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Recalling Ralph Winter's Apologetic for a Quasi-Religious World

We don't tend to examine our assumptions unless we're provoked. Ralph Winter had a provocative way of doing just that. He had a ministry of raising eyebrows. As editor of this journal for the last decade of his life, he stretched us beyond our settled notions of mission. When he passed from us ten years ago, he left some of his most fascinating thinking suspended in midair.

We owe a great debt to Beth Snodderly (former president of William Carey International University) for her custodianship of Winter's thinking from his final years.¹ In her EMS seminar last year, she reminded us of Winter's quick, inadvertent reference to "a set of keen thinkers" in one urban center of South Asia. He suggested that "if we recognize the existence of the 'unreached people' of the *scientifically educated community* of, say, Hyderabad . . . we quickly find the frontier . . . [of] 'the Religion of Science'"² (emphasis mine). Winter was pretty sure that a "quasi-religious scientism" could create a community of the like-minded anywhere, and that it presented a kind of religious boundary.

... the Religion of Science is clearly a barrier found today across many different ethnic traditions. It is one of the few frontiers that does not correlate specifically with the concept of unreached peoples, but rather runs throughout many different ethnic and cultural entities.³

As a missiologist, Winter widened our lens on the categories of religion by engaging modern scientism as a faith. He identified it as a modern form of religious consciousness—a thought world—that drew together those with a deep belief in the existence of order in nature (p. 98). Winter was enough of a scientist to appreciate the glory the scientist could behold in "the Book of Creation." Yet, fundamental to many of the scientific mindset was the belief that science was authoritative to the exclusion of other methods and disciplines. Winter believed it was unfortunate and unnecessary that scientists would categorically eliminate the Bible from the corpus of truth, and he was passionate about finding an apologetic that would speak into that mindset.

The articles and reviews in this issue of the *IJFM* are in pursuit of an apologetic for various forms of religious consciousness. Effective communication of the gospel will require a sharper discernment of the different denominations, allegiances, and thought worlds that crisscross any religious bloc: the Muslim Sufi (p. 59), the folk Buddhist (p. 69), or the devotional way of Hindu Bakhti (p. 104). Each is a slice of a larger and more stratified religious world.

Editorial *continued on p. 58*

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Editor

Brad Gill

Consulting Editors

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Gavriel Gefen, Herbert Hoefler,
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Copy Editing and Layout

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Secretary

Lois Carey

Publisher

Frontier Mission Fellowship

2019 ISFM Executive Committee

Len Barlotti, Larry Caldwell, Dave Datema,
Darrell Dorr, Brad Gill, Steve Hawthorne,
David Lewis, R. W. Lewis, Greg Parsons

Web Site

www.ijfm.org

Editorial Correspondence

1605 E Elizabeth Street
Pasadena, CA 91104
(734) 765-0368, editors@ijfm.org

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Send all subscription correspondence to:

IJFM

1605 E Elizabeth St #1032
Pasadena, CA 91104
Tel: (626) 398-2249
Fax: (626) 398-2263
Email: subscriptions@ijfm.org

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How should we go about refining a gospel apologetic for a specific religious mind-set? One could study how God used the cultural environment of the ancient Near East to communicate to Israel (p. 93). Or one might compare two prominent apologists from radically different religious contexts (p. 85). We might ask just how effective is the use of contemporary political idioms (p. 77). The missiologist would typically study emergent movements to Christ and identify important elements (pp. 100 and 102). The contributions in this issue range across Africa, Asia and Europe and offer the reader a bricolage of religious discernment.

But back to Winter's quest: he wanted to overcome the barriers of a quasi-religious scientism, that "science world" that flows universally across all religious worlds. He was upset with the unfortunate way this "ism" rejects a traditional Christian plausibility structure. His analysis began with the scientific community in the West, but the repercussions of scientism in a place like Hyderabad he would leave to others. He could merely point. Anthropology has been busy describing those repercussions for over half a century. The syncretic blend

of scientific consciousness and traditional religious worlds is documented in various cultural studies "beyond the West." It's usually seen as a collision that creates a cultural schizophrenia of sorts, a dissonance that Geertz called the "struggle for the real."⁴ It appears this collision of consciousness is growing among frontier peoples. Now that's important for frontier missiology, don't you think?

Winter's attempts to create this apologetic was impressive. He welcomed everyone in on his efforts to integrate science and the Bible. On occasion, he would hand me his latest schema for me to test on my scientific acquaintances. He admitted it was speculative, but he was trying to wield biblical truth just like the Apostle Paul. Recall that Paul's entire letter to the Colossians is his apologetic in response to the "plausibility" (Grk, *pitbanologia*, Col. 2:4) of an emergent syncretism in the Church. A certain structure of consciousness, built on certain "elemental principles," was capturing a segment of that first century society, and Paul's response—his apologetic—is one of the highest Christological portions of our scriptures.

Discerning the true nature of religious consciousness among a people is the basis of a more astute missiology. This issue of the *IJFM* appeals for greater discernment of religious worlds. Winter's analysis of a quasi-religious scientism demands that same sensitivity.

In Him,



Brad Gill
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

Endnotes

¹ "Bibliography of Articles by RDW about the Religion of Science," accessed June 14, 2019, <https://www.rdwresearch-center.org/single-post/2018/08/27/BIBLIOGRAPHY-OF-WINTER-ARTICLES-ON-RELIGION-OF-SCIENCE>.

