

How Do We Deal with the Baggage of the Past?

# What's in a Name? The Baggage of Terminology in Contemporary Mission

by *Herbert Hoefler*

**W**hat's in a name? A lot.

If someone mentions the same name as your hometown or your mother or your childhood enemy in a casual conversation, you are immediately filled with emotions and memories. Names from the past carry power into the present.

We have names from our mission history around the world that carry a lot of negative baggage. In this article we will look at five of them and reflect on what we can do about it. The five names we need to reconsider are: Christian, Church, Christianity, Baptism, and Conversion. They are all interrelated. Their baggage lays a cumulative negative weight on the free course of the Gospel all over the world, including often in the post-Christian Western world.

The challenge with each of these terms is to find replacements that will communicate clearly. The terms must enable the individual to identify comfortably with the content of the term. The term must communicate clearly to the rest of the world the content we intend.

## *The Term "Christian"*

The overseas situation I am most familiar with is India. In India, the term "Christian" is a legal term. It refers to someone who has been baptized and recorded on a church roster. Often s/he will also have an identifiably Christian name, which might be drawn from the native tongue, such as "Jesuraj" ("Jesus the King") or from Western tongues, such as "Stalin" or "Robinson" or from the biblical narrative, such as "Esther." A Christian, then, is identifiable as a member of a particular social group. Some Christian sects defiantly separate themselves from the culture and even offensively malign it, and these egregious examples only serve to highlight the negative impression of all Christians.

The "Christian" comes under separate civil law in India, just as Muslims do. "Christians" are seen, then, as a peculiar community, both legally and socially, with peculiar social habits such as their eating and dress and worship. They

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are as identifiable as the other minority group, the Muslims. When you identify yourself—or others identify you—as a “Christian,” all of these images and impressions come to mind for an Indian.

What do you do, then, if you do not want to be a part of this separate community, though you are a believer in Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior? What do you do if you would like to identify spiritually with fellow believers, but not separate yourself from your family and community? How can you make clear who you are spiritually without compromising who you are personally and socially? You need to find a different way to name yourself.

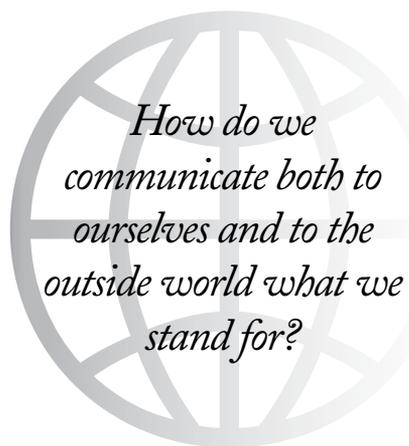
This baggage from the past around the term “Christian” exists in all the countries where the leaders of major religions felt attacked by the missionary enterprise that accompanied the Western colonial expansion. The term inevitably arouses feelings of resentment and defensiveness from past experiences with White Christian invaders and occupiers and exploiters. Usually people of these former colonies are very generous and forgiving toward us White Christians of today. The ones who bear the burden of this baggage are the national Christians. Typically, their loyalty to the nation and participation in the culture are doubted. The term “Christian” carries stereotypes from past colonial experiences.

In post-Christian countries also, the term “Christian” carries a lot of unwonted baggage. In Europe, Australia, and in parts of the USA, “Christian” is a pejorative term. There is an image of a Christian as someone who is self-righteous and shallow: “They think they are spiritual just because they go to church regularly. What do they really do for society? Are they any closer to God and His will than I am?” How do we communicate both to ourselves and to the outside world what we stand for?

Perhaps we should use a new term. What might it be? In India, those who

are believers in Christ but not on church rosters have come to call themselves “Jesu Bhaktas,” meaning “devotees of Jesus.”

- It's a term that immediately makes sense to the general community, the terminology is used for a “*Siva Bhakta*” or a “*Sai Baba Bhakta*” as well.
- The term also communicates a high level of commitment and loyalty. One cannot be a “*Siva Bhakta*” if one is a “*Jesu Bhakta*.”
- It communicates a spiritual lifestyle associated with that object of devotion. I know what I must live up to, and everyone else knows it.



