of the Christian faith entail a constant call for contextualisation. Since all cultures also display religious dimensions, i.e., a fundamental openness to transcendence, this contextualisation embraces also those traditions that have been labelled traditionally as “religions.”<sup>18</sup>

### *Growing Up in Multireligious Malaysia*

I grew up in a Confucian Chinese tradition mixed with Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism. During my late teens, I became a Christian through the reading of the Bible given by a friend. My Christian conversion, or turning to God, was a gradual process. It is difficult to determine a point of explicit confession of Christ as the moment of my personal conversion. But due to the teachings in my local Baptist church, I rejected all past associations with Chinese traditions. My rejection of Confucianist, Buddhist and Taoist cultures created deep tension and conflicts within my family and extended kinships since I could no longer participate in our family ancestor rites, religious festivals, community celebrations, or marriage and funeral rites. Due to the intimate links between religion and culture, it is difficult for Christian converts from other religious traditions to distinguish what is cultural and what is religious.

In later years, I discovered that turning to Jesus does not mean one must reject every aspect of Chinese culture, even if the practice is related to religious roots. I came across more complex verses in the Christian Scriptures when Jesus identified the Ninevites, the Queen of Sheba, and those who lived in the cities of Tyre, Sidon, Sodom, and Gomorrah (Matt. 10:15; 11:11; 12:41–42) as among those who will be welcomed into the kingdom of God. God's way of revelation will not be limited by our inadequate preaching, and our failures in mission are not the final determinant of people's salvation.

**My rejection of my religious heritage created deep conflicts within my family since I could no longer participate in our family ancestor rites, religious festivals, and funeral rites.**

My personal account of tensions and misunderstandings toward my family and cultural philosophical traditions, with its intimate link with world religious traditions, and my search for a more adequate Christian identity is not an isolated account, but one that is commonly repeated among Asian converts from different religious traditions. Lin Yutang, in his spiritual autobiography, *From Pagan to Christian*, traces his spiritual pilgrimage—how he moved from a fundamentalist rejection of his past Chinese heritage to a recovery and renewed appreciation of Chinese religion and a rejection of Christianity. Only in his old age, did he return to his childhood Christian faith, deeper and wiser.<sup>19</sup>

In a broader social political context, this personal example of struggle as a Christian from a Buddhist background becomes even more complicated when one considers the barriers for Malay Muslims (in Malaysia) to accept a Jesus wrapped in Western clothing. Although our research will focus on Buddhist and Christian belonging, we must also consider the theological implications of this study upon other faiths, particularly Islam and Hinduism. The reason is due to the dominant growth of insider movements that have mostly emerged within Islamic and Hindu communities. Therefore, most of the Christian literature and discussions have taken place in the context of these two religious backgrounds, Islam and Hinduism. To date, there is no major publication on dual religious belonging among Buddhists.

So, let's turn to a description of the cultural and religious divide between Christian and Muslim communities I experienced:

1. Theological differences between Islam and Christianity
2. Religious misunderstandings inherited from centuries of Christian-Muslim relations
3. Racial and cultural differences in Malaysia between Muslims and Christians (the latter are mostly from Chinese and Indian descent)
4. Social pressures against conversion to non-Muslim religions within the Malay community
5. Legislative barriers hindering freedom of conversion, marriage, burial and religious practice
6. Political structures organized along racial lines
7. Economic deprivations for converts, e.g., withdrawal of special privileges for housing, business, children's education.
8. Impact of global events such as Palestinian-Israeli conflicts, war of terror, and trade protectionism in Western countries.

In a situation where ethnicity and religion overlap (a fusion complicated by domestic and international socio-historical and political barriers) an adequate Christian theology of non-Christian religions must take into consideration multi-dimensional realities, but particularly a perspective on the nature and method for understanding dual religious belonging. There is no such thing as a purely bounded spiritual identity abstracted from socioreligious experiences of life in community. Where does one draw the line between culture and religion? Can Malay Christians follow Jesus while remaining in a culture informed by non-Christian faiths? How do Christians develop a map for discerning the possibility of being a hybrid Muslim-Christian?

In sharing the questions surrounding this interreligious predicament, I hope we will appreciate the complex issues that require more interaction and deliberation before we form simplistic, theological responses.

## Rethinking Mission as Inreligionisation

I use the term “inreligionisation” as 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. I define “frontier” as a zone of contacts and creative exchanges between adherents of different religions, a zone both open and liminal, with no one group being able to establish dominance. Instead, these are zones of proximal learning explored in a spirit of humility, dialogue and hospitality.

**It was an effort to retain or regain  
the texture and feel of places  
people call home—where people  
seek God through culturally  
embedded religious forms.**

This zone requires a radical relocation of message and messenger into other non-Christian religious contexts rather than a more traditional, territorial “from-to” approach. It is an attempt, for example, by Christians from Asian religious traditions who believe that it is possible not only to accept and incorporate certain doctrines or practices of other religions, but also to adopt in their personal lives many of the beliefs and practices of these religious traditions. It seeks to address both cultural objections against Christianity as a Western religion as well as the pain and loss of rooted Asian identities, i.e., whenever conversions to Jesus have resulted in the rejection and suppression of past identities. It 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.<sup>20</sup> This is a global task which Christians from the West could join—a shared vision to disciple followers of Jesus within different religious traditions.

In his response to my talk, H. L. Richard reminded us that “inreligionisation” is not a novel concept. He noted that we could trace similar ideas with 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 the heritages of the world’s cultural traditions. 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 their rich heritage for Christ.<sup>21</sup> Richards also highlighted Harvey Conn’s insight that “turning to Christ” is not turning to another culture but the rediscovery of one’s human origins and identity. He also asked whether “turning to Christ” could include a turning to the religious traditions that have shaped a person and society within any given culture.

Brad Gill, the editor for the *International Journal of Frontier Missiology (IJFM)*, helpfully suggested three dimensions to a Christian engagement of this proposal of inreligionisation:

- Inreligionisation requires that gospel communications respect other religious identities.
- Inreligionisation addresses the strategic loss in religious displacement.
- Inreligionisation allows for a fresh hermeneutical space.<sup>22</sup>

Regarding the latter, Gill cited William Dyrness’ concept of “hermeneutical space” and summarized it as the kind of necessary framework if inreligionisation is to flourish:

- 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.<sup>23</sup>

Such a proposal of mission engagement and culture transmission are welcome whenever Christians are open to meet with other living faiths in such a way that there will be a Hindu Christianity or Buddhist Christianity. Henri Nouwen speaks of the Christian vocation to create these kinds of spaces for strangers, “to convert the *hostis* into a *hospes*, the enemy into a guest, and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.”<sup>24</sup>

## Three Studies of Inreligionisation

At the conclusion of this first lecture, and for our discussion, I want to introduce three distinct studies that will stimulate our reflection on some of the aspects of mission as inreligionisation.

### Pilgrims and Ashrams

The first is the story of Bede Griffiths, who as a student at Oxford under the influence of C. S. Lewis would develop a deep interest in his Anglican Christian identity. However, in 1931, he became a Catholic Christian, and then in 1955 went to India as a mission worker. Griffiths became greatly influenced by monks who had already started living in ways typical of Hindu holy men (*sadhu*). This involved wearing saffron robes rather than a Western monk’s habit,

living in an *ashram* (traditional Hindu ascetic community), studying Hindu philosophy, and even engaging in Hindu-inspired forms of practice and meditation.

In 1958 Griffiths established a Christian ashram called Kurisumala. However, he was best known for his role at the ashram of Shantivanam, which had been founded by a monk known as Abhistananda (Henri Le Saux, 1910–1973). It was Abhistananda who offered a rather famous description of his experience while practicing Advaita Vedanta meditation, what is called an “advaita experience”: feeling his own self/soul merging with God/the divine such that they were one and undifferentiated. For a Christian monk who believed in God as the Trinity and creator of humanity, this was hard for Abhistananda to reconcile on an intellectual level. Nevertheless, he could not deny his experience of union with the divine.

For Griffiths, a dramatic experience occurred in 1990 when he suffered a stroke and had what he termed an experience of the divine feminine. He spoke of this as being linked to Hindu goddesses but also in Christian terms as relating to Mary and the Holy Spirit. In both these experiences Griffiths and Abhistananda remained firm in their Christian identity, but both were also deeply imbued within Hindu thought and practice. Could they be spoken of as Hindus and Christians? Yet, in their context, both these monks were aware that they were seeking a reconciliation between what is seen as two separate and distinct religions, between conflicting ways of experiencing what it means to be religious.

### Temples and Converts

A second example is my friend, John (not his real name), who was a missionary in Thailand for seventeen years and returned to Scotland with many questions with regards to the lack of fruitfulness during his mission service. He then completed his PhD in Buddhism and began to take an interest in engaging with Buddhist migrant communities in Scotland. In the morning he went to the Church of Scotland, but during the afternoon he would spend time helping migrants from Buddhist countries with their practical needs. As the Buddhists knew that he had a doctorate in Buddhism, they asked him to teach them Buddhism. As a Christian, could he teach Buddhism in the Temple with a clear conscience? Wasn't he supposed to reach them with the gospel instead? He decided to respond to this request affirmatively. After some time, they said, you are a Christian missionary, please teach us the Bible! Could he teach the Bible in a Buddhist temple rather than in

a church? John felt this was God's answer for his many years of dedicated friendship and practical support to his Buddhist friends. They then began to trust that his real motive was love rather than the conversion of his friends to Christianity. After a few years, some of those Thai migrants became

Christians. Instead of bringing them to church, John disciplined these converts in the Buddhist temple in Scotland. Many years later, I caught up with John on his journey of disciplining followers of Jesus in Buddhism, and he told me that the head monk (the Abbot) had also given his life to be a follower of Jesus within his Buddhist traditions.

### Idols and Ancestors

In my third study I want us to reflect on a hybrid diaspora community (as in my own experience) and our response to the issue of ancestor worship. As is typical, the process of inreligionisation confronts questions: How shall a contextual embodied community of Chinese Christians explore ways in which ancestor worship might be acceptable based on a Christian understanding of worship and relationship? Are there contextually appropriate ways to incorporate the Chinese values of respect towards ancestors (as we find in the Bible) with the ways in which we as Chinese Christians pay our respects to ancestors without resorting to worship of the ancestors?

How should Christians relate to idols? The biblical injunctions are clear—we are to worship no other god but God. All idols are to be destroyed. But what exactly are “idols”? Are the statues of saints in a church idols? Is the picture of Christ on the wall at home an idol? Is a rock representing a local village spirit an idol? What is “worship” and how does it differ from “respect”?

Questions such as these constantly arise as we enter new cultures with the gospel. They are not new. The early church wrestled with the question of the responsibility of Christians to the Roman emperors, who declared themselves gods. Could Christians simply bow to the emperors to express political allegiance? Or did it always signify worship? And how should the church view Mary and the saints? The Council of Nicaea in AD 787 wrestled long with the distinction between worship (*latreia*) and respect (*proskynesis*). Here is an example of the predicament I want to leave with you for further discussion. After speaking at a Conference in Thailand, a Thai Christian from Australia wrote to me with the following question:

I wonder what you think about this. This weekend, my family will bow to my deceased grandparents, just in their old house which is near where I stay with family. I generally do not participate in this ritual. What would be your advice?

Could he teach  
the Bible in a Buddhist  
temple rather than  
in a church?

Traditionally, many Christian pastors will advocate “no bowing to ancestors.” Here was my response to this friend:

I would advocate a “contextual ancestor veneration” whereby you could consider praying to God (or meditating on a Psalm) giving thanks for your grandparents and your extended family. Among Catholic Christians, they do light incense or candles and would be contextualising holding incense and offering prayers to God in memories of their ancestors—although some Protestants might have difficulty with this practice. If we were to ask “modern Chinese Thais” about such practices, they would say they are more about respect and memories (less about idols and worship). This is an example whereby as Christians we learn to dialogue and not ascribe meanings a priori. May God grant you wisdom and witness that’s meaningful for you and your family.

One can see from these three examples that for Evangelicals a mission that seeks to reconcile two incompatible and at times contradictory religious systems is very problematic. Yet we realize that Christianity has not had a successful record of mission and evangelism with world faiths. Is not the harvest plentiful and the labourers few within these world religions? Should we not seek an inreligionisation process whereby Christ becomes all things to all men and the riches we find in other religious worlds are transformed for the service of Christ? **IJFM**



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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See Ivan Satyavrata, *God has not Left Himself Without Witness*, (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 3–4.
- <sup>2</sup> During the ISFM plenary at the Evangelical Missiological Society’s national conference in October, 2021, I presented a lecture, “Contextual Frameworks for Interreligious Communication: An Asian Perspective” which introduced some of the themes in this lecture.
- <sup>3</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 477.
- <sup>4</sup> Gerhard Anderson, “Theology of Religions and Missiology,” in *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium*, eds. Charles Van Engen, Dean Gilliland, and Paul Pierson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 201.
- <sup>5</sup> Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 5; *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), x; Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 5–6; Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 23–54.
- <sup>6</sup> D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 10.
- <sup>7</sup> See discussion in D’Costa, 7.
- <sup>8</sup> D’Costa, 7.
- <sup>9</sup> Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 13–14.
- <sup>10</sup> See discussion on defining religions, new religions, and religious groups in Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim, *The World’s Religions in Figures: An Introduction to International Religious Demography*, 135–140.
- <sup>11</sup> See Christopher Partridge, “Religion (definitions),” in *Dictionary of Contemporary Religion in the Western World* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 59–65. See also Gavin D’Costa’s critique of John Hick’s separation of individual “faith” from community practices “involves ahistorical and asocial reification” in Gavin D’Costa, *John Hick’s Theology of Religions: A Critical Evaluation* (London: University Press of America, 1987), 136.
- <sup>12</sup> Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3–4.
- <sup>13</sup> McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 4.
- <sup>14</sup> Gerald R. McDermott and Harold A. Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 220.
- <sup>15</sup> Paul Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Johnson and Grim, *The World’s Religions in Figures*, 136.
- <sup>17</sup> Johnson and Grim, 136.
- <sup>18</sup> Jyri Komulainen, “Theological Reflections on multi-religious Identity,” *Approaching Religion*, vol. 1, (May 2001): 51–59, especially 51.
- <sup>19</sup> Lin Yutang, *From Pagan to Christian* (London: Beinemann, 1960).
- <sup>20</sup> Brad Gill, “Inreligionisation: Reconsidering that Most Vital Hermeneutical Space,” *Editorial Reflections, IJFM* 39:1 (Spring 2022): 53.
- <sup>21</sup> H. L. Richard, “Answering the Call to Inreligionisation: A Response to Dr. Kang-San Tan” (in reference to Tan’s “Contextual Frameworks for Interreligious Communication,” in the same issue), *IJFM* 39:1 (Spring 2022): 15–16.
- <sup>22</sup> Brad Gill, “Inreligionisation,” 51–54.
- <sup>23</sup> Brad Gill, “Inreligionisation,” 54.
- <sup>24</sup> Henri Nouwen, <https://henrinouwen.org/meditations/create-space-for-the-stranger/>.

# Response

## A Response to Dr. Kang-San Tan

by *Anna Travis*

It was a joy for me to read Dr. Tan's paper, and now be able to respond to this thought-provoking presentation. Dr. Tan, thank you for this paper, and for your presentation, borne out of your own experience and missiological study.

As I read this paper, I resonated strongly with Dr. Tan's experience of meeting Christ, the suppressing or rejecting aspects of his own heritage, and now his efforts to "retain or regain the texture and feel" of the place he used to call home—his Buddhist heritage. Dr. Tan has experienced and recognizes the loss that takes place with religious dislocation—when no other option was known or presented. Numbers of Muslims we have met describe a similar journey.

I resonated strongly with Dr. Tan's hope to re-visit essentialist definitions of religion (based on doctrines and theoretical understandings) that have put up barriers to the good news . . . and his hope to develop alternative approaches to "lived religion" that could open the way for interaction between religious life and the living Christ—"a fresh hermeneutical space," a fourth era, inreligionisation, a new wave—where Christians honor and take seriously the realities of the religious aspects of a person's heritage.

**Dr. Tan has experienced and recognizes the loss that takes place with religious dislocation—when no other option was known or presented.**

I was happy to read Dr. Tan's list of post-conservative evangelical theological perspectives that could help open the way for new Christ-centered kingdom expressions:

- Viewing Scripture as Spirit-inspired realistic narrative
- Seeing God as one who takes our pain and suffering into himself as he risks to save the ones he created
- Reminding ourselves that God has not left himself without a witness anywhere among the people he has made

- Emphasizing more strongly aspects of Jesus Christ's humanity as well as his divinity
- Rejecting triumphalism in mission, which certainly has added so many unneeded barriers to the good news

The main question that arose in my mind concerns the viability of "dual religious identities." In the contexts with which I'm familiar, the typical person expects a singular religious identity. (For example, a common question is, "Do you celebrate Christmas or the celebration after Ramadan?" Each religious group has the tradition of making trips "back home" to the older members of the extended family on the main holiday. So, the question is, on which holiday do you make your trip back home? By the answer to this question, a person indicates his or her single religious identity.)

However, in these same contexts, we have noticed a surprising amount of flexibility within this singular religious identity—"wiggle room" in thinking, in spiritual perspectives, alternative streams, both existing and new—being permitted within this singular identity. For example, there is room in many Muslim communities for new spiritual realities concerning Jesus and the New Testament.

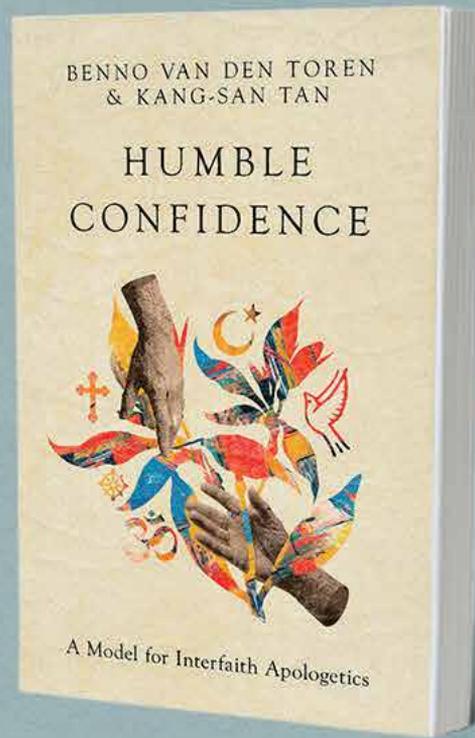
I am wondering: Could this be largely a difference in semantics? "Dual religious identities" vs. "Jesus streams" within another singular religious identity, such as "Muslims who are disciples of Jesus"? Is it possible that dual religious identities could be more possible for the highly educated? Or for the younger generations?

And of course, could dual religious identities be more possible in other societies with which I am unfamiliar?

I look forward to grappling further with these ideas.

Thank you so much, Dr. Tan, for your insights, your articulation of your experience, and your hopes for a better future. **IJFM**

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Beyond Contextualization

# Making Disciples, Contextualization, and Inreligionization: Some Reflections

by *Harold A. Netland*

*Editor's Note: This article was originally presented at the 2023 Ralph D. Winter Lectureship under the theme, "Beyond Contextualization: Crossing Religious and Cultural Boundaries."*

I am very grateful for the opportunity to participate in the 2023 Ralph D. Winter Lectureship. It is a special privilege for me to be here with my friend Dr. Tan. The title of our lectureship is "Beyond Contextualization: Crossing Religious and Cultural Boundaries." Dr. Tan has addressed these matters in a number of significant writings, urging us to move beyond contextualization to embrace inreligionization. My comments here are based primarily upon his 2022 essay, "Contextual Frameworks for Interreligious Communication."<sup>1</sup> His writings are thoughtful and provocative, and they raise important issues. If I understand him correctly, I find myself in broad agreement with much that he says, but I do have some questions about his proposal.

As we consider contextualization and inreligionization, we need to remember that these concepts are intended to enable us to live more faithfully as followers of Jesus Christ and to make disciples of Jesus of all peoples. This includes sincere and pious adherents of other religions. What should this look like in the 2020s and 2030s?

## *Becoming Disciples of Jesus*

Let's begin with the notion of being disciples of Jesus. A disciple is a committed follower of Jesus, someone whose life is characterized by the qualities outlined for us in Jesus' teachings throughout the New Testament. Becoming a disciple of Jesus involves believing certain things about God, Jesus, and humankind to be true; it also includes acknowledging one's sinfulness and casting oneself on God for mercy and forgiveness. It is only through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that one becomes a "new creation" and is able to grow steadily in conformity to the image of Christ.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus involves both continuities and discontinuities with one's past. In becoming a disciple, for example, one does not abandon one's nationality or ethnicity. We cannot entirely escape the collective influences that

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shape us when we come in faith to Christ—nor should we desire to do so. As historian Andrew Walls reminds us, “It is our past which tells us who we are; without our past we are lost.”<sup>2</sup> At the same time, embracing Jesus Christ as Lord always includes a turning from, or rejection of, some aspects of our past. In determining to follow Christ some things are left behind. Jesus begins his ministry with a call to repentance: “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.” (Mark 1:15) And Paul urges the folk religionists in Lystra to “turn from these worthless things to the living God.” (Acts 14:15) Yet, not everything from one’s past should be rejected. The break with the past must be over the right issues and for the right reasons, and this calls for wise judgment in sometimes perplexing situations.

**Religions tend to be dismissed as little more than domains of darkness, falsehood and evil. We have not treated followers of these religions with the respect they deserve.**

### *Contextualization*

It is in trying to find the proper balance between continuity and discontinuity that discussions about contextualization arise. By “contextualization” I simply mean the attempt to use symbolic forms which are sufficiently familiar to people within a particular context, and which adequately communicate the message of Scripture, in an effort to encourage acceptance of the gospel and obedience to Christ. Contextualization involves not only issues over linguistic terms used in translation but also concepts, identity markers, patterns of behavior, rituals, and social institutions. As such, contextualization is not an activity reserved for intercultural missionary encounters; it is something every church in any social context ought to be engaged in.

Contextualization is a dynamic process which operates at the tension produced by the polarity of two basic principles identified by Andrew Walls as the Indigenizing Principle and the Pilgrim Principle.<sup>3</sup> The Indigenizing Principle maintains that the gospel can be expressed in any language and can be “at home” within any cultural setting; there is no particular culture, language, or ethnicity that is distinctively Christian and thus normative for all people. This principle affirms one’s historical and current social context as a legitimate venue within which to live as authentic disciples of Jesus. One need not be abstracted from one’s broader social context.

But the Pilgrim Principle reminds us that although the gospel can be expressed within any social context it also stands apart from all contexts and judges every human community. The gospel is subversive and challenges patterns of life in every setting which are unjust or idolatrous. In an important sense, then, Christ’s disciples are “aliens and sojourners” and cannot be completely “at home” in any social setting. And therein lies the tension within which every community of Christ-followers must live and within which we endeavor to make disciples.

### *The Gospel and World Religions*

Dr. Tan has suggested that focusing just on contextualization with respect to culture is inadequate and that we need also to ask new questions about the relation between the gospel and major religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Inreligionization is proposed as a necessary step beyond contextualization.

I do agree with Dr. Tan that we need to take the major religions much more seriously and that we must extend questions about continuity and discontinuity beyond just the cultural dimension to include religion. Missionaries and local Christian leaders generally have not taken the time to study carefully religions such as Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism. Missiologists have tended to focus on folk religion<sup>4</sup> and have largely neglected the intellectual traditions within the great religions. Moreover, when religions are considered, they tend to be dismissed as little more than domains of darkness, falsehood and evil. We have not treated followers of these religions with the respect that they deserve. We need to rethink our approach and to repent of un-Christlike attitudes. Thankfully, there are welcome changes in some sectors. The 2010 Cape Town Commitment, for example, strikes a fresh tone when it states,

In the name of the God of love, we repent of our failure to seek friendships with people of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious backgrounds. In the spirit of Jesus, we will take initiatives to show love, goodwill, and hospitality to them. (11c.1b)

I also agree with Dr. Tan that there are aspects of one’s previous religious life that can be incorporated into one’s new identity as a disciple of Jesus.

### *Inreligionization*

What then should we say about Dr. Tan’s notion of inreligionization? My first observation is that it is not entirely clear to me just what is meant by the term. Although I agree that we need to take the religious dimension more seriously, do we really need a new term for this? What does inreligionization add that could not be included in contextualization?

In what follows, I will make brief comments on five issues, the first two having to do with culture and religion and the last three with the notion of inreligionization.

## Culture and Religion

First, part of our problem has been that too often missiologists have made a sharp distinction between the concepts of culture and religion, restricting contextualization to cultural matters while largely ignoring religious beliefs and practices. Although this is not his intention, I am concerned that in introducing a new term such as “inreligionisation” Dr. Tan might be reinforcing this dichotomy between culture and religion in an unhelpful manner. Contextualization focuses on culture whereas inreligionisation moves beyond culture to deal with religion. But this presupposes a neat distinction between culture and religion which cannot be sustained.

## Modern Constructs

It is important to remember that concepts such as culture, religion, the world religions, and even the notions of Hinduism and Buddhism, were developed during the past several centuries as Europeans and Americans became increasingly aware of the bewildering differences among various groups of people worldwide. As such, these concepts are in part modern constructs.<sup>5</sup> But to say that they are modern constructs is not to suggest that they do not pick out real patterns among diverse groups. Nor does this mean that what the terms “culture” and “religion” refer to had no reality prior to the modern era. It does mean, however, that these concepts were developed under particular historical circumstances and for certain purposes.

The concepts of religion and culture are important and, when properly qualified, can be helpful.<sup>6</sup> These are conceptual lenses intended to help us see and understand general patterns of similarity and difference across groups of people worldwide. To the extent that such concepts enable us to understand the lived realities among diverse peoples, they are helpful and should be utilized. But if they obscure or distort these realities, then they should be modified.

## Distinctions and Overlap

Without attempting to define the concepts of culture or religion here, we can observe that if we accept Ninian Smart’s characterization of religion as a multidimensional phenomenon then it is clear that the notions of culture and religion are similar and overlap. Smart suggests that we think of religions

as complex social systems characterized by ritual, narrative, doctrine, ethical norms, social institutions, experience, and material objects.<sup>7</sup> Although the concepts of culture and religion clearly overlap, they are distinct concepts and neither can be reduced to the other. For example, the same religion—Christianity or Buddhism—can be lived out or find expression in many different cultures. And if we think of culture very broadly, such as American culture or Singaporean culture, then there can be many religious traditions within one culture.

## Boundary Markers

Concepts such as culture and religion, or even Christianity and Buddhism, serve as boundary markers, setting off one domain from another. Boundaries of one kind or another are essential to successful living. Engaging with religious others, for whatever reason, involves crossing various boundaries. In a thoughtful and perceptive essay, David Vishanoff observes that “The notion of interreligious encounter presupposes the existence of a boundary across which interaction takes place.”<sup>8</sup> Boundaries are markers of difference and serve various purposes. But Vishanoff emphasizes that encounters across religious boundaries take place within a broader context of commonalities among those in the encounter. If two or more groups literally have nothing in common, then actual encounter would be impossible. Boundaries between religious groups become significant when particular things are highlighted, thereby calling attention to the differences (e.g., dietary restrictions). If other things were highlighted (respect for ancestors) the groups might be regarded as having much in common.

Boundaries are to some extent socially constructed and changeable. They are the product of certain collective decisions, often implicit, to regard certain things as significant markers of identity, distinguishing one’s own group from the others. Boundary markers can and sometimes do change. But whether certain boundary markers ought to be modified or abandoned is often a controversial and contested matter for a group.

Although missiologists are generally sensitive to the changing dynamics of culture, they often tend to treat religions as unchanging, homogenous, reifications. But the great religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam are vast families of traditions with enormous internal variation, and they are continually undergoing change, especially in the modern era with globalization.

What does  
inreligionization  
add that could not  
be included in  
contextualization?

Furthermore, in many contexts today the distinction between religion and culture is ambiguous and messy, so that it can be difficult to determine whether a practice is cultural or religious. This was certainly my experience in Japan. Is a funeral presided over by Buddhist priests a cultural or a religious event? What about ancestral veneration practices in the home or at the grave site? The problem becomes even more confusing when we consider that the symbolic meanings of institutions or practices change over time, and that during such transitions the meanings are contested and controversial. Who decides the meaning of a ritual in times of transition?

I recall a conversation with an elderly Japanese grandmother after I had given a presentation at a church. She had become a disciple of Jesus as an elderly woman—something that is extremely rare in Japan. But she had a question for me. Why, she asked, do Christians forbid participation in the local *matsuri* or festivals? A *matsuri* is a special festival, a time of boisterous celebration, music and dance. Most *matsuri* began in religious contexts and originally had clear religious meanings. Participants carry elaborate palanquins around town, and traditionally it was believed that special *kami* or deities of the village were housed in the palanquin. After parading the *kami* around the village, the men then escort the *kami* back to the Shinto shrine where they are deposited until the next celebration. But although the origin of most *matsuri* is clearly religious, one can argue that over time the religious significance of the festivals has diminished so that now they are primarily cultural celebrations. And that was this grandmother's point. She did not believe that the palanquins literally housed Shinto *kami*—the *matsuri* was simply an occasion for a fun celebration with her grandchildren and she could not understand why the Christians in her church disapproved of her enjoying the festivals with her grandkids.

I find her question very instructive. She was a new believer and had not yet been socialized in all the ways of the local Christian community. Moreover, she represents the many Japanese today who regard the *matsuri* as a cultural, not a religious, event, whereas her friends at church still think of it in religious terms. This naturally raises the question, whose perspective on the *matsuri* is correct and why? The grandmother's perspective is important—but so too are the perspectives of her fellow believers at church.

### Is Culture More Benign than Religion?

My second observation concerns the missiological tendency to regard the domain of culture as relatively benign or neutral, with good potential for successful contextualization of the gospel, while dismissing the religious sphere as inherently

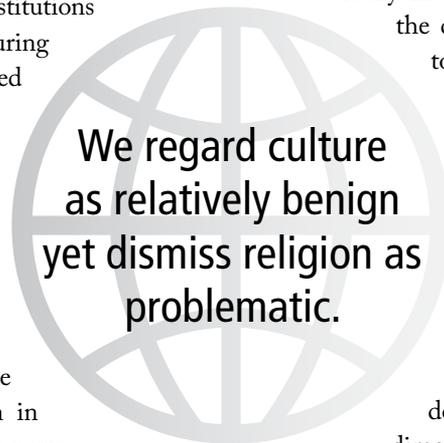
problematic and incompatible with the gospel. Thus, if a belief or practice is “merely cultural” then it is probably alright to use it in contextualization; but if it is clearly religious, then it is not.

But why should we assume this? Is the cultural realm really less problematic than the religious? Is the religious dimension really more likely to contain false beliefs, evil, and the demonic than the cultural? I do not want to minimize what is false and evil wherever these occur, but I do think that we need a more nuanced approach to these issues than is usually found in missiological discussions. Religions can contain remarkable elements of truth, goodness and beauty along with what is false and evil; and cultures can be demonic and evil as well as repositories of beauty and goodness. And yet, having said that, there does seem to be *something* about the religious dimension that elevates its significance when we consider making disciples of Jesus. Religion, as Paul Tillich famously noted, addresses matters of ultimate concern and this brings it into potential conflict with the gospel in ways that culture may not.<sup>9</sup>

Let me summarize this brief section on cultures and religions by suggesting that the most significant issue is not the label we ascribe to a particular belief or practice, whether it is cultural or religious. The most important question is whether adopting that belief or practice will make it easier for people to become disciples of Jesus Christ or whether doing so will actually inhibit disciple making.

### Identity and Hybridity

Now several observations about the notion of inreligionization. First, Dr. Tan raises the issue of identity and especially hybrid or multiple religious identity. Can there be a Hindu Christianity or a Buddhist Christianity? A Hindu Christian or a Buddhist Christian? These are complex questions, and they are made more difficult by globalization. Who determines a person's identity? Minimally, it seems, the perspective of the individual is relevant—how does the individual understand his or her own identity? But much more than just the individual is involved. I think of my father in rural Japan when I was a child. My father was from Norway and he was proud of his Norwegian identity. But when Japanese children saw him walking down the road they would point at him and exclaim “Amerika-jin! Amerika-jin!” The only category they had for someone with blond hair and blue eyes was “American.” Although my father would vigorously protest and correct them, they kept calling him an American. Our identity



is in part beyond our control and is shaped by what others perceive us to be. In my father's case, the issue was national or ethnic identity, but similar factors are at work with religious identity. In addition to the individual, there are many other stakeholders in determining whether one can claim the label Christian Buddhist. Given globalization and the technological revolutions in communication, these stakeholders can be far removed from the local context.

Now, there certainly are those today who identify themselves as both Christian and Buddhist. I think of my friend Paul Knitter, the prominent Roman Catholic theologian who has also taken vows as a Buddhist and who wrote *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*.<sup>10</sup> There are many in Europe and North America like him who embrace dual or multiple religious identities. I do think it is significant, however, that I cannot recall ever meeting anyone in Japan who referred to themselves as Christian Buddhists.

But this raises a related issue: Whose Christianity and which Buddhism? Paul Knitter, for example, represents an extremely liberal form of Roman Catholicism that is certainly outside of traditional Christian theism. Moreover, as one reads his book it becomes clear that he selectively reinterprets key Buddhist and Christian teachings to make them more amenable to his pluralist perspective. In other words, what he embraces is a syncretistic mix that, in my view, is neither authentically Christian nor Buddhist.

## To say that two teachings are similar—like Pure Land Buddhist and Christian teachings— is not to say they are identical.

But can one be a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ, as the Christian tradition has understood this historically, and also be an authentic Buddhist as this has been understood within Buddhism? But again—which kind of Buddhism? Buddhist intellectuals—who often insist that Buddhism is a philosophy and not a religion—typically have little in common with folk Buddhists, who often are animistic and polytheistic. In addition to the many schools of Buddhism, there are also the regional differences—Buddhism in Myanmar or Thailand is quite different from Japanese Buddhism. And then there are the many variations of Buddhism in Europe and North America, which minimize traditional metaphysical teachings

and turn Buddhism into a kind of modern therapy.<sup>11</sup> Being disciples of Jesus might be more compatible with certain forms of Buddhism than others.

### Peter Phan's Definition of Inreligionization

A second issue concerns Dr. Tan's use of Peter Phan's definition of inreligionization. Phan advocates that we not only accept in theory certain doctrines or practices of other religions but that we incorporate them, perhaps in modified form, into Christianity, and that Christians adopt in their personal lives "the beliefs, moral rules, rituals and monastic practices" of other religions.<sup>12</sup> But just what is being suggested here?

It is one thing to acknowledge that there are certain similarities between some Buddhist practices or beliefs and those of Christianity. For example, many have pointed out the striking similarities between the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, which is especially popular in China, Taiwan, and Japan, and Protestant Christianity. Indeed, there are remarkable similarities. But to say that two teachings or practices are similar is not to say that they are identical, and I think that despite the obvious similarities in some respects Pure Land Buddhist teachings are significantly different from Christian teachings.

I do find much to admire in Buddhism, especially in its influence aesthetically on Japanese culture. There is much beauty in Japanese culture and art that has been inspired by Buddhism. I think here of Japanese gardens, calligraphy, the tea ceremony, martial arts, poetry, literature, and drama, all of which have been influenced by Buddhism. Significantly, some rituals that emerged within Japanese Buddhism have been adopted within Christian churches—for example, the tea ceremony. But these have been adopted largely because they have lost their earlier Buddhist texture and are now regarded as Japanese cultural practices.

But if we follow Phan's proposal, which Buddhist doctrines should Japanese Christians, for example, accept? The Four Noble Truths, the central teaching of traditional Buddhism? There is an elegant logic to these four core teachings and I find the Buddhist analysis of desire / craving (*tanha*) to be perceptive.<sup>13</sup> But I cannot accept these as the true teaching about the origin of suffering and its elimination. And if I cannot accept the Four Noble Truths as the correct diagnosis of the causes of suffering then I cannot accept the Noble Eightfold Path as the prescription to its elimination. Nor can I, given the Christian teaching on creation, accept the doctrine of *paticca-samuppada* (variously translated as dependent origination or origination by dependence) as the fundamental principle of things coming into being. I also think the traditional teaching of *anatta*—no self—is incompatible with the Christian understanding of the person. And, of course, until the twentieth century, Buddhism was understood as denying

the reality of an eternal Creator God.<sup>14</sup> If inreligionization means accepting any of these core Buddhist teachings as they are understood within Buddhism, then I must object.

### Increasing Secularization and Inreligionization

Finally, I think we also need to ask whether closer identification with Buddhism is necessarily a positive thing for local disciples of Jesus. Much depends upon the particular context. In areas where Buddhist traditions and identity are still regarded positively, perhaps an appropriate form of adaptation can be helpful.

## Recent studies show that institutional Buddhism is in serious decline and younger Japanese are rejecting key markers of Buddhist identity.

