Beyond Contextualisation

Crossing Religious and Cultural Frontiers:
Rethinking Mission as Inreligionisation

by Kang-San Tan

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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.[1] 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.[2]

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.[3] 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."[4] 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.[5]

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

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?[6]

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.[7] 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."[8]

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?
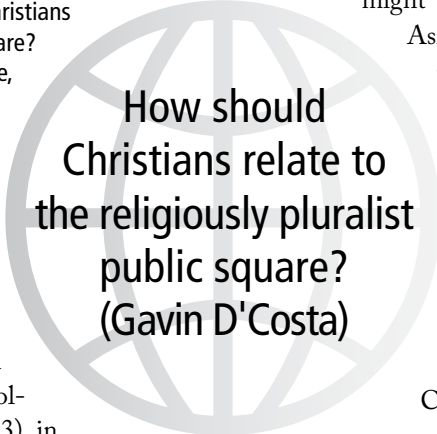
Post Conservative Evangelical Theology

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.

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

This does not mean that Christians accept those religions as salvific within themselves without Jesus. Just as many East Asians 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.[9]

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.[10] 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).[11] 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.

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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.[12] 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."[13]

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.[14]

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."[15] 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.[16]

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.[17]

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."[18]

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.[19]

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.[20] 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.[21] 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.[22]

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.[23]

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."[24]

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 Abhistikananda (Henri Le Saux, 1910–1973). It was Abhistikananda 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 Abhistikananda 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 Abhistikananda 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 discipled these converts in the Buddhist temple in Scotland. Many years later, I caught up with John on his journey of discipling 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.

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

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 statutes 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?

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 inreligionalisation 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

[1] See Ivan Satyavrata, *God has not Left Himself Without Witness,* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 3–4.

[2] 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.

[3] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 477.

[4] 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.

[5] 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.

[6] D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism,* 10.

[7] See discussion in D'Costa, 7.

[8] D'Costa, 7.

[9] Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 13–14.

[10] 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.

[11] 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.

[12] Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3–4.

[13] McGuire, *Lived Religion,* 4.

[14] Gerald R. McDermott and Harold A. Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 220.

[15] Paul Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 6.

[16] Johnson and Grim, *The World's Religions in Figures,* 136.

[17] Johnson and Grim, 136.

[18] Jyri Komulainen, "Theological Reflections on multi-religious Identity," *Approaching Religion,* vol. 1, (May 2001): 51–59, especially 51.

[19] Lin Yutang, *From Pagan to Christian* (London: Beinemann, 1960).

[20] Brad Gill, "Inreligionisation: Reconsidering that Most Vital Hermeneutical Space," Editorial Reflections, *IJFM* 39:1 (Spring 2022): 53.

[21] 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.

[22] Brad Gill, "Inreligionisation," 51–54.

[23] Brad Gill, "Inreligionisation," 54.

[24] 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**