

Religion and Identity

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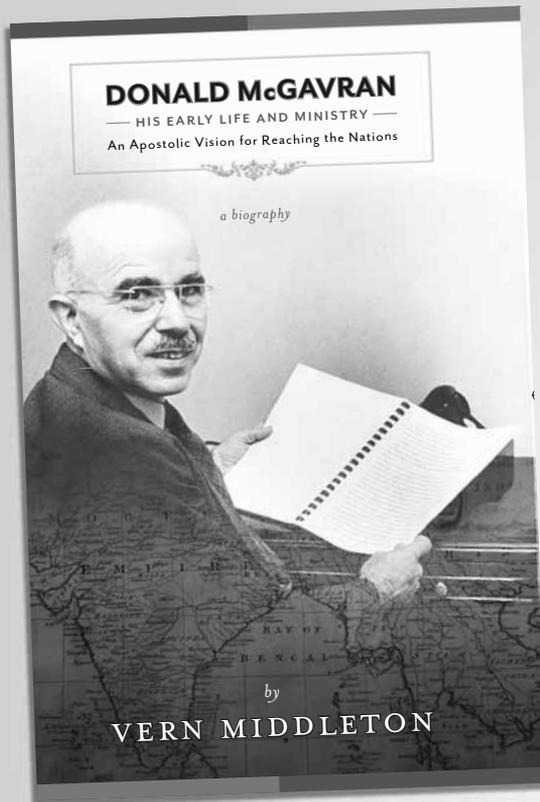
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Vern Middleton has been a lifelong church planter and missions professor. He served in India from 1965 to 1976. During his time in India he was mentored by Donald McGavran and they formed a close friendship in ministry and church planting experiences. It was out of the context of this friendship that Middleton decided to write McGavran's biography. During the last decade of McGavran's life Middleton had the opportunity to interact with him regarding virtually every page of the biography.

When I was young, one summer in Mexico City I read *Church Growth in Mexico*, one of Donald McGavran's first books. What a revelation. He described "ten Mexicos"—Mexico City, Liberal Cities, Conservative Cities, Tight Little Towns, Roman Ranchos, Revolutionary Ranchos and Ejidos, Indian Tribes, Tabasco, Northern Border Country, and Oscar's Masses (named for researcher Oscar Lewis). This analytical approach, this categorizing, this managerial perspective, was a breath of fresh air for me. I glimpsed how to begin making missiological sense of the maelstrom. I have been grateful ever since.

—Miriam Adeney, PhD
Associate Professor of World Christian Studies
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Vern Middleton

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Profiling Religion, Blurring Identity

Christian identity is facing a predicament. Two centuries of a vast and successful Christian movement may have prevented us from seeing certain implications in how we label our faith. This is especially true where a “Christian” belongs to a people within another great religious civilization. We’re now admitting that the term “Christian” creates ambiguities where it should have defined singular allegiance to Christ. And we’re beginning to suspect that the problem may be deeper than the term. It may involve the way we think categorically about religion.

The veil of modern secularization no longer blinds us to the *force* of religion. We so easily identify aberrant forms of violence as Muslim, Hindu, or Christian. But there’s a hidden assumption in adopting these religious profiles. We might assume that a single religious pattern is internalized thoroughly and consistently across an entire religious civilization. A label like Buddhist is actually a reductionism that fails to represent the variety and complexity of religious experience within its apparent domain. And it’s in this religious complexity that the identity of those who turn to Christ is fashioned. For their sake we’d better get below these broad categorizations to the paradigms that mold the way we think about religion:

Underlying the question of following Jesus within various religio-cultural systems is an understanding of the nature of world religions. An *essentialist approach* suggests that each major religion has a core set of beliefs that differs from all the other major religions. Religions are seen as monolithic, with a prevailing interpretation of core doctrine that defines the worldview of its adherents. A *cultural approach* to world religions, however, holds that they are a conglomeration of diverse communities, defined more by traditions, history and customs than a singular stated core theology. While the essentialist view has traditionally been held, current research in the field of religious studies challenges the essentialist view. Evidence points to a great variety of doctrines and practices within each of the major religious traditions. In practice, many Hindus, Muslims and Christians follow religious traditions with very minimal personal understanding of core beliefs.¹ (italics mine)

This more recent working definition suggests that the essentialist construct will fail to sort out the transformed identity of a Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist who turns to Christ. Monolithic religious labels may capture some of the higher and more conscious aspects of a religious civilization, but they cannot represent the unique fusion of religion, culture and identity in personal life. While “Buddhist background” or “Muslim background” may be shorthand for the religious context of a new believer, it fails to capture the scope and relevance of religion in a given believer’s life. Terms like “religio-cultural” and “socio-religious” are being deployed to

Editorial *continued on p. 160*

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indicate how both culture and religion inform the identity of those who turn to Christ. To what degree does a religious and cultural context determine the formation of the Christ follower? What particular aspects of their religious world might continue to shape them, and which are to be left behind? What will their newfound identity in Christ lead them to make of the ritual, aesthetic, institutional, doctrinal, ethical or material aspects of their religious world?

I'm reminded of a Muslim background believer who stood to his feet at a recent conference and said, "Brothers, when I hear the call to prayer, you don't understand how it draws me into evil." But how does one reconcile his comment with the Lebanese brother in Christ who prefers to sit in the quietness of the mosque to get in touch with God? These contrasts beg our examination. How has each person been shaped by their particular experience of religion and culture? Would we expect a difference for the rural Indonesian Muslim and an urban Egyptian Muslim? How about a Hindu raised in America versus one from a rural village in India? Indeed, we need a term like "socio-religious" that can capture at least some of the contextual elasticity that informs the distinctive identities of those coming to Christ from within other religious civilizations.

This issue of the IJFM will begin to explore "religious culture" as a determi-

nant in "Christian" identity. We've collected a number of articles (two of which were presentations at last year's ISFM meetings) and two lengthy book reviews. In the lead article, N. J. Gnaniah speaks to the tenacious grip of the caste system across the ethnoscapes of the Hindu world. Is there any more candid example of a thorny socio-religious reality than the caste system? Can we allow this deep



and pervasive institution to inform the identities of those who turn to Christ in a Hindu world? This author's heart for reaching the higher castes weaves a convincing argument.

Martin Accad explains how a dominant Western influence has cemented two historic identities among Arab believers vis-à-vis Islamic society. His vivid imagery of the chameleon and the hedgehog adds new color to the classic

typologies of the "Christ and Culture" debate. He also helps us evangelicals see how we perpetuate these same orientations. From his own struggle to overcome debilitating religious constructs erected between Muslim and Christian he offers a new continuum that may better integrate different types of ministry among Muslims.

Allen Yeh and Gabriela Olaguibel revisit the powerful Latin American religious movement surrounding the Virgin of Guadalupe. They're particularly sensitive to the "socio-religious" realities that go so easily unnoticed due to the centuries-old charge of syncretism. Try to suspend your worries about "christopaganism" and grant the authors some space to tease out the indigenous aspects of this Latin American religious movement.

Jeff Nelson reminds us to counsel wisely in contexts of religious totalitarianism. He takes us beyond the relatively free Greco-Roman context of Paul to that diaspora of Jews who lived amidst a foreign religious monarchy. He finds a simple and inspiring lesson in the life of Esther, whose story displays the vital role of public confession in the identity of believers within oppressive situations.

H. L. Richard's survey of seven new books in the field of religious studies

Editorial *continued on p. 211*

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.

Caste, Christianity, and Cross-Cultural Evangelism Revisited

by N. J. Gnaniyah

*Saathigal ellaiadi Paapaa—
Kula Thaalchi uyarchi Sollal Paavam;
Neethi, Uyarnta mathi Kalvi—
Anbu Niraiya Udaiyavarkal Melor.*

*There is no caste. It is sin to say
someone is high and someone is low.
The real high people are those who
have lots of righteousness, wisdom,
education and love.
—Mahakavi Bharathiyar, Tamil poet*

N. Jawahar Gnaniyah founded East West Community Church in Anaheim, California, where for the past 21 years he has focused on reaching the 300,000 South Asians in greater Los Angeles. Before coming to the United States, he and his wife Ranjini were involved in indigenous church planting in South India. He recently stepped down from his church to expand his training of others to reach the Hindu diaspora through Global Friends Network. He has a B.A. from Madras University, an M.Div. from Serampore University, and a Th.M. and D.Miss. from Fuller Seminary. Due to the disability and death of their second son from Muscular Dystrophy, he and his wife Ranjini founded the compassionate ministry “Danny and Friends” in 1992.

Editor’s Note: A version of this paper was originally presented at the September 2011 gathering of the International Society for Frontier Missiology in Phoenix, AZ.

The church of modern India continues to struggle with the pervasive reality of caste. The church knows firsthand the atrocities of caste, especially among the poor and outcaste. I have great respect for my brothers and sisters who have chosen to minister and advocate on behalf of these downtrodden ones. I believe, however, that the primary question today is not whether the church should take a position on the evil of caste—its evil is apparent to all—but how are we to fight it?

Like all ethnicities, caste is both a gift and a barrier. It grants us identity with family, uncles and aunts, and grandparents. At the same time, we don’t like the hierarchy and ranking it forces on us. We don’t like to be lower than those who are higher, smaller than those who are bigger. This is the paradox of caste, of both identity and hierarchy, that the church of India is struggling with today. And we must readdress it forthrightly in the mission of the church. In this paper, I want to discuss the reality of caste in Tamil Nadu (both outside and inside the church) and how we must deal with the topic of evangelism in the context of caste.

As a second-generation Christian from Tamil Nadu, I was not surprised to read the following about the *Christian reality of caste* in the Encyclopedia Britannica:

In India, the social stratification persists among Christians, based upon caste membership at the time of individual’s own or of ancestor’s conversion. Indian Christian society is divided into groups geographically and according to denominations, but the overriding factor is one of caste. Caste groups may dine together, and worship together, but as a rule, they do not intermarry.¹

Those from North America can add this to their particular knowledge about caste. It may disturb them, but I’m afraid they will not feel it like an insider would. When an insider does this research, or reads about these realities, it is heart-wrenching. It’s deeply meaningful, it touches their heart, and they respond to it from the heart. I am still wrestling with this problem of caste

intellectually as I write, but I also feel compelled to address the subject from my heart.

Some of my background may be helpful in this regard. I am a second-generation Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. My father was a Hindu from the second highest level of caste. God answered my ailing Hindu grandfather's prayer and told him "to accept and read the book which the white man will bring." He did receive a Bible from a missionary and both he and my father turned to Christ. While my father became a follower of Jesus, in a certain way he never became a "Christian." He wanted to keep his identity with his kith and kin, in other words, with his caste people. And because of this, more among my caste came to know Jesus Christ. He taught me to value this identity and to love the language of my people, so much so that I became a college teacher of our language. Over the years, in my marriage, in planting churches in villages across Tamil Nadu, in my doctoral work, and even in 22 years of ministry in the United States, I have tried to define and understand this reality of caste among Christians in India.

What is Caste?

Dyck suggests that

the word 'caste' was first applied to the units of Indian society by the Portuguese. It derives from the Portuguese word 'casta' meaning simply a human group. Most European languages ever since used the word 'caste'.²

But historical perspective does not de-mystify caste. Its nature and reality remain one of the most misunderstood dimensions of India. So we must ask from the outset, "What is caste?"

Forrester says,

the question is easy to pose, but extraordinarily difficult to answer, especially for the scholar who is aware of the great diversity of accounts of the nature of caste which have been offered.³

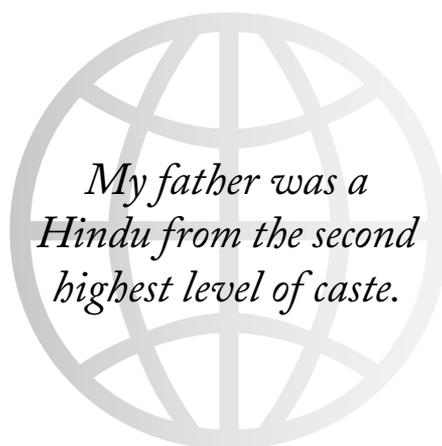
In the Encyclopedia Britannica we read that caste is a

group of people having specific social rank, defined generally by descent, marriage and occupation. Caste, most common in South Asia, is rooted in distant antiquity and dictates to every orthodox person the rules and regulations of all social intercourse and occupation.⁴

Generally speaking, and for our purposes here, we only need to understand it as a social and religious system that regulates a ladder of four major levels (rankings) of people, with one large additional ranking of outcastes underneath it all.

Caste is Real and Caste is Alive

Caste is a bad word in India and Tamil Nadu, but still a reality. Like caste in



India, the reality of color in the United States is considered a moral issue, yet remains a factor in social life. Books, articles, and movies propagate and reinforce caste in India (and color in the United States), even in the technological, freedom-oriented world of the twenty-first century. The 1967 movie, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," was all about overcoming the difficulty of inter-racial marriage. The reality is that traditional sentiments about inter-racial marriage still remain. In the United States in the 1950s and 1960s black people were called negroes. Now it is not only considered a bad word, but a prohibited word. Since India gained independence in 1947, caste is more and

more a forbidden topic of conversation. But it is an enduring reality in areas such as marriage, political elections, and education.

In spite of the economic and technological changes that have occurred in our modern world, marriages in India/Tamil Nadu are still primarily arranged. Most marriages take place among the same caste. Mixed marriages—so-called "love marriages"—are slowly but steadily increasing in the cities and towns. (If a love marriage happens in a village, the couple runs off to a big city like Chennai to live!) But on the whole, even in this twenty-first century, 90 to 95 percent of marriages are taking place according to the caste system only. The matrimonial advertisements in shadi.com as well as in magazines like *Thenral* (published in the Silicon Valley where there are 25,000 Indians) prove this to be true. You see ads like, "Wanted: A Brahmin bride." On the one hand, there is an openness to new ideas and new ways of connecting with people through Facebook, Twitter, and Gbuzz technologies; on the other hand, we have this caste system as it has existed for the past 4000 years, still mingling with the culture of our nation.

Political elections also reveal caste. If the majority of the people belong to one particular caste in any particular geographical area (constituency), the candidates will be of that same caste. In the Virudunagar area, only a Nadar person could win an election. In the Usilampatti area, only a Piramalai Kallar person will win. So all of the political parties select candidates of the same caste—this is the most important criterion for winning an election. Identity comes first, then political philosophy, money, or election strategy.

In terms of education, when I was a college student in the 1960s, there were only three men's colleges in the city of Madurai where I grew up: American College (a Christian college), Madura College (a Brahmin college), and Thiagrajar College (a

Chettiar college). In the past 50 years, many new colleges have been started, and most of them established on a caste basis. Vellaichamy Nadar College, Mannar Naikar College, *Sourashtra* College, *Yaadavar* College, Palsumpon *Thever* College, and Wakhford College for Muslims all have a caste name and it is a well known fact that most of the students in those colleges belong to that particular caste. When I returned to India and saw this phenomenon, I wept. Education is supposed to eradicate caste. Colleges and universities, as havens of intellectual freedom, should speak against caste. But in many of these cases, a particular donor gives the money and insists that the caste name should be on the college. Most of the student body will be from one caste because other colleges will not admit them based on their identity. This is interesting evidence that the power of caste is growing—not diminishing—in Tamil Nadu.

There is a saying in Tamil: *neeru pootha neruppu*, “fire under the ashes.” If we think that the fire is gone and only ashes remain, we are deluding ourselves. Though the ashes are on top, the fire is still underneath. Caste is like that in the big cities like Chennai. But in the villages it is an open fire with no ashes covering it at all.

Caste is Vertical, Becoming Horizontal?

The constitution of India states that every caste group is equal. So for over 60 years now (since 1947) we have equality, at least in terms of the constitution. In reality it is still superficial because the major religion of India, Hinduism, is closely related to the caste system. Hinduism’s “theological explanation” is that the creator (Brahman, not Brahmin) created (1) the Brahmins from his head; (2) the Kshatriyas from his shoulders; (3) the Vaishyas from his stomach; and (4) the Sudras from his legs. This Vedic picture does not even mention the fifth group, the untouchables. That is

When I returned to India and saw this phenomenon, I wept. Education is supposed to eradicate caste.

why those in the fifth group are called *outcastes* (outside the caste system). Mahatma Gandhi called the fifth group *Harijans* (the children of God). Nowadays they are called Dalits. So in reality the first group (Brahmins) still thinks that they are superior to others. The second caste group thinks that they are better than others and on it goes. Even among the fifth caste group, the Pallar think that they are better than the Paraiyar; the Paraiyar think that they are better than the Chakkiliar; the Chakkiliar think that they are better than the Kuravar; and the Kuravar think that they are better than the tribal people. The Indian government labels them SCs (Scheduled Castes) and STs (Scheduled Tribes). The SCs think that they are better than the STs. In response, we may assert the constitution and say that caste is horizontal, but in reality caste is still vertical.

Before Independence, caste was in the open; now it is underground. Before it was practiced publicly; now it is spoken of and practiced secretly. In the analogous situation of color differences in the United States one leader said, “We don’t talk and practice publicly, but we do talk at the dinner table.” It is the same situation in Tamil Nadu. Among our family members we talk, but we don’t speak of it publicly. This is even the case in the church, where we take communion together. We do not speak of difference, but we act it out. The first group will take the elements together, then the second group, then the third. It is changing, but in reality, we still can’t marry across caste. One can argue that even though the previous generations considered caste as vertical, the new generations are thinking horizontal. My observation affirms that this may be true, but the process is very slow. It’s the tension of idealism and

realism. We must maintain our ideals, but we must live in reality.

Which is Evil: Caste or Caste-ism?

The caste system has been in India for the past 4000 years. Is the system itself evil? Is there any good in it? What is wrong with the system?

First, what is good about the caste system? I recently saw one response to this very question on an “answer site”:

The caste system was practically not different from the class system of most civilized societies. It was a system of governance that is demonstrated in colonies of ants and bees. It was also generic to the hierarchical systems used to classify workers, with respect to their academic achievements and social status.⁵

According to Blunt:

Caste is an endogamous group, or collection of endogamous groups, bearing a common name, membership of which is hereditary, arising from birth alone, imposing on its members certain restrictions in the matter of social intercourse; either following a common traditional occupation or claiming a common origin...and generally regarded as forming a single homogenous community. (1969:5)⁶

The caste system is a social network. It gives relatives and families security. People feel that they are protected and cared for. They feel that they are respected. Middleton writes,

Caste is the communal extension of the joint family system. It produces a worldview centered on customs and ceremonies. It is primarily relational in its focus and creates an environment that is highly resistant to change. Caste is the very heartbeat of Hinduism.⁷

A society has social rules, and India has rules, and those rules help. This was hard for even the great heroes

of Christian mission like Carey and Ziegenbalg, whose individualistic orientation made it hard to comprehend our family orientation. Indeed, we cannot get married unless certain uncles and grandparents agree. They want to check all the family backgrounds of candidates for marriage. They weigh the strengths and weaknesses of the two young people and their families. This arranging is family-oriented and appropriate for a culture like ours. The missionary might come and say that I go to heaven alone, but I have to live here and now. I need my family.

The whole system was once horizontal and oriented towards helping each other and mutual co-existence. It all started well. In current Tamil Nadu, the Valluvar caste is considered low and very few people are highly educated in that caste. But 2000 years ago the famous poet Valluvar (later known as Thiruvalluvar, which means “honorable Valluvar”) wrote the great book *Thirukkural*. The Paraiyar caste, which is one of the scheduled castes now, were once the “drum beaters” who spread the news (much like today’s TV anchors). So we can tell that in the beginning the caste system was horizontal.

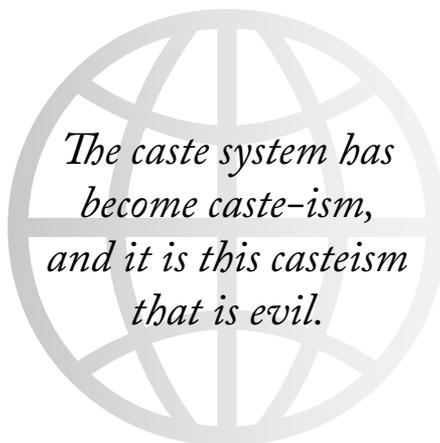
But as the years went by the whole scenario changed. We read something similar in the Old Testament. Afraid of the large number of Jewish people, a greedy and self-centered Pharaoh, made the people of Israel slaves and their lives became miserable. In the same way, there was an ingenious transformation of the caste system into a hierarchical system. Discrimination and tyranny made the whole system oppressive.

Just as the people of Israel slowly forgot that they were free people and adapted to the lifestyle prescribed by their oppressors, so the people of India developed a “slave mentality” rooted in the caste system, a worldview that ruined the minds of the people. The first three caste groups (Brahmins,

Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas) thought they were the *Dvija* (twice born). They became the upper castes and the others became the lower castes and outcastes. Naturally, the upper caste people developed the view that they were superior to the lower and outcaste people. And the lower caste and outcaste people developed the view that they were inferior to the upper caste people. This superiority complex and inferiority complex, this oppression and manipulation, has prevailed for thousands of years. The caste system has become caste-ism, and it is this casteism that is evil.

Races-Racism, Caste-Casteism, and the Bible

Dr. Roger Hedlund—a long-time missionary in India who understands the



complexities of caste—deals with this subject very well in his article “Caste and the Bible.”⁸ Beginning with the Creation story in his biblical theology of missions, he addresses the issue of hierarchy and caste as follows:

All are equally the creatures of God, and all humans reflect their Creator. The same dignity attaches to a poor person as to a rich one, to a Harijan as to a Brahmin. There is no basis for the caste system in the Biblical concept of humanity. All human beings are equally high—made in the likeness of the Creator. All are equally low as well, and in the need of redemption.⁹

After the fall, human beings lost their relationship with God. That led to rebellion and the making of a tower

in Babel. We read in Genesis 11 that God came down and gave different languages and scattered the peoples all over the earth. The different language groups and races, with various features and color, began to develop. A recent article on human races explains:

A human race is defined as a group of people with certain common inherited features that distinguish them from other groups of people. All men of whatever race are currently classified by the anthropologist or biologist as belonging to the one species, *Homo sapiens*. This is another way of saying that the differences between human races are not great, even though they may appear so, i.e. black vs. white skin. All races of mankind in the world can interbreed because they have so much in common.¹⁰

Yet, in reality, one race thinks that they are better than another. It is the same issue with caste. As racial differences have bred racism, so caste divisions have bred casteism. And the Bible is clearly against both racism and casteism, which promote bigotry, prejudice, discrimination, and slavery. Dr. Hedlund clearly points out:

Casteism is a form of racism. To perpetuate caste inequalities in the Church is a denial of the Gospel... Church leaders who practice church politics on the basis of caste are guilty of heresy.¹¹

Addressing the Evil of Caste

A shallow and truncated view of the history of India and specifically of Tamil Nadu often causes evangelicals to think that they are the only ones who oppose the caste system. But Hindus have struggled to eradicate caste as well, and it requires we look at each of these forms of resistance.

Hindu Resistance to Caste

As we saw in the quote at the beginning of the article, the famous Tamil poet Bharathi composed poems against the vertical nature of the caste system.

Bharathi fought against the caste system in the Hindu society. Although

born into an orthodox Brahmin family, he gave up his own caste identity. One of his great sayings meant: "There are only two castes in the world: One who is educated and one who is not." He considered all living beings as equal and to illustrate this he even performed *upanayanam* to a young harijan man and made him a Brahmin.¹²

But this effort never worked.

E. V. Ramasamy, who started the Self-Respect Movement (and was affectionately known as Thanthai Periyar, "noble father"), initiated the major effort to eradicate caste in Tamil Nadu. He openly declared that the caste system was brought by the Brahmins to control all others. He used to say that among monkeys and dogs there was no caste system. In his own words, "There is not Brahmin monkey or Paraya monkey. Then why among the humans we should have these distinctions."¹³

When India's first governor general, Rajaji, introduced the Kula Kalvi Thittam (Hereditary Education Policy) in 1952, he vehemently opposed the policy, saying that it was caste based and was aimed at maintaining caste hegemony. In 1954 that system was cancelled by the then chief minister, K. Kamaraj, who was a great friend of Periyar. Though Periyar tried his best to propagate "inter-caste" marriages, it never took off successfully.

Christian Resistance to Caste

The missionaries who came from the West responded to caste. The first missionary, Francis Xavier, saw many fishermen of Tamil Nadu (Paravars) become Christians in the sixteenth century. Over subsequent centuries large numbers from among the Outcastes or Dalits (mainly among the Paraiyar) accepted the religion of Christianity through significant people movements, and there have been some movements among the Sudra castes (Nadars) as well. So basically the Christian church to this day is made up of those who were originally

The people outside the mission compounds called these Christians the "sixth caste group"—the lowest of all.

from levels four and five of the caste system. This is not only true in Tamil Nadu, but also in the whole of India, with a few exceptions like the Syrian Christians of Kerala. There were minor movements among the Brahmins in the seventeenth century when Roberto de Nobili came to Madurai, as well as among the Vellalars in the nineteenth century, but these did not grow well.¹⁴ Writing about the first Paravar movement, historian Bishop Stephen Neill states:

The Parava Christians were so completely encapsulated by the caste system that they existed for themselves alone.... Caste divisions were then, as now, the gravest problem with which the Christian missions in India have had to deal.¹⁵

Only a few real caste movements have happened in Tamil Nadu. In contrast to such movements, Christian mission efforts won various caste people and brought them together into mission compounds. Missionaries thought that the mission compounds would solve the problems of caste since various caste groups (high and low) lived together and would even inter-marry. In reality what happened was that the mission compounds became "islands" that cut off many new converts from their caste groups. And the people outside the mission compounds called these Christians the "sixth caste group"—the lowest of all.

