

## Peripheral Vision

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July–September 2018



## The Discipline of a Lateral Gaze

I was walking with Todd Johnson through his Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) when he handed me their new regional study of North Africa and Western Asia.<sup>1</sup> As I leafed through its pages, I found myself back in the Arab streets and towns where I had served so long ago. But this volume provided a perspective that I had struggled to obtain during those years in North Africa—an aerial sweep of that predominantly Muslim geo-political world.

One particular memory stands out. I had been feeling a dull marathoner's ache from some long months of ministry in my Muslim mountain community when I got hold of a piece of fiction. Needing a little mental escape, I plunged into the tale of a renegade intelligence officer skulking around the streets of Southeast Asia. I don't remember the plot, but I'll never forget a principle vividly illustrated in the story's denouement. Ultimately, it was a tale of two kinds of knowledge: the first embodied by the street-level, cultural savvy of a covert operative; the second, by an older woman down in the basement of the home office, combing diligently through mountains of data from that region of the world. The resolution of the case required both kinds of knowledge. That story left an indelible impression on how I view the missiological task.

The 12,000 volumes at the CSGC represent a librarian's organization of global mission. Subjects are shelved categorically and predictably in an overall kaleidoscope of World Christianity. More than once I wanted to park and pull a title. The files were buried in the back offices, where the vital data for the World Christian Encyclopedia is compiled. I couldn't help but recall the elderly lady pouring over intelligence data in that spy thriller. The lesson was transferable: a more comprehensive knowledge is a vital complement to the skill and savvy of a field worker.

The articles in this issue of *IJFM* may fit those same categories. But they also demonstrate a discipline of mind we might label "peripheral vision." Strategic phenomena for our study and reflection might be close at hand, but run parallel to our mission, thus failing to intersect with it. As a result, they remain unrelated, unincorporated, and unused. Our peripheral vision fails us.

It was Edward de Bono who introduced the idea of *lateral thinking* a few decades ago, a kind of logic that disrupts the more traditional *vertical thought* process.

Lateral thinking moves across subject matter, like my roaming of those volumes at the CSGC. But that kind of thinking requires a more deliberate exercise, a kind of

Editorial *continued on p. 104*

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discipline that challenges the logic of a library. It tests our categories by pressing toward the margins, examining what tends to be ignored on the periphery. It will search beyond any denominational status quo and welcome the ambiguity of apparent incompatibilities. When it comes to missiology, lateral thinking promises to loosen up the matter-of-factness of locked down paradigms. It creates new vantage points and a broader canvas for missiological reflection.

These articles do just that. H. L. Richard looked afield and discovered a recent Roman Catholic movement among the peoples of India. His interaction with Fr. Jose Panadan offers valuable lessons on the dynamics of the gospel in a Hindu religious world (p. 105). Christian Anderson looks sideways and compares two movements in the distinct socio-religious contexts of Iran and Bangladesh, insisting that religious structures like the Muslim *ummah* (global community) shape the conditions of discipleship (p. 117).

George Bristow continues this journal's intrepid excursion into the subject of Muhammad and biblical prophethood (p. 127). David Dunaetz introduces the

insights of cognitive science to help us face the impact of technology on learning and theological education in the Majority World (p. 135).

Some have recently suggested that frontier missiology suffers from tunnel vision. Lee and Park in the recent *Missiology*<sup>2</sup> claim that the unreached people's emphasis (UPG) over the past four decades is myopic and naïve given 21st century global conditions (p. 148). Globalization, they say, calls for a more progressive anthropology, one that sees beyond the antiquated notion of people groups. We will be addressing some of these concerns this fall at ISFM 2018.

As an initial response we invite you to troll our archives ([ijfm.org](http://ijfm.org)) and benefit from our journal's lateral thinking across various disciplines, perspectives, and global realities. We believe you'll find promoted there a "peripheral" vision that qualifies static understandings of those conditions we now face among the frontier peoples of the world.

ISFM 2018 offers a rare opportunity to tackle how we communicate the frontier mission task to the wider body of Christ. For the past two years, mission

demographers have been wrestling with definitions of unreached peoples. In October, key leaders of mission mobilization agencies will hold a summit around the theme "Clarifying the Frontier Mission Task." Presentations, case studies, and formal responses will also seek to involve feedback and participation from all participants. To register for the October 12–14 gathering, which will be held at the Graduate Institute of Linguistics/GIAL, Dallas, Texas, go to [emsweb.org](http://emsweb.org) (see back cover).

In Him,



Brad Gill  
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth R. Ross, Mariz Tadros, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *Christianity in North Africa and West Asia*, Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity (Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Peter T. Lee and James Sung-Hwan Park, "Beyond people group thinking: A critical reevaluation of unreached people groups," *Missiology* 46, no. 3 (2018): 212–225, doi: 10.1177/0091829618774332.

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- ☞ 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.

# A Hindu “Path of Jesus”: A Case Study of Modern Roman Catholic Contextualization

by H. L. Richard

In the latter stages of the transformative Vatican II gathering (1962–5), the Jesuits launched a new pioneering ministry focused on non-Dalit Hindus in the northern part of the Indian state of Gujarat. The pioneer missionary, Fr. Manuel Diaz Garriz (1932– ) from Spain, is celebrated in a recent publication as “among the ‘missionary greats’ like De Nobili, Beschi and John de Britto for proving that one can fully belong to one’s *samaj* [social group/caste], and simultaneously, be a true *bhakt* (disciple) [devotee] of Jesus” (Rose 2011, 285; definitions in brackets are mine).

Yet that ministry today is not thriving. Garriz himself commissioned his younger Jesuit colleague, Fr. Jose Panadan, to “go deeply into this matter and study the causes by which the initial enthusiasm became dim.” (Panadan 2015: xxiv) Despite the passing of over half a century since the launching of this venture, this remains the only sustained outreach focused on caste Hindus that has been attempted in light of modern understandings of inculturation (or contextualization).<sup>1</sup> This paper will outline the approach of the mission to North Gujarat by exploring the insights that emerge in its initial success and, so far as can be discerned, the causes for its failure.<sup>2</sup>

This case study is based on three publications: *Mission in North Gujarat Volume 1: The Beginnings 1964–1989* was compiled by M. Diaz Garriz in 2004, was never publicly distributed, but was intended to help new mission personnel in North Gujarat understand the principles and roots of the mission; *Mission in North Gujarat II: The Way Ahead 1990–2011* was compiled and edited by Jose Panadan in 2011; and Panadan’s doctoral work, *Inculturation and Local Church: An Ecclesio-Missiological Investigation of the North Gujarat Experiment*, which was published in 2015.<sup>3</sup> Jose Panadan pointed me to these resources when we met at the Fellowship of Indian Missiologists in October of 2017, and he also procured for me a copy of the obscure first volume. My sincere thanks to Jose for his help in preparing this analysis.

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H. L. Richard is an independent researcher focused on the Hindu-Christian encounter. He has published numerous books and articles including studies of key figures like Narayan Vaman Tilak (Following Jesus in the Hindu Context: The Intriguing Implications of N. V. Tilak’s Life and Thought, Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1998), Kalagara Subba Rao (Exploring the Depths of the Mystery of Christ: K. Subba Rao’s Eclectic Praxis of Hindu Discipleship to Jesus, Bangalore: Centre for Contemporary Christianity, 2005), and R. C. Das (R. C. Das: Evangelical Prophet for Contextual Christianity, Delhi: ISPCK for the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1995).

## *The Approach in North Gujarat*

There are two complementary angles from which to view the North Gujarat mission. One is to focus on the theoretical foundations of the ministry, the other is to carefully observe practical field engagements. The theoretical will be outlined first, and it is based on a paper by Jose Panadan entitled "The Mission Paradigm of North Gujarat from the Perspective of Inculturation" (2011a). Panadan spells out the missiological orientation quite clearly, and this section will follow the six points highlighted by Panadan in his paper.

### 1. Hindu by Culture, Christian by Faith

The understanding that one can be a Christian by faith but a Hindu by culture is noted from earlier cases in Indian Christian history, but Panadan suggests that "we did not see this approach being lived out concretely and historically in any community" (2011a, 28). Following Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861–1907), a distinction is made between faith identity (*sadbana dharma*) and social identity (*samaj dharma*).<sup>4</sup> In keeping with this distinction, pioneer missionary Garriz avoided two terms: "to become" and "Christian." Panadan points out that

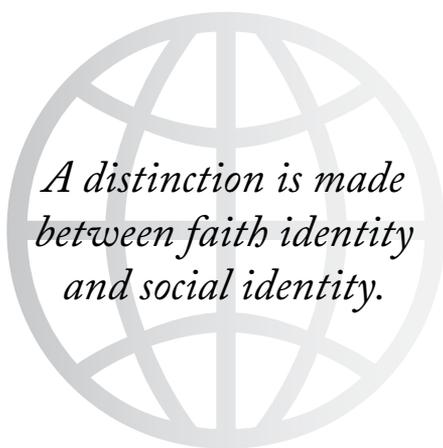
...instead of the expression "becoming" the word "accepting" is used. Thus, one does not become a Christian; rather, remaining within the Hindu fold, one accepts the message, the Way and the person of Jesus. This mode of proclamation inherently accepts Hinduism as a culture rather than a religion—thus the transformation is not a change of religion (*dharmaparivartan*) but the acceptance of a "Way of Life" (*panth*). (2011a, 28; emphasis original)

This understanding is rooted in the context-sensitive understanding of conversion that was spelled out by Hans Staffner:

As long as conversion signifies the discarding of the convert's social community our efforts at evangelization will always appear to them [Hindus] in the wrong light. This mixing up of religion and community obscures the

supernatural character of the Church, and mission work will always be suspect and be interpreted as a form of communal aggression. Every endeavour to spread the Kingdom of God will be seen as [an] attempt on the part of the Indian Christian community to increase its numerical strength at the expense of the larger Hindu community. It boils down finally to a struggle for dominance and a competition in all those spheres in which the interests of one civilian community are opposed to the interests of another civilian community: political and economic power, employment, privileges, etc.<sup>5</sup> (Panadan 2015, 249–250, quoting from Staffner 1973, 490)

I discuss this approach more fully below (in point six) on the matter of caste as sociological habitat. The North Gujarat



Mission achieved a measure of success in this approach, but it still represents just the tip of an iceberg in terms of inculturation/contextualization.<sup>6</sup>

### 2. Jesus as *Purna Avatar* (full incarnation)

Whether Jesus should be thought of in terms of *avatara* ("descent" of a deity) is one of the hotly debated issues in Indian Christian theology, and Panadan has an extended discussion of the issue in his doctoral work (2015, 291–313). But at the practical level the term simply resonates with Hindus. As Panadan says in his brief article,

followers of Jesus while following Hindu culture accept the message of Jesus;

accept Jesus as their "Guru," as their Redeemer and as the *Purna Avatar*. Those who accept Jesus as the *Purna Avatar* acknowledge the presence of other traditions and other *avatars*, but for them, Jesus is the ultimate Guru, the way, the truth, the one who can lead them to salvation and the "definitive self-revelation of God." (2011a, 30–1)

### 3. Ecclesiology of the *Isupanth*

In North Gujarat, there are many *panths* (paths or ways), so the message of Jesus was presented as the *Isu panth*, his disciples being *Isupanthis*. Most of those who chose to follow Jesus came from the *Niranth Panth*,

a popular group of Hindus highly independent from dogma or institutionalism and it has no temples nor images nor gods. (Panadan 2011a, 31)

This [Isupanthi] terminology being inclusive, indicates that there is no separate social identity for one who accepts the gospel. After all, Jesus did not establish a new religion, rather he initiated a transformation within the existing religion. (Panadan 2011a, 31)

In his larger work, Panadan spells out what this means:

This ecclesiological vision would make more sense if we understand *Isupanth* basically as a movement within Hinduism. (2015, 438)

The rhetoric of the North Gujarat Mission thus is fully in line with what is now in Evangelical Protestant terms called "insider movements." The new Jesus movement is not to be "Christian" but rather a movement within Hinduism. But the reality of what happened is a more complicated story; was it or could it ever be possible for this type of insider movement to be realized in such a deeply institutionalized entity as the Roman Catholic Church?

### 4. Every Priest as a Guru

The context of the popular religiosity of North Gujarat necessitates that every priest be a guru. As Panadan states,

the people of Niranth Panth are extremely committed to their devotion

to a Guru and very much alive to *bhakti*—devotion, to the Supreme God. (2011a, 32)

But priests are not permanently placed, and the *guru-shishya* [disciple] relationship is dynamic. This can lead to some tensions. Panadan points out that

it is common to see in the Church of North Gujarat that, while every priest is accepted as a Guru, the personal Guru of a follower of Jesus may not be his/her Parish Priest. We need to remind ourselves that the term “parish priest” indicates an administrative job while the role of a Guru is more spiritual. (2011a, 32)

Related to the priest as guru is the development of a new contextual festival based on the guru veneration of the surrounding culture. This is part of a larger contextual Marian festival that will be discussed under the next point.

## 5. Marian Devotion

Panadan shares the contextual need that was filled by devotion to Mary:

In the popular tradition, each caste has an ancestral/family goddess who is worshipped with great personal love and devotion. However, this concept of goddess is alien to Christian faith and to Christian theology. On the other hand, the new followers of Jesus began to experience both a cultural and religious vacuum due to the absence of a family goddess. (2011a, 32)

In response, Fr. Girish Santiago S.J., with local Isupanthis, began to present Mary as *kulmata* (ancestral clan mother), and a shrine was eventually built using a local Hindu architectural style. Mary was designated Unteshwari Mata, Our Lady of Camels, related to the centrality of the camel in North Gujarat society.

The Isupanthis of North Gujarat do not follow the Western calendar and do not recognize any Western saints’ days. The main Marian festival is celebrated on the 8th day of the annual Navratri (Dashera) festival when Hindus focus on the goddess.

**T**hey accept caste by making “a distinction between the ‘caste system’ (inclusive of discrimination) and ‘caste diversity’ (exclusive of discrimination).”

The honoring of the priest as guru also takes place at this time. But there is also a regular monthly pilgrimage to Unteshwari at each new moon.<sup>7</sup>

The focus on Mary has been controversial, with some suggesting that “in the devotional practices of Isupanthis, Marian devotion takes precedence over a Christ-centred spirituality” (Panadan 2015, 447). Panadan rejects this perspective, however, suggesting that “a realistic observation of the Church does not subscribe to this argument” (2015, 447), and Mary is certainly not honored as a goddess.

## 6. Caste as “Sociological Habitat”

As Panadan states, “The caste phenomenon is an integral part of the Indian ethos and culture” (2011a, 33). Therefore, caste cannot simply be avoided or transcended. This goes against the traditional Christian approach, which Panadan outlines in his doctoral work. But he concludes that

although the tendency is to reject the entire system of caste, what seems to be more objectionable are the discriminatory and hierarchical elements within it. (2015, 364)

So, the North Gujarat position is to accept caste as one’s “sociological habitat,” making “a distinction between the ‘caste system’ (inclusive of discrimination) and ‘caste diversity’ (exclusive of discrimination)” (Panadan 2015, 368).

Garriz spelled out his position on this:

Do we accept caste? We accept and strongly believe that a Patel or Thakor Isupanthis, must remain at all costs a Patel and a Thakor besides adhering loyally to his faith in Jesus. Naturally we cannot accept caste in the sense of “higher and lower” as laid down in Book One of the Manusmriti (Book 1, Nos. 31, 91–105). In Christ there is no Jew nor Gentile, no male

or female, no high or low. To accept a genetic distinction of higher and lower is simply absurd in New Testament values. Therefore, this is rejected. Before accepting baptism everyone must accept this. But caste has much wider implications than the “high and low” stratification demanded by *karma* and laid down by the Manusmriti. Caste constitutes for every person an essential part of its [*sic*] *dharmic* identity, its sociological habitat, a harmonious organization of society mainly for the purposes of “*beti aur roti vahevar*” [defined by Panadan as “a popular expression which refers to inter-caste marriage and inter-caste dining” (2015, 285)]. I well understand how Mahatma Gandhi could affirm that a change of “*dharm*” (*dharmic* identity) is an impossibility. One can accept a new *panth*, a new *bhakti*, faith in an up-to-now unknown guru or prophet, but “change” of *samaj*, change of your own family identity by “becoming” a member of a different *samaj*, is simply demeaning, alienating... in a certain sense “impossible,” as one cannot change what he really is... (1988, 376–7)<sup>8</sup>

This was one of a number of areas where the North Gujarat approach became controversial with other Christians, and the outworking of this social policy has not been without tensions, as noted by Panadan:

However, one cannot say that caste discrimination has disappeared completely among the Isupanthis, rather a qualitative change is visible and the followers of Jesus who belong to different castes are living fairly harmoniously with a genuine sense of *koinonia*. (2011a, 34)

## *The Development of the Mission in Practice*

The mission began in 1964 when Fr. Garriz moved to a small village (Mokhasan) in North Gujarat. In a

later definition of the work of the mission it was stated that

the North Gujarat Mission was started in 1964 by a mandate of [the] Fr. General of the Society of Jesus with the specific aim to undertake direct evangelization among caste Hindus. (Sanand Declaration 2004, 41)

Although the focus was on higher castes, it was also on people in poverty, as pointed out by Archbishop Stanislaus Fernandes:

The historical decision was to begin evangelization in a new area and among a new community of people who though neither Dalit nor tribal suffer the same economic and backward hardships prevalent among those who need special consideration to enter the mainstream of public life through education and health care and social empowerment. (2011, 12)

Fr. Garriz began slowly, seeking understanding and strong relationships:

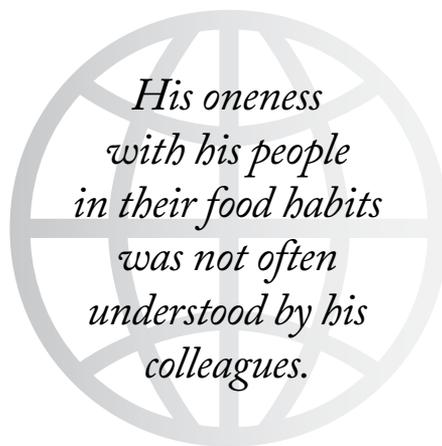
The first years were of slow and hard apprenticeship: what to do, what not to do. Four, five, six years of patient waiting, of praying, of reflecting. During the first six months in Mokhasan, I lived in the *dharamshala* of the Swaminarayan temple. Then for four more years I lived in the middle of the village, sharing a house with a kind Patel [forward caste] family, paying them a monthly rent.<sup>9</sup> (1988, 372)

Garriz embraced (and demanded from other workers) a vegetarian diet, an obvious decision due to the strong Jain influence on North Gujarat society, but one not understood by many of his fellow Christians ("His oneness with his people in their food habits, too, was not often understood by his colleagues who considered it unusual" [Rose 2011, 288]).<sup>10</sup> After the four years in a village home Garriz moved to a larger town, Kalol. He explained this move: "I saw that a small village did not afford sufficient privacy for people to contact me on a purely religious level" (2004f, 14). Despite his adaptability and simplicity, Garriz was necessarily a power figure in the local society.

Another set of six points (this time my summary of the data) will identify significant developments or trends from the first decades of the ministry.

### 1. Church Growth

Garriz spoke publicly about the work of the mission for the first time after nine years of ministry (Garriz 2004f). By then there had been about 2,500 baptisms. Most (1,500) were people of the backward (but non-dalit) Raval caste, and about half of those had come out of the Niranth Panth. There were 500 Thakors and 400 from two groups of Patels, these latter groups being forward castes. Most significant among these were two Raval Niranth Panth leaders (one came to faith in



1969, the other in 1971) who went on to win many others to faith in Christ (Garriz 2004f, 15–16).

In these early years it was established that one could maintain his caste community identity while following Christ. In 1967, some leaders of the Raval caste met with Garriz to request that a boarding school for boys be started. Garriz responded by asking if there would be freedom for these boys to embrace Christ, and an assurance was given in writing (Garriz 2004f, 18). In 1971, there was a move to expel Raval Catholics from caste, but when the Catholic Ravals rallied, that plan was abandoned (Garriz 2004f, 20). This raises the question of the viability

of movements to Christ, which will be looked at below. It is interesting that

most of our Thakor [higher caste] communities were originally contacted by the Raval friends acting as voluntary catechists. (Garriz 1988, 373)

### 2. The Centrality of Institutions

From the beginning Fr. Garriz drew on some Catholic nuns for assistance by providing medical services for the villagers:

For one full year Sr. Elvira and Sr. Martha had been going every Thursday in 1964–1965 from St. Xavier's Ladies Hostel, Ahmedabad to Mokhasan to help through medical service in the beginnings of North Gujarat Mission. So in 1972, our Superior Mother Zoila, welcomed the invitation of Fr. Arana, the Jesuit Provincial to accept the challenge of starting a new mission convent in Sanand. (Annakutty 2004, 145)

Initially Fr. Garriz remained aloof from educational institutions. He helped establish and taught in a village school that was handed over to the village (2004f, 13–4). But by 1972 a Catholic school was started and by 2011 there were 20 schools functioning (James 2011, 250–5). Writing in 1990, Garriz could say that "first contacts will usually be through educational, social and medical work" (2004c, 58).