It's a good term to use instead of “Christian” for those who want to remain in their communities as clear witnesses for Christ.

In post-Christian societies, I've heard people identify themselves as a “follower/disciple of Jesus” when witnessing to others. This might be a good alternative name. It communicates the personal challenge that the individual has undertaken in his/her spiritual life. It calls the believer to real obedience and calls the non-believer to clear consideration of the lifestyle. It's a term that Muslim believers in Jesus use, “followers of Isa,” when they want to remain within the Muslim social community.

Must we use the term “Christian” just because it became a popularly used term, even though it began as a mocking term in Antioch (Acts 11:26)? “Lutherans” and “Methodists” and “Baptists” continue to use the appellations that were foisted upon them in

ridicule. In our post-Christian societies, it would be much clearer both to members and to non-members of these denominations if they adopted a term that really described what they are about. Lutherans might call themselves “People of Grace Alone,” and Methodists might call themselves “People of Discipleship,” and Baptists might call themselves “People of Personal Decision.”

Obviously, this is pushing the point beyond what is practical. However, certainly it would be very helpful if we could adopt names that really describe what we are about. We cannot do this with established churches, but we should be able to do it in fresh mission territory.

### The Term “Church”

The term translated “church” in the New Testament (“*ekklesia*”) was used for any public gathering at that time. The peculiarly Christian term was “people of the way,” referred to several times in the book of Acts (9:2, 16:17, etc.). We can only guess what it meant to those first century believers, but it is obvious that they used a term that attempted to describe something peculiar about themselves. They invented a term that spoke a challenge to themselves and to all the world.

In many mission situations today, we have a double bind. The term “church” does not arise from the local culture. It is an English word, from colonial times. Therefore, it communicates this people's origins in the colonial past, with all the baggage that entails.

One pioneering advocate of contextualization in India, N.V. Tilak, coined the term “*Devacha dabar*” (“the royal court of God”). The movement toward contextualization in Hawaii uses the term “*ohana*” (“family”).

When one conducts brainstorming sessions with pioneering national missionaries in India about this topic, their suggestions typically are of two types. One is to translate what “*ekklesia*” was

in New Testament times, which is the word *sanga* (“gathering”). The suggestion, then, is to call the group of believers a “Jesu *sanga*” or “Christu *sanga*.” The other suggestion has been to follow the path of the early Christians in inventing a term that evokes a challenge to themselves and to others. They suggested terms such as “people of the righteous path” and “people of eternal life” and “gathering of Jesus’ disciples” and “people of the Master Guru.”

The terms “disciple” and “guru” in Indian usage are very clear and profound. Gurus have disciples who are accepted on the basis of total obedience and sincerity. The disciple searches for a guru who is worthy of his total allegiance, and the guru decides if this individual is worthy of his time in discipling. The call of the disciple is to learn all of his master’s teachings, to let the guru train him with all rigor, to grow into the spiritual character of the master, and to faithfully carry forward the master’s teaching and presence.

Therefore, to identify one’s community as that of disciples of the Master Jesus is to make a profound call both to oneself and to others:

- It is understood that this community now represents Jesus to the world.
- The world will judge their Guru by the worthiness of His disciples.
- They will be attracted to this discipleship by what they see in the faithful life of this fellowship of the Master.

A substitute term for “church” that includes “discipleship” terminology has both strong biblical and cultural roots.

In post-Christian societies, as we have seen already, changing terminology for denominations is problematic. However, we have seen some creative efforts at naming local congregations, particularly in urban Black churches. Just in the Portland area, I’ve seen “Church of Word and Spirit,” “Church of Eternal Life,”

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“New Beginnings,” “New Vision,” and “Church of the Living Way.” Such names communicate what this church is about, unlike more sterile names such as “St. Timothy Lutheran Church” or “Church of the Immaculate Conception.”

At least if a congregation names itself after the community it is in, such as “Forest Hills Community Church,” they are communicating that they are committed to the good of their local populace. One descriptive name I’ve seen near Portland, Oregon, is “Valley Worship Center.” Obviously, they are avoiding the problematic word “church” and identifying well with their geographical location.