Caste Inside the Church

Has caste left the church? Unfortunately, such is far from the truth. Whenever a bishop's election happens in some mainline churches, caste emerges. Whenever a marriage happens, it comes out. Whenever an appointment is made by an institution, it comes out. Whenever a promotion to a job in a Christian institution is made, it comes out. Some people would rather marry a

Hindu who belongs to the same caste than a Christian of another caste. It is sad, but true.

Lionel Caplan, who did a study of the Christian community in the city of Chennai, observed that the Tamil Christians follow two kinds of value systems that are held in opposition. They do agree to a "theology" (belief system) of equality before God and they perform all the prayers and rituals in the church. But in actual practice, they live by a different value system by seeking and performing favorable things related to their ancestral links and caste identity. The ideal of a "casteless" church, which they affirm and talk about, is not practiced. Because the Christian faith is privatized and compartmentalized, the integrity of Christian ethics and theology is compromised.¹⁶

Tamil Christians have a unique way of revealing their caste, and also of trying to find out another's caste. Every caste will hide behind a geographical identity or will represent itself through a prominent person in that group. Nadar Christians will say, "we are from Tirunelveli (or Nagercoil)" or "we are related to Brother D.G.S. Dhinakaran." Even a young person who was born in Chennai (Madras) will say, "I was born in Madras, but we are originally from Tirunelveli." Many Vellalar Christians will say, "We are from Palayamkottai," or "Mr. H.A. Krishnapillai is my father's great-grandfather." The Maravar Christian will say "we are from Ramnad" (even if they live in Madurai), and they may add, "We are related to the former Raja of Ramnad."

Caste and Evangelism

The church is growing in India but it is not growing fast enough. What is the main reason? Have we missed something on this difficult boundary of caste? Some may say the problem

is theological, which simply means people don't wish to accept Jesus. But when you explain the gospel in an understandable way, these same people do accept Jesus. The hesitation comes in joining the church, for any adherence to Christianity aligns one with a church made up of "other caste people." Dr. Donald McGavran, the great missiologist of India, once said that the real problem in India is sociological, not theological. Missionaries have come and brought truth. They have preached and preached. The Pentecostals have come and brought power in ministry, but the reality of caste still remains.

There are nearly 400 caste groups in Tamil Nadu. According to my rough calculation, in just five caste groups do Christians number in the thousands, while in another five castes they only number in the hundreds. This leaves 390 groups without any Christians, or perhaps one or two, or a very small number. Last month I introduced this information to a mission leader in Tamil Nadu. He didn't know that only 10 of the 400 castes in his region had any significant Christian representation. "How can you say this?" he challenged. He didn't want to believe it. When I mentioned the names of the caste groups without significant Christians, he said, "Wow, we know of nobody from that caste who is a Christian." We need eyes to see. We're content that a few Brahmins have come to Christ. The reason there are so few converts lies beyond spiritual receptivity. We need to see that it has everything to do with what we have expected of those who have actually responded to Christ. Whatever we have done has not provided a bridge for the gospel into these 390 castes.

Converts: Bridges or Stumbling Blocks

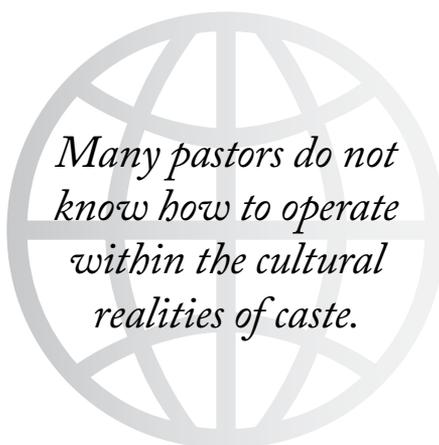
The people movements of the past century or so were a successful way of bringing people to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. The people won through these movements understood theology well and since they had sufficient

numbers to continue their normal lifestyle, their members had few sociological adjustments. But the mission compounds, while helpful in protecting some converts for a period, separated converts sociologically from their groups. Instead of becoming bridges they became stumbling blocks.

That trend continues.

Marriage Example 1

Not long ago I met two young converts in a conference here in the United States. The young man was from a Brahmin Iyengar caste from Tiruchy, and his young wife was from the Mudaliar caste from Kaancheepuram. They both came to the United States for higher studies and went to the same university. They attended a Bible study group and accepted



Jesus. Their love for each other grew and they got married, without the consent of their parents. After the marriage, they informed the parents and the family, who became very angry. The family disowned the couple and told them not to return to India because of the shame. They also took a vow that they would never hear anything about Jesus. The couple cried and cried. Now we could say that they were going through "persecution." On the other hand, they violated the culture and tradition of Tamil Nadu. And in so doing they also brought a great hindrance for the gospel.

Marriage Example 2

I know about a young Brahmin man who accepted Jesus in a college group

meeting. He did not have the courage to inform his parents. After graduation he left home for a job and started attending a church. The pastor helped him to get a bride who was not from his caste group. He married her despite his parents' objections. His parents and the family told him, "Because of that Jesus, you've rebelled against the family and culture. We will never hear the name of Jesus."

In my opinion these young converts were not taught properly. The church and many pastors do not know or understand how to operate within the cultural realities of caste. Most evangelicals or those who do evangelism do not know enough about the social structures of Tamil Nadu, but they do have a passion to "win souls" for Christ. So they preach the gospel, win one or two, and rejoice. But if we don't teach and train new converts properly, we lose the whole caste group. *It is a tragedy to win one or two, only to lose thousands.* So how should we deal with this issue?

Tamil Nadu Evangelism and Acts 1:8

Acts 1:8 says, "But you shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." At the 1974 Lausanne Congress, Dr. Ralph Winter introduced new insight into this verse by framing three types of evangelism, which he called E-1, E-2, and E-3.

The mandate was given to the Jews. In evangelism of the first type, E-1, the Jewish people were to witness to the people in Jerusalem and Judea, those who are basically Jews. It is reaching "our own kind of people."

In E-2 evangelism—and this is a very important category for the caste context—the Jewish people were to witness to the people in Samaria, who were Samaritans and not "of their kind." Now the Jews hated the

Samaritans, and severe taboos restricted associations between them. Today those people we could possibly reach because of a shared language may actually be among a Samaritan-like people with whom we don't have free access. E-2 is harder and more prohibitive than E-1.

In E-3 evangelism the Jewish people were asked to witness to the uttermost parts of the world, a Gentile world that represented very different languages and cultures. This cross cultural evangelism is the most difficult.

How can we apply Acts 1:8 to the Tamil Nadu situation? E-1 is reaching the same caste in Tamil Nadu. E-2 is reaching a different but somewhat similar caste in Tamil Nadu. E-3 is reaching completely different castes in Tamil Nadu, or other languages and castes in another part of India.

For a Nadar Christian it will be easier to reach a Nadar Hindu. For a Vanniar Christian it will be easier to reach a Vanniar Hindu. This is E-1. We should encourage new converts from unreached caste groups to make intentional efforts to reach their group.

When Jesus healed the demon-possessed man, he asked him to go back to his people and to share the gospel. He did the same with the Samaritan woman in John 4, and with the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark 8. We should encourage new converts to go back and be a good witness among their own people.

We should also do research on those caste groups that do not have any followers of Christ, adopt them for prayer, and make special efforts to understand them and reach them with the gospel. The gospel has the theological power, but unless it goes through the sociological network there is no real harvest. This has been a struggle for the past 2000 years.

Roberto de Nobili in the seventeenth century tried his best to reach the Kshatryas and Brahmins of Madurai

How we negotiate caste remains one of the most difficult cross-cultural evangelistic challenges for our region.

city. He not only had "theological power" but also "sociological consciousness." He understood the social network paradigm of that day. His methods and strategies, though successful, were opposed by the church. Can we learn some lessons from this pioneer after 300 years?

Conclusion

A Tamil proverb says: "If a cat closes its eyes, will the world become dark?" Of course, the world doesn't become dark; by closing its eyes, the cat is simply denying reality. This same denial of reality manifests in the "caste amnesia" of young Tamil Christians. They may ignore or forget caste, but others know who they are. And unless followers of Jesus with a passion for souls wake up to the "social network" reality of Tamil Nadu, it will be hard to reach the people there for Christ. If we want to close our eyes, the problem is in us, not in the gospel itself.

As one born in Tamil Nadu, my heart is burdened for all the people and castes there. I pray that they come to know and accept the Lord. But how we negotiate caste remains one of the most difficult cross-cultural evangelistic challenges for our region. There are mornings when I cry out and ask, "Lord, have I been a stumbling block?"

As one from the second level of caste, where such a modest number have come to know Christ, I'm especially sensitive to the inhibiting nature of caste. God knows that I do not wish to maintain the evils of a hierarchical system. But if we love both the Brahmin and the Harijan, then we must revisit the reality of caste identity. Can we at least understand it as an enduring and inhibiting *horizontal* reality that divides India? That way we would not hurry anyone to join our "island Christianity," but rather keep bridges open so that they will bring more of their own

people to the Lord. I believe this is the key to making our evangelistic strategies as sensitive and contextualized as possible, and to reaching the 390 remaining castes of Tamil Nadu. **IJFM**

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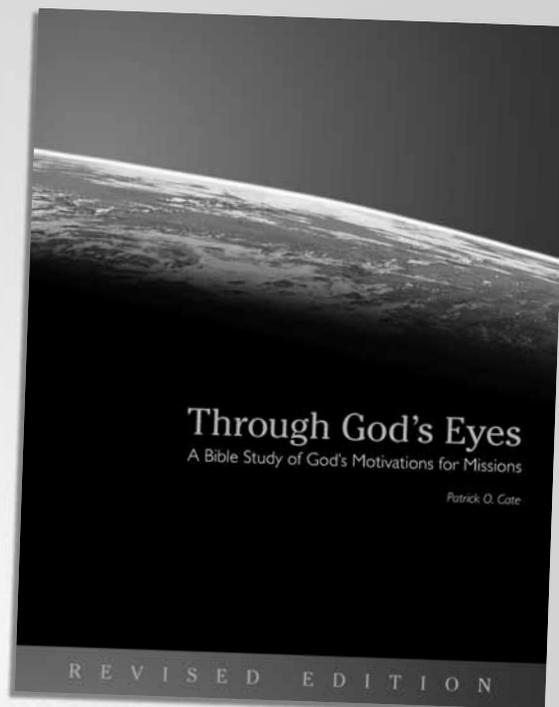
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The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Study of Socio-Religious Identity

by *Allen Yeh and Gabriela Olaguibel*

The Virgin of Guadalupe is one of the most iconic Christian symbols in the world. She is, however, more often misunderstood or misinterpreted and portrayed (especially by North American evangelicals) as a syncretistic, idolatrous image. In Latin America, she is often elevated to the status of the divine. She is recognized as the patron saint of the Americas, and has been alternately nicknamed “Queen of Mexico,” “Empress of the Americas,” and “Patroness of the Americas.” Her basilica is the second-most visited Catholic site in the world after the Vatican. It seems that the fate of many important women in history (more so than men) is to be mythologized, the historical person being overtaken by the myth—examples include Joan of Arc, Pocahontas, Cleopatra, Queen Elizabeth I, Sacagawea, Betsy Ross, Helen Keller, Anne Frank, and especially Mary the mother of Jesus. Why might this be? For whatever reason, these women become more useful as cultural symbols and rallying points than as real people whose historical role is accurately understood.

It has been far too easy for North American evangelical Christians to dismiss the Virgin of Guadalupe as syncretistic without exploring fully her dynamic role in the religious life of Latin America. Even Latin American Protestants preemptively claim her role, her story, and her apparitions as heresy without considering the vital insights they might gain from their own religious history. We’re tempted to share these reactions, especially when the Virgin is often regarded more highly than Jesus across much of Latin America. People pray to her first before they pray to God, asking her for healing and protection. Yet, by dismissing the Virgin entirely, we believe we miss crucial lessons in the connectivity of pagan religion, the Christian faith, and the cultural orientation of an indigenous people.

History of the Virgin of Guadalupe

The Virgin of Guadalupe originated from the province of Cáceres in the Extremadura region of Spain, and is one of several black Madonnas in that country. Her official name is Our Lady of Guadalupe and her statue is housed

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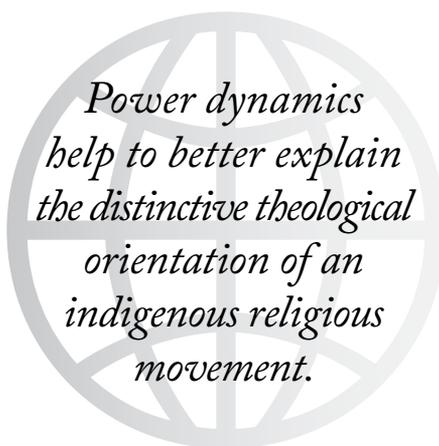
in the basilica of Santa María de Guadalupe. She was the most important Madonna during the medieval period of the Kingdom of Castile. When the idea of the “Brown Virgin” came to the Americas (as she became popularly known after indigenization), one of the most significant religious developments occurred that would change the face of Latin American religion. The two earliest accounts of this story were published by Miguel Sánchez in 1648 in Spanish, and in 1649 in Nahuatl. The latter and more authoritative account was written by Luis Lasso de la Vega.¹

On December 9, 1531, an Aztec named Cuauhtlatoatzin (Christianized name Juan Diego) happened to be walking through Tepeyac on his way to church in Tlatelolco when he suddenly heard a sweet voice summoning him. On the hilltop he saw a vision of the Virgin Mary in Aztec dress who spoke to him in his indigenous language, asking that a church be built in her honor on that very spot. He proceeded to relay this request to the first Bishop of Mexico City, Juan de Zumárraga, who promptly dismissed him. Juan Diego returned to the Virgin, reporting his lack of success and lack of credibility. She requested that he return to see the Bishop, which he did. The second visit made a little more headway when the Bishop asked for a sign as proof.

On Diego’s third visit to the Virgin, she provided that very proof. Juan Diego’s uncle, Juan Bernardino, was ill at the time. The Virgin said to Diego: “Know, rest very much assured, my youngest child, let nothing whatever frighten you or worry you. Do not be concerned. Do not fear the illness or any illness or affliction. Am I, your mother, not here?” Not only did she heal his uncle at that very moment, but on top of the hill in mid-winter she provided a miracle of flowers. He gathered the flowers into his indigenous cloak (known as a *tilma*) and carried the flowers to Bishop Zumárraga. When he opened his poncho, a painted image of the Virgin was emblazoned on

his cloak in their stead. The Bishop got the sign he wanted and commissioned a shrine at Tepayac to house the cloak. Though the origins of this story and even the very historical existence of Juan Diego are in doubt, this cult of the Virgin caught fire in the hearts and imaginations of Mexicans everywhere.²

The building that housed the cloak was completed in 1709 by Pedro de Arrieta. Eventually this old basilica began sinking into its foundations, Mexico City having been built on the bed of a drained lake (Lake Texcoco, on the site of the former Aztec capital city Tenochtitlán). For this reason, and to accommodate the overwhelming number of pilgrims, architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez was commissioned to design a new basilica, which was built between 1974



and 1976, right next to the former location. The cloak of the Virgin was framed and placed in this new basilica with a moving walkway underneath to keep the visitors from crowding the image. The Virgin commands such awe and respect that many pilgrims approach the basilica on their knees when they get within several hundred yards, or even a few miles, of the building. Visitors are especially frequent on the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which is December 12.

Latin Americans vs. North Americans

To properly understand this phenomenon of the Virgin of Guadalupe it is important to appreciate how Latin

Americans are different from North Americans in their understanding of the three categories of race, class, and gender, and how these relate to their religious faith. These are frequently seen as the three lenses of liberation theology: black, Latin American, and feminist, respectively. But these three categories are also recounted in the Pauline epistles: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28). The Apostle Paul also addresses this threefold dynamic in Ephesians 3:6, 5:22, and 6:5, as well as in Colossians 3:11, 19, and 22.³ These categories, what we interpret as power dynamics, help to better explain the distinctive theological orientation of an indigenous religious movement that emerged around the Virgin of Guadalupe.

For North Americans, theology has more often been understood as acultural, apolitical, asexual, and non-racial. In other words, it is often the case that the well-intentioned dominant majority is not aware of the lenses through which they view the world. They see themselves and the worldview that underlies their theology as normative. A minority, on the other hand, may be more aware of those lenses in comparison to a powerful majority. However, though Latinos may be a minority in North America, it ought not to be forgotten that the whole of Latin America has a much larger population than the United States, and as such, they may also be quite unaware of how their own lenses on theology are affected by race, class, and gender.

The reality is that these three power dynamics are historically and culturally different in North America. In the North the racial mixing of blood is a relatively new phenomenon, while in Latin America it has been present from the very beginning of European contact with the Americas. This also has a profound effect on political perspectives: European descendants in

North America classify themselves as the conquerors, whereas Latin Americans, because of their mixed heritage, identify with both the conquerors and conquered. There is a tension in Latin America, particularly in Mexico, between these two identities, which might be seen as a cultural *mestizaje* (a racial and/or socio-cultural mixture). Finally, though Latin America is a patriarchal society (even more so than North America), it is ironically the women who form the backbone of society and thus are more stable, foundational, and important.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is perhaps the most significant way that these three inextricably linked perspectives find their expression in Latin American Catholicism. In some ways, she *had* to be female, indigenous or mixed race, and identified with the oppressed or common people. It must be remembered that she had significance in New Spain back when it was not yet Mexico—when there was still a distinction between conqueror and conquered—as well as to modern-day Latin America. From the very beginning, when the Virgin was identified with the Aztec goddess Tonantzin (Tepeyac was the hill which was associated with her), the adaptability of her religious role became apparent. This adaptability—which not only bridges geographies and ethnicities; but also time and situation—is what makes the Virgin so remarkable. The following sections will explore her religious dexterity through the categories of race, gender, and class, as well as through the more typical category of religion. Each is not so much a clear-cut category, but more a perspective or a lens, since each overlaps in and through the Virgin's role in Latin American religious expression.

Indigenous: The Virgin and Race

It is not insignificant that Juan Diego was racially an Aztec, and that the Virgin appeared to him with indigenous clothing, speech,

Embracing the Brown Virgin was a conscious act of putting down roots in the New World. —Gregory Rodriguez

and skin coloring. Latin America is a very racially mixed continent: the offspring of Spaniards and Indians were called *mestizos*; of Spaniards and Africans were *mulattos*; and of Indians and blacks, *zambos*.⁴ Some have been further delineated the racial categories as follows:

Spaniard + *mestizo* = *castizo*

Spaniard + *mulatto* = *morisco*

Spaniard + *morisco* = *albino*

Spaniard + *albino* = *torna atrás*

Indian + *torna atrás* = *lobo*

Indian + *lobo* = *zambaigo*

Indian + *zambaigo* = *cambujo*

cambujo + *mulatto* = *albarazado*

albarazado + *mulatto* = *barcino*

barcino + *mulatto* = *coyote*

Indian + *coyote* = *chamiso*

chamiso + *mestizo* = *coyote mestizo*

coyote mestizo + *mulatto* = *ahí te estás*⁵

Regardless of the ways that these designations are parsed, the fact remains that multiple racial permutations constitute part of the fabric of this continent. One of the most significant examples of this phenomenon is that the Mexican Independence of 1810 was started by *criollos* (people of Spanish descent born in the New World), not by people of indigenous background. Similar to North Americans during the Revolution against the British, *criollos* in the Americas began to identify more with their birthplace than their ancestral homeland. They were Mexicans, not Spaniards. And “for *criollos*, embracing the Brown Virgin was a conscious act of putting down roots in the New World.”⁶

As Octavio Paz observes, first and foremost “se trata de una Virgen india”⁷ [it's about an Indian Virgin]. Though

today the Virgin of Guadalupe is easily recognizable by her brown skin and Mexican or Indian features, how did she become this way? Certainly she was not presented this way to the Indians. Whether the Spanish Virgin was originally brought to the Americas as a white (European) Virgin, or as the “black virgin”⁸ of Byzantine origin from Extremadura in Spain,⁹ it is clear that the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe was transformed in the New World. Gregory Rodriguez also puzzles,

The Indians appropriated her image and through a process that is shrouded by myth and legend, the Mexican Guadalupe became brown-skinned.¹⁰

However this came to be, there continues to be a racial distinction in Latin America between Christ and the Virgin: the former is white, the latter is brown. This may seem a small point, but it is a powerful one. It highlights the feeling that Christ is imported, but the Virgin is one of the people. She is “mother” and could not have been so if she did not look like the people.

The Virgin of Guadalupe served a symbiotic function prompted by necessity: people believed in her and she gave them what they needed. The fact that nearly every Latin American country has its own version of the Virgin shows that the conquered people all desired an image with whom they could identify. In Cuba, she became known as the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre; in Bolivia she is Our Lady of Copacabana; in Brazil she is Our Lady Aparecida; in Nicaragua she is Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of El Viejo;¹¹ and in Venezuela she is the Virgin of Coromoto. She transcends not only nations but also ethnicities. She is viewed paradoxically as both a Christian symbol that

legitimizes the European right to invade and evangelize the New World as well as a racial affirmation of the identity and worth of the indigenous Christian community.¹² This is not unlike black slaves in the American South who appropriated the religion of their oppressors in order to find worth, dignity, and hope; and even when the oppression subsided, their faith remained as an affirmation of their indigenous identity. However, in Latin America, the Virgin had a more profound unifying effect, where Latin America came to be seen as a single entity despite different races and even languages (notably Spanish vs. Portuguese). The Virgin as patron saint, first of Mexico and then of all Latin America, transcended difference and contributed vitally to this unity.¹³

Female: The Virgin and Gender

When attempting to comprehend the significance of the Virgin of Guadalupe for the Mexican populace, we must reflect on the country's origins and the first contact between Europeans and the indigenous peoples. Unlike the British who established themselves as *settlers* in the Thirteen Colonies and brought their families, the Spanish conquistadores came to the New World as *conquerors* without their women, so they needed to take the indigenous women for their own. This was further exacerbated by an indigenous culture where women were given away as gifts and sacrifices, especially when the Spaniards were regarded as gods. These factors begin to explain the drastically different evolution of societies in North America and Latin America.

Plainly stated, Mexicans are the children of the violated woman. When understood in this manner, the fervor with which the Virgin of Guadalupe is venerated does not come as much of a surprise. As philosopher Carlos Fuentes explains regarding the Mexican national identity, through the Virgin of Guadalupe,

De un golpe maestro, las autoridades españolas transformaron al pueblo

indígena de hijos de la mujer violada en hijos de la purísima Virgen. De Babilonia a Belén, en un relámpago de genio político.¹⁴

[In a master stroke, the Spanish authorities transformed the indigenous population from being children of the raped woman to children of the pure Virgin—from Babylon to Bethlehem in one flash of political genius].

This created the foundation for the ferocious loyalty of Mexicans to the Virgin, because the conquered people had found their mother and their hope all in one fell swoop.

Allow us a historical comparison at this point. The Virgin provides a very different source of identity from that of La Malinche, who is perhaps the most notorious woman in Mexi-



can history. The latter was originally known as Malintzin (or Doña Marina by the Spanish) and served Hernan Cortés (the conqueror of Mexico), as mistress and interpreter, as she spoke both Nahuatl and Mayan.¹⁵ Today she is regarded throughout Mexico as a Judas figure, as she not only was bedded by Cortés but provided information to him and the conquistadores which was useful in overthrowing the Aztec empire. Her name is sometimes spoken with revilement¹⁶ and she was both iconic and infamous, her mythological status far overshadowing her actual historical persona.

Large amounts of literature have gone into detail about this comparison

between the raped and helpless woman, and the holy and untouched Virgin. Likewise, there is a corresponding shame and dignity attached, respectively, to being either the offspring of a raped and dominated woman or the offspring of a pure Virgin mother who is free of male dominance. The Mexican populace not only regards La Malinche as the violated mother but also as a traitor to the indigenous people. She went from being Malintzin, one of the twenty slave girls presented to Cortés as a gift from Aztec Emperor Moctezuma, to being La Malinche, meaning “woman of the conquistador.”¹⁷ And yet, at the same time, her treason went hand in hand with having no other option—she was a slave, who became Cortés’ lover and child-bearer, and mother to a new people. She gave birth to his first son, Martín, who was one of the first *mestizos* and thus the primogenitor of a new race. Yet, the children of conquistadores and Indians were not acknowledged as legitimate. Again, this was much the same as in the American South when white slave owners could produce offspring with their black slaves in order to increase their slave population.