Mission and church compounds, called *ashrams*, multiplied in relation to the schools and social and medical work. In describing the decline of response to the gospel, Archbishop S. Fernandes placed some blame on this institutionalizing trend:

The Church appears less as with a spiritual mission [than] as a socio-educational welfare non-government organization that circumstances placed on the shoulders of the missionaries. (2011a, 14)

The explanation for the last clause is then given, that in the first decade of work serious floods and then drought necessitated relief work, marking the missionaries as social workers.

### 3. Inculturated and Contextual Developments

Contextual *terminology* is crucial to this North Gujarat ministry; starting with the name Isupanthis, to priests as gurus, catechists as *bhagats* (holy men), and ministry centers as ashrams. But contextual *realities* are yet more important. Communication of the gospel has largely been undertaken by local Isupanthis serving as catechists using the local forms of *bhajan* (spiritual song) and *katha* (spiritual drama).

Everything in contextual ministry is a learning process. Garriz gives a good example of this in engaging catechists:

When we began this mission among caste people in 1964, the greatest difficulty we faced was lack of catechists. As the first converts began coming, our first concern was to choose catechists among them. The first catechists whom I tried to train were chosen from among educated young men. Experience soon taught me that the social pattern in rural India is deeply "patriarchal" in the sense that young people (even with university degrees) are not allowed a say in the affairs of the caste, family, etc. Age is still an essential requirement for being accepted as an active member of the social group. Today all our catechists are above 35 years of age with many of them well in the fifties. Many of them do not have any formal education. What counts is their personal integrity, practical wisdom, etc. (2004e, 26–27)

Elsewhere, Garriz points out that a catechist

may be illiterate but must be a good "contacter" and better if he is also a good singer of *bhajans*; and obviously he should be deeply pious. (2004c, 58)

The importance of *bhajan* in North Gujarat is well illustrated by this testimony of Garriz:

Though educationally backward, those Thakors who have been influenced by *bhakti* traditions possess a very beautiful religious culture of their own, with *bhajans* of very

*Communication of the gospel was undertaken by local Isupanthis using the local forms of bhajan (spiritual song) and katha (spiritual drama).*

profound religious content. I have certainly had unforgettable religious experiences sitting down for hours in their *bhajan mandalis*... (2004f, 17)

Hundreds of *bhajans* have been written and thousands of *katha* performances (related to the life of Christ but also addressing pressing social issues) have been developed and presented in North Gujarat (see Macwan 2011 for details).

It seems odd that there is no discussion of contextualized baptism, although it is pointed out that family/group baptisms were performed rather than individual ones (Garriz 2004c, 60). As noted above, contextual festivals developed related to Mary, and a contextual marriage and funeral service were also prepared (see Mascarenhas 2004 and Santiago 2004). The end result was that

there really is a different *cultural* identity (or at least there *should be*) between the Isupanthis (Hindu-Catholic) and the "old Christian." (Garriz 1988, 379; italics original)

### 4. Opposition

In 1974, severe persecution broke out against the Catholic institutions and new local Isupanthis. The persecution lasted for six to eight months (Garriz 1988, 373 says six months; Garriz 2004d, 247 says eight months). There had been opposition previous to 1974, but large numbers of baptisms set off a major outbreak of persecution, as described by Garriz.

...when groups of families began to ask for baptism and there began to emerge in various villages new Christian communities, a stormy reaction was inevitable. Fundamentalists of our region invited a group of Bengali Hindu monks.... For various weeks two Hindu monks wrapped in their saffron robes went about the streets of

Kalol (which had then a population of about 80,000) surrounded by groups of youngsters shouting "*Christianto nash karo*" [destroy the Christians]. For six full months, week after week, public meetings were organized in the towns of Kalol, Mehsana, Sanand, etc. to instill hatred in the people against Christianity. (2004d, 243–4)

Every single village where we had Catholics or catechumens were [*sic*] visited by a group of Sadhus with film slides, tape recorder, etc. They systematically excited the feelings of the people against the Christians specially on the issue of "cow-butchering." In several villages the converts were physically pushed to the Mandir [temple] for aarti [worship]. They were threatened with expulsion from the village, with the burning of their houses, some were beaten, an attempt was made on the life of our lay leader (R. D. Patel), a trumped up case was put against me and I had to appear in court several times. (1988, 373)

Most of the believers stood firm in the face of this opposition. Garriz later concluded that

as a matter of fact, the persecution which lasted eight months had the opposite result of what the fanatics expected. Our Christian community emerged from the persecution purified, stronger and more confident for the future. At a meeting at Kalol of the main leaders of the Christian Communities, Raval Mangal Kushal of Mandali expressed the sentiments of all saying, "After all that we had passed through these last six months, we feel confident that nothing in the future will be able to move us from Christ."<sup>11</sup> (2004d, 247)

There was other opposition against new believers and workers, but nothing again on the scale of this 1974 outbreak. John Rose suggested that

perhaps, the persecutions that the infant Church of Kalol went through in 1974 will never be repeated, as we

have won the hearts of our enemies through our institutions. (2004, 169)

### 5. Arrival of New Tribal and Dalit Believers

In 1971, Catholic Christians from tribal background were discovered in the far northwest corner of Gujarat. Garriz responded with assistance for those desperately poor and long neglected people, who had become Christians in what is now Pakistan, and who had then migrated to India in the time of Partition (1947). As institutional work developed in that area, numbers of Dalits of the Vankar community also joined the church. Garriz later wrote to the Jesuit Provincial (future archbishop S. Fernandes) pointing out that manpower was more focused on the tribals than the caste Hindus:

We have two types of Mission here in this [North Gujarat] area...mission to Adivasis [tribals] and to Caste Hindus. At present there are in this area five Jesuit missions to Adivasis...with 9 Jesuit priests and 2 lay brothers. The mission to Caste Hindus is only at Dhandhuka, Sanand, Kalol and Mehsana with 6 Jesuit priests and 1 scholastic. You can see there is already an imbalance in favour of the Adivasi mission. This imbalance becomes all the greater if we look at the picture of the entire Gujarat Province.... I have nothing against this situation. It is the product of historical, sociological and many other valid reasons. But certainly the fact remains; there is imbalance in personnel and resources against our caste-Hindu missions. (2004b, 212)

As will be noted below, the response to Christ from higher castes has been slow. Dalit and tribal peoples more readily join the church and so attention and manpower easily drifts away from the higher caste groups.<sup>12</sup>

### 6. Separate Housing Arranged

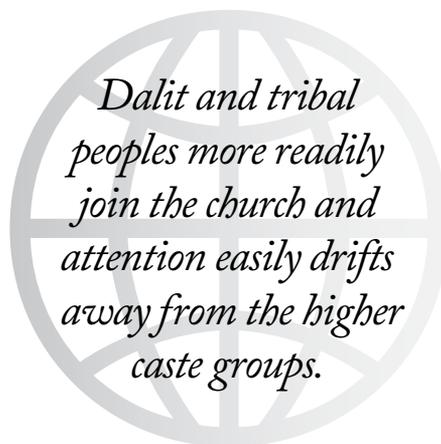
There has been great concern about whether a "viable community" of Isupanthis would develop in North Gujarat. Panadan describes the concern and the concept:

By and large, in India, particularly in the rural areas, caste pervades

everything to the point that a community can survive and flourish only when it is socially viable. By social viability we mean a substantial number of stable and committed members in each group who can remain firm and steadfast especially when adverse situations arise. (2015, 423)

As people came to Christ from various scattered villages it was felt that consolidation was necessary, and this was done through what are called Xavier Nagars.<sup>13</sup> Panadan again gives a clear description:

Xavier Nagars are settlements of Isupanthis families which are established adjacent to the parish church. The rationale of this initiative is that it is believed that unless the appropriate situations are created for the new



converts to practice their faith, it is not possible to sustain their faith. At present there are five such Xavier Nagars in North Gujarat. (2015, 383n)

In his defense of the Xavier Nagar concept, Garriz appeals for support to the Christian villages developed earlier by Protestant missionaries (2011, 261). Yet the basic concept here seems to be in direct contradiction to the incarnational idea of maintaining one's caste identity as their sociological habitat. This seems a fundamentally extractionist approach. This counter position is well stated by Archbishop S. Fernandes:

The original vision of the Isupanthis remaining in the village community set-up needs to be maintained, especially when they are a good

number of families. They have their role in the village. To segregate them even though with the good intention of protecting their simple faith, will only keep them away from the mainstream of society and decrease their sense of self-confidence. They must take charge of their lives and the newfound faith must remain rooted in their village of origin. (2011b, 225)

It is also interesting that Panadan suggests that "Today everyone recognizes that the creation of such Xavier Nagars is no more economically viable" (2015, 427-8). What will develop in future years related to this approach will be interesting to observe.

### Some Observations

Before drawing some conclusions from this case study, I will make five observations related to points of importance not highlighted above. The first should be obvious from what has already been stated but needs to be emphasized: that is, in agreement with John Rose's quotation in my first paragraph, Fr. Manuel Diaz Garriz is a remarkable missionary whose work should be known, studied, and followed.

Garriz consciously followed in the path of de Nobili and Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, and had mentors like Hans Staffner who supported his approach. Yet he is a singular figure in implementing a vision of "radical inculturation" in a pioneer ministry (this is his terminology, see 1988, 375). His patient start, which involved building relationships and deep learning about local realities, and his readiness to listen and learn (as seen in the case of the age of catechists in the instance above) are truly praiseworthy.<sup>14</sup>

Garriz is a striking example of a missionary who cultivated reticence. His involvement with the tribal Majirana Catholics led to participation in a syncretistic festival mixing Hindu gods, praise to Jesus, and tribal history. His comments on the confusion of the situation:

I should confess that I do not see any easy and clear solution to this problem. The easy way out would be to ban the

Catholics from attending the festival and establish a rival festival instead. Our Catholic Majiranas are loyal and would do what I tell them to. But that would not be a solution. That would be escapism and it would introduce an element of alienation in the conscience of the Christian Majiranas. We will have to go on thinking of a solution in the coming years. (2004a, 209)

Similarly, in the incident referenced above where Raval Isupanthis were threatened with expulsion from their caste, Garriz was clear: “The catechists and leaders among the Catholics came to me asking what to do. I told them to decide for themselves” (2004f, 20). In the making of the shrine to Mary, Garriz had numerous ideas that were overruled by the local disciples, and in the end a local artist was hired and given instruction on Mary in Christian iconography, then was left free to do what he thought best.<sup>15</sup> Garriz proposed an image of Francis Xavier with four arms in accord with Indian artistic symbolism, and was disappointed at the hostile response that killed this idea (2004g, 190).

Finally (on Garriz), he continually emphasized the long slow process that is necessary for genuine inculturation/contextualization. His self-definition of his venture in 1988 was “Our work is a groping in faith and in love” (375), which he later clarified:

I am deeply convinced that it is not for us, the first generation of missionaries, to try to create a neat blue-print for inculturation. It is the living experience of the new communities that will go on creating—out of the joint existential reality of their Hindu culture and their faith in Jesus—the modules of this new way.... (1988, 379)

In a paper written in 1994, Garriz suggested that one to two generations or 30 to 60 years will be needed to establish his work (2004h, 259).

The second observation is that it cannot be a great surprise that dependency has become a big problem in North

“**M**any missionaries admit that this dependency is very much present even today among those who are practicing *Isupanth*.” —Panadan

Gujarat. The influx of personnel and the building of institutions made this almost inevitable. Panadan comments that “many missionaries admit that this dependency is very much present even today among those who are practicing *Isupanth*” (2015, 429n). Fr. Alex Thannipara, after forty years in service among the *Isupanthis*, stated that

once the people experienced how benevolent the missionary was other needs also surfaced and so to satisfy them they were drawn to *Bapu* [father, i.e. Garriz]. As a result of responding compassionately to all the material needs of the new *Isupanthis* they tended to become lazy and dependent on the missionary even in matters where they have resources to manage themselves. Hence we need to reverse the present trend. (2011, 230)

The third observation, not unrelated to dependency, is that attrition and lukewarmness are too much in evidence. One testimony in this regard is from Sanand: “Down the years many among the baptized people stopped being part of the Catholic community because of various reasons” (Kodithottam 2011, 58). Girish Santiago outlines the complexity of such matters:

[The] participatory inculturation process has enabled and enhanced them to feel at home with the Christian cultural incarnation and inter-faith dialogue. Besides such spiritual hunger, we come across, at regular intervals many of our people who highly aspire for the material prosperity in their life at the expense of our institutions (ashrams). Though, due to our ongoing accompaniment, many have come up in their integral life, still some are very comfortable to be ever lazy and lame for they feel that they give an opportunity to Fathers and Sisters to serve them relentlessly and to reveal [to] them the loveable, graceful and merciful face of God. (2011, 277)

Panadan identifies the same problems:

Another major pastoral concern is that a good number of *Isupanthis* have cut themselves off completely from the Church and from Church related activities. (2015, 428)

Further:

The excessive preoccupation of the Christian community for material assistance is a counter witness to the true propagation of the Christian faith. (2011a, 35)

Panadan also shares concern about Ganesh (*Ganpathi*) related to marriage celebrations:

Among the Hindus, one of the common religious practices as part of the entire celebration of wedding is what is known as *Ganesh Sthapan* which is an event that happens a few days prior to the marriage in which the blessings of god *Ganpathi* is sought for the upcoming auspicious occasion. The researcher has observed that this practice is very common even among the *Isupanthis*. The researcher has also verified it by glancing through about ten wedding invitation cards printed by *Isupanthis* for their marriages. (2015, 375n)

That leads to the fourth observation, that there is nothing more complicated in the North Gujarat Mission than the range of issues related to marriage. The contextualization of a marriage ceremony was mentioned above, yet that seems to have been an attempt at creating a common service for all *Isupanthis* rather than letting each caste group take possession of their own traditions in appropriate ways. Some pastoral guidelines for issues related to marriage were drawn up by outside Jesuit leaders and then presented to local *Isupanthis* (A. Fernandes 2004a).

Apart from marriage ceremony issues, the core principle of staying within one’s caste as sociological habitat is never more clearly tested than in marriage. There have been *Isupanthis*

marriages with traditional Christians (Panadan 2015, 402) and most Isupanthis are marrying outside the faith. Garriz stated this as a goal of genuine acceptance within the caste community:

A community will be "sociologically viable" if their members are accepted as Thakors, Ravals, Koris, etc. and *at the same time* as Ishupanthis within their own caste, particularly for the purpose of marriage. (There are still other aspects of a "viable community"—economic viability, spiritual viability—which are less important for the purpose of the present reflections.) (1988, 380–1; emphasis original)

Panadan is perhaps speaking a bit more cautiously when he states that

as far as the question of mixed marriages is concerned, in the present situation, it is unavoidable. Such occasions can also be wonderful means of evangelization and dialogue. (2015, 447)

One final complexity is that many marriages in North Gujarat involve legally underage brides and/or grooms (Panadan 2011a, 35) and the Catholic priests clearly do not want to be involved in these weddings (Panadan 2015, 331; A. Fernandes 2004, 79, 81).

Finally, it is my observation that there have been some serious failures in applying inculturation principles. One of those would be in the area just mentioned, where outside priests drew up marriage guidelines which were communicated to the local disciples. The development of Xavier Nagar residential communities is another example already mentioned. It seems oddly inappropriate that the first baptism (Patel 2011, 201) and the first Patel Isupanthis marriage (Garriz 2004f, 19) were celebrated in the city cathedral in Ahmedabad.<sup>16</sup>

Nothing can be of greater concern than the flagging of faith and of the original vision. One of Panadan's conclusions to his doctoral research was that the church will not grow:

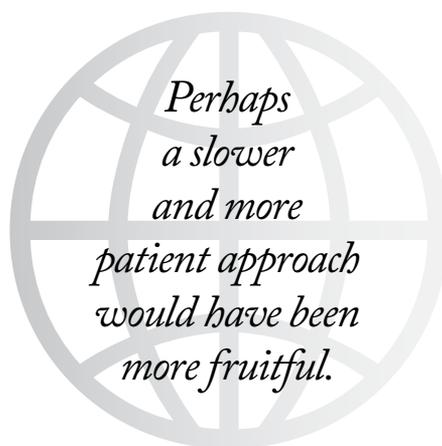
Our investigation confirms that while the community of Raval Isupanthis, who form the major bulk of

the Isupanthis in North Gujarat, has reached [a] certain level of social viability, the other Isupanthis communities like Thakors or Koli Patels, etc., are far from this ideal and in the current socio-political scenario the possibility for further numerical growth is very dim. (2015, 423–4)

This is by no means an isolated opinion, as Archbishop Fernandes (among others) also drew attention to the changing political scenario:

The changing socio-political scenario since post [*sic*] 1990 is our present day experience. The so-called Freedom of Religion Act has halted any new baptismal entry into the Church. (2011a, 14)

This raises questions again about "contextual baptism" and about how



truly new believers have been able to maintain their caste identity. The problem of foreign personnel also comes into play here. George Kodithottam wisely pointed out that

if we agree that we, Christians as a community and Jesuits as a religious body, do have some role to play in the emerging Gujarati society of tomorrow then, it can't be done through importing personnel from outside, whether it be from Spain, Bombay, Goa, Kerala or Tamil Nadu or any other part of India. It has to come from the soil of Gujarat. (2004, 66)

The Jesuits can certainly be commended for their efforts to raise up local leadership; note on the inside front cover of Panadan (ed. 2011) a picture

of three Raval nuns and a Raval member of the Society of Jesus. But a massive influx of outside personnel has also been necessary to maintain all the institutions, and Panadan points out that

lack of committed missionaries who are convinced of this particular way of being a local Church has been a major setback for the on-going faith formation of the Church in North Gujarat. (2015, 431)

Perhaps a slower and more patient approach would have been more fruitful in the long run.

## Conclusions

The North Gujarat Mission clearly identified and defined the central issue in contextualization in India. It is neither culture nor theology (although these are also crucially important), but rather community identity. Garriz very clearly and accurately defined the goal:

The ideal should be that persons and families are accepted within their own caste group (Patel, Gajjar, Thakor, Panchal...) *and at the same time* as disciples of Jesus as a totally natural and acceptable phenomenon. (1988, 380)

George Kodithottam also stated it quite clearly:

Evangelization today necessarily requires a new way of being Christian, i.e., *being a disciple of Jesus without losing one's cultural roots and social belonging*. It should not be about creating new culturally rootless and socially disenfranchised groups, but about making disciples who are capable of influencing their cultures and societies through their discipleship and contribute to the evolution of their communities and societies toward *kingdom communities*. *That is only possible if these disciples remain an integral part of their social groups and cultural communities*. (2011, 60; emphasis original)

The traditional ideal of a new believing community which transcends and refuses to recognize caste is simply

not feasible. It leads to situations like Garriz described:

One of our sincere converts, Shri M.B.P. recalls how when he first approached, 20 years ago, a Protestant Padre in Ahmedabad for baptism—after a thorough study of the New Testament—he was told to his utter surprise that as a sign of his “new life” he should eat meat, and that eventually he should marry his sons and daughters within the “Christian” community. (1988, 380)

Even with such clarity of understanding and vision, the mission in North Gujarat still failed to live up to its ideals. It failed by relying too much on Christians and institutions; note George Kodithottam’s warning that “We [Christians] seem to have an exaggerated sense of our own importance both individually and collectively” (2004, 65). It failed to maintain the type of long-term consistency necessary for the work that was undertaken. Panadan comments on this:

The pastoral ministry of the Church will be effective and fruitful only if the process of inculturation initiated right from its origin and pursued down the years is understood in its perspective with all its nuances, respected and promoted by the present and the subsequent generation of missionaries. (2015, 444)

For those interested in new attempts to share the good news of Christ with non-Dalit Hindus there is much to learn from the North Gujarat Mission. It appears that everything will militate against success; the existing church and mission movement will not support what needs to be done, working against best practices (usually out of ignorance and/or misguided zeal). The general Hindu population will not understand what is being done or why. New disciples of Christ will require generous space to determine just how they should live for Christ among their own people, and outside friends will find it challenging to offer

**E**ven with such clarity of vision, the mission still failed to live up to its ideals by relying too much on Christians and institutions.

sufficient faith and patience that allows for this space.

Daunting challenges lie ahead for people who attempt to share Christ contextually in high caste Hindu contexts. Rather than inducing paralysis, this case study should lead to a realistic understanding of the nature of the task. Lessons from this modern Roman Catholic effort point towards less expectation of rapid results, more investment in patient learning, and deep adaptation. Patient trust in God and in the resources of the people group may well in time lead to the type of faith response that many of us dream of in Hindu contexts. **IJFM**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Roger E. Hedlund claimed in 1995 that “despite Christianity’s success in India, however, its track record in evangelizing the Hindu majority could best be described as massive neglect” (1995, 82). That remains the case today, as Protestants cannot even show a failed effort at systematic contextualized outreach to caste Hindus like this one lone Roman Catholic attempt.