But in many cases, including Japan, I do not think this will be advantageous. Although most Japanese still identify as Buddhists, recent studies show that institutional Buddhism is in serious decline and that younger Japanese are rejecting some key markers of Buddhist identity. Ian Reader examines a wide variety of evidence—including multiple surveys of religious beliefs, the numbers of temples, Buddhist priests, participation in popular folk rituals, Buddhist funerals, or observance of the Buddhist family altars—and concludes that all indicators show a clear decline in Buddhist affiliation. Reader

states that “organized, established Buddhism in Japan is in a serious state of decline, one that threatens the continued existence of a major religious tradition that for over a millennium has been an important element in the sociocultural fabric of Japan.”<sup>15</sup> Reader observes that public dissatisfaction with Buddhism is so pervasive that a new phrase has been adopted—*bukkyobanare* (estrangement from Buddhism).<sup>16</sup> He contends that Japan today is actually a highly secularized society.

Secularization (in terms of the idea of a “decline of religion” and a public withdrawal from engagement with the religious sphere) is a growing force to be reckoned with in Japan today. Moreover, there are clear correlations between modernisation, urbanisation and higher levels of education (factors often cited as formative forces in the secularisation process), and declining levels of religious belief and practice, whether individually or institutionally.<sup>17</sup>

To the extent that other traditionally Buddhist societies also are being impacted by modernization, urbanization and globalization, we might expect that they too will undergo declining public attraction to Buddhism. If so, this raises the question whether, in such societies, a closer identification with Buddhist teachings and practices might actually be counterproductive in making disciples of Jesus. **IJFM**



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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See especially Kang-San Tan, “Contextual Frameworks for Interreligious Communication: An Asian Perspective,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 39:1 (Spring 2022): 5–14.
- <sup>2</sup> Andrew Walls, “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture,” *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1996), 13.
- <sup>3</sup> Walls, “The Gospel as Prisoner,” 13.
- <sup>4</sup> By “folk religion” I mean the beliefs and practices of ordinary lay believers rather than those of the scholars, theologians, priests or other “gatekeepers” of the religious tradition.
- <sup>5</sup> The literature on the development of the concept of religion is vast, but helpful discussions include Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Guy Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). See also Kevin Schilbrack, “Religions: Are There Any?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78:4 (December 2010): 1112–38.
- <sup>6</sup> See Harold Netland, *Christianity and Religious Diversity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), chapter 1.
- <sup>7</sup> Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- <sup>8</sup> David R. Vishanoff, “Boundaries and Encounters,” in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, eds. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt and David Thomas (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 342.
- <sup>9</sup> Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 4.
- <sup>10</sup> Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009). See also Robert B. Stewart, ed., *Can Only One Religion be True? Paul Knitter and Harold Netland in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

- <sup>11</sup> See David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and idem, ed., *Buddhism in the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 2012).
- <sup>12</sup> Peter Phan, as quoted in Kang-San Tan, “Contextual Frameworks for Interreligious Communication,” 5.
- <sup>13</sup> See Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 45–60; and Paul Williams with Anthony Tribe and Alexander Wynne, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 30–54.
- <sup>14</sup> On the question of the compatibility of Buddhism with an eternal creator God see Keith Yandell and Harold Netland, *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 181–92; Paul Williams, “Aquinas Meets the Buddhists: Prolegomena to an Authentically Thomas-ist Basis for Dialogue,” in *Aquinas in Dialogue: Thomas for the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Jim Fodor and Christian Bauerschmidt (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 87–117. See also the debate among Perry Schmidt-Leukel, “‘Light and Darkness’ or ‘Looking Through a Dim Mirror’? A Reply to Paul Williams from a Christian Perspective”; José Ignacio Cabezón, “A Buddhist Response to Paul Williams’ *The Unexpected Way*”; and Paul Williams, “Buddhism, God, Aquinas, and Morality: An Only Partially Repentant Reply to Perry Schmidt-Leukel and José Cabezón,” in *Converging Ways? Conversion and Belonging in Christianity and Buddhism*, ed. John D’Arcy May (EOS: Klosterverlag Sankt Ottilien, 2007), 67–154.
- <sup>15</sup> Ian Reader, “Buddhism in Crisis? Institutional Decline in Modern Japan,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 28:2 (2011): 235.
- <sup>16</sup> Ian Reader, “Secularisation, R.I.P.? Nonsense! The ‘Rush Hour Away from the Gods’ and the Decline of Religion in Contemporary Japan,” *Journal of Religion in Japan* 1 (2012): 16.
- <sup>17</sup> Reader, “Secularisation,” 10–11.

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# Response

## Response to Dr. Harold A. Netland

by Darren Duerksen

I've long appreciated Dr. Netland's work in theologies and philosophies of religion, and it is wonderful to have him here and to be able to respond to his excellent paper. He has raised some important questions and issues that spur thoughts and questions of my own.

First, I appreciate and agree with Dr. Netland's discussion on the relationship of culture and religion. He rightly warns us to not reify or reinforce an artificial divide between culture and religion, or at least to try not to as best as we're able with the limitations of our language. But, while we should recognize the deep relationship between culture and religion, he also reminds us that they are not completely the same. Religious practices and beliefs are distinct from other aspects of culture, but also certainly part of and deeply connected to culture. I also appreciate his admonition to not vilify religion as evil while gracing culture as neutral. Rather, we need to see that God's goodness resides in both the cultural and the religious, and that both are also broken by sin.

And yet, and perhaps I'm wrong and can be corrected, I sense that it is important for Dr. Netland that Christ-followers clearly discern what is religious and what is cultural. He shares how Christians in Japan forbid participation in the *matsuri* festival, which puzzled an elderly, new Christ-follower. Netland suggests that, because she saw it as a culturally fun celebration with little popular association with its Shinto origins, it might be acceptable for her and other Christians to celebrate it. But what, I want to ask, if it did have some "religious" significance? Might a group of Christ-followers discern some aspect of God, his goodness, wisdom, or truth, in it, thereby providing another reason for which they could and should celebrate it?

Along these lines, I think one of the more important topics that Netland directs us to is the question of the "adoption" of practices and beliefs. He critiques Peter Phan's proposal that Christians incorporate in their personal lives "the beliefs, moral rules, rituals and monastic practices" of other religions. He suggests this is fine if the practices have lost some of their explicit religious orientation, as with the Japanese tea ceremony, but what about teachings that would run counter to historic Christian theology, like certain tenets of Buddhism? Does inreligionization mean that Christians adopt these?

I certainly appreciate that some teachings and practices could be found by Christ-followers to not be consistent with following Christ. But I think we need to move beyond what missiologists used to discuss as "form and meaning." In this framework, the

central aspect of Christianity is its meaning, its doctrines and ideas. The forms that housed and expressed this meaning could be adapted and changed—or contextualized—so long as the meaning was preserved. I agree that meaning is important. But, I want to ask, whose meaning is to be preserved? The Calcedonian Christian meaning? Sixteenth century German Christian meaning? Twentieth century American Christian meaning? I'm not suggesting there is nothing central to the Christ following traditions. Certainly, faith in Christ as Son of God, his birth, death, and resurrection, its importance for salvation, and Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom of God are all things I would argue are essential for Christ following faith and communities. But Christ-followers understand these in various ways depending on their hermeneutical cultural and religious lenses.

Perhaps one of the problems is again our terminology. Dr. Netland rightly suggests that it is perhaps a distraction to try and parse out whether something is cultural or religious. To think of dual religious belonging, or of someone being both Christian and Hindu gets us into these quandaries of if, and how, Christians can be more Hindu, or Hindus can be somewhat Christian. I wonder if it could be more helpful to consider how persons in other religious communities interpret, make sense of, and follow biblical scripture and Christ through and in light of their community's religious beliefs and practices. In other words, how do they read Christ in light of the four Noble Truths and the eight-fold path? No doubt, biblical scripture and Christ's leading may cause them to affirm, modify, challenge, and perhaps not accept some of these, or aspects of them. But beyond the question of picking and choosing is the question of, not if, but how, their religious traditions shape their understanding of Christ, and how Christ by his Spirit is at work in this process.

## Might a group of Christ-followers discern some aspect of God, his goodness, wisdom, or truth in the Shinto celebration?

I want to recall a statement that Anna Travis made in her presentation. To paraphrase—the goal is not to try and retain a religious identity or set of beliefs or practices. The goal, the attraction, is the magnetic reality of Jesus. What will help persons grasp this? For some, perhaps for many, it will be to follow and make sense of Jesus from within their religious tradition, whatever they decide to call themselves. As Netland suggests at the end of his paper, perhaps some will not find this desirable—they might not *want* to identify and interpret things from a Buddhist perspective, because they do not do that anyway. Perhaps they've adopted a secular viewpoint, and *that* is now their hermeneutical lens. In this case we're still talking about inreligionisation, except that the gospel is engaging a Buddhist-tinged secular framework. The goal is still the reality of Jesus. **IJFM**

Beyond Contextualization

# Udayanacharya's *Samvāda* and the Dialogue of Traditions: A Model of Inreligionization

by Brainerd Prince

*Editor's Note: This article was originally presented at the 2023 Ralph D. Winter Lectureship under the theme, "Beyond Contextualization: Crossing Religious and Cultural Boundaries."*

This is a methodological enquiry about the dialogue of traditions, particularly religious traditions, and in specific about the dialogue between Christian and Hindu traditions in India. Historically, if Christian traditions encountered Hindu traditions in three waves, then my contention is that the quality of this engagement has continually degenerated over centuries, to an extent that the current political climate does not freely allow any engagement between Hindu and Christian traditions.

Although we only have sparse records, the first wave of the Eastern Christian tradition's engagement with Hindu traditions appears to have had huge successes. During the initial Catholic wave of about a thousand years, the language of conversion became prominent, and the quality of engagement decreased. The Protestant wave continued the agenda of the Catholic traditions, and the modern missionary movement was born. This was accompanied by the political colonization of India. Christian traditions standing on the shoulders of political power had little regard for their Hindu counterpart. Contemporary post-independent India continues to bear this brunt that has created enmity between the Hindu and Christian traditions.

Therefore, there is a need for a new model of Christian engagement with Hindu traditions, a model that not only does not antagonise Hindus but also enables Hindu traditions to legitimately self-discover Christian traditions in the encounter. What better model would be acceptable to a Hindu than one that is born and shaped within the Hindu horizon? Udayanacharya, a great Nyāya Hindu scholar of the eleventh century, has provided one such framework as a model of engagement between traditions, which can be termed the *samvāda* engagement of traditions.

The argument presented in this paper is this: if Christians are able to engage with Hindus using a model of engagement that is acceptable to Hindus, then that engagement will necessarily be successful and meaningful. The paper has four parts: Section one explores a few models of "engagement" in mission studies.

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Section two critically reviews the historical engagement of Christians with Hindus in order to explicate the problematic of engagement in the Indian context. In the third section, I look at a few outliers in the Indian mission story. In the final section, I will present Udayanacharya's samvāda model of engagement between different traditions, which I argue can be the basis of a dialogical missional approach—and which could be seen as a variation of the inreligionizing model.<sup>1</sup>

### *Models of Engagement in Mission Studies*

Within mission studies, different models have emerged that embody the changing understandings of the self's engagement with the other. We have come a long way from a colonial model of mission, to an indigenous model of mission, to what Jenkins has called "reverse mission" in his *The Next Christendom*. Two models that come to mind are inculturation and contextualization. The term "inculturation" is used for the first time in 1962 and then officially by Pope John Paul II in 1979.<sup>2</sup> The term "contextualization" had its historic first appearance in 1972 in the ecumenical publication *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund* (1972). However, these two models came out of the larger change in the philosophical climate in academia which has been termed the postmodern turn.

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The revolt against universal rationality had begun to flourish with Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* and was extended by the works of Lakatos, Feyerabend and Kuhn in the philosophy of science and Peter Winch in the social sciences. In the 1970s Jean-Francois Lyotard defined the term "postmodern" as an "incredulity" for universal rationality.<sup>3</sup> The focus shifted from text to the context. The social, political, and existential contexts that defined the conditions for the production of knowledge were given supremacy. It was against this background that both inculturation and contextualization were born.

Aylward Shorter defines inculturation as "the on-going dialogue between faith and culture or cultures . . . it is the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture

or cultures."<sup>4</sup> The term "inculturation" is a development from old terms like "adaptation," "accommodation," and "indigenization" as the need to move away from the concept of a western culture imposing its universal gospel. Pedro Arrup defines it as:

The incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation) but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a "new creation."<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting that Shorter talks about a "relationship." However, it is not the relationship between the missionary and the missionized that has been reflected upon, but rather the relationship between the Christian message and culture. It is quite revealing that although there appears to be importance given to the other's context, in inculturation, the other continues to be eclipsed. According to Arrup, the sole purpose seems to be on "transforming" the culture according to the message in order to bring about a "new creation," and in no way is it bothered about the relationship between the missionary and those missionized.

While contextualization is very similar to inculturation, Darrell L. Whiteman notes that contextualization seeks to make the gospel/text relevant to the context of the culture.<sup>6</sup> It is the model of contextualization that necessitated the rise of contextual theology, giving importance not only to the Scripture but also to the context in which it surfaces.<sup>7</sup> Stephen Bevans understands classical theology as being objective and contextual theology as being subjective.<sup>8</sup> However, he claims that while it does not resort to relativism, it gives due importance to context because meaning is ascribed to reality through "the context of our culture or our historical period, interpreted from our own particular horizon and in our own particular thought forms."<sup>9</sup> The contextual model of mission does direct us to the context of the mission field and its horizon. However, once again, the relationship between the missionary and the missionized community remains invisible and unaddressed.

In this brief survey what is seen is that while the context and historical location of those missionized are being taken into consideration, the ontological relationship or engagement the missionary has with the missionized community is not addressed. Of course, one could counter-argue that those mission agency handbooks, particularly for new missionaries, would give specific instructions on how to behave and live in a mission context. A quick look at two handbooks revealed that while there is a lot of information and even rules on how the missionary should live and relate with their home organization and supporters, I was unable to find any clear direction on how the missionary should relate with the communities they work amongst.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps our own mission preparation programmes echo this lack. There are

resources on friendship mission or friendship evangelism that seek to use friendships as a starting point for the mission. These models have strong critiques, and as one of them countered, “friendships with an agenda are never true friendships.”<sup>11</sup>

### *Historical Engagement of Christians with Hindus in India*

The main argument put forward in this section is that Christian traditions historically came to India in three main waves. With the arrival of the Catholic wave, the relationship progressively deteriorated between the Christians and the Hindus, culminating in a breakdown during the Protestant wave. Referring to the arrival of Christians in India, Frykenberg writes:

From an Indian perspective, arrivals of successive waves of Christians on the western shores of India, taking place at various times over centuries, either as refugees and settlers and traders, can be documented. Such waves can be dated by looking at royal grants of lands and privileges which Christians received. These grants, duly certified as deeds or documents, were inscribed on copper plates, stone slabs, and/or palm leaf (cadjan). These were later embellished and reinforced by oral traditions.<sup>12</sup>

While this is not a work of history, a few representative sites of engagement will be chosen that best showcase the engagement between Hindu and Christian traditions.

#### **The Eastern Wave**

Mission historians have claimed that historically Christianity came to South Asia in the first century, immediately after the Jesus event, brought by one of Jesus’ twelve disciples, Thomas. This is based on writings from the second and third centuries that talk about a Christian presence in India. These writings reveal that a Jewish Christian named Panpaenus, a mentor to Clement and Origen, had a determination “to preach Christ to the Brahmin and philosophers.”<sup>13</sup>

Frykenberg argues for the authenticity of Saint Thomas’ visit to India and says that the internal sources found amongst the Syrian Christians of South India through

carefully preserved oral sagas, literary texts, genealogies, epigraphic and numismatic data on stone tablets and copper plates and coins of copper, silver, and gold (as well as bullion), and architectural remains<sup>14</sup> . . . [give] clearer and more specific indications of how what are now known as Thomas Christians, also known as Syrian Christians, came into being and how they came to be concentrated in the south-west corner of India, in what is now the state of Kerala.<sup>15</sup>

Our primary interest lies in what these oral traditions have to say about the Indian reception of the Apostle Thomas—the first Christian on Indian soil. It is said that the Apostle Thomas predominantly worked amongst Brahmins, unlike the modern Protestant Mission that predominantly worked among the lower caste. The legend claims “The rajah of Kodungalur gave

Thomas permission to preach the gospel and gave him gifts of money . . . the king also became a Christian.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, it is claimed that because of his many miracles, Thomas was able to make many followers of Jesus out of the Brahmins.

## Water droplets transforming into flowers has huge spiritual value within the Hindu religious imagination.

An interesting story, recorded by Zaleski, mentions Thomas venturing into the Brahmin quarter. This story follows a miracle where the Apostle Thomas throws some water into the air by the side of a pond in the presence of many Brahmins.<sup>17</sup> The water droplets fell back down at Thomas’ feet in the form of showers of beautiful flowers. This was a turning point which resulted in many Brahmins following Christianity. What is interesting to note is that the water droplets transforming into flowers has huge spiritual value within the Hindu religious imagination. One could even say that the miracle was contextualized within the spiritual language of the Hindus, whereas flowers hold no such significance in the first century Jewish-Christian religious imagination.

This first encounter between Jewish Christianity and South Indian Brahmins was overall acceptable to the Hindu population, so much so that, according to legend, Thomas built seven churches: “Kodungalur, Quilon, Chayal, Niranam, Korkamanglam, Parur and Palayur.”<sup>18</sup>

Although there is valid historical evidence for formal church life in India from AD 345, there is also evidence that during the great Persian persecution from AD 340 to AD 401, “a community of ‘East Syrian’ or ‘Babylonian’ Jewish Christians landed on the Malabar coast.”<sup>19</sup> This community of 400 people belonged to seventy-two royal families. The local South Indian king welcomed this community and bestowed on them high caste privileges. Some of these privileges included

seven kinds of musical instruments and all the honours, and to travel in a palanquin and that at weddings the women should whistle with the finger in the mouth as do the women of kings, and he conferred the privilege of spreading carpets on the ground and to use sandals and to erect a pandal and to ride on elephants.<sup>20</sup>

From the historical accounts what is clearly noted is that this community of Jewish Christians, also called Malankara Nazaranis, were enterprising and successful in creating wealth. Frykenberg writes that “those who had once prospered in Mesopotamia prospered in India, and were seen as generating local prosperity wherever they settled; their presence was courted and coveted by local rulers.”<sup>21</sup>

## The Catholic Wave

The second wave of Christianity in South Asia began with the clerical travellers and culminates with the coming of the various Catholic orders into the South Asian peninsula. The era of clerical travellers began with the Islamic Hejra in AD 622 to the coming of Vasco de Gama in 1498.<sup>22</sup> Frykenberg claims that only four visits are noteworthy. The first visit, according to the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, was that of two monks, "Sigehelm and Aethelstan, who were sent by King Alfred and who told of their visit to the tomb of St Thomas at Mylapore (Mailapur)" recorded in a report from AD 883.<sup>23</sup> The second visit was of John of Monty Corino, a Franciscan missionary who was sent as a papal emissary to the Christians in Malabar in AD 1293. The third visit was of Friar Ordoric to Quilon in AD 1325. Finally, the visit of Father Jordanus, which occurred in AD 1321 to AD 1322.

While we do not have much information on Sigehelm and Aethelstan's visits, we are told that the efforts of John of Monty Corino were so successful that in AD 1307, he was appointed as China's first Catholic Archbishop. John of Monty Corino reports, "I remained in the country of India, wherein stands the church of St. Thomas the Apostle, for thirteen months, and I baptized in different places about one hundred persons."<sup>24</sup> Thus, with John of Monty Corino's visit, we can see the beginning of a missionary method in which Christians came as visitors with the primary motive of converting the locals before moving on, which is contrary to the settlement approach, the predominant method of the first wave where the Christians remained on the land.

John of Monty Corino's observations of the Hindu Indian people were that they were idolators without having any regular hours for worship like the Christians. He writes, "they never join together in worship at any fixed hour, but each goes to worship when it pleases himself. And so they worship their idols in any part of their temples, either by day or by night."<sup>25</sup>

He also took offense at the local Hindu population's ways of life:

For their daily food they use rice and a little milk; and they eat grossly like pigs, to wit, with the whole hand or fist and without a spoon. In fact, when they eat their food, they do look more like pigs than men.

From this, Yule infers that "John was not received in the houses of Indians of the higher classes."<sup>26</sup> From this, we can see the beginning signs of the impending deterioration of the relationships between Christians and Hindus.

Converting the locals before moving on, is contrary to the settlement approach, the predominant method of the first wave.

By the arrival of Friar Ordoric, Christians had become pure spectators, phenomenologically observing the other without a sense of empathy or togetherness. For example, Friar Ordoric observes that where "the blessed Thomas the Apostle" was buried, "His church is filled with idols, and beside it are fifteen houses of the Nestorians, that is to say Christians but vile and pestilent heretics."<sup>27</sup> Here is a clear example of how Friar Ordoric referred to Thomas as blessed, but held a disdain for the local South Asian population. That he also had a deep disdain for the local Christians, whom he calls vile and pestilent heretics, reveals the binary thinking that had set upon Western Christians. He also describes the local church of the Malabar Christians negatively as filled with idols.

The earliest *Pfarangi* (foreign) Christians in India were not just Catholic, nor just "Roman" Catholic. They were profoundly Portuguese. They came armed with the *Padroado Real* which gave them authority from the Church in Rome to fill clerical positions in overseas colonial regions, like India.<sup>28</sup> On 21 June 1481, Sixtus IV in *Aeterna Regis Clementina* summed up all previous papal bulls with the words:

Navigation in the oceans of recent discovery is restricted to Portuguese ships. The Portuguese are true lords of lands discovered or yet to be discovered. The Portuguese may freely trade with unbelievers, even Muslims, provided they do not supply them with arms or anything of the kind. The Portuguese Crown may found churches, monasteries, and other places of religious usage . . . Spiritual Power belongs to Portugal in perpetuity.<sup>29</sup>

The *Padroado Mandate* opened the doors for a host of monks and missionaries from different orders to come boldly and legitimately to India and do mission work. The Franciscans (600 friars by 1635), the Dominicans (from 1498), the Augustinians (from 1572), and the Jesuits (founded in 1540), represented by Francis Xavier, came in large numbers, and all these missionaries were sent along the coastlines and across the countryside in the inner parts of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>30</sup> They converted in large droves the fishermen communities like the Paravars and Muckavars who have remained Christians for over four and a half centuries.<sup>31</sup> Francis Xavier and others who did not know the Tamil language, walked from village to village,

building prayer houses, baptizing children, and drilling children in rote recitations of the Lord's Prayer, Ave, Creed, and Commandments.<sup>32</sup> These doctrines were to be recited aloud every morning and evening at the sound of a bell. Attempts were made to install a *kanakkapillai* (catechist/accountant) for each village, to keep track of births, deaths, and marriages for each lineage (*vamsha*).<sup>33</sup>

However, in 1582, a series of events took place that changed the status of Roman Catholic missions in India. Stephen Neill, the historian of Indian church and missions, captures it well and it is best to quote him at length:

But in 1582 the even tenour of life was disturbed by one of the most disastrous series of events in the whole history of Roman Catholic missions in India. Two villages in the extreme south of the peninsula of Salsette—Cuncoim and Assolna in the spelling used by the Portuguese—had been specially obstinate in holding fast to the Hindu way and its ceremonies. Early in 1582, in reprisal for injuries done to a messenger who was carrying despatches from Cochin to the viceroy, a fleet of boats sailed down from Goa and destroyed the temple at Assolna. At the same time the captain of Rachol marched down with troops to Cuncoim; a Jesuit Fr Berno set fire to the large temple in the village; a number of smaller shrines was also destroyed. Then Fr Berno, with incredible folly, “killed a sacred cow on the spot, with the double object of defiling the holy places and destroying the object of superstition, and he profaned a sacred tank by casting into it the intestines of the slaughtered animal.”<sup>34</sup> The authorities seem to have been unaware of the lasting fury occasioned by the outrage. In 1583 a visit was paid to Salsette by the new provincial Rudolf Aquaviva, formerly of the mission to the Great Mogul, accompanied by a number of priests, some Indian Christians and a group of Portuguese gentlemen. On 15/25 July [1583 25 July], the anger of the people broke out in open violence. Aquaviva, who stood forth as the acknowledged leader, was the first to suffer. Then the mob fell on Fr Berno, the object of their special animosity; the other two priests followed soon after. A lay brother, Aranha, though terribly wounded, survived in hiding till the next morning, when he was discovered, killed and horribly mutilated. Altogether fourteen others were killed, the bodies were stripped by outcaste menials, thrown together into a large pit which, this being monsoon time, was full of water, and covered over with branches to prevent discovery. When, the same evening, news of the disaster reached Goa, there was no limit to the distress and dismay caused by events for which there was no precedent in the history of the missions.

Many Christians had died at the hands of pirates or in sporadic outbursts of violence. But so ruthless a massacre, carried out by the generally kindly and gentle Hindu population, was unexpected and alarming. It was decided that the bodies of the martyrs must be recovered and given Christian burial. It fell to Stephens as rector of the college at Rachol to set about the recovery of the bodies. At first the people denied all knowledge, but before long were tricked into agreeing to the surrender; the menials carried the bodies to the north bank of the river, where they were received by the group from Goa and reverently carried to the church. It was found that the bodies were so swollen by their immersion in water that it was not possible to array them in Jesuit robes; but with such order and ceremony as was possible they were laid to rest. What follows is far from edifying. Though the fathers pleaded that vengeance should not be taken on the guilty, fifteen of the leading men who came in to plead for pardon and to promise friendship were immediately cut down by the soldiery; others

were pursued to the mainland and done to death. The five villages concerned were deprived of their liberty, two being handed over in fief to one Portuguese, and three to another.<sup>35</sup>

This incident depicts the unspoken nexus between the missionaries and the colonial powers as well as the undercurrents between the missionaries and the native converts.

### The Protestant Wave

The final wave of Christian mission into India is called the Modern Missionary Movement where a variety of Protestant groups came to India. The problematic nature of the Christian mission to the Hindus in the modern era, one could claim, lay in the lack of a robust dialogue of traditions between the Christian and Hindu traditions. Guder argues that any study of the history of missions and evangelism in the last few centuries would reveal that the missionary movement of the western Christian traditions were largely accompanied by “the legacy of western cultural imperialism” which exercised “domination and cultural control,” thus reflecting an absence of the incarnational model in western mission. He argues that “the western view of all contexts for mission has been governed solely by western perspectives” with the assumption that the western way was synonymous with the way of Christ, which precisely led to the failure to do mission in the incarnational “Jesus Christ way.”

## The assumption that the western way was synonymous with the way of Christ led to the failure to do mission in the incarnational “Jesus Christ way.” (Stephen Neill)

It is alleged that Christian mission, particularly in its Protestant evangelical format, has for a long time singularly focused on the conversion of the missionized Indian to Christianity and that it does not pay any respect to their inherent Hindu traditions, texts and practices. In an insightful article on conversion and Christian mission in India, Claerhout and De Roover have set forth historical evidence from Portuguese, German and British missionary sources, arguing that Christian missions looked down on Hindu traditions. They write:

From the 16th to the 21st century, the Christians have viewed their encounter with the Hindu traditions as a battle between Christianity and idolatry . . . Therefore, the Christians oppose the Hindu traditions to the Christian religion in terms of the beliefs these “rival religions” proclaim.<sup>36</sup>

Some of the examples they have cited demonstrate the deeply antagonistic perspective the Christian mission had for Hindu traditions. The language of “battle,” “rivalry” and “opposition”

reveals the binary that existed between Christianity and Hindu traditions. It is worthwhile looking at a few pieces of primary evidence as testimonials of antagonism:

In what terms shall I describe the Hindu mythology? There was never, in any age, nor in any country, a superstition so cruel, so atrocious and so diabolical as that which has reigned over this people. It is a personification of evil.<sup>37</sup>

Before me was the land of idolatry, concerning which I had heard and read so much; and I was now to come into contact with that mighty system of superstition and cruelty which was holding millions enslaved in its bonds; to see its hateful rites, and by the exhibition of the Truth to contend with its dreadful power.<sup>38</sup>

In this brief, the king orders that neither public nor private "idols" be tolerated on the island of Goa and that severe punishment must be meted out to those who persist in keeping them. The houses of people suspected of keeping hidden idols are to be searched. Heathen festivals are not to be tolerated and every brahman is to be banished from Goa, Bassein and Diu.<sup>39</sup>

These words belonging to both European missionaries and European State representatives reveal the deep antagonism they had towards Hindu traditions.

**De Nobili became a scholar-missionary. His aim was to become thoroughly Brahmanised, to avoid any word or deed which might give offence, and to gain complete mastery of Sanskrit and Tamil learning (*veda*).**

### Christian Mission Outliers

However, in the history of Christianity in India we also find that there are several instances where Christian missionaries enjoyed a meaningful experience with Hindus, and they were able to understand each another in spite of their differences and leanings, even during the colonial era.

Whereas Francis Xavier dealt with the lowest, most polluting segments of Tamil society on the Fisher Coast, Roberto de Nobili dealt with the highest and purest. Father Robert de Nobili arrived in Goa, a South Indian state, in 1605,<sup>40</sup> and was clear about his spiritual mission which was to "remove the impression that Christianity was merely a foreign, Western religion." Towards this goal, he mastered both Sanskrit and Tamil.<sup>41</sup> In the shadow of the four towering gateways (*gopurams*) of the ancient Minakshi-Sundareswarar Temple, where thousands came each day and where throngs of students from far corners of the land flocked, a young aristocrat from Italy settled down in 1606. Here, with Vishvasam and Malaiyappan, as well

as Shivadharmā his guru, he became a scholar-missionary. His aim was to become thoroughly Brahmanised, to avoid any word or deed which might give offence, and to gain complete mastery of Sanskrit and Tamil learning (*veda*).

Acquiring fluency in texts of the Agama and of the Alvar and Nayanar poets, scrupulously abstaining from all pollution from defiled or tainted things (e.g., *Xesh*), subsisting only on one simple meal, and wearing the "sacred thread" of the "twice-born" (*dvija*) along with the ochre robe of a *sannyasi*, he engaged Vedānta philosophers in public conversations and debates, and won a following of converts and disciples, including his own guru. His manifesto, inscribed on palm leaf and posted on his house, declared:

I am not a parangi. I was not born in the land of the parangis, nor was I ever connected with their [lineages] . . . I come from Rome, where my family holds a rank as respectable as any rajas in this country.

By cutting off all links with crude, beef-eating, alcohol-drinking barbarians from Europe, de Nobili, the "Roman Brahman," identified himself as being Indian and became known as "Tattuwa-Bhodacharia Swami."

Catholic learning established in Nayaka Madurai, epitomized by its repository of rare manuscripts at Shembhagannur Monastery, reached its zenith with the work of the Italian Jesuit Constanzo Giuseppe Beschi (1680–1747). This sage, also known as Viramamuni Swami or as Dharrya Nathaswami, produced classical *Sangam* (*Cankam*) epics, philosophical treatises, commentaries, dictionaries, grammars, translations, and tracts for Hindu Christians and non-Christians alike.<sup>42</sup> Such works put him in the forefront of Tamil scholarship. His *Tembavani*, an epic of 3,525 *tetrastichs* of 30 cantos, his commentary on Thiruvalluvar's *Kural*, and his public disputations<sup>43</sup> with scholars (*acharyas*) and mendicants (*pardarams*), won renown. The grandeur of his entourage matched that of the Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram. Clothed in a long tunic bordered in scarlet and robed in pale purple, with ornate slippers, purple-and-white turban, pearl and ruby earrings, bangles and rings of heavy gold on his wrists and fingers, a carved staff of inlaid ivory in his hand, he sat in his sumptuous palanquin upon a tiger skin, with attendants fanning him, holding a purple silk parasol surmounted by a golden ball to keep the sun from touching him, and attendants marching before and behind him lifting high a standard of spread peacock's feathers (symbolizing Saraswati, goddess of wisdom); he ostentatiously displayed all the marks of divine and regal authority. Chanda Saheb, Nawab of the Carnatic, honoured him in his *darbar*. He bestowed the title of Ismattee Sannyasi upon Beschi, presented him with the inlaid ivory palanquin of Nawab's grandfather, and appointed him *diwan*, a position which awarded him a tax-exempt estate (*inam*) of four villages worth 12,000 rupees income per year.<sup>44</sup>

Let us look at the example of the German missionary to India, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg,<sup>45</sup> who is also represented by Claerhout and De Roover as someone whose Christianity is incommensurable with Hindu traditions. Claiming that Ziegenbalg made a difference between false and true religion, they write, “On the one hand, the false religion of the heathens consists of sin and error . . . On the other hand, there is the true religion of the people of God.”<sup>46</sup> This they claim with regard to a pamphlet written by Ziegenbalg called *Abominable Heathenism*.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, in the quote they provide from the pamphlet, they themselves say that Ziegenbalg’s critique was against *a-jnana* (the absence of knowledge and the antithesis of wisdom) and all his negative claims were about *a-jnana*. What is interesting is that Hindus would totally agree with Ziegenbalg’s negative description of *a-jnana*. As a matter of fact, Bhagwat Gita 14:8 clearly delineates the negatives of *a-jnana*. Of course, the difference would lie in how Ziegenbalg and the Hindus proposed to overcome or overthrow *a-jnana* but not in what it stood for. Thus, what Claerhout and De Roover fail to capture is the dialogue and the comparative work that Ziegenbalg was successfully doing and his creative use of the Hindu term *a-jnana* in presenting the Christian gospel as well as the wonderful relationships that Ziegenbalg had with Hindus such as Modaliappa, a young man with whom he was a friend for life, a 70-year old blind pandit Watthiar as well as many other Tamil tutors and scholars including Ganapati Wattiyar who was a “converted poet who, having already become his colleague and friend for some time, also became his partner and research assistant.”<sup>48</sup> Frykenberg argues that none of what Ziegenbalg accomplished would have been possible had Ziegenbalg not enjoyed the confidence and support of

Tamil admirers, colleagues, friends, informants, and teachers. Indeed, his rapid progress astonished and delighted local Tamils; and his open and engaging personality quickly won him popularity among Tamil poets and scholars.<sup>49</sup>

Stephen Neill, the historian, writes that it was not a one-way process with the missionaries, just as much as they wanted to change the Hindus, they too got “converted” in the process.

One notable result of these Tamil studies was a change in Ziegenbalg’s attitude to the Indian people and to the Hindu religion. When he arrived in India, he shared the view generally held by Europeans that Indians were a barbarous people, and that their religion was no better than a depraved superstition . . . But by 1709 he had come to realise that the Indians are a civilised people; and, as he penetrated more deeply into their classical writings, he was amazed to discover the depth of their moral insights and the admirable style in which their wisdom is expressed.<sup>50</sup>

There were many other western missionaries as well, for instance, Mother Teresa who is still highly esteemed in India. Greene in her biography on Mother Teresa refers to her

as “Bengali Teresa.”<sup>51</sup> K. P. Kesava Menon, in his forward to *Christianity in India*, described a church typical of the Indian Christian tradition as “Hindu in culture, Christian in religion, and oriental in worship.”<sup>52</sup>

### *The Samvāda Rules of Mission Engagement*

Our study of the historical engagement between Christian traditions and Hindu traditions in the Indian subcontinent has revealed problems that acted as deterrents, particularly during the modern age. While these problems began during the Catholic wave, it was during the Protestant wave these problems came into full bloom. One mustn’t forget that the Protestant engagement happened during the colonial era that had a lopsided power equation between the imperial Christians and the colonized Hindus. This inequality of power affected the engagement of traditions.

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The recent memory of the colonial encounter continues to cast a shadow on Christian-Hindu engagement even if in post-Independence India there has been a reversal of fortunes and power equations with the Hindus coming to political power in India. While it is the majoritarian Hindu population that presently dictates politics in India and the Christians are a minority, the long shadow of the colonial past continues to influence Christian-Hindu engagement resulting in an alienation of the Christians. However, what has remained unchanged is the Christian attitudes to the Hindu which continue to be colonial, hence the problems of the Protestant wave have not yet been successfully addressed.

While there are a lot of resources available within the post-enlightenment Western hermeneutical tradition to envision a better model of engagement between the Christian and Hindu traditions, be it in the works of Buber, Levinas, Bakhtin, Ricoeur, or Macintyre, the primary goal for us is to excavate resources from within Hindu traditions so that what is proposed will be broadly acceptable to Hindu traditions, without of course ignoring the western resources. In other words, the primary source for the proposed new model of engagement will be the Hindu traditions.

The argument presented in this work is that one way of overcoming the problems that continue to plague Christian-Hindu relations is to articulate a model of engagement that

is agreeable to both Hindus and Christians. Therefore, the task is to find a Hindu model of engagement excavated from the historical Hindu traditions that not only overcomes the problems but is also agreeable to the Christians.

If such a model of engagement be found, then it would not only critique the colonial attitude of Christians towards Hindus but also envision a way forward for future Christian engagement with Hindus. One such sophisticated Hindu model for the engagement of traditions is found in the works of the eleventh-century Nyāya scholar, Acharya Udayana.

Although it has been stated more than once that Udayana is one of the greatest Indian philosophers, unfortunately there are not very many secondary works on either Udayana or his works. George Chemparathy, who can be argued to be the foremost leading scholar on Udayana, says, “Scholars are almost unanimous in declaring Udayana to be one of the greatest of Indian philosophers.” In the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school itself, to which he belongs, he occupies a singular position of authority and renown. Flourishing at the period of transition from the Older Nyāya to the New (Navya-Nyāya), he shines as an unrivalled master of the former and an inspiring herald of the latter.