Herein lies the irony of Mexican identity: both the Virgin and La Malinche offer an indigenous or *mestizo* identity but only one offers dignity to inferiors in a power relationship, and that makes all the difference in being seen as a scorned or venerated symbol.¹⁸ “Por contraposición a Guadalupe, que es la Madre virgen, la Chingada es la Madre violada.”¹⁹ [In contraposition to the Guadalupe, who is the virgin Mother, the Chingada is the violated mother.] The Virgin thus offers an alternative identity which is not based on historical reality—while the mixed-race identity of most Mexicans today is historically explained by rape and conquest, it is spiritually reinterpreted through the Virgin, who offers a much more palatable and attractive identity. Instead of being illegitimate children of the rapist father,

they are granted legitimacy through the pure Virgin mother.

In a way, this reinterpretation may be analogous to Muslim appropriation of the Judeo-Christian story of Abraham attempting to sacrifice Isaac, and their replacing the son with Ishmael. It is a vindication of the “other” woman (Hagar over Sarah) and a legitimizing of the illegitimate son who is seen as the forefather of Arab-Muslims. Yet, it was even more complex with the conquistadores because Cortés’ son with La Malinche, Martín, was baptized and even recognized to a certain extent. However, Cortés’ second son, who was from his actual Spanish wife, Catalina Juárez, was also called Martín, but in his case he was afforded full privileges of sonship. The predicament lay in this:

La legitimación del bastardo, la identificación del huérfano, se convirtió en uno de los problemas centrales, aunque a menudo tácitos, de la cultura latinoamericana.²⁰

[The legitimization of the bastard, the identification of the orphan, became one of the central problems, even though often tacit, of the Latin American culture.]

However, this complex problem was solved early:

el primer arzobispo de México, Fray Juan de Zumárraga, quien halló la solución duradera: darle una madre a los huérfanos del Nuevo Mundo²¹

[the first archbishop of Mexico, Fr. Juan de Zumarraga, found the lasting solution: he gave a mother to the orphans of the New World].

She was the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Beyond these historical reasons, there are also modern reasons for looking to a female as a more ideal inspiration than a male. Males are largely missing in Mexican society today, whether through divorce (a contemporary category—divorce implies marriage first, but in the colonial period rape and fornication were more prevalent), infidelity (again, until recently divorce was

The Virgin provides for the people politically in terms of social acceptance, citizenship, power, immigration, and geography.

unheard of even if the husband was unfaithful in marriage—the woman just had to tolerate it), or absence (fathers working in the United States who send money home to their families). Given all this, it is not surprising that women have greater significance in Latin America than they do in North America.

The idea of God the Father does not have the same implications to Latin Americans as it does to North Americans. The difference between the Virgin and God is that

la Madre Universal, la Virgen es también la intermediaria, la mensajera entre el hombre desheredado y el poder desconocido, sin rostro: el Extraño.²²

[The Universal Mother, the Virgin, is also an intermediary, the messenger between the abandoned man and the unknown power without a face: the Stranger.]

God the Father is the one regarded as the distant Stranger, whereas the Virgin provides a context of familiarity and recognition. Octavio Paz further explains:

No existe una veneración especial por el Dios padre de la Trinidad, figura más bien borrosa. En cambio, es muy frecuente y constante la devoción a Cristo, el Dios hijo, el Dios joven, sobre todo como víctima redentora. En las Iglesias de los pueblos abundan las esculturas de Jesús—en cruz o cubiertas de llagas y heridas en las que el realismo desollado de los españoles se alía al simbolismo trágico de los indios: las heridas son flores, prendas de resurrección, por una parte, y, asimismo, reiteración de que la vida es la máscara dolorosa de la muerte.²³

[A special veneration for God the Father of the Trinity does not exist; he is a blurred figure. In turn, the devotion to Christ, God the Son, is more

frequent and constant—the young God who, overall, is a redemptive victim. In the churches, sculptures of Jesus are abundant—on a cross and covered with sores in which the realism of the Spanish allies with the tragic symbolism of the Indians: the wounds are flowers, symbols of resurrection, but at the same time that life is a painful mask of death.]

The Mexican people venerate Christ the Son because he is humiliated, bleeding, and abused. They identify themselves with him, as they also reach out to the Mother figure which gave him birth.

For many Latin American women especially, Mary is accessible whereas the Bible is not. Part of it may have to do with illiteracy and some of it has to do with culture and Catholicism (the Bible being neither promoted nor encouraged among the female laity), but there is no intentional slight.²⁴ However, the reality remains that the persons of Mary, God the Father, and Jesus are more approachable than the Bible, but this is especially so with Mary. Her gender contributes to her accessibility for women who may have a harder time identifying with the male persons of the Trinity. The Virgin intercedes for the people, and acts in an incarnational way that appears like “one of us,” and who *is* “one of us.”

Political: The Virgin and Class

The examination of the racial and gender qualities of the Virgin of Guadalupe provides the background for understanding the political aspect of the Virgin, a power dynamic that encompasses both of the first two. The Virgin provides for the people politically in terms of social acceptance, citizenship, power, immigration, and geography.

As explained above, the fact that the Virgin is indigenous and female provides for the natives in connecting them relationally with the Virgin in this more familiar way. She is indigenous, meaning one of their own. This racial and political connection is stressed further in the nature of her apparition: she reveals herself to Juan Diego, a new Catholic convert who belonged to the poorest class of Aztecs.²⁵ The Virgin is also a mother, thus a nurturing and comforting figure. This newfound place in the established religion of the Spanish translated into a newfound place in the established social system of the Spanish. Through the Virgin of Guadalupe, the indigenous population realized a more dignified identity in Spanish society.

The Spaniards were not ignorant of the preference of the Indians toward the Virgin of Guadalupe, nor of the probable syncretism taking place. In fact, the Franciscans opposed this movement, declaring it to be idolatrous.²⁶ However, the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe was permitted, encouraged, and promoted by the Spanish. This decision played a vital role for two populations: the indigenous and the *criollos*, as explained above. The Marian cult was confirmed and encouraged by having the account of her apparition printed in both the Spanish language and in Nahuatl. The reason was to encourage *criollos*, not just the indigenous, to venerate the Virgin.²⁷ In this way the *criollos*, like the indigenous, felt more tied to New Spain than Old Spain.

Often in Latin America the Virgin is seen as higher than Christ, whether by physical placement on the altar or by her being symbolically crowned by the persons of the Trinity. This is especially puzzling when it is the Virgin over Jesus. Although God the Father is seen as the distant Stranger, shouldn't the Christ be sufficient for the people? It is precisely in this contrast with Jesus that this is most important. The Virgin was needed as a victorious image

as opposed to the Christ of sorrows. All Mexican Christ-figures are dead, bleeding, and solitary, whereas the Virgin is celebrated with glory, flowers, and processions.²⁸ But she had to be a victorious image who identified with the lowliest of people:

La Virgen es el Consuelo de los pobres, el escudo de los débiles, el amparo de los oprimidos. En suma, es la Madre de los huérfanos.²⁹

[The Virgin is the Comfort to the poor, the shield of the weak, the protection of the oppressed. In short, she is the Mother of the orphans.

For Mexico, from the beginning of its national history, through the Independence of 1810 and even the Revolution of 1910, it has been about



a struggle for power. This power dynamic is accentuated when contrasted to the United States, which began with settlers, not conquistadores, and sought independence to establish a democracy for free people.

In addition to this, the Virgin is a symbol of migrant Mexican identity, a physical image that can accompany people. Before 1980, the Virgin of Guadalupe was hardly seen outside of Latin America.³⁰ Today, her image is splashed across North America in almost any Mexican religious community, and as such, through her image, Mexico can accompany the people to wherever they move in the world.

The Virgin of Guadalupe, among all Marian images in the Americas, has a special place of importance because she is

the only one that can be said to result from an apparition held to be supernatural... In other places on the continent devotion to the Virgin centers around an image, either found or sculpted by the natives or brought by the missionaries themselves.³¹

This means her identity as Guadalupe was not imported. She belongs to the Americas, and to the people, or perhaps it might be better said that the people belong to her. The following states it comprehensively yet succinctly:

Fundamentally, its meaning is that the Virgin maternally adopts the "natives" of Mexico and with them the whole Latin American people. The apparition of the woman later called the *Indita* (little Indian woman) or *Morenita* (little dark woman) to the Indian Juan Diego has important historical implications. It demands absolute respect for *the other*; we must welcome this otherness and allow its right to be so. In this apparition the "divinity" of the white ones takes on the indigenous, or rather the indigenous takes this divinity as its own in order to assert its right to life in the face of white power... The divinity appears to be taking sides with the weak, with the one to whom it is speaking and revealing itself. The Indian understands her and feels absolutely certain of her protection... The apparition becomes an ally of the Indian, collectively, as the representative of an oppressed culture. The mission given to the Indian by the Virgin is to build her a temple. The initiative or this building comes from her, but the work of building it is done by the Indian. In this indigenous popular tradition it is the woman Mary who sends him out on a mission; in the Christian scriptures it is Jesus who sends. The Virgin does not have the same problems as the white oppressor. She loves the Indian and adopts him as her son. This gives him strength to fight for his own cause against the established church authorities. The carrying out of

the Virgin's request means the affirmation of the identity of a people beginning a new moment in history. The apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the growing devotion to her plays an important part in the restoring to an exploited people a religious identity that will help in the construction of a new national identity.³²

This is where land and dignity are tied together: to be Latin American is a single identity, and a proud one. The people made the Virgin of Guadalupe what they needed her to be for themselves, but by doing so, they really allowed her to control their destiny. Latin Americans are united under her banner, which is really more of a political symbol than a Catholic one, as it encompasses power, authority, race, language, government, history, geography, and the identity of a people.

Contextualization vs. Syncretism: The Virgin and Religion

When discussing the Virgin, inevitably the question of her role in contextualization vs. syncretism will be brought to the fore. The former is forming and communicating theology in a culturally relevant way, while the latter combines Christianity with indigenous religion such that it creates something new, something no longer authentically of either religion. Missiologically, Christian mission hopes for the former and not the latter. Yet, the answer to this question is not always so clear-cut; there are ways of navigating this apparent dichotomy that are more nuanced.

One missiologist who articulates this well is Don Richardson, the author of *Eternity in Their Hearts* and *Peace Child*, who posits the principle of redemptive analogy based on biblical characters like Melchizedek (Genesis 14) and the Apostle Paul on the Areopagus (Acts 17).³³ How did Melchizedek become the priest of the Most High God, though he was living in pagan Canaan? How did the pagan men of Athens worship this

T*he answer to this question is not always so clear-cut; there are way of navigating this apparent dichotomy that are more nuanced.*

“unknown god” who actually was the Christian God, according to Paul? In other words, how did people in non-Christian lands somehow know God, whether directly or indirectly, though they lacked Scriptures (special revelation)? The answer, according to Richardson, is general revelation (“He has also set eternity in the hearts of men”—Eccl. 3:11), that all people have at least an inkling of the true God planted in them, even if they do not have the Bible.³⁴

Beyond the Canaanites and Greeks, the principle of redemptive analogy can be seen in civilizations throughout the world such as the Incas (their creator god Viracocha), Ethiopia's Gedeo people (their omnipotent god Magano), and the Chinese (their supreme god Shang Ti),³⁵ whose deities all have certain uncanny resemblances to Yahweh. To equate these gods to the Christian God may, at first glance, seem to be blatant syncretism, but perhaps it is something more subtle than that, more akin to how Abraham and Melchizedek both knew the same God though neither had the Bible, one being from Ur and the other from Salem.

The accusation of syncretism surrounding the Virgin of Guadalupe lies in its location on the Tepeyac hill where Juan Diego saw his vision. This was the site of the old pagan temple affiliated with the virgin mother of the Aztec god, Tonantzin, and the Virgin's basilica would be built on this very site. Perhaps in this case, the principle of redemptive analogy can be seen in the

mestizaje of the Roman Catholic Church. In order to communicate their message, missionaries needed to learn the native languages. But that was not enough; they also needed to couch their teachings in images and metaphors that the natives could

understand. And by doing so, the Catholic Church in the Americas was forever transformed (my italics).³⁶

Therefore, this indigenous movement was not just a racial and cultural *mestizaje*, but also a religious *mestizaje*.

While the Virgin remains central in this *mestizaje*, other elements blended into its powerful hold on the people. The Virgin mother implies a father and a son, each which introduces earlier notions and events into the mix of this religious movement. Any religious idea of father surrounds the arrival of the conquering Cortés and the anticipated return, according to prophecy, of the plumed serpent god of the Aztecs, Quetzacoatl.

También encontraron un padre. México le impuso a Cortés la mascara de Quetzalcóatl. Cortés la rechazó y, en cambio, le impuso a México la mascara de Cristo. Desde entonces, ha sido imposible saber quién es verdaderamente adorado en los altares barrocos de Puebla, Oaxaca y Tlaxcala: ¿Cristo o Quetzalcóatl?³⁷

[They also found a father. Mexico imposed the mask of Quetzalcóatl on Cortés. Cortés rejected it and, in turn, imposed the mask of Christ on them. Since then, it has been impossible to determine who is truly worshiped on the baroque altars of Puebla, Oaxaca, and Tlaxcala: Christ or Quetzalcóatl?]

The subtlety here is that the indigenous people wanted a father in Cortés, whom they mistook for the indigenous Quetzalcóatl.

Cortés' rejection of fatherhood countered with a notion of Son (Christ). This evoked even more complex notions of Son and sacrifice:

En un universo acostumbrado a que los hombres se sacrificasen a los dioses, nada asombró más a los indios que la visión de un Dios que

se sacrificó por los hombres. La redención de la humanidad por Cristo es lo que fascinó y realmente derrotó a los indios del Nuevo Mundo. El verdadero regreso de los dioses fue la llegada de Cristo."³⁸

[In a universe accustomed to men sacrificing themselves for the gods, nothing astounded the Indians more than the vision of a god who sacrificed himself for men. The redemption of humanity through Christ is what fascinated and ultimately defeated the Indians of the New World. The true return of the gods was through Christ.]

However, this is where the lines begin to blur between any potential redemptive analogy and total syncretism. In Mexican theology, the question lies in whether the Virgin and the Christ truly cause the reawakening of a story deeply embedded in their cultural psyches which can be a foothold for Christianity, or whether this is an unholy marriage of two ideas that should never mix.

Cristo se convirtió en la memoria recordada, el recuerdo de que en el origen los dioses se habían sacrificado en beneficio de la humanidad. Esta nebulosa memoria, disipada por los sombríos sacrificios humanos ordenados por el poder azteca, fue rescatada ahora por la Iglesia Cristiana. El resultado fue un sincretismo flagrante, la mezcla religiosa de la fe Cristiana y la fe indígena, una de las fundaciones culturales del mundo hispanoamericano.³⁹

[Christ became the recovered memory, the remembrance of the origins in which the gods sacrificed themselves for the benefit of humankind. This clouded memory, dissipated by the somber human sacrifices by the Aztec powers, was now rescued by the Christian church. The result was a flagrant syncretism, the religious mixture of the Christian faith and the indigenous faith, one of the culture foundations of the Hispano-American world.]

It is Carlos Fuentes' view that this blending is total syncretism, but the way he describes it above could just as well be a contextualized redemptive analogy.

Syncretism is perhaps much more evident in relation to the key notion of sacrifice in the Aztec story of creation. It is a story of two gods who threw themselves into a fire in order to be reborn as the sun and the moon. But the implications for humanity were severe:

Si los dioses se habían sacrificado a fin de que el mundo y la humanidad existiesen, entonces con más razón la humanidad estaba obligada a arrojarse, de ser necesario, en las grandes hogueras de la vida y de la muerte. La necesidad del sacrificio era un hecho indudable en la sociedad indígena, no sujeto a discusión o escepticismo de cualquier tipo.⁴⁰

[If the gods had sacrificed themselves so that the world and humanity could exist, even more so, humanity was obligated to throw itself, if necessary,



into the great sacrificial place of life and death. The necessity of sacrifice was an indubitable act of indigenous society, not subject to discussion or skepticism of any kind.]

The indigenous believed they were necessarily expendable for the continuation of the universe. The concept of sacrifice seems like an ideal redemptive analogy, but herein lies the syncretism: the people accepted Christianity because of how it related to their old religions, not because they rejected their old religions. The Aztecs had male and female gods, but when the male gods were defeated by the Spanish, they clung on to the female goddesses as represented by

Tonantzin. Even today, in a complete acknowledgment of syncretistic belief, the Virgin of Guadalupe is sometimes referred to as Guadalupe-Tonantzin by indigenous worshippers.

The distinction between contextualization and syncretism in this religious movement is not at all clear. Without a doubt, the phenomenon of this Virgin of Guadalupe is approached in both ways by Latin Americans. The task at hand (to mix metaphors) is to be discerning in separating the wheat from the chaff, rather than throwing out the baby with the bath water.

Conclusion

If there is one thing that can be said about the Virgin, it is that she belongs to the people. Through her, the people feel like Christianity is their religion. And it is not only their faith as a system of belief—their whole identity is given dignity and meaning through the Virgin. She has shaped the indigenous way that Christianity is understood and expressed in Mexico and throughout Latin America. The Virgin is so important because she *is* Mexico, and she is one of the people. She is the mother that everyone knows, because everyone has a mother (something that cannot be said of fathers in Latin America).

Evangelicals may remain reluctant to embrace this historical movement due to its central focus on Mariology. Tim Perry argues in his book, *Mary for Evangelicals*, that “Mariology is not by definition unbiblical and need not justify or culminate in impiety.”⁴¹ Though he does acknowledge the extremes and abuses that the Marian cult has suffered, Mary is nonetheless important in the Bible and anti-Catholic sentiment can be harmful in either ignoring or denigrating her. He calls Mary the “first and model disciple ... [who] is first and foremost the first-century Palestinian woman.” She is “well familiar with the challenges that continue to threaten the faith of even the most postmodern of disciples: doubt, misunderstanding, almost unimaginable grief. She is a model

because she rises to meet these.”⁴² In other words, she is God’s representative on earth to identify with the marginalized. But she is also triumphant: she is a fulfillment of several Old Testament themes and can even represent Israel herself as the redeemed people of God.⁴³ As such, the idea of the Virgin of Guadalupe representing Mexico in terms of race, gender, and class, does not seem so far-fetched after all. **IJFM**

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³If there had to be a fourth category of power dynamics, it would be age, as Paul also highlights this in Eph. 6:1 and Col. 3:20. But given that age is a transitory thing (everyone old has, at some point in their lives, been young), it is not as permanent a category as the other three in terms of identity.

⁴Edwin Williamson, *The Penguin History of Latin America* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 145.

⁵Rodriguez, pp. 47–48.

⁶Rodriguez, p. 37.

⁷Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 108.

⁸The Black Madonna’s coloring can be explained as of African origin or perhaps even Semitic; but she was still required to be contextualized to be brown for the indigenous Americans.

⁹Rodriguez, pp. 35–36.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 36.

¹¹Ondina E. González and Justo L. González, *Christianity in Latin America: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 56–57.

¹²Ibid., p. 56.

¹³Rodriguez, p. 37.

¹⁴Carlos Fuentes, *El espejo enterrado* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992), p. 156.

¹⁵Williamson, p. 17.

¹⁶The word “*malinchista*” which is derived from *La Malinche* is a modern-day term for a Mexican who regards anything foreign as better than anything Mexican simply because it is not Mexican.

¹⁷Fuentes, p. 119.

¹⁸In modern slang in Spain, one of the greatest insults is “*hijo de puta*,” lit. “son of a prostitute.” However, in Mexico, it is “*hijo de la Chingada*,” lit. “son of the violated one.” See Paz, p. 103. Though it may seem from a North American Christian perspective that the former would be worse because the woman is voluntarily giving herself over whereas the latter had no fault in the matter, from a Latin American perspective, everything is about power. Therefore, to be raped or victimized is actually worse than being a prostitute.

¹⁹Paz, p. 109.

²⁰Fuentes, pp. 155–156.

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²²Paz, p. 109.

²³Paz, p. 106.

²⁴Ada María Isasi Díaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), p. 149.

²⁵González and González, p. 54.

²⁶Rodriguez, p. 36.

²⁷Rodriguez, p. 37.

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²⁹Paz, p. 109.

³⁰González and González, pp. 304–305.

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³³The principle of redemptive analogy is “the application to local custom of spiritual truth. The principle we discerned was that God had already provided for the evangelization of these people by means of redemptive analogies in their own culture. These analogies were our stepping stones, the secret entryway by which the gospel came... and started both a spiritual and a social revolution from within.” Don Richardson, *Peace Child* (Ventura: Regal, 1974), p. 9. Redemptive analogy was later affirmed by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization at the 2004 Forum in Pattaya, Thailand, “Hidden and Forgotten People,” Occasional Paper No. 35, p. 41: http://www.lausanne.org/documents/2004forum/LOP35A_IG6A.pdf.

³⁴Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura: Regal, 1981), pp. 18–33.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 33–71.

³⁶González and González, p. 54.

³⁷Fuentes, p. 156.

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³⁹Ibid., p. 157.

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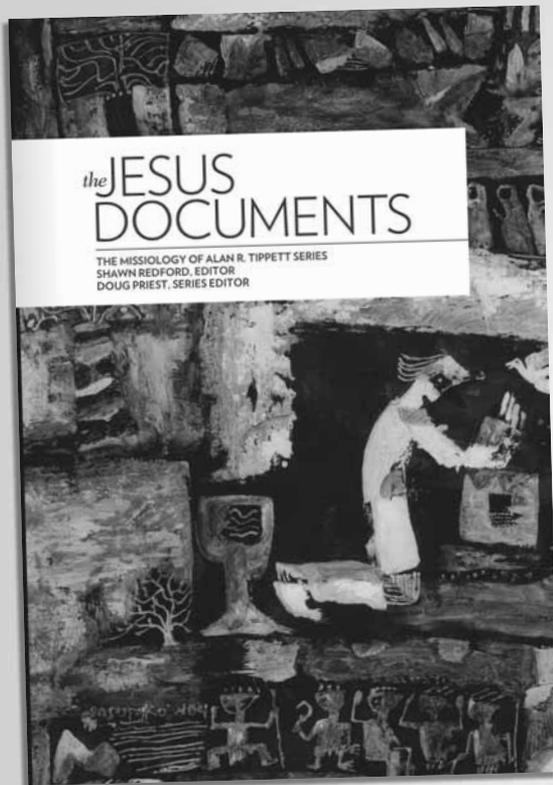
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Mission at the Intersection of Religion and Empire

by Martin Accad

Editor's Note: A version of this paper was originally presented at the September 2011 gathering of the International Society for Frontier Missiology in Phoenix, AZ.

Today we live in an incredibly interconnected world with our Muslim neighbor. There is hardly such a thing as a significant local or regional issue any longer. Global connectivity prevents it. If an issue is significant, chances are it is already a global issue. It is being blogged about; there are Facebook groups advocating one position or another in connection with it; and there are opinion shapers tweeting about it and shaping the views of “followers.” Every local Muslim context is caught up in this new connectivity, where global events quickly reinterpret what is significant.

This global conditioning is reflected in a statement written for the Christian news media following the killing of Osama bin Laden. Charles Kimball, author of *When Religion Becomes Lethal*, suggests that “[t]his dramatic development highlights many critically important factors that converge at the intersection of religion and politics today.”¹ He calls us to “recognize that the conditions that helped create and sustain Osama bin Laden’s extremism continue to exist: *unrepresentative, autocratic rulers* in many predominantly Islamic lands, perceived heavy-handed and predatory *U.S. political, military and economic involvement* in many of these same countries, and the deep frustrations with *the plight of Palestinians* after more than 40 years of military occupation.” (emphasis mine) Kimball further points out that “[w]hile the vast majority of Arabs and Muslims have rejected Bin Laden’s violent extremism, the ‘Arab Spring’ upheavals throughout the Middle East and the urgent need for real progress in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict underscore the sources of frustration that must be addressed constructively.” He concludes: “It is important to remember that Bin Laden’s movement took root when Soviet troops occupied Afghanistan and gained strength when U.S. troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia.”

“What do all these ‘regional-gone-global’ issues have to do with mission?” you may ask. Again, I believe that these political issues stretch and condition

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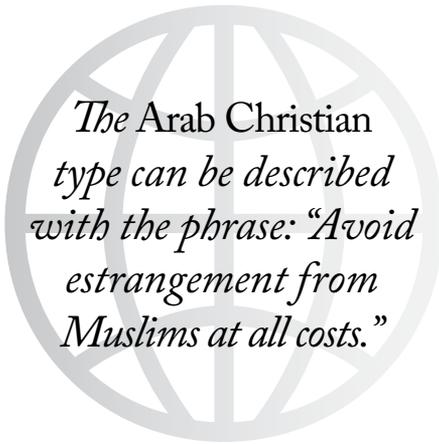
other distant contexts of Muslim ministry. There is an increasing sensitivity to what I call “the intersection of Religion and Empire.” It has implications everywhere. As a missionary friend of mine told an audience of young people preparing for the mission field, “Do not even think of going on mission to anywhere in the Muslim world before having developed a sophisticated and well-researched understanding on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. And when you have, it better be one that takes very seriously the issues of social justice affecting the Palestinian people.”