<sup>2</sup>In making this statement I am going against Jose Panadan, who wrote, “We must get rid of any language of the ‘failure of mission’ in North Gujarat” (2015, 448) since the basic paradigm has proved valid even though fruit from higher castes has been less than anticipated.

<sup>3</sup>Panadan’s title should be clearly explained: inculturation and contextualization are largely the same, the former term being preferred by Catholics and the latter by Protestants; both will be used in this paper, including the verb form “inculturated” which is not common among Protestants. “Local church” has a distinctive meaning, quite different from the Protestant understanding of a particular local congregation. A “local church” is understood as a church that is genuinely inculturated and reflects the character of the society within which it exists; it is thus much more than a single congregation. Panadan quotes the International Theological Commission definition: “the criterion

for the identity of a particular Church (i.e., a diocese) is essentially theological, while the criterion of a local Church (i.e., an organic group of particular Churches) is primarily socio-cultural” (2015, 72, quoting from Komonchak 1986, 15).

<sup>4</sup>For more information on Upadhyay, see *IJFM* 18:4, 195–200, “Brahmabandhab Upadhyay and the Failure of Hindu Christianity” by Madhusudhan Rao.

<sup>5</sup>For more on Staffner see *IJFM* 24:2, 87–97, “The Possibility of a ‘Hindu Christ-Follower’: Hans Staffner’s Proposal for the Dual Identity of Disciples of Christ within High Caste Hindu Communities” by Brian K. Petersen.

<sup>6</sup>It should be noted that fear of conversion remained a problem; as late as 1998 all the boys ran away from a new hostel “for fear of religious conversion” (Malar 2011, 107). Some of the reasons why this problem persisted will become clear below.

<sup>7</sup>The Unteshwari Mata shrine can be seen at <https://archgandhinagar.org/parishes-missions/parishes/kadi-unteshwari-unteshwari-mata-maria-mandir/>. There is a substantial article focused on the architecture of the shrine and three smaller articles in the *Mission in North Gujarat I* volume (Garriz 2004g, A. Fernandes 2004b, Vedamuthu 2004, Girish 2004). There are five Unteshwari focused papers in *Mission in North Gujarat II* (Manickam 2011, Panadan 2011b, Poothokaren 2011, Chakranarayan 2011, Vedamuthu 2011); the best description of the priest-guru celebration is in Chakranarayan (2011). See also Panadan 2015, 324–7, 332–3.

<sup>8</sup>Ishupanthi and Isupanthi are alternative spellings, the former obviously preferred by Garriz.

<sup>9</sup>I have made some minor corrections to these sentences based on corrections made in the paper as republished in *Mission in North Gujarat I: The Beginnings 1964–1989*, 43–57.

<sup>10</sup>Vegetarianism is also now being abandoned by some, as noted by Panadan: “Vegetarianism is followed in the Catholic Ashrams of North Gujarat Mission as a way of respecting the local culture and local sensibilities. However, this seems to be disappearing from certain centers without a collective process of discernment by the

missionaries working in the same region" (2011a, 35).

<sup>11</sup> It is rather disconcerting to note Garriz using such Christian terminology in this statement. Obviously he was writing for Christians, but arguably he was affirming their wrong terminologies and perspectives by writing in this way. In an email to me of May 23, 2018, Jose Panadan clarified the use and understanding of terms in North Gujarat today: "The local Christians [*sic*] understand themselves as Isupanthis and not as Christians. But the non-Isupanthis (people of other religions) think of the Isupanthis as Christians. They cannot understand the possibility of being followers of Jesus by being part of the Hindu society. The new generation of missionaries (who do not know the history, who do not care for inculturation) often uses the expression Christians.... Although the term Isupanthis is found in Gujarati Christian literature, many Christians outside of North Gujarat do not really understand the meaning in its context."

<sup>12</sup> This problem developed already in the iconic experience of Robert de Nobili (1577–1656), as lower caste converts overtook his original focus group, the forward castes (see Rajamanickam 1995, 396–400, *passim*).

<sup>13</sup> The abandonment of local terminology for a European Christian name is striking.

<sup>14</sup> Patience is often not recognized as a virtue in mission work. In December of 1965 there were complaints that Garriz's new work was "a waste of time." The matter was referred to Rome, with a response that "the experiment must continue" (Garriz 1990, 372).

<sup>15</sup> The result was not pleasing to many traditional Christians but was very satisfying to the Isupanthis (Garriz 2004g, 189–90).

<sup>16</sup> Jose Panadan pointed out to me that this was because there was not yet a church structure in North Gujarat.

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# Navigating the Constraints of the *Ummah*: A Comparison of Christ Movements in Iran and Bangladesh

by Christian J. Anderson

**D**iscipleship to Jesus always takes place within the contours of particular social contexts, whether it fits smoothly into these social constraints, or rubs abrasively against them. For those following Jesus in the Muslim-majority world, religion is an essential and unavoidable part of this social context. Islam is rarely a privatized or compartmentalized set of beliefs—the practices of its “Five Pillars” are public. Muslim religion interpenetrates community life, not only intertwining with culture, but integrating with social and political structures. Yet missiologists have often overlooked this key socio-political dimension of Muslim context.

## *Structures (Not Just Culture) as Discipleship Context*

In the long history and eventual decline of the historic Christian churches in the Muslim world across Asia, the limitations imposed by Muslim socio-political structures were fundamental to the working out of a public, witnessing presence.<sup>1</sup> Those constraints continue to be basic to the dynamics of how Christians living under Muslim governments in Asia and Africa congregate and witness. Yet with regard to Muslim-background Christ fellowships and discipleship movements within Islam, western missiology has preferred to focus on religion in terms of *cultural* contextualization, often neglecting Islam’s social structures as an essential part of that discipleship context. It was anthropologist Charles Kraft’s application of dynamic equivalence theory to the *cultural* forms that the church might take in a mission context that helped set the direction for the Insider Movement debates.<sup>2</sup> The concept of the “homogenous unit principle,” developed by Donald McGavran and mission anthropologist Alan Tippett, focused on contextualizing the Bible and Christian witness within distinct “people groups,” as delineated by language, ethnicity, and culture. Social structure was acknowledged only as boundaries defined by these local affinities, potentially isolating these groups—and any people movements within them—from one another in the spread of the gospel.<sup>3</sup> David Shenk, however, soon noticed the problems of over-emphasizing these ethnic delineations in the Muslim world with its larger sense of collective religious identity.<sup>4</sup>

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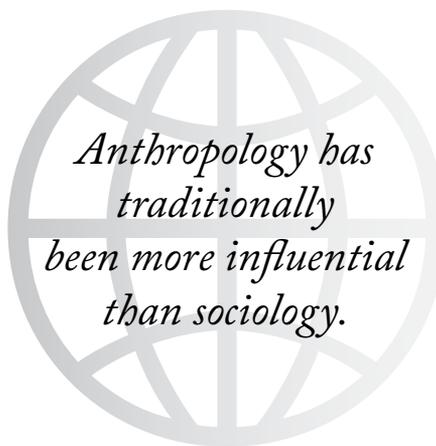
*Christian J. Anderson is presently a PhD student at Asbury Theological Seminary, researching insider movements and their implications for the transmission of World Christianity. He has served as an Anglican pastor and church planter in Sydney, Australia, and became interested in missiology through leading short-term teams to South Asia.*

When John Jay Travis introduced his important category of “C5” Christ-centered communities that remained “legally and socially” within Islam, it was still in a framework that emphasized *cultural*-religious appropriation. The *sociological* context of a C5 community of faith was obscured. Travis distinguished between types of believing communities that used religiously neutral language and cultural forms (C3), Islamic cultural forms (C4), and Islamic forms and aspects of Islamic theology (C5).<sup>5</sup> The important aspect of social identity in Travis’ model has only been pursued more recently, with David Greenlee’s edited collection *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?* It is a book full of illuminating studies on how individual Muslim-background believers negotiate their personal identity within Muslim society and in relation to both Muslim and Christian communities.<sup>6</sup> But far less has been written focusing on Muslim *social structures* themselves, taking seriously their capacity to affect whole discipleship movements (not just individual identity). This deficiency reflects North American missiology’s interaction with the social sciences, where anthropology has traditionally been more influential than sociology.<sup>7</sup> Clifford Geertz’s anthropology of religion has been especially prominent in our missiology, and we more readily view religion as a set of symbols that evocatively communicate worldview meaning; we are less prone to accept Talal Asad’s critique that wider social processes shape the meaning of those symbols,<sup>8</sup> or to use Peter Berger’s analysis of religion and societal structure as mutually dependent.<sup>9</sup>

Two recent contributions may indicate a correction of this tendency to focus only on culture. Fuller Theological Seminary’s 2016 Missiological Lectures were devoted to trying to understand the “Dynamics of Contemporary Muslim Societies” as vital preliminary work to any missionary engagement.<sup>10</sup> The

other contribution is a recent article by John Jay Travis and Anna Travis in which they examine the “Societal Factors Impacting Socioreligious Identities of Muslims Who Follow Jesus.”<sup>11</sup> They look at discipleship of Muslim-background believers through the lens of Muslim social structures and focus on a similar question to the one I wish to pursue: “*why* different groups of Muslim-background believers gravitate toward different types of fellowships.”<sup>12</sup>

In analyzing 2007 data from 5,800 surveys completed by field workers across the Muslim world, the Travis research first pointed to a large distribution of Christ fellowships in their three categories of C3 (28%), C4 (37%), and C5/Insider (21%), with



a further 8% in the C6 category of “secret believers.” Why the different C-spectrum fellowships in different places? With the caveat that missionaries themselves may have influenced the kinds of fellowship that form, the authors then identify a string of on-the-ground factors, which include:

1. Political factors (including how Islamic law is enforced with conversion penalties)
2. Communal factors (at the family and neighborhood level where peer pressure occurs)
3. Religious, demographic, and cultural factors (including the history of Muslim-Christian relations and the strength of

ethnic identities with respect to religious ones)

4. Individual factors (relating to the integrity and experience of Islam on a personal level)<sup>13</sup>

As I will demonstrate, these are very pertinent observations. But the factors listed are not ordered by importance nor arranged systematically. Since the authors are (understandably) reluctant to publish the names of the countries where certain types of fellowships have emerged, it is difficult to go further and connect particular societal factors with particular types of fellowship.

I hope that this article will stimulate ideas for taking socio-political context seriously as we compare different Jesus-discipleship movements in the Muslim world. I want to give special attention to the Muslim ummah, that fundamental socio-religious structure of global Muslim identity. First, I will look at the ummah as a basic force serving to bind together Muslim society, a force with which all Muslim-background movements to Christ must come to terms. But I will argue that there are variations in the potency of the ummah’s structural layers—variations which may help explain why a particular type of discipleship movement would more likely occur in one part of the Muslim world and not another. As evidence for this, I will then compare discipleship movements in Iran and Bangladesh.

### *The Muslim Ummah and Jesus Discipleship*

The *ummah*<sup>14</sup>—the worldwide “Muslim community” that’s experienced locally and perceived globally—has been held together by strong social and political bonds from its inception. The Qur’an uses the word “ummah” sixty-two times, with slightly different meanings.<sup>15</sup> While for the most part an ummah is a religious community to which God has sent a prophet, there seems to be a progression in the latter Medinan surahs,<sup>16</sup> where more often it

refers to Muhammad's community—those who have truly submitted to God under the prophet's teaching, and who have now become exemplary, "the best of all communities that has been brought forth."<sup>17</sup>

It was in Medina that Muhammad united Arabs across tribal lines into a single community, while rallying them to fight in the name of Islam against those from their own tribe and bloodlines. Ties to the ummah now trumped tribe and kin. But many characteristics of Arabian tribal life would be carried over: primary loyalty to the Muslim "tribe," religio-political headship, spatial territoriality, and impositions on non-members.<sup>18</sup> Muhammad saw the ummah as being a place of political and economic protection (*dhimma*) for non-Muslims willing to submit to its overall authority, evidenced initially in the monotheistic Jewish community's being allowed to exist alongside the Muslims with only hints of a lower sub-ummah status.<sup>19</sup> But as Muhammad's Medinan revelations became more legislative, theocratic pressures were exerted on the three Jewish tribes, two of whom were exiled and one attacked.<sup>20</sup>

A trajectory had begun where Mohammedan monotheism was to be inseparably intertwined with lines of social and political organization, and the whole would be referred to as the Muslim ummah. Although today there is no longer an overall political structure governing all Muslims, there is an ingrained Muslim belief in the ummah as a global society under one God and his *sharia*.<sup>21</sup> This global consciousness has taken on powerful social and legal flesh in distinctive ways in diverse Muslim societies. This is what I want to explore.

This socio-religious "oneness" of the ummah is the right starting point for seeing the challenging socio-political context for Muslim-background discipleship. It implies two pressures acting as a "forcefield" within which disciples of Jesus make their spiritual decisions: an inward acting bond

## *The ummah's unifying force is stronger in some places, and the different institutional structures that hold the ummah together vary in strength.*

based on Muslim religious confession and practice, and an outward exclusion of the non-Muslim who must be socially and legally separate from the ummah. These forces bring a range of related challenges for a fruitful disciple-making movement, which I associate with:

1. Faithful presence
2. Faithful distinction
3. Next-generation continuity

First, consider the difficulty of *faithful presence* alongside the ummah.

These social forces may not allow Jesus discipleship a tenable "alongside" position. The ummah protects those within it and opposes those who depart with the zeal of wounded tribal honor. For the new Christ followers who do leave, they often forfeit family inheritance, employment networks, marriage prospects, even a home to live in.<sup>22</sup> Though such a sacrificial decision in Jesus' name can be initially a powerful act of witness, they must then join Christ communities that are cut off from former Muslim families and networks. Even when they can negotiate a degree of continuity in those relationships,<sup>23</sup> the challenge remains: How can they fruitfully disciple members of the ummah if it has shunned them?

Not surprisingly, the large 2007 study I referred to earlier indicated that Christ fellowships remaining in the ummah (C5) were more successful at seeing the gospel permeate and transform their existing social networks.<sup>24</sup> But to remain within the Muslim community brings another problem: that of *faithful distinction*. The inward pull of Muslim social structures is towards a religious unity around a Muhammad-mediated monotheism. How can disciples live within these structures and still, with integrity, uphold Jesus as God's supreme mediating authority?

Whether pulled into the ummah or pushed away from it, Tim Green reminds us that discipling communities also face the issue of next-generation continuity.<sup>25</sup> For Muslim-background Christ fellowships that have pulled away from the ummah, the next generation is likely to pull further away from the possibility of discipling new Muslims: either they develop their own religious identity (if the Muslim-background community is large enough to marry into), or they join a Christian church. Christ fellowships that remain inside the ummah risk being reabsorbed back into a "non-Jesus following Islam," through the inexorable pressures of intermarriage, orthodox Islamic teaching in their socio-religious networks, and a weak connection to the global body of Christ. Green suggests that the most stable position might be as a tolerated sect within Islam, though finding a stable identity may be at odds with sustaining an outward-looking discipleship movement.<sup>26</sup>

However, discipleship does not take place merely against the backdrop of the ummah's singularity but also against its variation across contexts. Though it exerts a consistent and powerful socio-religious influence across the Muslim world, this unifying force is stronger in some places than in others, and the different institutional structures that hold the ummah together vary in strength. For the sake of conceptualization, I will try to simplify the ummah's complex socio-religious bonds into a set of three strata:

1. The individual level
2. The family and mosque network level
3. The collective and state level

By the use of this three-fold strata I am aligning with Tim Green's analysis

of personal identity negotiation among Muslim-background Christ followers, which he believes takes place at the levels of “core identity,” “social identity,” and “collective identity.”<sup>27</sup> Here, though, I am more interested in analyzing the ummah’s bonding influence toward the Muslim identity.

At each of these levels (i.e., individual, family/mosque, and collective/state) there are certain agents, patterns, rituals, and penalties which engender loyalty to the ummah. At the individual level, heart loyalty to the ummah may emerge from factors such as household upbringing, ongoing personal prayers, personal convictions about Muhammad and the truth of Islam, or conceivably from a demonic bondage.

Family and mosque network could reinforce Muslim loyalty to the ummah in a myriad of ways: mosque and festival participation, a particular imam’s authority in social and religious matters, the requirement to marry another Muslim, the strong social and economic support extended to fellow Muslims, the withholding of this same support from non-Muslims, and the threat of banishment, physical punishment, or honor killing for those who attempt to leave Islam.

At the collective and state level, bonds to the ummah could be fortified by the joining of national/ethnic identity with Islam, laws of apostasy and intermarriage, pervasive legal and judicial bias against non-Muslims, the fixed religious status of citizenship cards, or by extra-judicial arrests and persecution.

Straightaway, it is obvious that different ummah structures will vary in strength and importance across different contexts. A spiritually disillusioned Muslim woman in Tehran and a proud Muslim Indonesian immigrant in London are both tied into the same universal ummah, but through different local structures. Even within a single country, the ummah’s cohesion may vary significantly between regions and across an urban-rural axis.

Don Little’s recent study into the obstacles faced by sixty Muslim-background disciple-makers in the Arab world demonstrates that the ummah presents different challenges in different church planting contexts, and Little also found it helpful to categorize them into Green’s three levels of identity negotiation. He found that the three most frequently cited obstacles were at the level of social identity: pressure from family, from the religious community, and from economic vulnerability; also, frequently cited were personal fears at the core level, and at the collective level the challenges of marriage, child-rearing, and education laws.<sup>28</sup> But my point is that these are more than problems of individual identity negotiation. Each



“obstacle” that Little identifies are features of a larger socio-political landscape in that part of the Muslim world. They are clues to the social contexts that shape and transform what “effective discipling” will look like.

### *A Comparison of Iran and Bangladesh*

By taking a look at two Muslim-background discipleship movements in Iran and Bangladesh, I want to begin to test the hypothesis that fruitful Christ movements in the Muslim world will vary in form according to the strength and relative importance of the different structures of the ummah. For each of these locations I will describe the kind

of discipleship movements that are occurring, and then examine how their features interact with the strength of the ummah’s ties at the individual, family/mosque, and state/collective level.

#### **Iran**

In Iran, there are now about 100,000 Muslim-background Christ followers—still a tiny portion of its population of 82 million, but growing rapidly from as few as 500 Muslim-background believers when the revolution occurred in 1979.<sup>29</sup> Duane Alexander Miller’s research indicated that these new believers have decisively turned away from the ummah, and from the authority of the Qur’an and Muhammad, and are embracing an evangelical form of Christianity.<sup>30</sup> Forbidden by law to enter into established Christian churches,<sup>31</sup> they meet in small, secret home gatherings as regularly as security permits, and may not even use their real names.<sup>32</sup> According to Christian news sites, these are usually small groups of five to twelve people, and if they get any bigger, they will tend to form new groups.<sup>33</sup> Some of these groups are led via the internet by pastors who have fled the country, and many make use of Farsi Christian television channels broadcast from outside Iran.<sup>34</sup> Leaders appear to be quickly raised up; new converts frequently begin organizing their own house groups within six months, at which point they are likely to come under monitoring by the Iranian government.<sup>35</sup> The government’s Revolutionary Guard have increased harassment strategies to prevent new Christ followers from progressing along a path from worship, to baptism, on to evangelism: they begin with warnings, but eventually proceed to imprisonment, flogging, or exile to remote parts of Iran.<sup>36</sup>

Let us take a step back and look at the three strata of the ummah as a context for this extraordinary movement of Iranian Muslims to Christ. At the *state/collective level*, the Iranian government takes strong measures to bind Iran as a nation to the Muslim ummah and

to violently repress any religious alternative. Nor is there a legal religious identity available to Iranian converts, since they are not allowed to associate with the official Christian churches (who themselves are prohibited from conducting services in Farsi).<sup>37</sup> Once found out, Muslim-background Christians also face bureaucratic obstacles to employment and education.<sup>38</sup> From what we have outlined, the threat of the state is arguably the dominant social context to which the dynamics of the Christ fellowships must adjust. The pressure to conform to the ummah is not coming from a senior family member or mosque leader, but from the regime above, leading to a dynamic of covertness, as distinct from insider-ness or an isolated invisibility (C5 and C6 on Travis' spectrum).