His importance in the history of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika can be gauged by the attitude towards him of later writers, from his own school as well as from other schools. While he became for his own school a recognized authority who is often referred to by the mere title of Ācārya . . .<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, Karuvelil refers to him as “. . . Udayana, the great Naiyāyika.” With regard to the significance of Udayana’s work, Karuvelil writes,

Expounding the Nyāya system, he presents his work (Atmatattvaviveka) as the “ultimate Vedānta” (caramavedānta) wherein all the other systems of thought, including Advaita Vedānta, are subsumed as preliminary stages of it.<sup>54</sup>

In Laine’s view Udayana is not just a “great eleventh century Nyāya philosopher” but also “an extremely skillful philosopher” who had the “ability to include a wide range of philosophical topics under the aegis of his stated *prayojana* [stated purpose].”<sup>55</sup>

The logical competency of Udayana seems to have been generally accepted. To mention but one Indian writer of the sixteenth century, Śāyana Mādhava, the author of the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*, speaks of him not only as “one whose fame had spread everywhere” (*viśvavikhyātakīrtih*), but also as “one who has seen the opposite shore of the ocean of the principles of logic (*nyāyanayapārāvārapāradrk*), an epithet which aptly expresses his thorough knowledge of logic.”<sup>56</sup>

In this section, I will explore the *samvāda* rules of engagement that have historically provided a framework for dialogue between traditions. What is unique is that the Brahmanical

Hindu tradition had “a shared terminology and shared procedural assumptions that allowed different Brahmanical schools to dialogue” and the dialogue also happened with other established traditions like the Buddhist and Jain traditions.<sup>57</sup> In other words, there was freedom to disagree and debate with those belonging to another Hindu school or tradition or even with other non-Hindu religious traditions.

I would like to present the *samvāda* tradition of philosophical engagement arising out of the Hindu traditions that provided the rules of engagement for dialogue between different traditions of enquiry. *Samvāda* from the Sanskrit, *sam* for “together” and *vāda* for “word,” means “wording together” or “discouring together” and could be used to mean “dialogue.”

However, very little work has been done on excavating the concept of *samvāda* out of the Indian classical traditions particularly for methodological value. A pioneering work on the origins of *samvāda* was a paper presented by Laurie Patton entitled “*Samvāda: A Literary Resource for Conflict Negotiation in Classical India*,” in *Evam: Forum on Indian Representations* (Delhi: Samvāda India, 2003), where she puts forward the genealogy of the term as well as gave examples of its use in classical Indian texts. Patton also translates *samvāda* as “interlogue” in a co-authored article entitled *Hinduism with Others: Interlogue* (2006).<sup>58</sup>

**There was freedom to disagree and debate with those belonging to another Hindu school or tradition or even with other non-Hindu religious traditions.**

Apart from Patton’s work, there is scarcely any other work on *samvāda*, although Daya Krishna has a book by the name of *Samvāda: A Dialogue between Two Philosophical Traditions* (1991), which does not refer explicitly to the classical tradition of *samvāda* itself, but rather captures a contemporary dialogue held in Pune in 1983, between Indian philosophers trained in the Western tradition and those trained in the classical Indian tradition of philosophizing.<sup>59</sup>

The only other prominent usage is by John Clayton, the philosopher of religion, whose use of *samvāda* provides the rules of engagement for dialogue from an Indian intellectual point of view. But before we look at Clayton’s usage, a quick summary of the historical excavation of *samvāda* done by Patton would be useful.<sup>60</sup>

Patton argues that the Brahmanas used *samvāda* to mean “bargain” and the *Dharma Sūtras* used it to mean “conversation, discussion, or dialogue.” In the *Ramayana*, it means an account or an incident story and in the *Mahabharata* it has the added meaning of dispute.

In the *Mīmamsa sūtras* it means agreement or accord and similarly in the *Tantravartika* (1.2.22; 1.2.47) and the Jain text *Prabandhacintamani* (52.4). Patton goes on to give four examples which are “named as *samvāda* by early and classical Hindu texts themselves” and hence she argues that *samvāda* is indeed an “indigenous genre.” But she goes on to state that *samvāda* certainly “does not have a tradition of criticism behind it” like classical schools of philosophy and suggests that “it is never too late to start one.” However, here Patton appears to be unaware of the development of the concept of *samvāda* and its use in the medieval era, particularly from the eleventh century onwards.

Clayton has precisely worked out the use of *samvāda* as a method for philosophical discussion and debate between different philosophical traditions from its historical usage in such discussions between different strands of the Indian intellectual tradition. Clayton illustrates the structure of a *vāda* or inter-tradition debate, through the Buddhist-Hindu debates found in the eleventh century Udayana’s treatise *Atmatattvavivēka*. He argues that the structure of a *samvāda* debate consisted of two parts—negative and positive.<sup>61</sup> The conventions governing the negative component, the goal of which was to undermine the opponent’s position, were: (a) a presentation of a “fair statement” of the opponent’s position, (b) the arguments in its favour, and finally, (c) the arguments that can be used against it. What is interesting here is, as Clayton observes, this negative component was carried out completely in accordance with the opponent’s rationality. Even in citing authorities, one had to use texts that were authoritative for the opponent. The conventions governing the positive component, the goal of which was to offer arguments in favour of one’s position, dictated that proofs could be supplied that were either (a) based on reasons shared with the opponent, or (b) were “tradition-specific reasons that were not acknowledged as reasons by one’s opponents.”<sup>62</sup> This clarifies the difference between the two traditions.

I would like to term this act of dialogue that seeks to clarify the other and engage with the difference of the other and even make a contribution to inform the epistemological crisis in the other’s tradition of enquiry as the very act of living together. However, this is preceded by two prior acts that are necessary to be able to conduct this dialogue. First, to know oneself, in a sense know the traditions that construct

the enquiring self, its rationality, its authoritative texts, the narrative within which these texts have meaning as well as its ultimate concerns. One can only distinguish the other, if one has some clarity on oneself. I have not yet dwelt on the language of tradition or *parampara* which is central to this knowing. Secondly, to understand the other in their tradition of enquiry and rationality. To understand the other is similar to learning a new language, the language of the other’s tradition. Macintyre calls it as possessing “second first languages” or being “polyglossic” à la Bakhtin, and similar to Bhabha’s “hybridity.” It is only after this understanding of the other that one can perform the act of living together with the other as dialogue. Now to summarise the three elements of *samvāda*: first, know oneself, secondly, understand the other, and finally, dialogue as living together.

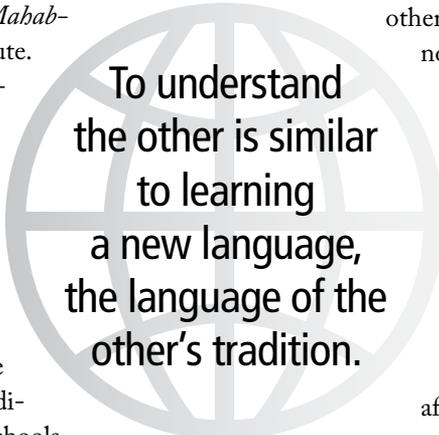
There is clear resemblance between the *vāda*-tradition and the dialogical-hermeneutics that is at an infant stage of development within the western intellectual tradition. This similarity is attested by Flood with regard to his own work in the academic study of religion that the *vāda*-tradition is “wholly in accord with the dialogical model I wish to develop in the coming chapters” for the study of religion.<sup>63</sup>

The *samvāda* form of dialogue historically has brought into dialogue different intellectual and religious traditions primarily to delineate the boundaries of the discourse between rival schools of Vedic textual exegesis, in ways that clarified difference and debate in South Asia.<sup>64</sup> This is an example of the dialogical freedom that Hindu traditions have historically possessed. There is freedom to learn about another religious tradition, including its scriptures and rationality at a proficiency that is acceptable to an adherent of that tradition. One also had the freedom to dialogue and converse with those of other religious traditions about religious matters.

### *A Model of Inreligionization*

I would like to end by elucidating the “dialogue of traditions” approach which can be used as the process that delivers inreligionization. This model is built upon Udayana’s *samvāda* rules of engagement as well as the literature on hermeneutical thought which is not reviewed here for the sake of brevity.

The “dialogue of traditions”<sup>65</sup> can be said to have five stages, which when completed successfully would have accomplished the vision of inreligionization. “Incommensurability of traditions” can be seen as stage one and as the starting point. At this beginning point, the Christian tradition that is entering into



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an engagement with another religious tradition recognises that at the point of beginning, the “other” tradition is very different from one’s own, to an extent, one is even unable to understand it at first blush. This incommensurable starting point is important as it protects the other from being subsumed by the Christian tradition and re-invented in its own image.

The second stage consists of “Imagination of the Other” and here the Christian makes a dedicated effort to learn the other’s tradition. He learns it so well that the other tradition becomes like a “second mother tongue.” The third stage “Inhabitation of Tradition” builds on the second, and now not only gets to “know and learn” about the other but also takes a further step and participates in the other’s tradition. This enables the Christian to truly and empathetically walk in the other’s shoes and makes the other’s tradition as their own. It is only after this level of engagement that one is able to exercise “Interrogation” and critically engage with the other. During this stage, one has earned the right to ask the tough questions, discern similarities and differences between traditions and even pass judgement over traditions in a comparative sense. Finally, this process culminates

in the “Integration of traditions” where a new tradition is born. This new tradition sublates both the Christian and the other traditions and births a new flavour that entails both. This newly birthed tradition can be called their very own by both Christians and the other with whom this process of “dialogue of traditions” engagement has happened leading to inreligionization.

Here is a model of dialogue and engagement that is homegrown in the Hindu world and gives clear instructions on how different religious traditions should engage with one another. If the Christian missionaries were to follow the samvāda model of dialogue, I believe that not only can the challenges and problems that have been raised in the history of missions in India be avoided, but without compromising on our beliefs, Christians can meaningfully engage with Hindus. **IJFM**



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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the Ralph D. Winter Memorial Lectureship (October 2023, Pasadena, CA) and specifically was a response to Kang-San Tan’s proposal of the inreligionization model.
- <sup>2</sup> Timothy J. Gorringer, *Furthering Humanity: A Theology of Culture* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 199.
- <sup>3</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Benninton and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxxiv, 7.
- <sup>4</sup> Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988), 11.
- <sup>5</sup> Pedro Arrupe, “Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation,” in *Aixala* (ed.), Vol. 3 (1978), 172.
- <sup>6</sup> Darrell L. Whiteman, “Contextualization: The theory, the gap, the challenge,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 21/1 (1997), 2–6.
- <sup>7</sup> Stephen B. Bevans and Katalina Tahaafe-Williams (eds.), *Contextual Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2012), 9.
- <sup>8</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 3–4.
- <sup>9</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 4.
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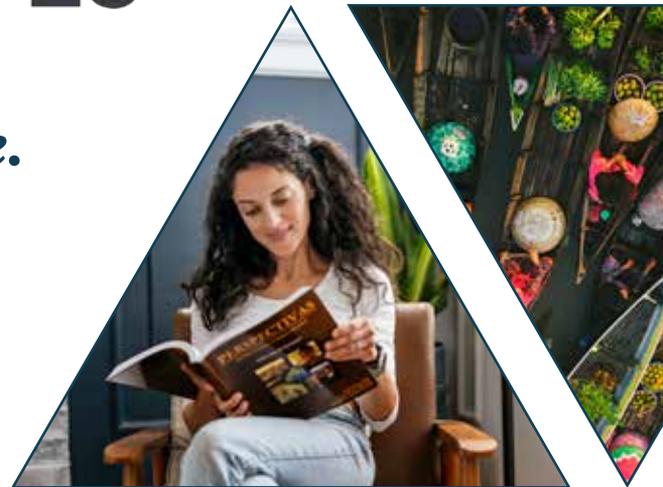
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Beyond Contextualization

# The Faith of Fatima: A Case Study of Muslim Followers of Jesus

by *Anna Travis*

**M**y family and I had the privilege of working in an Asian Muslim community for twenty-two years. It was there that we met a wonderful, winsome Muslim woman we call Fatima.<sup>1</sup> This paper tells the story of how Fatima came to know and follow *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah) and led many of her family and friends to know and follow Jesus as well. Watching what God is doing in the life of Fatima to this very day has impacted me deeply.<sup>2</sup> First, before sharing this story, and a bit of my own, I would like to pause and pray for Fatima, her family, and friends.

Please join me:

“O God, we all, with one heart, now bring to you Fatima and friends, as we consider what you are doing in and through them. Protect them, comfort them, strengthen them, and give clear leading to them in all things. Through Jesus we pray, Amen.”

Before telling the story of Fatima and my history with Muslims, I would like to explain how I will be using several terms. The first term is “Christian.” Different individuals and groups use the term Christian in different ways, sometimes as a noun and sometimes as an adjective.

For example, evangelical Christians tend to use the word Christian to refer to someone who is a serious disciple of Jesus or someone who is “born again.” It is not uncommon to hear evangelicals say, “I became a Christian at age twenty-five.” Whether having grown up as a nominal member of a church or not, the term “becoming a Christian” refers to the point in time when the person made a serious commitment to be devoted to Christ.

Others use the term Christian simply to describe individuals’ personal belief system. Whether living the life of serious disciples of Jesus or not, at least in terms of their beliefs, they could be classified as “Christian” (i.e., adhering to church creeds or doctrines).

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Yet others, however, use the term simply to mean one's affiliation or socioreligious identity. In this case, it does not matter what one may personally spiritually believe. What makes a person "Christian" would be factors such as family heritage, ethnic background or church / religious membership or affiliation. *Worldwide, this is the way that the word Christian is most often used.* This is why North African Muslims, for instance, would make the blanket statement, "French are Christians" or how, for example, a national census could conclude that the United States is 70% Christian.

Throughout this paper, I will use the term "Christian" and "Christianity" to refer to people's identity and religious affiliation, not necessarily their personal spiritual beliefs. I will use the term "follower of Jesus" or "Christ-follower" to refer to one's personal spiritual beliefs. Therefore, if Muslims or Jews choose to follow Jesus as risen Savior but do not go through the additional step of "changing religions," I will refer to them as Muslim followers of Jesus, not "Christian Muslims" or Jewish followers of Jesus, not "Christian Jews."

Likewise, when I refer to someone as "Muslim" or part of the Islamic community, I am referring to affiliation and identity, not necessarily that individual's personal beliefs or practices.

### ***My Story: Formative Years Living with Muslims***

We arrived in the country where we hoped to share the good news of the Kingdom of Jesus with Muslims, with a commitment to live at first with a local pre-Jesus-following Muslim family, following the advice of mission linguists Tom and Betty Sue Brewster.<sup>3</sup> We were able to live for several months with two different families, and then moved into a house in a tight-knit Muslim community. Because the houses in the neighborhood were so close to each other, it felt like we were renting a few rooms in a big house, where sound easily traveled, and our neighbors kept a close and loving eye on us.

We ended up staying there for seventeen years. We participated in community life—attending weddings, visiting the sick, and celebrating holidays with our neighbors. We learned the language and made precious friends. But the most impactful thing for me in living for seventeen years in that community was attending funerals.

When a person in our neighborhood would die, all the people on our block would gather around the family. The Muslim leaders from the mosque would come. They would make sure the body was quickly washed and wrapped in white cloth, and

then laid in the middle of the living room, with everyone sitting in a circle around the body. The person from the mosque would always say:

"Hopefully this person's good works are enough to bring him straight to the side of God. We all need to remember—the day of death will come for each of us. One day your body will be wrapped in white cloth and will be laid in the middle of the living room. So, you need to remember Allah every day. Wherever you are, you must think of God. And whatever happens, don't die, unless you die inside Islam."

At the end of the funeral, everyone would greet each other before leaving. I would get back to my house just down the block, barely making it into the door, before bursting into tears. "Lord! How are these people going to find Jesus when they hear this over and over again—that they have to stay inside Islam?" I would cry out to God, pour my heart out to God. The sense I got was that somehow the Lord would meet them inside Islam.

During those years, we and our team were involved in a variety of what we call pre-movement activities that we were convinced would be necessary to see a breakthrough. This included Scripture translation, intercessory prayer, focused time with Muslims, praying for the sick, the founding of NGOs to address community needs, and culturally-appropriate outreach.

Meanwhile those years were also full of listening to our neighbors' points of view. Here are a few examples:

"When you talk about God, please remember that we don't need your religion. We already have a religion, unlike people in other parts of the country who do not yet have a religion." (They were referring to groups they deemed tribal, animists, or who were following folk beliefs.)

"We are happy to receive prayer from you, yes, even if you pray to God through Jesus, peace be upon him. We know that all prayer goes up to God, and God decides which prayers he will answer."

"If we hear you refer to one of the prophets by the wrong name, it affirms our view that what your group believes is incorrect." Note: This came up when I was reading some Old Testament passages with a Muslim friend, using the main translation available at the time. In this translation, "Abraham" is used, whereas Muslims say "Ibrahim." All the more impactful is the name we use for Jesus—is it the foreign-sounding name used by Christians, or is it his familiar Arabic name, Isa? Fortunately, in terms of communication in our country of residence, as in many Arabic-speaking countries, Christians and Muslims alike use the term "Allah" for God.

And whatever happens, don't die, unless you die inside Islam.  
(a Muslim leader)

After those long, life-changing years, the time came to move from that neighborhood to another part of our city.

### *Fatima's Story: Following Jesus as a Muslim*

At that time, we were introduced to Fatima. What a privilege to get to know this woman, a practicing Muslim, who was actually following Jesus, and already very familiar with the New Testament. She would share her life with me. I would learn from her. I would share things that it seemed God was putting on my heart for her. We did inner healing together. She would go over the hurts of her childhood. At one point, the power of the Lord was so strong when we were praying together that an evil spirit spontaneously left this godly woman. She exclaimed, "It's gone, it's gone!" Looking back, I am convinced the Lord was empowering her for what he had for her in the years ahead.

When Fatima was young, she, her siblings, parents and grandparents were part of a multi-generational household. Interestingly, her grandfather would often take her aside and say, "Fatima, one day, the truth of Allah will come to Islam." She, at the time, did not know what he could have been talking about.

**The Lord wants to meet you  
right where you are. You can become  
a follower of Jesus just as you are.  
It's not religion that saves;  
it's Jesus who saves us.  
(An Asian pastor)**

When Fatima got a little bit older, she had to quit school to go to work to help her family survive, and she ended up working for foreigners. She married at an early age and continued to work. One of her employers encouraged her to convert to Christianity when she was showing an interest in Jesus. Her husband and her father told her, "No, no, you cannot convert. You have to stop working there." It turned out that she was able to keep that job only when her employer agreed to not let national believers come around to try to influence her to come into Christianity. Still, those seeds had been planted. Later, she worked for another foreign family and began to study the Bible there. By this point, she and her husband had a son. One time that son was very sick in the hospital and Christians came to pray for him. Miraculously he was healed, and soon was discharged from the hospital.

Fatima's interest in Jesus grew as she saw God heal her son, and she continued even more to diligently read the Bible. While she was working at her employer's home, an Asian pastor came to stay there for a while and noticed that she was reading the Bible on her lunch break.

He said, "Fatima, what is that you're reading?"

"Oh, it's the New Testament."

"What do you think about Jesus?"

"Jesus is wonderful."

The pastor said, "Well, have you become his follower?"

"No, I can't become his follower."

"Why is that?"

"I'm a Muslim, and both my husband and my father have forbidden me to become a Christian and be baptized."

This Asian pastor wisely said, "Fatima, actually the Lord wants to meet you right where you are. You can become a follower of Jesus just as you are. It's not religion that saves; it's Jesus who saves us."

"Really? I didn't understand this! I would love to become his follower."

That day she decided to follow Jesus, and as she tells her story she says,

"Whoosh, the spirit of God entered my heart!"

Fatima shared her experience with her son who had been healed. And she explained to her mother what had happened to her. Now there were three in the family following Jesus together. Two or three friends had also been reading the New Testament, and this small number grew quietly in their faith for a number of years.

When Fatima and I became friends, we prayed together for her husband, her father, and other close friends and family members who often came to mind. When her husband, and then her father decided to follow Jesus, we rejoiced together—the very two men who years earlier had forbidden her to become a Christian, now walked together with her in following Jesus as Muslims.

Ideas of leaving Islam, joining Christianity, no longer calling herself Muslim, attending a local church, singing Christian hymns or songs, meeting on Sundays, celebrating Christmas, removing her head covering in public, eating pork, changing her name, calling Jesus by his foreign name (which the national Christians did, both verbally and in their Bible translation), or labelling a friend or family member an "unbeliever"—never came up. Fatima recognized that what her grandfather had spoken about—that someday the truth of God will come to Islam—had started to become a reality for her.

Fatima began explaining more clearly to friends and acquaintances, as the opportunity arose, what it was like for her to follow Jesus as a Muslim. About this time, we left the country for about three months. When we returned, Fatima had gathered ten people to study the New Testament together every week. She had been asking, “Have you ever read the four holy books?” She found this to be a natural question, since officially Islam claims the *Taurat* (the first five books of the Old Testament, or often viewed as the entire Old Testament), *Zabur* (Psalms), the *Injil* (New Testament), and the *Qur’an* as holy Scripture. The Torah, Psalms and New Testament are referred to as the “previous books.” Many would answer that they had enough trouble reading the one—the *Qur’an*—and didn’t want to look at the other holy books. Yet, other people did show interest, and now ten were regularly reading together.

### *An Indigenous, Multiplying Ecclesia is Birthed*

One person in this group of ten we call Yusuf. We had been doing our best to introduce Jesus to Yusuf for a number of years, and he had expressed little interest. However, two years before, Yusuf had become extremely angry over an offense committed by a stranger and was not acting himself. My husband asked Yusuf if he would like prayer, and the Lord worked powerfully such that a demon clearly left Yusuf’s life, and he experienced immediate relief from the anger. Other than that experience, he did not appear to be spiritually hungry or open.

Now, when we saw Yusuf after returning from our three months away, he was obviously quite joyous about something. He said, “I’ve become a follower of Isa the Messiah!” He went on to explain that he had been regularly gathering to read the New Testament, and that he felt like a new person. We asked him, “Is this not the same thing we’ve been talking about for the last few years?” Yusuf explained, “Yes, yes, the same. But when you were talking about Jesus, I thought you were trying to get me to join your church. My brother left Islam and entered Christianity when he married a Christian woman, and the family hardly speaks to him. No way would I want to join a church.”

The humorous thing is that we were not even attending a formal church at the time. Yet Yusuf could not help but assume that as we explained the good news about Jesus, we expected him to leave his religious community and join a different group. Interestingly, Yusuf never performed the formal prayers (most people we knew prayed at least once a day, if not more). Yusuf did not attend the mosque and never fasted.

During the (Islamic) month of fasting, when our other male neighbors would congregate outside for the countdown of the last few minutes till it was time to break the fast and have a smoke, Yusuf would chuckle and light up a cigarette right in front of them. Yet the importance of religious identity for this utterly nominal Muslim was enough to keep him from deciding to follow Jesus. Yusuf explained to us, “When you prayed with me and the evil spirit left me, I knew Jesus is the Way. But I couldn’t make the decision to follow Jesus until I saw the example of Fatima’s life.”

As this group shared their new life with others, other groups started forming.<sup>4</sup> They would choose a passage of the New Testament, sometimes reading it out loud two and three times. They would discuss how to apply what they read, pray for each other, and eat a snack. Later they started pooling small contributions voluntarily to help needy people in the neighborhood.

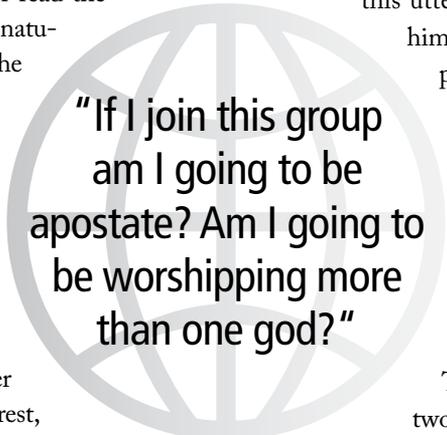
As others were hearing about these groups, they would often ask two questions. First, “If I join this group, am I going to be apostate?” (That is, must I leave Islam and become a Christian?) Second, “If I join this group, am I going to be worshipping more than one God?”

The members of the groups would answer,

“No and no. God, who caused us to be born inside the community of Islam, gives us peace and the desire to stay, so we can remain connected to our families, and explain this new life. We are not leaving to join a different religion. And we know there is only one God. We believe in the one true God, and in Jesus the Messiah whom he has sent to us.”

That seemed to be enough to address their concerns, such that a good number of new people were joining or forming new groups.

When people were sick, people from the group would pray. Sometimes a person was healed; other times healing did not come. One time, one of the early followers of Jesus said to those around his death bed, “Jesus is here to pick me up.” This started happening more often when someone was dying. Several hours before death, the person would say, “Jesus is here to pick me up.” Their understanding is that it is as if a cord the size of a single piece of hair divided into seven is stretched over a deep chasm, and Jesus is the one who takes them across, safely to the side of God. How could they ever do this on their own? They explain that they need Jesus.



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than one god?”

Another group formed a little bit outside the city. The man who was inviting his family and friends to read the New Testament told Fatima a story from his childhood. “Back in the day, my father told me, ‘One day, someone will talk about the truth of Allah coming into Islam. You must listen.’” He had not heard Fatima’s story about her grandfather repeatedly saying a similar thing. I wonder how many Muslims in the world have heard something like this from the Spirit of God.

It must be said that the organic nature of this work of God has not come about without deliberate choices at key junctures. I will share a handful of examples.

One time a mosque leader from a town several hours away got wind that his mosque members were over at a neighbor’s house regularly reading the New Testament. He marched over to the house and with anger, declared the meeting to be “forbidden.” The group texted Fatima to ask her to make a visit, sooner rather than later. She went to the town with two or three friends to get to know this mosque leader. With humor and humility, she thanked him for his concern, and asked for his prayers and blessing. She explained that his mosque members would remain faithful attenders and would cause him no trouble. They were simply studying the very books that Islam instructed them to study (*Taurat, Zabur, Injil* and *Qur’an*), and of course she knew he would agree and support the idea. By the grace of God, the problem was solved.

Another time, a neighbor asked one of the members of a newer group what on earth they were doing in those meetings. Why was there not the usual chanting of the first *surah* of the *Qur’an*? After talking together, this group decided to invite any neighbor to join at any time, and to chant the first *surah* together at the beginning of each meeting. Praise God, the contents of that portion of the *Qur’an*<sup>5</sup> are easily interpreted to be in line with the Bible, so their conscience before God was clear.

These Jesus followers find it necessary from time to time, often in the first year of their new life, to resist accusations that they have become Christians, that they are reading a forbidden holy book, that they are leaving Islam, or the like. They remind anyone daring to complain in this way that their families are Muslim, and they are too. They continue to fast during *Ramadan*, they celebrate Muslim holidays (not Christian ones), they continue to attend Muslim functions as much as they always have (not Christian ones, especially not Christian mission conferences), they continue to keep their Muslim personal names, diet and dress standards, and most important of all, they call themselves Muslims. At the same time, they remind each other that any person who follows Jesus is their brother or sister. No speaking ill of Christians is allowed (although this is the norm in their communities, given common views of unkind treatment of less fortunate

Muslims by very well-to-do Christian employers and business owners). Fatima even told us one time that she views Jews who follow Jesus as her brothers and sisters! (The negative view of Muslims toward Jews in this part of the world cannot be overstated, although no one we know has ever personally met a Jewish person.)

With all the gracious continuing of so many aspects of Muslim life as they follow Jesus, there is at least one common practice that Fatima and friends are fanatical about eradicating: the practice of looking to spiritual powers outside of their devotion to God through Jesus. Though not all Muslim Jesus followers we know of have been involved with occult practitioners before they decided to follow Jesus, many have. Though their Muslim religious leaders remind them that it is forbidden, often out of their desire or desperation, many visit mystical people who pronounce curses toward enemies, infuse objects with protective powers, and sell recipes for financial success or physical healing. This is where devotion to Jesus is most tested. This is where the enemy of our souls puts most of his efforts. One woman who decided to follow Jesus, along with most of her extended family, could not bring herself to give up certain charms, amulets, and occult practices. She saw these as giving hope for achieving financial relief. One of her uncles made his living as an occult practitioner, and he seemed to have great sway over the opinions of the rest of the family. Fatima would plead with this woman. We all prayed for her. We compiled a list of Scriptures showing the dire consequences of these practices. To no avail. She fell away. I feel the grief even as I write this. On the other hand, those Muslims who follow Jesus and find freedom from these practices experience a tangible and contagious joy and peace.

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Not only has it been important to navigate life as Jesus followers as questions arise among fellow Muslims, they must also navigate issues that come up with Christians. For example, a number of years after we had already moved away from Fatima’s location, a group of field workers decided they would like to incorporate what God was doing through Fatima and

friends into their ministry, hoping to help it expand more quickly. She listened politely, thanked them for their offer, and explained that what they planned to do would not naturally fit with her people. Over the years she has had to stand against some well-meaning takeovers. Yet she does not stand alone, but stands with a group of tested friends who make decisions together after ample discussion and prayer. She summarizes it by saying, “We are not agents of foreigners; God is sending us to our people to keep explaining what we are experiencing, until they understand.”

Sometimes a comment arises with others we meet outside Fatima’s circle:

“If we had known it was possible to follow Jesus and stay in our religious community, we would have done that when we discovered Christ, but we didn’t know there was any other option, so we left Islam and changed our religious identity.”

I honor any person who has paid the high price of leaving community, or who has been thrown out of the extended family for the sake of Jesus. I believe God is calling many of these brothers and sisters to be involved in extending the kingdom from where they now find themselves—inside Christianity. For others, God may call them to return to their religious community of birth, to one degree or another. One friend of ours was distinctly led by the Lord to return to his Muslim identity several years after he had left Islam. He approached each family member to ask to be received back. He explained that he would return only under the condition that they would allow him to continue to follow Jesus. They heartily agreed, by the grace of God. He says about his experience, “I have come home.”

Another Muslim friend of ours who follows Jesus described what it was like when his Christian friend first explained the kingdom of God—forgiveness of sins, freedom from demons, eternal life, peace, power to do God’s will, the experience of the nearness of God, comfort in suffering. It was like a beautiful garden, and he eagerly made his way to enter. Then his friend described the extra-biblical Christological creeds he would need to agree to, and it made him feel like the ticket to get into this beautiful place now had a price of ten million dollars. As we heard his story, we wondered, is that God’s requirement? If it is, then yes, we have to pay the price. Yet, if it is not God’s requirement, should we continue to require it? Our friend became convinced as he read the Bible that God does not require him to embrace the interpretations delineated in certain Christian creeds. We greatly respect this brother’s expression of faith in Jesus. We contemplate the risk of setting aside the requirement of such creeds. So far, we feel that the far greater risk is to insist on them, and possibly push away from Jesus someone who would otherwise embrace him.

We count it a great privilege to see God calling people to follow Jesus while remaining Muslims. And it is also a great privilege to see God calling national Christians to further open the way for this possibility in their spheres of influence. One Asian church leader in the area where we worked attended a consultation on work among Muslims. During the consultation, several national Christians from the denomination he led were describing their work with Muslims—they were sharing the good news of Jesus, yet definitively not insisting on a change in religious identity. As is the custom, after the presentation of these accounts, the denominational leader was on the program to address the consultation and end in prayer. As he rose to his feet, a hush came over the room. He declared,

“As you carry out your ministries, if God wants to send his Spirit to blow through the mosques of our country such that many decide to follow Jesus, I say to you all today, *our denomination will not need to count them.*”

It seemed that the Spirit of God blew through that place that day, and God was pleased that a trusted national Christian leader would be willing, for the sake of Jesus, to let go of the standard practice of counting “fruit” and measuring ministry success.

Groups of national Christian leaders in denominations and other organizations have lent their support for efforts to produce Scripture translations for various Muslim populations. They continue to use their standard church translations, since they reflect the common terminology and phraseology of their communities. Yet they are welcoming additional translations that reflect the common terminology and phraseology of other communities who have never had the chance to hear the Jesus accounts in their own heart dialect.

**If God wants to send his Spirit  
to blow through the mosques of this  
country such that many decide to  
follow Jesus, *our denomination will  
not need to count them.***

Some may question the validity of the idea of Muslims following Jesus from inside Islam, pointing to outsiders as having insisted on it. Yet, is it not so, that the idea of having to leave Islam to follow Jesus has been insisted upon by outsiders as well, and that this endeavor to encourage Muslims to change religious identity has continued for over a millennium? Whether the option for Muslims to follow Jesus while retaining the religious identity of their birth is an idea from the outside or from inside, there is one thing that is clear: it is not the

magnet that will attract Muslims to Jesus. It is only a way to remove a barrier, to lift a requirement that may not be required, to offer a fighting chance to Muslims who are strongly predisposed against leaving their people to join the other group. However, once this requirement is removed, could it be that God will use the sacrificial love of Jesus followers, miracles, answered prayer of Jesus followers, the labor by Jesus followers to produce appropriate Scripture translations, and the magnetic reality of Jesus himself, to draw as many Muslims as possible into this new life?<sup>6</sup>

## Following Jesus while retaining the religious identity of their birth is not the magnet that will attract Muslims to Jesus. It is only a way to remove a barrier.

### *A Biblically Based Grassroots Theology Emerges*

As we had the privilege of watching God work in the life of Fatima and friends, we started jotting down the sayings we were hearing as followers of Jesus explained their new life . . .

“We have discovered Isa the Messiah, the long-forgotten savior of Islam.”

“We embrace and read all the holy books of Islam.”

“Jesus, our divine Lord, is above us, below us, behind us, in front of us, on either side of us. We can feel his presence.”

“When we die, Jesus picks us up and takes us to the side of God.”

“We look down and not up.” I didn’t understand this at first. They explained, “The Lord encourages us to look down to recognize those who are less fortunate than we are, and inspires us to help them in some way, instead of always looking up to those who are more fortunate than we are, longing to be like them, or to be connected in some way, so that we could rise up to their level. We look down, and not up.”

“We pray, and also we put out effort.”

“If we need a way out of a situation, and it seems impossible, we need to get up in the middle of the night when everything is quiet to pray. We sense the presence of Jesus, and somehow, he communicates with us and shows us a way out.”

“When we decide to follow Jesus, we will read a portion of the New Testament each evening. All family members are free to join, but we don’t pressure anyone. Eventually,

when most of the members of the household are joining us in nightly reading, we can start to talk about our new life with people outside the family.”

“We look forward to the (Islamic) month of fasting. Normally, we would fast in order to have our sins forgiven. Now, for us it is a time of solidarity with our community, and a time to get closer to God.”

“When we eat together, we remember the sacrifice of Jesus for us.”

“Our job is to live out our life with God through Jesus, explaining our experience, so that our family members and friends will understand what God has done for them in Jesus. They will become understanders.” It was so interesting for us to note that they don’t call each other “believers,” nor call others “unbelievers.” The label “unbeliever” (or *kafir*) is used to describe rebellious people who do not believe in God. They see fellow Muslims, not as unbelievers, but as those who do believe in God, and who are yet to understand what God has done for them in Jesus.

And they say, “The New Testament is the mountain top of all the holy books. The holy books must be read through the lens of the New Testament.”<sup>7</sup>

In the midst of many examples of Muslims who remain in the religious community of their birth as they follow Jesus, I offer this case study for our consideration. My hope is that some of the details of this narrative will help us better understand how new ways of following Jesus are being forged by Jesus followers like Fatima and friends. Different from most models of the past where people have assumed that a religious identity change is necessary, these Jesus followers are not making this shift in outward identity. I believe they are endeavoring to be in the world but not of it,<sup>8</sup> that is, they are in the world religion of their birth, but not of it.<sup>9</sup> They are going beyond religion and living in the kingdom of God. **IJFM**



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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Due to the sensitive nature of this account, I will not mention locations, dates, or the actual names of anyone in the narrative.
- <sup>2</sup> We no longer live in the country where this narrative takes place, but we were able to visit Fatima recently.
- <sup>3</sup> Tom and Elizabeth Brewster recommended that cross-cultural Christian workers begin their time on the field living in the home of a local family in order to understand and “bond” with that culture and community. Thomas and Elizabeth Brewster, “Bonding and the Missionary Task,” *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, eds. Ralph Winter and Steve Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981).
- <sup>4</sup> In the unpublished paper “In the Footsteps of Bible Women,” my field colleague Elisa Park describes how certain women in India, China, and Korea in the nineteenth century came to faith as they served as helpers for female field workers. These bold women carried the gospel through family networks, did grassroots pastoral ministry, and often were used by God to see the first waves of the gospel build momentum in new areas. Her paper deals with women in non-Islamic contexts in the past, and how similar dynamics are at work in the lives of some of the women in the accounts described here.
- <sup>5</sup> “In the name of God, the gracious, the merciful. Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds, the most gracious, the most merciful, master of the Day of Judgment. It is You we worship, and to You we call for help. Guide us to the straight path, the path of those You have blessed, not of those against whom there is anger, nor of those who are misguided.”
- <sup>6</sup> For other accounts of Muslims, like Fatima, who follow Jesus and have seen ecclesia or fellowships develop, see the references below marked with an asterisk (\*).
- <sup>7</sup> For other examples of groups of new followers of Jesus developing theologies that are both biblical and culturally relevant to particular socio-religious communities, see the references below marked with a plus sign (+).
- <sup>8</sup> John 17:15–18.
- <sup>9</sup> Anna Travis, “In the World but Not of It: Insider Movements and Freedom from the Demonic,” *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities*, eds. Harvey Talman and John Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), pp. 521.