You cannot carry the gospel to the Muslim world today without having a clear and well-articulated opinion on the Palestinian tragedy, on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and on US global military involvement and its offensive neo-colonial support for autocratic regimes and dictators to guard its own economic interests. Today, these issues are particularly relevant, and they politicize the context of our evangelistic witness. The US has generally adopted an unprincipled wait-and-see approach to the various manifestations of the recent “Arab Spring,” driven by the priority of guarding its strategic economic alliances, regardless of moral considerations. Furthermore, and astoundingly, at this time it stands nearly alone against the world in its commitment to veto the Palestinian bid for statehood (submitted this past September to the United Nations).

If I were an American today, I would have to ask myself: On what basis is anyone in the Muslim world going to give me permission to claim I have anything good to bring to them? Yet, that is what Jesus has commissioned us to take to the world: the Good News! Indeed, the current state of global affairs should not only be an embarrassment to Americans in a Muslim context; it is also an embarrassment to Arab Christians, whose evangelical identity, issuing from historic American Protestant missionary work, immediately associates them with

everything American. We must ask, “Where do we go from here?” Could it be that, as evangelicals, we have lost any credibility, any permission, to carry the gospel to the world? I do believe that in the midst of all this we might still have a role. It might even be argued that it is when the situation in the world is really “bad news” that Good News makes the most sense. It is the expression of this Good News that needs to be reconsidered, revisited, transformed, and shaped in line with the realities of the age.

I will argue in this paper that, interestingly, this perception of a *Western* reality so threatening to the East (as described above), together with the de facto association of Christians in the



The Arab Christian type can be described with the phrase: “Avoid estrangement from Muslims at all costs.”

East with the “Christian” West, is not a new phenomenon in history. I begin first with the rift that has developed today among evangelicals in regards to the contextualization of ministry among Muslims (the controversy over the illegitimacy of so-called “Insider Movements,” in my view, essentially boils down to the inability of some evangelicals to find anything redeemable in Islam, an unfortunate derivative of the reductionist perception of Islam as a single monolith). Secondly, and most important, I suggest this rift in Western mission perspective is a modern continuation of an age-old ambiguity, one that Christians of the East have faced for centuries in

relationship with Islam. Historically it has often reflected the nature of an Eastern Christian’s relationship with the West, which today takes on global proportions. Thirdly, I will look briefly at various Christian attitudes and approaches to Islam that are possible in our modern context, and focus a little bit on what I call “the *kerygmatic* attitude.” In closing, I will reflect briefly on a couple of attitudes and stances that have become important components of my understanding of ministry among Muslims, and which I suggest might also be important components of a healthy missional approach in the contemporary Muslim context.

Two Ways of Being Christian in the World Today

George Sabra, professor of Systematic Theology and Academic Dean at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, argues that there have been two types of attitudes that Christians of the East have adopted toward Islam throughout history.² For lack of better labels, he calls the first type the *Arab Christian*, and the other the *Eastern Christian*. It is important to note that Sabra is consciously in the realm of typology when he seeks to substantiate this thesis. He specifically makes the point that his typological categories are “not a matter of polls and statistics,” but are more philosophically than statistically based.³ His categorization is, indeed, based on experience, observation, and reflection, not on strict empirical research. As such, he runs the risk of generalization and oversimplification. But if these warnings are kept in mind, the two types are extremely useful in thinking about the relations of Christians and Muslims in the East throughout history. With the same warning kept in mind, I will proceed later to extend this typological approach to a globalized perspective on East and West, Christianity and Islam.

The *Arab Christian* type, Sabra argues, can be described with the phrase: “Avoid estrangement from Muslims

at all costs.” The alternative *Eastern Christian* type may be described with the phrase: “Save Middle Eastern Christianity at all costs.”⁴ The Arab Christian type is an “accommodation-ist” who will do anything to avoid rocking the boat, seeking acceptance from the fourteen-centuries-old Muslim neighbor. As a result, this Arab Christian type has been characterized by openness and a search for common ground that might lead to greater cooperation with Muslims. The Eastern Christian type, on the other hand, is one that seeks and affirms distinctiveness from the Muslim neighbor, often rejecting even the legitimacy of a common Arab identity (hence the focus on Eastern rather than Arab). The result is a real or perceived antagonism toward neighboring Islam, and a natural drift toward an identification with the West.

It may be noted, at this point, that Sabra’s scheme assumes three main roles in this interfaith/intercultural drama: (1) *the Christian of the East*, (2) *the Muslim of the East*, and (3) *the West*. It is in relating with that entity called the West, and with respect to daily interaction with the Muslim of the East, that the Christian of the East embraces the type either of Arab Christian or of Eastern Christian. In the remainder of his article, Sabra surveys some important periods in the history of Christian-Muslim relations, pointing out how these three roles have been taken on by various actors in that history, and how each of the two types appropriately fits various categories of Christians.

One disturbing feeling that emerges as one considers Sabra’s framework is that both types of Christians from the East seem to embrace a stance toward Islam largely out of fear: fear of extinction. As a result, the Arab Christian adopts the self-preserving strategy of the chameleon, while the Eastern Christian becomes a hedgehog. The Arab Christian seeks to blend, often to the point of self-effacement, whereas

The Eastern Christian type may be described with the phrase: “Save Middle Eastern Christianity at all costs.”

the Eastern Christian is self-protective to the point of antagonizing the Other continuously. There are, in my view, serious missiological problems with both animals. The chameleon’s interaction with Islam often becomes syncretistic, or at best mainly concerned with existential matters for self-preservation. The hedgehog’s interaction will tend toward being polemical (lit. “warlike,” from Greek *polemos*), relationally hurtful, or in some milder fashion, adopts a defensive, apologetic position.

But both types will objectify the Other rather than interact subject-to-subject, fulfilling that proverbial dictum that “people fear what they don’t understand.” The essential problem, as I see it, is that fear is often born from a sense of being fundamentally different from a certain other, which leads to a fear of being either rejected or harmed by that ‘other.’ And by objectifying the “different Other,” we lock ourselves into a perpetual subject-object relationship, instead of being capable of relating subject-to-subject.

This fear, then, would be symbolic of the Christian of the East, whether Arab or Eastern, to continue Sabra’s categories. But this composite Christian of the East would also suffer from an inferiority complex, one based on real demographic inferiority that then distorts into a psychological sense of inferiority. In order to cope with this psychosis, the Arab Christian type would develop the coping mechanism of self-effacement by blending into the local majority in order to experience a sense of belonging. On the other hand, the Eastern Christian type would develop the coping mechanism of local self-segregation for the benefit of embracing a larger identity with global Christianity. Again, by fulfilling their need to belong, they antagonize the neighbor, who is kept at arm’s length.

The impact of this fear and inferiority needs to be addressed more significantly in mission today. Based on our use of Sabra’s typology, which effectively marks two psychotic extremes, we ought to seek an approach to the Church in mission among Muslims that encourages a balanced and healthy personality type. That is what I will attempt to do in the final section of the present paper. But before I do so, I want to further examine the present manifestation of these two psychological types in evangelical perspectives on mission to Muslims.

Two Approaches to Islam among Evangelicals Today

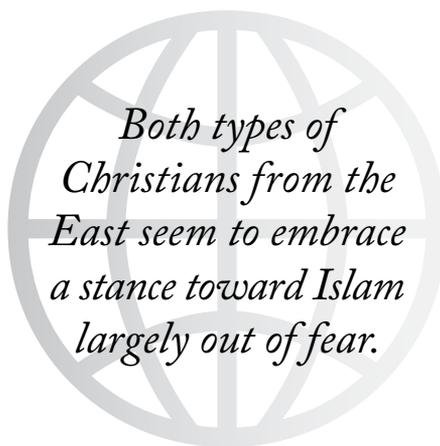
Traditionally, evangelicals have shied away from the concept of interfaith dialogue because in their minds it has often implied giving up on evangelism. In a 2010 paper entitled, “Recent Changes in Christian Approaches to Islam,”⁵ Patrick Sookhdeo, an influential evangelical voice who stands against dialogue with Islam, surveys with suspicion and great concern the new trends of “dialogue with Islam” that have emerged among evangelicals in recent years, and more particularly since 9/11. He identifies the roots of this dialogical approach in liberal theology, and describes it as little more than *accommodationism*. He warns that “the current evangelical practice of interfaith dialogue and accommodation seriously threatens to jeopardize evangelism, especially among Muslims.” He also accuses evangelicals engaged in dialogue with Muslims of naïveté and of ignorance of the true nature of Islam.

This accusation has been repeatedly leveled against those evangelicals who, in 2007, signed the Yale response to the now-famous “Common Word” document. Briefly, in October 2007,

a group of 138 Muslim leaders from around the world issued the so-called “A Common Word between Us and You” statement.⁶ It was written in a very gracious style, adopting as common ground with Christians the same common ground that Jesus had established as the foundation of ‘the Law and the Prophets’ (Matthew 22:37–40), namely, “love of God and love of neighbor.” The letter’s clear move *toward* the Christians it addressed, as an honest attempt to find common ground rather than lure Christians onto Islamic turf, revealed clearly the peace-building approach of the initiative.

Although numerous Christian individuals and organizations from around the world received the Muslim document with enthusiasm, “anti-dialogue evangelicals” perceived it as a Muslim deception, a ploy to dismantle the mission enterprise. Accordingly, the significant Yale evangelical response, “Loving God and Neighbor Together,” officially published in a full-page ad of the New York Times on November 18, 2007,⁷ was also viewed as emerging out of ignorance, from Christian leadership lacking a perceptive understanding of Islam’s essential expansionist nature. As one of the 300 original signatories who endorsed the Yale response, I have received numerous emails from evangelical friends wondering how I could have missed the “obvious trap.” As signatories, all of us were also served in recent months another booklet entitled, *The Common Word: the Undermining of the Church*. It was accompanied by a personal note to the evangelical signatories of the Yale response, once again appealing to us to rescind our endorsement. It is dedicated “to the converts from Islam,” appealing to them not to “lose heart because of those who have trivialized that incomparable love through their acceptance of a commonality you know all too well to be a well-crafted illusion.”⁸

What emerges, then, from these recent developments among evangelicals, is that the basic stance of those who argue for the legitimacy of dialogue proceeds from a more positive vision of Islam, or what one might call an *Islam-friendly* approach. Those who staunchly reject the legitimacy of dialogue, on the other hand, may be described as being more *Islam-antagonistic*. It would appear that these judgments are more instinctive and experiential than carefully thought out. Those evangelicals who either have had bad experiences with Muslims, or who are influenced by those who have had bad experiences, have developed an antagonistic and negative attitude and approach to Islam. Those, on the other hand, who have had positive encounters with



Muslims, along with those influenced by these more positive evangelicals, have a more friendly attitude and approach to Islam.

At this point it appears that evangelicals are still primarily reactionary and experiential in their attitude to Islam and Muslims. In other words, these attitudes do not seem to derive from a comprehensive historical, theological, and liturgical reflection and analysis of Islam’s nature. There have certainly been some harsh condemnations of Islam since 9/11 that have demonized it in its entirety. But I do not believe there has been any serious attempt at developing a proper Christian theology of Islam that does justice to the

multiple dimensions and diverse manifestations of its religious world.⁹

I believe it is also this non-theological, experience-based approach to Islam that has evangelicals divided into two distinct and fairly antagonistic camps with regard to contextualization and the emergence of what are commonly called “Insider Movements.” How can one accept that it is possible for a Muslim to become a follower of Jesus while maintaining a positive, even a ritualistically-engaged, presence in their original Muslim milieu, if one believes that Islam is demonic in its origins, its founding texts, and its history? On the other hand, those who perceive a substantial historical and theological continuity between Islam and the Judeo-Christian tradition, and for whom both Islam’s founding texts and its ritualistic practices contain much that is aligned with that tradition, are much more inclined to accept greater continuity between a follower of Jesus and their Muslim past.

Sookhdeo points out in his 2010 survey that policies of non-proselytism have been adopted at various points by Anglicans, Catholics, and the World Council of Churches, as a prerequisite to Christian-Muslim dialogue. *Proselytism* is often used as the dirty word in the discussion, as opposed to other softer words like *witness*. There are indeed those Christians who have preferred to distance themselves from evangelism, often as the result of a very negative historical interpretation of Christian mission, where coercive conversion is understood to have been the rule of the day. The very idea of mission and missionaries has conjured in some people’s minds (both Christian and Muslim) images of white colonial powers forcing colored indigenous peoples to give up their ancestral ways and adopt both the cultural and religious traditions of their new masters.

This common perception of proselytism is one of the unfortunate

consequences of what I see in the intersection of Religion and Empire. Consider, for example, Emerito Nacpil's description of mission, given during a consultation in Kuala Lumpur in February 1971, as "a symbol of the universality of Western imperialism among the rising generations of the Third World."¹⁰ He concluded: "The present structure of modern mission is dead. And the first thing we ought to do is to eulogize it and then bury it." He advises that "the most *missionary* service a missionary under the present system can do today to Asia is to go home!" He represents a common tendency to reinterpret evangelical motivations through the lens of Empire.

Evangelicals have chosen to respond to this global sensitivity quite differently. If we return for a moment to Sabra's typology, it might be insightful to extend his two types to the current mission orientations within evangelicalism. The more *dialogue-oriented* approach to Islam may be identifiable with the Arab Christian type, whereas the more *evangelism-oriented* approach may be aligned with the Eastern Christian type. The concern to blend in motivates for dialogue and the search for common ground, whereas the concern for distinctiveness, strengthened by a sense of belonging to a global Christian majority, motivates for evangelism and conversion from one to another distinct reality.

Although these two orientations represent a natural phenomenon emerging out of the two historical types, I want to venture my concern for what this represents in the evangelical world today. The fanatical endorsement of the one orientation, accompanied with the categorical—sometimes violent—rejection of the other, verges on serious personality disorder, perhaps even a kind of spiritual psychosis. Some indeed have become the object of vicious attacks because of their endorsement of the dialogical approach. This observation should not be understood as an

I am sometimes told by Muslims that all form of missionary activity should be stopped because it causes conflict between communities.

absolute defense of dialogue. As will be pointed out in the next section, evangelicalism with no evangelism ceases to be evangelical at all. At the same time, particularly in light of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Christianity without dialogue that works for peace is no Christianity at all. I'm simply suggesting that the either/or perspective leads to a kind of dualism that is missiologically highly problematic and unhealthy.

We need to avoid the dualism that would regard dialogue as the Kingdom-approach to mission, whereas evangelism would be the Church-approach to mission. I would argue that we do not have to choose between Church and Kingdom, because the New Testament tells us that the Church is the earthly manifestation of the Kingdom, and that the Kingdom of God, while already here through the Church, is not yet fulfilled until the parousia. The belief that we need to choose between Church and Kingdom suggests a confusion that would identify Church with Religion and Kingdom with Empire. Once this confusion has occurred, the act of converting to Christ begins tacitly to imply becoming a member of the new religion of Christianity in a socio-political sense, contributing to the growth of the empire that has sometimes been referred to as "Christendom." I am not suggesting that those evangelicals who oppose the new type of evangelical dialogue today are consciously endorsing such a worldview, but in effect that is what their position would seem to amount to.

Christian-Muslim Dialogue from Conversion to New Birth in Christ

I am sometimes told by Muslims, with whom I dialogue on public panels, that all form of missionary activity should be stopped because it creates conflict between communities and does

not reflect tolerance of other faiths. In addition, they say it could lead to conversion. My response, however, is that in this case we should stop any kind of further conversation together. At a 2010 dialogue conference in Toronto, I put forth the following challenge: "What if, in conversation with a Muslim friend, I was so impressed and seduced by the beauty of his discourse that I chose to convert to Islam? Would that delegitimize our conversation? Would I have to be prevented from becoming a Muslim?" I suggested that I didn't believe this would be fair either to him or to me, or to either of the two religions. Dialogue, for evangelicals, should not so much be an alternative to evangelism that may lead to conversion. Rather, it should motivate us to revisit our understanding of these concepts of mission, evangelism, and conversion in light of our Scriptures.

The New Testament Concept of Conversion

We come across several words in the New Testament that express the concept of conversion. Let us identify the principal ones, do a bit of a word study, and then summarize our findings. Any standard Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, such as Bauer and Danker's, or Grimm's, will provide definitions along the lines below:

1. *προσηλυτον* (*proseluton*) (Matt. 23:15; Acts 2:11; Acts 6:5; Acts 13:43): refers specifically to a Gentile convert to Judaism. This was a special category of non-ethnic Jews that subscribed to various levels of adherence to the Mosaic Law.
2. *νεοφυτον* (*neophyton*) (1 Tim. 3:6): occurs only once, where the apostle Paul

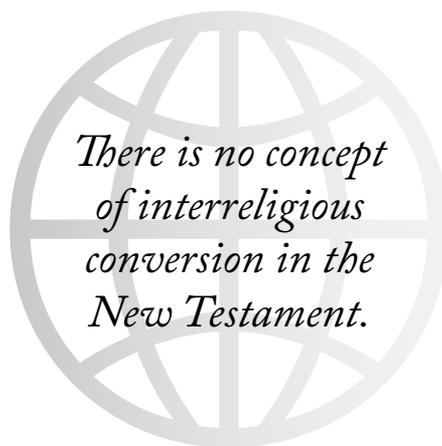
recommends that leaders in the church should not be individuals who have recently joined the church (usually translated as “convert”).

3. **ἀπαρχή** (*aparkhi*) (Rom. 8:23; Rom. 11:16; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 15:20, 15:23, 16:15; 2 Thess. 2:13; James 1:18; Rev. 14:4): This can refer ritualistically to the first portion of any produce, which was set aside for God, according to the Mosaic Law, before the rest could lawfully be used. It can refer to the first manifestation of something to be followed by similar manifestations. And it can also mean a foretaste or pledge for something greater to come, like a down-payment (see also **ἀραβων**, which recalls the word عربون *‘arbūn* in Arabic). In a couple of NT passages (Rom. 16:5 and 1 Cor. 16:15), the term is translated as “first convert,” but it is in the context of Paul referring to a first person or household in a town that embraces the message that he was preaching.
4. **μετανοία** (*metanoia*) (Matt. 3:11; Luke 5:32; Luke 24:47; Acts 5:31; and numerous other places): usually translated as “repentance.”
5. **ἐπιστρέφω** (*epistrepho*) (Matt. 13:15; Matt. 18:3; Mark 4:12; Luke 22:32; John 12:40; Acts 3:19; Acts 15:3; Acts 28:27): can mean anything from turning around or returning to a place physically, to turning away from sin, to experiencing an internal change of heart, to turning (back) to God. There is no suggestion of turning from one religion to another in the passages that use this verb.

Several of the Greek words that are used in the New Testament with reference to the concept of “conversion”

are rendered in English translations of the NT with the word “convert.” The word most immediately referring to a religious conversion is *proselyton*, which occurs in the English language as *proselyte*, as well as in the act of *proselytism*. This has almost become a dirty word in the English language today and certainly is not a popular one in dialogue circles. However, in the NT, the verb occurs exclusively as a reference to Gentile converts to Judaism, never to indicate a person that has endorsed the gospel message of Jesus, nor even a member of churches established later by the apostles.

Perhaps the closest term semantically to this first one is the word *neophyton*, which refers to someone



who has joined a church established by Paul. This term originally belonged to the world of agriculture, meaning a newly-planted tree. But it occurs only once in the NT (1 Tim. 3:6). Here Paul is giving recommendations regarding the choice of leadership for the community of believers—this should not be someone who has *recently* come to believe in Christ, a *neophyton*.

The third term that is translated “convert” in two NT passages (at least in the NIV translation) is *aparkhi*. The word actually means “first fruit” and comes from Jewish ritualistic language. Paul uses the term a couple of times to refer to the first person that becomes

a follower of Jesus in a certain town or region. The other two terms, *metanoia* and *epistrepho*, are semantically close in meaning. They refer respectively to the idea of *repenting* and *turning away* from a previous way of doing things.

In summary, there is no concept of *interreligious* conversion in the NT when it comes to turning from any worldview and embracing the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is never suggested that a Jew should reject Judaism and adopt some alternative religious way when they come to accept Jesus’ claims about himself (a reference to “Christianity” would be an anachronism). The NT focus is on repentance, not from some religious affiliation but from certain attitudes, behaviors, and ways of thinking. It invites people to be so transformed from their previous ways that Jesus refers to this transformation as a *new birth*! Jesus’ gospel invites the repentant to turn to God by accepting the claims that Jesus made about himself and about God. The NT epistles, written by Christ’s apostles to early communities that had become Christ-followers, describe that status as someone being *ἐν Χριστῷ* (*en Christo*), in Christ.

An Evangelical Understanding of “New Birth” and of Being “in Christ”

The key passage for us to understand the concept of *new birth* in the NT is found in the words of Jesus, in chapter 3 of John’s Gospel. The chapter describes a secret encounter between Jesus and a prominent Jewish religious leader named Nicodemus. Nicodemus expresses much respect for Jesus and acknowledges that he has come “from God” (John 3:2). To this Jesus responds that being from God is not something inherited from one’s ancestors. In other words, Jesus was affirming that the fact that he had come from God had nothing to do with his Jewish ethnic belonging. And he invites him to rise above his religious identity with the following

words: “No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (John 3:3). He invites him to embrace an alternative identity by pointing him to a higher and deeper spiritual principle than ethnic belonging: “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (John 3:6). And he warns him that God’s Spirit moves right across the safe boundaries of our religious institutions: “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Elsewhere in my teaching and writing, I derive from this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus the suggestion that Jesus possessed a *supra-religious* view of reality and of religions.¹¹

The apostle Peter, in the opening chapter of his first epistle, writing to a Jewish audience, clearly has well understood his master’s worldview as he criticizes “the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers” (1 Pet. 1:18). Instead, he affirms to his audience: “[Y]ou have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23).

Elsewhere in the NT, the apostle Paul expresses this idea of new spiritual birth through the seed of Christ rather than of physical birth through the seed of Abraham; it is simply through the concept of being “in Christ” (*εν Χριστω* [*en Khristo*]). He summarizes the concept in 2 Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” In Galatians 6.15, Paul follows completely in the supra-religious thinking of his master through his affirmation: “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.” And finally, being *in Christ* is crowned by the amazing promise in Romans 8:1: “[T]here is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (NIV). Paul

They usually prefer to think of themselves as development workers, peacemakers, or NGO personnel, rather than missionaries.

expands extensively on the idea of being a new creation in Christ by using the metaphor of adoption (*υιοθεσια* [*uiiothesia*]). “In love,” Paul affirms, God “predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:5). Paul describes the status of being without Christ as being “in slavery under the basic principles of the world” (Gal. 4:3). “But when the time had fully come,” he asserts, “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Gal. 4:4–5). The word translated as “sons” in this verse is the same *υιοθεσιαν* (*uiiothesian*).

This verse is important for Christian-Muslim dialogue, for it sets Jesus’ title of *Son of God* in its proper hermeneutical context: because we are God’s slaves outside of Christ, God invites us, by being *in Christ*, to become ourselves sons and daughters of God. Paul continues in verse 6: “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Gal. 4:6). Here the metaphors of “being born again,” “adopted” as “new creations,” and “in Christ” all come together. They all point to God’s initiative, in Christ, whose ultimate purpose is to draw us into a relationship of intimacy with Himself as heavenly Father, as normal children may have intimacy with their earthly father.

The Kerygmatic Approach and the Supra-Religious Starting Point

I believe we are living in a new era of evangelical mission. In the past, we were told that we had to choose between evangelism and dialogue. Evangelism was the signature of evangelical mission work. Dialogue,

we were led to believe, was the task of liberal Christians who have diluted the gospel. The emergence of a new generation of missionaries in a post-modern, post-Christian, should we say post-Christendom era forces us—whether we like it or not—to abandon any dichotomy. An emerging generation of missionaries (who usually prefer to think of themselves as development workers, peacemakers, or NGO personnel, rather than missionaries) is giving up on any fake missionary “platform.” During the final two decades of the twentieth century a so-called platform was often used as a pretense to gain a residency permit in closed-access countries, often with no substantial work on the ground to justify it. The emerging generation of Christ-following missionaries is abandoning such pretense for real and legitimate platforms, actual jobs, where they can live out the Kingdom of God as global Christians, rather than as Western Christians going out to the world to “save the heathen.”

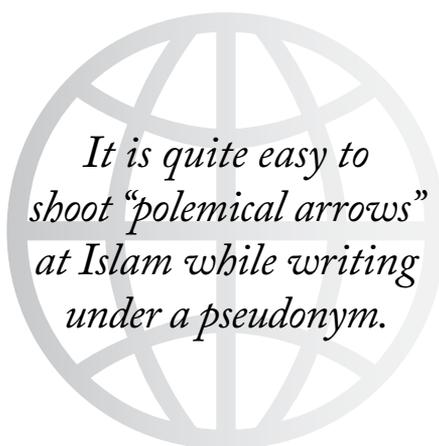
In this new way of thinking, the evangelical approach to interfaith dialogue is by definition *missional*. There is no option of putting gospel proclamation on standby for the sake of dialogue. The moment dialogue becomes for us an *alternative* rather than a *complement* to the proclamation of the gospel, we cease to be evangelical, at least according to the widely accepted definition of the term. Despite the fact that there is no single definition for “evangelical” (since evangelicalism has never known a centralized representative authority), prominent evangelical leaders and historians have described its central characteristics. John Stott, J. I. Packer, and Alister McGrath agree on at least six common evangelical characteristics: (1) The supremacy

of Holy Scripture, (2) the majesty of Jesus Christ and his sacrificial death, (3) the lordship of the Holy Spirit, (4) the necessity of conversion, (5) the priority of evangelism, and (6) the importance of fellowship.¹² Bebbington focuses on four characteristics that are held in common: (1) the centrality of conversion, (2) the importance of activism, (3) the importance of the Bible, and (4) the centrality of the cross.¹³ These definitions still stand. What characterizes us as evangelicals, beyond the central tenets of Christian doctrine, is our holding to the centrality of the Bible, the cross, evangelism, and conversion, adding as well the importance of fellowship and the Holy Spirit's lordship over the community of believers. Most important is the fact that some form of faith-witness has always been a foundational distinctive of evangelicalism.