There is, however, another element that can weaken this state strata of the ummah in Iran: a collective sense of Persian identity that runs so deep as to rival Islam as a unifying force. The two corporate identities are competing "ethnocultural loyalties," according to Harold Rhode.<sup>39</sup> The Persian civilization long preceded Islamic conquest, and its history, language, and literature evoke pride even when it contradicts Islam.<sup>40</sup> The Muslim-background believers to whom Miller spoke were evidently ready to re-connect to this Persian collective identity.<sup>41</sup> It's quite conceivable that a future Iranian government could choose to bind national unity to Persian ethnicity instead of to the ummah.<sup>42</sup>

The ummah's "middle" identity level of *mosque and family networks* appears much weaker in binding people to the Muslim community. Mosque attendance in Iran is exceptionally low for the Muslim world: only 27% of Iranians

## The apparent disconnect between Iranian families and local mosque authority may explain how the Christ discipleship movement spreads so effectively.

go even once a week.<sup>43</sup> Compared to religious leaders in other Muslim societies, the Shiite clerics have had their own influence reduced by politicization from above.<sup>44</sup> Iranian reformist writers Abdolkarim Soroush and Muhammad Mujtahid Shabestari have objected to Iran's religious authority being concentrated in the hands of the government rather than in the hands of pious, independent religious scholars.<sup>45</sup> The apparent disconnect between Iranian families and local mosque authority may help explain how the Christ discipleship movement seems to spread so effectively through family and relational networks.<sup>46</sup> If Iran's family networks are inherently strong, but their ties to the ummah are weak, this would make it possible for whole groups to quickly shift allegiance to Christ.<sup>47</sup>

At the *personal* level, Iranians' ties to the ummah also appear very weak. Disillusionment with the autocratic tendencies of the Islamic Republic has contributed to a disillusionment with Islam itself.<sup>48</sup> The tendency for new believers in Jesus to do away with all Muslim forms of worship, especially when the state is not watching, indicates that house church members do not feel much loyalty to the ummah's devotional patterns of approaching God. Similarly, when Iranians have attempted to make a new start in Europe, many are quick to dissociate themselves from Islam and convert to Christianity, either genuinely or in order to increase their chances of asylum.<sup>49</sup> Collating these observations for Iran, we can then sum up the relative strengths of the ummah strata as shown in table 1 below.

Table 1. Levels of Ummah Cohesion (Iran)

State/Collective (Ummah strata)	High (strength)
Mosque and extended family	Low
Personal	Low
Type of Discipleship Movement	Covert/Underground, outside the Ummah

### Bangladesh

Moving from Iran to Bangladesh, we find another significant movement of people to Christ from a Muslim background, but who are remaining within the ummah, calling themselves "Isai Muslims"<sup>50</sup> (*isa imandars*).<sup>51</sup> Isai Muslims in Bangladesh were first identified as "insider movements" in western missiology discussions in the 1980s.<sup>52</sup> Since then, the movement has grown: the World Christian Database estimates that by 2015, the majority of Muslim-background believers in Bangladesh were members of insider movements—100,000 out of 180,000.<sup>53</sup> Finding and publishing accurate information on *Bangladeshi* Isai Muslims in particular is not straightforward; those within the fellowships, and the cross-cultural workers who are in contact with them, want to keep a certain level of anonymity, so a lot of information must be included under a larger heading of "South Asia." (This itself says something about these believers' global sociological positioning: whereas Iranian underground churches have many advocates among migrants' groups, human rights' groups, and western denominations, Bangladeshi Isai Muslims only have obscure missionary voices, who themselves are treated with suspicion by many Christian stakeholders.) Tim Green, quoting a trusted informant in Dhaka, gives a helpful overview of how Isai Muslims fit socially into the Bangladeshi Christ-followers landscape:

[i] The first group is made up of the ones we call "Christian." They are completely assimilated in the traditional church with its festivals, language and social relationships. They no longer have any contact with their Muslim relatives. [ii] In the second group are the ones called "Isai."<sup>54</sup> They mostly live in the Christian community but

preserve a little contact with their Muslim relatives, visit them at *Eid* and so on. They switch between Christian and Muslim terminology according to the group they are with... their Muslim relatives view them as heretical but not beyond the bounds of social contact. [iii] Next we have... "Isai Muslim." They are mostly in the Muslim community but they preserve a little contact with Christians. They use Muslim terminology... Muslims view them as an odd kind of Muslim, but acceptable within the range of Muslim sects. [iv] Finally we have those who follow Jesus but are called "Muslim." They remain within the Muslim community... [and] have no contact with Christians... [Some] Believers in this group meet for fellowship with each other... Others... do not meet up with other Jesus-followers.<sup>55</sup>

Even though Green's point is to show that there is a range of identity options for the Muslim who turns to Christ, we can still see a social gap between the first two options (outside the ummah) and the second two (inside the ummah), and hints that the gap is determined by their extended family. We get a more detailed snapshot in Jonas Adelin Jorgensen's field study, where he interviewed forty-four members of three Jesus *imandar* groups in Dhaka during 2002 and 2004.<sup>56</sup> Fitting into Green's third "Isai Muslim" category, these members have a small amount of contact with the Christian community<sup>57</sup> but meet as *jamaat* (community) fellowships, mainly in homes but sometimes in offices or slum areas, retaining Muslim forms and redirecting them to Jesus.<sup>58</sup> Most had been baptized.<sup>59</sup> Most continued to attend the mosque in some way, either regularly or when they visit their family in the village.<sup>60</sup>

Looking at Bangladesh's ummah structures as a context for the growth of *Isai Muslims*, we see that ummah ties at the *state/collective level* have a degree of slackness. The constitution is ambivalent:

The state religion... is Islam, but the state shall ensure equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian... religions.<sup>61</sup>

That is, Bangladeshi national identity is not exclusively tied to Islam; there is a degree of religious freedom for Christians, and in theory, freedom for Muslims to convert to Christianity.<sup>62</sup> But there has always been a competition in Bangladeshi politics between a secularist Bengali national vision—represented by founding father Sheik Mujib's generation, who fought for independence against Pakistan in 1971—and an Islamic nationalism, which rose up after Mujib's assassination in 1975. While Islamic politics have gained influence in the last decade,<sup>63</sup> the government has not directly persecuted Christians (barring land displacement pressures in rural areas<sup>64</sup>). Unlike Iran, churches with Muslim-background believers do not currently face legal pressure.

At the *mosque/family network level*, the ummah bonds are far stronger. While weekly mosque attendance (53%) is only medium in comparison to other Muslim populations,<sup>65</sup> those in religious authority at the community level wield considerable influence. A study of communities in the Dinajpur district described a popular desire for moral order to be regulated at the level of the *samaj* (local or kinship community), with the mosque playing a key role.<sup>66</sup> It is *communal* rather than state violence that Christian churches have to fear. The U.S. State Department's 2016 report into religious freedom in Bangladesh highlights community violence against religious minorities, documenting fifteen of the year's worst incidents, in both rural and urban settings. This included the attempted murder of a Muslim convert to Christianity in May 2015, and 60 Catholics being beaten by sticks in June.<sup>67</sup>

Muslim Isai, too, face pressure from their families and local networks for their commitment to Jesus. Jorgensen's interviewees reported that their families treated the move with great suspicion, or even accused them of madness; one described how his village court had ruled that other villagers should sever social and business ties with them.<sup>68</sup> With community-level authority functioning to protect against even the Muslim Isai type of deviation, we can see these Muslim Isai as having developed a feasible but difficult social position—one that coheres with their faith in Jesus, and finds a place for it in a very taut, even claustrophobic, socio-religious setting.

At the *individual level* of the ummah, it is difficult to estimate how deep Bangladeshi loyalty to the ummah goes. In the 2012 Pew Survey, 81% of Bangladeshi Muslims said that religion was important to them, yet only 39% said they prayed several times a day.<sup>69</sup> A window onto Bangladeshi personal commitment to Islam is provided by Isai Muslims themselves. In Jorgensen's study, some of the interviewees are more enthusiastic than others with keeping the term "Muslim" as a self-description.<sup>70</sup> What does seem clear is that there is an appreciation of the Muslim worship forms (more than Muslim religious structures), and various levels of un-enthusiasm about the Christian churches and even "Christianity" as a religion.<sup>71</sup> The contrast here with Iranian converts is striking. With admittedly more research needed on this last stratum, we can surmise the following levels of ummah cohesion for Bangladesh, shown in table 2 below.

Table 2. Levels of Ummah Cohesion (Bangladesh)

State/Collective (Ummah strata)	Low
Mosque and extended family	High
Personal	Medium
Type of Discipleship Movement	Isai Muslim prayer fellowships, inside the Ummah

## Conclusion

I have laid out a way that we can take social context seriously as we consider what kind of fruitful disciple-making movements God is causing to flourish in the Muslim world. Tim Green, in calling for a reframing of the polarized debate over Insider Movements, remarks

... the debate is *too generalized*. The socio-cultural contexts of such countries as Algeria, Iran, Bangladesh and Indonesia are very different from each other. Why, then, do we persist in homogenizing them all with the same lines of argument?<sup>72</sup>

In comparing contexts, I have argued we need to pay attention to the ummah as a fundamental socio-religious constraint operating at all levels of Muslim society, and thereby pulling on, or pushing against, any Jesus discipleship movement that occurs. By examining the strength of these forces on three different levels of social structure in Iran and Bangladesh, I have tried to show that there is a logic to the kind of discipleship movement that emerges and proves fruitful. I hope that others will engage with the initial model I've proposed, suggesting where it is either inadequate or useful, especially in its application to other Muslim populations—whether in the Muslim-majority world or outside of it. I believe it has predictive value, but we must see if that value extends to the further challenges which ensue in the social positioning of the second generation.<sup>73</sup>

No genuine follower of Jesus from a Muslim background chooses an easy path. In fact, those we have looked at in Iran and Bangladesh are willing to defy their most powerful ummah stakeholders (the state and the community respectively). Yet, they do it in ways that make sense in their socio-political context, ways that prove feasible for the gospel of Jesus to take root and flourish among Muslim peoples and their societies. **IJFM**

**T**hese Muslim Isai have developed a feasible but difficult social position that coheres with their faith in Jesus in a claustrophobic socio-religious setting.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Moffatt, in the conclusion to his first volume of the history of Asian Christianity, says: "The church might better have withstood violence. Sharp persecution breaks off only the tips of the branches; it produces martyrs and the tree still grows. Never-ending social and political repression, on the other hand, starves the roots; it stifles evangelism and the church declines. Such was the history of the church in Asia under Islam." *A History of Christianity in Asia: Volume 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1998), 504.

<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Kraft, "Psychological Stress Factors among Muslims," in *Media in Islamic Culture* (1974): 137–44; and "Dynamic Equivalence Churches in Muslim Society," in *The Gospel and Islam: a 1978 Compendium* (1979): 114–128. For a commentary on the role of Kraft's dynamic equivalence ideas in the historical development of the insider movement debates, see Henry J. Wolfe, "The Development of the Insider Movement Paradigm," *Global Missiology* 4, no. 12 (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Donald McGavran and C. Peter Wagner, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990) 153–178. As one critic noted, "McGavran identifies 'a few typical elements of social structure' as: the unique self-image, marriage customs, elite or power structure, landrights, sex mores, people consciousness, geographical location and language. What is particularly surprising is his omission of religion from his discussion of social structure. As he acknowledges in *How Churches Grow*, the missionary requires knowledge of actual beliefs and practices in other religious systems. Religion in many non-Western societies, however, is an integral part of the social structure and must be understood within a particular social context." Wayne McClintock, "Sociological Critique of the Homogeneous Unit Principle," *International Review of Mission* 77, no. 305 (1988): 107–116, italics added.

<sup>4</sup> David W. Shenk, "The Muslim Umma and the Growth of the Church," in Wilbert R. Shenk (ed.), *Exploring Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 151–152.

<sup>5</sup> John Travis, "The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of 'Christ-Centered Communities' ('C') Found in the Muslim Context," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34(4) (1998): 407–408.

<sup>6</sup> David Greenlee ed. *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, Or Somewhere in Between?* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Priest, "Anthropology and Missiology: Reflections on the Relationship," in Charles Edward van Engen, Darrell L. Whiteman, and John Dudley Woodberry, *Paradigm Shifts in Christian Witness: Insights from Anthropology, Communication, and Spiritual Power: Essays in Honor of Charles H. Kraft* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 43–54.

<sup>9</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1967).

<sup>10</sup> These lectures have since been published as Evelyne A. Reisacher, ed., *Dynamics of Muslim Worlds: Regional, Theological and Missiological Perspectives* (IVP Academic, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> John and Anna Travis, "Societal Factors Impacting Socioreligious Identities of Muslims Who Follow Jesus," in Harley Talmann and John Jay Travis, eds., *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015); published in an earlier form as "Factors Affecting the Identity that Jesus Followers Choose," in J. Dudley Woodberry, ed. *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008), 193–205.

<sup>12</sup> Travis and Travis, "Societal Factors," 600.

<sup>13</sup> Travis and Travis, 602–604.

<sup>14</sup> The Arabic word *ummah* comes from either the Hebrew *am* (nation) or the arabic *umm* (meaning 'mother' or 'the source' of something born). For a discussion on etymology, see Frederick M. Denny, "Meaning of Ummah in the Qur'an," *History of Religions* 15, no. 1 (1975): 36–42, and Nadia Amin Rehmani, "Debating the Term Ummah as a Religious or Social and Political Notion," *Hamdard Islamicus* 33, no. 1:9, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> It refers at different times to followers of the prophet, a religious congregation, a minority religious population, a nation, or a species. Gabriele Marranci, *The Anthropology of Islam* (New York: Berg, 2008), 108.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., surah 2:128a: “Our Lord, and make us Muslims in submission to You and from our descendants a Muslim nation [*umamah*] in submission to You.” See Denny “Meaning of Ummah,” 43.

<sup>17</sup> Surah 3:110a. See Denny, “Meaning of Ummah,” 34–35.

<sup>18</sup> For a description of some of the Arabian influences on Muhammad, including Bedouin clans, see Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 23–45.

<sup>19</sup> See discussion of article 25 of the Constitution in Frederick M. Denny, “Ummah in the Constitution of Medina,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 36, no. 1 (1977): 44.

<sup>20</sup> Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 35–36.

<sup>21</sup> Sumaya Mohamed Saleh, and Shadiya Mohamed Baqutayan. “What is the Islamic Society?” *International Review of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2, no. 2 (2012), 118. For a study in the pervasiveness of, but variations in “Ummah consciousness” across the Muslim world, see Riaz Hasan, *Faithlines: Muslim Conceptions of Islam and Society* (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2003), 84–105.

<sup>22</sup> Sufyan Baig describes how his own conversion to Christ as a young man resulted in his Indian father banishing him from his home and family business. His unprepared pastor could only send him to an orphanage: “One day I was living as a wealthy businessman; the next day, for the sake of food and shelter, I was cleaning toilets in an orphanage for street children.” His research in India revealed many similar stories of leaving the ummah—and the frequent discovery that the church could not provide adequate community. Baig, “The Ummah and Christian Community,” in *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 72.

<sup>23</sup> See Green, “Identity Choices at the Border Zone,” in *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?* 59–61.

<sup>24</sup> Andrea Gray and Leith Gray, “Transforming Social Networks by Planting the Gospel,” in J. Dudley Woodberry ed., *From Seed to Fruit*, 287–289.

<sup>25</sup> Green, “Identity choices at the Border Zone,” 63–66.

<sup>26</sup> Green, 64.

<sup>27</sup> Tim Green, “Conversion in the Light of Identity Theories,” in *Longing for Community*, 47–50, drawing these categories from Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *Prolegomena to the Psychological Study of Religion* (London: Associated University Press, 1989), 96–97.

<sup>28</sup> Don Little, *Effective Discipling in Muslim Communities: Scripture, History and Seasoned Practices* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 136–139.

<sup>29</sup> Duane Alexander Miller, and Patrick Johnstone, “Believers in Christ from a Muslim background: a Global Census,” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 11 (2015); Duane Alexander Miller, “Power, Personalities and Politics: the Growth of Iranian Christianity since 1979,” *Mission Studies* 32, no. 1 (2015): 66–86; Jason Mandryck, *Operation World* (7th edition) (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2010), 465.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, “Power, Personalities and Politics,” 69.

<sup>31</sup> US State Department, 2016 Report on International Freedom: Iran, accessed May 2018 <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269134.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Mark Bradley, *Iran and Christianity: Historical Identity and Present Relevance* (A&C Black, 2008), 178.

<sup>33</sup> “Rapid Church Growth, How is it Happening?,” Elam Ministries, accessed May 2018, <https://www.elam.com/page/rapid-church-growth-how-it-happening>; “Country Policy and Information Note; Iran: Christians and Christian Converts,” UK Home Office, accessed May 2018. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/58b42f774.html>, citing an interview with Open Doors.

<sup>34</sup> “Many New Church Plants Thanks to the Internet,” Elam Ministries, accessed May 2018, <https://www.elam.com/Iran30/many-new-church-plants-thanks-internet>; K. A. Ellis, “Evangelism, Iranian Style,” *Christianity Today*, June 21, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> “Country Policy and Information Note; Iran,” UK Home Office, accessed May 2018 <http://www.refworld.org/docid/58b42f774.html>, 16.

<sup>36</sup> “Country Policy and Information Note; Iran,” UK Home Office, accessed May 2018 <http://www.refworld.org/docid/58b42f774.html>, 18–19, drawing on 2017 interviews with Open Doors and Elam Ministries.

<sup>37</sup> “2016 Report on International Freedom: Iran,” US State Department, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269134.pdf>, accessed May 2018.

<sup>38</sup> “The Persecution of Christians in Iran,” Christians in Parliament, accessed May 2018, <http://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk/uploads/APPGs-report-on-Persecution-of-Christians-in-Iran.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> Harold Rhode, “The Unending Battle between the Persian and Islamic identities of Iran,” *Identities in Crisis in*

*Iran: Politics, Culture and Religion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> In July 2000, after the death of Ahmad Shamlou (an atheist poet) 30,000 Iranians lined the streets of Tehran to pay their last respects. Mark Bradley, *Iran and Christianity: Historical Identity and Present Relevance*, 34.

<sup>41</sup> “There is also the deep conviction I found in many of my interviews with Iranian Christians, that Islam is a form of socio-religious colonialism—that it was unjustly imposed by Arabs (an unaccomplished and uncultured group of warriors, in this view) on the rich and great culture of Persia. As one interviewee said, ‘Islam was a step up for the Arabs, because they moved from fighting with each other to unity; but for Iran it was a step down.’” Miller, “Power, Personalities and Politics,” 75.

<sup>42</sup> Rhode, “The Unending Battle between the Persian and Islamic identities of Iran,” 17.

<sup>43</sup> Tezcur, Gunes Murat, Taghi Azadarmaki, and Mehri Bahar. “Religious participation among Muslims: Iranian exceptionalism.” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 15.3 (2006): 217–232.

<sup>44</sup> See Olivier Roy, “The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran,” *The Middle East Journal* (1999): 201–216.

<sup>45</sup> Kathleen Foody, “Interiorizing Islam: Religious Experience and State Oversight in the Islamic Republic of Iran.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83, no. 3 (2015): 599–623.

<sup>46</sup> Family networks tend to safeguard the house churches from government-aligned strangers joining. See Austrian Red Cross/Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation, “Iran: House Churches,” June 2017 accessed May 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/975066/download>, accessed May 2018), 7.

<sup>47</sup> Mark Bradley suggests that whole family networks have been known to convert together, but he does not provide evidence of it. (*Iran and Christianity: Historical Identity and Present Relevance*, 180).

<sup>48</sup> Miller, “Power, Personalities and Politics,” 74–75.

<sup>49</sup> Koser Akcapar, Sebnem. “Conversion as a migration strategy in a transit country: Iranian Shiites Becoming Christians in Turkey,” *International Migration Review* 40, no. 4 (2006): 817–853; “Iranian Refugees Turn to Christianity in the Netherlands,” BBC, August 25, 2017 accessed May 2018 <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-41040163/iranian-refugees-turn-to-christianity-in-the-netherlands>; “Muslim Refugees are Converting to Christianity in Germany,” *Independent*,

December 19 2016, accessed May 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/muslim-refugees-converting-to-christianity-in-germany-crisis-asylum-seekers-migrants-iran-a7466611.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Tim Green, "Identity Choices at the Border Zone," in *Longing for Community*, 61.

<sup>51</sup> Jonas Adelin Jorgensen, *Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas* (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2008).

<sup>52</sup> Jeff Morton, *Insider Movements: Biblically Incredible or Incredibly Brilliant?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), 113–115.

<sup>53</sup> Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill), accessed April 2018.

<sup>54</sup> "Isai" is the adjective related to the Arabic word, "Isa," or Jesus.

<sup>55</sup> Green, "Identity Choices at the Border Zone," 59–60.

<sup>56</sup> See Jorgensen, *Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas*, 136–141.

<sup>57</sup> Jorgensen, 137–138.

<sup>58</sup> Jorgensen, 142–144.

<sup>59</sup> Jorgensen, 155–157.

<sup>60</sup> Jorgensen, 160–161, 234–236.

<sup>61</sup> "2016 Report on International Freedom: Bangladesh," accessed May 2018,

<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269170.pdf>, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Bangladesh Constitution Part 3: 41(1): "Subject to law, public order and morality—(a) every citizen has the right to profess, practise or propagate any religion; (b) every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions."