One denomination that has risen into prominence more recently is the Pentecostals. They have had the privilege of naming themselves, and their title does describe—for those who know what “Pentecost” is—what they are about as a church body. They emphasize life in the Holy Spirit, in His gifts and power.

Names can make a difference.

### *The Term “Christianity”*

When it comes to “Christianity,” we tend to accept its benefits to world history and to absolve ourselves from its atrocities. We accept the plaudits of sociologists who trace the rise of democracy, women’s rights, dignity of children, etc., to Christianity’s influence. When it comes to events like the Thirty Years War or the Crusades or racism, we tend to attribute those phenomena to aberrant Christian behavior. That wasn’t “real Christianity.”

Obviously, “Christianity” is a mixed bag in world history. In many of our mission situations, the negative aspects of Christianity are prominent in people’s memories and feelings. Christianity is recalled as a cultural

invasion of their societies, if not a military invasion of their countries. “Christianity” is not a religion as much as a culture, in their experience. In Japanese terminology, for example, the word for “Christianity” has a suffix which identifies it as a political organization rather than a religious one such as Shintoism and Buddhism. That was their experience, so that is how they named it.

Christians in our mission contexts inherit this mixed baggage from the past. They also are victims of the ire of local militants against perceived Western attacks on their nations and societies. Why are churches burned and Christians killed in Muslim countries when the USA invades another Muslim land? Why are they attacked when Europeans insult Muhammad or refuse to allow Islamic practice by Muslim citizens? In these societies, religion and culture and even politics are generally understood as one whole. What a nation of Christian heritage does, Christianity has done. And local Christians are viewed as part of that Christianity, present on their soil.

This view is particularly prominent in Muslim lands. Islamic theology has the central concept of the “*umma*.” This is the worldwide brotherhood of all Muslims, unlimited by any national boundary:

- Muslims feel responsible and accountable for whatever happens to a brother or sister in their “*umma*” family.
- They will leave the safety and tranquility of their own land to go risk their lives to defend a fellow Muslim being attacked in another land.
- Some envision a universal Caliphate that will one day implement Allah’s rule of shariah law among all peoples, ush-

ering in the peace and prosperity that Islam promises.

From this viewpoint, politics and culture and religion are all one, world-wide. Christianity is the historic foe of the umma. Christians are inheritors and perpetrators of Christianity. We are our past, for better and for worse.

The only response to this view is to reject it. One of the best ways to reject it is to reject the terminology associated with this heritage, as suggested above. New believers in these contexts do not identify themselves as Christians, but as members of their own societies and cultures. By clearly and publicly rejecting the name "Christian," they can dissociate themselves to some extent from "Christianity." By inventing a term rooted in their own society's religious/cultural heritage, they can clearly proclaim who they truly are as followers of Jesus in their own society.

Strikingly, other major religions have much clearer terminology identifying themselves: "Islam" = "submission to God," "Buddhism" = "quest for enlightenment," "Sanatana Dharma" (proper name for Hinduism) = "eternal way of life." It would be very helpful if our national missionaries could introduce themselves as representatives of a worldwide spiritual fellowship, not a political/cultural attack, as Timothy Tennent has advocated.

What might such a term be? We need to leave it to each cultural context to develop terminology that makes our intention clear. However, it might be something like "Worldwide Fellowship of Jesus" or a return to biblical terminology such as "People of the Way, Intl." or "Callers on the Name Everywhere" (I Cor 1:2) or "Worldwide People of God" or "Children of the Light, Intl." (I Thes 5:5, I Jn 1:7) or "Worldwide Children of God" (I Jn 3:1) in the vernacular languages.

Congregations that want to reach post-modern youth in the West are already inventing new terminology so the call of God in Christ can get a fresh look:

- Instead of "church services," they speak of "gatherings."
- Instead of "Christian," they speak of "followers of Christ."
- Instead of "Bible Study," they speak of "theological studies."
- Instead of "boards and committees," they speak of "task forces."
- Instead of "church offices," they speak of "giftedness."
- Instead of denominational names, it is fresh titles for their congregations, such as "Imago Dei" and "Mosaic" and "Fresh Faith" and "New Beginnings" here in Portland, Oregon.



It's the same problem of baggage from the past that needs to be creatively and clearly addressed.