Evangelicals certainly did not learn interfaith dialogue in 2007 as a result of the Yale Response to the Common Word. And for all the historic, indeed history-making, nature of that highly publicized exchange, many well-respected evangelical leaders were engaged in courteous dialogue with Muslims long before. One of the very first dialogues between conservative evangelicals and Muslims in Lebanon began as early as 2003, as part of a course on Islam in Beirut. In fact, it was aborted about a week before the original event, as a result of the displeasure of one particular pastor. But every year since then, our Institute of Middle East Studies at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary has organized a Middle East Conference with a focus on Islam and the Church's responsibility to be a witness in the Muslim world. Each year, during that week, we have brought Christians and Muslims together in the evening to interact in a dialogue forum. The motivation and purpose of our annual conference is decidedly and unapologetically missional, passionately dialogical, and holistically

transformational, both for us and for our Muslim partners in dialogue. The misunderstandings emerging in certain evangelical circles of the Middle East as a result of the dialogue initiatives of our Institute of Middle East Studies have had a particular benefit: they have forced us to reflect on our activities and to develop theoretical frameworks to help our understanding.

Having been the object of several personal attacks by evangelical pastors as a result of my approach to Islam (which was deemed unacceptably friendly and courteous), I developed in 2004–2005 a dialogical spectrum that identified five positions within an infinite continuum of relational possibilities between a Christian and a Muslim. I called it the “SEKAP Spectrum



of Christian-Muslim Interaction,” with SEKAP being an acronym for the distinct orientations: Syncretistic, Existential, Kerygmatic, Apologetic, and Polemical.¹⁴

Where would Sabra's types fall on this SEKAP spectrum? His Arab Christian type leans toward the syncretistic/existential (SE) attitude and approach to Islam and Muslims, whereas the Eastern Christian type is inclined to adopt the apologetic/polemical (AP) attitude and approach to Islam and Muslims. Over the past few years, I have spent much time and energy exploring and experimenting with the theoretical and practical implications of the *kerygmatic* (K) attitude and

approach in my ministry and interaction with Muslims, one I believe that honors, uses, and integrates the entire SEPAK spectrum in a balanced missional personality.

The learning process is, of course, ongoing and I'm learning and growing at a personal level through my relationships with Muslims. And at the same time, there is also a corporate growing taking place, as my colleagues and I continue to explore and push the boundaries of relationship with Muslims in the context of the Institute of Middle East Studies at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Lebanon. In conclusion to the present paper, I would like to share a couple of points that we have learned in the process. They are some of the core elements of what I would call the *kerygmatic* attitude and approach to Islam and Muslims. They constitute, in my view, important characteristics of a balanced missional personality in today's world realities.

Transparency and Humility

There is many an approach to Islam today in the global evangelical world that is completely useless to those of us who have a calling and passion to live and serve among Muslims *in* the Muslim world. It is quite easy to shoot “polemical arrows” at Islam while writing under a pseudonym, chatting anonymously in internet chat rooms and forums, or even speaking through a television or radio broadcasting microphone, especially if you are sitting in a library or studio in California, Spain, France, or England. It is quite a different matter to do so and continue to live and serve in the Muslim world. Some missionaries have learned this the hard way and finally developed a concept they refer to as “3D” communication. In a word, considering the closely interconnected world we live in, whenever they say or teach anything about Islam, they speak with awareness that they may well have at least three simultaneous audiences: the

Christian community, the media, and the world at large.

This reality is one to which those of us who have grown up in a country within the Muslim world are intuitively attuned. But far from being a “strategy” for mission and evangelism, or even one borne out of an instinct for self-preservation, for us it falls within the category of integrity, an antonym to “bearing false witness.” We learn to speak fairly, avoiding rash generalizations, because we have experienced Muslims as human beings, with as much diversity within the group as there are colors among the fish of the sea. I, for one, have of course not always succeeded in living up to such integrity. But when I fail, I have learned to call it what it is—the sin of bearing false witness. When I hear endless slander of Islam in some of our evangelical (even missionary) circles, my heart bleeds with sadness, for suddenly we can slip into the pathology of the Eastern Christian type where it borders on psychosis.

As an Arab Christian (and this time I am not referring to the “type”), I also have to come to terms with my evangelical, my Protestant, and, whether I like it or not, my American heritage. For indeed most of the Protestant community of Lebanon is the fruit of American missionary labor. In today’s global world, that connection frankly does not bother me at a personal level (everyone is bound, after all, to go to McDonald’s or Starbucks from time to time!) However, in my Arab context, both local evangelicals and foreign missionaries are judged through people’s experience of America’s role in the world. And sadly, when economics replaced principled morality during the Arab Spring; when national self-interest and narrow foreign policy interest trumps social justice in the case of the Palestinian bid for statehood at the UN; when democracy and freedom continue to be preached to the drumbeat of F-16’s in Iraq and Afghanistan; then we

I learned early in my journey of dialogue with Muslims that most Muslims appreciate clarity and honesty about your agenda.

evangelicals, both locals and missionaries, had better develop and adopt a politics of humility in our approach to Islam. Fancy that we level a blanket accusation of violence and brutality against Islam when the world has access to the records of an endemically violent colonial history in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and indeed in North America itself toward its native population—and oh-so-often in the name of Christianity, and with such “solid” Biblical support. With such a record in recent history, there is no need even to mention the more distant past of the Crusades or the Reconquista. The absurd reality that such sin exists among us should make us humble enough to acknowledge that there may be more than one brand of Islam within Islam, beyond the one that manifests itself in murderous violence. Appreciating this diversity is key to moving us out of fear and into genuine relationships that can lead to transformation.

Furthermore, transparency is not only about integrity of discourse, but also about being candid regarding your agenda and objectives. I learned early in my journey of dialogue with Muslims that most Muslims appreciate clarity and honesty about your agenda and that they would much rather engage in conversation with persons who have a seriousness about their faith that leads them to passionate evangelism, than with those who claim to be what they are not and say what they assume their Muslim interlocutor wants to hear.

In my relationship with Muslim leaders, I am quite candid about the fact that as an evangelical working at a Baptist seminary, I belong to a tradition that is strong on evangelism and conversion. I am clear that I am just as keen for the opportunity to present them with a balanced and attractive

discourse about Jesus as they are for an opportunity to present me with an attractive discourse about Islam. I am adamant about demonstrating practically to them all the respect, admiration, and love that I deeply feel for them. I joke with them about their need to be patient with us when they come to us for dialogue and interaction, as they are likely to hear many stereotypes about Islam and are at risk of coming under direct attack. They usually assure me that I am likely to experience the same among them!

Personal Transformation

This attitude of transparency, humility, and openness in my interaction with Muslims has taken me on a journey of personal transformation. As I have wrestled to find ways to express the gospel plainly and without the usual Church jargon, and as I have strived to overcome my own prejudice and apprehension toward Islam, I have been transformed in my own understanding of God, Christ, the Church, mission, and religion generally.

The starting point has been what I now call my “religious worldview.” I have discovered that even though the Protestant Reformation emerged in reaction to the often lethal institutionalization of the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, and despite its profound critique of the burden of a tradition that came to supplant the primacy of Scripture and God’s grace, we ourselves also quickly become thoroughly institutionalized. We may pay lip service to the idea that we *only* preach Christ, not Christianity. But in reality, through our church life, in our personal lifestyle, and in the message that we preach, it is obvious that we love the cliquish comfort of our often sterilized club-like church meetings, and it is clear that

there are few things we would love more than for the rest of the world to align with our expectations and norms. In a word, we would love for everyone to live and breathe within the boundaries of our own comfort zone.

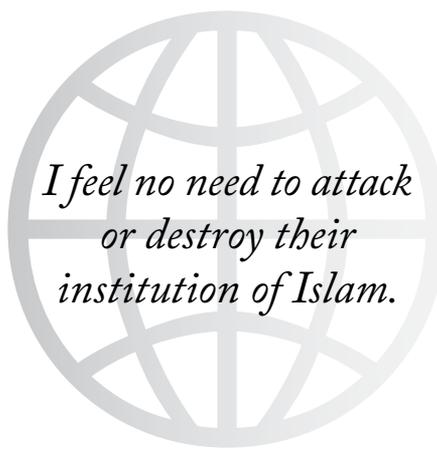
However, the more I read about Jesus' life and work, and the more I read his teaching and parables, the more I become convinced that his message had little to do with creating a religious alternative to Judaism. Jesus kept pushing the boundaries of accepted social and religious conventions. He kept the common doors of religious exclusivism flung wide open, in a way that allowed him to embrace the alienated and marginalized. His pet peeve was the religious leaders, the self-appointed guardians of access to God. And he continually sought to realign priorities, when religious symbols and institutions such as the Sabbath or temple were twisted to enslave rather than liberate the religious community. From the four Gospels emerges a picture of Jesus who, despite embracing his Jewish religious tradition as an inherent part of his socio-cultural identity and religious heritage, was nevertheless not limited by that tradition. He was clearly at peace with his Jewishness, but by no means did it encapsulate the nature or manner of his relationship with God to whom he referred as Father. Neither would he have initiated an alternative religious institution such as Christianity to replace the old.

Furthermore, it is clear from the apostle Paul's stance on circumcision that he fully understood the implication of Jesus' attitude, teaching, and behavior toward religion. His invitation to the Gentiles to be "in Christ" (*en Christo*) sought to bypass this central Jewish institution. Our attempt to follow in these footsteps should provoke us to reject the primacy of religion in our evangelistic message. As the evangelical adage goes: "We preach Christ, not Christianity." It remains for us to really believe this and actually practice what we preach.

In my personal practice, this realization has completely transformed my starting point in dialogue with Muslims. I no longer feel that I am in competition with them. I feel no need to attack or destroy their institution of Islam (for indeed Muslims define Islam as an institution) in order to replace it with some rival structure called Christianity. I am happy instead to explore with them the implication of Jesus' life and teaching on their reality, whatever their professed socio-religious identity.

Conclusion: A Holistic and Transformational View of Mission

The realization that Islam touches on every dimension of life and reality, that it is more than a set of religious



propositions needing to be dismantled, leads us to recognize that presenting an alternative set of Christian propositions is inadequate as the sole vehicle of the Church's mission. Its redemption requires a holistic missional enterprise.

Ironically, the mainline missionary efforts during the nineteenth century, for all of their many flaws, managed to transform Muslim societies and cultures far more profoundly than the more conservative evangelical efforts of the twentieth century, which consisted mainly of oral proclamation. It was the Presbyterian missionary efforts in nineteenth

century Beirut, which established transforming initiatives such as the Syrian Protestant College (now the American University of Beirut), that have arguably had the greatest influence in shaping the socio-cultural makeup of Lebanon as we know it today. I believe, for instance, that it was the deep social impact of this extensive liberal arts education, which has been pervasive in Lebanese society for now over 150 years, that has spared Lebanon from needing to experience its own "Arab Spring." Since its independence in 1943, Lebanon—unlike most neighboring countries—has had no dictatorship, and therefore no autocratic ruler to overthrow. The Lebanese population would not tolerate dictatorship because it is profoundly steeped in the values of liberty and freedom of thought and choice. There is no doubt that Protestant institutions like the American University of Beirut have had a key role in instilling these values in Lebanese society.

It is unfortunate that the more conservative evangelical missionary enterprise of the twentieth century gave up this more holistic approach to mission. Today, however, in the twenty-first century, we are able to learn from the mistakes of both the more liberal enterprise of nineteenth-century mission as well as the more conservative one of the twentieth. A reflection on mission at the intersection of Church and Kingdom should catalyze such an analysis to draw lessons from both historical experiences.

Finally, I do hope this present paper starts us toward a twenty-first-century missiology that helps the emerging generation of evangelical workers in God's harvest to come to terms with both the theological and political dimensions of our missionary past. A younger missionary enterprise stands at the contemporary intersection of Religion and Empire. The marriage of Mission with Empire has proved catastrophic in the history of the Church's mission in the world. It is startling

that we can still miss this point even today. In the post-Iraq-war era, mission agencies continue to perpetuate the mistakes of the colonial era (missionaries, quite frankly, have walked into the country alongside the soldiers without seeing the implications for mission). And, even more pressing theologically—and I believe this is the greatest current challenge within evangelical mission—the marriage of Mission with Religion continues to prove ineffective, and indeed I believe, unfaithful to the gospel of Christ. Any reflection on mission at the intersection of Religion and Empire should challenge us to embrace a missionary task that is both supra-religious and thoroughly Christ-centered. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ “Baptist Leaders Reflect Morally on Killing of Osama bin Laden,” *Ethics Daily*, May 2, 2011, accessed October 31, 2011, <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/baptist-leaders-reflect-morally-on-killing-of-osama-bin-laden-cms-17840>.

² George Sabra. “Two Ways of Being a Christian in the Muslim Context of the Middle East.” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17 (January 2006): 43–53.

³ Sabra, “Two Ways,” 45.

⁴ Sabra, “Two Ways,” 44.

⁵ The paper is available on the website of the Barnabas Fund, which was founded and is directed by Patrick Sookhdeo, “Recent Changes in Christian Approaches to Islam,” 8 March 2010, accessed 4 November 2011, <http://barnabasfund.org/US/News/Archives/Recent-Changes-in-Christian-Approaches-to-Islam.html>.

⁶ For a record of the initiative and the many responses to it, see the various materials found on www.acommonword.com.

⁷ This can now be viewed at <http://acommonword.com/lib/downloads/fullpageadbold18.pdf>.

⁸ From the opening dedication of the booklet, *The Common Word: the Undermining of the Church*.

⁹ A notable recent exception, which actually goes into a fairly extensive and comprehensive analysis of the Muslim view of God is Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (HarperOne: 2011).

¹⁰ Nacpil, Emerito, “Whom Does the Missionary Serve and What Does He Do?”

in *Missionary Service in Asia Today* (Hong Kong: 1971).

¹¹ See for example my article (jointly written with John Corrie) on the “Trinity” in the *IVP Dictionary of Mission Theology* (IVP: 2007), or my forthcoming chapter “Christian Attitudes toward Islam and Muslims: A Kerygmatic Approach,” in Evelyne Reisacher (ed.), *Thinking Christianly about Islam and Muslims, A Festschrift for Dudley Woodberry* (forthcoming).

¹² Packer, *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem* (Oxford: 1978); McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Hodder and Stoughton: 1994); both cited in Stott, *Evangelical Truth* (IVP: 1999), 27.

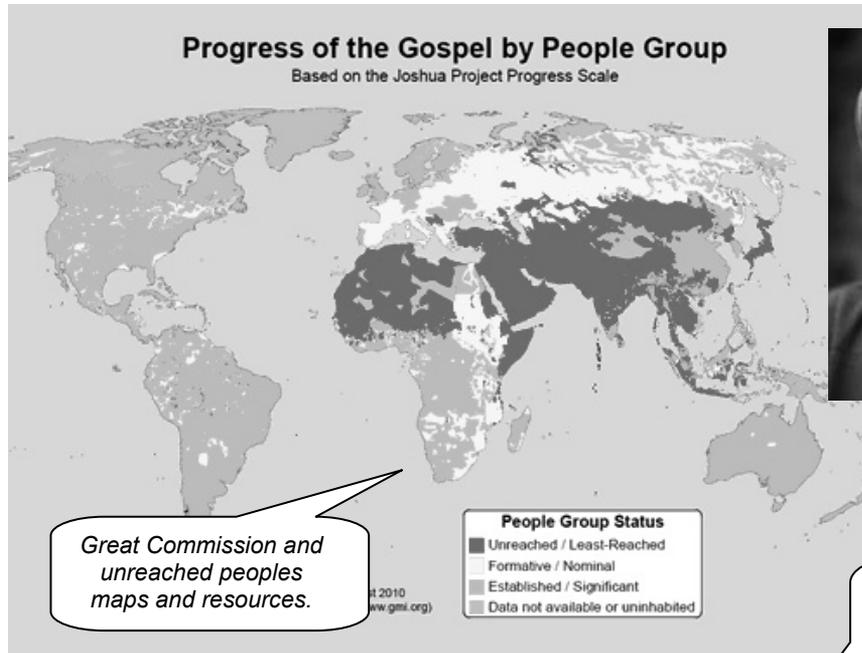
¹³ D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (Unwin Hyman: 1989).

¹⁴ The SEKAP Spectrum is forthcoming in a Festschrift to Dudley Woodberry, as part of a chapter entitled: “Christian Attitudes toward Islam and Muslims: A Kerygmatic Approach.”

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Going Public with Faith in a Muslim Context: Lessons from Esther

by Jeff Nelson

Missionologists and practitioners among Muslim converts continue to grapple with the question of self-identity within threatening religious environments.¹ I suggest that we take this discussion of identity a step further and begin to explore the manner and timing of a convert's self-disclosure. This article examines the story of Esther and her mentor, Mordecai, to explore a *critical strategy* of advising secret believers, a *critical decision* concerning self-disclosure, and the influence of a *critical mass* of public believers in leading many others to faith. The article also considers the role of *critical mentorship* in advising Muslim background believers on the timing of self-disclosure.

How or when should a secret believer make her faith public? At what point should a man identify himself as a Christ follower? Those working among Muslims often struggle to know how to advise converts on this issue because of the tension between biblical commands to confess one's faith and the cultural realities of persecution or martyrdom.

The story of Esther from the Hebrew Scriptures has parallels with the issue of self-disclosure of Muslim converts and implications for their mentors as well. The parallels include a people group threatened due to their identity with God; laws that support the persecution and death of the people of God; encouragement by a mentor to conceal identity for a time and later to reveal identity, even though disclosure might lead to death; and the hand of God in giving grace to the believer in their moment of disclosure.

Critical Strategy

God Allows Certain Believers a Season of Hidden Faith

The heroic missionary narrative of Esther begins with proud, powerful King Xerxes' impulsive banishment of one queen and the ensuing search for another. He selected Esther, a Jewish orphan raised by her older cousin Mordecai, as his new queen. Xerxes was unaware of Esther's true identity

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because Mordecai, a godly prophet, had forbidden her to reveal her nationality or family heritage to anyone (Esther 2:10, 20).

The concept of secrecy regarding one's faith is not unique to Esther. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:38) kept their belief in Christ secret, and Naaman's request regarding bowing down in the temple of Rimmon may suggest that he intended to keep his belief in God secret (2 Kings 5, particularly 17–18). It should be noted, though, that keeping one's faith secret is the exception in Scripture; public confession of one's faith in God or Jesus is the norm.

The issue of self-disclosure for Esther and Mordecai came to the forefront shortly after King Xerxes promoted Haman to the highest position among the noblemen. The king ordered that all royal officials bow down and pay homage to Haman at the king's gate. Mordecai chose to obey God rather than bow to Haman (Esther 3:2). If he had not done so previously, this act definitely disclosed Mordecai's identity as a Jew. His godly behavior, however, not only put his life in danger, but the lives of all those who followed his God as well (Esther 3:5–6).

Haman devised a demonic plan and presented it to King Xerxes, advising him that a certain group within the provinces threatened his kingdom, power, and rule. He informed Xerxes of his plan to remove the rebels and offered to put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the annihilation of the group (see Esther 3:8–9). The king, true to his nature, consented to the edict to “destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews” (Esther 3:13).²

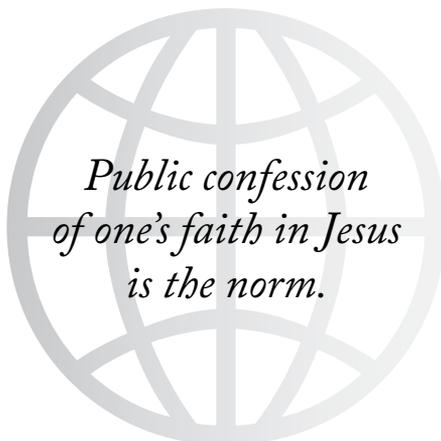
Mordecai learned of the edict and appealed to the only source he knew who could intervene: the God he boldly served (Esther 4:1). In sackcloth and ashes, he interceded for his people. Esther heard of his heartache and prayer but did not know the cause. She sent him food and clothing and encouraged

him to return to joy (Esther 4:4–5). Did Esther's concern spark an idea? Did Mordecai begin to see God's vision? Did he suddenly understand God's purpose in bringing Esther to the palace, which up to this point had been a mystery to him?

Critical Decision

God Requires of Every Believer a Time of Public Confession

Mordecai sent word to Esther telling her of the edict to annihilate all the Jews in Persia on a single day and urging her to plead with the king for her people (Esther 4:8). Esther replied that death awaited anyone who went to the king uninvited (Esther 4:11). Mordecai, her mentor, sent a second word, “If you



remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish” (Esther 4:14).³ The same person who had advised Esther to conceal her identity (Esther 2:10, 20) now advocated exposure. He also urged her to take a most dangerous step. Her self-disclosure as a follower of God and a member of this people would likely result in her death.

How could Mordecai make such a horrifying recommendation? Was it not bad enough that his actions had “caused” Xerxes to issue the decree against God's people? Now he suggested that his innocent relative sacrifice herself to save God's people

from the destruction decreed as a result of his actions. Identifying with the Jews that Xerxes had condemned to die would bring death for her as well. The logical response would have been to continue to remain silent concerning her identity, especially during this time.

However, a believer must not only consider the personal risk resulting from disclosure, but the risks to others as well. If Esther revealed her identity, she would have a positive impact on many. If she continued to conceal her identity, she would have a negative influence on many. Esther may have reasoned, “God loves me so much that he led the king to choose me as queen. I live in this palace with servants waiting on me. Mordecai's advice to keep my identity secret has certainly proved to be providential. Even though Xerxes' forces may kill all of my people, I alone will be saved. God must love me more than the rest of my people.”

Rather, Esther sought the mind and will of God. She heard the words of her trusted confidant, “And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14). She determined that she and all the Jews in Susa would fast and pray for three days, after which time she would approach the king in the inner court, even though the law forbid her to do so without his summons. She concluded, “And if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16). Esther had chosen to “live dead.”⁴

God carefully orchestrated Esther's self-disclosure. God (whom Scripture does not name in the narrative) continued to give Esther his gift of favor before the king. Xerxes extended his scepter to her uninvited approach and asked what she desired from him (Esther 5:2). Esther replied that she wanted to invite the king and Haman to a banquet (Esther 5:4, 8). They accepted her invitation, and during the course of the banquet, the king asked, “What is your petition?” (Esther 5:6).

Again, Esther invited the two men to a second banquet the following day. At the appropriate moment during the second banquet, Esther disclosed her identity when she asked the king to spare her life as well as the lives of her people. She identified herself with the condemned people of God (Esther 7:3–4).⁵

The moment of truth had come for Esther. She did the unthinkable, the unlawful, and the illogical: she gave up her right to life in order to identify with the God she loved and to save the people he loved. She had made the commitment to “live dead” three days prior. Now she acted on that commitment. She could not turn back. She had confessed her faith in God under a legal system and in a culture that condemned those of that faith to death. She stood ready to die for her faith, her confession, and her God.

David Shenk points out the importance of self-disclosure for Muslim converts as well, even in the face of persecution. “Many in our group have suffered much persecution after conversion. Yet, the precious prize of knowing Jesus as Lord and Savior, and God as father, was a gift worth suffering for Yet, in every culture and within every person, the center point of conversion is the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, and that God is our loving Father. It is the Holy Spirit who reveals that Jesus is Lord and brings to pass a new creation that is the fruit of repentance and commitment to Christ.”⁶

Critical Mass

God Uses the Public Confession of a Believer to Strengthen the Faith of Others

Esther’s confession allowed her to “live dead” from that moment forward. She no longer lived as a secret believer. The Jews proclaimed her name throughout the kingdom. Her fame gave hope to the fearful and faith to the doubting.⁷ Her declaration set a people free, changed an empire,

and brought revival. Esther launched one of the greatest unsung missionary movements of the Old Testament. “And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them” (Esther 8:17).

Esther’s critical decision to move from secrecy to public disclosure of her faith created the opening for others to reveal their devotion to God. Sparked by one woman’s faith and profession, a critical mass of believers stood boldly, resulting in many others coming to faith.

Kevin Greeson notes a similar phenomenon among Muslim background believers: “Most of these secret believers are waiting for a critical mass of believers to form within their community before they are willing to come out of hiding. Missionaries need new strategies that will reach behind closed doors to disciple these secret believers.”⁸ He emphasizes the important concept of “critical mass.” When believers reach a point of critical mass, some may then be willing to publicly disclose their identity in Christ.⁹ Esther took a step of faith and made her identity public. Her public statement of faith not only gave other children of God courage to stand up and identify with God, but also resulted in many Gentiles believing in her God and identifying with her people.