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Akhand Akhtar Hossain, "Islamic Resurgence in Bangladesh's Culture and Politics: Origins, Dynamics and Implications," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 23, no. 2 (2012): 165–198; Md Maidul Islam, "Secularism in Bangladesh: An Unfinished Revolution," *South Asia Research* 38, no. 1 (2018): 20–39.

<sup>64</sup> "2016 Report on International Freedom: Bangladesh," accessed May 2018, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269170.pdf>, 11.

<sup>65</sup> Pew Survey 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-2-religious-commitment/>.

<sup>66</sup> Joseph Devine, and Sarah C. White, "Religion, Politics and the Everyday Moral Order in Bangladesh," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 1 (2013): 127–147. The study noted that for a community to be without a mosque was a source of shame and even

anxiety. There was also an openness to being taught a purer form of Islam by traveling members of the Tablighi Jamaat (140–142).

<sup>67</sup> "2016 Report on International Freedom: Bangladesh," US State Department, accessed May 2018, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269170.pdf>, 11–13.

<sup>68</sup> Jorgensen, *Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas*, 210–211, see footnote 337.

<sup>69</sup> "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity," in Chapter 2: Religious Commitment, Pew Forum Report 2012, accessed May, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-2-religious-commitment/>.

<sup>70</sup> Jorgensen, *Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas*, 231–233.

<sup>71</sup> Jorgensen, *Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas*, 231–233.

<sup>72</sup> Tim Green, "Identity Choices at the Border Zone," *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah or Somewhere in Between?*, 65.

<sup>73</sup> If a community of Jordanian immigrants living in the United States, for example, had "High" strength ties to the ummah at the personal level, but "Low" at the communal and state level, what might we expect a fruitful discipling movement to look like from a social perspective?



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# More than a Prophet: John the Baptist and the Question “Is Muhammad among the Prophets?”

by George Bristow

“So, what do you think of Muhammad?” I have often been confronted with this challenging question during my 30 years in Turkey. Without giving reasons for rejecting Muhammad as the final prophet, I sometimes answer, “Jesus said, ‘I am the first and the last,’ and as a Christian I believe that he will be with his followers until he returns at the end of this age.”<sup>1</sup> At times I talk about Joseph Smith, whom Mormons believe to be a great prophet. Although Smith spoke very highly of Jesus Christ, the Book of Mormon subverts the biblical story line at various points and so I cannot affirm his claim to be a prophet. Because of obvious parallels with Islam (divine revelation and a “final” prophet centuries after Christ), Muslim questioners understand my Christian position regarding Muhammad without requiring that my position be spelled out.<sup>2</sup> The point is clear: because these later writings (the Qur’an or the Book of Mormon) do not cohere with the biblical witness to God’s final act through Jesus, I do not see their proclaimers as trustworthy prophets. This approach to evaluating prophecy is analogous to the early church’s use of the “rule of faith”—a summary of the biblical metanarrative joining the confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior with the confession of God as Creator.<sup>3</sup>

In his provocative article, “Is Muhammad Also Among the Prophets?” (*IJFM* 31:4 [Oct-Dec 2014]), 169–190), Harley Talman offers a very different answer to this challenge, arguing that there is “theological, missiological, and historical sanction for expanding constricted categories of prophethood to allow Christians to entertain the possibility of Muhammad being other than a false prophet.” Talman’s argument has stimulated thoughtful responses from Ayman and Azumah,<sup>4</sup> but because of the importance of this subject for missiology, I wish to revisit the question from the perspective of comparative theology, and from my own experience and research in Turkey.

To treat this issue adequately we must not only do biblical theology carefully but also examine the qur’anic picture as a whole. Representative Muslim scholars should be able to concede that I present the nature of prophethood in the Qur’an

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fairly, particularly in relation to Muhammad. In previous research on Abraham I argued that we need to think clearly about the partially overlapping biblical and qur'anic narratives.<sup>5</sup> Otherwise, our first impressions of common ground may turn out to be false positives, incorrectly indicating commonalities that do not stand up to scrutiny. Here I will focus especially on accounts of John the Baptist, son of Zachariah, as an instance of such overlapping narratives.

As we look at qur'anic and biblical concepts of prophecy and prophets, I will defend three propositions. First, Muhammad's prophethood is inseparable from the qur'anic prophet story pattern and needs to be examined as the epitome of this element of Muslim worldview. Second, biblical prophethood or prophecy is inseparable from the overarching biblical narrative which reaches its fulfillment with the coming of Jesus. Third, these two perspectives on prophethood are fundamentally incompatible.

### *Muhammad and the Qur'anic Prophets: Muhammad as the "Seal"*

Talman states his intent to

broaden our base of theological, historical and missiological understandings of prophethood in general and of the person of Muhammad in particular. (170)<sup>6</sup>

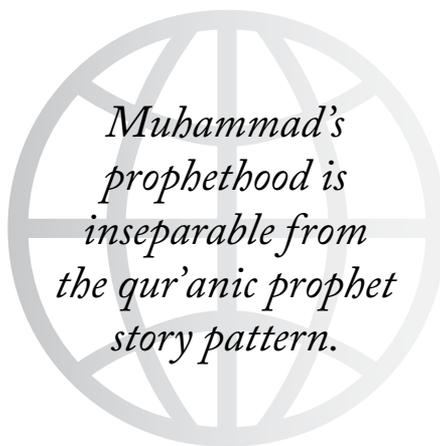
Since he rejects Islamic tradition as a reliable guide to understanding Muhammad,<sup>7</sup> I will focus on the qur'anic prophethood material, particularly the "prophet stories" found throughout the text. Concerning the overall unity of the Qur'an, Ruthven says:

The seemingly chaotic organization of the material ensures that each of the parts in some way represents the whole... any one of the *surahs* will contain, in a more or less condensed form, the message of the whole.<sup>8</sup>

This coherence is evident in the prophethood material.

Numerous prophet stories appealed to throughout the Qur'an flesh out the concept of prophethood. These narratives generally follow a pattern in which the community rejects the messenger, but God vindicates the prophet and punishes the unbelieving community. These fragmentary episodes provide moral examples, underscoring the danger of rejecting the messengers of God and warning the audience to beware how they receive the Prophet (Muhammad) and his message.

Qur'anic prophets are sent to different human communities to proclaim ethical monotheism: "We sent a messenger to every community, saying, 'Worship God and shun false gods'" (16:36).<sup>9</sup>



The Qur'an, which is disclosed to the final messenger, describes itself as "guidance for mankind" (2:185). No society will be judged before being warned by a prophet, who may even testify against them in the judgment (10:47; 39:69). Unless we deny that Muhammad is the primary addressee in qur'anic discourse, as some do,<sup>10</sup> we find him presented there as the epitome of prophethood: "Muhammad... is God's Messenger and the seal of the prophets" (Q33:40).<sup>11</sup>

Muslim scholars have recognized that this qur'anic pattern diverges from the biblical salvation-history concept of God redeeming a particular people through a series of covenant-making

acts. Al Faruqi, for example, rejects the biblical pattern as unworthy of God:

The so-called "saving acts of God" in Hebrew Scripture, Islam regards as the natural consequences of virtue and good deeds... The "Promise" of Hebrew Scripture, or the unearned blessing of any man or people, the Qur'an utterly rejects as inconsonant with God's nature and His justice; the Muslims being no more unfit for such favoritism than any other people.<sup>12</sup>

Whether or not al Faruqi misrepresents the biblical concept of God's election of grace with the phrase "such favoritism," he correctly represents the qur'anic position as deeply different from it. The lives of qur'anic prophets support its rhetoric and worldview, in which they function as models for believers. Salvation comes through "virtue and good deeds," above all by avoiding the unforgivable sin of *shirk* or idolatry (Q4:48, 116; cf. 39:65; 34:22; 31:13).

The close relationship between Abraham and Muhammad displays this qur'anic prophet portrait clearly, especially the story of Abraham disputing with idolaters, which is found in eight suras in different forms.<sup>13</sup> The Qur'an narrates how Abraham deduces the reality of God from the evidence of creation and boldly rebukes his kinfolk (6:78-84). In some accounts, Abraham is cast into a fire by his adversaries but is miraculously protected.<sup>14</sup> As Muhammad is being mocked by idolaters, God assures him that other messengers have been mocked before him (6:10) and that he has been guided into "an upright religion, the faith of Abraham" (6:161).

Like Abraham, John (Yahya), the son of Zachariah, also functions in this role of model messenger in the Qur'an.<sup>15</sup> In 6:84-86 he is listed among the prophets whom God chose and "guided on a straight path." Like all qur'anic prophets, John's exemplary character is underscored: "He will be noble and chaste, a prophet, one of the righteous"

(3:39; 19:12–14). His birth story, which forms part of Mary’s story in the Qur’an, has elements in common with the narrative in Luke 1:5–20.<sup>16</sup> But we find nothing of his ministry or crucial New Testament (NT) role as Jesus’ forerunner, which, as we will see below, is key for understanding the biblical perspective on prophets.

While stories of qur’anic prophets are found in a variety of detail and are certainly not identical to one another, their DNA is consistent. The qur’anic portrait of Muhammad as the ideal and final prophet is built upon and inseparable from this qur’anic prophet model.

### *Jesus and the Biblical Prophets: John as the “Seal”*

If Muhammad cannot be separated from the larger qur’anic narrative, neither can biblical prophets be separated from the overarching biblical narrative. The Hebrew prophets arise within Israel, the people uniquely “known” by God (Amos 3:2). With rare exceptions (e.g., Jonah), they prophesy in Israel, charging God’s people to live by His covenant.<sup>17</sup> Biblically speaking, “the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2) and as Vanhoozer says

the task of interpreting Israel’s history... fell first to the prophets. It was their interpretive words that made sense of God’s saving deeds.<sup>18</sup>

Biblical use of the category of prophetic activity is not systematic, but varied and complex.<sup>19</sup> It may therefore be useful to distinguish the activity of prophesying from the “vocation” of prophet as it came to be understood. Prophetic activity, for example, even included temple singers who, though not prophets, “prophesied with the lyre in thanksgiving and praise to the Lord” (1 Chron. 25:1–3).

While the phenomenon of prophecy was prevalent throughout the ancient Near East and similar terminology was used for these figures and the Hebrew prophets, there were also significant

*It may be useful to distinguish the activity of prophesying from the “vocation” of prophet as it came to be understood.*

differences, above all the nature of the gods they served.<sup>20</sup> Another was that outside of Israel “there is no evidence that ancient Near Eastern prophecy ever fundamentally questioned the monarchy.”<sup>21</sup> By contrast, the “prophets of the Lord,” who spoke his word whether favorable or not to the regime,<sup>22</sup> were frequently in conflict with false prophets who flattered the kings of Israel. These are typically either idolatrous “prophets of Baal and prophets of the Asherah” (1 Kings 18) or “prophets of the deception of their own heart,” who claimed to represent the Lord (Jer. 23:26). Often these false prophets served along with diviners, dreamers, soothsayers, or sorcerers (Jer. 27:9). “The leading traits of their ‘revelations’ are mixing of falsity and truth (Jer. 23:28) and stealing Yahweh’s words from other sources,” such as dreams and other prophets (23:30–32).<sup>23</sup>

At the core of genuine prophethood was “covenantal integrity” embodied in personal contact with the living God, obedience to covenant provisions, and loyalty to his Davidic kingdom promises. God said of false prophets, “if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people” (Jer. 23:22). The life-changing calls of Isaiah and Ezekiel came from the throne of God symbolized by the ark of the covenant in the temple (Isa. 6; Ezek. 1; cf. Rev. 4–5). The prophets relay both God’s anguish over his disobedient children and his intent to restore a remnant after the inevitable judgment falls.

It is against this background that we should place Saul, with whom Talman begins his consideration of Muhammad’s reputation among Christians. Saul’s surprising “prophesying” prompted the reaction, “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (1 Sam. 10:10–13). Yet Saul

is not said to be a prophet, but only to have “prophesied with the prophets” under the Spirit’s influence. Years later Saul, controlled by jealousy, sent messengers to capture David, who had been anointed king by the prophet Samuel.<sup>24</sup> Saul’s messengers “also prophesied” when they approached the ecstatic company of prophets (19:20–21), yet the messengers were not called prophets. Although the Spirit had long since “departed from him” (16:14), Saul “prophesied” again (19:23–24). He finally consulted a banned medium when God no longer answered him. The experience of being moved to ecstasy and prophesying under the powerful influence of God’s Spirit does not make one a prophet of God. Nor is the case of Saul a likely point of common ground with Muslims, since the comparison of Muhammad with sinful Saul contradicts the consistent qur’anic portrait of prophets as exemplary and protected by God from significant sin.

There are no clear biblical references to genuine prophets outside of the covenant people of God. Paul once quotes a pagan prophet from Crete as “a prophet of their own” (Titus 1:12; cf. Acts 17:28), but not as a prophet of the Lord.<sup>25</sup> Balaam, who superficially appears to be an exception, on closer scrutiny turns out to represent a pattern of false prophecy. God’s Spirit came upon Balaam and he spoke divine oracles (Num. 24:2). Yet Moses’ soldiers later executed him for helping the Midianites lead Israel into idolatry (Num. 31:8, 16). Moreover, in the most important NT reflection on Balaam, Peter speaks of “the prophet’s madness,” and uses Balaam as a memorable example of “false prophets” (2 Peter 2:1, 16).<sup>26</sup> Thus Balaam is clear evidence that simply communicating words from God does not make one a genuine prophet of God.

We see this same phenomenon in the New Testament. Even Caiaphas, the high priest who conspired to have Jesus executed, unwittingly but truly "prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation" (John 11:44–52). The outpouring of the Spirit makes prophecy a central reality of God's new covenant people (Acts 2:1–36). Yet even if NT prophecy can be both legitimate and fallible as some argue,<sup>27</sup> identifying and rejecting false prophecy remains essential (1 Tim. 4:1–3; 2 Peter 2:1; 3:1–2; 1 John 4:1–6).<sup>28</sup> The essential criteria is loyalty to the incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord, whose apostolic gospel was once for all delivered to the saints by his apostles and prophets (Jude 3; Eph. 2:20–22; 4:11).

A robust Christian understanding of prophecy must also reckon with the epochal change introduced by the arrival of Jesus Christ. Here we return to John the Baptist, who epitomizes biblical prophecy from the perspective of the Evangelists. We saw above that in the Qur'an John is simply one of the prophets. But Jesus speaks of him as something more akin to the "seal" of the prophets:

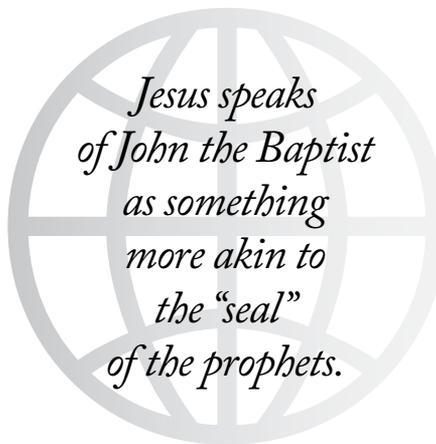
What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you." Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he... All the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. (Matt. 11:11–14)

John was a genuine prophet of God, his calling announced by the angel Gabriel in the temple sanctuary and by Zachariah's prophecy.<sup>29</sup> He arose among the covenant community and proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But as the promised "messenger," whose coming heralds the arrival of God himself, he was "more than a prophet" and identified by Jesus as the greatest person born to that point.

All four Gospels begin their accounts of Jesus' ministry with John's arrival and cite Isaiah 40:1–11 and Malachi 3:1 to identify him as the forerunner. In both Old Testament (OT) passages, the one whose way is being prepared is the creator God, coming at last to restore his people.<sup>30</sup> Jesus thus gives his disciples a framework for understanding God's progressive self-revelation in relation to John and to himself:

Moses/prophets → Final OT prophet (forerunner) → The Son<sup>31</sup> → NT prophets

In the parable of the tenants, Jesus shows that God (the landlord), after sending many prophets (the servants), has finally sent his son (Matt. 21:33–46).



He also announces to Jerusalem that as the Son he will send them "prophets and wise men and scribes" to announce his reign (Matt. 23:34; see 24:14; 28:18–20). The author of Hebrews works within this same framework: God, who spoke *through the prophets* in past ages, is now speaking "in these last days" *by his Son*, (Heb. 1:1–2).

John felt himself unworthy as Jesus' lowly servant (Luke 3:16) and introduced him with glowing words brimming with OT prophecy:

- "He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me." (John 1:15, 30) — Jesus is the pre-existent Coming One. (Ps. 118:26; Mic. 5:2; Mal. 3:1)

- "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Luke 3:16) — Jesus is the giver of the eschatological Spirit. (Isa. 59:20–21; Joel 2:30)
- "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Luke 3:17) — Jesus is the Lord of the harvest. (Mal. 4:1–3).
- "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him." (John 1:32) — Jesus is the Spirit-endowed Messiah and Servant-Priest. (Isa. 11:1; 42:1; 61:1)
- "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) — Jesus is God's own sacrificial Lamb. (Gen. 22:8, 14; Isa. 53:6–7)
- "The one who has the bride is the bridegroom." (John 3:29) — Jesus is the coming "Bridegroom" of God's people. (Isa. 62:4–5)

The NT apostles and prophets confirm and develop John's witness, preaching the crucified and risen Jesus as Lord to Jews and "God-fearers" with direct citations of the prophets,<sup>32</sup> and to Gentile hearers with the biblical metanarrative in the background (Acts 14:15–17; 17:24–31).<sup>33</sup> They insist that "all the prophets" proclaimed these messianic days (Luke 24:25; Acts 3:24; 1 Peter 10–12). New Testament prophets, along with the apostles, unfold the unsearchable riches of Christ to the people of God (Eph. 3:4–10). The test of prophecy is henceforth full conformity to the Spirit-revealed testimony that Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3).

Thus, from the standpoint of biblical theology, Jesus' era is the finale of salvation history. There can be no return to pre-Jesus prophecy, at least none which does not submit to the corrective teaching of Christian evangelists (Acts 18:25–26) and to baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:1–10). Paul makes this clear to the Athenians: "The times of ignorance God

overlooked, *but now* he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30–31). Despite suggestions by Talman (179) that we might think of Muhammad as a “BC-like prophet during an AD time frame,”<sup>34</sup> we find no evidence in the New Testament for the possibility of another “preparatory economy” like God provided in OT salvation history.<sup>35</sup>

In the Old Testament, prophecy highlights God’s dwelling place in Jerusalem and the priestly worship based on the law of Moses and the commandments through David and the prophets (2 Chron. 29:25–30; 36:15–16). Jesus’ inauguration of the “new” covenant promised by prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel brings not only the fulfillment of the Davidic kingdom through Jesus, son of David and son of God, but also of the priesthood through Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice and ministry at God’s right hand (Heb. 8–10), of God’s law now written on hearts as the law of Christ (2 Cor. 3; Heb. 8; 1 Cor. 9:21), and of Christ’s worldwide “body” as the true dwelling place of God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:19–22; 3:). The New Testament concludes with John’s prophecy of Christ’s “bride” as the holy temple-city (Rev. 21:9–22:5). Considering this advancing purpose of God, there can be no return to a geographical center of worship on earth, whether Rome, Mecca, or Salt Lake City.

### *Incompatible Perspectives on Muhammad’s Prophethood*

We can more clearly see the incompatibility of biblical and qur’anic concepts of prophethood by pairing the main elements of the qur’anic and biblical worldviews. I have argued elsewhere that the essential three elements of the Muslim worldview are Tawhid (divine unity), Prophethood, and Afterlife, and that these may be usefully juxtaposed with the elements of a biblical worldview framework summarized as “creation, fall, redemption,

**W**e can see the incompatibility of biblical and qur’anic concepts of prophethood by pairing the main elements of their worldviews.

consummation,” resulting in the following set of pairs or correspondences:

Creation-Fall – Tawhid

Redemption – Prophethood

Consummation – Afterlife

While the first and last of these pairings share some common ground, the middle pair, redemption and prophethood, radically diverge and ultimately tell different stories of God and humanity.<sup>36</sup> These divergent narratives also correspond to very different diagnoses of what is wrong with the world. In the biblical worldview God brings redemption to *fallen* humanity (through Christ); in the qur’anic worldview he provides reminders and guidance to *forgetful* humanity (through prophets). While the Bible underscores God’s repeated entries into and powerful action within history, the qur’anic version of human history highlights God’s repeated sending of prophets. The comparison of the biblical John as the coming Lord’s unique forerunner with the qur’anic John sharpens this dissonance.

Muslim writers are clear that the biblical concept of *God coming tangibly into the world* is incompatible with the qur’anic Tawhid principle. For Shah, the tension caused by the “amalgamation of anthropomorphic and transcendental tendencies” of the Hebrew Bible becomes unbearable in the NT: “Incarnational theology is not paradoxical. It is thoroughly and utterly contradictory.”<sup>37</sup> Muslims see the Qur’an, revealed to Muhammad, as correcting the Jewish error of making God too immanent and the Christian error of deifying a prophet. Yet this biblical revelation of the God of Israel condescending to come among us is at the heart of its prophetic witness.