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- \* Duerksen, Darren. *Christ-Followers in Other Religions: The Global Witness of Insider Movements*. UK: Regnum Books International, 2022. (South Asian Case Study and theological reflections)
- \* Dyrness, William. *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016. (a case study from the Philippines and theological reflections)
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- \* Woodberry, Dudley. “Contextualization Among Muslims: Reusing Common Pillars.” In *The Word Among Us*, edited by Dean Gilliland, 282–312. Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1989. (a case study from South Asia)

# Response

## A Response to Anna Travis

by *Darren Duerksen*

I'm so glad to be able to respond to Anna's paper and presentation. She introduces us to Fatima, her journey, and those that have journeyed with her into faith in Jesus. There are numerous things I'd love to comment on, but I'll focus on three.

First, Anna gives us the gift of an honest story. It gives us a snapshot of how many people were attracted to what Anna calls the "magnetic reality of Jesus," and how their lives were changed as a result. It takes us into the heart of a Muslim community and shows us how Jesus entered into and is transforming the community from within. And, Anna also gifts us by sharing the challenges that they've faced and things she would do differently. What stands out to me is the reminder that, though God can and does work through planned, strategic programs, his most profound work often comes from unexpected places, through imperfect persons and communities, and in ways we're not looking for. Were we walking with Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, we may have questioned his choice of rough, imperfect Galilean men and women to be the ones to help launch a mass movement. Perhaps some might have said the same about Fatima, a Muslim woman. Anna reminds us that God's work sometimes looks a little unpredictable. Maybe even a little unorthodox.

### Anna gives us the gift of an honest story—a snapshot of how people were attracted to what she calls the magnetic reality of Jesus.

This leads me to a second reflection. If some of us were honest, we might confess that we're not always comfortable with disorganization, unpredictability, or things that seem to us a bit unorthodox. When Anna tells us that one Christ-following Muslim decided from his own reading of the Bible that God did not require him to embrace the interpretations of Christian creeds, it could raise red flags for many. Don't the creeds help keep Christ-followers from error? We get uncomfortable. Anna acknowledges this when she says that she and others with her are aware of and "contemplate the risk of setting aside such creeds." But, she says, there is also a risk in insisting on them and "possibly pushing away from Jesus someone who would otherwise embrace him." I think of the reality that, in the history of the Christian church there have been religious groups who were Christian in their beginnings, rejected certain creedal statements, broke away from Christian churches, and now no longer prioritize Christ and the Bible. In response,

Christians have often watched for anything that could be heresy, policed it, and even punished it. And while the deviation of some groups from God's intent no doubt has hurt the witness of the gospel, we could argue that Christian efforts to safeguard, and punish what they saw as heresy has often damaged the witness of the gospel just as much, if not more.

What Anna models for us here is a posture that I think we in the West greatly need. That is, we need to stop assuming we're in control of the gospel and God's movements. We need to relinquish power, even if it makes us uncomfortable. Even if it means things look to us a little chaotic. And, yes, even if it means that someone or a group goes in a way we do not agree with.

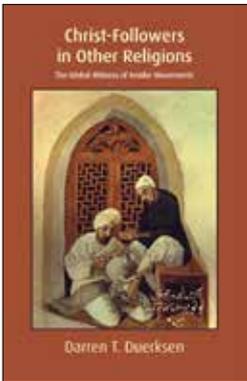
As an example of this kind of posture, Anna shares about the mission leader who, when hearing about what was happening among Muslims said that if God calls people to Jesus through the mosques of his country, his denomination would not need to count them. This is actually quite a profound statement. Counting can be a way of exerting power. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the British colonial administration conducted regular censuses. One of their unstated reasons was that knowing numbers, communities, concentrations of religions and groups, helped them to more easily control their colony. They knew that it was easier to manage and manipulate a colony if they could count it and quantify it. For a Western or Western-shaped Christian institution to forego counting new believers signals an important move—that they will not seek to quantify and manage or control what is happening. This is perhaps something we as Christians who are involved in cross-cultural ministry need more of.

Lastly, I'm so glad that Anna emphasizes the importance of prayer, and the miraculous. Time and again, we are reminded of the importance of praying for, and with, people, and of the ways in which God brings miraculous change in peoples' lives, whether it is an inner healing, a physical healing, or release from demonic oppression.

Perhaps one question that I would offer the discussion regards how inreligionization relates to what some call primal or folk religions. Fatima and her community make a clear distinction between proper faith and inappropriate, occult-like practices. This reflects the orthodox Muslim view, as Anna points out, and also seems to resonate with some biblical teachings.

But it seems to me that, in some primal or folk religious contexts, some of these practices may be more central to their religious tradition and community. I am not an expert on folk or primal religions, but I wonder how Christ-followers in those contexts, who embrace an inreligionization approach, would evaluate these. Would they agree with calling the practices "occult"? How would they respond to the idea that these practices and their traditions facilitate demons, and the demonic? We are mainly discussing the so-called world religions, but it would be interesting and helpful at some point to engage indigenous and folk religious traditions as well. Perhaps at the next conference. **IJFM**

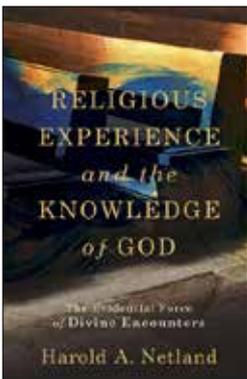
# New Publications by Our Authors



## Christ-Followers in Other Religions: The Global Witness of Insider Movements

by Darren T. Duerksen | Regnum Books Int'l, 2022

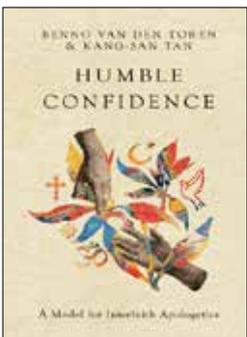
In recent decades many people have begun following Christ while remaining a part of their non-Christian religious communities. These insider Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Native American, and other followers of Christ have generated much interest and controversy, particularly in Western mission agencies and churches. In this book Duerksen analyses the ways in which God's Spirit may be creating alternative missiological imaginaries through these individuals and groups, and how their understandings of and witness to Christ can challenge, expand, and de-center prevalent Western understandings of Christian mission and discipleship.



## Religious Experience and the Knowledge of God: The Evidential Force of Divine Encounters

by Harold Netland | Baker Academic, 2022

For many Christians, personal experiences of God provide an important ground or justification for accepting the truth of the gospel. But we are sometimes mistaken about our experiences, and followers of other religions also provide impressive testimonies to support their religious beliefs. This book explores from a philosophical and theological perspective the viability of divine encounters as support for belief in God, arguing that some religious experiences can be accepted as genuine experiences of God and can provide evidence for Christian beliefs.



## Humble Confidence: A Model for Interfaith Apologetics

by Benno van den Toren and Kang-San Tan | IVP Academic, 2022

Today's cosmopolitan, multicultural, and multifaith environments call for new approaches to apologetics. To relate the transcultural gospel to diverse and ever-changing contexts, we must free Christian apologetics from dominant Western habits of mind ill-suited to interreligious dialogue. Tan and van den Toren provide a global, intercultural introduction to Christian apologetics. They present a model of crosscultural dialogue and accountable witness and explore how it plays out in the context of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, secularism, the primal religions and in late-modern spiritualities. Building on recent developments in apologetics and missiology, as well as their experience teaching internationally, they offer an approach that listens and speaks with both humility and confidence.

Beyond Contextualization

# What Gets “Converted”?

## Reflections on Language and Images of Religious Conversion

by *Darren Duerksen*

*Editor’s Note: This article was originally presented at the 2023 Ralph D. Winter Lectureship under the theme, “Beyond Contextualization: Crossing Religious and Cultural Boundaries.”*

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.

## Pba and her community felt that Jesus was the Christian deity, responsive only to those who had taken baptism and become Christians.

### *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.<sup>1</sup> 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

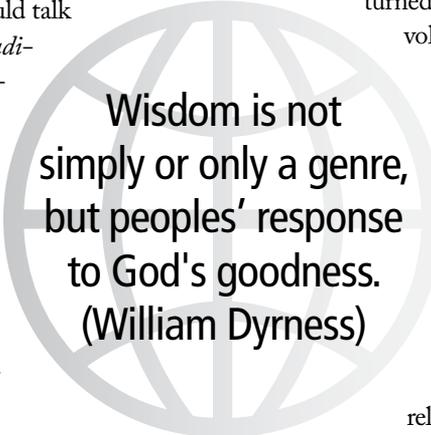
well-known criticism against the concept of *religion* contending that, while people have probably been religious for time immemorial, the systematization of this into what we call religion is a very modern invention.<sup>2</sup> In addition, no less modern is the organization of systems of belief into 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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

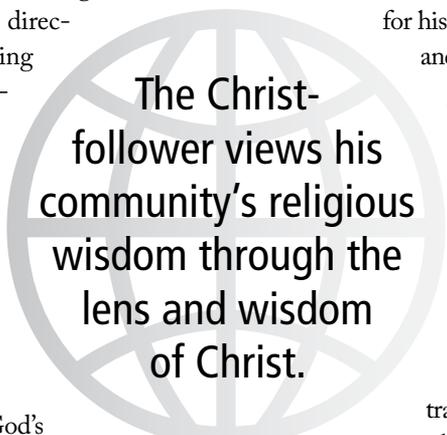
in the Old Testament, is that it should help us relate well to God, his creation, and each other. In other words, true wisdom, including true religious wisdom, is not abstract. It is expressed in and through relationships that reflect God’s purposes for his creation. Here again, the ultimate expression 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.<sup>8</sup>

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?<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup> 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.

**A turn to Christ may call people  
to discern and view  
their community’s wisdoms,  
religiosities, and narrative journeys  
in a new way.**

### *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**



So we can better serve you, please give us feedback in this short IJFM Survey.

Online, click here for the [IJFM Survey](#).

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> 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).
- <sup>2</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).
- <sup>3</sup> 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.
- <sup>4</sup> 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.
- <sup>5</sup> William A. Dyrness, *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 101, 07.
- <sup>6</sup> Dyrness, *Insider Jesus*, 51.
- <sup>7</sup> William A. Dyrness, *The Facts on the Ground: A Wisdom Theology of Culture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), 31.
- <sup>8</sup> Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation*, 76. Riesebrodt and Smith prefer the term *religiousness*.
- <sup>9</sup> See also Christian Smith, *Religion: What it is, How it Works, and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 47.
- <sup>10</sup> 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.
- <sup>11</sup> 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.
- <sup>12</sup> 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.
- <sup>13</sup> Dufault-Hunter, Erin Elizabeth, *The Transformative Power of Faith: A Narrative Approach to Conversion* (New York: Lexington Books, 2012), 78.
- <sup>14</sup> Joel B. Green, *Conversion in Luke-Acts: Divine Action, Human Cognition, and the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).
- <sup>15</sup> 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.
- <sup>16</sup> 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**

# Beyond Contextualisation Dual Religious Belonging as a Contextualised Faith?

by Kang-San Tan

*Editor's Note: This article was originally presented at the 2023 Ralph D. Winter Lectureship under the theme, "Beyond Contextualization: Crossing Religious and Cultural Boundaries."*

Various Christian bodies are beginning to address the issue of belonging to more than one religious tradition. The World Christian Council, in their recent publication, "Religious Plurality and Christian Self Understanding," reflected on the phenomenon of "double belonging" as a pastoral issue:

Many Christians seek ways to be committed to their own faith and yet to be open to the others. Some use spiritual disciplines from other religious traditions to deepen their Christian faith and prayer life. Still others find in other religious traditions an additional spiritual home and speak of the possibility of "double belonging."<sup>1</sup> (Italics mine)

I am writing as a Christian theologian who subscribes to the confessions stated in the Lausanne Covenant 1974 and who has been an active member of the Lausanne Theology Group as well as the World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission. The Lausanne Movement's mandate is, "The Whole Church bringing the Whole Gospel to the Whole World," meaning it is the task of the whole church (clergy and laity) to witness to the whole gospel (word and deed) to the whole world (to all nations). They convened the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Cape Town (October 16–25, 2010) which brought together 4,200 evangelical leaders from 189 countries, and thousands more participated through online meetings around the world.

In preparation for the Lausanne Congress Cape Town of 2010, the Lausanne Theology Working Group hosted a consultation in Beirut, Lebanon, 14–19 February, 2010. Together with twenty-three key theologians from fourteen countries, they worked together on four plenary papers and sixteen case studies. I had the privilege of presenting one of the plenary papers which contributed toward a new recognition among Evangelical theologians on this phenomenon of dual religious belonging. The findings of the Beirut Theological Statement

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on “The World of Cultures and Religions” were published in part, and in paragraph four it presented a new focus on dual religious belonging:

1. We are committed to bearing witness to Christ in the whole world, which means among all people on the planet. The world of humanity exists, by God’s clear intention, in nations, tribes, and languages—in other words, in cultures. Human cultures are religious in varying forms and degrees. The distinction between religion and culture is far less clear than often portrayed. For all religions exist within cultures, permeating and shaping them. For that reason, religions also share in the radical ambiguity of all human cultures.
2. We recognise that cultures and religions are neither monolithic nor static. Both change and vary throughout history and therefore should not be counted as “given” or absolute. The church also changes, is influenced by, and influences the cultures within which it is birthed and grown. The process of discernment within the local church is fundamental if Christians are to understand the ways (positive and negative) in which the cultures around them shape their witness and their calling.
3. If religions are fundamentally human cultural constructions and if cultures are also part of the created order, then we can be sure that at least three elements are intertwined within religions as cultural phenomena. First, because all human beings are made in God’s image and receive God’s general revelation, there will be some evidence of God’s revelatory work within the religious elements of any culture. But second, because all human beings are sinners, such revelation will also be distorted and darkened by our wilful disobedience, and that too will take religious forms. And third, because Satan is also at work in the world, there will be elements of satanic deception and evil in all culturally embedded religions. In short, religions can include elements of God’s truth, can be massively sin-laden, and can be systems of satanic bondage and idolatry.
4. We recognize that all followers of Christ experience the challenge of dual belonging: we are Christians who belong to Jesus, *and* we find ourselves within a culture to which we belong by birth or circumstance (and such cultural belonging may be static or it can be fluid and changing through life). The challenge is that while we cannot escape the fact of such dual belonging, we are called to single covenantal loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ. Western Christians face the dual belonging challenge of being disciples of Jesus while living within cultures of consumerism and militarism. They need to be aware of the idolatrous and quasi-religious power of those dominant forces in their culture and the extent

to which believers can be subverted by unconscious syncretism and cultural idolatry. There are some groups of people in other cultures, previously unconnected with established Christianity, who are now following Jesus Christ while living within their original religio-cultural traditions. As they seek faithfully to follow Jesus, they meet together with other followers of Jesus in small groups for fellowship, teaching, worship and prayer centred around Jesus and the Bible. At the same time, they live their lives socially and culturally within their birth communities. This phenomenon of following Jesus within diverse religio-cultural traditions needs careful biblical, theological and missiological evaluation. We are well aware that it is a complex phenomenon drawing conflicting evaluative responses, and we do not seek to take a position on it here. Our point merely is that it is a challenge that affects not only those who become followers of Jesus in the context of what are commonly called “other faiths.” The dangers of syncretism are worldwide, and so are the complexities of careful, biblically faithful contextualisation. We commend the work of other groups who are studying the latter in depth, but we would urge Lausanne to sponsor a more thorough biblical theology of religions within cultures and what following Jesus means in such contexts.<sup>2</sup>

**All followers of Christ  
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we belong by birth.**

An important assumption of this paper is that the goal of Christian mission is to participate in the ushering in of 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 to be understood in terms of bringing all things under the kingship of God. With regard to the function of religions, it would involve the transformation of non-Christian religious systems with gospel values whenever Jesus is encountered as Lord. Therefore, instead of compromising discipleship, I am arguing for a radical following of Jesus’ model of ushering in the Kingdom of God, which includes “inreligionisation.” The goal of mission is not just evangelism and church

planting, but a worldview transformation of whole cultures and religious life in such a radical way that Jesus is confessed as Lord over every aspect of life, including past religious cultures.

Can someone be both Christian *and* Buddhist? In the recent best seller, *Life of Pi*, when it is discovered that the main teenage character, Piscine Molitor Patel, is a practising Hindu, Christian, and Muslim, the religious leaders all agree that “in these troubled times, it [is] good to see a boy so keen on God. . . . But he can’t be a Hindu, a Christian *and* a Muslim. It’s impossible. *He must choose.*”<sup>3</sup> (italics mine)

Can Christians belong to more than one religious tradition? What are the arguments put forward for dual religious belonging and how do Christians develop a theological assessment of such a dual phenomenon, particularly when it exists among Christians who hold on to the finality of Jesus Christ as their unique saviour for salvation?

What kind of theology of dual belonging can best sustain the phenomenon of dual religious belonging? What are some contributions of dual religious belonging theology toward Evangelical contextual missiology? In addressing these vital questions I want us to rethink the Christian theological debates surrounding “religions” and “insider movements,” specifically for those coming to Christ from other faith traditions.

### *Christian identity*

Before discussing any Christian theology of dual religious belonging, it will be helpful to deal briefly with the complex idea of identity. *Webster’s New World Dictionary* defines identity, among other things, as “the condition or fact of being a specific person or thing; individuality.” Identity can be personal, group, cultural, national, and also religious. Identity will be determined not only by an individual perception but also in relation to and by the perceptions of other groups.

We are now witnessing an emerging social condition of “hybridity,” whereby one’s identity is now shaped and facilitated by the mixing and interactions of diverse cultures.<sup>4</sup> Traditional and strict boundaries between cultures are increasingly becoming more difficult to maintain in global cities. Christian understanding will need fresh theological categories in order to take into account or reflect the reality of active diffusions of beliefs, practices and influences between religions.<sup>5</sup>

Writers such as Stuart Hall challenge a traditional concept of identity as a self-contained and fixed concept.<sup>6</sup> Hall distinguishes between three different conceptions of human identity: the first being the “Enlightenment subject” which

conceived of the human person as “a fully centred, unified individual . . . whose ‘centre’ consisted of an inner core . . . remaining essentially the same . . . throughout the person’s existence.”<sup>7</sup> This view saw identity as individualistic, autonomous and fixed. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, with the complexity of the modern world, there was a

growing awareness that the idea of a self-contained,

fixed identity was not adequate. Instead, identity was formed “in relation to ‘significant others,’ who mediated to the subject, the values, meanings and symbols—the culture—of the world he/she inhabited.”<sup>8</sup>

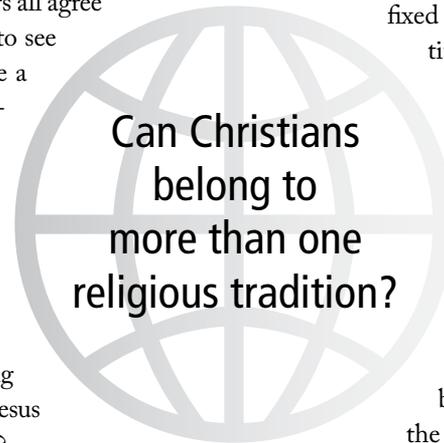
This second concept of identity is called the “sociological subject” whereby an individual’s inner core was continually being formed and modified in dialectical interaction with his or her society and culture. Identity in this conception bridges the gap between the individual and the society, between the private and the public selves. Such a dynamic view of identity demands a rethinking of theological categories when Christian theologians analyse complex phenomenon such as dual belonging.

By the late twentieth century, a third, postmodern conception of identity emerged, the “postmodern self.” The fragmentation of the self-identity occurs when the self is “composed not of a single, but of several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved identities.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, identities are contested and negotiated between competing loyalties and circumstances. Likewise, the modern social landscape is also breaking down, resulting in “the very process of identification, through which we project ourselves into our cultural identities, has become more open ended, variable and problematic.”<sup>10</sup> It is possible that people will assume different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent self:

The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the system of meanings and cultural representations multiplied, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, anyone of which we could identify with at least temporarily.<sup>11</sup>

It is part of an assumption of cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall that the modern, pluralist societies allow (indeed require) their members to adopt multiple social identities concurrently. This is seen in the different *roles* one person may play as she or he interacts with different groups (in the family, workplace, leisure group etc.).

Manuel Castells writes primarily on *collective* rather than *individual* identity and observes three kinds of meaning-making by collective groups in modern societies. Firstly, *legitimising identity* is “introduced by the dominant institutions



Can Christians  
belong to  
more than one  
religious tradition?

of society to extend and rationalize their domination.” A second type is where countercultural groups build “trenches of resistance and survival” as a form of *resistance identity*. A third kind of meaning-making is *project identity*, formed when groups come together to “seek the transformation of overall social structure” (with feminism as a case in point).<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, identity should always be thought of in the plural and as fluid, especially in the global exchanges of cultures and religions in both Asia and megacities today. Discussion of religious identities cannot be separated from power relationships in one’s sociopolitical, regional and global context, because religion is always being used as a political or economic tool. It is beyond the scope of this research to engage with further sociological study of identity, but focuses instead on the theological nature of religious belonging, as constructed and debated within the field of theology of religions.

Christian identity refers to how Christians have understood themselves as a group, both historically and within any contemporary society. Christian identity is rooted in the person of Jesus Christ, whom Christians believe is the Son of God. From that basic orientation or identification with Jesus, there are at least four factors which are crucial to the construction of a Christian identity:<sup>13</sup>

1. Christian “memory” (interpreted in the Scripture)
2. Traditions, theology and liturgy as mediated through historical constructions (e.g., an Orthodox faith, or Anglican denominational identity)
3. Local Christian communities (especially when they function as hermeneutical communities)
4. Social, political and religious contexts of the Christian.

The first two categories played a greater influence in identity formation, especially during the first two centuries or so. This is because Christian identity had to survive the initial onslaught of competing ideologies and emerge as a distinct Christian community. However, indigenous Christian and contextual identities (numbers three and four) only emerge and mature as local Christian communities grow in theological self-understandings and communal discernment. These two factors—local identity formation and an engagement with other socio-historical realities—will shape a given Christian identity.

### ***Evangelicals and Dual Religious Belonging***

Dual religious belonging is a phenomenon of individuals who identify themselves as followers of more than one religious tradition. People of faith may find themselves in various dual or multi-religious conditions due to growing up in pluralistic societies, to the inter-religious marriages of their parents, to an exposure to multi-religious traditions through

social networks, or to their conversion to another faith. In the West, the phenomenon of dual religious belonging occurs because a growing number of Christians are attracted to Asian religions. While some become Buddhists or Hindus, others decide to retain their Christian belonging, while at the same time seeking to incorporate elements of Asian religions into their life and practices. At some point in their journey of faith, these individuals may decide to retain both faith traditions, more or less equally, as part of their religious identity or religious belonging.

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Multi-religious identity is defined as having *one unique identity* (instead of two religions), but “one that is formed and developed under the influence of several religious traditions.”<sup>14</sup> Identities cannot be compartmentalised but are developed based on historical, social and cultural conditions, including drawing on sources of traditions from various religions. In contrast to the radical pluralist model, this multi-religious identity of a double believer group may not belong to two or more religious communities simultaneously. However, these double believers exhibit openness to the grace of God in different religions, and are interested in incorporating the teachings of these religions as their own. They have no problem maintaining identification with different faith communities and worshipping in different temples and churches at the same time. However, we do acknowledge the trend is towards a decline of religious identification among people from younger generations in urban cities. While different world religions might still exert a profound influence on global societies, individuals have freedom to choose not only which religion but also no religion.

For Christians in Asia, *belonging* to two or more religious communities externally as a conscious choice can be problematic both theologically and socially. In terms of Corning’s second criteria of acceptance by a religious community, double religious belonging (external identification) is generally not acceptable to Christians, Muslims and Hindus in Asia.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, it does not mean that it is impossible for a certain form of multi-religious *identity* to be nurtured among Christians. For *dual religious belonging*, (in contrast to

double belonging) the emphasis tends to be on dual religious belonging *within* oneself. It is neither a conscious maintenance of two or more religious systems or an external social identification with two or more religious communities at the same time. If the first category of double religious belonging finds its source (although not exclusively) in a pluralist theology of religion, one suspects that this second type of internal multi-religious identity draws its theological inspiration from within an inclusivist framework. While holding on to the centrality of Jesus, an openness to the revelation and efficacy of other religious truths allows practitioners of Christianity to develop a new identity that is not exclusively from the Christian tradition. Normally, such an inclusivist double believer

has one dominant religious affiliation and a second one which is secondary to the first but one in which the person draws in a continuous manner. The second religion may provide teachings, beliefs, and/or religious practices/customs. The degree to which the relationship between the dominant and the secondary is asymmetrical can vary.<sup>16</sup>

### *Can Exclusivist Christians Sustain Dual Religious Belonging as a Contextualised Faith?*

Missiologists, such as Ralph Winter, compare insider movements with the transitions in early Gentile mission:

It is just as unreasonable for a Hindu to be dragged completely out of his culture in the process of becoming a follower of Christ as it would have been if Paul the Apostle had insisted that a Greek become a Jew in the process of following Christ. . . . In the New Testament there was no law against a Greek becoming a Jew. However, Paul was very insistent that that kind of a cultural conversion was not necessary in becoming a follower of Christ.<sup>17</sup>

It may be helpful to delineate key differences between the radical model of Multiple Religious Belonging from our current contextualisation model of exclusivist Dual Belonging. First, rather than a pluralist appreciation of other religions as salvific structures of salvation, dual belonging stems from a growing recognition that Muslims and Hindus need not leave behind their past identities and cultures. Whenever new converts of Jesus Christ become Christians, they are encouraged to remain within their cultural identifications. Due to the intimate link between culture and religious identities and a new understanding of postmodern identities as not fixed and complete, followers of Jesus from different religious traditions may take on a dual belonging identity. Second, promoters of insider movements seek to avoid negative connotations of “Western Christianity” (i.e., labels such as imperialism, anti-nationalism and other foreign influences). For Asian converts to Christianity, Jesus could be the centre of their faith but they may not want to be identified with Western forms of Christianity. Third, unlike the first radical proposal of combining two

or more religious systems, many of the proponents of insider movements include conservative Christian mission groups who are firmly in the exclusivist camp, with regards to their theology of religions. Fourth, while the first two models tend to consist of *individuals* without a single identifiable community, insider movements tend to consist of *mass movements* of Hindus or Muslims toward Christianity.

One fine example of such an interdisciplinary approach to this phenomenon is found in, “Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas. A Qualitative and Theological Study of Syncretism and Identity in Global Christianity,” a doctoral study presented at the University of Copenhagen by Jonas Petter Adelin Jørgensen. Jørgensen studied two groups of insider movements: Muslim background believers *Īsā imandars*, meaning “those faithful to Jesus,” and Hindu background believers *Christ bhaktas*, meaning “devotees of Christ.” Both groups are self-consciously not Christian, although their religious faith shares a deep family resemblance to the larger Christian community. The religious life of the imandars and bhaktas are found to be a mixture between Christian theological ideas and forms from other religious traditions (Islam and Hinduism respectively). Instead of branding these groups as syncretistic, Jørgensen argues that the practice of the imandars and bhaktas could be viewed as new and creative manifestations of Christianity in a global age. The study concluded that theologically, the imandars and bhaktas identified Jesus Christ as central and essential although their dual identification with Islam and Hinduism respectively is based on a rather free interpretation of culture and symbols revolving around this fundamental relation.<sup>18</sup>

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### *Syncretism and Hybridity*

Syncretism is a contested term and could be based on the assumptions that religions are bounded entities— that every religious tradition has clearly defined doctrines and practices. Scholars may often specialize on one religious group, on textual traditions and maybe elite members who are not seeing syncretistic elements in their own traditions. Christians may approach these religious others with a view to determine what is syncretistic rather than with a readiness to embrace ambivalence and dynamic interchanges between faith practices.

There are those who view the mixing and borrowing between religions as having both negative as well as positive effects on Christianity—negatively, when Christianity is subsumed under the rubric of another religion, for example in the syncretistic practices of witchcraft or pagan worship; positively, when the mixing of the two faiths resulted in the transformation of Christian faith. For example, Christians can learn from meditation practices arising from the value of silence in Buddhist meditation. If we redefine our concept of syncretism not based on the mixing of religions but rather on evaluating its intended meaning using appropriate biblical criteria, we will have a different perspective on syncretism. In this biblical view, the syncretistic mixing of two religions is judged negatively only when the mixing of Christianity with incompatible elements of other religious beliefs or practices resulted in the gospel of Jesus Christ losing its integrity, such as pagan worship or the denial of the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Robert Schreiter suggests we view syncretism as the necessary synthesis of identity formation.<sup>19</sup> Syncretism is inevitable as we live in a global flow of constant interactions with different cultures and religions. When dual religious belonging is viewed as a process of identity formation, then we understand both synthesis and syncretism happening together, as two sides of the same coin. Syncretism then is not viewed as something negative but as an inherent process of identity formation in a dual religious context.

In real life, the process of synthesis and syncretism will take place as Christians read non-Christian scriptures such as the Qur'an or Tao Te Ching as part of their intertextual readings of religious scriptures. Increasingly, new and imaginative Christian identities could be nurtured as Muslim background believers read the Bible alongside the Qur'an, and as Chinese Christians reinterpret Confucian texts through Christian theological lenses. K. K. Yeo, Professor of New Testament at Garreth-Evangelical Seminary, in *Musing with Confucius and Paul*,<sup>20</sup> demonstrated how an Evangelical Chinese Christian identity can be constructed without capitulating to dominant Western Christian values. For example, the Confucian ideal of filial piety and honouring ancestors are important aspects

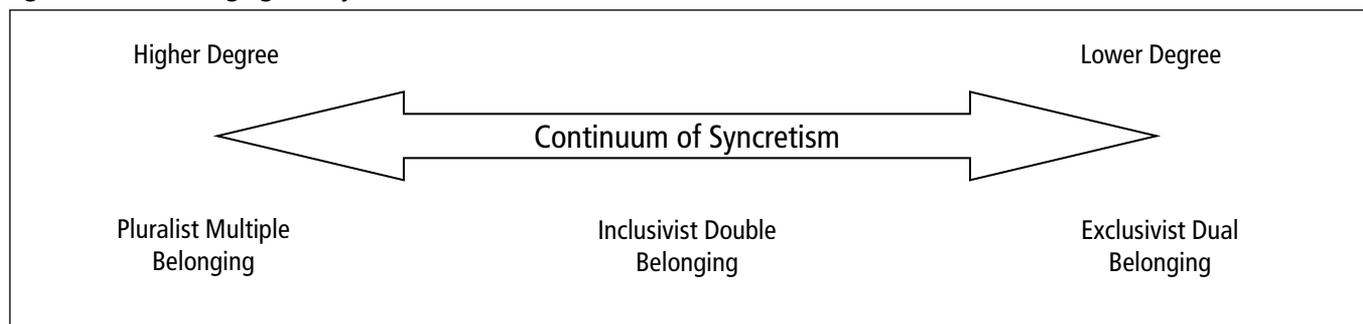
that Chinese Christians may have to rediscover as part of the construction of Chinese identity. On the other hand, the high value attached to individual rights and freedom (which is foreign to both the Christian gospel and the Chinese culture) extolled in the West becomes problematic for constructing a harmonious Chinese self. Yeo's intertextual Pauline-Confucian studies, while demonstrating a hybrid identity, become a quest for an authentic Chinese Christian ideal.

In the final analysis, in contrast to a comparative study, Christian theology will then need to engage more seriously with the total revelation of God, as revealed in the Bible as well as theological perspectives within the Christian community. It also needs to engage with insights and values from the different religious traditions. For example, what kind of new Christology and new ecclesiology are developed out of these three models of multi-religious belonging? Until we have more developed theologies coming out from these contexts, ongoing dialogue and continued creative thinking build a missiological appreciation for these new movements.

Though tentative, a missiological framework could be suggested. While I recognize the ambiguities alongside the continuum from Multiple Religious Belonging (external combination of two religious systems), Double Religious Belonging (within oneself) to Dual Religious Belonging with one's past religious heritage, the diagram below tries to illustrate both the dangers of syncretism as well as possibilities for enrichment when dual religious belonging is anticipated. (See Figure 1.)

So, to the question whether it is theologically possible for a Christian to follow Christ while retaining some form of identification with one's previous religion such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Chinese religions, one must say a tentative but qualified "yes." The answer seems to depend on what kind of multi-religious belonging is being considered. Certainly, a positive yes for dual religious belonging, but a tentative yes if we are referring to an external identification of faith and loyalty to two religious systems of thought. Evangelicals will need to reject multiple religious belonging as a liberal modernist

Figure 1. Dual Belonging and Syncretism



approach that is untenable with biblical faith. However, Asian Christians need not reject everything of past religious beliefs, as long as they are compatible with Christian Scripture. Alan Race pointed to the teaching of the early Church Father, Justin Martyr, who clearly taught on the operation of God's grace outside Christianity:

It is our belief that those men (sic) who strive to do the good which is enjoined on us have a share in God; according to our traditional belief they will by God's grace share his dwelling. And it is our conviction that this holds good in principle for all men (sic).<sup>21</sup>

Just as Augustine learned from Neoplatonism, Thomas Aquinas learned from Aristotle, and John Calvin learned from Renaissance humanism, then it can be argued that Asian Evangelicals may be able to learn from the Buddha—and other great religious thinkers and traditions—perspectives that can help them more clearly understand God's revelation in Christ.<sup>22</sup> These early Church Fathers learned from the knowledge of the world's philosophies of their time, and they were transformed by their learning, but they also challenged those aspects which were not true or compatible with Christian doctrines and beliefs. If the key lesson is about mutual learning between religious traditions, then we must also raise the question as to why Western Christians may not also learn from the great non-Christian teachers of the non-Western world.

Asian Christian spirituality can recognize and affirm those elements that are “good, true, and holy” within one's past religious faith, whether it be Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam. Regardless of one's answer or inclination, dual belongers will need to continually reflect and exercise discernment, through the help of Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and the local community of dual belongers. In the process of critical reflection, there will be elements within one's previous religious beliefs and practices that can be retained and there will be other elements within one's past religious beliefs and practices which need to be rejected. Identification with one's past religion requires the convert to hold in tension those elements of continuity and discontinuity. Over time, an intra-religious dialogue between

insider movements and the established church traditions (past and present) as *equal partners* will further shape the development of insider movements' theologies. Meanwhile, we approach the new phenomenon of dual religious belonging not as a final product or outcome but a dynamic process of negotiating identities between Christianity and past religious belongings and a dynamic negotiating between an emerging indigenous form of Christianity and an apostolic faith whereby, as highlighted by Kathryn Tanner, the “. . . distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed *by* the boundary as *at* it.”<sup>23</sup>

Dual religious belonging allows different perspectives to flourish within one and the same person by encouraging inculturation and promoting understanding between two religions. In interreligious dialogue, a dual believer is able to enter into past religious belief systems and draw insights which may not be available to an “outside” observer or partner. In a sense, both *etic* and *emic* perspectives may be appropriated. A key notion in anthropological research is the distinction between the imposed (exported) *etic* perspective and the (indigenous) *emic* perspective. The emergence of a dual belonging community enables both the imported Christian perspective as well as the indigenous Asian religious perspective to intersect and interact—in particular, when the local community of dual belongers, such as that of Muslim background believers, becomes a hermeneutical community. One can only pray and hope for the emergence of such indigenous Christian communities that will bridge the temple and the mosque. Their growth presents unprecedented promise for the development of authentic Asian Christian identity and will contribute to the reconciliation of religious communities worldwide. Dual belongers may then contribute to the project of self-theologising and the development of indigenous Christian communities. **IJFM**



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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding,” World Council of Churches, accessed on 12/08/2011, Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding | World Council of Churches (<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/religious-plurality-and-christian-self-understanding>).

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Wright, Cape Town Commitment 2010, accessed on 12/26/2013, The Cape Town Commitment - Lausanne Movement (<https://lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment#foreword>).

<sup>3</sup> Yann Martel, *Life of Pi: A Novel* (Singapore: Mariner Books, 2002), 92.