Critical Mentorship

God Uses Mentors to Prepare Muslim Background Believers for Their Moment of Public Confession

Muslim converts face the delicate question of the right time to boldly identify with Jesus Christ. Their mentors must prayerfully consider how to advise their spiritual children in this matter.¹² As with Mordecai, a mentor may at times advise secrecy and at other times advise openness. When the right time comes, may mentors boldly and prophetically encourage their disciples to “declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’” (Rom. 10:9).

Those mentoring Muslim background believers must pray for godly wisdom

to advise converts under their care.¹³ The story of Esther and Mordecai indicates that God does at times allow for secrecy regarding one’s faith in him. A mentor may suggest secrecy for a time to a Muslim background believer, but as Esther’s life demonstrates, a critical moment may come in that believer’s life when God no longer wants their faith in him to remain secret. Esther’s choice to publicly confess her identity with God and his people involved personal risk. But she chose to please God and rest in his care rather than protect herself and lose God’s approval. The story of Esther demonstrates that at times God protects a believer’s life even against laws, culture, and hatred. However, this may not always be the case. For example, God rescued Peter from prison and death in Acts 12:7–10, and yet he allowed King Herod to put James to death with the sword in Acts 12:2. Esther’s story also demonstrates that the bold public confession of even one follower of God often results in (1) emboldening the faith of those who have previously hidden their belief in God and (2) turning others to faith in God.

Mordecai made perhaps the most difficult decision of his life when he advised his innocent mentee to reveal her identity at the risk of her life. But this decision took on historic proportions for the people of God. As mentors, missiologists, and practitioners among Muslims, we must strive to have the wisdom, prayer life, and boldness of Mordecai as we advise those God allows us to influence. **IJFM**

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Endnotes

¹In my experience with Muslim background believers, their self-identity is a multifaceted issue that defies simple explanation and often frustrates external expectations. As cultural outsiders, we often see the issue in false clarity, imposing simplistic understandings of terms and relationships. We have great expectations for young believers to 'take their stand' in a society hostile to the spread of Christianity within its ranks, where the struggle for survival is more intense than we outsiders will ever understand. But for many Muslim background believers, identity is fluid, taking the most appropriate form for the situation. For instance, where Christianity has strong negative connotations, Muslim background believers may avoid a 'Christian' label and identify themselves in different ways according to various perspectives and situations." Bernard Dutch, "Should Muslims Become 'Christians?'" *International Journal of Frontier Missions* (2000) 17: 15. The debate that Dutch addressed in 2000

continues to the present. Gary Corwin observes, "For the last decade there has been an ongoing debate in mission circles on appropriate limits to contextualization among various socio-religious groups—Muslim peoples in particular. . . . The crux of the issue has to do with the identity of new believers." Gary Corwin, "Issues of Identity in a Muslim Context: Common Ground?" in *Envisioning Effective Ministry: Evangelism in a Muslim Context*, ed. Laurie Fortunak Nichols and Gary R. Corwin (Wheaton, IL: Evangelism and Missions Information Services, 2010), 139.

²All Scripture quotations taken from the Holy Bible, Today's New International Version ® TNIV ® Copyright © 2001, 2005 by Biblica, <http://www.biblica.com>.

³Mordecai's theology agrees with that of Paul and Jesus. Paul's statement in Romans 10:9–10 ties salvation to declaration: "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved." Jesus' statement in Matthew 10:32–33 also connects public confession to heavenly introduction: "Whoever publicly acknowledges me I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever publicly disowns me I will disown before my Father in heaven."

⁴The term *live dead* refers to a concept in which individuals follow Jesus' instruction to give up their life and follow him (Luke 9:23–26). In Esther's case, she chose to give up her right to live for the sake of her God and her people. From that moment on, she no longer lived for herself, but for her God. A recently launched church planting initiative among unreached people groups in East Africa calls their project *Live Dead* to describe their commitment to their task. For further information on this group, see <http://live-dead.org/>.

⁵Bilquis Sheikh recounts a conversation with her Muslim family and friends, one of whom advised, "Don't declare your Christianity publicly."

"You mean keep my faith a secret?"
"Well. . ."

"I can't," I said. "I can't play games with God. If I must die, I die." Bilquis Sheikh and Richard Schneider, *I Dared to Call Him Father: The Miraculous Story of a Muslim Woman's Encounter with God* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 2003), 87.

⁶David W. Shenk, "Forms of Change," in *Encountering the World of Islam*, ed.

Keith Swartley (Colorado Springs: Biblica, 2005), 241.

⁷Parshall also discusses the importance of a critical mass of believers in a Muslim community: "Our goal is to see a small cluster of believers within a given geographic area. When the ideal of sociological strength, plus maturity on the part of the believers, is reached, it becomes possible to consider baptism. Premature baptism has often sparked off intense persecution from the Islamic community." Phil Parshall, "Discreet Witness," in *Encountering the World of Islam*, ed. Keith Swartley (Colorado Springs: Biblica, 2005), 242.

⁸Kevin Greeson, "Church Planting Movements among Muslim Peoples," *Mission Frontiers*, March–April 2011, <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/church-planting-movements-among-muslim-peoples> (accessed August 20, 2011). Greeson's book *The Camel: How Muslims Are Coming to Faith in Christ!* has elicited intense discussion in the mission world. While Greeson does make some controversial statements, his identification of indigenous church planting movements is refreshing. Missionaries involved in the Muslim world must further investigate the concept of critical mass. Kevin Greeson, *The Camel: How Muslims Are Coming to Faith in Christ!* (Arkadelphia, AR: WIGTake Resources, 2007).

⁹Morin relates a story of two Christian workers in a Muslim community whom God used to miraculously raise a girl from the dead. The miracle resulted in thirty Muslims following Isa al-Masih that day and the establishment of a church of five hundred believers in a year. This type of public demonstration of God's power and the movement of a critical mass of people can produce the impetus for church planting. Harry Morin, *Muslim Ministry in the African Context* (Springfield, MO: Africa's Hope, 2007), 112–114.

¹⁰"Knowing the Bible's teaching on suffering will help us prepare Muslim converts to endure suffering." Thabiti Anyabwile, *The Gospel for Muslims: An Encouragement to Share Christ with Confidence* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 159.

¹¹Bilquis Sheikh studied the story of Nicodemus as she wrestled with ways to mentor new Muslim background believers. Sheikh and Schneider, 135.

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Book Reviews

Wrestling with Religion: Exposing a Taken-for-Granted Assumption in Mission

The Birth of Orientalism, by Urs App (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010)

A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason, by Guy G. Stroumsa (Harvard University Press, 2010)

Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Modern Essentialist Image of Islam, by Dietrich Jung (Equinox, 2011)

Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History, by Andrew J. Nicholson (Columbia University Press, 2010)

Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia, by Thomas David DuBois (Cambridge University Press, 2011)

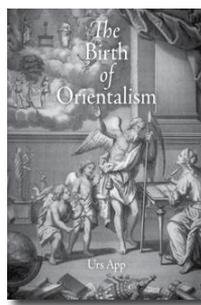
Secularism and Religion-Making, ed. Mark Dressler and Arvind-Pal Mandair (Oxford University Press, 2011)

God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World, by Stephen Prothero (HarperOne, 2010)

—reviewed by H. L. Richard

This article will survey seven new books from the broad field of religious studies. The discipline of religious studies is in turmoil, as present understandings have shattered the very paradigms that gave birth to the discipline. New paradigms have not yet developed, resulting in confusion and uncertainty related to every aspect of the study of religion. This chaotic situation should excite and empower biblical Christians, who have long fought the compartmentalization of biblical faith into a narrow paradigm of religion focused on private spirituality and Sunday morning events. The Bible is not a religious book, not a book dealing with a defined compartment of life, rather it speaks to every area of life with a holistic perspective on life under the lordship of Christ.

Five of the books discussed here are historical, wrestling with how our current paradigm of “world religions,” which is so inadequate, came to the place of acceptance it holds today. Two are focused on the early history of the concept of religion in the Western world. The next three probe aspects of the three great non-Christian religious traditions, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Finally, two broad studies are considered, one a collection of rather technical scholarly papers, the other a new popular introduction to the world religions.



Orientalism and Its Antecedents

Urs App in *The Birth of Orientalism* presents an in-depth study of key personalities, many of them missionaries, who laid the foundation for European thinking about the Orient and the religions of the East.¹ This is a book that has to be read to be believed, and this review can hardly begin to do justice to its fascinating contents, as suggestively indicated by App in his preface; “The history of religions demonstrates with sufficient clarity that invented facts, dubious claims, and mistaken assumptions can occasionally work wonders” (p. xv).

His first major study is of Voltaire (1694–1778) and particularly “Voltaire’s Veda” (the title of chapter one). Voltaire’s Veda is the infamous Ezour-Vedam, long considered a Jesuit hoax played out on unsuspecting Indians. App probes deeply and concludes otherwise.

Whatever the intentions of its [Jesuit] authors were, it was Voltaire who almost single-handedly transformed some missionary jottings from the South Indian boondocks into “the world’s oldest text,” the Royal Library’s “most precious document,” and (as a well-earned bonus for the promoter) into the Old Testament of his deism! (p. 64, quotations from Voltaire)

App picks up the Ezour-Vedam discussion again in chapter seven and spells out a convincing theory for the origin of that text and how it (wrongly) came to be associated with scandal. Yet this kind of detailed study of the study of ancient texts is presented for broader purposes than mere intellectual curiosity.

Voltaire’s “Indian” campaign ended up playing a crucial role in raising the kind of questions about origins and ancient religion that played at least as important a role in the establishment of state-supported, university-based Orientalism as did the much-touted colonialism and imperialism. (p. 64)

This type of undercurrent of resistance to Edward Said’s thesis regarding the imperial motivations of study of the East runs throughout, and is one of the merits of the study. (But note also trenchant criticism of a major critic of Said, p. 441f.)

Voltaire’s intellectual dishonesty is clearly documented, and the anti-Christian bias that drove his work is apparent. Yet this is far from the worst case of motivated ineptitude that App documents. John Holwell (1711–1798) is discussed in chapter six promoting a forged text as an ancient Indian document (a document that added fuel to Voltaire’s fire). In the course of the discussion App wanders into fascinating terrain, tracing viewpoints that the Ganges was one of the four rivers of Eden and the legend of Prester John, prompted by absurd claims Holwell made about idyllic life in Bisnapore (Bishnupur, 130 kilometers north of Kolkata).

Holwell's supposedly ancient text, the Chartah Bhade Shastah, was claimed as older and more authentic than the Vedas. In App's analysis, however:

Whoever authored the Shastah, it certainly addressed problems of utmost interest not to any ancient Indian author but rather to a certain eighteenth-century Englishman familiar with Indian religion as well as the theological controversies of his time. (p. 323)

Holwell was as biased against Christianity as Voltaire, and was hardly less scrupulous in his audacious claims, yet in the end App suggests that he was not himself the forger of his dishonest document. App chimes in on discussions about "Hinduism," particularly whether that is an invented reality, an imagined construct, or an appropriately designated phenomenon. He sides with "invention," with far more specific detail than most who would agree with that assessment.

Its inventor, I propose, is Mr. John Zephaniah Holwell, and the year of this invention is 1766 when Holwell wrote his second volume. This was indeed a creative act and not just a discovery of something that was there for all to see and understand. (p. 360)

Throughout the sixteenth to eighteenth century struggles with new "religion" constructs there was a presumed sense of historical development that led to wild speculations. Egypt was considered by some the birthplace of religion, with Buddhism and even Buddha himself being traced there (p. 180). Orthodox Christianity was divided on the idea that an ancient root of monotheism was evident in newly discovered traditions, with some early contextualizers (Ricci, de Nobili, etc.) supporting this while others saw only idolatry in and behind the newly discovered faiths (p. 279, etc.). The battle for Buddhism involved the wild suggestion that the Forty-Two Sections Sutra was a reliable historical text (p. 223ff.), and the idea traceable to Japanese Jesuits that Buddha on his deathbed taught an esoteric doctrine that undermined his popular teaching (pp. 2, 140f., etc.).

This is still only a few of the fascinating insights and curious ideas expounded in App's study. Yet it must be stressed again that his aim is not just to tickle intellectual curiosity. There is good reason for reticence in all "conclusions" and assured positions staked out by academics and practitioners still today.

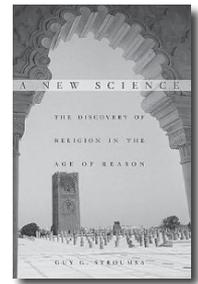
With regard to the discovery of Asian religions, parading "false" ideas (for example, about the founder of Buddhism) is far easier than understanding why those ideas arose and *realizing the fragility of present-day certitudes*. (p. 136; emphasis added)

Religion as a Now-Dated New Science

Guy Stroumsa goes still earlier to trace out the Western roots of the very idea of religion in *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason*. He shows that the modern concept of religion developed considerably earlier than the

19th century when the comparative study of religion became an accepted academic discipline.²

Through a series of case studies, I shall try to show here that the birth of the modern study of religion reflects nothing less than an intellectual revolution. This revolution offered a new understanding of religion that had no real precedent in the Middle Ages or during the Renaissance. In this sense, the birth of the modern comparative history of religions can be called the *discovery* of religion. (p. 5; italics original)



Stroumsa, however, is not so focused on the discovery of religion as he is on the historical factors that prepared the way for this discovery. It should be noted from the outset also that he is not celebrating the new science of religion, rather he seeks to explain how the dominant paradigm which is now being contested in academia first came to prominence.

Stroumsa identifies three significant factors that laid the groundwork for the new theory of religion. The first is the explorations and discoveries of Roman Catholic missionaries in the Americas and later in Asia, where new peoples and practices were discovered that raised many questions about religion. Second is the Renaissance with its emphasis on antiquity and linguistics, leading to the learning of foreign languages and the translation of sacred texts of other faiths. Finally the Reformation and the wars of religion that followed raised many questions about religion and about Christianity itself.

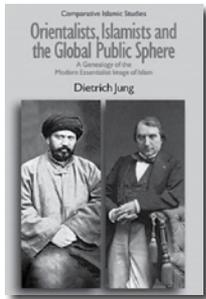
This text is full of insights. Stroumsa documents the impact of early missionary encounters with other peoples, and how the resultant recognition of multiple religions also led to the idea that there must be an essence of religion underlying this diversity. The idea of natural religion, which undermined a biblical perspective on revelation, came to the fore, as did a focus on ritual as opposed to belief (theological) systems. Biblical studies underlay the origin of religious studies, and Stroumsa explores trends in the study of Judaism, theories about the Noahic flood and the existence of idolatry, leading on to studies of Zoroastrianism and Islam.

In his penultimate chapter Stroumsa looks at civil religion as it was identified in China by Jesuit missionaries, and in ancient Rome. He outlines the Rites Controversy in China and documents that while Buddhists were considered idolaters, Confucianism was considered non-religious due to the absence of idolatry. Natural religion concepts led the Jesuits to see atheistic Confucians as very close to Christianity! The Church finally ruled against the Jesuit approach, but it impacted the developing concept of religion nonetheless.

In his epilogue Stroumsa summarizes the revolution that took place in European thought in the centuries under discussion.

The birth of the modern study of religion reflects nothing less than an intellectual revolution. This revolution offered a new understanding of religion.—Guy Stroumsa

The old conception of one true religion versus the multiplicity of false religions was gone. One learned to consider all religions—the ancient polytheistic systems as well as the newly discovered ones, such as that of India—as so many reflections of truth. (p. 163)



Islam in the Global Public Sphere

Dietrich Jung's study of *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere* brings the European discussion of religion forward to the present time with a specific focus on "a genealogy of the modern essentialist image of Islam" (the book's subtitle).³ Jung wrestles with a

profound problem for those who oppose present day certitudes about "world religions;" how did this inadequate and false construct come to such prominence and how does it still retain its hold on so many people? In Jung's own words:

The longer my engagement with the Middle East has lasted, the more I have asked myself why Islam is so frequently represented in the holistic terms of an all-encompassing socio-religious system. How is the persistence of this specific image of Islam to be explained *against all empirical evidence?* (p. 1, emphasis added)

While Jung is focused on Islam, his intellectual genealogy has clear implications for the development of the concepts of Hinduism and of Buddhism as a world religion.

This is a dense study that does not make for easy summation; the brief and selective summary here is intended to move those interested in the perspective presented to study the entire argument of the book. Since the book has only six chapters this review will follow the six point outline that is the structure of the book.

Chapter one defines the problem of the essentialist view of Islam. In both popular and academic discussions, in both the Islamic world and the West, Islam is seen as "a comprehensive, unique and unifying way of life encapsulated in the scripture of revealed texts and the example of the Prophet" (p. 5), strikingly in contrast to the pluralist culture of the West. Jung states that only a minority of scholars in the field of Islamic studies would support this essentialist paradigm, most affirming a constructivist position that complex social, cultural and historical factors contribute to the construction of political and religious systems.

The idea of a global public sphere is introduced, a new phenomenon in our world which is now a global village.

Ideas forged in European academic circles impact current Muslim self-perceptions in complex and intriguing ways. Jung closes his introductory chapter with a good summary of the twofold aim of his study.

Firstly, it is intended to enhance our understanding of the origin and evolution of a specific modern image of Islam. More precisely, it investigates the linkages between European scholarship on religion and Islam with the ideas of Islamic modernism in shaping the modern essentialist image of Islam on which Islamist ideologies and Western perceptions of Islam largely rely ... Secondly, in introducing and applying the analytical device of a global public sphere, this book is intended to contribute to the field of the sociology of knowledge in empirical and theoretical terms. (p. 16)

In his second chapter Jung discusses Orientalism and the towering influence of Edward Said. This is a perceptive chapter that merits serious study. Jung summarizes five Orientalist themes that Said identified, and sees these five still very much alive in the current essentialist view of Islam. Jung also summarizes five major areas where Said has been criticized, and discusses these as background for his own understanding of Orientalism.

Chapter three brings the global public sphere into focus, with analysis of globalization and discussion of "multiple modernities." The meaning of "religion" plays a crucial role here, and Jung argues that:

the revision of Protestant Christianity laid the foundations for a general notion of religion in modern society. This reconstruction of the Christian faith took place under the societal imperative of functional differentiation that was observed as the gradual separation of religion from other realms or social action such as politics, education or law. Classical theories of secularization rationalized this process as a "decline of religion" in modern society. More recent approaches to the sociology of religion, however, have emphasized the paradoxical character of this process. While religion has lost its all-encompassing character, the religious field has attained at the same time a much more visible and identifiable logic through its separation from the social environment. (p. 45)

Jung arrives at a working definition for "religion," but one which this reviewer finds very unsatisfying as it affirms "the holistic nature of religion...in permanent tension with the principle of functional differentiation" (p. 81). The near impossibility of an adequate definition of "religion" is well summarized.

Whereas the meaning of the term "religion" is apparently self-evident in public discourse, defining religion is a highly

Jung shows how this modern Western worldview and perception of Islam came to be internalized by Muslims themselves, against common sense and the reality of Muslim diversity across the globe.

contested field in the social sciences and humanities. Indeed, from a scholarly perspective, it is far from evident what should be understood as religious and religion. (p. 76)

Following the bias of this review, the wider discussions of chapter three will simply be skipped over. In chapter four Jung develops his core thesis that it was German liberal Protestantism that most influenced the modern understanding of religion, which spread from biblical studies to sociological studies to Islamic studies. This reviewer is convinced of Jung's interpretation, of which only a general summary can be stated here.

Ironically, the apologist attempts to make Christianity more rational [German liberal Protestantism] contributed, in the end, to pushing religion further into the transcendental realm of interaction with the supernatural. Modern religion ultimately was conceptualized as faith, as individually experienced belief in supernatural forces. In short, in the structural context of functional differentiation, religion emerged as a more autonomous and therewith clearly visible but at the same time much more limited social sphere whose outer-worldly orientation often has been equated with irrationality. In light of these reductionist tendencies of modernization, orientalist and sociologists have conceptualized Islam as a holistic unity trying to resist modern differentiation. In the modern image of Islam, this resistance is epitomized in presenting Islam as an inseparable unity of religion and politics, as an all-encompassing way of life. In light of the Protestant reconstruction of Christianity, western scholars turned Islamic traditions into an ideal type of traditional religion, fiercely opposing the rationalizing, individualizing and spiritualizing tendencies of the modern Christian program. (p. 155)

Ironies abound in the complex confusion of religious studies, and none greater perhaps than the need for Evangelical Christians to recognize that their fight against "the modern Christian program [liberal Protestantism]" of secularization and functional differentiation in the Western world has complex repercussions in the realm of comparative religion. Biblical Christians should be "fiercely opposing the rationalizing, individualizing and spiritualizing tendencies" of modernity, and in doing so align themselves with the supposed position of Islam (only with falsely essentialized Islam, not with the complexity of lived Islams in multiple cultural contexts; irony upon irony).

Jung goes on in his fifth chapter to discuss Islam as a problem, focusing on four founding fathers of the modern study of Islam: Ignaz Goldziher, Christiaan Hurgronje, C. H. Becker and Martin Hartmann. He identifies and discusses:

four core elements which in conceptual terms characterized the intellectual milieu in general out of which Islamic studies

emerged: an evolutionary approach to history, the paradigmatic dichotomy between tradition and modernity, a modern conception of religion, and the civilizing role of secular education. (p. 208)

From this foundation these German scholars saw Islam as a holistic, medieval, deterministic system of binding ethics and law, intrinsically different from the West. In popularized and trivialized form, these ideas contributed significantly to the modern essentialist view of Islam.

In his final chapter Jung shows how this modern Western worldview and perception of Islam came to be internalized by Muslims themselves, against common sense and the reality of Islamic diversity across the globe. Sayyid Qutb is first discussed, summarizing his project as "reconstructing true Islam with the help of modern conceptual tools" (p. 217). The Salafiyya movement and various of its leaders are indicted as "firmly anchored in the global discourse of modernity" (p. 248). An example of the type of transformation of traditional Islamic approaches into a modernized, fundamentalist mindset, can be given related to sharia.

They [Muslim reformers] initiated a fundamental change in meaning with regard to the most significant elements of Islamic traditions. This applies in particular to the societal role and understanding of the *sharia*. Originally representing a metaphor for "a mode of behavior that leads to salvation," the *sharia* developed into a "total intellectual discourse," representing a religious, scholarly and holistic field of social reflection and deliberation. Under the impact of nineteenth century Islamic reform and modern state formation, however, the meaning of the *sharia* was transformed into a rather fixed set of rules. This transformation took place with reference to the modern functional relationship between positive law and the state; a relationship that implied the idea of the enforcement of legal rules by the coercive means of the state. (p. 247)

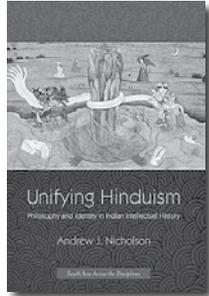
Jung offers no "solution" for the errors he uncovers in the complex aspects of historical development of understandings that he outlines. He succeeds in portraying how a fundamentally erroneous perception of an essentialized Islam came to dominate current perceptions, as:

Western and Muslim public spheres were, from the beginning, inseparable parts of a rising global modernity, constructing modern knowledge on Islam within the coordinates of a wider global public sphere.... They were all engaged in producing modern knowledge on Islam by interpreting Islamic traditions through modern concepts such as religion, culture, nation and civilization. (p. 263)

It can only be hoped that this inadequate summary of a profoundly important book will move some to read and

As is often noted, there is no mention in any Sanskrit text of the presence of Islam, yet Nicholson concludes that it was under the pressure of Islam that a unified sense of Hindu identity first developed.

reflect on the book in its entirety. Christian reactions against perceived-as-essential Islam need to be radically modified, and critiques of Muslim fundamentalism need to be refined in light of the roots of that debate in liberal Protestantism.



Hindu Unity

It is a long leap from the Eurocentric books reviewed thus far to this outstanding scholarly exploration into the roots of the concept of “Hinduism.”

Andrew Nicholson establishes a new set of certitudes (still fragile, as App would remind us) with his analysis of *Unifying Hinduism*.⁴ He lays

out his central thesis in the opening paragraphs, which is a discomfort with both sides of the deep divide on “Hinduism.” Both the eternal religion (*sanātana dharma*) idea that many Hindus enunciate, and the modern scholarly paradigm of Hinduism as a nineteenth century invention (or eighteenth, as App traced to Holwell) fall short of properly accounting for developments in the history of ideas in India.

The thesis of this book is that between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries CE, certain thinkers began to treat as a single whole the diverse philosophical teachings of the Upaniṣads, epics, Purānas, and the schools known retrospectively as the “six systems” (*ṣaḍdarśana*) of mainstream Hindu philosophy. The Indian and European thinkers in the nineteenth century who developed the term “Hinduism” under the pressure of the new explanatory category of “world religions” were influenced by these earlier philosophers and doxographers, primarily Vedāntins, who had their own reasons for arguing the unity of Indian philosophical traditions. (p. 2)

Nicholson makes this point mainly by a detailed study of the work of Vijñānābhikṣu. Vijñānābhikṣu was a *Bhedābheda* (difference and non-difference) *Vedānta* philosopher of the sixteenth century, and in re-evaluating the traditional academic appraisal of this largely unknown scholar Nicholson takes aim at the entire enterprise of the modern study of Indian philosophy. Only a few strands of his critique can be pursued here.