### *The Terms "Baptism" and "Conversion"*

The terms "baptism" and "conversion" are interrelated theologically and historically. Usually, a convert is baptized. S/He is typically not considered a convert until s/he is baptized.

Our problem comes in addressing the perception of what these terms imply. One is baptized/converted into what? If it is into a "Christian" or into the church or into Christianity, we have all that baggage from the past to deal with. If it is viewed as baptism/conversion into discipleship with Jesus, we have a whole different reception of the event. It is a conversion of life rather than a conversion of faith or community. There is a great respect for Jesus in all the religions of the world, both theologically and popularly. They wel-

come people to become "Christ-like" in their midst as His disciples.

- How do we make clear that baptism and conversion are spiritual events?
- How do we make clear that through baptism a family will not lose a son but will gain a wonderfully transformed son.
- How do we help the parents to see this event as a source of great joy and pride, instead of as an event of great loss and shame?
- How can we bring the New Testament concept of baptism as an event that is "into Christ" (Rom 6:3, Gal 3:27) and into the spiritual "Body of Christ" (I Cor 12:3)?

In India, one way is to conduct the baptism in the home, as a spiritual event, not as a church event. The event is conducted publicly before the whole family and community, with participation by local Christians, but never recorded in any church roster. The new believer may well relate to the local Christian community on a spiritual level, but not as a member of the church. Indian missionaries report how government officials have no objection to their conducting Bible studies, having people pray to Jesus, enabling people to give their lives to Jesus. "Just so there are no conversions." Which translated means: no baptisms into the church.

Muslims have invented a new term for "conversion." They call it "reversion." By this term, they pointedly contrast their understanding to that usually associated with conversion. In Muslim theology, everyone is innately "Muslim" at birth. We are tempted and fall away, and we need to "revert" to our true, created self.

Wouldn't it be meaningful if we developed terminology that conveyed the true meaning of these events? In India, some are now using the term "*diksha*" for baptism. *Diksha* is any spiritual initiation rite. It is used as the rite by which one makes a vow of loyalty to a guru and is officially recognized by the guru as his disciple. Might that be a possible way to describe the meaning

of baptism, whether as dedication of an infant or of an adult, as it already is in some Indian languages?

In the New Testament, the word “conversion” (Mt 18:3, Acts 15:3, etc.) is not nearly so commonly used for one’s new life in Christ as terms such as “turning to” (Acts 9:35, 11:21, I Thes 1:9, Jas 5:20, etc.). In the Tamil language of India, with which I am familiar, this is precisely the terms that are used, “turning/changing of the heart.” A term for “changing of religion” could easily have been used, but, by the wisdom of God’s Spirit, the term used for conversion is clearly a spiritual term. It conveys well the call of the Gospel, as does the personalized term, “You must be born again.”

### *Our Call to Address the Baggage*

What’s in a name? A lot.

One of the responsibilities/opportunities we of this missionary generation have is to address the baggage of our past. Most of our partner church lead-

**M**ost members of our partner churches are unwilling to change the wrapping, for fear of violating the contents.

ers feel a deep loyalty and reverence for the missionary heritage. The Western church brought the saving, elevating Gospel of the Lord. It came packaged in very questionable—and even objectionable—wrapping, but it was still the Gospel of God. Most members of our partner churches are unwilling to change the wrapping, for fear of violating the contents.

When we have meetings in India to discuss these issues, Western missionaries are usually assigned the task of critiquing the missionary heritage. Few church leaders would dare to do it publicly. They would appear to be ungrateful and disrespectful. We who represent that heritage are the ones to address it critically. The issues can extend to misunderstandings of a central biblical term such as “Son of God.” For Hindus, the term can be

misunderstood as the offspring of a conjugal relationship between deities and for Muslims as a conjugal relationship between God and Mary.

We are called to release our national partners from the burden of past baggage so there can be free flow of the Gospel in their lands. One of the ways we can free them is to give them permission and encouragement to rethink the burdensome and confusing terminology with which the Good News has been wrapped. Once we take off those distracting and confusing wrappings, the beauty of the pure Gospel can be seen and enjoyed and considered by all. **IJFM**

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