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- <sup>13</sup> “Christian Identity in a Pluralistic Context: Continuity and Discontinuity,” accessed June 10, 2013, <https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/research/theology/programs/identity>.
- <sup>14</sup> Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration: How Inter-Faith Encounter Changes Christianity*, (SCM Press, 2009), 46–48.
- <sup>15</sup> Catherine Cornille, *Many Mansions?: Multiple religious belonging and Christian identity* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2010).
- <sup>16</sup> Gideon Goosen, “Edith Stein: An example of dual religious belonging?,” *Australian E-Journal of Theology*, (2005): 1, accessed July 21, 2023, AEJT ([https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/download/eea22be20587543963b940587ddd5a09d68ad1002756166272390174afb0e47c/484386/OA\\_Goosen\\_2005\\_Edith\\_Stein\\_an\\_example\\_of\\_dual.pdf](https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/download/eea22be20587543963b940587ddd5a09d68ad1002756166272390174afb0e47c/484386/OA_Goosen_2005_Edith_Stein_an_example_of_dual.pdf)).
- <sup>17</sup> Ralph Winter, “To the new ASM: Greetings from the West,” *Asian Missiology*, Vol. 2/No.1, (2008): 201, accessed July 21, 2023, To The New Asian Society of Missiology - Asian Society of Missiology (<https://asianmissiology.org/2010/10/15/greetings-from-the-west/>).
- <sup>18</sup> Jonas Petter Adelin Jørgensen, “Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas: A qualitative and theological study of syncretism and identity in global Christianity” (Doctoral Study presented, University of Copenhagen, 2006), accessed 13 May 2008, <http://isis.ku.dk/kurser/blob.aspx?feltid=160364>.
- <sup>19</sup> Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 62–83.
- <sup>20</sup> K. K. Yeo, *Musing with Confucius and Paul* (Cascade Books, 2008).
- <sup>21</sup> Alan Race, *Christian and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religion* (London: SCM-Canterbury Press, Ltd., 1983), 42.
- <sup>22</sup> Race, *Christian and Religious Pluralism*, 42–44; also on Clement, the early Church Father’s view on the presence of divine truth in Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism.
- <sup>23</sup> Jørgensen, “Jesus Imandars,” 40.

# INSIDER CHURCH

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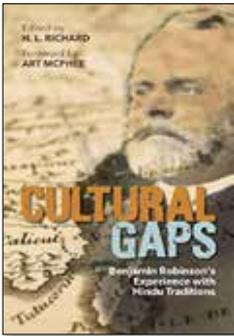
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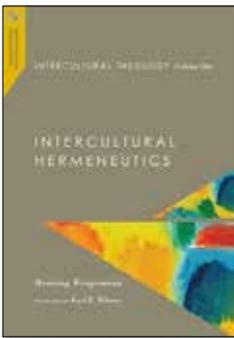
# Further Resources on the Hermeneutical Process



## Cultural Gaps: Benjamin Robinson's Experience with Hindu Traditions

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

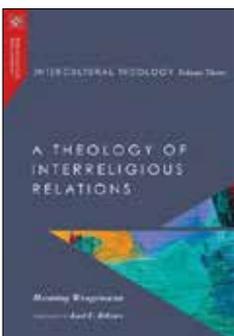
Differences between Hindu and Christian traditions account for an uneven reception of the gospel of Christ among Hindu peoples, and these difference call for a deeper understanding of intercultural hermeneutics. In *Cultural Gaps*, H. L. Richard brings a forgotten nineteenth-century pioneer back into 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.



## 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.



## 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.

Beyond Contextualization

# The Life and Thought of R. C. Das: His Theology of Interreligious (Hindu-Christian) Relations

by *H. L. Richard*

**R**ajendra Chandra Das (1887–1976) was born in (then) East Bengal in the village of Shyampur, then some miles away from Dhaka but today integrated at the edge of the growing metropolis. He was from the backward Namasudra caste but his father was a somewhat prosperous farmer and a devout Vaishnava Hindu. As an intelligent boy Das won scholarships and by age 15 was sent to Dhaka for schooling. There he came into contact with Christianity and the Brahmo Samaj.<sup>1</sup> Both Christianity and the Brahmo Samaj appealed to him as he was drawn to the way of Christ. Das himself described his feelings:

I became attached to Brahmoism and to Christianity almost simultaneously though during the earlier part of my residence in Dacca I was inclined more to Brahmoism than to Christianity. Had I not kept up this connection with Christianity (for which I thank God) perhaps I could not have become what I am today. There was sufficient reason for my partiality to Brahmoism at that time.

First of all, it is indigenous in every way, and so naturally appealed to my heart. Secondly, it possesses a most excellent literature in the vernacular and music of a high standard which, I believe, is the most effective instrument to attract men to religion and spirituality and to change men's opinions (their traditional views). Thirdly, it offers a reconciliation of all the conflicting religions of the world though I discovered the fallacy of its eclecticism before long. Lastly, the Brahmo community is highly developed in point of education, morals and religion, and is a pleasant half-way house between Hinduism and Christianity. All these drew my attention to it.

I hardly found any good Christian literature, and scarcely frequented the Christian chapel. I remember having gone to the Bengali service once or twice, but it gave me little satisfaction. The whole thing appeared to be a got up show arranged by the missionaries. The service was dry and formal; no bhakti (devotional spirit) was seen among the few people. It was words and words and sound and sound. No spontaneous spirit of worship that I saw in the Brahma Mandir. Everything, even the very atmosphere, seemed to me foreign and alien to my taste. (Richard 1995, 27; written in 1911, published in *National Council of Churches Review* in March, 1949; revised and reprinted as a tract in 1974.)

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*H. L. Richard is an independent researcher focused on the Hindu-Christian encounter. He has published numerous books and articles including studies of key figures like Narayan Vaman Tilak (Following Jesus in the Hindu Context, Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1998), Kalagara Subba Rao (Exploring the Depths of the Mystery of Christ, Bangalore: Centre for Contemporary Christianity, 2005), and R. C. Das (R. C. Das: Evangelical Prophet for Contextual Christianity, Delhi: ISPCK, 1995).*

## *Embracing Christianity*

Yet in the end Das opted for Christianity as more satisfying than the Brahmo Samaj:

Brahmoism stirred the depths of my soul, created a restless spirit in me, but gave no adequate consolation and peace. It told me to repent and turn to God, but I was unable to work true repentance. I often shed tears but found no peace, no assurance of God's love and forgiveness. It increased my restlessness and dryness of heart. I chased the shadowy ghost of the God of Brahmoism in vain while on the contrary without my wishing it or being even conscious of it the reality of the presence of God in Christ followed me, upheld me and even got hold of me. It was, it seemed to me, at least a feeble realisation in my own very humble and obscure life of the truth of the cat school of philosophy in Vaisnavism—the kitten being compulsorily moved and rescued by mother cat. The Brahmo God though true in theory eluded my grasp, and I could not worship unless I created a God in my heart. But I was not to be satisfied with imagination. I wanted reality which would at once satisfy my conscience and intellect. Brahmoism hardly told me anything of the stain and impurity which blackened my soul and heart, and dimmed my vision of God and defiled His image in me. Brahmoism scarcely offered me an adequate means of salvation except a false repentance which has to be worked out. It told man to go to God, but did not undertake to remove the barrier between. Reason and intuition are the ultimate criteria of truth according to Brahmoism. Revelation is an absurd impossibility. Well did my whole nature revolt against such a system when I arrived at the age of discretion and maturity. (Richard 1995, 32; written in 1911, published in *National Council of Churches Review*, March, 1949; revised and reprinted as a tract in 1974.)

I chased the shadowy ghost  
of the god of Brahmoism in vain  
while on the contrary  
the reality of the presence of God in  
Christ followed me, upheld me,  
and even got a hold of me. (R. C. Das)

So Das was baptised by Baptist missionaries in 1908 at the age of twenty-one. I fear the above account will be read too negatively in regards to the Brahmo Samaj, so this incident after Das' baptism provides another perspective:

On the day following the baptism, early in the morning came Prashanta Kumar Ray—my class friend in the Dacca Government College—calling me to his uncle and my beloved

acharya of the New Dispensation Church of Keshub Chandra Sen, Bhai Banga Chandra Roy, editor of East Bengal Times and member of an aristocratic Hindu family, who was one of the 40 outstanding converts initiated in one day's meeting of Keshub Chandra Sen into the Brahmo Samaj. My friend called out from the ground floor that Rajendra was coming. Immediately the octogenarian saint with a stick in hand started to come down to welcome me, stepping on a rather precarious wooden staircase. With some difficulty and with strong but loving words I succeeded in making him wait upstairs. I was pleasantly shocked to see his childlike delight and enthusiasm to run down to meet me at sight. When I went up slowly and carefully and bowed on his feet he stretched out his loving hand and shook it strong with mine and affectionately embraced me saying "From today you are my brother." I was like his son, his nephew's age, but I understood what he meant—brother in Jesus Christ. (Richard 1995, 35; from unpublished "Autobiographical Reflections")

## *Higher Studies*

Das moved to Kolkata around 1910 to pursue a BA in English, Sanskrit, and philosophy; he graduated with honours. He spent a year in the newly reconstituted Serampore Theological College, intending to join the Baptist ministry, but the course work was not satisfying to him. He then spent three years earning a master's degree in philosophy in Kolkata, and during this time joined the Anglican church. He had been rejected from a position as an evangelist among the Baptists but was appointed by the Anglicans. He was married in 1917 and eventually had seven children.

Patterns and priorities of the ministry of R. C. Das were set in his early years in Kolkata (rooted in his Dhaka experiences outlined above). He was initially deeply involved in traditional Christian evangelistic work but moved away from this in favor of indigenous methods. Das himself wrote,

In spite of heavy work as an advanced student and soon as a teacher, I used to address large numbers in halls in the open air, in cities and in villages—sometimes audiences as large as five thousands. It was all direct and frank—preaching the word—and appeal to heart and head to accept the claims of Christ upon one's life. I soon realised the futility of it all—its impersonal vagueness, its vanity, its costliness in mental and physical energy, above all its temptation to name and fame. I preached in the villages of Dacca, Barisal, Faridpur, Jessore, Khulna, Nadia, 24 Parganas, and Pabna districts of the then divided Bengal and always in cooperation with missionaries and Indian evangelists. I preached with my gospel team in the halls and squares of Dacca and Calcutta; and was the leader in arranging huge evangelistic campaigns for John R. Mott, Sherwood Eddy and others and was the first and last editor of Prochar Abhijan—a monthly—promoting evangelistic campaigns in Calcutta and in the presidency of Bengal. . . . But soon I was led to a new spirit, a nobler motive, a congenial and quiet evangelistic approach. What follows will be a verification of the personal, friendly and indigenous

method in evangelism as spiritually and otherwise valid and effective. (Richard 1995, 40; from *God's Redemptive Acts and Creative Dealings through One Who Found Life*, Varanasi: R. C. Das, 1962)

As a developing Christian leader Das was encouraged by his mentors towards joining the Anglican ministry with the prospect of eventually becoming a bishop and bringing a genuinely Indian ethos into the church. But Das found it necessary to turn aside from this proposed path. He wrote,

I have a sense of vocation and a call from God, a freedom in initiative and a wider ideal—which I think cannot be fulfilled within the purview of the church which is too tight and strict in law and order. I shall be swamped in its thick atmosphere and thwarted at every step by the very tradition of the church—totally alien to India—and by the very close fellowship of its members in a different climate. . . . In the Anglican church I, a Hindu convert, as a priest shall be only one black rung in the entire white wheel of the church. What can I do for the church and what can the church do for my life development? (Richard 1995, 39; from unpublished "Autobiographical Reflections")

Whether Das' Anglican friends could have steered him through the church system to rise up as a bishop cannot be known. What is clear is that there was opposition to his innovative indigenous approaches. Willie (W. E. S.) Holland was especially a friend and support to Das, and when he relocated from Kolkata to England for a time, he thought it best that Das also leave the city. So from 1918 to 1922 Das shifted to St. John's College in Agra.

### Teaching in Agra

Das taught by a Socratic method rather than by focusing on rote memory. Since this paper is not solely biographical, I will only share one incident from the beginning of his Agra years:

While still in Calcutta a friend warned me that a Hindu convert and nationalist as I was I might have to face some social problems from the Christian community—unpopularity, exclusion and even persecution, U. P. Christians being what they were—not only western in their living style but harbouring anti-Indian and anti-Hindu prejudices and cherishing extra territorial politics and cultural loyalties and economic and religious gratitude to the west. I thought it was horrible. To obviate at least an initial unpleasant situation, the friend suggested that I should adopt European dress. In spite of my reluctance, as a tactical gesture, I wisely accepted the advice. Why should I under the actual circumstances allow an external thing like dress to be the cause of misunderstanding when Christians should have, and have, internal spiritual unity? (Das 1976, 129)

Throughout his life R. C. Das did not shy away from controversy when he felt important principles related to God's kingdom were at stake. But as this incident shows, he was willing to compromise on matters of less significance. In 1922 Das received a call back to Bengal, where he initially served under the Anglican Church Missionary Society for two years, then under the indigenous leadership of Allauddin Khan in the Church of God until 1930. The latter had rather extreme views, opposing both doctors and the wearing of gold ornaments by women, yet Das worked happily in this fellowship until an irresistible call came from Varanasi.

### Varanasi

From 1930 until his death in 1976 R. C. Das was in Varanasi. He was called to serve in the Benares United City Mission (BUCM) which had been formed a few years earlier by a number of cooperating Protestant mission societies, such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the London Missionary Society (LMS), and the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS), etc. The founder who recruited Das was J. C. Jackson, a British missionary who had first entered India under the Salvation Army but later joined the WMMS. He had married a Tamil lady and saw his role in Banaras primarily as a caretaker, looking for someone to truly lead the work. That person was R. C. Das.

While serving in Banaras under the BUCM, Das was the prime force in founding the Christian Society for the Study of Hinduism (CSSH). He was a major influence on the CSSH's journal, *The Pilgrim*, which ran from 1941 to 1955. In 1947 after the close of the BUCM, Das started his own journal, *The Seeker*, which in 1958 became *The Seeker and Pilgrim*. In 1964 Das changed the name of his journal again and called the new publication *The Church of Christ*, which he edited right up to 1973 when he was eighty-six years old. Das was a significant player in many national mission and church consultations in the middle of the twentieth century, including the Indian Theological Conferences and numerous National Council of Churches (NCC) consultations. He sought to establish a permanent school for Christian study of Hinduism and sought NCC backing for this, but it never came to fruition.

In Varanasi, Das often worked from a Christian ashram which he founded, the Kristapanthi Ashram located in Dasashvamedh not far from the main bathing *ghat* in the holy city. When the CSSH and BUCM folded, Das lived at the Dasashvamedh Ashram and he eventually died there. Das did not have a particularly happy family life. His wife left in 1949 to return to East Bengal related to fears of losing family property due to Partition. But there were also deeper marital problems.

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method in evangelism.  
(R. C. Das)

## Relational Tensions

In his writings, Das was often rather severely critical of the Indian church and missions, as will be discussed below. This contributed to his reputation as a difficult person to get along with. The closure of the Benares United City Mission was closely tied to relational tensions that included Das.<sup>2</sup> On this complex topic I cannot do better than quote what I wrote over twenty-five years ago:

Das remained a bit of an enigma to many who knew him personally. His family life was not particularly happy and the lack of a close friend and co-worker, which he himself lamented, no doubt contributed to his general failing in relationships with other Christians. Yet many comment on how warm he could be personally even when seeming harsh in his printed diatribes. Das seemed simply not to understand why friends would be troubled by his public criticisms which he considered were made in the cause of Christ and truth. (Richard 1995, 4)

## Writings and Insights

Das was a critical and creative thinker, but his writings are not easily available. He did not produce any major book, his most noted publications being the booklet *How to Present Christ to a Hindu* (North Indian Tract and Book Society, 1951 with some reprintings), and a collection of four shorter papers entitled *Convictions of an Indian Disciple* (Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society [CISRS], 1966). His magazines ran for twenty-seven years but few copies are extant in libraries. His autobiography was never published and is in too rough a form to be publishable. He wrote some major papers that appeared in various journals but as yet those have not been collected and published. My collection of selections and shorter pieces from his writings, as referenced above, remains the most accessible source for understanding Das.

The remainder of this article will look at some major themes in the thought of R. C. Das. Four topics will be touched. Evangelism was central to Das' life and concern, so that must be first. Evangelism for Das could not be separate from indigenization, or contextualization to use our modern term, so that will be second. Third, Das' approach to traditional churches and missions must be noted. Finally, his creative thought in relation to Hinduism will be outlined.

## Das as Evangelist

It must first be highlighted that Das was an evangelist and among Christians was a promoter and teacher on evangelizing Hindus. His booklet *How to Present Christ to a Hindu* is a classic that should be reprinted and studied again.<sup>3</sup> Das is an important figure in the discipline we now call Indian theology as he commented on many areas of theological thought. Yet Indian

theology has been a largely theoretical enterprise removed from practical life. Das was intensely practical, as his focus on evangelism indicates, so to consider him as an Indian theologian seems inappropriate, thus that designation will not be used here.

## Das as Contextualizer

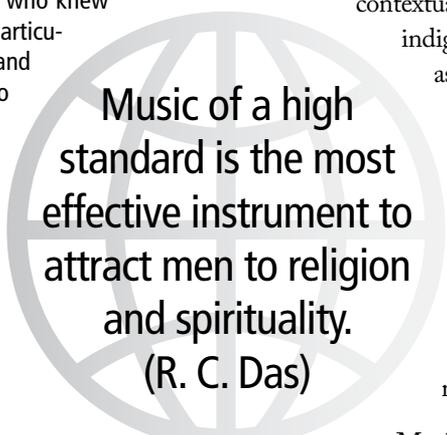
For Das, evangelism had to be related to the life and culture of the people, so he was an avid proponent of what today we call contextualization (he used the older terminology of indigenization). Das was an avid proponent of ashrams as the best site for interacting with Hindus, and for many years he sponsored an annual gathering of Christian *sadhus* (religious ascetics) and ashramites to reflect on issues of faith and life.<sup>4</sup> Das recognized the centrality of devotional music in living Hinduism, as noted in his comment that "music of a high standard . . . is the most effective instrument to attract men to religion and spirituality" (1976, 33).<sup>5</sup>

Much more should be said about contextualization in the teaching of R. C. Das, but space prohibits extensive detail. He proposed Hindu architecture for worship centers, art, flowers and incense in worship, chanting the names of God/Christ, *arati* (an aspect of home or temple worship where oil lamps are rotated circularly clockwise in front of an image; also done to honor a human guest), the use of Sanskrit *slokas* (quotes from sacred texts or songs), etc. (Richard 1995, 123–4). Surely if Das were alive today, he would recognize that modern urban India has changed, but one suspects he would still press that Hindu cultures have a strong pull, as well as being largely in line with the Bible, whereas modernity often undermines the biblical focus on humility, meditation, bhakti, and service.

## Das' Evaluation of Church and Mission

Related to his deep concern for contextualization, Das was a rather strident critic of the Indian church and of missionary influence on the church. We are now in a post-missionary era, so Das' thoughts on this topic are only of historical interest. Yet I find his perspective fascinating, compelling, and worthy of deep reflection. The core is that missionaries should leave the church but not the country; they should let Indian Christians alone to deal with all the issues of living for Christ in India, and they should instead engage in pioneer encounters with India's Hindus, Muslims, tribals, etc. This means he was opposed to partnership as the best way for Indians and internationals to relate:

The policy and practice of partnership between Indian and western churches or of merging and integration of missions into churches, have done great harm to both church and mission. It has made the Indian self complacent and uncreative and obstructed and frustrated the missionary. . . .



Music of a high standard is the most effective instrument to attract men to religion and spirituality.  
(R. C. Das)

I believe in the ideal and principle of partnership but do not accept it, in the present circumstances, as a policy applied to the growing but weak church. Partnership, to be real and beneficial to both parties, must be practised between equals; when the Indian church will be mature and unafraid and on its own feet it can welcome mission partnership both as regards personnel and policy and resources in order to contact more effectively its non-Christian environment. . . .

Though the country has attained political liberty the church still suffers from slavery. She is tied to the apron strings of mission organisation. She is economically, morally and spiritually dependent on mission supplies. Her own life cannot be creative under the circumstances. (Richard 1995, 170; from *The Seeker*, vol. 6 no. 5, 1952)

Das' critical evaluation of missionary meddling in church affairs and Indian Christian subservience to foreign ways made him unpopular with both missionaries and nationals, with many exceptions for those who appreciated his insights and candid criticisms. Someone should undertake a major study of Das' views on the church and what a contextual church would look like, etc., and the relevance of his insights for modern times.

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Das had many critics, most related to his views on missions and on contextualization (i.e., the use of Hindu forms in evangelism and worship). I am not sympathetic with criticisms in this area. Das regularly called for "experiments" as he wanted to free up creativity and release spiritual dynamism among the followers of Jesus. In 1948 in a paper on "New Experiments in Religion" he wrote,

Construction is always preceded and accompanied by some amount of destruction. To build truly Indian Christian theology the first prerequisite is a revolutionary mind. Our young theologians will have to brag less of their learning which is secondhand. Out of their own personal experience of the riches of Christ they will have to weave, humbly and tremblingly indeed, the warp and woof of its structure in indigenous terms and thought forms artistically and strongly too. Then it will touch and tell. (Richard 1995, 101; from *The Guardian*, Sept. 20, 1948)

Another criticism of Das can be stated at this point. He supported "experiments" that had little hope of success, such as his annual meeting for Christian sadhus referred to above. He held out a romantic hope that a new Indian church would emerge from some of the unstable fringes of the Indian church and mission scene.<sup>6</sup> Such support and encouragement for schismatics who left existing churches obviously did not endear Das to the leadership of churches and missions.

### Das on the Gospel in Relation to Hindu Traditions

How to think about "Hinduism" is one of the burning issues of our day. Massive tomes are being written debating the validity and utility of the term, and it seems unlikely that debate will end soon. Conservative Christians seem stuck on the old, and now thoroughly discredited, idea that Hinduism is "a religion." But in academic circles, "religion" is debated as much or more than even "Hinduism." R. C. Das, as a practical evangelist, did not produce clear definitions of these terms, but he had a clear grasp of Hindu realities and insightfully presented perspectives that are still helpful today.

### *Fulfillment Thought*

During over forty years of writing and commenting, Das made many points about Hinduism and the encounter of the gospel with Hindu traditions. To spell out his position in detail is beyond the scope of this paper; rather some representative comments will be shared and discussed. First, it can be noted that Das was largely favorable to the idea that Christ and Christianity fulfill Hinduism; but there are some careful nuances to his understanding, and in the end, I think it better NOT to consider Das a fulfillment advocate. In a 1937 paper on "The Christian Approach to Popular Hinduism" Das wrote,

. . . Christianity is the fulfilment of Hinduism in no mechanical sense. It is not like a dome or tower imposed externally upon the structure of Hinduism. Christianity is rather like leaven, qualifying, vitalizing and reshaping the whole system of Hindu thought, emotion and activity. The moral and spiritual ideas and practices of Hinduism, in so far as they are true and noble, are affected as it were by similar but far deeper truths in Christianity. As Christianity is not essentially a theological system or a moral code but a life and spirit inspired and generated by the Christ living in the hearts of men and transforming them by His dynamic principles, the spiritual and ethical ideas and attitudes that have emerged from Christian experience will naturally lay upon similar truths in Hinduism that have affinities with them. (Richard 1995, 128; from the *National Council of Churches Review*, April 1937)

### *Beyond Fulfillment*

So fulfillment was acceptable to Das, but it was the "life and spirit inspired and generated by the Christ living in the hearts of men" in dynamic encounter with Hindu "thought, emotion and activity" that would produce a new expression

of discipleship to Jesus. In a paper written six years later on “A Modern Apologetics for Hinduism,” Das envisioned a similar type of interreligious engagement:

Attacking Hinduism from outside is like beating the wind or the water—Christianity must leaven and transform Hinduism from the inside. Votaries of truth need neither be alarmed nor delighted that in the process a good deal of Hinduism will be surely destroyed. It is the conviction of the writer that eventually Hinduism as a system will die a slow natural death and live within the church as a force, inspiration and mentality. Should Christianity or need Christianity suppress, supplant and uproot Hinduism or rather should Christianity transplant, transform, vitalise its ideas and institutions with Christian spirit, direction and motive? It is futile to attack Hinduism from without, however spiritual our weapons of warfare. A militant religion cannot destroy another religion that looks inward for power and support. The Christian leaven must be allowed to work from within. If this is done Hindu institutions and organizations—its legalistic system—will die, while the true treasures—the ethical and spiritual values—cleansed and replenished by Christian graces, will live within the church. Up to now the Christian leaven has worked very partially in the intellectual life of educated India but the spiritual springs and moral intuitions of Hinduism remain untouched. In a way it is quite urgent to influence the social and public life of India with the Christian verities of liberty, equality and fraternity and with the Christian standards of purity, truth and rectitude—which is possible only if and when the Christian community will act as salt and light, losing itself in the service of men, always being ready to discharge obligations without claiming rights for itself. (Das 1943, 22; partially reprinted in Richard 1995, 77)

In analyzing this statement, it must first be noted that “Christianity” and “Hinduism” are used in reified ways that do not really fit with the major point being made. The point is clearly *against* an opposition of Christianity and Hinduism as competing religions; “Christianity” is to go inside of “Hinduism” and transform it. Much of Hinduism will be destroyed in this process, but an unstated assumption is that much of Christianity will also be discarded (triumphalistic, colonial, militant Christianity must also die).

### *Possessio*

In that same paper Das posed this same issue as a question:

Will Christianity face and touch this Hinduism from outside from the standpoint of an institution and a creed however good and true and thus supplant it or contact it and possess it, revivify it and regenerate it like a dynamic movement of the Divine Spirit? (Das 1943, 17)

“Christianity” taking possession of “Hinduism” and regenerating it presents a rich and profound perspective on gospel engagement with Hindu traditions. This fits with Dutch missiologist J. H. Bavinck’s missiological position, that *possessio* is the proper approach to other cultures and faith traditions.<sup>7</sup>

I would add a slight nuance here; the taking possession of Hindu traditions is for people from Hindu families; those of us born in Christian families are outsiders who must be very careful regarding how we approach and engage with Hindu traditions.

## Attacking Hinduism from outside is like beating the wind or the water—Christianity must leaven and transform Hinduism from the inside. (R. C. Das)

### *Mutual Possessio*

But Das has a more nuanced approach than Bavinck, as he presents a mutual penetration of the spiritual traditions. This statement is again from the 1937 paper quoted above:

. . . living Hinduism can easily and normally pass into living Christianity without serious loss to either. This means that our study and criticism of popular Hinduism should be dispassionate and constructive, with a view to truth and uninspired by mere propagandist zeal. Outwardly the evangelist should live the Hindu life subject to obedience to essential Christian principles. This will not only disarm opposition and melt prejudice but will also remove the harmful idea that Christian conversion is mere change of outward community. We should stand for genuine heart and life change, entrusting the consequences to the hand of God. . . . (Richard 1995, 132; from the *National Council of Churches Review*, April 1937)

Writing on “The Church’s Relation to Hinduism” in 1959 Das used the phrase “discriminating penetration” (Richard 1995, 125; from *The Seeker and Pilgrim*, vol. 13 no. 1, 1959). I would adjust this, and expect Das would approve the change, to “discriminating mutual interpenetration,” as the disciple of Jesus “lives a Hindu life” and possesses the riches of a particular Hindu heritage, while calling Hindus to honor Christ and make him central to their Hindu life and thought—thus a mutual taking possession of the heritages of the other.

Das wrote on this point again in a paper in 1962, addressing

. . . the important question of the relationship of Christianity to Hinduism—concretely that of the Hindu convert to his past and to the country. The proper relation must be fairly intelligently and emotionally grasped otherwise there is the danger of either (a) aloofness—resulting in an ineffective barren Christian life or (b) indiscriminate mixing—consequence being a flat syncretism. The heritage of India in its spiritual as well as cultural aspects belongs to the

Hindu convert to Christianity as to the Hindu himself. The difference is the Hindu accepts and follows the tradition blindly whereas the convert uses his judgment enlightened by Christian truth and rejects everything that is inconsistent with Biblical revelation. But he does not do it in any mechanical way. To a true believer and lover of his country it just happens. It is spontaneous. Because the word of God made flesh—Jesus Christ—is the truth all truths find their fulfilment in and through Him. He is the energising and directing spirit and judge of all and keeps his disciples from falling into error. . . . (Das 1962b: 21–22)

Two quibbles should be noted related to this statement. “The Hindu convert to Christianity” is not an acceptable description for the person who is doing what Das is talking about. This is a follower of Jesus to whom “the heritage of India in its spiritual as well as cultural aspects belongs.” He or she has embraced Hindu ways so is truly Hindu, not a convert to “Christianity.” Second, Das is too negative towards Hindus; surely some “blindly” accept and follow tradition, but many are engaged in spontaneous and intuitive transformation of Hindu life and thought, the very kind of transformative process that Das is calling disciples of Jesus to engage in. The disciple of Jesus does this under the guidance of the Spirit of Christ and of the Bible, but spontaneous change from Hindu agents is manifestly and rapidly happening to Hindu traditions all around us.

**To the Indian heart,  
illuminated by the light of the cross,  
will be manifest the wonders, beauty,  
and fascinating power  
of the love of God. (R. C. Das)**

### *Christ as King of Hinduism*

I suspect this approach to the Hindu-Christian encounter is stretching the parameters of many, but I want to give one last stretch before closing this summary of R. C. Das' perspective. In a 1952 paper on “Hinduism: The Source of Its Power” Das suggested that

To meet Hinduism in its anti-Christian aspects or to absorb Hinduism on its pro-Christian side, historical Christianity with its modern missions might find the task too difficult and complex. . . . But when Jesus Christ is disentangled from theology and historical phenomena and presented as a saviour, master and God he will both by his power and wisdom possess the stronghold and himself become its king and commander. (Das 1952, 8–9)

Traditional Christianity is probably not capable of coping with the vision Das lays out for taking possession of Hindu traditions, but here he looks forward to Christ himself bringing this to pass. Christ himself can possess Hindu traditions and emerge as king. This too easily becomes another variety of Christian triumphalism, but in this vision Christianity is not involved; this is a revived and regenerated Hinduism that is still true to its ancient roots.

Already in 1926 Das laid out a vision of this glorious possibility:

Touched by the magic wand of Christ, the great soul of India will reveal the mysterious depths of its moral and spiritual resources to the wonder and lasting good of all mankind. To the Indian heart illumined by the light of the cross will be manifest the wonders, beauty and fascinating power of the love of God in a manner, and with a result, undreamt of before. (Richard 1995, 106; from the *National Council of Churches Review*, Feb. 1926)

### *Conclusion*

R. C. Das' vision of India and Hinduism transformed by Christ almost takes one's breath away. His vision is well supported by the Bible (1 Cor. 3:21–22, for example) and by mis-siological thought (as seen in Bavinck and the current consensus on contextualization). In light of Das' understanding it must be said that the task of engaging Hindu India with the good news of Christ has hardly begun. We are ignorant, ill-equipped, unaware even of how far we are from ready to engage the Hindu world. May this paper, may the legacy of R. C. Das, awaken us to realization of the high call still waiting for response; the call of engagement with the fascinating complexity of Hindu traditions and the varieties of people (image bearers of God) who identify as Hindu. **IJFM**



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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> About the Brahma Samaj, David Kopf wrote, “Originally the Calcutta Unitarian Committee in 1823, the Brahma Sabha in 1829, and finally the Brahma Samaj in 1843, this community played a crucial role in the genesis and development of every major religious, social, and political movement in India from about 1820 to 1930. Brahmos were the first Hindus to defy the taboo about crossing the seas to the West. They were the first social reformers, and the first to extend full equality to their women. Brahmos were the pioneers of liberal political consciousness and Indian nationalism, and they introduced ethical and professional standards into Indian law, medicine, natural sciences, teaching, journalism, and civil administration. Significantly, the man often known as the ‘Father of modern India,’ Rammohun Roy, was also the founder of the Brahma Samaj.” (Kopf 1979, xiii) Das met the Christo-centric Keshab Chandra Sen faction of the Brahma Samaj in the years of its declining influence after Keshab’s 1884 death.
- <sup>2</sup> The details of the birth and death of the Benares United City Mission are outlined in my doctoral thesis which is accessible at <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/4657> (see chapter two, “The Benares United City Mission,” 99–119).
- <sup>3</sup> Much has changed since 1951, but the noted Indian Christian thinker P. Chenchiah commented that “It [*How to Present Christ to a Hindu*] contains in a short compass almost the whole of mature Indian Christian thinking on the subject and gives a correct picture of the Hindu religious psychology—very rare to get” (*The Pilgrim* vol. 9, no. 4, Dec. 1950: 19). The “Hindu religious psychology” remains “rare to get.” It is arguably not drastically different from what it was a century ago, particularly in relation to Christ and Christianity, and lies largely outside the grasp of Christians.
- <sup>4</sup> Das was more than a little skeptical about the quality of Christian *sadhus*. He wrote in 1970 saying “We have had experience of nearly a hundred Christian sadhus—good, bad, indifferent—having stayed in the Khristpanthi Ashram, Varanasi over the past forty years. These and many others have filled the Christian community in India. Some 25% of them are good, helpful and exemplary. The rest are wicked and even dangerous. . . . Even the good ones have not all kept their vows of celibacy and poverty. They have been acquisitive. Once they have collected some money or have fallen in love with some midwife or teacher or widow, they have built good houses and married. Their preaching has been a cloak to hide their worldly ambitions . . .” (Richard 1995, 115; from *The Church of Christ* vol. 7 no. 4, 1970).
- <sup>5</sup> Many blindspots can be identified in the missionary work that led to the Indian church, but most glaring has to be the failure to recognize the centrality of culturally appropriate music. Now there is a discipline of ethnomusicology to address this failure, and it needs to become much more widely known in India. But current Christians have embraced from the heart forms of music which do not touch the hearts of Hindus; this remains a massive problem in effective communication to Hindus.
- <sup>6</sup> Two quotations in support of my suggestion about “romantic hope”: “It will be easy to see now that the history of the baptised and unbaptised Hindu Christian movement and the indigenous church movement led by baptised Hindu intelligentsia is fairly long, ancient, diverse and widespread” (Richard 1995, 218; from *The Church of Christ* vol. 5 no. 3, 1968). “This is only one of hundreds of signs and evidences of the utter discontent among the different denominations and we regard them as the birth pangs of the true and indigenous church in India which must emerge and replace the myriad sects that have come from the west” (Richard 1995, 220–1; from *The Seeker* vol. 7 no. 1, 1953, commenting on the “All One in Christ Church” being started in Bengal).
- <sup>7</sup> See my brief exposition of *possessio* in Richard 2011.

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# Beyond Contextualization Ceremonialism: Ritual as a Pathway for Relationship

by *Elizabeth L. Walker*

*Editor's Note: This paper was originally presented at a gathering of the Rethinking Forum sponsored by Marg Network in Dallas on July 22–24, 2022.*

Ceremonies and rituals within another religious culture are often met with confusion, skepticism, or reluctance by cross-cultural workers. Many followers of Jesus spend years arduously learning language and new methods of gospel communication yet can neglect to learn the powerful symbolic communication that takes place through ritual and ceremony. My experiences of friendship with Hindu people over the past thirteen years would have been much shallower without mutual participation in ritual. I have learned that ritual, ceremony, tradition, and formality are some of the primary ways that my friends show their closeness to me—and I show my closeness to them.

I moved to India in the summer of 2009, one month after graduating college, just short of my twenty-second birthday. Before this move halfway across the world, I had exactly one South Asian friend. Arriving in India, I loved being immersed in another culture, learning and observing its norms, traditions, and ways of life. As an outsider, who grew up primarily in White American culture, almost everything about the way my new Indian friends lived their lives was different than mine.

Over time, I began to notice many rituals and routines. My Hindu friends had routines when waking in the morning, prescribed ways of leaving the home, prescribed ways of returning home, and traditions around mealtimes and worship. It seemed as if one day of my friends' lives included more ritual and tradition than an entire month of mine. Since this first arrival in India, my Hindu friends and I have walked through some of life's most sacred and special occasions together. We have each gotten married, had children, moved, gotten new jobs, and bought houses. These important moments in life have often been celebrated and commemorated through ritual and ceremony. Participating in the formality of these rituals has deepened my friendships immensely and brought unique opportunities to authentically share my faith in Jesus.

In this paper I want to address this ceremonial aspect of Hindu society—why it is important, how it is seen in the lives of Hindus, and how followers of Jesus may appropriately participate in it. I humbly admit that I write not as an academic, but as a friend of Hindus sharing my own lived ethnographic experiences.

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### Why is Ceremonialism Important?

When I use the term “ceremonialism,”<sup>1</sup> I am referring to the affinity my Hindu friends have for ritual, ceremony, tradition, and formality in their lives. While the daily life of most Hindus includes many rituals and traditions, the ceremonial nature of Hindu society is seen most clearly through the lens of family life, during what are known as “life cycle events.” Life cycle events are the iconic, significant moments that mark the passage of time through a person’s life, such as birth, coming-of-age ceremonies, marriage, and death.

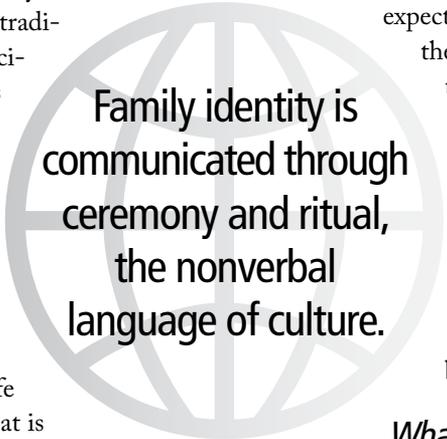
Ceremonialism in a culture is important for many reasons. First, ceremonializing life events creates meaning and highlights what is important to a group of people. To determine what life events are most significant within a culture, look first to its ceremonies. In every culture, people gather together, cook special food, wear special clothing, and give gifts for those events in life that they hold most sacred. Ceremonialism allows a culture to create meaning for its own participants as well as create a broader sense of identity for the community.