Despite the best efforts of historians of Indian philosophy, the terms used to translate Sanskrit philosophical concepts are imbued with Eurocentric (and Christian-centric) meanings. The two words most commonly used to translate *āstika/nāstika*, “orthodox” and “heterodox,” come out of the Christian theological tradition and hence carry historical connotations that distort the understanding of native Indian categories of thought. (p. 176)

Nicholson documents that *nāstika* (heterodox) in its earliest uses meant a reviler of the Veda (p. 171). Later it came to be associated with denial of an afterlife (p. 173).

He suggests the best meaning for *āstika* (orthodox) is affirmer, potentially referring to the affirmation of either ritual, virtue, life after death or the Vedas (with *nāstika* meaning a denial of these). But “by the sixteenth century, the term *nāstika* had become a frozen category denoting the materialists, Buddhists and Jains” (p. 180), and this continues in standard texts to the present time. Vijñānābhikṣu was a crucial figure in the development of the idea that various philosophical schools were all part of a larger unity, yet his unity omitted the very school that modern Orientalists esteemed as supreme.

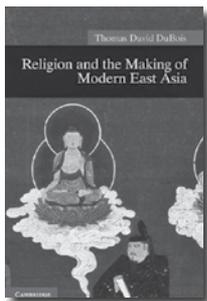
By Vijñānābhikṣu’s account, Advaita is not a real form of Vedānta. Nor is it even an *āstika* system. According to Vijñānābhikṣu and the Padma Purāna, it is secretly a type of Buddhism, and in fact, its doctrines are even more awful than Buddhism’s. (p. 98)

Nicholson objects to the “Advaita-centric histories of Vedānta that have become so influential” (p. 25), but, much more than this, objects to the entire schema of six orthodox schools of philosophy as a definition of unchanging opinions uniformly held for centuries. Nicholson shows how the six schools of philosophy became an “ordering principle” (p. 154), with most scholars being fully aware that many more than six schools of philosophy existed (Mādhava in the fourteenth century listed sixteen, p. 159). This fact becomes central to his striking final chapter.

There is a remarkable anomaly related to the times of Vijñānābhikṣu. As is often noted, there is no mention in any Sanskrit text of the presence of Islam, yet vernacular texts abound with clear recognition of that presence which was surely unmistakable. Nicholson sees a solution to this in the six schools of philosophy rubric, which made no allowance for bringing in the new phenomenon of Islam. Yet Vijñānābhikṣu argued against *nāstikas*, either tilting with windmills as Buddhists had long ceased to be a living presence, or attacking these traditional foes “as placeholders for Islam” (p. 191). So Nicholson concludes that it was under the pressure of Islam that a unified sense of Hindu identity first developed. And “the unification of Hinduism is a continuing process as different groups struggle to define a Hindu essence and to tame the unruly excess of beliefs and practices today grouped together as Hindu” (p. 204).

The colonial domination of the West over “the rest” in recent centuries has caused many Western categories, ideas and paradigms to appear more universal than they might otherwise have seemed.—Richard King

The development of “Hinduism” as a “world religion” goes on largely under the radar screen in the Western world, quite in contrast to developments related to essentialized Islam. Hindu traditions are sufficiently diverse to confound efforts at essentialization, and the modern rubric of “religion” founders most definitively in light of Hindu traditions. The practical import of these matters for missiology motivates this lengthy review, but such application must be left for other occasions.



Buddhism as East Asian Religion

Thomas DuBois’ study of *Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia* fails to reach the academic standard of the books discussed thus far.⁵ This is a rather popular level history of “religion” in East Asian history, and the biggest problem is that “religion” is

never adequately discussed. In a footnote to the introduction DuBois indicates that he is following Joachim Wach’s *Sociology of Religion* “even if this approach might not satisfy historians” (p. 6). He acknowledges that “the modern concept of religion is Western in origin” and points out that a word was coined in Japan to express this Western concept, and that word was then borrowed in China (p. 4).

DuBois introduces Chinese religion by saying that “for the great majority of Chinese people today, religion consists of a combination of three distinct traditions: Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism” (p. 15). Confucianism is then defined as “less a religion than a political philosophy” (p. 15). Later it is suggested that “in practice, the three religions constitute a single whole,” with the further claim that “in terms of both belief and practice, China’s three traditions effectively combine to form one religion” (p. 35). Yet rather than define or even consistently speak about this supposed (and unnamed) one religion, DuBois in later chapters refers to “many Buddhisms” (p. 104) and reminds readers that “Buddhism consists of a number of competing schools and interests, rather than a single institution...” (p. 106). Later he says that “actual religious practice in China is very diverse. Beyond the integration of the ‘three religions,’ it includes dozens, or even hundreds, of local, highly specialized deities...” (p. 174).

In the midst of this conceptual confusion, DuBois outlines the intriguing history of what have been reified as the major religious traditions in China and Japan, and indeed the book

will be helpful for those who want such an introductory history. The story is brought right up to the current time with discussion of Buddhists borrowing Christian propagation techniques (p. 181) and mention of problems with the concept of “religion” at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions (“However well-intentioned the World Parliament may have been, the event showed how far the Western conception of religion was from the one developing in Japan” (p. 182)).



Religion-Making

The process of creating religions and the role of secularism in that process are the key themes in a collection of a dozen scholarly papers by eleven different authors on *Secularism and Religion-Making*.⁶ The editors, Dressler and Mandair, in their opening paper challenge the validity of the concept of “world religions,” and in that context twice define what is meant by “religion-making.”

We conceived of “religion-making” broadly as the way in which certain social phenomena are configured and reconfigured within the matrix of a world-religion(s) discourse. In other words, the notion refers to the reification and institutionalization of certain ideas, social formations, and practices as “religious” in the conventional Western meaning of the term, thereby subordinating them to a particular knowledge regime of religion and its political, cultural, philosophical, and historical interventions. (p. 3)

Broadly conceived the term religion-making refers to the ways in which religion(s) is conceptualized and institutionalized within the matrix of a globalized world-religions discourse in which ideas, social formations, and social/cultural practices are discursively reified as “religious” ones. (p. 21)

Secularism does not stand aloof of this process, but is implicated throughout as itself part and parcel of the religion-making process.

Despite their different attitudes towards liberal secularism, however, there is a consensus within the philosophically oriented schools of post secular thought that religion and secularity are co-emergent and codependent. Indeed, they argue that these processes haunt each other, such that religion, as it has developed in the West, has always been present in all secular phenomena even when it appears to be absent and secularity, in turn, has covertly continued a religious agenda. (p. 6)

The second paper in the collection by Richard King, “Imagining Religions in India,” presses the issue further into practical applications.

T*his review surely makes clear that missiologists need to grapple with the complexities of religion and move beyond simplistic assumptions about the “world religions.”*

The colonial domination of the West over “the rest” in recent centuries has caused many Western categories, ideas and paradigms to appear more universal and normative than they might otherwise have seemed. The category of “religion” is one such category and could be described as a key feature in the imaginative cartography of Western modernity. (p. 38)

As a number of scholars have pointed out, both our *modern* understanding of “religion” as a “system of beliefs and practices” and the academic field of religious studies are a product of the European Enlightenment. . . . As such its [the term “religion”] continued unreflective use cross-culturally, while opening up interesting debates and interactions over the past few centuries (and creating things called “interfaith dialogue” and “the world religions”), has also closed down avenues of exploration and other potential cultural and intellectual interactions. (p. 39; italics original)

In a summary statement of his viewpoint in this regard, King affirms what should be printed as a bold banner across all missiological consideration of “religion”:

The continued unreflective use of the category of “religion,” however, does not carry us forward in our attempt to understand better the diverse cultures and civilizations of the world. (p. 43)

Both these opening essays ask the question of why religious studies should even continue when the fundamental category of “religion” has been weighed in the balance and found wanting. King gives a good justification.

The colonial translation of diverse civilizations through the prism of the category of “religion” remains, in a Western context at least, the primary point of orientation and intervention for the comparative study of cultures. It is where the suspects are held for interrogation. That there are considerable problems in reading universal history in terms of the deeply embedded category of religion in the modern Western imagination is precisely a reason for its ongoing interrogation by scholars with specialist knowledge of non-Western cultures, if only because it remains the point of entry of so much that constitutes “cultural difference” into the Western *imaginaire*. (pp. 53-4)

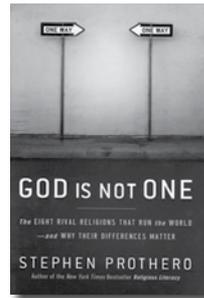
King also vents at the unfairness, if not illegitimacy, of secularism; “Secularist ideology requires the concept of religion precisely as a means of maintaining its own hegemony as ‘nonmetaphysical,’ which of course it is not” (p. 60).

These snippets from the opening papers do not do justice to their depth and importance, and this review can only briefly mention the subject matter of the ten remaining papers, each of which is worthy of more detailed treatment. Chapter three considers Sikh nationalism and the embrace of “religion” into related discourse. Chapter four looks at Islam related to secularism and the meaning of time and history. Chapter five

gives a profound analysis of “religious violence” in light of the dubious validity of the adjective “religious.” Chapter six looks at American “spirituality” in relation to “religion,” identifying blind spots in the liberal espousal of the former. Chapter seven is primarily an impressive critique of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, focusing on Islamic mysticism and whether it is supports liberal Islamic modernity.

Apache “religion” and its place in American law related to “religious” artifacts is the subject of chapter eight. Chapter nine looks at the Alevi of Turkey and their distinctive “religiosity” in relation to Sunni orthodoxy. Chapter ten documents and ruminates on the fascinating transformation of a north Indian blood sacrifice festival into a state-sponsored cultural event. Chapter eleven outlines the failure of a colonial attempt to use Buddhist institutions to develop education in Burma, and how the misunderstanding of “religious” aspects of the situation doomed the attempt. Chapter twelve concludes the volume with an analysis of tensions related to “religious otherness” in modern Germany.

These essays forward the understanding and application of new paradigms related to the traditional category of “religion” and are recommended reading for those seeking understanding of why the longstanding paradigm of “world religions” needs to be abandoned.



Populist Religion

Steven Prothero wrote a popular introduction (*God Is Not One*) to what he called in his subtitle “the eight rival religions that run the world.”⁷⁷ Prothero is to be commended for rejecting simplistic assumptions that all gods and religions are one, and also for seeking to forward understanding about different religious traditions. Yet in light of the serious wrestling with religion under discussion in this article, Prothero is disappointing and even irritating.

That there are eight world religions is the first point of contention. Sikhism and Jainism do not make Prothero’s list, and he elevates Yoruba religion to the status of a world faith. In a footnote during his discussion of Yoruba religion he defends the construct of world religions.

Like the term *religion*, *world religion* has taken on a life of its own outside academe, so killing it is not an option. All scholars can do is bend it, which I hope to do here by joining many scholars and practitioners of Yoruba religion in arguing for the way of the orishas as one of the great religions. (p. 362, italics original)

But he acknowledges that “Yoruba religion varies widely across time and space ... and there are strong arguments for treating these adaptations as separate religions of their own” (p. 206). Later he refers to “the elusive and elastic manifestations of Yoruba religion” (p. 232), and admits that “[i]t is difficult to summarize the key practices of any religion, particularly one as elastic as orisha devotion” (p. 233).

Yet Prothero is not inconsistent in arguing for Yoruba religion despite an inability to define it; that same problem is present in all the “world religions.” Prothero points out that “religious studies scholars are quick to point out that there are many Buddhisms, not just one” (p. 12). “As the fatwa slinging shows, there are many interpretations of Islam” (p. 50). See below for the still greater complexity of other of Prothero’s “world religions.”

The closest Prothero comes to defining what he is talking about as religion is a disclaimer about putting too much emphasis on faith.

It is often a mistake to refer to a religion as a “faith,” or to its adherents as “believers.” As odd as this might sound, faith and belief don’t matter much in most religions.... When it comes to religion, we are more often what we do than what we think. (p. 69)

Prothero somehow concludes that Islam is “the greatest of the great religions” (p. 62). He presents an interesting picture of Christianity as the second greatest religion, with sections on Mormonism, Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism and “Brown Christians.” Once beyond the Semitic faiths, however, Prothero has trouble with his undefined assumptions.

Confucianism seems, despite its relative obscurity in the West, to stand among the greatest of the great religions, behind only Islam and Christianity.... There is a nagging question, however, about whether Confucianism is a religion at all. Very few people in China think of it in these terms. For them Confucianism is a philosophy, ethic, or way of life. Only five religions are officially recognized by the Chinese government (Buddhism, Daoism, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam), and Confucianism is not on the list.... Like Buddhism, Confucianism can’t seem to make up its mind about the religion thing. So it calls into question what we mean by religion and in the process helps us to see it in a new light. (p. 105)

Hinduism is considered “the way of devotion” (p. 131). Despite an acknowledgement that Hinduism is “the least dogmatic and the most diverse” of the great religions (p. 134), Prothero fails to adequately grapple with the vast diversities of Hindu traditions. The religion question arises again in discussion of both Buddhism and Daoism.

There is some question about whether Buddhism is a religion, but as with Confucianism this question reveals more about our own assumptions about religion than it does about Buddhism itself. (p. 186)

To be fair, Daoists have never really tried to systematize their thought.... Their tradition is an endlessly elusive grab bag of philosophical observations, moral guidelines, body exercises, medicinal theories, supernatural stories, funerary rites, and longevity techniques that, more than any of the other great religions, defies definition. (p. 284)

In the midst of this conceptual confusion Prothero suggests that

with the emergence of the Mahayana school, Buddhism moved undeniably into the family of religions, since its vast (and growing) pantheon of bodhisattvas and Buddhas offered devotees all the grace and magic of other religions’ gods (p. 190).

It can hardly be a surprise that by the end Prothero is ready to list atheism among the religions.

Whether atheism is a religion depends, of course, on what actual atheists believe and do. So the answer to this question will vary from person to person, and group to group. It will also depend on what we mean by religion. (p. 324)

Conclusion

This review of seven recent books on religion surely makes clear that missiologists need to grapple with the complexity of religion and move beyond simplistic assumptions about the “world religions.” The confusion evident in the discipline of religious studies must give pause to dogmatic assertions, but cannot lead to paralysis as this topic is too vital to be neglected or to be allowed to drift along under current inadequate paradigms.

Endnotes

¹ *The Birth of Orientalism*, Urs App, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, pp. 550 + xviii. All quotes in this section are from this book, with page number indicated.

² *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason*, Guy G. Stroumsa, Harvard University Press, 2010, pp. 223 + x. All quotes in this section are from this book, with page number indicated.

³ *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Modern Essentialist Image of Islam*, Dietrich Jung, Equinox, 2011, pp. 323 + viii. All quotes in this section are from this book, with page number indicated.

⁴ *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History*, Andrew J. Nicholson, Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 266 + xii. All quotes in this section are from this book, with page number indicated.

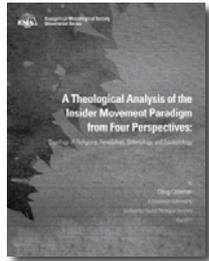
⁵ *Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia*, Thomas David DuBois, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 259 + xii. All quotes in this section are from this book, with page number indicated.

⁶ *Secularism and Religion-Making*, Mark Dressler and Arvind-Pal Mandair (eds), Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 275 + x. All quotes in this section are from this book, with page number indicated.

⁷ *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World*, Stephen Prothero, HarperOne, 2010, pp. 388 + ix. All quotes in this section are from this book, with page number indicated.

A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology and Ecclesiology, by Doug Coleman (Pasadena: EMS Dissertation Series, William Carey International University Press, 2011)

—reviewed by Bradford Greer, Ph.D.



The title of this Ph.D. dissertation led me to assume that Doug Coleman was going to provide a theological analysis of insider movements. Many missiologists are eagerly awaiting studies of this nature. However, what Coleman actually does is to analyze articles written by what appears to be primarily Western authors who have written in favor of insider movements.¹ Due to this, the dissertation could have been more appropriately entitled: “A Theological Analysis of Articles Written in Defense of the Insider Movement Paradigm.” This clarification in the title would have helped me properly align my expectations and would have spared me from my initial disappointment.

Nonetheless, Coleman demonstrates clearly within this dissertation that he is, first and foremost, a *Christian* scholar. His analysis of these writings is irenic and generously fair. Even though he may disagree with authors over specific issues, he refers to these authors with respect and grace. In this way he continues to keep the bar high for Christian scholarship.

Coleman was transparent about his research methodology and the assumptions behind them. However, I was disappointed to find one dimension in his research methodology lacking. Being that missiology is an interdisciplinary academic field that primarily researches the dynamics that happen when the church, Scripture, and any given culture intersect, I generally expect that a missiological dissertation will engage with a specific culture or a select number of cultures rather than a selection of articles. This fieldwork grounds the research and safeguards it from becoming ethereal. Coleman was transparent about the absence of this engagement in his introduction.² However, the lack of field research (describing how a particular group or groups of followers of Christ from other religions are engaging with the Scripture in their context) appears to have negatively impacted his ensuing methodology and analysis. I saw this impact in three fundamental assumptions that shape Coleman’s methodology, assumptions that appear to have gone unnoticed by Coleman. These assumptions surface as one works through the dissertation. Field research likely would have revealed to Coleman at least two of these assumptions and enabled him to make appropriate adjustments.

The first assumption that Coleman makes is to view Islam through an essentialist lens. Essentialism defines faith in

very limited terms. With regard to Islam, it is often described in terms of a particular set of classical interpretations of Islamic sacred and legal literature.³ However, when one watches faith in practice one notices the incredible diversity in what is actually believed. This is why defining a world religion like Islam in an essentialist manner is problematic. Coleman’s essentialist view of Islam causes him to conceptualize and define Islam in a monolithic manner and disregard the significance of the actual diversity in faith and practice that exists within and across Islamic communities.⁴

The second assumption that Coleman makes is to conceptualize culture in a mono-dimensional manner. Thus, he appears to assume that a culture can be divided into independent categories rather than viewing it as a multidimensional mosaic of interconnected parts. Thus, Coleman is able to speak about Islam as if it can be isolated from Islamic cultures.

The third unnoticed assumption is a bit surprising for a dissertation that claims to be substantially theological in nature. It appears that Coleman disregards the impact of hermeneutics on exegesis and the interpretation of Scripture and assumes that holding to a high view of Scripture either nullifies or minimizes the impact of personal story and theological/church tradition(s) upon one’s understanding of Scripture.

Now, we evangelicals do not have a magisterium upon which to rely for authorization of our interpretation of Scripture. It is customary in evangelical academic theological discourse for analysts to follow certain procedures as they approach the Scriptures. Scholars are expected to reflect upon and articulate the assumptions that they bring to the text, in other words, describe their hermeneutical lens. One’s hermeneutical lens is often shaped by one’s theological and church tradition(s) as well as one’s personal journey. After this honest and transparent reflection, if the methodology behind the exegesis is acceptable and the analysis consistent, then the conclusions can be considered viable. A fellow academic may not agree with the fundamental assumptions that comprise an analyst’s hermeneutical lens, but the analysis and conclusions are generally to be considered viable. This process is important because evangelicalism embraces a wide range of potentially conflicting theological traditions (such as Presbyterianism, Methodism, Pentecostalism, etc.). This transparency in methodology facilitates us academics to stand united in Christ even though we may disagree on particular theological points.

However, in his “Key Assumptions” section, Coleman downplayed the significance of one’s hermeneutical lens on the interpretive process. He stated: “The role of experience and worldview and their impact on hermeneutics is worth debating, but the basic starting point for methodology should be the text of the Bible.”⁵ He proceeded to state that he views Scripture as inerrant and coherent. Thus, it appears that

Coleman assumes that holding to a high view of Scripture either nullifies or minimizes the impact of personal story and theological/church tradition(s) upon how one reads the text.

This compelled me to conclude that a naïve realist epistemology shapes his hermeneutical lens.⁶ The downside of naïve realism is that it tends to narrow the analysts' ability to observe data and discern nuances that do not align with or contradict their assumptions or analysis. It also can cause analysts to be over-confident about their conclusions. The impact of naïve realism can be subtle, and it can be pervasive. Did this naïve realistic epistemology render Coleman unaware of his essentialist and monolithic view of Islam and his mono-dimensional view of culture? These appear to be interrelated.

At least, with regard to his theological traditions, Coleman acknowledged that he holds to a Baptist ecclesiology. However, the reader is left to fill in the details of his hermeneutical lens.

As I read through Coleman's work, I saw these three assumptions emerge and shape his analysis and his conclusions as he interacted with the articles.

Coleman's begins his analysis by looking at the Insider Movement Paradigm and Theology of Religions. Coleman adopts a soteriological conceptual paradigm for analyzing religions and the statements about religions by Insider Movement Paradigm (IMP) proponents, viewing them as either exclusivistic, inclusivistic, or pluralistic.⁷

Coleman is generously fair as he presents the IMP proponents view that God is at work in some ways in other religions, and that members of these religions can come under the Lordship of Christ and enter the kingdom of God without aligning themselves with "Christianity" (that is, primarily Western, cultural expressions of the Christian faith), and remain within their "socio-religious" communities. He credits the IMP proponents as being exclusivistic noting that "their writings indicate that they affirm the necessity of hearing and believing in the gospel of Jesus Christ in order to be saved."⁸

In this section Coleman focuses in on the writings of one proponent in particular, Kevin Higgins, because Higgins has written the most about the theology of religions. Reflecting on these writings with the aforementioned soteriological paradigm, Coleman recognizes that

Higgins both affirms and rejects elements of all three traditional categories. In a technical sense, he appears to affirm an exclusivist position regarding soteriology. Higgins finds some agreement with inclusivists regarding ways in which God may be at work in the religions and the positive value they may hold. Other than the admission that it perhaps provides the best explanation for the Melchizedek event, Higgins seems to find little agreement with pluralism.⁹

Yet, Coleman acknowledges that he has difficulty incorporating the assertion that "it is permissible to remain in one's pre-salvation non-Christian religion while redefining or reinterpreting aspects of it."¹⁰ Coleman had previously described how Higgins conceptualized this "remaining." He wrote:

Dividing religion into three dimensions, Higgins suggests that the "remaining" may look different in each. For example, Naaman modified some of his *beliefs* and *behavior*, but at the level of *belonging* appears to have continued just as before... Finally, Higgins asserts that a biblical understanding of conversion does not require an institutional transfer of religion, but "...the reorientation of the heart and mind (e.g. Rom 12:1ff)."¹¹

Yet, even with this recognition that there is a change in beliefs and in behavior, it appears impossible for Coleman to accept that a follower of Christ can remain in his or her "religion."

This is where Coleman's unmentioned assumptions impact his analysis. In Coleman's mono-dimensional view of culture, a community is comprised of aggregate parts. Thus, one can divide and isolate aspects of the culture (in this case religion) rather than seeing all these aspects as inextricably interrelated.¹² In addition, since he essentialistically and monolithically defines religion (in particular, Islam), then it is obvious how remaining within it would be seen as impossible. This exemplifies how Coleman's assumptions limit his analysis and conclusions.

Reading this chapter reminded me of Stephen's speech in Acts 7. In his book, *The New Testament and the People of God*, N.T. Wright points out that the land and the temple were key identity markers for the people of Israel.¹³ Stephen's speech undermined these identity markers. Stephen pointed out how God had been with Abraham, Moses, and Joseph outside the land. Solomon, who had built the temple, recognized how the temple could not contain God. For Stephen, the presence of God and the responsive obedience of his people to his presence were the vital identity markers for the people of God. Is not this what Kevin Higgins' quote articulated—that one's true identity as followers of Jesus is fundamentally comprised of one's allegiance and obedience to Jesus and his Word and the manifestation of Jesus' presence among his people by their change of behavior? All other identity markers are inconsequential.

Coleman proceeds to look at the Christian doctrine of revelation and the insider movement paradigm. As the discussion begins, one is confronted with a limitation as to Coleman's development of the Christian understanding of revelation. Coleman appears to regard general revelation as if it were a static enterprise by God, that is, something that God has done previously in space and time. Coleman states:

At the most basic level, Scripture indicates that creation confronts man with the existence of God and informs him to some extent of God's attributes, specifically His eternal power and divine

What authority do outsiders actually have? Where do outsider theological concerns cross the line and actually exemplify a form of theological imperialism—a theolonialism?

nature (Rom. 1:20). Furthermore, God has placed awareness of moral responsibility within man's conscience.¹⁴ (Rom. 2:14-15)

Though this perception of God's putting information about himself in the creation and in human conscience as a static event may be a classic perception in theology, it does not adequately reflect the biblical testimony. As evangelicals, we make a distinction between natural theology (that which man can discern about God through this "static" information) and general revelation (God actively revealing himself to people through what he has made and through an active involvement in people's consciences). Coleman appears to overlook this dimension in general revelation as the active, ongoing act of God in revealing himself to people. Did a naïve realist approach to the doctrine of revelation cause him to overlook this significant distinction in his analysis?

This subtle distinction reshapes Coleman's analysis of direct and special revelation. It removes the discussion from being a strictly rational, analytical process and intentionally appreciates how God is personally engaged in each step of the revelatory process with each person and with communities across space and time. The personal testimony of many Muslims that they have come to faith in Christ through visions, dreams, or through a healing demonstrates God's personal involvement in this self-revelatory process.