Hebrew prophecy gives great significance to the *temple and priestly sacrificial*

*system*,<sup>38</sup> looking for its fulfillment in the “last days” (e.g., Ezek. 40–48).<sup>39</sup> The New Testament announces this fulfillment in Jesus and his new covenant kingdom of priests. But the qur’anic perspective not only allows neither “intercession” nor “ransom” in the “Day when no soul will stand in place of another” (2:48; cf. 6:164; 17:15) but also, as traditionally understood, rejects Jesus’ death by crucifixion (4:157)<sup>40</sup> and makes nothing of his present universal priestly role. Here the qur’anic John’s simple prophet role diverges deeply from priestly-born John’s prophetic declaration of Jesus as the “Lamb of God.”

The biblical John warns of the “wrath to come” and points to Jesus himself as the judge who will separate wheat from chaff (Matt. 3:7–12). In the qur’anic message, belief in the afterlife is second only in importance to belief in God. The prophets continually remind forgetful humanity of God and “the Day.”<sup>41</sup> Talman asserts that “the emphasis of [Muhammad’s] eschatological proclamation was Christ’s Second Advent” (185). Yet if we base our understanding of Muhammad’s prophethood on the Qur’an, this is a dubious statement. While there is extensive para-qur’anic Muslim exegetical literature that expects Jesus’ return in the eschaton, no qur’anic statement clearly affirms it. As Reynolds says:

None of the events which Jesus is said by the [Muslim] exegetes to accomplish in the eschaton—killing al-Dajjāl, leading believers in prayer, breaking Crosses, killing swine (and Christians), etc.—are mentioned in the Quran.<sup>42</sup>

Despite similarities, there are deep differences between the qur’anic “afterlife” concept which emphasizes the soul’s “return” to God and the biblical “consummation” concept which is built upon the resurrection and return of Jesus.<sup>43</sup>

Talman claims that:

Jewish Christian Christology . . . would not have compromised the Abrahamic monotheism of the *ḥunafá'*, as did the aberrant Christologies of the Christians that Muhammad refuted in the Qur'an. (173)

I have two concerns here. First, the New Testament writings diverge sharply from the Jewish exegetical narratives which parallel the Qur'an in many places and which were apparently known to pre-Islamic Arab monotheists.

Second, as Bauckham has demonstrated, the earliest Jewish Christian monotheism was a "Christological monotheism" which included Jesus "in the unique identity of this one God."<sup>44</sup> Thus the "Abrahamic monotheism" of the New Testament, in which Christ presents himself as the God of Abraham and the Lord of David (John 8:56–58; Matt. 22:41–46), has little in common with that expressed in the Qur'an. It does, however, have a lot in common with the Christology of the churches present in the Hijaz at the time of the emergence of Islam. Despite intense controversy over how to formulate the mystery, "the orthodox, the Monophysites, and the Nestorians were all agreed that He was both God and man."<sup>45</sup> The Qur'an insists that Jesus is only a messenger (Q 5:72–75; 4:171).

The presence of biblical concepts and para-biblical material in the Qur'an, especially given its use of the formula "remember . . ." when introducing prophet narratives, may be explained by their presence in the Jewish and Christian communities extant in the Hijaz. Yet we should remember that the New Testament explicitly warns against Jewish exegetical narratives and interpretive approaches which paint biblical figures in glowing colors (1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; Titus 1:14). Watson shows how Paul is in "conversation" with second-Temple narratives in which Abraham is a paragon of virtue.<sup>46</sup> It seems to me that the Qur'an expands on these Jewish para-biblical "hero" stories and presents a very different narrative. While claiming to confirm

the previous books,<sup>47</sup> it does not present a continuation, much less a concluding resolution, of this particular history.

A full biblical theology of Islam (or other religions) is beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>48</sup> God is indeed at work among peoples outside of the covenant community in a variety of ways, not leaving himself without witness (Acts 14:17; Rom. 1:20). God does speak through visions, angels, and human representatives to individuals who need to hear the true prophetic word, such as Naaman whose servant girl told him of Elisha (2 Kings 5:1–4), and Cornelius whom the angelic vision prepared to hear Peter's "message by which you will be saved" (Acts 11:14). But neither Naaman nor Cornelius were thereby made



prophets. Deciding if there is a biblical category which can include Muhammad as a prophet of God is a different question, one which requires a thorough assessment of the Qur'anic prophet story pattern and the role of prophets in the overarching biblical narrative.

Talman cites with approval Bavinck's view that "God dealt with Muhammad and touched him."<sup>49</sup> Bavinck does indeed argue that:

Buddha would never have meditated on the way of salvation if God had not touched him. Mohammed would never have uttered his prophetic witness if God had not concerned Himself with him. Every religion contains, somehow, the silent work of God.

But he also insists that man always subverts this silent work of God through *repression* and *substitution*, that the church must humbly testify in harmony with all the prophets, and that in Jesus Christ alone do we hear God's voice and see his image.<sup>50</sup>

In my view, the Qur'an *substitutes* a different story for "the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand *through his prophets* in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son . . ." (Rom. 1:1–4). Consequently, the Qur'anic prophet model personified by Muhammad is ultimately incompatible with the biblical model in which "the spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 19:10).

### Missiological Implications

A gospel-centered hermeneutic is essential to seeing the Old Testament and New Testament writings as one book. As the seal of the biblical prophets, John the Baptist's ministry as Christ's forerunner clarified this hermeneutic, announcing that the Kingdom of God was at hand. After his resurrection, Christ taught his followers to read the Scriptures in light of his suffering and subsequent glory (Luke 24:25–27, 32–34, 44–49; Acts 1:3). If we are going to use the Bible to evaluate Muhammad correctly and witness to Muslims convincingly, we must keep this interpretive grid clearly before us. This is, of course, essential to doing a biblical theology of any religion.

A reconstruction of Muhammad's prophethood which forces him into a quasi-Christian category, as a prophet bearing fallible witness to Jesus, does justice to neither the Bible nor the Qur'an. Respectfully confessing my belief in the uniqueness and finality of Jesus is therefore the best answer to the question of what I think of Muhammad. Telling the story of John the Baptist pointing to Jesus as the long-expected Savior and Jesus' testimony to John as "more than a prophet" may give clearer understanding why Muhammad does not fit into the biblical story.

Good witness often takes the hearers' worldview as a starting point, as Paul began his talk in Athens with a reference to the altar "to the unknown god" (Acts 17:23). But as Coleman notes, "Paul moved from commentary on the altar to a fairly significant rebuke of their worldview and practices while continuing to emphasize both their ignorance and culpability."<sup>51</sup> Witness to Muslims may well begin from their understanding of prophets and move to the Gospel, as Pennington proposes.<sup>52</sup> However, it is crucial in light of my findings here to keep in mind that biblical and qur'anic concepts of prophethood are deeply different. We should stress John's prophetic announcement of the glorious One who came after him and Jesus' own insistence that all the prophets spoke of him.

Whatever our biblical theology of religions, we do not respect Muslims by redefining Muhammad on our own terms. Rather we honor their seeking after God by standing with John, the prophet who was "more than a prophet," and directing them to the Lamb of God. **IJFM**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Rev. 1:17–18; Matt. 28:18–20.

<sup>2</sup> There are also parallels between Muslim and Mormon writings in their relationship to Jewish extra-biblical literature. See Bradley J. Cook, "The Book of Abraham and the Islamic Qisas Al-Anbiya' (Tales of the Prophets) Extant Literature," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 4 (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Greene-McCreight, "Rule of Faith," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 704.

<sup>4</sup> See *IJFM* issues in volumes 32 (2015) and 33 (2016).

<sup>5</sup> See George Bristow, *Sharing Abraham?: Narrative Worldview, Biblical and Qur'anic Interpretation and Comparative Theology in Turkey* (Cambridge, Mass: Doorlight Academic, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Page numbers for Talman, "Is Muhammad Also Among the Prophets" are given in parentheses when it is cited.

<sup>7</sup> Talman aligns himself with scholars who "maintain that Muhammad's message

should be interpreted in harmony with the previous Scriptures which it claimed to confirm, rather than rely on later traditions that contradict them" (170–71).

<sup>8</sup> Malise Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 84.

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise noted I cite the translation of M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Rippin says, "it does seem that in no sense can the Qur'an be assumed to be a primary document in constructing the life of Muhammad." Andrew Rippin, "Muhammad in the Qur'an: Reading Scripture in the 21st Century," in *The Biography of Muhammad: The Issue of the Sources*, ed. Harald Motzki (Boston: Brill, 2000), 307.

<sup>11</sup> This is one of four verses where Muhammad is mentioned by name (3:144; 33:40; 47:2; 48:29).

<sup>12</sup> Isma'il R. al Faruqi, "A Comparison of the Islamic and Christian Approaches to Hebrew Scripture," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 31, no. 4 (1963): 286, 90.

<sup>13</sup> Qur'an 6:74–87; 19:41–50; 21:51–73; 26:69–102; 29:16–27; 37:83–100; 43:26–28; 60:4–7.

<sup>14</sup> Though this material has no parallels in the canonical Abraham narrative, many are found in Jewish para-biblical writings. See Shari L. Lowin, *The Making of a Forefather: Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegetical Narratives*, Islamic History and Civilization (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> John is mentioned in four suras: 3:33–41; 6:84–90; 19:2–15; 21:83–91.

<sup>16</sup> These include the angelic announcement to his father Zachariah as he prays in the sanctuary and his mother's barrenness. Zachariah's dumbness comes in answer to his request for a sign, rather than a punishment as in Luke's account.

<sup>17</sup> OT prophecy also includes judgments on Israel's neighbors: Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Ethiopia, Egypt, Edom, Arabia, Kedar, Hazor, Elam, Tyre, Sidon (e.g., Isa. 13–25; Jer. 46–51; Ezek. 25–32; Dan. 4–5; Amos 1:3–15; Zech. 9:1–7; and the books of Obadiah and Nahum).

<sup>18</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 50.

<sup>19</sup> A search for the words prophet, prophecy, prophesy, and cognates yields more than 550 verses, across biblical genres. Of these, 35% refer to individuals who are called "prophet" (or "prophetess") of God; 25% are plural references to "the prophets" sent by

God to Israel (e.g., Neh. 9:26, 30); another 23% refer to "false prophets;" 12% refer to the "prophesying" activities of both true and false prophets; and 5% refer to "prophecy" as a phenomenon. For example, Daniel 9:24 speaks of an eschatological sealing of "vision and prophecy" and the NT refers to prophecy as a spiritual gift (1 Cor. 12–14).

<sup>20</sup> See Karl Möller, "Prophecy and Prophets in the OT," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> J. Stokl, "Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. G. McConville (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 23.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Sam. 3:20; 1 Kings 18:4, 13, 22; 22:7–8; 2 Kings 3:11; 17:13; 2 Chron. 18:6, 13; 20:20; 28:9; 29:25; 36:16; Ezra 5:2.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald E. Manahan, "A Theology of Pseudoprophets: A Study in Jeremiah," *Grace Theological Journal* 1, no. 1 (1980): 88.

<sup>24</sup> The role of Samuel, Nathan, and other prophets in announcing the reign of David and the Davidic Messiah is crucial, as Peter reminds the Jews of Jerusalem in Acts 3:24; see also 1 Chron. 29:29.

<sup>25</sup> "Prophet" would then be a title of honor that attached itself to various historical (and legendary) figures known to have been great teachers and poets." Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 700.

<sup>26</sup> See also Deut. 23:4–5; Josh. 13:22; 24:9–10; Neh. 13:2; 2 Peter 2:15; Jude 1:11; Rev. 2:14.

<sup>27</sup> Most notably Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, Rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000). Talman affirms this position in footnotes 64 and 114.

<sup>28</sup> Jesus repeatedly warned his followers of false prophets to come (Matt. 7:15; 24:11, 24).

<sup>29</sup> Luke 1:11–20, 76–79.

<sup>30</sup> See Bristow, 30, endnote 42. On Jesus and the coming of God, see N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 2 (London: SPCK, 1996), 615–21.

<sup>31</sup> Jesus identifies himself in the context as the unique Son of God (Matt. 11:27).

<sup>32</sup> Acts 2:21–36 cites Pss. 16, 110, and 132; Acts 3:12–26 cites Deut. 18:15–19 and Gen. 22:18; Acts 4:8–12 cites Ps. 118 and Acts 4:24–28 cites Ps. 2. Stephen (7:52) and Philip preach the good news about Jesus from the prophets (Acts 8:27–35). Peter (Acts 10:43), Paul (Acts 13:16–41, citing Pss. 2 and 16, Isa. 49 and 55; Hab. 1) and James (15:13–18,

citing Amos 9:11–12) believed that the gospel was precisely what *all the prophets* had announced beforehand. Several begin specifically from John (Acts 1:22; see 10:27; 13:24–25).

<sup>33</sup> Note the movement from the ages before Jesus—“in past generations” and “the times of ignorance”—to the emphatic “*but now...*” of the final, post-resurrection era in which all peoples are commanded to repent and take refuge in Christ (Acts 14:16; 17:30).

<sup>34</sup> Citing Dudley Woodberry’s lectures.

<sup>35</sup> For discussion of proposals that the Qur’an be seen as preparatory for Muslims see Doug Coleman, “A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology, and Ecclesiology,” EMS Dissertation Series (Pasadena, CA: WCIU Press, 2011), PhD Dissertation, 128–29.

<sup>36</sup> Bristow, 36–51.

<sup>37</sup> Zulfiqar Ali Shah, *Anthropomorphic Depictions of God: The Concept of God in Judaic, Christian and Islamic Traditions: Representing the Unrepresentable* (Herndon, Va.: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2010), 661.

<sup>38</sup> It also insists that insincere sacrifices are abhorrent to God (e.g., Mal. 1).

<sup>39</sup> On the “expanding end-time purpose of temples” in the OT prophets, see, Gregory

K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission* (Leicester: IVP, 2004), 123–67.

<sup>40</sup> Q4:157 is interpreted differently by some: “God (and not the Jews!) first made Jesus die, and then made him ascend to heaven.” Gabriel Said Reynolds, “The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?,” *Bulletin of SOAS*, Vol. 72, no. 2 (2009): 240. Nevertheless, in 19:33 Jesus’ death is treated just as that of John in 19:15.

<sup>41</sup> Bristow, 163–67.

<sup>42</sup> Gabriel Said Reynolds, “The Muslim Jesus. Dead or Alive?,” *Bulletin of SOAS*, Vol. 72, no. 2 (2009): 250. See also Zeki Sarıtoprak, *Islam’s Jesus* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 23.

<sup>43</sup> Bristow, 47–51, 163–68.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 182.

<sup>45</sup> Theodore Sabo, *From Monophysitism to Nestorianism: AD 431–681* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 1. As Cragg argues, “The clause, from Nicea, ‘of one substance with the Father’ was not in question.” Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 15–16. Block says, “It

was Monophysitism that Muhammad likely encountered.” C. Jonn Block, *The Qur’an in Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Historical and Modern Interpretations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), Kindle Locations 911–12.

<sup>46</sup> Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 167–269.

<sup>47</sup> For example, “He has sent the Scripture down to you [Prophet] with the Truth, confirming what went before: He sent down the Torah and the Gospel earlier” (Q3:3; cf. 2:91; 3:81; 5:48; 10:37).

<sup>48</sup> A recent evangelical entry is Daniel Strange, *For Their Rock Is Not as Our Rock: An Evangelical Theology of Religions* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> J. H. Bavinck, *The Church between Temple and Mosque* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 125.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 200–05.

<sup>51</sup> Coleman, 59. See pp. 54–65 for discussion of Acts 17:15–34, particularly engaging Kevin Higgins, “The Key to Insider Movements: The ‘Devoted’s’ of Acts,” *IJFM*, Vol. 21, no. 4 (2004).

<sup>52</sup> Perry Pennington, “From Prophethood to the Gospel: Talking to Folk Muslims About Jesus,” *IJFM*, Vol. 31, no. 4 (2014): 197–98.

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# Cognitive Science and Theological Education in Technologically Developing Countries

by David R. Dunaetz

*Editor's Note: This paper was presented at the Evangelical Missiological Society national meeting in October 2017. While focused on the learning process in more traditional settings of theological education in the Majority World, the author's insights illustrate the increasing relevance of cognitive science to missiology. These transferable concepts apply both to the informal learning contexts encountered in frontier mission, and to new training institutions where movements to Christ are emerging among unreached peoples.*

**A**lthough incredible diversity exists among humans, there is sufficient similarity in human minds across cultures to scientifically study how a person's thoughts, feelings, and behavior influence each other. Cognitive science is the broad, interdisciplinary field that examines the psychological and biological phenomena associated with the mind. Because the human mind is so complex, progress in the field is often painstakingly slow, especially when compared to the progress that has been made in the physical sciences. Although we can predict with a good deal of accuracy what a molecule or a nearby star will do in a year or a century from now, we have a very difficult time predicting what our next-door neighbor will do tomorrow. Nevertheless, cognitive science has enabled us to discover general trends that describe how humans are likely to behave in various circumstances, although we will never be able to predict exactly how a specific individual would act in those circumstances.

## *Towards a Theology of the Mind*

For many Christians, anything having to do with psychology is of questionable value. Some equate psychology with the speculative assumptions of psychoanalysis developed by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939; e.g., Freud 1923; 1962) which have long been downplayed, if not discredited, by scientists (Dufresne 2007; Eysenck 1991; Stanovich 2013). After World War II, the dominant paradigm in psychology was behaviorism (Skinner 1971; Watson 1926) which was more scientific in nature but was still quite unacceptable from a Christian point of view. Behaviorists such as Watson and Skinner believed that human behavior depended uniquely on a person's background and his current environment. From a behaviorist point of view, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and other cognitive phenomena were irrelevant to behavior, mere artifacts of evolution that gave humans the illusion of free will and for which humans could not be held accountable.

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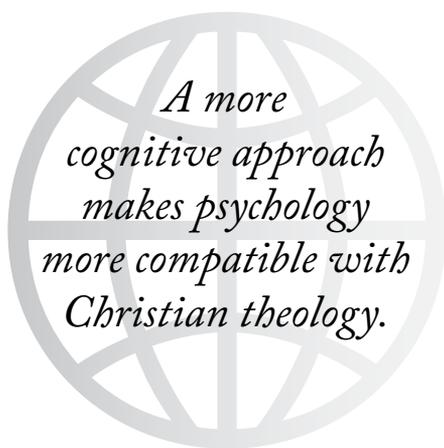
However, by the 1960s, psychologists began to realize that mental states and processes did indeed influence behavior and could be studied relatively objectively, albeit imprecisely. As these mental states and processes were studied, it became clear that the experimental evidence pointed to the mind, not as a blank slate, but as a preprogrammed organ that tended to learn, interpret, and create in predictable ways across individuals and across cultures (Pinker 2002). By the 1980s, this approach to studying the human mind became dominant in the field, a change which has become known as the cognitive revolution (Miller 2003).<sup>1</sup>

This new focus on the mind has made psychology as a science much more compatible with Christian theology. Rather than assuming that human beings are born as a blank slate, they are assumed to be born with a specific nature common to all humans, yet also with individual differences. The role of science is thus to discover and describe this nature and to describe how, along with individual differences and the environment, it influences human behaviors such as learning, communication, and social interaction. This is perfectly congruent with Christian theology which teaches that human nature most certainly exists and is characterized by, if not defined by, both the image of God (עֶלְמָא אֱלֹהִים, Gen. 1:26–28) and sinfulness (Rom. 3:23, Eph. 2:3).

### *Theological Education and Cognitive Science*

Thus, insights gained from cognitive science concerning learning (such as in a context of theological education), to the degree that they are true and are based upon an accurate understanding of human behavior, can enable Christian missionaries, educators, and students to become more effective in the areas to which God has called them. In this article, we will focus upon *learning*, which is one of the principal goals of theological education. Learning can be defined as “the process of acquiring new and relatively enduring information or

behaviors” (Myers and DeWall 2015, 280). This definition is especially appropriate for theological education because it includes the concept of acquiring both information and behaviors. Traditional theological educators certainly want their students to master information about the Bible, church history, and theology, but even traditional, western theological education is not limited to learning information. It includes acquiring new behaviors which, depending on the cultural context, may range from administering baptism and performing weddings to exegeting a biblical passage and presenting an effective sermon on it. In addition, theological education may include elements of leadership and character development, which manifests



itself through new behaviors which are constructive and consistent.

Because it can occur in many different contexts, for the purpose of this study, traditional theological education will be defined as *the complex process by which students, in an institutional context, learn new and enduring information and behaviors that are relevant to Christian life and ministry* (cf. Myers and DeWall 2015, 280). These institutions may be schools, churches, or any other organization with theological education as one of its goals. Institution-based learning differs from other types of learning in several ways. First, the material presented to the student is not presented in its normal, day-to-day context as a student

might naturally encounter it (e.g., responses to attacks on Christianity by a non-Christian friend) and, second, the material is primarily transmitted through language (oral and/or written), rather than by watching other people model it (e.g., the biblical concept of forgiveness) (Bruner, Olver, and Greenfield 1966; Scribner and Cole 1973).