Second, ceremonializing life events can make an event feel “more real.”<sup>2</sup> While life events can occur without ceremonies, certain aspects of familiar rituals signify to our hearts and minds that an event is truly happening. Furthermore, when the rituals and traditions we associate with major life events are missing, it can feel as if the event never took place. The COVID-19 pandemic brought this experience to each of our lives. Holidays spent alone instead of with family, graduates who never walked to receive their diploma, and couples who married without friends and family present, all struggled to believe time had passed and life changes had occurred. On a mental and emotional level, ceremony brings reality to the life experiences taking place.

Third, ceremonializing life events communicates without words. In Indian contexts, each religious community, each caste, and even each family has its own way of performing certain rituals, and these rituals require the participation of specific family members in specific ways. A family demonstrates its cultural identity, religious beliefs, important relationships, and values through the way they conduct their rituals and ceremonies. These elements of family identity are communicated nonverbally, without the need for words, through the language of ceremony. Ritual then becomes the nonverbal language of culture.

Lastly, ceremonializing life events allows the community to participate in the life of the family. This point is especially salient in Hindu society. Attendance at important life cycle events communicates closeness in relationship and mutual

acceptance. In my relationships with Hindu friends, there is a seemingly clear unspoken rule that “if we are friends, we show up at each other’s events.” By attending and participating in ceremonies in prescribed ways, guests uphold cultural expectations and “bless” the family (quite literally the term my Hindu friends use). The blessing that is desired in these contexts is presence and well wishes, the former communicated by attendance and the latter communicated by participating in appropriate formalities such as bringing gifts, greeting family members, and touching the head (or sprinkling rice and/or flower petals upon the head) of the person(s) being celebrated at the event.



Family identity is communicated through ceremony and ritual, the nonverbal language of culture.

### What Does Ceremonialism Look Like?

As mentioned previously, ceremonialism in Hindu culture is most clearly seen through the life cycle of a Hindu family. Hindu tradition and ancient texts dictate sixteen *samskaras*, which are considered rites of passage in a Hindu person’s life. It is the duty of parents to conduct these rituals for their children. These ceremonies are both times of celebration and times of prayer for blessing upon a child or family.

Of the sixteen required *samskaras*, the first fourteen occur from conception through adolescence. The first three *samskaras* occur before birth (during the mother’s pregnancy), the next four occur in the first year of life, and the next three during childhood. Many of these infant and childhood ceremonies commemorate important “firsts” for the child—e.g., first outing, first bite of solid food, first haircut, and first time writing the alphabet. Four more rituals typically take place during adolescence, signifying the growth of knowledge, physical maturity, and spiritual awareness. Lastly, the final two *samskaras* are marriage rites and funeral rites.

Beyond the traditional sixteen *samskaras*, Hindu families often bring an element of ceremonialism to modern life. When a Hindu family moves into a new home, it is very common for the family to host a *griha pravesh*, a ceremony commemorating the family’s move and to pray for God’s blessings upon them in their new residence. Many families will also take part in specific rituals when making a large purchase (such as buying a car) or opening a new business, and first birthday parties have become one of the largest celebrations for many contemporary Hindu families.

How each ritual is performed and celebrated varies widely by community: (1) by region or language affiliation (e.g., Bengalis, Gujaratis, Tamils, etc.), and (2) by *jati*, i.e., the extended family clan. While all sixteen *samskaras* are honored

and recognized in Hindu families across India and the Indian diaspora abroad, different communities and families will consider some rituals more significant than others. Where the ritual is performed also varies by community and family as does the number of guests invited. Some rituals are celebrated at home or at a temple privately, and others are celebrated at a large rented venue with many guests present. For some rituals, the family may perform the prescribed traditions themselves, while for other rituals, the family may hire a priest to conduct the rites. Lastly, the specific name of each *samskara* varies by language group.

Describing how two different language communities may choose to celebrate a representative ceremony, the *anna prashana* (commonly referred to as the “rice ceremony,” a ritual commemorating a child’s first bite of solid food, which is typically boiled rice), can illustrate how significant these differences in ceremony can be. A Bengali family in Kolkata may rent a venue and have a large celebration for their child’s *mukhe bhaat* (the most common name for the rice ceremony in West Bengal), inviting many family members and friends, catering a meal for the guests, and hiring a priest to perform the rites. A Telugu family living in America may recognize their child’s first bite of food at home with close relatives and a small *pooja* (i.e., worship time to a specific god or goddess) performed by the parents. Though all Hindu communities will have some general notion of the rites that need to be performed for each *samskara*, answering the questions of where, when, how, and by whom will vary dramatically between communities, *jatis*, and families.

## To avoid participating in ceremonial activities is to greatly hinder our ability to build strong relationships with Hindu people.

My personal observation is that the ceremonies most likely to be celebrated on a large scale (and which guests outside of the family are invited to attend) are: the baby shower (often called *godh bharai*); a baby’s naming ceremony (often called *naamkaran*, or in some communities it is known as a “cradle ceremony”); and marriage rites (*shaadi* is the word most commonly used for “wedding”). Hindu weddings actually include many specific ceremonies such as *mehndi* (the henna party), *haldi* (the turmeric party), *sangeet* (the music and dances performed by the bride, groom, and family members), *baarat* (the groom’s arrival procession), *pheras* (the marriage vows in

which the bride and groom walk in circles around a sacred fire), and many others. Additionally, for some communities, a baby’s *anna prashana* (as described above), a child’s first haircut ceremony (often called *mundan*), or an adolescent’s “thread ceremony” (sometimes called an “investiture ceremony” or *upanayana*, a ritual in which forward-caste males receive a sacred thread which they wear throughout their lifetimes) are also occasions for larger celebrations. In my years of knowing Hindus, it seems that each region or language block has a special affinity for one or another of the *samskaras*.

It is important to note that rituals and ceremonies in Hindu culture are often holistic sensory experiences; they involve all five senses—sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. There are bright colors, many decorations, and possibly images of gods or goddesses. There are unique smells from incense, flowers, and the food being prepared. There is always special food that is given to the family members and guests. There are many sounds, either music, religious chanting, or the loud chatter of family members in attendance. Lastly, there are physical ways the guests are involved in the ceremony, most likely by “blessing” the child or couple that is the focus of the ritual. As mentioned previously, this blessing is typically done by sprinkling rice and/or flower petals on the honoree’s head.

### *How Can Followers of Jesus Respond to Ceremonialism?*

As incarnational witnesses living in relationship with Hindu communities, there are two appropriate ways that followers of Jesus can respond to ceremonialism in our Hindu friends’ lives:

- We can attend and participate in our Hindu friends’ ceremonies.
- We can invite our Hindu friends to participate in our lives through ceremony.

A third option is that we avoid all rituals and ceremonies we are invited to attend by our Hindu friends. Although this is a common view among faithful Christians largely due to a fear of syncretism, I do not believe this is necessary or best. There may be a handful of specific instances where it is prudent to avoid certain invitations. But, generally speaking, to avoid participating in ceremonial activities with our Hindu friends is to greatly hinder our ability to build strong relationships with Hindu people. Hindering our ability to build relationships hinders our ability to demonstrate and articulate the good news of Jesus with Hindus. My life experience echoes what I first heard from Timothy Shultz, that Hindus receive truth through “webs of meaningful relationships.”<sup>3</sup> In the Hindu worldview, attending and participating in our friends’ life event rituals is a crucial step in developing a meaningful relationship of trust.

## Attendance and Participation in Our Hindu Friends' Ceremonies

As friendships between Hindus and Christians develop, there will inevitably come a time when a Hindu friend invites a Christian friend to attend a function (this is the generic term many Hindus use for special life event rituals) or pooja (this term can be used either specifically for a worship ceremony to a specific deity or generally to describe any ritual that has some religious significance). This invitation communicates relational closeness and acceptance from the Hindu friend, yet it often invokes fear in the heart of the Christian friend. We wonder,

**What will happen at this event? Will I be the only non-Hindu there? What will they ask me to do? Does it mean I am worshipping their god/goddess if I go? Will I compromise my witness by being there? Is there demonic activity involved?**

It is understandable to feel fear or uncertainty when we are asked to attend an event we have never witnessed before, from a culture other than our own, and led by friends with different religious beliefs. Years of Bible study and conversations with Hindus have led me to believe that attendance and measured degrees of participation can easily co-exist with my faith in Jesus and my witness for him among my Hindu friends.

In discussing this topic with many followers of Jesus who are friends of Hindus, I believe most of our concerns regarding attendance at Hindu ceremonies can be summarized in three main questions:

- Will I worship another god by attending?
- Will I give the appearance of worshipping another god by attending?
- What will happen at this event, and what will I be asked to participate in?

Regarding the first question, my personal, prayerful study of Scripture has led me to the conclusion that worship is an act of the heart, the bestowing of my praise, adoration, love, and obedience to a specific deity. I knowingly and mindfully worship the triune God—that is, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There can be a fear in attending ceremonies that we will “accidentally” worship another god; however, I humbly suggest that these fears are founded in an understanding of worship as a set of actions rather than a posture of the heart. If worship truly occurs on a heart level, I am confident I will give my praise, adoration, love, and obedience to none other than Jesus no matter what is going on around me. Worship is an act of the will, and mere attendance alone does not mean that I am worshipping another god.

If I believe I am not worshipping another god by attendance, then the next question to address is, “Will my attendance give the appearance to others that I am worshipping this other deity?” The best people to answer this question are actually the other Hin-

dus in attendance. Over the years, when attending ceremonial events, I have asked many of my Hindu friends, “What does it mean to you that I am here?” Invariably, the answer is always, “It means that you are my friend.” I know many other followers of Jesus who are friends of Hindus who ask this same question. Their friends answer the same way. In total, I could count dozens and dozens of answers that attendance means friendship. I have never once heard of a Hindu answering this question by saying, “It means you are worshipping this deity.”

Through these personal conversations with Hindus, I am convinced that attendance at Hindu functions and poojas does not mean I am worshipping another deity nor does it confuse my friends' understanding of my faith in Jesus. If I bring up the subject of devotion and worship at a ceremony, my friends say things like, “Yes, yes, Elizabeth, we know that you follow Jesus.” If I can be confident in what is communicated through attendance, the next question that arises is, “What will happen at this event, and what will I be asked to participate in?” I believe answers to questions of participation require a more nuanced and Spirit-led approach.

**This invitation to attend a Hindu function communicates relational closeness, yet we wonder, “Does it mean I am worshipping their god or goddess if I go?”**

I would like to briefly “peek behind the curtain,” and share what most likely happens at these types of events as well as how I and others I know typically handle issues of participation. While all ceremonies and rituals are different, and the context of each event and family is unique, some generic themes can be noted. Upon entering the home or venue, you will be asked to remove your shoes. Many guests will be dressed in traditional ethnic attire (especially, women and children). In my experience, men and women tend to congregate separately, although gender separation is not as rigid as in other cultures. You will notice many guests or family members laughing and talking. You may hear music being played or chanting. The person who is the focus of the event (often a child) will be dressed in special clothing.

For the ritual aspect of the ceremony, family members may perform a pooja that most likely involves a brass oil lamp (known as *diya*), incense (known as *agarbaati*), camphor tablets that are burned (known as *aarti*), fruit, flowers, and one or more idols or pictures of gods and/or goddesses. Either a family member or a hired priest will perform the pooja or rituals. Normally, this part of the ceremony involves the immediate

family members (parents and child) while other guests observe what is happening. The person performing the rituals may bring a plate with burning aarti around to guests and you will notice guests wave their hands over the fire and then touch their hair, eyes, or heart. The priest or family members may put a colored powder mark (known as a *tikka*) on the foreheads of those in attendance. The priest or family members may also distribute food (usually some form of sweets or fruit) from the worship plate to guests, called *prasad*.

All of these gestures are signs of hospitality from the family to you and are the family's way of blessing you as their guest. Acceptance or refusal of these gestures is an admittedly complex topic. There are spiritual elements to the aarti, *tikka*, and *prasad*; Hindu families vary widely on what they believe spiritually, what these elements mean to them, and why they offer them to you. You may accept these gestures, if you desire, or you may politely decline these gestures, if you desire, by pressing your two hands together (palms together, as in a praying or *namaste* greeting position), smiling, and saying "no thank you." I know followers of Jesus, whom I respect greatly, that both accept and decline these aspects of the ceremony. Personally, my response to each varies by the setting, occasion, family, and the Holy Spirit's leading in the moment.

There may also be a time during the ceremony when each guest blesses the honoree of the event by sprinkling rice and/or flower petals on his/her head (as mentioned previously). I would encourage any follower of Jesus to participate in this part of the ceremony. Another aspect of blessing that you may see is children touch the feet of elders, including you, and the appropriate response in these situations is to touch the head of the child with your right hand. Both of these formalities are the most tangible ways that you as a guest show your well-wishes, love, and respect for the family. For most modern Hindu families, these formalities have little to no "spiritual" significance but are meaningful rituals that communicate love and blessing. Lastly, these events always end with a meal.

One of your Hindu hosts' deepest concerns at any event is that you are comfortable. They will not knowingly push you to do things that make you uncomfortable, although they may unknowingly ask you to participate in ways you would rather avoid. You are always free to respectfully decline involvement, to sit toward the back of the group as an observer rather than a participant, or to ask your friends to guide you in appropriate participation. You can tell your Hindu friends, "You know that I am a follower of Jesus, and I have promised to

worship only him. Can you tell me what I should or should not do as his devotee?" You can heed the words of your Hindu friends while submitting most strongly to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

I would also like to note that these are my experiences as an outsider living in friendships with Hindu people. These are the levels of meaning and freedom that I have experienced. I recognize that the experiences of Hindu people who begin to follow Jesus may be different within their own context. Some families will accept a family member's devotion to Jesus and how they desire to participate in rituals as a follower of Jesus. Other families may pressure the family member to participate in ways in which he/she feels uncomfortable.

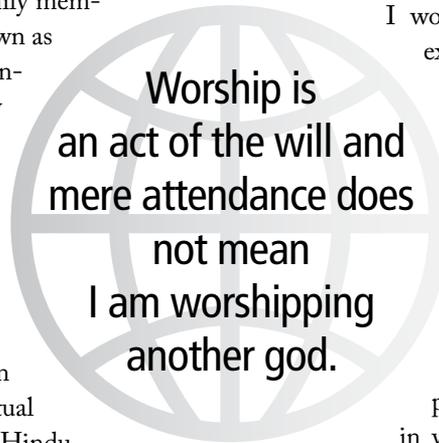
I have walked alongside Hindu friends believing in Jesus who have experienced both responses. The people most able to speak to appropriate levels of participation in Hindu ceremonies as insiders (as Hindus or members of the family) are followers of Jesus who are Hindus, not myself.

### Inviting Our Friends to Participate in Our Lives Through Ceremony

In addition to participating in our Hindu friends' lives through ritual, followers of Jesus must look for ways that we can share our lives with our Hindu friends through ceremony as well. My husband and I have lived in Hindu communities through our engagement, marriage, and the births of our children, and through these experiences we learned that we must create ceremony where it does not naturally exist to adequately and meaningfully share our lives with our Hindu friends. As we share our lives, we have the opportunity to share our faith, and, for us, our relationships and our witness for Jesus have grown stronger the more we have incorporated ceremony. A few stories will illustrate how sharing our lives through ceremony has happened for our family. Please know these stories are descriptive of a principle, not prescriptive in nature. Incorporating ceremony into your life will look different for each follower of Jesus who is a friend of Hindus.

#### *Engagement*

My husband and I met and became engaged while living in India. We are both Americans, and he proposed to me in the typical "American" way of getting down on one knee, asking me to marry him, and giving me an engagement ring. Shortly afterward, I began calling my Indian friends to tell them the exciting news. To my surprise, my friends were overall mostly offended by my announcement! The common response was, "Why didn't you call me?" (which I understood to mean,



“Why didn’t you invite me?”). I tried to explain that my fiancé had surprised me, that I did not know I was getting engaged, and that there was no way I could have invited them. These assurances did little to convince my friends of my innocence.

After a few of these conversations, I began to realize that my friends thought there had been a formal engagement ceremony, and I had not invited them. It dawned on me that, for my Hindu friends, an engagement is a formal public ceremony between two families. In an effort to share this part of my life with my Hindu friends, my fiancé (now husband) and I set about planning a Hindu-style engagement ceremony in which my friends could participate.

With the help of my closest Hindu friends, we spent weeks preparing for the event. We ordered special invitations and delivered them personally to guests. We bought new clothes and jewelry and hired decorators, caterers, and photographers. It was indeed a massive project.

We had over one hundred friends and neighbors join us for this engagement ceremony. It was a very special time for me to celebrate with my community and for them to celebrate with me. Multiple friends traveled hundreds of miles by bus or plane to be there. Many of my coworkers, friends, and neighbors came to share in the occasion, and we had guests ages one year old to eighty years old in attendance. As all good Indian parties do, our evening ended with dancing and a photo shoot. I was married a few months later and moved to another city. This event was a very meaningful opportunity for me to say goodbye to my friends. How different this engagement ceremony was from my American-style engagement! In one way, my friends could not participate; in the other, the whole community participated and was able to bless us.

**Without discussing it,  
these baby showers were traditional in  
Hindu customs and traditions but did  
not include the worship  
of any Hindu god or goddess.**

### *Baby Showers*

A few years later, my husband and I moved back from India to America. We lived in an apartment community full of many Hindu families. After living in the community for a few years, we became pregnant and were expecting our first child. Our friends were so happy! Our Hindu neighbors quickly began asking me when my baby shower would be. At first, I was

unsure how to respond because I had no baby shower planned. I explained that in my culture the couple does not host their own baby shower but that friends host the event for them. Eventually, my friends approached my husband and said:

Elizabeth said her friends host the baby shower. We are her friends. We will throw her a baby shower. We don’t know how to do it your way [meaning, according to American culture], so we are going to do it our way.

These friends, along with the help of my husband, hosted a surprise baby shower for me. The party included dressing me up in jewelry, each lady putting bangles on my wrist (because “babies love the sound of bangles”), my husband and each friend blessing me by putting a mixture of rice and flower petals on my head, my husband and friends feeding me special food that had been prepared for this occasion, and taking many pictures.

A few months later, we had another group of friends from our apartment community ask to host a baby shower for us, again, using their own cultural traditions. This baby shower included similar activities: dressing me up in a sari and jewelry, my husband and friends feeding me special food, my husband and friends blessing me by placing rice on my head, and a baby-themed photo shoot. All of the friends who hosted these baby showers for me are Hindus, and they also know that I am devoted to Jesus. Without even discussing it together, each of these baby showers appeared traditional in terms of Hindu customs and traditions but did not include the worship of any Hindu god or goddess. My friends desired to bless me with their customs while also honoring my spiritual beliefs. It is truly possible for both of us to live in friendship, participating respectfully in each other’s worldview.

### *First Food Ceremony*

My last story comes after the birth of our first child, a baby boy. My husband and I were still living in the apartment community, and as people would meet our son, they would ask us when his rituals and ceremonies would be. I would often sheepishly reply, “We don’t really have many ceremonies for a baby in our culture.” As this conversation happened repeatedly, I began to sense that our neighbors were getting offended that we had yet to invite them to some type of ceremony or event for our son. I could perceive that they wanted to bless our family and the way they knew how to do that was through ceremony. So, as previously, to fill this relational gap and share our lives with our friends, we went about planning a Hindu-style ceremony for our son.

Since we were living in America and our friends deeply desired to see our cultural traditions, we ultimately planned a ceremony that combined both an American-style baby dedication as one would see at a church and the anna prashana ceremony mentioned previously. We chose this ceremony because it typically

occurs around six months of age, which was the age of our son at the time. Over fifty families from our apartment community joined us for this special day, and it was truly a memory we will never forget!

Our event began with the American-style baby dedication. My father, who is an ordained minister, led the American component in which we dedicated our son to God and promised to raise him according to the teachings of Jesus. Next, my husband told the crowd, “We are followers of Jesus. We would like to worship him on this special day. Please join us if you would like.” Then, we sang Hindu-style worship songs about Jesus called *Yeshu bhajans*.<sup>4</sup>

## Although our ceremony centered on worship to Jesus, many friends told us this ceremony was *pakka* (perfect, accurate, and well-done).

After singing, we proceeded to the Hindu rituals of the *anna prashana*. First, my husband and I poured special rice from our hands while we made vows committing our son to God. Then came the highlight of our celebration—our son was fed his first bite of solid food (boiled rice with milk) by his maternal uncle while both sets of grandparents showered him with rose petals. The crowd cheered! Next, each of our family members ceremonially fed our son and blessed him by sprinkling rice and flower petals on his head.

We then played a traditional Indian game that is said to reflect what type of person a child will become in life. Many special items are placed in front of a baby (such as a book, calculator, paintbrush, pen, money, etc.), and whichever item the child crawls forward and grabs first represents his/her future career. Our son grabbed the money first, which thrilled the crowd! Our afternoon ended with guests coming up one by one to bless our son and everyone enjoying a meal together.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Many of my thoughts on this subject have been shaped by Pranam Collaborative Learning Services. I am grateful for the opportunity to lecture with them and learn from them. I highly recommend their programs to all who are friends of Hindus. More information can be found at <https://pranamcolearning.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> I first read about this idea through an article from Dr. Michael Barnes’ book that is part of the Pranam program. Michael H. Barnes, *In the Presence of Mystery: An Introduction to the Story of Human Religiousness* (Twenty-third Publications: Waterford, CT, 2003), 203.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Shultz, *Disciple Making Among Hindus: Making Authentic Relationships Grow* (William Carey Library: Denver, 2016), 58.

<sup>4</sup> Aradhna Music is a great resource for *Yeshu bhajans*. My family personally uses these songs in our worship with Hindu friends, both by playing the songs from a phone or computer and by learning and singing them ourselves. Songs can be accessed at <https://yeshusatsang-toronto.bandcamp.com/track/aradhana> or at <https://www.youtube.com/@aradhnmusic>.

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Shultz, Timothy. *Disciple Making Among Hindus: Making Authentic Relationships Grow*. William Carey Library, 2016.

The immediate response to this ceremony for our son was incredibly positive. Although our ceremony centered on worship to Jesus, many friends told us that we did this ceremony *pakka* (meaning “perfect, accurate, and well-done”). Some even told us we did the ceremony more traditionally and fully than they had performed it for their own children. There was a feeling of excitement, and our friends felt honored that we chose to incorporate their traditions into our special event for our son. I have a distinct memory of looking around the room and seeing smiles and so much joy on every face.

The impact of this ceremony has also been long-lasting. Some friends desired to learn more about Jesus and to join us in worshipping him after this event. One friend has shown videos of the ceremony and the worship time to hundreds of relatives across the US and India. Another friend told us that he felt peace as he rewatched videos of the worship time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most importantly, relationships with friends in our community were deepened as our friends participated in the life of our family and blessed us in ways that were meaningful to both them and us. And as so often happens in Hindu community, as relationships deepen, so do opportunities to demonstrate and articulate the good news of Jesus.

### Conclusion

All those who walk in the way of Jesus try to build relationships, and many who seek to live incarnational lives build relationships cross-culturally. In the Hindu world, part of building relationships will always be ceremony. Learning to embrace the role and importance of ceremony in friendships with Hindu people opens the door for deeper relationships and presents truly authentic opportunities for followers of Jesus to best communicate their devotion. **IJFM**



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# Movements to Jesus in Least-Reached Peoples

## INSIDERS *and* ALONGSIDERS

An Invitation to the Conversation

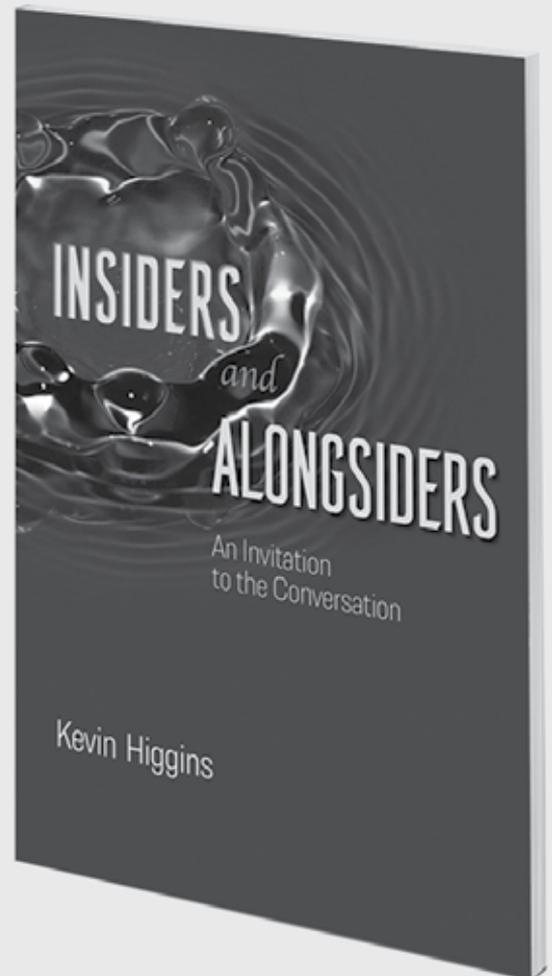
KEVIN HIGGINS (Author)

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Beyond Contextualization

# A Psalmody for Jesu Bhaktas: Hindu Jesu Bhakti in the Poems of Swamy Dayanand Bharati (b. 1952)

by *Herbert Hoefler*

**T**here is no more effective evangelism than testimonies to Jesus from within the community of non-believers. These testimonies can occur when a community member has a convincing experience of Jesus through a miracle, a healing, a vision, or an answer to prayer. In the case of Swamy Dayanand Bharati, the Holy Spirit has brought a gifted Tamil *bhakti* poet to accept Jesus as his *maha guru* (great master). Through his poetry, he demonstrates to his fellow Hindus how one can be a *Jesu Bhakta* (devotee of Jesus) as a Hindu. One can be a respected and proud member of the culture under the lordship of Jesus and the authority of Scripture.

Swamy Bharati is firmly in the bhakti tradition of Hinduism in his devotional poetry. This is a tradition in which Hindus are very comfortable, especially those in the South. Thereby, Swamy Bharati invites other Hindus to come to know and accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour. Fellow Hindus admire the beauty of Swamy Bharati's poetry and intensity of his devotion, and some have come to be his disciples. He has innovated a Hindu-style devotional rite, called the *maha prasada* (great blessing) that is being used by Jesu Bhaktas in home gatherings around the country and abroad. As his devotional poetry spreads the message, we can expect many more sincere Hindus to be led by the Holy Spirit to see this path of Jesu Bhakti as the path for them too, now and for decades to come.

## *Roots of Jesu Bhakti*

In this article on the Jesu Bhakti Hindu poetry of Swamy Dayanand Bharati, we will begin with a discussion of the strong historical roots of this piety. We will see how mystical devotion to Jesus has been a universal phenomenon, both within Christianity and beyond. Poetry is typically used to express this deep personal devotion; this is also true in the Bible.

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## Jesu Bhakti in Religions

Jesu Bhakti is not limited to Hindu devotees of Jesus. Finding in Jesus a personal Lord and Guru is a phenomenon among devotees in all religions, interpreted within their particular worldview. Here are a few examples:

### *Sufi Islam*

“The mystical interpretation of Jesus, in Sufism, remains highly prized, even though he is not singularly glorified but utilized as a powerful transformative idiom for spiritual development in Sufi literature.”<sup>1</sup>

### *Kabbalah Mystical Judaism*

“There is no knowledge that proves the Divinity of the Messiah better than . . . kabbalah.” (Kabbalah Centre, Los Angeles, CA. Pico della Mirandola [1463-94])<sup>2</sup>

### *New Age*

People ask me all the time, “Is Jesus the only way to God?” I answer by saying, “He is my way to God.”<sup>3</sup>

### *Atheism*

“He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him . . . they shall learn in their own experience Who He is” (Albert Schweitzer).<sup>4</sup>

**Pietism felt the rationalistic  
expression of faith was neither  
transformative nor personal,  
but advocated a mystical expression  
that would unite all.**

### *Buddhism*

In 2001 the Dalai Lama stated that “Jesus Christ also lived previous lives,” and added that “So, you see, he reached a high state, either as a Bodhisattva, or an enlightened person, through Buddhist practice or something like that.”<sup>5</sup>

The singular thread through these various religious quotations is that individuals find in Jesus some kind of transformative spiritual experience. This allegiance is not just an admiration for Jesus’ teaching (such as the Sermon on the Mount) but a personal relationship, an encounter of a spiritual and devotional character. They can speak of Jesus as their Lord. Thus,

it is not surprising that there would also be such mystical devotion to Jesus within Hinduism. The Hindu Swamy Dayanand Bharati is an example of such devotion.

## Jesu Bhakti in Christianity

The religious philosopher Paul Tillich has been famously quoted as saying that all religion begins and ends in mysticism. In Christianity, this mystical relationship is with Jesus. We are all familiar with the mystics in the Roman Catholic tradition, but we are less aware of the mysticism of the Protestant tradition. This tradition is generally called Pietism.

Pietism arose in the seventeenth century in Europe among the churches of the Reformation, particularly in Germany. In the theological battles between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, the Christian faith was expressed in intellectual doctrines. Such scholastic systems of faith were useful for doctrinal disputations, but not for spiritual nourishment. It also fomented disputes that splintered the church into competing factions. Besides being divisive, the leaders of Pietism felt this rationalistic expression of the faith was neither transformative nor personal. They advocated a mystical expression of the faith that would transcend denominational divisions and would demonstrate a devotion to Jesus that could unite all in a spiritual unity. They expressed and spread this approach to the faith through mystical hymns. Here are some examples:

### Johann Scheffler (1624–1677)

Jesus, Savior, come to me;  
Let me ever be with Thee.  
Come and nevermore depart,  
Thou who reignest in my heart.<sup>6</sup>

### Johann Freylinghausen (b. 1670)

Who is there like Thee,  
Jesus, unto me?  
None is like Thee, none above Thee,  
Thou art altogether lovely;  
None on earth have we,  
None in heaven like Thee.<sup>7</sup>

### Nicolas von Zinzendorf (b. 1700)

Jesus, still lead on  
till our rest is won;  
and although the way be cheerless,  
we will follow, calm and fearless.  
Guide us by your hand  
to our fatherland.

Jesus, still lead on  
till our rest be won.  
Heav'nly leader, still direct us,  
still support, console, protect us  
till we safely stand  
in our fatherland.<sup>8</sup>

We are all familiar with the Pietist hymns that are still in common usage today, such as “Jesus, Lover of My Soul” (John Wesley), “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” (Joseph Scriven), and “In the Garden” (Austin Miles). They call people of all doctrinal traditions to a uniting love and devotion to Jesus. The goal of these mystical writers and composers is to call us into a transformative personal relationship with Jesus. This Christian mysticism permeates the traditions of the faith even today, and is the same call we experience in the Jesu Bhakti poems and songs of Swamy Dayanand Bharati.

### Bhakti in the Wisdom Literature of the Bible

Finally, we see that such mystical devotion is a central theme in the Wisdom literature of the Bible, especially in the Psalms of lament. This devotion is also expressed in poetic style, in the Hebrew poetic style of rhyming thoughts:

#### Psalm 6:2–3

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing.  
O Lord, heal me, for my bones are troubled.  
My soul also is sorely troubled. But Thou,  
O Lord, how long?

#### Psalm 10:1

Why dost Thou stand afar off, O Lord?  
Why dost Thou hide Thyself in times of trouble?

#### Psalm 38:8–9

I am utterly spent and crushed; I groan because of the  
tumult of my heart.  
Lord, all my longing is known to Thee; my sighing is  
not hidden from Thee.

#### Psalm 42:1–2

As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul  
for Thee, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When  
shall I come and behold the face of God?

#### Psalm 130:1

Out of the depths I cry to Thee, O Lord. Lord, hear  
my voice!  
Let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication.

#### Job 42:4–6

“Hear, and I will speak; I will speak and you declare  
to me.  
I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but  
now my eye sees Thee.  
Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and  
ashes.”

#### Song of Songs 2:16, 3:1

My beloved is mine, and I am His. . . . Upon my bed  
by night, I sought him whom my heart loves.

#### Song of Songs 4:10

How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride.  
How much better is your love than wine.

#### Song of Songs 8:6

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon  
your arms.

We will see this same emotional spiritual devotion in the Jesu bhakti poems of Swamy Dayanand Bharati. They are a psalmody for the Jesu Bhaktas of Hindu India.

### *Jesu Bhakti in the Poetry of Swamy Dayanand Bharati*

#### Character of Jesu Bhakti

##### *Hindu Character*

Swamy Dayanand Bharati is a Hindu *sanyasi*, highly learned in Hindu religious and philosophical ways and literature. As a Jesu Bhakti, he is the author of a book on Hinduism, *Understanding Hinduism*.<sup>9</sup> He has chosen the Hindu path of bhakti and writes poetry in the Hindu bhakti tradition. The Encyclopedia Britannica describes this tradition thus:

Bhakti (Sanskrit: “devotion”) in Hinduism is a movement emphasizing the mutual intense emotional attachment and love of a devotee toward a personal god and of the god for the devotee. According to the Bhagavadgita . . . the path of *bhakti*, or *bhakti-marga*, is superior to the two other religious approaches, the path of knowledge (jnana) and the path(s) of ritual and good works (karma).

It is evident that this Hindu bhakti tradition is very similar to the Pietism tradition in the Christian Protestant tradition and the mystical tradition in Roman Catholicism, as well as the piety of the Wisdom literature of the Bible. Jesu bhakti has arisen in Hinduism as it has also in other religions, often in the form of devotional poetry. Historically, Hindu religious literature and doctrinal beliefs have been expressed in poetic formulations, which are easily remembered and digested.

Swamy Bharati is a Hindu whose spirituality is in the bhakti tradition, which encourages and legitimizes anyone to choose the deity one is attracted to and trusts. Through a long process of struggle and searching, the Holy Spirit led Swamy Bharati to choose Jesus as his personal god and guru in life, his *ishta deva*. His bhakti poems are addressed to Jesus, though he also writes occasional poems on non-religious themes. Swamy Bharati reads many theological books and reflects on them in his poems. To date, he has composed and posted over a thousand rhyming Tamil poems on his blog with English translations and explanations (dayanandbharati.in). For the purpose of this paper, I asked him to select his favorites for me to reflect on theologically. For the most part, I have used his own English translations.

Swamy Bharati shares that he writes his poems spontaneously, as events occur in his life or thoughts arise from his readings of Scripture and theology. To quote from his blog:

Often, I think that I need not give any reason why I write poems or some articles in the name of "brainstorm." As I often say, I write only for my need. . . . Of course, there will be inconsistencies and contradictions . . . but I often write according to the need that comes in a particular situation . . . Above all, as I too evolve according to age and understanding, that too is reflected in my poems and writings. (#456)

Thus, the poetry is not intended to teach anything. It is on a different level and has a different intention than intellectual doctrinal formulations. The poems are a celebration and reflection on life, life with God in Jesus Christ, his Maha-Guru. As Swamy Bharati says in poem #668: "When unable to understand theology, only bhakti alone provides bliss."

He has written an entire poem (#802) on this theme, and some excerpts are below:

There is no limitation for bhakti, going beyond any theology.

Bhakti never sees caste and family. . . . It will embrace whoever comes within it.

If one bows calling herself as a simple one or brags herself as a learned one, both are the same before it . . .

You called me to be your bhakta, removing all the discussion about theology and doctrine, removing all kinds of unnecessary arguments.

Running in the path toward salvation, you enabled me to run making me as your own.

### *Ecumenical Character*

As commented above, proponents of Protestant Pietism saw such personal piety as a path to bridge the gap between the warring factions of post-Reformation Christianity. Adherents to the Reformed, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic traditions could keep their personal theological beliefs but unite in devotional piety to their common Lord. This was the case also with the Hindu bhakti movement.

The origins of this movement are generally attributed to the seventh century in South India and then it gradually spread throughout the country. There was bitter conflict between devotees of Vaishnavism, Saivism, Jainism, and Buddhism; the bhakti saints sought to unite these warring factions in a mutual spirit of devotion and love to their chosen deity. In addition, these poets gathered people of different castes and

languages, enabling them to express their spirituality in their heart language. It was a piety for the general population, free from Brahmanism and Sanskrit.

Swamy Bharati writes his poetry in his mother tongue of Tamil. For the sake of his devotees around India, he typically provides a rough English translation. While the emotional impact of his poems is strongest for those who share his Tamil culture, the content and spirit of his poetry are communicated in the translations.