How did and does this ongoing active working of God impact the way the Qur'an was comprised or impact the way the Qur'an is read by Muslims? As Coleman acknowledges, this is difficult to determine. Nonetheless, what he acknowledges is that God has used the Qur'an to lead people to faith in Christ. Coleman quotes Dean Gilliland whose research found that thirty percent of Nigerian Fulbe believers indicated the Qur'anic references to Jesus led them to seek more information about Jesus.¹⁵

While Coleman acknowledges that IMP proponents do not affirm "the Qur'an as the 'Word of God' or inspired scripture," he feels that "the Christian understanding of revelation and the sufficiency of the Bible raise significant questions regarding such an approach, especially in light of the Muslim view of the Qur'an and Muhammad."¹⁶ He states:

The Bible's teaching on these matters sets it at odds with the traditional Muslim interpretation of the Qur'an. Christians cannot accept the Muslim view that "... the message revealed through Muhammad—the Qur'an—must be regarded as the culmination and the end of all prophetic revelation.¹⁷

Though this traditional understanding of the Qur'an may be the understanding of many Muslims across the globe, it

is not the only understanding. There are those who identify themselves as Muslims and believe that the Qur'an is only a collection of stories. How should this acknowledgment of the actual diversity in belief that exists within Islamic communities impact Coleman's analysis? This is another example of how Coleman's essentialism limits him.

It appears that Coleman joins the ranks of those who feel that if the Qur'an is used, insider believers may ascribe an undue authoritative status to all the content in the Qur'an. This, from an outside standpoint, appears to be a valid concern. This leads Coleman to conclude:

Regarding Islam, the IMP, and the doctrine of revelation, this chapter suggested that the Qur'an contains both general and special revelation, the latter via oral tradition. It was also noted that traditional Muslim interpretations of the Qur'an conflict with God's revelation in the Bible. Nevertheless, some missiologists advocate reading Christian meaning into the Qur'an without providing warrant for their hermeneutic, other than pointing to Paul's approach in Acts 17.¹⁸

What Coleman fails to realize is that the reason that IMP proponents have defended the practice of reading the Qur'an through a Christ-centered lens is because this is what insider believing communities have done. Though I may agree or disagree with Coleman's analysis of Acts 17 and the implications of what Paul's use of the altar to the unknown god and his use of local folklore indicate, a bigger issue arises here. The issue is this: What authority do outsiders actually have as they assess and evaluate what insider believing communities do? Where do outsider theological concerns cross the line and actually exemplify a form of theological imperialism—a *theolonialism*?

What Coleman (and those he quotes who concur with his conclusions) does not appear to understand (and therefore cannot appreciate) is that the Qur'an is an integral part of the narrative world of most, if not all, Muslims. Even for Muslims who do not accept the Qur'an as a sacred text and acknowledge that it exerts no influence in shaping their lives or values, it still can be an integral part of their world.¹⁹ This reminds me of a discussion a few believing friends from Muslim backgrounds were having years ago. They were discussing how they used the Qur'an to present their faith. I asked them if I could use the Qur'an in these ways. They unanimously and without hesitation said, "No. It is our book, not yours." Even though they were followers of Christ, they unanimously owned the Qur'an as an integral part of their world.

Therefore, are not insider believing communities duly authorized by the Lord to determine how they use their Islamic texts, how much "authority" they ascribe to them, and how

they ultimately interpret them? As long as they hold the Scriptures as the ultimate and final authority in their lives, is there a problem with believing communities determining how they use something that is so integrally a part of their narrative world?

This question of who holds the authority arises again in Coleman's ensuing discussion of soteriology. With regard to soteriology and the IMP, Coleman's assumptions shape his analysis. He states: "[T]he most basic claim of the Insider Movement paradigm is that biblical faith in Jesus does not require a change of religious affiliation, identity, or belonging."²⁰ Coleman defines what he means by religious affiliation where he writes: "salvation does not require a change of religious affiliation and, therefore, a faithful follower of Jesus Christ can remain within the socio-religious community of Islam."²¹ I appreciate that Coleman described religious affiliation as remaining within one's socio-religious community, making this distinct from one's allegiance to Christ. This is an important distinction. Nonetheless, for a follower of Christ to remain in one's Islamic socio-religious community is incongruous to Coleman. Since Coleman views culture as a composite of aggregate parts, he assumes Islam and culture are separable.

IMP proponents assert that in many contexts they are not separable. Thus, IMP proponents differentiate between one's allegiance to Christ, which can never be compromised, and one's affiliation with one's socio-religious community, which can be retained if the insider so chooses.

Reflecting on this, Coleman provides an extensive analysis of two texts the IMP proponents have used to justify this "remaining": Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians 8–10. Coleman does especially well in revealing the nuances behind the discussion and the decision of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.

Regarding IMP claims about Acts 15, Coleman states that "advocates are correct in understanding this passage as fundamentally a debate about salvation, and whether Gentiles were required to follow the Law in order to be saved. Acts 15:1 makes it clear that teachers from Judea saw circumcision as essential for salvation, or at least a necessary evidence of true faith. Furthermore, some of the believers from among the Pharisees also added that Gentiles should "observe the Law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). These constituted the two demands related to Gentile salvation (v. 21) The issue in Acts 15 is "... not merely post-conversion behaviour but what constitutes true conversion in the first place."²²

This, however, as Coleman points out so well, is not an adequate description of the issue. For the Council comes up with certain prohibitions in their letter. These prohibitions indicated that the Council was concerned that Gentile Christians completely disassociate themselves from idolatry and idolatrous practices²³ and even "refrain from activities that even resembled pagan worship, thereby avoiding even the appearance of evil."²⁴

Coleman concludes his analysis of soteriology by saying:

Not only does union with Christ represent the central truth of salvation and the core of Paul's experience and thought, it also functions as the reason for his prohibition of both sexual immorality and idolatry. Theologically, to be united with Christ in salvation is incompatible with both of these.²⁵

I think all IMP proponents would agree with his statement.

Where the disagreement arises is in Coleman's application of this truth. He appears to make the error of "direct transferability,"²⁶ equating first century idolatrous worship with attendance at Muslim religious ceremonies. He states:

The point here is not whether Insider believers must avoid mosque premises entirely, or even whether faith in Jesus requires them to adopt the term "Christian" or refuse labels such as "Muslim," "full Muslim," or "Isahi Muslim." In view here is continued participation in the Muslim religious community. If remaining in one's religious community is an essential part of Insider Movements, and if participating in mosque worship or other clearly religious events is required for maintaining one's status as a "Muslim" religious insider, the approach is contrary to Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 8–10.²⁷

What Coleman fails to recognize is that so many differences exist between first century Mediterranean world idol worship (along with dining at temples in Corinth) and Muslim religious ceremonies in the twenty-first century that these should not be equated.

This error of direct transferability and his assumed essentialism compel Coleman to construct a single image of Islam as well as what an insider believer's appropriate response to it should be. However, at least one insider believer, Brother Yusuf, does not necessarily agree with Coleman's image or response.²⁸ The question arises: Who then is authorized to construct the authoritative image of Islam (as if there is only one) and the appropriate response to that image? Is it Coleman or the insider believer? According to Coleman, he—the outsider—is authorized.²⁹

It appears that Coleman's oversteps the boundaries here and exhibits a form of theolonialism. His monolithic definition of Islam limits his range of movement in this area. He does not realize that Islam is actually defined by Islamic communities and that these communities define it in different ways. This is why Islam looks different across and within Islamic communities.

Coleman concludes his analysis by focusing on the ecclesiology that appears in the writings of the IMP proponents. Coleman graciously acknowledges that the IMP proponents have not been anti-church. He notes that in their writings IMP proponents have stated that though insider believers may continue some form of mosque attendance or visitation they also participate in separate gatherings of those who are followers of Jesus. What is troubling for Coleman is that he finds the ecclesiology of the IMP proponents deficient.

Coleman is transparent that his hermeneutic for his ecclesiology is Baptist, that is, it is based upon the principle of regenerate church membership. Coleman admits that his ecclesiological perspective, though based upon Scripture, is somewhat idealistic. He writes:

The ideal of regenerate church membership does not mean it is always perfectly executed in any local body of believers; only God ultimately knows with certainty the spiritual state of any individual who professes faith.³⁰

What also shapes Coleman's ecclesiology is that his approach to church is "separatist." It is not without warrant that Coleman is neither a Presbyterian nor Anglican. Had he been, would he have been so inclined to begin his analysis with the Epistle to the Hebrews?

Coleman points out how the IMP proponents have compared insider believers with early Jewish believers. IMP proponents have stated in their writings that since early Jewish believers remained fully within Judaism for many decades this justifies insider believers remaining as active members within their socio-religious communities. However, Coleman points out that

as the temple of God and the New Testament people of God, the church possesses a unique continuity with Israel and Judaism...in spite of this continuity, [the Letter to the] Hebrews argues that the old covenant has been fulfilled in Christ and, therefore, the church is to sever ties with Judaism. Remaining in or returning to Judaism, a divinely inspired system, constituted a serious spiritual danger for the early Jewish believers.³¹

I think that Peter O'Brien nuances the problem these believers were facing a bit better than Coleman. It appears that the problem was that they were in danger of abandoning their identity in Christ and corporate fellowship and returning to "a 'reliance on the cultic structures of the old covenant' in order to avoid persecution."³² To abandon Christ and rely once again upon these structures was a serious danger. In the light of this, Coleman raises an important concern. I think an appropriate way to value this concern would be to help insider believers understand the historical context of the Letter to the Hebrews and its historical application. This would facilitate their ability to discern what the Spirit would say to them in their context in the light of what is written.

A significant weakness arises in Coleman's analysis when he begins to look at how IMP proponents describe how church is practiced. His ecclesiological presuppositions, combined with a lack of field research, make him appear somewhat unable to cope with the on-the-ground realities that exist in various Islamic contexts.

This becomes evident when Coleman cannot appreciate Rebecca Lewis' assertion that insider believers "do not attempt to form neo-communities of 'believers-only' that compete with the family network (no matter how contextualized)";

instead, "insider movements" consist of believers remaining in and transforming their own pre-existing family networks, minimally disrupting their families and communities.³³ Coleman views this as an "apparent rejection of regenerate church membership."³⁴ He somehow assumes that non-related individual believers can be brought together and form a separate "neo-community" of "believers-only."³⁵ It appeared to me that his presuppositions combined with a lack of field research impacted how he interpreted what Lewis actually describes.

Coleman posits that forming churches with redeemed believers who are not necessarily related would be much more biblical. Bringing together individuals who are truly converted would create a more formalized church structure. Membership would be established clearly through baptism, not based upon relational ties. A formal membership would heighten the value of the celebration of the Lord's Supper and would in turn facilitate church discipline.³⁶ In his view, the benefit of this formalization is forfeited when extended family units are the foundation for the church.

In the area where I have worked for over 25 years, grouping of unrelated "believers" often does not result in the formation of meaningful "churches." These groups are comprised usually of men and these believers tend to bond with the foreigner(s) connected to the group rather than to one another. These "believing" individuals form little relational trust or relational accountability among themselves. The foreigner usually has no access to their communities or their families to discover how these "believers" actually live out their lives. Therefore, since there is no knowledge of how these individuals actually live, there is no possibility of church discipline. What also has happened in these contexts is that if any "believers" discover the misdeeds of another, these believers often have no relational capacity to address the issue. If they try to address the misbehaving believer, that believer can cause immense problems for those confronting him. As a result, little if any church discipline takes place.

In contrast, relational trust usually exists within extended family groups. In addition, when the groups are comprised of extended family members, then the family members know how the others are living. Those who are the leaders within the family can discipline those who are not living appropriately, or these leaders can appeal to outside help if necessary. Thus, Coleman's concerns appear to have arisen from his lack of engagement with church planters. This is why field research is invaluable in missiology. It roots one's analysis in what actually occurs in given cultural contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Doug Coleman's dissertation provides a valuable service in that it provides a scholarly lens through which to evaluate the writings of proponents of the Insider Movement Paradigm. Coleman is irenic and generously fair in his treatment of the subject matter and of those whose writings he analyzes. His methodology and his analysis are

naturally impacted by his assumptions. What is problematic in his research is that he appears to hold to three assumptions of which he was incognizant. He does not seem to recognize the actual diversity in belief and practice that can exist within Islamic contexts. He also views culture mono-dimensionally; therefore, it is assumed that religion is something that can be separated from culture. He does not realize how integrated Islam actually is in the cultures in question. This essentialism and mono-dimensional view of culture appear to make it difficult for him to see how followers of Christ can remain within their socio-religious communities. The third assumption he makes is that he assumes that a high view of Scripture negates or minimizes the impact of culture and worldview on exegesis and interpretation of Scripture. This indicates that he holds to a naïve realistic epistemology. Does this naïve realistic epistemology along with the other two assumptions limit his conceptual categories and his range of movement in his theologizing? It does appear so. Finally, since Coleman's research is primarily textual, it lacks the benefit of field research. Conducting field research would have exposed Coleman to the weaknesses embedded in his assumptions and positively impacted his analysis and conclusions. **IJFM**

Editor's note: This review was based on the Kindle edition of Coleman's work, which does not have page numbers. As a service to our readers, we have provided in brackets the original page numbers corresponding to each Kindle location (or set of locations). Example: Kindle Locations 619–628. [p. 22]

Endnotes

¹ Coleman, Doug. *A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology and Ecclesiology* (Pasadena: EMS Dissertation Series, William Carey International University Press, 2011), Kindle Locations 620–622. [p. 22] Kindle Edition.

² Kindle Locations 619–628. [p. 22]

³ See Jung, Dietrich. *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere* (Equinox Publishing, 2011), 5.

⁴ For an example of this see Kindle Locations 2748–2756. [pp. 176–77]

⁵ Kindle Locations 590–591. [p. 20]

⁶ This perception of his naïve realism is reinforced by Coleman's later statement that "missiology should be driven and governed by biblical and theological teaching and parameters" (Kindle Locations 622–623). [p. 22] The statement is true. However, it neglects to acknowledge the significant impact of cultural context on the person doing the biblical exegesis and interpretation.

⁷ Kindle Locations 676–687. [pp. 26–28]

⁸ Kindle Locations 698–699. [p. 28]

⁹ Kindle Locations 828–831. [p. 37–38]

¹⁰ Kindle Locations 831–834. [p. 38]

¹¹ Kindle Locations 795–800. [p. 35]

¹² This mono-dimensional view of culture as being comprised of aggregate parts is reflected in this quote by Coleman: "Lewis also points out that conversion to a certain cultural form of Christianity

is not necessary for membership in the kingdom, and may even prove to be a hindrance. This, too, is a helpful distinction, although her application of it leads to a false dichotomy. She fails to mention the possibility of a new form of biblical faith appropriate to the local culture yet distinct from other religious communities and identities" (Kindle Locations 1350–1352). [p. 74]

¹³ Wright, N.T. *The New Testament and the People of God* (Fortress Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Kindle Locations 1460–1462. [p. 83]

¹⁵ Kindle Locations 1808–1809. [p. 107]

¹⁶ Kindle Locations 1428–1430. [p. 81]

¹⁷ Kindle Locations 1695–1698. [p. 99]

¹⁸ Kindle Locations 2168–2171. [p. 133]

¹⁹ For an example of this in the life of one Muslim scholar, see how Hamed Abdel-Samad speaks about the Qur'an in: Political Scientist Hamed Abdel-Samad: 'Islam Is Like a Drug', <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/0,1518,druck-717589,00.html>, accessed: September 18, 2010.

²⁰ Kindle Locations 2180–2181. [p. 135]

²¹ Kindle Locations 2185–2186. [p. 135]

²² Kindle Locations 2242–2248. [pp. 139–40]

²³ Kindle Locations 2319–2322. [p. 145]

²⁴ Kindle Locations 2326–2328. [p. 146]

²⁵ Kindle Locations 2996–2998. [p. 193]

²⁶ For a description of direct transferability see: Ciampa, Roy E. "Ideological Challenges for Bible Translators," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* (2011) 28 (3): 139–48.

²⁷ Kindle Locations 2758–2764. [pp. 176–77]

²⁸ Kindle Locations 2736–2756. [p. 178]

²⁹ Kindle Locations 2734–2749. [pp. 175–76]

³⁰ Kindle Locations 3456–3457. [p. 227]

³¹ Kindle Locations 3680–3686. [p. 244]

³² O'Brien further describes this danger: "But whatever the precise reasons, it is the outcome of such a turning away that is of great concern to the author. 'Christ, his sacrifice, and his priestly work are so relativised that they are effectively denied, and apostasy is only a whisker away. It is to prevent just such a calamity that the author writes this epistle'" Peter T. O'Brien. *The Letter to the Hebrews*. Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 13.

³³ Kindle Locations 3444–3446. [p. 226]

³⁴ Kindle Location 3450. [p. 226]

³⁵ Kindle Locations 3451–3452. [p. 226]

³⁶ Kindle Locations 3485–3512. [pp. 229–31] Coleman writes: "The above discussion of ordinances, church membership, and church discipline inevitably leads to the conclusion that in order to be faithful to biblical teaching and fulfill its responsibilities, a church must strive for clarity in several matters. First, since membership and the ordinances are for believers, a church must determine as much as is humanly possible the spiritual state of those who are candidates for baptism and membership. It must also refrain from indiscriminately offering the Lord's Supper to anyone in attendance, with no effort to define and explain the proper recipients. In the exercise of its covenant responsibilities, including church discipline, the church must also understand who constitutes its membership" (Kindle Locations 3513–3518, [pp. 231–32]). I did not see these concerns justified in the quotes by Lewis that he provided.

In Others' Words

Editor's note: As we mentioned in the editorial, this issue is several months behind. Because we're committed to bringing your "fresh news," you'll notice material in this section that did not exist in 2012. We hope you'll forgive the obvious anachronisms.

Translating "Son of God"

Coverage of the issues surrounding the debate over translation of "Son of God" continues in popular Christian periodicals ([Ⓞ christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/octoberweb-only/son-of-god-translation-guidelines.html?start=1](http://christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/octoberweb-only/son-of-god-translation-guidelines.html?start=1)). The focus has not been without ramification for organizations. Wycliffe, and its strategic partner SIL, have issued statements which both correct and balance the charges that were earlier advanced against their translation philosophy and practice ([Ⓞ sil.org/translation/divine_familial_terms.htm](http://sil.org/translation/divine_familial_terms.htm)). Prominent New Testament professors and Christian scholars have been included and have interacted on these issues through the Evangelical Theological Society and other forums. Their own positions require on-going refinement and articulation ([Ⓞ frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/2012Clarification.htm](http://frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/2012Clarification.htm)). John Piper took a position in *World* magazine that cites J. I. Packer's interpretation of the prologue to John's gospel ([Ⓞ worldmag.com/articles/19235](http://worldmag.com/articles/19235)). Piper gives all due respect to translators, but weights the importance of using context and teaching, rather than the selection of terms, in correcting misunderstandings of the biblical truth in the minds of readers. One senses the distance from the field and the effort required by those in the American pulpit or behind a seminary lectern to grasp the issues at stake in actual translation and communication to Muslims.

WEA to Lead Review of Translation Practice

The WEA (World Evangelical Alliance) has accepted a request by Wycliffe and SIL for "an independent review of policies and practices relating to the translation of 'God the Father' and the 'Son of God.'" For further information, see wycliffe.net/stories/tabid/67/Default.aspx?id=2631.

"Insider Movement" in a Surprising Place?

Perhaps the most succinct, yet comprehensive, missiological perspective on Insider Movements has been published . . . on Wikipedia ([Ⓞ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insider_Movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insider_Movement)). The article "Insider Movement" covers terms and definitions, the emergence of this social phenomenon, the controversy at hand, and the development of missiological concepts in both Hindu and Muslim contexts. Further reading and external links

are provided (you'll want to check these out carefully). Of course, standard disclaimers concerning Wikipedia apply.

Religion and Identity

The same Wikipedia article (above) provides an outstanding perspective on religion, culture and identity (note the quote in the opening editorial of this issue, which is from section 3.1 and 3.2 of that article). The issue of religious identity is getting a fair amount of press outside the academy, although most of it is still addressing it from a political perspective ([Ⓞ meforum.org/3145/middle-east-christians-identity](http://meforum.org/3145/middle-east-christians-identity)).

A younger perspective on religion and Christian faith has gone viral, and may represent a common suspicion of religious institutions among younger adherents across all religious traditions ([Ⓞ religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/01/19/hate-religion-love-jesus-video-goes-viral/](http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/01/19/hate-religion-love-jesus-video-goes-viral/)).

More technical perspectives on the debate surrounding religion within the academy are filtering into the popular press. One example is the rising role of Chinese intellectuals in what might be termed an indigenous perspective on Christian theology and the Christian church in China ([Ⓞ booksandculture.com/articles/2011/julaug/critiqueallreligions.html](http://booksandculture.com/articles/2011/julaug/critiqueallreligions.html)). Sino-Christian studies include top Chinese intellectuals who weary of the imposition of Western metanarratives that kidnap and interpret what is actually their own indigenous Christian phenomenon. These intellectuals are developing their own original reflections on the distinctly Chinese identity of "their" burgeoning Christian movement. This keen "self-actualizing" of Chinese Christian identity picks up where African and Latin American scholars have been dominant these past decades.

Mobile Technology and Ministry

If one wants to scoop the latest developments in mobile technology in mission, a report has been published online (Executive Summary of the 2011 Mobile Ministry Forum Consultation) from the second annual Mobile Mission Forum (MMF) held at JAARS in North Carolina this past December ([Ⓞ mobileministryforum.org/2012/02/mobile-ministry-forum-2011-consultation-executive-summary](http://mobileministryforum.org/2012/02/mobile-ministry-forum-2011-consultation-executive-summary)). This open and inclusive network shares a goal of seeing mobile access to the gospel across the globe by 2020. **UFM**



Whether you're a Perspectives instructor, student, or coordinator, you can continue to explore issues raised in the course reader and study guide in greater depth in **IJFM**. For ease of reference, each **IJFM** article in the table below is tied thematically to one or more of the 15 Perspectives lessons, divided into four sections: Biblical (B), Historical (H), Cultural (C) and Strategic (S). *Disclaimer: The table below shows where the content of a given article might fit; it does not imply endorsement of a particular article by the editors of the Perspectives materials.* For sake of space, the table only includes lessons related to the articles in a given **IJFM** issue. To learn more about the Perspectives course, visit www.perspectives.org.

Articles in IJFM 28:4

	Lesson 2: The Story of His Glory (B)	Lesson 6: The Expansion of the World Christian Movement (H)	Lesson 7: Eras of Mission History (H)	Lesson 9: The Task Remaining (H)	Lesson 10: How Shall They Hear? (C)	Lesson 11: Building Bridges of Love (C)	Lesson 14: Pioneer Church Planting (S)
Caste, Christianity, and Cross-Cultural Evangelism Revisted N. J. Gnaniah (pp. 161–167)		X	X	X	X	X	
The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Study of Socio-Religious Identity Allen Yeh and Gabriela Olaguibel (pp. 169–177)		X	X		X	X	X
Mission at the Intersection of Religion and Empire Martin Accad (pp. 179–189)			X		X	X	
Going Public with Faith in a Muslim Context: Lessons from Esther Jeff Nelson (pp. 191–194)	X						X
Book Reviews: Wrestling with Religion: Exposing a Taken-for-Granted Assumption in Mission H. L. Richard (pp. 196–203)			X				X
Book Review: A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology and Ecclesiology Bradford Greer (pp. 204–209)					X		X

(Editorial *continued from p. 160*)

portrays an academy grappling with their own categorical assumptions about religion. Richard has pressed this issue at two previous ISFM gatherings. Here in this more sophisticated treatment it's important not to miss the forest in the trees: scholars are wrestling with the essentialist interpretation of religion. Lo and behold, it may be that the academy, which usually trots off in the opposite direction from those of us in missiology, is actually serving our interests at this time. We may need them to help us unpack crude and inaccurate assumptions.

Bradford Greer's critique of Doug Coleman's recent dissertation engages us in another pertinent academic field: the theology of religion. Coleman has given us an historical and analytical review of the past few decades of literature on Insider Movements,

and Greer is quick to point out the presuppositions which carry over from Coleman's academic discipline. Again, an essentialist interpretation of religion seems to raise its head, and Greer feels this subtracts from a more full and accurate interpretation of movements to Christ within other religious worlds. (We hope to hear a response from Doug in the next issue).

These four articles and two reviews hopefully will stimulate and inform your study of religion and identity. The bottom line is whether or not it helps us understand the formation of "Christian" identity on the religious frontiers. Stay tuned for more on this subject in future issues of the journal.

Finally, the obvious "anachronisms" in my editorial and in the *In Others' Words* section betray the fact that our October–December 2011 issue is very

late in getting to you (late Spring 2012). We apologize and want you to know that we're working hard to get caught up by the end of 2012. While the date on the cover may not be current, please rest assured that the material in this issue is very much up-to-date.

In Him,

Brad Gill
 Editor, IJFM

Endnotes

¹ I don't normally cite Wikipedia, but I found this quote from the insider movements page exceptional. Wikipedia contributors, "Insider movement," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Insider_movement&oldid=490903202 (accessed April 25, 2012).

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