### *Cross-Cultural Cognitive Functions*

Before examining principles from cognitive science that may be useful for theological education in developing countries, the question of whether the underlying cognitive phenomena are *culturally universal* or are *culturally relative* must be asked. This is an important question because much of cognitive science has been developed by studying people who are white, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (commonly known as WEIRD; Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010a, 2010b), whereas most people in the world are not.

Some cognitive functions are clearly universal. People of all cultures use the five senses to gain information about their physical and social environment. People of all cultures use language to communicate within their in-group. People of all cultures can also learn cultural information in a classroom setting (Bruner 1960).

Other cognitive functions differ from culture to culture. This is at least partially due to differences in cultural *schemas*, cognitive structures and categories representing regularities in patterns regularly encountered in one’s culture (Baldwin 1995; Nishida 1999). Similarly, language structures influence beliefs about the world. Languages vary in the vocabulary available to describe differences in nuances, both in physical domains (e.g., colors or weather-related phenomena) and the psychological (e.g., emotions or commitment). These vocabulary differences, as well as grammatical structures that exist in a language (e.g., tenses), influence how members of a culture think, feel, and behave (Myers and DeWall 2015; Whorf

1956). Other cognitive phenomena that differ by culture include perceptions of fairness and cooperation, moral reasoning, and self-concept (Henrich et al. 2010b).

So, there are some cognitive processes that vary according to culture and others that are common to all humans. The processes that are purely biological and are fundamental to human nature tend to be culturally universal. The processes that are learned and are influenced by the environment tend to be culturally relative. However, it is often difficult to distinguish between these. As a rule of thumb, one can assume that, apart from evidence to the contrary, human cognitive processes are at least similar between cultures, if not identical. However, if there is evidence that cultural differences in cognitive processes exist, these need to be taken into account because the phenomena may very well be culturally relative.

The phenomena and models described in this study currently appear to be culturally universal. They include automatic and effortful processing, the spacing effect, and the testing effect. However, as our knowledge and understanding of culture increases, it would not be surprising to find at least some small differences between cultures in how these phenomena play out. To complicate matters, all cultures are evolving (Mesoudi, Whiten, and Laland 2006) and this cultural evolution is accelerating, at least in part, due to technology (Rosa 2003). Because of the rapidity of technology-driven cultural change, a special emphasis will be placed on the influence that technology can have on the cognitive processes and phenomena involved in theological education in the Majority World.

### *Automatic and Effortful Processing*

When theological students (and everyone else) are exposed to new information, some type of processing must occur in their brain before one can say that the material has been learned to some degree or another. Cognitive scientists distinguish between low elaboration and

**T***o complicate matters, all cultures are evolving . . . and this cultural evolution is accelerating, at least in part, due to technology.*

high elaboration strategies to describe ways that the information can be processed and how beliefs and attitudes are formed (Chaiken 1980; Kahneman 2011; Petty and Cacioppo 1986a, 1986b). The type of elaboration strategy used influences how well a person learns material and the strength of their beliefs that form about the material.

Low elaboration strategies use *automatic processing* to store the perceptions made by the source of the new information. This is sometimes called System 1 thinking (Kahneman 2011) and is said to use the *peripheral route* through the brain. Automatic processing is fast and does not require much, if any, effort, but it does not critically evaluate the content of the material concerning its truth or relevance. Rather, the environment of the message influences its impact. For example, automatic processing occurs in theological education when a student receives and evaluates information positively because he or she believes the professor to be credible and authoritative, because the teacher is attractive or charismatic, or because the professor presents the information in a catchy or humorous way. In automatic processing, the learner uses these and other mental shortcuts (*heuristics*) rather than evidence and reason to evaluate the material. This type of learning requires far less effort than more in depth processing, but is less stable, less resistant to counter arguments, and less likely to influence the learner's behavior than learning that involves in-depth processing (Chaiken 1980; Eagly and Chaiken 1998).

High elaboration strategies, on the other hand, require *effortful processing* rather than automatic processing (Petty 2013; Petty and Cacioppo 1986a, 1986b). This is also known as System 2 thinking (Kahneman 2011) and is said to use the *central route* through the brain. Effortful

processing only occurs when a person is both willing and able to put in the time and effort necessary to comprehensively analyze the material being presented. Rather than focusing on the source or context of the material, this type of processing focuses on the content of the material. Learners are typically willing to put forth the effort necessary for effortful processing when they believe that the material will personally affect their lives depending on whether it is true or not.

For theological education, this means that the primary role of the professor is not only to provide access to new information, but also to ensure that the student effortfully processes the material. Education that consists of listening to lectures, reading texts, and then rereading the texts (and even highlighting key points) generates less effortful processing than education that includes writing (whether summarizing, elaborating, or applying the material), discussion, and testing, especially when these elements are clearly seen to be directly relevant to the student's previous experiences and ministry (Dunlosky et al. 2013; Fowler and Barker 1974). Assuming that all theological students in a given context will have access to the material that they need to learn through lectures or books, we can safely predict that the amount that each student learns will be proportional to his or her effortful processing of this material. The most effective professors are thus those who maximize effortful processing in their students, creating *desirable difficulties* that lead to greater learning (Bjork, Dunlosky, and Kornell 2013; Kornell and Bjork 2007).

### *The Testing Effect*

One way to increase effortful processing (and thus learning) is through testing, either non-graded self-testing or graded testing that is part of the curriculum.

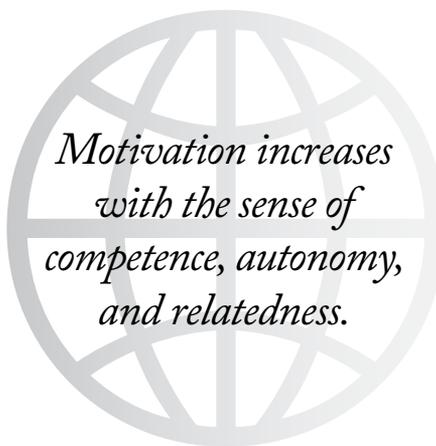
The *testing effect* describes the phenomena whereby people who have been tested on material they have studied remember it better than those who have not been tested on it, even when the amount of studying is the same (McDaniel et al. 2007; Roediger and Karpicke 2006). This phenomena is especially true when the tests are composed of questions that require a higher level of processing (such as analysis, evaluation, or application) than questions that require a lower level of processing, such as recalling facts (Jensen et al. 2014; Wooldridge et al. 2014).

There are at least several mechanisms behind the testing effect. First, from a biological perspective, retrieval practice through testing strengthens neural pathways linking concepts that increase recall ability (Liu et al. 2014; Wing, Marsh, and Cabeza 2013). Although retrieving information and processing it for analysis, evaluation, or application is difficult the first time, it becomes easier with practice and the ability to do so becomes more permanent. Thus while it might be initially difficult for a theological student to respond to the test prompt “What would you say to a member of a youth group who is considering becoming a Muslim?”, the second time he or she faces the prompt (or an actual youth group member), the response will require less effort.

Second, from a motivational point of view, the testing effect occurs because testing typically motivates people to use high elaboration strategies and expend the effort necessary to thoroughly process the material. Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2008; Ryan and Deci 2000) is useful for understanding how testing may increase motivation. Motivation can be either extrinsic (directed towards seeking external rewards) or intrinsic (directed towards meeting internal, psychological needs). Testing in theological education can produce extrinsic motivation if the student believes that mastering the material (or at least doing well on the test) will lead to higher grades, a better internship, a higher salary, or any

other perceived reward coming from an outside source. However, such motivation persists only as long as the prospect of gaining such a reward is a possibility.

Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is more permanent and not conditioned by external forces. Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2008; Ryan and Deci 2000) argues that intrinsic motivation for a behavior (such as studying material for a test) increases to the degree that the behavior increases one’s sense of *competence, autonomy, and relatedness*. Theological students, like all humans, want to be competent, to gain mastery over their environment in order to achieve their life goals. If they believe that studying the material in a class may increase their competency,



they will be likely to study for a test. The role of the theological educator in this case is to demonstrate that the material is related to competencies necessary to achieve their life goals. For example, if a theological student desires to serve the Lord in a local church, the educator can increase motivation to study for a test on the Pentateuch by demonstrating how mastery of the Pentateuch can make that person a more effective minister, such as by providing a foundation of creation theology or interpersonal ethics. Students who do well on a test measuring these competencies will increase their internal motivation to use these competencies in real life situations. In contrast, those who do not do well will be less motivated to try to use these competencies.

Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2008; Ryan and Deci 2000) also predicts that intrinsic motivation to perform a behavior will increase with autonomy, the feeling that one can freely choose to perform the behavior or not. For the theological educator, this implies that instruction should not simply teach the “correct” way to do things (baptize, perform a marriage, preach a sermon, start a church, etc.), but should provide instruction and examples concerning a number of means and strategies for accomplishing these tasks. This enables theological students to choose the approach which best corresponds to their personality, gifting, and context. Being able to choose among different approaches will increase their sense of both competence and autonomy, increasing their motivation to perform the task. Testing students with questions that ask them to compare and evaluate methods and strategies to accomplish ministry tasks are especially useful for developing this sense of autonomy.

The promise of high quality relationships also increases intrinsic motivation according to self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2008; Ryan and Deci 2000). Being created in the image of God whose fundamental nature is love (1 John 4:7–8) implies that humans are innately social. Furthermore, we do not simply desire relationships with others, but high-quality relationships which are mutually beneficial cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually. If a Bible professor teaching a course in the prison epistles can demonstrate how mastery of the material will increase the quality of students’ relationships, the students will be more motivated to study the material. Tests that focus on applications of the biblical content are especially relevant to help the student focus on improved relationships. Prompts such as “How did Paul express his thankfulness to the Philippians?” or “Cite several Pauline principles of conflict resolution.” encourage students to think in terms of relationships and motivate them to master the concepts in order to improve their relationships.

## The Spacing Effect

One of the most important ways that cognitive scientists have discovered to increase retention of abstract material is *distributed practice* in contrast to *massed practice* (Cepeda et al. 2006; Ruch 1928). Distributed practice is studying material over a period of time, coming back to it after breaks (ranging from minutes to weeks) whereas massed practice is doing all of the studying at once, commonly known as cramming. The difference in learning that occurs under these two conditions is known as the *spacing effect* (Kapler, Weston, and Wiseheart 2015). The studying effort spaced over a longer period of time leads to more permanent learning than does the same amount of studying massed together. For example, studying a language a little bit each day, or even several times a week, will lead to better retention than studying for the same total amount of time once a week in one sitting (Bahrlick et al. 1993).

In addition to encouraging students to study regularly, this means that effective professors will design their courses so that students are repeatedly exposed to the material in a cognitively challenging way multiple times during the quarter or semester. Quick learning essentially leads to quick forgetting (Cepeda et al. 2006; Ebbinghaus 1885/1913). The physical phenomena behind the spacing effect is that repeated processing of given material creates longer lasting neural pathways. Like the testing effect, repeated exposure to material makes it easier to recall, especially when needed (Sisti, Glass, and Shors 2007). Several psychological and behavioral phenomena lie behind the spacing effect as well.

First, the material being studied continues to be evaluated by the unconscious brain in between study sessions in a process known as incubation (Sio and Ormerod 2009; Smith and Blankenship 1991). This process is at least partially responsible for the *eureka effect*, whereby a person has a flash of insight concerning a problem about which he or she is

*The unconscious brain continues to evaluate through a process of incubation, and this is partially responsible for the eureka effect.*

not consciously thinking (Jung-Beeman et al. 2004; Perkins 2001). A theological student who does not understand a difficult concept (e.g., the relationship between faith and works) may not get the information the first or second time he or she studies the relevant biblical texts. However, during a flash of insight sometime later, the relationship may become clearer. A third session of studying the relevant biblical texts would allow the incorporation of the new insight into the student's understanding of faith and works, cementing the student's convictions by strengthening his or her beliefs (Dunaetz 2016).

A second learning-enhancing phenomena that occurs during the spacing effect is the incorporation of new and relevant experiences into one's developing schemas (Shors 2014; Sisti et al. 2007). If students are studying about baptism in a theology class, they might hear some basic rationale about different modes. The material might not generate much cognitive reflection because there are so many other equally interesting concepts presented in the class, especially if the professor's preferred baptismal mode corresponds to that of the students' background. However, if a student encounters someone in the coming weeks who prefers a different mode of baptism, the student's interest is piqued and additional reflection occurs. Without distributed practice, what the student learned originally might not evolve. However, if the professor assigns additional assignments or tests that concern arguing for or against a mode of baptism, deep level processing is more likely to occur in students who can add recent experiences into their thought process as they develop their argument. Students who cover the question of baptism all at once in the semester will not have this advantage. Students who are exposed to the topic several times during

the semester will have the advantage of being forced to integrate their new experiences into their learning.

A third phenomena that occurs with spaced study periods in contrast to a massed study period is simply the testing effect (Putnam, Sungkhasettee, and Roediger 2016; Roediger and Karpicke 2006). When students encounter new material on a topic, they are, to a certain degree, tested on the previously covered material. Cognitive effort is required to recall the material on the topic, perhaps with significant priming from the professor, which strengthens the neural pathways associated with the concept and makes the material easier to recall when needed.

Because interacting with material several times over a long period is a more effective way to learn than is concentrated exposure to the same amount of material (Kapler et al. 2015; Putnam et al. 2016), theological educators can organize their classes and motivate their students appropriately:

- Professors should encourage regular studying and reviewing after each class period rather than cramming before exams. It is useful to inform students that this is a more effective way to study because students tend to believe that massing is more effective than distributed practice (Son and Simon 2012).
- Learning will be more permanent in classes that meet several times per week rather than just once a week or once a month. Frequent exposure to the material is more effective than longer, infrequent exposure to the material.
- Longer semesters are more effective than shorter semesters. Shorter semesters provide less opportunity to process and apply the material

and there are fewer opportunities to integrate new, relevant experiences into the course.

- Short, frequent assignments are more effective than fewer, long assignments. Students should be asked to review, analyze, and apply the material shortly after its initial presentation to strengthen their understanding of the concepts so that they may continue to build upon them.
- Frequent, cumulative quizzes and tests are more effective than fewer, non-cumulative quizzes and tests and much more effective than no testing or quizzing. Increasing the number of quizzes and tests increases learning through both the testing effect and the spacing effect.

Although the spacing effect is one of the most strongly supported phenomena in the cognitive sciences, implementing strategies that increase learning through this phenomena is often met with resistance by students, professors, or administrators. Such strategies often require more time, effort, and resources than strategies that encourage massing. Nevertheless, as faithful stewards of that which God has entrusted us, we need to consider what is in the best interest of theological students and the people whom God is calling them to serve.

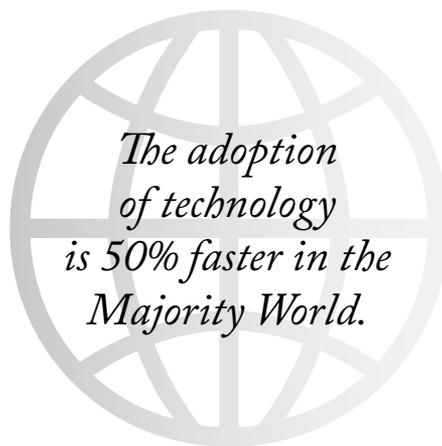
### *Technology-Related Pitfalls*

Much of the Majority World is characterized by rapid adoption of electronic technology. Because the technology gap during the Cold War era was so large between developed and developing nations, the adoption of technology has been around 50% faster in the Majority World than in the West since then, but a gap still exists (The World Bank 2008). This has enormous implications for theological education in the Majority World, providing both opportunities and pitfalls.

Although contemporary electronic technology in Majority World contexts permits the use of media in the classroom (e.g., PowerPoints and YouTube),

facilitates communication (e.g., email and texting), makes scholarship accessible (e.g., Google Scholar and ResearchGate), and permits paperless classroom management at a distance (e.g., Moodle and Canvas), technology can also reduce learning in theological education. Research in the cognitive sciences provides insights into how to avoid some of the dangers associated with technology.

Perhaps the most obvious danger associated with technology is distraction in a classroom. Although humans believe they can multitask, they really only can give their *attention* to one event or activity at a time (Driver 1998; Kaplan and Berman 2010; Pashler and Johnston 1998). Attention is a process by which a person perceives information from



one source while ignoring information from other sources (Pashler 1998). This choice concerning one's focus may be either conscious or unconscious. If too much information is available, *bottlenecking* occurs which causes some information to not be perceived. This permits the information that is the focus of one's attention to be processed and acted upon, although other information is ignored and has little influence on a person (Simon 1994).

This means that students tend to believe that they can surf the internet on their cell phones or laptops during a lecture deemed boring, yet keep an ear open in case the professor says anything important or interesting. In reality, these

students miss much information that would increase their learning. Forbidding both cell phone use (Beland and Murphy 2016) and internet access in the classroom (Wood et al. 2012) increases learning as demonstrated by higher test scores. In addition, students who can see another student's screen are often distracted due to no fault of their own (Fried 2008). Messaging apps and social networks are often the greatest distraction in developed countries (Junco and Mastrodicasa 2007) and there is little reason to doubt that a similar phenomenon occurs in the Majority World where people tend to be more collectivistic than individualistic.

The question thus arises, "Should theological educators ban the use of computers and cell phones in the classroom?" Mueller and Oppenheimer (2014) found through a series of experiments that students who took lecture notes by hand learned more than students who took notes on their computer as demonstrated by their response to conceptual questions on a test. Even when not distracted by the internet, computer users tended to focus their attention on copying material verbatim whereas students taking handwritten notes processed the information to put it into their own words. This means that theological educators can increase learning by forbidding the use of computers and cell phones in the classroom because this both reduces distractions and encourages deeper level processing. Certainly, in some classes the use of a computer would be beneficial (e.g., a course in media use for evangelism), but in many classes it is in the students' interest to forbid its use.

Another threat to theological education associated with technology concerns the students' time management outside of the classroom. The internet provides a virtually unlimited source of amusing cat videos and other sources of entertainment (Myrick 2015). Internet-based entertainment is often effective as a mood enhancer, but it also motivates procrastination and the negative effects that accompany it (Myrick 2015; Steel

2007). This makes time management more difficult for students. They may have every intention of studying, but the draw of internet entertainment and social media may severely restrict the time that they can consecrate to their studies. Because this phenomena is relatively new, a given culture may have few effective strategies for overcoming this difficulty. Theological educators should thus consider introducing time management strategies into the curriculum. In many cultures, calendars and to-do lists would be very appropriate, both of which can be managed through technology (e.g., Google Calendar, Microsoft Note), often more effectively than through traditional handwritten approaches. A wide variety of time management apps exist (e.g., Timeful, Focus Booster, and Remember the Milk) which increases the likelihood of finding a culturally appropriate tool. So by beginning the semester with the presentation of several time management strategies, a theological educator would likely enable his or her students to study more and thus learn more during the semester.

The inappropriate use of media by the professor in the classroom is another threat to effective theological education. As mentioned earlier, students who take notes on a computer process the information less than those who take notes by hand (Mueller and Oppenheimer 2014). This is especially true for PowerPoint presentations which are often presented at a rate that is comfortable for the professor but not the students (Putnam et al. 2016). Elizabeth Marsh and Holly Sink of Duke University (2010) have demonstrated that students typically learn better from a PowerPoint presentation if they are given paper copies of the slides before the lecture than if they took all their notes themselves. Such handouts increased student satisfaction, reduced time needed to study, and increased test scores. Print-on-demand publishers (e.g., Createspace.com) permit professors to publish lecture notes or other handouts in the form of a soft-cover book at a price of 1%-3% of a typical US textbook and at about half

**W**hen an institution focuses on economic stability, student satisfaction or engagement may become more important than learning.

the price of photocopies, without a need to print a minimum number of copies (e.g., Dunaetz 2017). Such books are an economical way to enhance the effectiveness of PowerPoint-based lectures.

### *The Economic Threat to Learning*

The increased use of technology in the Majority World is strongly associated with economic growth (Chatterji 2016; The World Bank 2008). Economic growth is generally a desirable phenomenon, but some side effects may affect theological education in the developing world. Theological institutions started by missionaries are initially dependent on outside funds. Those who control the funds have a large say in defining the mission of the institution (e.g., training workers for full-time Christian service). However, as the national church and local economy grow, the likelihood of the institution supporting itself grows as well. This has long been a goal of many mission organizations (e.g., Venn 1865). However, once an institution needs to support itself, including its salaried staff, it is easy for its mission to drift. The leaders of the organization, especially Christian leaders, are likely to feel responsible for the well-being of the employees of the organization, a phenomena often associated with servant leadership (Mark 9:35; Greenleaf 1977). Because of *loss aversion* (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Kermer et al. 2006), the immediate threat of hurting coworkers seems more serious than a change of mission for the school. Our brain essentially tells us (through subjective feelings) that the loss associated with hurting someone (e.g., laying off a colleague due to lack of funds) is greater than the long-term benefits of focusing on the established mission of the theological institution. So, leaders may conclude that if they make the mission of the organization broader (e.g., providing a theological education to everyone who

is interested vs. preparing ministers who have been recognized by their churches for full-time ministry), they can meet the needs of both the students and the employees, while maintaining their own salaries as well.