Denominational theologies can be highly intellectual and complex, attempting to justify and clarify differences. Swamy Bharati is not anti-intellectual. To the contrary, he is continually reading theological materials and searching for intellectual cogency in his beliefs. However, he is very clear that doctrinal formulations

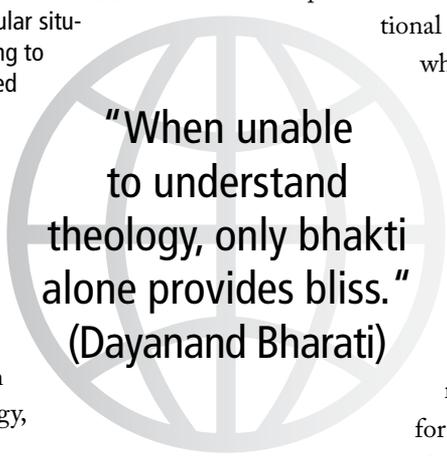
are not the heart of his faith. He continually retreats to his mystical devotion to renew and center his spiritual strength.

The ordinary worshipper can find these doctrinal formulations and arguments quite incomprehensible, distracting, and irrelevant. What they want from their faith is encouragement and strength for their daily journey and hope for their eternal future. So, too, does Swamy Bharati, as is reflected in his poetry. As the Pietists said, religion must move beyond intellectual assent to inner spiritual transformation. Jesu bhaktas can find this transformation in their heart of hearts by participating in the renewing and recentering mystical devotion of Swamy Bharati's poems.

This mystical piety can inspire devotion to Jesus across Christian denominational lines and unite Christians with the many Hindu devotees of Jesus. As with the early Hindu bhakti poets, Swamy Bharati's poetry can unite devotees of Jesus across gender (he habitually refers to bhaktas with female pronouns), caste, denominational, religious, and linguistic lines. Putting divisive arguments aside, all can experience God's love and express their love together by singing these songs.

### **Themes of Jesu Bhakti**

In many religious traditions, the Supreme Deity is unknowable and unreachable. The Deity is a great and powerful Being who is feared and mollified. Not so in bhakti piety. Christian scriptures emphasize that God is love. He loves us, and we are called to love him in return. He calls us to his embrace.



**"When unable to understand theology, only bhakti alone provides bliss."  
(Dayanand Bharati)**

**Intimacy**

In his poems, Swamy Bharati swims in the ocean of intimacy with the Divine. The Divine is addressed with the Tamil second person singular term used for family members and close friends. There is a feeling of warmth and an attitude of trust. One can be vulnerable and openhearted in this safe environment. It is a comforting and renewing relationship. Some quotations from Swamy Bharati's poems of intimacy:

**Poem #962**

We remain bound together with deep love  
 We lost our sense by getting immersed in love...  
 Who can understand this? If I tell this, they will mock me...  
 Let us remain in a relationship which nobody can understand.  
 Let us rejoice by living this forever.

**Poem #780**

Forgetting myself, I get completely lost in you . . .  
 Silently I get lost in that bliss, transcending body and words . . .  
 There is no place for separation . . .  
 I will live with you always.

**Poem #668**

Unending bliss is flowing there  
 It comes like a river of honey.  
 When unable to understand theology  
 Only bhakti alone provides bliss . . .  
 Once you gave yourself to me, where is any separation between us? . . .  
 I become a mad man by enjoying it. . . .  
 Let us remain there forever, without knowing separation.

**Poem #1296**

I understood the special relationship  
 Which you bestowed exclusively for me . . .  
 (People) say that God is common to everyone  
 And even try to prove it to me.  
 There is no means for me to communicate to them  
 What you have done exclusively for me. . . .  
 One cannot understand it unless it is lived  
 And experienced in life.

**Poem #576**

I got some kind of disturbance within me,  
 And I rushed unto you to share it.  
 When I come near to you, I forget all about them.  
 Silently, I bowed at your feet.  
 When you hugged both my shoulders.  
 Forgetting myself I fall on your chest.  
 Closing my eyes as I keep my head on your chest,  
 Taking me kindly, you hugged me deeply within you.

**Poem #459**

It might be easy for you to throw me away.  
 Accepting or rejecting me is your prerogative.  
 But it is not possible for me to leave, who has no other refuge  
 And even if you ask me to leave, that is not possible for me.

**Like a Mother**

Female goddesses are very popular in the Hindu bhakti tradition. It is a natural outgrowth from the sense of intimacy between the divine and the devotee. The goddess has love for all, but for her devotee children she has what in Tamil is called *passam* (tender affection.)

In the history of India, in the Indus Valley civilization of 3000 BC we have statues of goddesses. In the Upanishads, she is Pakriti, the all-pervasive energy present in all things. In the Mahabharata this creative force is personified as Shakti, who then takes many Devi forms performing all divine powers of creating, preserving, defending, destroying, and on and on. In the bhakti tradition, then, female deities like Saraswathi, Parvati, and Lakshmi, are very popular, performing these various divine duties.

**Female deities are  
 very popular in bhakti tradition.  
 It is no wonder that Bharati would  
 express similar biblical allusions to  
 the divine as female.**

It is no wonder, then, that the Hindu bhakti of Swamy Bharati should express this strong Hindu tradition, personifying The Divine as female, having the same powers and duties as Devi. Indeed, in the Bible as well, we have such allusions. Consider Jesus' famous grieving for the fate of Jerusalem: "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings" (Matt. 23:37). The prophet Isaiah found in motherhood the nature of God in his commitment to his People Israel: "You shall suck, you shall be carried upon her hip. As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you" (Isa. 66:12-13).

Therefore, with these two strong biblical and Hindu traditions, it is no surprise that addressing and conceiving of

God as mother is a pervasive theme in the poems of Swamy Bharati, as illustrated below:

Poem #1367

A mother will make a child to cry  
Then hugging it the next minutes.  
Is not this the heart of a mother?  
After that, as the baby becomes upset.  
It will kick the mother with much whining.  
Can I do that? Can I kick you? . . .  
You should take me to pamper, as I am kicking you . . .  
Taking and hugging me and comforting me,  
You should behave like a mother.

Poem #1312

I become like an infant that does not know its  
own need.  
But I am in my mother's two arms,  
Even though I am unaware . . .  
To the infant that knows only its mother,  
There exists no separate world.  
It never finds separate joy,  
As it has relationship with much affection with  
mother.

Poem #1267

Like a mother who accepts  
The beating of her baby with a smile,  
Accepting my scolding as praises,  
Is your nature.

Poem #1204

Is there any baby on this earth that does not know  
How to change the wrath of its mother?  
Whining slightly, the mother will hug it.  
Don't think that I have crossed the age for whining.

Poem #294

Who is there who understood my heart?  
Who will listen to me when I share? . . .  
Why have you given me this many trials,  
O my Lord, I cannot bear any more pain. . . .  
But I know your motherly heart.  
That alone is my greatest weapon.  
If one hand strikes, another will hug,  
And I found great joy only in this . . .  
I will take refuge in you.

Poem #814 (titled "You Are My Mother")

My mother, won't you hug me,  
Won't you take me to your feet? . . .  
Though the mother spans,  
The child will fall back on her lap . . .  
I grew only seeing your face,  
Drinking your grace, I grew in life . . .  
But like a child I will cry

So that I will again get more of your love.  
There is no comparison for this relationship.  
It is the right of a bhakta to receive it . . .  
Once you come as my mother,  
I receive it as your child,  
There is no greater joy other than this on the earth.

**In an intimate, mother-like  
relationship, there is security. We are  
free to be honest and forthright.  
We can complain.**

*Arguing*

In an intimate, mother-like relationship, there is security. We are free to be honest and forthright. Like Jeremiah, we can complain, "You have deceived me, and I was deceived" (Jer. 20:7). Like the psalmist, "Why dost thou stand afar off, O Lord? Why dost thou hide thyself in times of trouble" (Ps. 10:1)? Even Jesus on the cross cries out, "My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken Me" (Matt. 27:46)? So also is there a mother-child relationship in Swamy Bharati's poems, as illustrated below:

Poem #987

There is no true change within me,  
I don't have the thought to live for you . . .  
Even after knowing this, you don't have concern  
for me . . .  
I shed tears thinking of my condition.  
I longed for when you would touch me.  
What is the reason for further delay?  
Is it right on your part to leave me alone to suffer?

Poem #963

You said that you would not go away from me—That  
is your promise  
But now you forgot me. That alone is cruel.  
On the one side my *atman* (soul) is longing for you.  
On the other side, my heart is furious toward you.  
As I weep with longing, I am completely wet.  
But due to the heat of my anger, I become dry . . .  
Therefore, ask your heart and give answer to me

Poem #961

My melted heart is panting thinking of you.  
Tears are flowing like a fountain.  
When I am burnt out by living in solitude,  
Where has your grace gone, leaving me alone? . . .  
Is it right on your part not to dwell in my heart?  
Do you not share in my shortcomings?  
If I lack in bhakti, is it not a loss for you?  
Don't further delay once you know this.  
Don't forsake my heart anymore.

**Poem #956**

When soldiers fight, they have a common set of rules for combat.  
 There is a rule that only two equally strong soldiers should fight with each other.  
 How many times can I say that I am not ready for combat with you? . . .  
 I told you several times that I am not the proper person for your lila (divine play).  
 I clearly told you that I don't have energy to act on the stage further . . .  
 But while I perform and faint, you alone should come to carry me.

**Lament**

Closely related to the theme of argument in bhakti, is the theme of lament. Lament is a feeling of frustration and disillusionment. It is exhaustion from futile arguing. Lament is a huge theme in the Bible where approximately 40% of the 150 psalms are considered psalms of lament. It is a common theme among the prophets, and there is a whole book of the Bible called Lamentations.

Lament arises from disappointment. Disappointments arise because of expectations. Expectations arise because of promises and relationships. Only in a relationship of love and trust does a lament arise. Since that is the character of a bhakti relationship, there will be heartfelt laments when things do not go as one had hoped and expected.

## Most of Hindu bhakti philosophy is written as poetry, and Bharati advocates that Christian theology be expressed this way.

Because the relationship with the Lord is so firm and sure, the laments typically end in an affirmation of trust and hope. This is true, for example with the psalms of lament in the Bible. Only six of them do not end with the famous "None-theless . . ." We see this same pattern in Swamy's poems. Here are quotes from some of Swamy Bharati's poems of lament:

**Poem #1293**

You alone know the life that I am living.  
 You alone will bestow the liberation that I seek.  
 Till that time, O my Lord, give me your grace to have patience.  
 The life on earth becomes a burden.

My lamentation alone became praises now . . .  
 Thinking of your divine grace in my heart,  
 I should live only seeking you.  
 I longed only for this kind of life.  
 I prayed for you to bestow only this life.  
 I carry that responsibility.  
 Accepting it, I will complete my duty if you ask me to.

**Poem #820**

There is none who can weep for me.  
 There is none who will cry with me.  
 No one understood my condition.  
 Therefore, no one wept for me.  
 You wept for the world. You also wept for your relatives.  
 You wept remembering your friend, but you forgot this dog.  
 Because already you redeemed me, therefore I got my comfort.  
 Therefore, I stopped crying.

**Poem #389**

Let your grace uphold me.  
 Let your compassion increase.  
 I come to you seeking mercy. What else can I say? . . .  
 Don't I have a place in your kind heart?  
 Do I need to ask this: Does your heart not melt for me? . . .  
 I lament and cry, unable to understand.  
 This life on earth is a burden  
 Enough is enough, please take care of me.

**Poem #393**

I went everywhere searching for him.  
 I searched for him in so many places all the time.  
 I don't know why he has this much interest  
 In seeing my frustration in seeking him. . . .  
 People are talking that I am struck with lust.  
 Not knowing my true love, they talk like that.  
 They all spoil my name, joining together,  
 Not knowing my heart, they are rebuking me.  
 Let anyone talk whatever they want to talk.  
 Who is going to come and help me in this?  
 Unless they know about my true bhakti,  
 Who else will know the real treatment for my sickness?

**Scripture**

Swamy Bharati is highly knowledgeable not only in Christian theology and in Hindu philosophy, but also in the Holy Scriptures. He uses the term *muktiveda*, meaning "salvation scripture." He always wants to check if what he is thinking is in accordance with Holy Writ. The poems are mini-homilies.

Most of Hindu bhakti philosophy is written in the form of poetry, and Swamy Bharati advocates that it would be good if Christian theology also were expressed this way. He argues

that poetry is a form that Hindus appreciate for its artistry and tradition, and it is easier to memorize. It is similar to the use of poetic hymns the European Reformers used to teach the illiterate masses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some quotes from a few of these poems:

#### Poem #310

It is the word which was there from the beginning. . . .  
Everything came only through that word . . .  
And that showed the light to humanity,  
And the darkness can never overcome that light.  
. . . that light which alone will enlighten  
Everyone who is born on this earth.

#### Poem #3

I don't have the aromatic oil on my hand  
I don't have tears also in my eyes  
Neither have I the courage or heart  
to seek and bow at your feet  
One woman got remorse on seeing her condition  
She was shocked by the cruel nature of her sin  
Taking courage she approached His feet  
He bestowed forgiveness on seeing her condition  
She was ready to accept the insult by others  
And bowed at the feet of the King Muktesan (Saviour)  
"Go in peace as I have removed your punishment  
Which cannot be removed otherwise," He said.  
Knowing my condition I came at your feet  
Won't you accept me the poor man?  
I don't know any other place of refuge  
Save me O Lord of Grace

#### Poem #20

The Eternal God who pervades everywhere  
The Grace who yourself  
Out of overflowing love for the humanity  
Who came as His only son  
You lived with the divine Glory and  
Why you gave up that divine nature?  
You came to this earth in order to redeem  
A wretched sinner like me . . .  
Therefore God lifted you up and  
Gave you that Glory  
So that the heavenly being, men on earth and those  
who dwell below the earth  
Will bow before you with humility

#### Poem #374

When he was sobbing recalling  
With heavy burden in his heart  
How he lamented confessing all  
And how he felt very sad?  
"Even if the entire world deny you  
I won't do that  
And I will give myself to protect you"

Did he remember this?  
When the guru came carrying the water  
To wash the feet (of the disciples)  
"I won't allow you to do this to me"  
Did he remember these words?  
"We left everything to follow you  
What we will gain" as he asked  
"You will receive the eternal life"  
Did he remember this promise (by the Lord)  
I am also in the same situation  
And walk everyday denying you.  
Do you have love for me?  
As I was asking this, bowing my head silently  
And afraid to lift up my face to see Him,  
I took refuge at His feet, saying:  
"You know that too, O my Lord."

#### Poem #379

Getting up before the sun rises  
And looking all around with much fear  
And rushing to the grave before others could notice  
And when they reached the front of the cave  
As its mouth remain opened  
And they went inside with much hesitation  
A man dressed in white dress  
Proclaimed that noble news (to them)  
"Did you come searching after the Lord?  
Who hanged on the Tree?"  
Look and see the place where He was kept  
And the divine one is already gone . . .  
Though they ran without saying anything  
What all the things they were thinking in their mind  
But when they conveyed the news accordingly  
The disciples didn't believe their words.

#### Poem #397

In order to show how good is he  
And asked the question for others to applaud him  
To the one who has a mean mind?  
The Lord turned to him and said—go and do. . . .  
"Who is your neighbour?  
Whom you think is your neighbour  
Those who are in need are your neighbours  
If you help them they will become your own"—  
go and do. . . .  
Yet he became very sad  
As he has desire over his wealth  
Though he received the apt answer to his question  
Went away as if he hadn't heard,  
Without giving any response (to the Lord)—  
go and do.

#### Poem #441

Rejecting the good one  
And allowing the criminal to escape  
In order to preserve his position

He has done the worst thing  
 But there is no point in blaming him  
 That too is the will of God  
 But as he failed to uphold his justice  
 He earned a bad name  
 Did he alone do this  
 Did he commit that mistake only for others  
 We too are like that  
 We too transgress in order to please others.

**Such feelings of separation anxiety  
 are difficult for non-mystic believers  
 to understand. . . . it hurts to lose  
 the nearness, even briefly.**

### *Viraha-bhakti (Love in Separation)*

Viraha-bhakti is an experience peculiar to mystical bhaktas. In Christian mysticism, a similar experience is called “the dark night of the soul.” As we have seen in the above poems of lament, a major source of frustration and confusion is the yearning of the bhakta for a close experience of the Divine. Once you have had the joy of this close Divine Presence in your life, you want it over and over again. It is understandable to feel this absence deeply when it has been so transforming and fulfilling.

In his explanation for one of these poems, Swamy Bharati quotes from the *Canto Spiritual* of the mystic saint, St. John of the Cross, to illustrate his feelings:

Where did you hide, my lover,  
 Leaving me in agony?  
 You wounded me, and then fled like a deer.  
 I ran outside after you, crying out,  
 And you had gone.

Such feelings of separation anxiety are difficult for non-mystic believers to understand. Most believers are aware that God is near and cares, but they may never intimately experience this nearness. One might have a sense of it on a human level between lovers and parents and children. It is because the relationship is so close and enriching that it hurts so much to lose it, even briefly. You savor the memory and yearn for its return. Here are some examples:

#### Poem #682

I came seeking your feet.  
 I can hear the sound of your gentle steps  
 Like honey in my ears.  
 I visualize your holy footprints,

And auspicious music is all around.  
 I get ready to receive you.  
 I prepared the arati<sup>10</sup> to welcome you.  
 What is the reason for so much delay?  
 Are you hesitating to accept this slave?  
 Every second feels like an eternity.  
 Alone with my heart, the body also burns.  
 The love in separation is burning me down . . .  
 I become frustrated, filled with tears.  
 You gave me the promise  
 That you would definitely come to redeem me.  
 I am waiting for you,  
 Longing for you to come, to accept me.  
 Enough is enough of this divine play.  
 Play your pranks somewhere else,  
 Saving me who suffers due to love in separation.  
 Give me the joy of joining with you.

#### Poem #961

My melted heart is panting, thinking of you.  
 Tears are flowing as a fountain  
 When I am burnt out by living in solitude.  
 Your grace has gone, abandoning me.  
 Unfathomable fear has come.  
 My heart is shivering thinking about it.  
 It doubts whether you have forgotten me.  
 It laments that there is no use in living anymore.  
 I lived so far not knowing separation.  
 So far I have lived not experiencing separation.  
 When it first came, I completely lost myself. . . .  
 Not forgetting me, though, you came  
 And redeemed me out of love till I became completely yours.  
 Is it not right on your part to dwell in my heart? . . .  
 Don't forsake my heart anymore.

#### Poem #868

I waited for him with tearful eyes . . .  
 I fell in love and never realized that he is a thief.  
 I never knew about separation.  
 I remembered his promise of non-separation  
 Therefore, when he came and knocked on the door,  
 I ran with much enthusiasm and opened the door . . .  
 Before I could tell about his love, he went away.  
 He made me drown in the pond of my eyes . . .  
 Did he think that I am not qualified for him? . . .  
 The one who bestows grace, receiving anyone, why  
 did he renounce only me?  
 But I won't forget the promise which he gave. I live  
 only believing it.  
 The one who promised to come will definitely come.  
 He will bestow the opportunity for me to bow at  
 his feet.

## Poem #780

I was waiting for you, remaining awake.  
 I was looking for your arrival, not even blinking my eyes.  
 When the time was right, you came and received me.  
 As my tears were pouring down, you hugged me.  
 Forgetting myself, I get completely lost in you.  
 I closed my eyes. My hair stood on end.  
 I kept both your feet in my heart.  
 O my God, I was worshipping at your feet.  
 Silently I was drowned in bliss, transcending body  
 and words.  
 I was with you. I lived without needing anything more.  
 Offering myself, I was bowing at your feet.  
 But when I woke up, I realized it was all just a dream.  
 The vision that I had was not true, I realized.  
 Whether true or not, once you came within my thought,  
 There was no more separation, I realized.  
 Once I had the relationship. there would never be  
 separation.  
 Therefore, I don't wait on you anymore.  
 I will live with you always.

**Though the bhakti relationship  
 is one of intimacy and trust, it is a  
 Master-Servant relationship, one of  
 humility and submission.**

*Humility/Submission*

Though the bhakti relationship is one of intimacy and trust, it is a Master-Servant/Disciple relationship. Jesus' disciples called him Master. Only he could presume to call them friends (John 15:15). From the standpoint of the bhakta, it is a relationship of humility and submission. This is illustrated below.

## Poem #425

A mother will have extra concern over a sick child.  
 As I become good for nothing, you too had this kind  
 of compassion on me.  
 Though I don't know even the word "thanks,"  
 But like a dog I will stay at your feet,  
 For the leftovers that you will throw from your table  
 for me.

## Poem #23

Only a burning lamp can light another one, is true in life.  
 I don't find any use for my learning  
 Unless my heart with the power of the Spirit  
 Becomes a burning lamp by receiving light (from you).  
 Having eyes, I became blind; became deaf having ears

Became a fool, even though I have intellect  
 And became a poor man in my heart.  
 Without you in my heart, I became empty . . .  
 Show mercy to this poor man in this life on earth  
 To become a burning lamp through your eternal Words.  
 Give your words as the un-quenching lamp to this slave,  
 Who sought your feet.

## Poem #973

What are the final answers to everything?  
 Let people give it to me if possible . . .  
 There is no final answer for everything  
 Until God tells it clearly.  
 Those who realize this will leave it to God  
 And remain humble.

## Poem #954

I cannot bear the burden of sin.  
 I cannot understand the nature of sin. . . .  
 When I wandered seeking an answer to this,  
 You came as the answer to me.  
 You shed your blood for me on the cross for this . . .  
 I am unable to bear that burden alone.  
 I beg you to give mercy and remove it.

## Poem #953

As long as I live, my sinful nature,  
 Which is rooted with me, won't go from me . . .  
 As your atonement reminds me again,  
 I come to you, begging again . . .  
 I beg for you to give your grace  
 For me to fight against it till the end  
 I call upon you to carry me when I stumble, not to  
 fall again.  
 When I lie down wounded after a fight,  
 I call upon you to come and put balm on my wounds.  
 Healing me again, standing with me by giving company  
 To struggle again until you take me to the further shore.  
 Till then, remain as my guru, to show me the way.  
 I give myself to you, for you to lead me each day.

## Poem #456

There is nothing in my life to parade (before others).  
 I have nothing to say to the world.  
 What is there to give others from an empty vessel?  
 This is not pseudo-humility.  
 This is the fact which I tell after full realization . . .  
 On which greatness could I brag  
 When I don't have anything.  
 Even what little I had is gone  
 Once I understood the Truth  
 Physically, appearance has disappeared very quickly.  
 I don't see any greatness even in my birth (as a Brahmin).

I never achieved any greatness in my education,  
 And what all I learnt never came to any use.  
 And I never found the things which I searched for.  
 Now what is there for me to brag in any of them?  
 I made noise like an empty vessel  
 And put a mask on all through my life.  
 Finally, when God came and redeemed me,  
 I found the true greatness about it.  
 That greatness is enough for me, and I will take  
 pride in it.  
 All other greatness is nothing but rubbish,  
 And all are mere loss for me.

I have called my poems "bhakti  
 theology songs." A theologian need  
 not be a poet, but without bhakti/  
 faith one cannot do theology.  
 (Dayanand Bharati)

### *Worship*

Of course, the fundamental relationship of the human to the  
 Divine is worship. Here are excerpts from Swamy Bharati's  
 poems of worship:

#### Poem #1267

However I sing, my heart won't find fulfillment.  
 I cannot utter your sweet name simply in words.  
 Like a mad person intoxicated with bhakti,  
 However much I write (songs), they are not enough for  
 me  
 Though I lament, complaining against you so many  
 times,  
 The one time I sing your praises my heart is fulfilled.  
 As you accept both scolding and praising equally,  
 As I sing about you, I feel joy in my heart.

#### Poem #11

The embodied Light  
 Became a Graceful Word,  
 Incarnate to save this world;  
 Hail to You!  
 Remaining primordial God,  
 You became His gracious Son;  
 Creator of everything,  
 You came to this world, Hail to You!  
 Crossing beyond mind and words,  
 Becoming the form of Light  
 and the source of Life,  
 You are the essence of Grace; Hail to you!

You remain as Grace upon Grace;  
 You became Light to this world  
 And showed light in darkness;  
 Lord Muktinath, Hail to you!

#### Poem #84

In this calm evening when I sit with my Lord,  
 As a melodious music surrounds me, I forget  
 myself.  
 Birds with their gentle voices praise the Lord,  
 And my heart too rises up to worship Him.  
 What other pleasure will I seek in this contra-  
 dicting world,  
 Other than sitting at His feet, to gently massage  
 His feet.

#### Poem #534

You come to give something to me,  
 But I don't know what it is . . .  
 I cannot reject it as mere emotion.  
 I didn't accept it as feeling of my heart.  
 Yet, there is some kind of bliss, and I am unable to  
 understand it.  
 My hair stands up, and tears are coming.  
 My tongue gets twisted, and my pulse is going down.  
 And I want to dance. More than that, I experience  
 some kind of peace  
 But my tongue hesitates to share. Yet, my heart is  
 forcing me to do it.  
 But words are hesitant and unable to share.  
 What actually happened to me?  
 Yet, I need to share all this so others might get the  
 same bliss.  
 They should experience this joy in themselves,  
 And they should drown in this divine bliss.

#### Poem #1

The day has dawned and birds are singing.  
 Let us praise the Holy Lord Muktesan.  
 Sun has risen and the devotees have gathered.  
 Let us sing a joyful song and glorify Him.  
 Flowers have blossomed and the world has woken up.  
 Let us praise the Holy Lord Muktesan.  
 Temple bell is calling the devotees.  
 Let us glorify Him by singing joyful song.  
 The saints are glorifying Him and  
 The angels are adoring the divine name of the Lord  
 Muktesan.  
 Come ye all devotees to bow and serve Him  
 Who removes all our sorrow and gives holiness.  
 All the nations glorify Him and the Holy Scriptures  
 praise Him.  
 Let us also daily glorify Him, bowing at His holy feet.

### Conclusion by Swamy Dayanand Bharati

I asked Swamy Bharati to write the conclusion for this article, as these bhakti poems are his life:

I have called my poems "bhakti theology songs." A theologian need not be a poet, but without bhakti/faith one cannot do theology. Likewise, a bhakti poet inevitably uses theology. However, she is not bound by abstract, intellectual formulations. She can express her bhakti, which is mainly based on her personal relationship with *Bhagavan* (Lord God), using the medium of poems. I found my solace in the poems as it gave immense personal freedom and joy to celebrate my relationship with the Lord. Of course, it is a private world and personal *sadhana* (devotion or meditation). Yet, a bhakta always calls others to join her to celebrate this personal relationship with the Lord.

Another advantage that I have as a Hindu bhakta of the Lord is to inherit a rich bhakti tradition in India, not keeping it within the academic discipline of theology. The Hindu tradition of so many bhakti saints from various sects only added richness to express my relationship with the Lord through my poems. Of course, those who are strictly brought up in "Christian tradition" cannot understand this. As I cannot disown my roots and Hindu tradition, not minding others' criticism, I with much joy use my own Hindu tradition to express my bhakti theology.

A special example are my poems of *viraha-bhakti* (love in separation). Some followers of the Lord feel uncomfortable to use such poems; however, my Hindu tradition gave me the personal freedom to express my bhakti in this genre.

## I was immensely blessed by a rich Tamil heritage to express my bhakti in the Lord by writing poems. (Dayanand Bharati)

I always thank God that I was born not only in India but also that I know Tamil as my mother tongue. It is one of the richest living languages in the world, and its religious literature was almost always expressed in poetry. I was immensely blessed by that heritage to express my bhakti in the Lord by writing poems.

So, though I have written poems only for my personal need and private *sadhana*, still I am happy to share with others, requesting every follower of the Lord to use one's own birth tradition while celebrating her relationship with the Lord. I hope this paper will give some small hope for a few to rethink their personal view about their own birth traditional values that are a gift from God.

### Postscript by Hoefler

I would like to conclude by quoting in full a poem that I think expresses well the depth of Swamy Bharati's bhakti:

#### Poem #24

You are the Mother, you are the Father  
You are my Master, You are my Refuge  
You are my dear Friend  
You are my compassionate Brother  
You are the centre of my love  
You are the Lord to my soul  
Who stole my heart with affection!

I sing unto you in melodious music  
With a melting heart and  
Emotional spirit with bhakti  
The eternal Being  
God of God and True Jyothi (light)  
The blissful Light  
Refuge to the bhaktas

Where can I find language?  
To praise you  
How can I tell you  
The longing of this poor man's spirit?  
How can I utter them to you?  
Don't you know my heart?  
The Eternal one  
God my Master

By cleansing my inner being  
With blissful tears and forgetting myself  
Like a girl who is  
Struck with love  
Seeking the face of the beloved  
And every day approaching you  
I offered myself unto you  
Protect me; I took refuge at your golden feet

My heart melts in you  
And the hairs stood up at the end  
Tears flowing from eyes  
Bowing at your feet with folded hands  
I come unto you as my refuge  
O Mother I am your child  
I cannot find on this earth  
Any other refuge other than your feet. **IJFM**



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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Milad Milani, "Representations of Jesus in Islamic Mysticism: Defining the 'Sufi Jesus,'" *Literature and Aesthetics* v. 21 n. 2, (December 2011): 49 (on web, p. 5).
- <sup>2</sup> "Texts from the Kabbalah. . . highest purpose they serve is external dialectical confirmation of the truths already possessed within Christian doctrine as the triune character of God, the reality of the Incarnation, and the divinity of Christ as the fulfillment of messianic prophecies."  
*Pico della Mirandola: New Essays*, M. V. Dougherty, ed. "Three Precursors to Pico della Mirandola's Roman Disputation and the Question of Human Nature in the Oratio" (New York, NY: Ohio Dominion University, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 131–32 (cf also, pp. 156, 163–64, 172).
- <sup>3</sup> Steve McSwain, "Jesus: The Original New Age Thinker" (Beliefnet.com, response to question no. 3).
- <sup>4</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 403.
- <sup>5</sup> "My attitude toward Jesus Christ is that he was either a fully enlightened being or a bodhisattva of a very high spiritual realization." His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1996).
- <sup>6</sup> *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), #356 (Johann Scheffler, "Jesus, Savior, Come to Me").
- <sup>7</sup> *The Lutheran Hymnary* (Minneapolis, MN: Austana Publishing House, 1913), #30 (J. A. Freylinghausen, "Who is There Like Thee?").
- <sup>8</sup> *The Hymnal* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), #386 (Nicholas Von Zinzendorf, "Jesus, Still Lead On").
- <sup>9</sup> Dayanand Bharati, *Understanding Hinduism* (New Delhi: Munshiram Monoharlal Publishers, 2005), 336 pp.
- <sup>10</sup> One important type of puja in Indian temple and private worship is arati, the waving of lighted lamps before an image of a deity or a person to be honoured (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/puja>).

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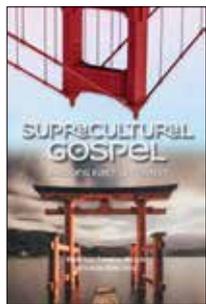


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# Books and Missiology

*Supracultural Gospel: Bridging East and West*, by Mary Lou Codman-Wilson with Alex (Qin) Zhou (Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing, 2022), x + 224 pp.

—Reviewed by Andy Bettencourt



Today the missiological spotlight has fallen on the drama of global migrations, with over 200 million people displaced and in transition from their homelands. This phenomenon is often referenced as one grand homogeneous narrative, but we're all quite aware that the individual stories, the trauma, the wrenching displacement of lives

represent very different experiences. We can persist in believing this broad and varied demographic shares a common vulnerability to the claims of the gospel—but, again, isn't this a rather dubious assumption of homogeneity. Perhaps truer is that in every migratory narrative the gospel will have to bridge the two worlds of this diaspora. In the recent book *Supracultural Gospel*, the authors Codman-Wilson and Zhou want to focus our attention on how one can bridge the gospel in one particular diaspora between East and West.

While some readers may question the exact focus of this text and its primary audience, it's clear that the *Supracultural Gospel* attempts to enable Asian internationals and immigrants to thrive in their Christian life back in their home country (7). The authors also hope to “provide helpful contextual tools for those who reach out to and disciple Asian internationals while they are in the West” (7). In both cases, the authors want to explore how to think outside the box of the gospel in the West and East, and they propose a supracultural gospel that can be contextually suitable in both cultures (14). This goal is admirable, and a handful of Western and Eastern authors are enlisted into a conversation about how to communicate the gospel in both contexts.

The authors first compare the Western “boxes” of the gospel with Eastern “boxes,” both of which restrict the gospel (17–40). The four major Western boxes include Western captivity of the gospel, individualism/materialism, “Christianity Lite,” and

the prosperity gospel (19), whereas the Chinese boxes include persecution, cultural resistance, viewing Christianity as an outsider religion, the prosperity gospel, and collectivism/realism (29–34). Interestingly, Zhou includes boxes from within the Chinese church as well as the broader Chinese culture. Within the Chinese church:

Church members—both new converts and longtime believers continue to draw parallels between commercial wealth and Christian faith . . . among Christians in rural China, a major reason for people to convert to Christianity is the benefit of being healed and protected by Jesus. The claim that belief in Jesus can cure illness is a popular one and has a deep root in rural believers' hearts. Yet some rural believers practice their realistic faith in an unrealistic way. They refuse to take medical treatments for illness and pray instead for God's healing. Such rural believers came to faith when their illnesses were healed after praying, but they would also question God if the illnesses lasted longer. (32, 33–34)

Thus, Zhou's criticism is equally leveled at tension points within the broader Chinese culture as well as the Chinese church.

The Japanese and Thai boxes include *wa* (the value of harmony or living together without tension), *jyoushiki* (adhering to the common sense or assumed standard), *gimu* (obligation to reciprocate received kindnesses), and more generally the dominance of Asian values that affect Christian witness (35–38).

For the Thai, harmony is a key issue particularly when there are significant relationships between Christians and Buddhists. All the Thai informants in the research expressed the concern that dialogical discussion would cause arguments and break relationships. This same issue is dominant in Japan. (38–39)

One wonders here if the gospel is being adequately communicated to Thai and Japanese people, since these boxes strike most readers as rather positive. Perhaps there is need for further exploration on how dialogue is conducted in Japanese and Thai contexts, especially amidst differences. Among the reasons for relational tension quoted in the text are philosophical differences, religious differences, inability to converse, inability to participate in traditions and practices, and inability to carry on family traditions (39–40). These are indeed weightier matters in Asian cultures as they involve connection to the family, community, and culture and can unintentionally communicate one's desire to leave the family, culture, community, and relationships behind due to religious and philosophical commitments.

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*Andy Bettencourt (M.Div., Fuller Seminary) serves in the Winter Launch Lab (<https://www.winterlaunchlab.org/>) and works alongside workers, agencies and networks in discerning innovative ways forward on the frontiers of mission. He is passionate about interfaith dialogue and a mutually enriching discipleship that unpacks each person's identity and life experience alongside the Scriptures.*

The authors are challenged by the width of their categories and the limited space to dialogue across these cultures. For instance, the prosperity gospel shows up as a challenge in both the Western and Chinese boxes. Also, combining collectivism/realism and individualism/materialism without delving into the uniqueness of these terms seems inadequate. In general, the approach of cultural boxes also commits a common Western mistake of essentializing and categorizing elements of culture rather than presenting them as embodied and interconnected aspects of a given culture. These are helpful values to discuss, but their limited presentation and framing as boxes prevents the deep engagement needed to make sense of another culture and adequately proclaim the gospel in that context.

Part three of the book attempts to explain the core of the supracultural gospel (44). Salvation's unconditional love is centered through the cross, God's care for his people, and a transformed life (48–53). The authors then attempt to reframe sin by focusing on Jesus's own shame before and during his crucifixion (58–61). The authors acknowledge the difficulty of communicating the concept of grace, so they instead use brokenness, honor, and restoration as lenses for understanding grace in an Asian context (63–69). The authors note that all those who come to faith in Christ need to live out their Christian lives connected to Christ's body, and that believers need to ask for God's help and possibly even start a small group if they cannot find a fellowship to join (83, 89). Followers of Jesus are then called to live out God's mission in the world out of obedience, the reality of people's lostness, a sense of integrity, and for God's glory (94–97).

**The authors acknowledge the difficulty of communicating the concept of grace, so instead they use brokenness, honor, and restoration as lenses for understanding grace in an Asian context.**

There is much to unpack from this supracultural representation of the gospel. The authors toggle between contributors from the West and Eastern thinkers as well as Asian interviewees. At points, Western resources predominate, especially in the Holy Spirit chapter, but these six essential aspects of the gospel do a decent job of communicating elements of the Christian faith. However, they require further unpacking in larger theological and missiological works as well as engagement from a primarily Eastern perspective. This work does a fine job in

attempting to produce a resource for Western spiritual leaders that dialogues with Asian immigrants and international students; however, it ultimately is challenged in trying to speak to multiple audiences and contexts while covering a wide breadth of material.

Part four addresses discipleship essentials that undergird thinking outside the box, which includes a Christian mind, five essential attitudes, Christ's lordship, internalizing God's word, powerful prayer, and effective spiritual warfare (99–157). These discipleship essentials are introduced in a manner that is helpful for beginning dialogues. However, unpacking each of them in detail requires further explanation, but that is not the intent of these authors. It is particularly important to ground the spiritual warfare conversations in specific contexts so that the ideas presented are not misunderstood. This is likely why the questions for disciplers focus on the experiences of disciples, the realities of their world, how the discipler is counseling them, and practical ways for practicing the given methods (157). Much nuance is needed here, as spiritual warfare has often clouded conversations around one's cultural and religious experiences.