When the focus of the institution changes to concern for economic stability, student *satisfaction* or *engagement* may become more important than student learning. By focusing on satisfaction or engagement, student retention will increase (Kuh et al. 2011) which helps meet the financial needs of the organization. However, with an increased emphasis on meeting student desires, it is quite possible that academic standards and learning decrease (Trow 1987). Since maximizing learning requires effortful processing, higher standards are resisted by students; weaker students are especially discouraged by higher standards and are more likely to drop out, taking their tuition with them. There are no easy solutions to the tensions created by a need for stability and the desire to maintain and fulfill the original mission of a school. However, being aware of the cognitive processes involved can help leaders of theological institutions make wiser decisions.

If one of the main goals of theological education is to prepare students for ministry, students need to learn the knowledge and skills that will make them effective ministers of Jesus Christ. Schools can encourage this learning in ways that are effective or ineffective, or anywhere in between. By being aware of some of the cognitive phenomena that can enhance learning, such as effortful processing, the testing effect, and the spacing effect, administrators and professors at theological institutions, especially those in technologically developing countries, can encourage effective practices that will prepare students to use all their gifts for the service of the gospel. **IJFM**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The cognitive revolution occurred primarily in America. European psychologists had not adopted a behaviorist perspective to the degree that American psychologists had and thus continued to consider mental processes in their study of human behavior. In other contexts (e.g., the biblical world or other non-Western cultures), the importance of thoughts and beliefs, and how they relate to behaviors, had never been doubted.

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# Book Reviews

*Traditional Ritual as Christian Worship: Dangerous Syncretism or Necessary Hybridity?*, edited by R. Daniel Shaw and William R. Burrows (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), xxiv, 276 pp.

—Reviewed by Dwight P. Baker



Throughout missionary history, and indeed throughout the whole of church history, the issue of control has been prominent. Who or what is authoritative? Is there a standard and, if so, who has rights of administration? On the flip side, this concern has found expression as fear of syncretism. Where do the bounds of permissibility lie? Is someone appointed to patrol those borders? In a world of immense—and sometimes individualized—religious diversity, who is the authoritative arbiter? What rests secure within, and what lies beyond the pale? Or should all fences be torn down and all neighbors be allowed to tramp in?

Efforts to address these issues from a missionary vantage point are not new. Half a century ago, W. A. Visser 't Hooft traced the challenge of syncretism back to the heart of the earliest Christian documents, the New Testament itself—and even earlier. For him the danger of syncretism was far from nonexistent, but it was hardly a matter to lead to timidity. Foremost, he discussed instruments of communication, stating that words, terms, language, forms, concepts, all alike, could be appropriated and made part of Christian understanding and expression as long as one needful criterion was met. The decisive issue was whether or not the “new” elements, concepts, and terms fit within the Christological understanding proclaimed by the apostles. Which system was acknowledged to be in control: the Christocentric understanding of the New Testament or that of some other system from which concepts, terminology, or practices were being appropriated? With that allegiance secure, the followers of Christ could proceed boldly.<sup>1</sup> (By all

means, in conjunction with Visser 't Hooft, do read Lesslie Newbigin's slender volume, *The Finality of Christ*.<sup>2</sup> It both puts the stakes of the discussion on display and opens up the topic of conversion.)

### *Indigenity, Contextualization, and Accommodation*

The 1950s and 1960s saw articles by William Smalley and others that dealt with the character of the indigenous church published in the journal *Practical Anthropology*. The articles stretched Protestant missionaries, calling attention to their lack of trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to guide “younger” churches. Smalley especially focused on the need for anxious missionaries to surrender “control” and to place their confidence in the capability of the Holy Spirit to lead national and tribal churches in making decisions that were appropriate for their settings and circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

Discussion of indigenization persisted; a seminal article by Charles Taber appeared in 1978. Titled “The Limits of Indigenization in Theology,” the topic was one he, as president of the American Society of Missiology, had been requested to address. Taber sought to shift the focus from “outer boundaries” of the permissible and instead to emphasize “central norms” or “criteria” for Christian theology. Writing to Western mission leaders and professors, he concluded:

Let us not impose rigid limits on what our brothers and sisters are doing; not only because we do not have the power to enforce our judgments, but because we do not have the right. Let us, for our own blessing, try to understand what they are doing. Let us feel free to ask questions; but let us also be prepared to listen to them tell us where our theology has been wrongly or excessively indigenized. As we do, we will help one another, in the fellowship of the entire Body, to grow into the full stature of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Not only, contended Taber, do younger churches growing up on the “mission” field have the right to pursue theological construction in ways and directions that differ from those developed over centuries in the Western churches, but Western churches might find profit for their own spiritual life if they were to listen in and to do so with open and receptive hearts.

Discussion of appropriate and inappropriate ways missionaries might accommodate the gospel to the understanding and life settings of their hearers had long preceded

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**W***hat is at stake is the lifting up of forms or elements found in traditional religious practice and incorporating them as objects of Christian concern and components within Christian worship. Can it be done?*

widespread missionary interest in the topic of indigenizing the gospel. Inquiries into ways and limits for contextualizing the gospel overlapped with and succeeded discussions about indigenization. Efforts to inculturate the gospel, to create local theologies, and more, followed in line. To the three traditional missionary goals of planting churches that were self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating, Paul Hiebert added a fourth, that of self-theologizing.<sup>5</sup>

*What Does Hybridity Add?*

With so much as lead-up, what new does the topic of hybridity bring to the discussion? How does it differ from the approaches advanced earlier? In the hands of Daniel Shaw and William Burrows, the argument for hybridity shifts the ground significantly. At the same time, it carries forward a line of development that can be seen as implied by positions and arguments expressed under some of those earlier labels, though not necessarily expressly articulated by their proponents.

Before developing that point, a word about the book itself. Dan Shaw has taught at Fuller Theological Seminary's School of Intercultural Studies since 1982. He served with Wycliffe as a Bible translator in Papua New Guinea (PNG), did his anthropological fieldwork there, and also has returned for significant periods of further residence and study. Bill Burrows served for five years as a Divine Word missionary in PNG, teaching theology and laboring as a rural pastor. For twenty years he was managing editor for Orbis Books. Since retirement he has been research professor of missiology at New York Theological Seminary. With deep roots in Papua New Guinea, both editors draw on their experience and acquaintance with the peoples and religious history of the island as a foundation for their conception of hybridity.

The opening chapter by Shaw and the second chapter by Burrows supply the theoretical underpinnings of the volume. These chapters are followed by twelve case studies, contributed by authors spanning the globe. Hailing from Armenia, Costa Rica and Nicaragua, First Nations (Canada), India, Jamaica, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, and the United States, they represent multiple theological and ecclesiological traditions as well. In their diversity they supply vantage points from which to illustrate hybridity "in action," so to speak. To pull

out names and topics almost at random: Yoshiyuki Billy Nishioka reports on a Christian death ritual in Japan; Paul Mantae Kim reflects on making space in the Korean church for a Christian understanding of the Korean ancestral rite; El Baile de La Yegüita examines a Costa Rican folk festival of reconciliation; Chinaka S. DomNwachukwu explores the presence of indigenous Igbo worship in Nigerian churches; Joshua Kurung Daimoi lifts up ancestors as a bridge for understanding Jesus among the Sentani of PNG; and John Sanjeevakumar Gupta writes in the context of India of a house for God to live in. Each of the twelve case studies deals with an aspect of pre-existing worship and ritual which has been lifted up and made, to greater or lesser degree, a facet of local Christian reflection or expression. Here lies the point at which hybridity goes beyond indigeneity (how can local Christian leaders be allowed to take charge of local Christian decisions), contextualization (how should Christianity be shown to address issues and concerns in one or another local context or region), and similar projects. What is at stake is the lifting up of forms or elements found in traditional religious practice and incorporating them as objects of Christian concern and components within Christian worship. Can that be done? Ought it to be done? Can components of traditional religious practices be incorporated within Christian worship and still speak to Visser 't Hooft's concern that mashing together of two religious systems (dangerous syncretism) is to be avoided at all cost?

Part of the answer to that question lies in the nature and scope of common grace. If God's grace manifest in Jesus the Christ and made effective by the Holy Spirit is God's special grace, then common grace is everything else that God does in and for the world. God is not and never has been absent from the world. Common grace is present to all people everywhere, and it bears testimony to God's goodness. Paul, in speaking to the people at Lystra, declared the same, saying that God "has not left God's self without a witness" (Acts 14:17). If traditional religion from time immemorial is or can be, at least in part, a response to God's common grace, then traditional religious concerns and practice—on Christian grounds—cannot simply be written off, summarily and without appeal or further consideration, as being utterly and only darkness, without

**I** am wary of contextualization as a missionary's open sesame. I have always felt more comfortable with receptor-oriented adaptation: indigenization or contextualization *by* rather than contextualization or adaptation *for*.

any glimmers of light. There might even be something to be learned. That insight can engender humility—an insight that alone is worth much more than the price of the book and the labor of studying it closely.

### Conclusion

Accommodation, indigenization, contextualization, and inculturation, when carried out as *missionary* techniques or programs for success, have always seemed to convey a concessionary air. The pejorative whiff of condescension is one reason, I suspect, that each felt like an incomplete step on the way and not a destination. Hence the quest continued for an appropriate way to frame the issue. I am wary of indigenization, contextualization, or any similar gestures conceived of as a technique in Jacques Ellul's sense of the term, that is, as a missionary's open sesame. I have always felt more comfortable with receptor-oriented adaptation: indigenization or contextualization *by* rather than contextualization or adaptation *for*.

In offering itself as the latest addition to this series, the term "hybridity," as noted, takes seriously the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit among all peoples and throughout all history the whole world over. It is grounded in common grace. And grace wherever and however expressed is to be cherished and nurtured, not denied or demeaned. To make the implication explicit: the ground was not utterly barren before the arrival of missionaries (out goes an immense amount of Western Protestant missionary rhetoric of the past two hundred years). Everything was not as dark or as evil as it possibly could have been. That stated, there was and is still plenty of warrant for Christian missionary outreach, but it might wear a different face and have a different cast to its character.

John Pobee has insistently stated for his continent that Africans were not *tabula rasa*, religiously or otherwise, upon the arrival of Western missionaries.<sup>6</sup> The same is true of peoples in other parts of the world. Could it be that some religious conceptions, concerns, and modes of expression present before the arrival of missionaries could appropriately find their way into those people's ways of thinking about Jesus the Christ and their ways of expressing their worship of him? *Traditional Ritual as Christian Worship* offers a strong case for the affirmative. **IJFM**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *No Other Name: The Choice between Syncretism and Christian Universalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 50–82.

<sup>2</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1969).

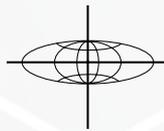
<sup>3</sup> See William A. Smalley, *Readings in Missionary Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Charles R. Taber, "The Limits of Indigenization in Theology," *Missiology: An International Review*, 6, no. 1 (1978): 53–79, quoted words, pp. 53–54, 77. See also Charles R. Taber, "Is There More Than One Way to Do Theology? Anthropological Comments on the Doing of Theology," *Gospel in Context*, 1, no. 1 (1978): 4–37. (Full disclosure: Charles Taber, who died in 2007, was my wife's older brother.)

<sup>5</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, "The Fourth Self," in *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 193–224.

<sup>6</sup> John Samuel Pobee, *Giving Account of Faith and Hope in Africa* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017).

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**TRADITIONAL RITUAL  
AS CHRISTIAN WORSHIP**

*Dangerous Syncretism  
or Necessary Hybridity?*

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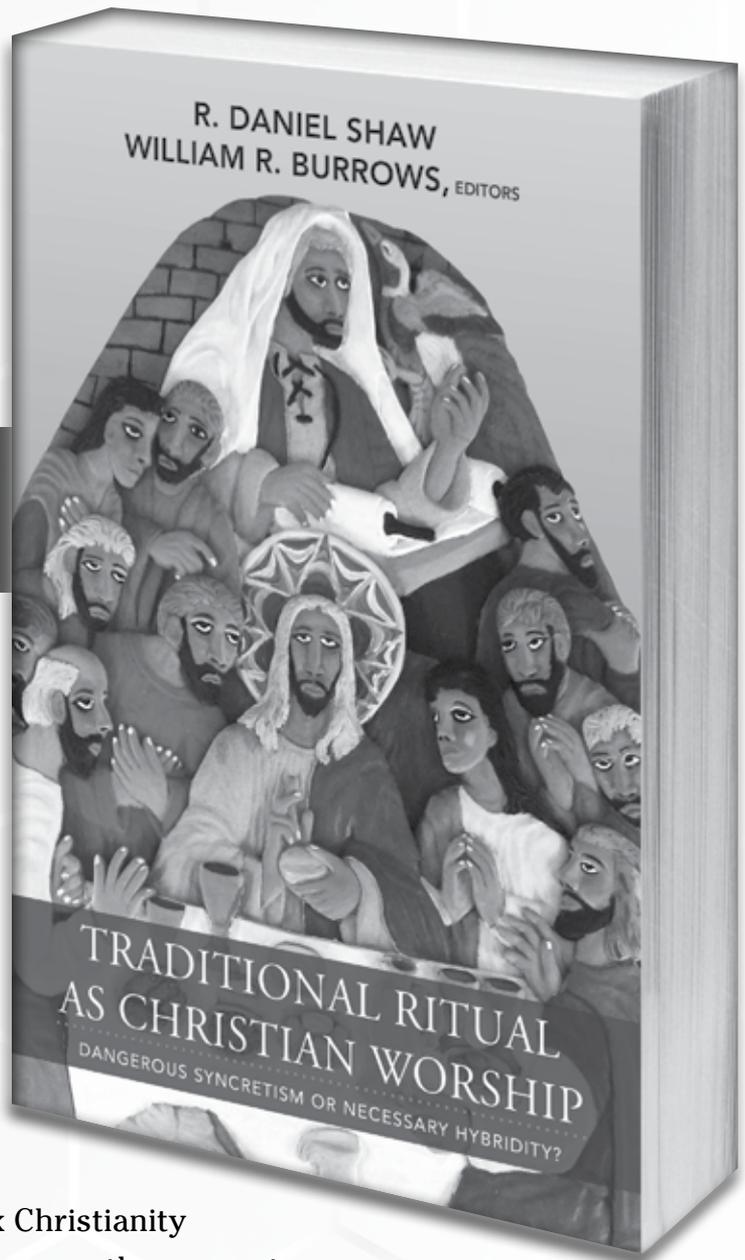
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✎ Editors ✎

**C**ontributions by some of missiology's leading lights discuss rituals, beliefs, and practices of diverse peoples, supporting the conclusion that orthodox Christianity is hybrid Christianity. "Brilliantly drawing upon the concept of religious hybridity, Shaw and Burrows assert that the future of world Christianity ought to be shaped by people making sense of how God was already active among them before the missionaries arrived—in the rituals and ceremonies that enabled them to connect with the divine. I believe this book will change the way we talk about mission." —**Harvey C. Kwiyani**

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# In Others' Words

*Editor's Note: In this department, we highlight resources outside of the IJFM: other journals, print resources, DVDs, websites, blogs, videos, etc. Standard disclaimers on content apply. Due to the length of many web addresses, we sometimes give just the title of the resource, the main web address, or a suggested search phrase.*

## Boko Haram Terror: Thousands Killed, Millions Flee

Boko Haram has recently expanded into Chad, killing eighteen and kidnapping nine women (“[Suspected Boko Haram Militants Kill 18 in Chadian Village](#)”). In the past nine years, more than 30,000 have been killed in Boko Haram’s relentless march to establish an Islamic caliphate made up of pieces torn from Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The violence and terrorism have forced more than 2.7 million people from their homes in a desperate flight for safety. See also the Council on Foreign Relations’ website for the background on “[Nigeria’s Battle with Boko Haram](#),” updated August 2018.

## Boko Haram and Secularization: Is There a Connection?

Dave Datema, former General Director of Frontier Ventures, will be giving a talk entitled “Boko Haram as a Response to Secularization and the Implications for Mission Praxis,” at the upcoming Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS) meetings in Dallas, October 12–14. This year’s EMS theme is “[Mission and Evangelism in a Secularizing World](#).” The International Society for Frontier Missiology annual gathering, meeting jointly with the EMS, has chosen the theme “[Clarifying the Frontier Mission Task](#).” One new tool that should help clarify things is the brand new series of maps on [joshuaproject.org](#) showing where the largest “frontier” people groups are.

## Nepal Reported to Have Fastest Annual Growth Rate of Christian Conversions in Asia

The *South China Morning Post* looks at the geopolitics surrounding Nepal, a country of concern to both India and China: “[How India and China Are Keeping the West Out in Nepal](#).” For China, Nepal represents the escape route for Tibetans fleeing Chinese rule. For India, Hindu conservatives are upset at the number converting to Christianity.

The Centre [*sic*] for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC), a US-based research group, lists Nepal as the Asian nation with the most accelerated rate of conversions. At 10.93%, it has the fastest average annual growth rate of Christian conversions in Asia. Currently comprising 3.8% of the Nepali population, the population of Christians is expected to double by 2020, which worries both India and China.

## American Pastor Released from Prison to House Arrest in Turkey

On July 25, 2018, the Turkish government abruptly released Andrew Brunson, an American pastor who had been imprisoned in a Turkish prison for 22 months on false espionage charges. See the *Washington Post* August 15 article “[Why an American Pastor’s Imprisonment is at the Center of the US-Turkey Dispute](#).” *The New York Times* adds that more than 20 US (Turkish American) citizens and three Turkish American Embassy employees have also been detained in the past two years since the failed coup attempt.

## Are Unreached People Groups Passé?

Don’t miss the article in *Missiology* (June 2018) by Lee and Park of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School entitled “[Beyond People Group Thinking: A Critical Reevaluation of Unreached People Groups](#).” The authors rehearse three (old) objections to unreached people group (UPG) thinking. The first objection is *theological*, and refers to what they claim is a dubious hermeneutic of “*panta ta ethne*.” The second is *cultural*, based on what they see as an outdated (and unbiblical) “essentialist” view of culture. The third is *strategic*, and is based on their reading of McGavran’s “homogenous unit principle” (HUP). Lee and Park reject the idea of mobilizing personnel and resources for the most unreached people groups. They reason that the emerging fellowships would be homogenous (not multicultural) and might perpetuate racism and division (instead of unity). These claims call for further interaction with the authors.

## Further Reading for Different Takes on UPG Controversy

For different views on some of these same topics, we invite you to peruse this handful of articles. On hermeneutics and theology of *panta ta ethne*, see John Piper’s 1991 (but still relevant): “[Unreached Peoples: The Unique and Primary Goal of Missions](#).” You’ll find a lot of relevant articles in the *IJFM* archives. On culture, don’t miss Mark Pickett’s “[Ethnicity, Kinship, Religion, and Territory: Identifying Communities in South Asia](#),” which reflects an up-to-date and complex understanding of the overlapping boundaries of identity (*IJFM* 32:1). For more historical context and accuracy about UPGs and strategy, see “[The Legacy of Donald McGavran: A Forum](#)” in *IJFM* 31:2. In the same issue, you’ll find Harold Fickett’s piece on Winter’s Lausanne speech—a very [entertaining, but informative article](#) that puts Winter’s views on unreached peoples in context. Greg Parsons, former General Director of Frontier Ventures (the mission agency Winter founded) has written “[Will the Earth Hear His Voice? Is Ralph Winter’s Idea Still Valid?](#)” in *IJFM* 32:1. Lastly, see Dave Datema’s brief history of the development of the unreached people group concept in “[Defining Unreached: A Short History](#),” published in *IJFM* 33:2. **IJFM**

## Related Perspectives Lesson and Section

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, including a list of classes, visit [www.perspectives.org](http://www.perspectives.org).

### Articles in IJFM 35:3

	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 12: Christian Community Development (S)	Lesson 13: The Spontaneous Multiplication of Churches (S)	Lesson 14: Pioneer Church Planting (S)
<b>A Hindu "Path of Jesus": A Case Study of Modern Roman Catholic Contextualization</b> H. L. Richard (pp. 105–15)			X		X			X	X
<b>Navigating the Constraints of the Ummah: A Comparison of Christ Movements in Iran and Bangladesh</b> Christian J. Anderson (pp. 117–25)				X	X			X	X
<b>More than a Prophet: John the Baptist and the Question "Is Muhammad among the Prophets?"</b> George Bristow (pp. 127–34)	X	X							
<b>Cognitive Science and Theological Education in Technologically Developing Countries</b> David R. Dunaetz (pp. 135–43)						X	X		

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