The last section of the book contains practical examples of living outside the box (159). The first of these final chapters focuses on a few metaphors for transformation as well as transformation in familial relationships, approaching cultural traditions, and how one relates to one's own children (161–73). The last chapter of this section and the book re-roots the gospel in Japan by helping the reader to learn how to witness in more nontraditional ways. These might include witnessing through Japanese testimonies, praying for family members, the modeling of love through service, striving for peace and holiness, helping others to see God's pain, and lastly, through counsel on how to remain faithful disciple-makers (197–206). If I were to encourage anyone to read one section of this book, it would be this one. The content and examples are solid. The experiences of Asian believers are highlighted alongside excerpts and quotations from the writing and statements of Asian teachers, pastors, missionaries, and theologians. This allows one to experience and appreciate the differences and challenges of faith in Christ lived out in an Asian context. Although the sections on transforming familial relationships and ancestor veneration are brief, they present enough information for those conversations to begin.

Now for the title: the word "supracultural" is complicated. While scholars debate the essential meaning of culture, it's clear that culture isn't simply a "thing" but describes different patterns, practices, and experiences that form and inform groups and individuals. Culture is how we live as individuals and communities and how we make sense of the world. The gospel, on the other hand, is good news and will be embraced by people who wish to follow Christ throughout the world (4). Thus, the

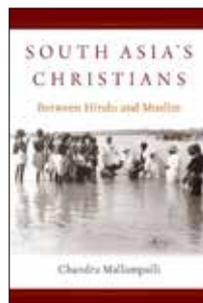
good news should be communicated to individuals and groups in a manner that can be culturally understood, embraced, and lived out. However, the author's phrasing is confusing regarding this matter. Although the gospel is to be communicated cross-culturally and into different cultures, it must be nuanced, discussed, and lived out in specific understandable ways. The authors' attempt to speak to both Western and Asian cultures at the same time leaves their message unclear. A decisive question to ask here is if the book is primarily for a Western or an Eastern audience? The authors note that the goal of this resource is first and foremost to enable Asian internationals and immigrants to thrive in their Christian lives back in their home countries (7). However, the content seems to prioritize a Western audience, which is not wrong, but should be made clear by these authors. Otherwise, it may not be experienced as good news. The authors attempt to bring Western and Eastern ideas together, to facilitate dialogue and conversations that include both; however, the title of their book confuses its purposes. Ultimately, this is a fine resource for Western Christians hoping to engage with Eastern Christians or seekers, but to say that this book is primarily for Easterners is to ignore its Western slant and emphasis on Western resources and categories.

**The authors note that their goal is to enable Asian internationals and immigrants to thrive in their Christian lives back in their home countries.**

This book begins some significant conversations, but it ultimately serves missions best when put into the hands of faithful ministers who wish to come alongside Asian immigrants and students and are curious to learn more about Eastern cultures and ways of life. It's hard for a Western reviewer to comment on how a book might be received by those from other cultures; however, I'd imagine that Asian readers of this book might have difficulties with some of its sections, unless they were able to have conversations with a Westerner. To put it simply, this book starts a decent dialogue between Western and Eastern cultures, but by no means finishes that dialogue or clarifies important details. One can hope for more books like it that would press further into the nuances of Western and Eastern cultures, the concept of sin, spiritual warfare, and living out one's faith in Asian contexts.

*South Asia's Christians: Between Hindu and Muslim*, by Chandra Mallampalli (Oxford University Press, 2023), xvi + 351 pp.

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard



South Asian society defies simplistic analysis. Thus, presenting an overview that gets the nuances right is a rare achievement. This book is an impressive example of success in this area, despite its focus being on the somewhat narrow world of Christianity in South Asia. (But the subtitle of “between Hindu and Muslim” makes clear that there can be no valid study of South Asian Christianity that does not deal with the overshadowing Hindu and Muslim presences.)

Mallampalli surveys the historical development of South Asian Christianity with a decided focus on current issues, as is fitting in a book in the series “Oxford Studies in World Christianity.” His introduction provides a number of the careful nuances which make the book so valuable. In the Christian encounter with South Asia, Mallampalli sees three major aspects of interaction; knowledge production, debate, and conversion (6). The latter two are more easily recognizable, but missionary contributions to understanding life and thought in India should not be underestimated, despite Mallampalli's wise observation that missionary debate and learned engagement with “other religions” (quotation marks as used by Mallampalli) had nothing to do with the conversion of the Dalit and tribal peoples. “The unmanageability of Dalit converts and their identities not only places them *between Hindu and Muslim* but also at the margins of organized Christianity in South Asia” (12, italics original).

Indian Christianity is vital for understanding India since Christians were “both catalysts of nationalism and the ‘other’ of nationalism” (12). Christian education especially stirred nationalist thought and action, but a Christian “vision that began with universal claims and transformative aspirations triggered anticolonial nationalisms that portrayed Christians as foreigners” (12). Mallampalli suggests that “as cricket originated in England and eventually became a genuinely South Asian sport, Christianity underwent a similar transformation through which it became a genuinely South Asian religion” (13). Yet Mallampalli also warns not to “overlook instances where Christians have asserted clearer religious boundaries and have developed a distinctive consciousness through revival movements, theology, or exposure to global Christian networks” (11).

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The historical survey of Indian Christianity predictably starts with chapters on the St. Thomas churches and then the Jesuit mission to Akbar. Mallampalli provides an excellent overview of the traditions (and texts) related to the Apostle Thomas in India, perhaps the best place to start investigating these stories. Mallampalli grants the possibility that Thomas was in India, and even the possibility that some early converts were Brahmans, but if that was the case “they were Brahmins who lacked the social capital they would enjoy later” (24).

From 1580, Jesuit missionaries began a series of visits to the court of Akbar who welcomed and interacted with them for complex political and spiritual reasons. In the end, Jesuit dreams of converting the emperor (and thus the entire kingdom) were revealed as empty. Mallampalli compares this failure with the four-centuries-later failure of Christians to understand Mahatma Gandhi’s similar surface openness to Christianity which was also undergirded by an adamant embrace of pluralistic universalism.

In his third chapter, Mallampalli takes on the complex historical heritages of Francis Xavier and Robert de Nobili under the broader rubric of cultural accommodation. The turmoil surrounding these issues has not yet stilled; Mallampalli insightfully suggests that “In key respects, the Jesuits appear to have made a virtue out of what would be a natural tendency toward cultural accommodation in regions beyond the reach of Goa” (87). It is not possible to prevent all accommodation (or syncretism) so one must beware of being too concerned about these matters. Mallampalli also helpfully highlights a tension between foreign priest and local agent:

Priests faced a constant irony: Catechists made the difficult task of cross-cultural evangelism possible while at the same time contributing to the priests’ sense of vulnerability and resentment. (82)

Foreign missionaries have never been as effective as local workers, and the fact that this simple and obvious truth is not yet widely understood reveals missionary insistence on keeping themselves in the center of the story.

The complex relationship between Christianity and European colonialism (chapter four) raises a simple question, which Mallampalli proceeds to answer:

How exactly did a religion that spread within a context of war capitalism become translated into one that was genuinely owned by Indians? Despite the history of European exploitation, violence, and racism, Indians became Christian. They did so not by accepting every cultural or political assumption of their European rulers, but by embracing a faith that was translated into their own language and experience. (110)

“The argumentative Protestant” is a fitting title for the fifth chapter, and Protestant argumentativeness continues to be a stumbling block to this day. An extensive quotation from

the pro-Western Muslim reformer Sir Syed Ahmed Khan strikingly makes the point:

The missionaries introduced a new system of preaching. They took to printing and circulating controversial tracts, in the shape of questions and answers. Men of a different faith were spoken of in those in a most offensive and irritating way. In Hindustan these things have always been managed very differently. Every man in this country, preaches and explains his views in his own Mosque, or his own house. . . . But the Missionaries’ plan was exactly the opposite. They used to attend places of public resort . . . to begin preaching there. It was only from fear of authorities that no one bids them off . . . And then the missionaries did not confine themselves to explaining the doctrines of their own books. In violent and unmeasured language they attacked the followers and holy places of other creeds. (135, from *The Causes of the Indian Revolt*, 1873, 18)

This is not merely a historical embarrassment but a crucial factor for understanding current “religious” realities. As Mallampalli states, “Relentless public criticism of the beliefs of others mobilizes opposition funding, counter-propaganda, and new patrons of opposing agendas” (140). Something like a Protestantization of other faith traditions results, and unsympathetic analysis (Mallampalli singles out Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations* as an example of offense in this area) “de-historicizes difference and presumes uniformity where it does not exist” (143).

## Protestant argumentativeness continues to be a stumbling block to this day.

Mallampalli appropriately focuses his sixth chapter on “Upper Caste Converts to Protestantism” before shifting the focus (also appropriately) of his concluding four chapters to the establishment of Protestantism as a religion of the poor and oppressed in India. In a book that is remarkably free from error, there are two minor slips in dealing with forward caste converts. On page 148 discussing Narayan Vaman Tilak, Mallampalli references his friendship with missionary Justin Abbott who “had produced” volumes on the Poet-Saints of Maharashtra; but those volumes post-dated Tilak’s life, so the phrase here should be “who would go on to produce.” Similarly, on page 158 Mallampalli quotes Frykenberg on Pandita Ramabai’s shift to a focus on “*bhakti*, or personal devotion to God expressed with great emotion,” but this is dated too early, tied to “America’s populist Christianity” during Ramabai’s 1880s USA visit, when in fact that emphasis developed later related to crises in India in the 1890s.

Mallampalli goes from south to northeast to northwest India in documenting “Mass Conversion among Dalits and Tribals” in chapter seven. Like the stories in chapter six, this is stimulating reading with many nuances which explode our tendencies to develop simplistic talking points.

On the contrary, missionaries were often overwhelmed by the eagerness and scale with which Dalits and tribals sought baptism. Native evangelists and catechists bore the brunt of the burden as they assisted with Bible translation, propagated the faith, and provided Christian instruction for new converts. (188)

Chapter eight looks at “Nationalist Politics and the Minoritization of Christians,” a topic on which Mallampalli has previously published (*Christians and Public Life in Colonial South India, 1863–1937: Contending with Marginality*, New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Western colonial frameworks distorted reality, and “decolonization in South Asia consolidated notions of nationhood that were built around Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist identities” (204). This dynamic, as quoted above, “de-historicizes difference and presumes uniformity where it does not exist” (143).

Chapter nine gives an insightful and nuanced approach to “Dalits and Social Liberation,” although I feel there may be some measure of special pleading for the missionary approach. In a section on “Multiple Identities,” Mallampalli points out that:

Converts moved constantly between the domains of village life and those of the Church. As they did so, they negotiated their original identities with their new Protestant selves. Missionaries may have aspired to see converts make a clean break from their past, but this would have required them to provide those converts with an entirely new source of livelihood and an alternative social existence, removed from village life. As noted above, they neither aspired to nor were able to achieve such ends among their mass converts, who were compelled to maintain dual participation and dual identities. (228)

This seems to understate missionary commitment to remake Indian society. The consistent critique of caste (a topic only cursorily touched on by Mallampalli) was self-described by missionaries as an attack on the foundation of Hindu society. True, the mass movements made it impossible to extract converts into a new civilizational set-up, but the missionary attack on caste was not lessened and aimed at uprooting traditional Indian society (as also with many Christian attacks on caste today).

Christian appeals for the Indian government to provide affirmative action programs for Dalit Christians is one of the complex topics addressed. That conversion to Christianity disqualifies a Dalit from government aid is seen by many Indian Christians as blatant injustice. But Mallampalli points out three assumptions behind the 1950 Constitutional Order that established this system: “. . . the castelessness of Christianity; its transformative impact on the lives of converts; and its capacity to bring foreign resources to bear upon the plight of India’s untouchables” (235).

What of those points can be denied without bringing shame to Christianity and its teachings and practice? Yet a 2005 government appointed Mishra Commission stated bluntly that

Their [persons of Scheduled Caste origin converted to Christianity] position both in the Church as well as amongst fellow Christians is no better than that suffered by their counterparts in other religious denominations. (237)

A final chapter looks at “Pentecostalism, Conversion and Violence in India.” Pentecostalism is the most dynamic and expansive variety of Christianity in India today, as well as being the branch of Christianity most likely to continue the older missionary tradition of attacking other faiths. Mallampalli suggests that:

It is one thing to say that Pentecostals are attacked in India because they attack other faiths. It is perhaps more accurate to say that Pentecostals are attacked because they attract. (242, italics original)

Mallampalli points out that “Pentecostalism and Hindutva are clearly at odds with each other; and yet they appear to draw from a common set of tools arising from globalization” (243).

The rise of Pentecostalism does not have a simple explanation.

The emergence of Pentecostalism in Kerala and in South Asia as a whole involves many variables, sometimes in tension with each other. These include the role of overseas patrons, the quest for local autonomy, enterprising and visionary leadership by Indians, and interpersonal conflicts and church splits that created new churches. Out of this complex array of factors, Pentecostal and independent churches multiplied throughout South Asia and became the force in World Christianity that they are today. (248)

The Pentecostal vision is strikingly at odds with that of liberation theology, and Mallampalli’s perspective in this matter is insightful:

Some contend that Pentecostalism has had a greater impact on the poor than liberation theology, despite the strong emphasis of the latter in Catholic and Protestant seminaries in South Asia. Although its message is not oriented to matters of social justice, Pentecostalism has had an impact on self-worth, empowerment, and dignity for the poor. In this respect, the aims of Pentecostalism intersect with those of liberation theology. (251)

Mallampalli has some concern with the approach of Chad Bauman to anti-Pentecostal violence in India today.

His [Bauman’s] analysis appears to walk a fine line between portraying Pentecostals as victims of unlawful violence while also identifying them as bringing the violence upon themselves through triumphalist rhetoric and practices. (255)

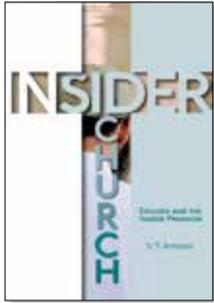
Mallampalli wisely refrains from projecting the future of India or of South Asian Christianity. But clearly his account sets the stage for many more dynamic chapters ahead in the saga of gospel encounters with the complex peoples of South Asia.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See my IJFM review at [https://ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM/27\\_2\\_PDFs/27\\_2%20Book%20Reviews.pdf](https://ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/27_2_PDFs/27_2%20Book%20Reviews.pdf).

*Insider Church: Ekklesia and the Insider Paradigm*, by S. T. Antonio (Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing, 2020), xxiii + 211 pp.

—Reviewed by Andy Bettencourt



In *Insider Church*, S. T. Antonio takes a fresh look at the nature of the church in Scripture and tradition and brings it into a missiological conversation with the insider paradigm (xxii). Antonio's aim is to deepen a vision of the church that would invite Muslims to join the number of the redeemed (xxiii). His book is a substantial resource for ecclesiology that engages deeply with the scholarly work of alongsiders and their reflections on insider movements.

He traces the church's identity through the Old Testament people of God, Jesus' kingdom family, Pentecost, the apostles' teaching, and the Bride of Christ in the New Jerusalem (26). Antonio highlights that this ekklesia has a unique redemptive relationship to the triune God, that it is a global, multiethnic family that gathers locally, and that it is an observable fellowship that partially reveals the New Jerusalem. He also views the church as one holy, catholic, and apostolic community that abides in the Word, that celebrates the sacraments of baptism and communion, and which is an important instrument for salvation and spiritual formation. He concludes that this ekklesia has an apostolic mission to bring the nations under the reign of King Jesus and into his kingdom community (68–69). In such an ecclesiology the desirable goal is a legitimate indigeneity/inculturation/contextualization, and the undesirable outcome is a total indigeneity/culturalism/syncretism (84).

Antonio argues that faith in Christ not only brings us into the global body of Christ but also gives us an alternative history (87). However, the insider paradigm envisions the church as embedded within the world:

The relationship between the church and the world is a critical facet of the insider model of the church. While acknowledging the presence of the kingdom of darkness in the world and the need for God's transforming work, the insider paradigm emphasizes the positive value of social and cultural structures and religious structures as either established by God or as spheres within which God is present and at work. The insider church is envisioned as a community embedded within the social, cultural, and religious structures as yeast in

the dough, a change agent which spreads the transformation of the kingdom and God's new creation within these structures without rejecting them or separating from them. (121)

Antonio concludes that the insider paradigm converges with the biblical vision at some points and departs from it at others (164). He neither condemns the insider paradigm nor completely affirms it; instead, he evaluates its strengths and weaknesses with an eye towards the further multiplication of biblical churches among Muslims (166). He notes that the insider paradigm offers a model which unleashes the yeast of the kingdom while opening the door to another yeast that may also leaven the pure biblical nature of the church (169).

The author concludes with questions. He interrogates the larger goals of the insider paradigm and whether remaining inside one's community of birth promotes spiritual maturity. He also questions whether groups of believers can fully express dynamic visions of the biblical church while retaining significant connections to Muslim religious identity (172–73). Antonio's chief concern is that believers of Muslim background may become indistinguishable from their Muslim community and fail to express the uniqueness of Christ and his kingdom (182).

**His book is a substantial resource for ecclesiology that engages deeply with the scholarly work of alongsiders and their reflections on insider movements.**

It is intriguing that none of Antonio's eight principles directly attend to the stated longing to see Muslim-background fellowships remain in their communities or offer guidance to believers in navigating their Muslim contexts (182–83). His principles offer rich biblical imagery and solid contributions to ecclesial tradition, but one may wonder about their contextual depth and any potential for shaping a sociocultural engagement with Muslim peoples.

While I highly recommend it for increasing one's understanding of insider missiology and ecclesiology, I wonder how it would interact with Kevin Higgins' most recent work and perspective on *Insiders and Alongsiders: An Invitation to the Conversation*.<sup>1</sup> Higgins notes that the deepest markers of an insider movement are not the questions about socioreligious decisions themselves,

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*Andy Bettencourt (M.Div., Fuller Seminary) serves in the Winter Launch Lab (<https://www.winterlaunchlab.org/>) and works alongside workers, agencies and networks in discerning innovative ways forward on the frontiers of mission. He is passionate about interfaith dialogue and a mutually enriching discipleship that unpacks each person's identity and life experience alongside the Scriptures.*

rather they concern other questions: *Who makes decisions in the movement? How do they make those decisions? Why do they make them?*<sup>2</sup> Higgins' model highlights deep engagement with indigeneity, where the insiders themselves make decisions through the use of Scripture, ongoing dialogue, and perhaps an alongsider's presence.<sup>3</sup>

Higgins also addresses the eventual socioreligious place of insider movements. He approaches the ongoing shape of insider movements rather open-handedly by presenting a range of possibilities, at least these three are future faithful directions for insider movements: (1) critical mass and then separation as "Christians"; (2) "yeast in the dough" (i.e., movement leaders believe that faithful discipleship involves biblically shaped adherence to Jesus within their birth religion); (3) "wheat and tares" (i.e., movement leaders believe they will eventually experience overt, consistent persecution or that fellow adherents to their birth religion will declare them heretics).<sup>4</sup> Jesus speaks to the latter in John's gospel:

I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you. (John 16:1–4)

## The deepest markers of an insider movement are the questions: Who makes decisions in the movement? How do they make those decisions? Why do they make them? (Kevin Higgins)

One should note that Higgin's publication emerged after Antonio's book,<sup>5</sup> so it may contain ideas about ecclesiology and insider movements of which Antonio was unaware. Nevertheless, Higgins engages and presses beyond the "yeast in the dough" ecclesiology that Antonio primarily used to characterize insider movements.

From the perspective of insider advocates, Antonio's attempt to assess the insider paradigm as a viable tool or strategy (4, 126, 169, 176), is lacking and by necessity will require a process worked out by those within these movements.<sup>6</sup> Thus, viewing insider movements simply as a strategy is a rather poor conceptualization, because insider movements centrally focus on the decisions, reflections, and conversations of either the group or movement in question. Those within these movements dialogue and reflect over the Scriptures and come to various decisions

regarding life, faith, and practice over different periods of time.<sup>7</sup> This matter of time is an ongoing question, one that involves the duration required for these movements to continue to grow and develop. One might say until the return of Jesus, but Antonio's ecclesiological model acknowledges the need to see continual fruit and ongoing maturity in their life together.

Antonio's ecclesiological model provides a helpful conversation partner for any group wishing to discern just how believers may remain committed to following Jesus and bear witness to his kingdom in their context. The insider paradigm, however, offers fruitful questions about the roles people should play in a new movement and who ought to be the decision-makers. And any reflection on how insiders distinctively bear witness to Christ presses against Antonio's suspicion that insiders may remain too similar to the people of their culture. However, other inherent challenges remain. There is the matter of overt persecution. There is also the barrier of deeply understanding another culture. It is hard for outsiders to understand when and how actions may challenge another's culture or resonate with it, to have that ability to assess the degree of this imposition. There's also the challenge of interpreting the biblical text, whether head coverings' passages, passages interacting with the lives of women, or Jesus's own discussions regarding political powers and religious authorities.

Nevertheless, Antonio has given missiologists, church leaders, and movement leaders a thoughtful engagement of the ekklesia in both Scripture and tradition that will be helpful to reflect upon as movements grow. He also shows an interest in deeply engaging the thoughts and ideas of others, even those who may have different understandings of insider movements and the ekklesia of Jesus Christ. He should be commended for setting up this conversation as a dialogue that can challenge multiple sides rather than taking expressed aim at one group. This type of dialogical engagement is refreshing, nurturing, and invites further conversation. One would hope that more authors would assume this disposition, so that the church can experience a healthier dialogue seasoned by encouragement and thoughtful critique. **IJFM**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kevin Higgins, *Insiders and Alongsiders: An Invitation to the Conversation* (Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishers, 2021), 15–22.

<sup>2</sup> Higgins, *Insiders and Alongsiders*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Higgins, 37–43.

<sup>4</sup> Higgins, 53–58.

<sup>5</sup> *Insiders and Alongsiders* was published in 2021 whereas *Insider Church* was published in 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Higgins, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Higgins, 37–43.

# In Others' Words

*Editor's Note: In this department, we highlight resources outside of the IJFM: other journals, print resources, DVDs, websites, blogs, videos, etc. Standard disclaimers on content apply. Due to the length of many web addresses, we sometimes give just the title of the resource, the main web address, or a suggested search phrase.*

## Missiological Reflections

### What About Informal Theological Education?

With the reports of burgeoning church planting movements to Christ taking place in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, many are considering the best ways to train new leaders theologically—and more informally. Don't miss the report by Michael Ortiz, International Director of the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE) entitled, "[Theological Education Can't Catch Up to Global Church Growth](#)," *Christianity Today*, June 2, 2023.

Over the past three years, our constituency base has expanded significantly to include nonformal and less-structured theological education. In fact, at that time we had none of these institutions. Recently welcoming training ministries such as the Cru-based International Leadership Consortium, Trainers of Pastors International Coalition (TOPIC), and Increase Association's network of training programs for church leaders throughout Asia, ICETE honors their desire to benefit from our global interconnectedness. This includes creating relationships with the traditional seminaries to share with nonformal students the tools and short courses often associated with higher education—such as Bible commentaries, simplified theology, and innovative homiletics. . . . Standards to measure effective spiritual formation training are being developed in Nigeria and India. Oral pastoral leadership programs have started in South Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia—and will soon in Tanzania and Senegal. And regional collaboration hubs are being established in South America and Africa, to link partners in similar local contexts.

### Is Partnership Inherently Western, Egalitarian, and Individualistic?

Too often Westerners have assumed that an egalitarian partnership is the best way to relate to indigenous believers. Author Rennae de Freitas offers up a vigorous argument against partnerships that overlooks power differences and a compelling proposal for a redeemed patron-client system that stands squarely against corruption. Check out, "Power and Partnership: Implications of Redeemed Patronage in Missional Context," in the [July 2023, Volume 51, Issue 3 of \*Missiology: An International Review\*](#):

Undoubtedly, many Western missionaries swim unaware of the power factors that make up the water of the Majority World. Robert Oh, an Asian American missiologist, observes

this ignorance in Asia in his article "[Patron-client Dynamics between Korean missionaries and Cambodian Christians](#)." (*Asian Missions Advance* # 48 (July 2015: [12–19])). Oh writes, "In many cases, Westerners who believe in the equality of persons and the virtues of independence in their culture are not prepared to understand the intricate rules and expectations of Patron-client relationships. They are not conscious of their expected role as patrons." In other words, they swim unaware of the water.

In the worthy pursuit of partnership, a serious problem emerges out of this ignorance of cultural "water." Denying the existence of the power inherent in wealth, race, education, and even citizenship removes the possibility of transformation and redemption. The historical effort to develop authentic and equal partnership in mission may have missed how the Majority World handles power imbalance across relationships.

### To Be Thai is to Be Buddhist

Of interest in this same issue of *Missiology* is an article on a movement to Christ among Thai Buddhists. According to the author, Manuel Becker, "Thailand boasts the second-largest number of Buddhists in the world after China. The mantra 'to be Thai is to be Buddhist' is deeply ingrained in most Thai people." Becker goes on to recount a fascinating story of a missionary family who suffered a tragedy—the death of a wife—but allowed the Thai community around their family to help support and pray for them with many turning to Christ. Don't miss this compelling account of how a missionary widower returned to the field, married a Thai believer, became an integral part of her family, and was honored at the passing of her father to be chosen by his deceased spirit as the new head of the family. The article ends with a brief missiological examination of this network or movement of close to 3,000 Thai Buddhist followers of Jesus. ("[A Case Study of an Insider Movement Among Buddhists in Thailand](#)," Manuel Becker, *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. 53, Issue 3 [July–September 2023].)

### Frontier Missions and Technology Questions and Answers about Technology

How will the presence of internet connection and use affect mission agencies involved in online evangelism or online scripture engagement? The [July–September Evangelical Missions Quarterly](#) is dedicated to these and more technology questions. (If you don't have a subscription, you can purchase a print copy on Amazon.) One fact jumped out from Andrew Feng's excellent lead article on digital collaboration: there are large portions of the world either unconnected to the internet or not using the internet: Afghanistan (83.3%), Somalia (90.2%), a very rural India ([only 35.87% urbanized](#)) with 50% of the Frontier People Groups (less than .1% Christian) is 51.3% unconnected. Take a look at Feng's multiple lists of excellent resources and links to a myriad of technological

efforts. Also, look for links on how to join different online prayer teams for people groups and how to engage online with unreached or frontier people groups.

### "If Data is the New Oil, then I want to Own It..."

The use of data is exploding in Asia, but some countries tightly control it whereas others don't. How will this impact the witness for the gospel and the safety and security of believers in restricted access countries? Don't miss the article "[In Asia, Data Flows are Part of a New Great Game](#)," *The Economist*, July 10, 2023.

Asia saw international [bandwidth usage](#) grow by 39% in 2022. To many, the Chinese model resonates, says Deborah Elms of Asian Trade Centre in Singapore: "If data is the new oil, then I want to own it, goes the thinking."

### India Leads the World in Internet Shutdowns

But whereas China and the US are competing to "build and control digital infrastructure that the other cannot access," India is simply shutting it down whenever it wants complete control. For a democracy, this is a real violation of freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

For the past five years India has [led the world](#) in internet shutdowns, according to Access Now, a New York-based advocacy group. Last year the second-highest number of internet disruptions, 22, was recorded in Ukraine, many of them related to the war there. In India, there were 84. The majority of India's internet shutdowns are imposed in restive areas such as Jammu & Kashmir, which accounted for more than half of last year's stoppages. The small north-eastern state of Manipur, which has been [riven with ethnic violence](#) since early May, is entering its third straight month of internet blackout. ("[India, an Aspiring Digital Superpower, Keeps Shutting Down the Internet](#)," *The Economist*, July 5, 2023)

### Genocide

#### The Most Globalized Genocide in the World

The chair of the US Commission for International Religious Freedom, a Uyghur dissident, was interviewed by *Foreign Policy*. Born in a detention center, he commented that:

China's campaign against the Uyghurs is the most globalized genocide in history. Products produced by [slave labor](#) end up in the homes of consumers around the world—including, as of recently, hair weaves seized by U.S. customs that are thought to be the shorn hair of prisoners.

Take a look at this interview entitled, "[The Witness](#)" (*Foreign Policy*, March 20, 2023).

In February 2023, *CNN* published a hard-hitting expose when a major cache of Chinese police documents was leaked. It is now accessible to the public with an online search engine to help expatriate Uyghurs find out what has happened to their loved ones in Xinjiang. One man left China in 2003 for an academic fellowship with the Ford Foundation. He has since become Deputy Director for the Uyghur Service broadcasts for

Radio Free Asia and just this past February, through this online search engine, discovered that twenty-nine of his immediate and extended family members had been detained—and some had been given long-term jail sentences—just because of their association with him. ("The Darkness of Not Knowing Disappears': How a China Data Leak is Giving Uyghurs Answers About Missing Family Members," *CNN*, February, 2023.)

### Is the Darfur Genocide Happening Again to the Same People?

Civil war broke out again in the Sudan in April with two rival military factions wreaking havoc and leaving thousands dead and millions of displaced people in their wake. Don't overlook this poignant guest essay in the *New York Times* Opinion section written by a Sudanese graduate student at Yale, Ms. Bayan Abubakr.

The city of El Geneina, home to over half a million people, has been described by doctors as "[one of the worst places on earth](#)." Parts of Khartoum do not have [running water or electricity](#) right now. Evacuation [remains difficult](#), if not nearly impossible. As this disaster has unfolded, international leaders have once again ignored the Sudanese people. This includes the more than [8,000 neighborhood resistance committees](#), trade unions, and women's groups that participated in the [Revolutionary Charter for Establishing People's Power](#), a blueprint for a [bottom-up approach](#) to democracy. The participants refuse to cooperate with the Sudanese military, which has orchestrated genocides and violence since Sudan's independence in 1956, or with its dark offshoot, the R.S.F. ("[Sudan Will Not Be Left for Dead](#)," *New York Times*, July 7, 2023)

Relief Web commented on the number of people displaced both internally (2.2 million) and externally to neighboring countries (700,000)—40% of whom have fled to Egypt:

The continued escalation of violence is compounding an already dire humanitarian situation in the country and the region. At least 24.7 million people—about half the population of Sudan—are in urgent need of humanitarian aid and protection, one third of whom are in Darfur, where the situation is deteriorating dramatically. ("[Nearly 3 Million Displaced by Conflict in Sudan](#)," *Relief Web*, July 6, 2023)

### Children as Weapons of War

#### China Erases Cultures and Religions

More than one million children in Tibet have been forced into year-round boarding schools by the Chinese government in a largely successful effort to destroy any vestiges of Tibetan culture, language, and religion in the next generation. This includes [fifty mandatory preschools](#) where 100,000 Tibetan children ages 4–6 are detained:

The latest salvo was revealed Monday, when three U.N. experts warned that roughly 1 million Tibetan children have been [separated from their families](#) and forcibly placed into Chinese state-run boarding schools, as part of efforts to absorb them "culturally, religiously and linguistically" into the

dominant Han Chinese culture. The scheme involves placing children from rural communities into residential schools, where lessons are conducted solely in Mandarin Chinese with scant reference to Tibetan history, religion, and certainly not [to the] exiled spiritual leader [the Dalai Lama](#). The result is that many children forget their native tongue and struggle to communicate with their parents when they return home, which is typically just for a week or two each year. ("['China's Residential Schools Separate a Million Tibetan Children from their Families,' UN Says](#)," *Time*, February 7, 2023)

### It Worked in Tibet; Let's Try it in Xinjiang

More than 900,000 Uyghur children (as of 2019), some as young as four years old, have been relocated to "schools" surrounded by barbed wire with armed guards. The Uyghur language, culture, and Muslim religious practices are all forbidden. See "[The Urgent Need to Defend Uyghur Children and Their Families](#)," *Forbes*, May 8, 2023. This is on top of the forced sterilization and mandated birth control of Uyghur women—a policy of the Chinese government which has resulted in a precipitous 84% decline in population growth from 2015 to 2018 in Kashgar and Hotan, the two largest Uyghur prefectures. "In 2018, 80 percent of all net added IUD placements in China were performed in the Uyghur region, despite the fact that the region only makes up 1.8 percent of the nation's population." See the [Uyghur Human Rights Project](#), April 2023. See also "[China Panel Hears Harrowing Stories from Dissidents](#)," *Axios*, April 2023. And don't miss the detailed interviews with Uyghur parents in Amnesty International's "[Hearts and Lives Broken: The Nightmare of Uyghur Families Separated by Repression](#)" (2023).

### Gender-Based Violence Targets Young Girls in the Sudan

Since war erupted again in April 2023, 1.5 million children have been displaced and 13.6 million children—one of every two children in the Sudan—are urgently in need of humanitarian aid ("[Sudan Conflict: Children Under Increasing Threat](#)," *Africa News*, July 17, 2023). To make matters even worse:

"Teenage girls are being sexually assaulted and raped by armed combatants in Sudan in alarming numbers, with many survivors aged between [12 and 17 years old](#)," said Save the Children. The children make up some of the cases of sexual and gender-based violence as a result of the escalating conflict, with incidents of rape, sexual assault and sexual exploitation being reported by women and girls who have fled the conflict in Khartoum and other areas . . . Some survivors are arriving in neighbouring countries pregnant as a result of rape, according to [UNHCR](#). There have also been reports of girls being kidnapped and held for days while being sexually assaulted, and of gang rapes of girls and women. ("[Sudan: Children as Young as 12 raped and assaulted](#)," reliefweb, Khartoum, 7 July 2023)

### Ukrainian Children Kidnapped by Russia Virtually Untraceable

The horrific methods the Russian Federation is using to destroy the Ukrainians' will to fight eerily resemble the brutal genocidal policies of the Chinese Communist government against the Uyghurs and the Tibetans, just not at the same massive scale quite yet. But, more than 15,000 Ukrainian children, ages four to eighteen years, have been removed from their families by Russian soldiers and taken to Russia to be "reeducated" in camps, placed in orphanages, and put up for adoption.

Ukraine says it has documented nearly 20,000 cases of deported or forcibly transported children. But that number could be as high as 300,000, according to the Ukrainian president's advisor on Child Rights Daria Herasymchuk.

See the heart wrenching photos of Ukrainian babies being taken away by Russian soldiers supposedly to protect them from the war in "[Where are Ukraine's Missing Children?](#)" (*NBC News*, July 1, 2023). But as is made clear in a July 3rd article in *The Atlantic*:

Russian authorities have gone so far as to make what appears to be an official, concerted effort to cover the tracks that may lead to the Ukrainian children's eventual recovery. Processed into the Russian system, the children no longer go by their given names, practice the religions they were raised in, or communicate with their families. They are entered into an adoption system that takes pains to cover up their provenance, an effort that Ukrainian advocates say not only makes the children untraceable, but forms part of a larger project of cultural erasure. ("[The Children Russia Kidnapped](#)," *The Atlantic*, July 1, 2023)

### What Can Christians Do to Help the Uyghurs?

On the website Neighborly Faith, Chelsea Sobolik, the policy director for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, has written an excellent article summarizing the plight of the Uyghurs and suggesting responses that Christians can take:

William Wilberforce, who famously worked for years to abolish the slave trade in the UK, stated, "You may choose to look the other way but you can never say again that you did not know." There's no denying that an ongoing genocide is occurring against the Uyghurs, and each one of us must answer the question, "How is the Lord calling me to push back against the darkness and love my Uyghur neighbor?" We should earnestly pray over how the Lord is calling us to get involved in this current season of our lives.

Check out this blog for a list of six practical ways to pray for the Uyghur people and two practical suggestions for advocacy. ("[A Christian Response to the Uyghur Genocide](#)," *Neighborly Faith*, 2023.)

Note that the Uyghurs, estimated to be [11,768,000](#) strong, are one of the thirty-one largest Frontier People Groups with less than .1% Christians among them. See [Joshua Project at joshua-project.net/languages/uig](#) for a list of resources available in the Uyghur language. **IJFM**



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**Articles in IJFM 39:2-4**

	Lesson 7: Eras of Mission History (H)	Lesson 10: How Shall They Hear? (C)	Lesson 11: Building Bridges of Love (C)	Lesson 14: Pioneer Church Planting (S)
<b>Crossing Religious and Cultural Frontiers</b> Kang-San Tan (pp. 69-76)				X
<b>Making Disciples, Contextualization, and Inreligionization</b> Harold A. Netland (pp. 79-86)		X		X
<b>Udayanacharya's Samvāda and the Dialogue of Traditions</b> Brainerd Prince (pp. 87-97)	X			X
<b>The Faith of Fatima: A Case Study of Musim Followers of Jesus</b> Anna Travis (pp. 99-107)		X	X	X
<b>What Gets "Converted"?</b> Darren Duerksen (pp. 109-116)		X		X
<b>Dual Religious Belonging as a Contextualised Faith?</b> Kang-San Tan (pp. 117-124)			X	X
<b>The Life and Thought of R. C. Das</b> H. L. Richard (pp. 127-134)	X			X
<b>Ceremonialism: Ritual as a Pathway for Relationship</b> Elizabeth L. Walker (pp. 135-141)			X	X
<b>A Psalmody for Jesu Bhaktas</b> Herbert Hoefler (pp. 143-155)		X		X

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