² Ralph D. Winter, "From the Editor's Desk," accessed June 14, 2019, *IJFM* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2004):3, http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/21_1_PDFs/02_04_Editorial_21_1.pdf.

³ Ralph D. Winter, "From the Editor's Desk," accessed June 14, 2019, *IJFM* 20, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 108, http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/20_4_PDFs/107_Editorial_20_4.pdf.

⁴ Clifford Geertz, "The Struggle for the Real," in *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 90–117, https://monoskop.org/images/0/06/Geertz_Clifford_Islam_Observed_Religious_Development_in_Morocco_and_Indonesia_1971.pdf.

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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.

Who Is Muhammad: Dead Man or Living Light?

by Colin Bearup

Many Christians are unaware of the *Nur Muhammadi* doctrine, the teaching that Muhammad was and is a being of light present since before creation. Those Christians who are aware of it tend to dismiss it as “not Islam,” as some marginal or sectarian development. It is in fact widespread and ancient. If we are to engage with Muslims, we should understand what many of them really believe.

It is unlikely that someone reading the Qur’an for the first time without previous knowledge of Islam would conclude from the text that Muhammad was a pre-existent light appearing in human form. On the other hand, if one’s first contact with Islam comes through reading devotional literature, one might easily come across sentiments such as these:

Muhammad is the fountain-head of lights and darkneses and the source of their emergence from the presence of pre-endless-time. So, his light was the first of lights... From him all things were clothed in their origination in existence, and their continuity is uninterruptedly from him. The prophets and messengers have come from him one by one, and all the kings and all the creatures.

This text is from a *qasida*, a devotional poem, written by a Moroccan Sufi master, Sidi Muhammad Ibn al-Habiib (1876–1972 CE). The idea that Muhammad is the first of all creation appears un-Qur’anic, unorthodox and we may assume it is a late and marginal deviation from true Islam. It is probably not something we have come across in Christian literature about Islam. But this English translation of al-Habiib’s *qasida* can be found on the website of a high-profile Western convert to Islam, Ahmad Thompson, who writes on matters of law and politics, Christianity and Islam.¹ Such an exalted view of Muhammad is not the sentiment of an eccentric twentieth century Sufi cleric, rather it is a widely-held view which reaches back into the earlier centuries of Islam. Though rarely encountered in formal presentations of Islam, it is celebrated and propagated within the Islamic world through poetry and song. Al-Habiib may have been writing in the twentieth century, but his thoughts are by no means a recent phenomenon. In the twelfth century, the great

Colin Bearup has served with WEC in Chad since 1986. He led the translation of the first New Testament in the Chadian dialect of Arabic and is author of Keys, Unlocking the Gospel for Muslims. He is currently ministering in the UK among Muslims of Pakistani background.

Sufi teacher Abdal Qadir al-Jilani (1077–1166 CE) penned similar words about Muhammad:

Allah Most High first created, from the divine light of His own beauty, the light of Muhammad (s)... This is declared by our master the messenger of Allah in his words, "Allah first created my soul. He first created it as a divine light;"^{2,3}

Jilani lived in Baghdad and is regarded as the founder of the Qadiriya Sufi order, one of the most widespread Sufi orders in the world. He is still venerated in many different Sufi traditions. His contemporary, Qadi Iyad (1083–1149 CE), lived in Andalusia (Muslim Spain) and wrote a much-celebrated work known as the *Shifa*. It includes these words:

Ibn Abbas said that the spirit of the Prophet, praise and peace be upon him, was a light in the hands of Allah two thousand years before He created Adam. That light exalted Him and by this light the angels exalted Allah, and when Allah created Adam, He cast that light into his loins. He also tells us that the Prophet, praise and peace be upon him, said, "Allah brought me down to earth in the loins of Adam, then He placed me in the loins of Noah and thereafter cast me into the loins of Abraham. Allah proceeded to move me from one noble loin and pure womb to another until He brought me out of my parents."⁴

Both these eminent scholars were writing in the twelfth century but at a still earlier date, Mansur al-Hallaj (858–929 CE) wrote of Muhammad:

He is and was and was known before created things and existences and beings. He was and still is remembered before "before" and after "after," and before substances and qualities. His substance is completely light, his speech is prophetic, his knowledge is celestial, his mode of expression is Arabic, his tribe is "neither of the East nor the West," his genealogy is patriarchal, his mission is conciliation, and he has the title of the "unlettered."⁵

Many writers through the centuries have expressed such sentiments. The writers of poetry and devotional songs, often using local languages, have put them into the mouths of many untutored Muslims across the world. If such ideas are likely to go undetected by the uninitiated reader of the Qur'an, just where do they come from? We must turn to the other sources of authority in Islam.

The Hadith

The second textual authority in Islam is the Hadith literature, which is the written record of the oral accounts of what Muhammad and his companions did and said. The Hadith collections which are most widely accepted as



authentic were compiled in the ninth century. The Sunnis recognise six collections and the Shi'a four, but all Muslim authorities acknowledge that the collectors rejected many more Hadith than they accepted. Even so, each collection consists of thousands of oral records and contains massively more material than the Qur'an itself. For example, *Sahih Bukhari*, perhaps the most widely accepted Sunni collection, contains 2,762 Hadith drawn from a pool of more than 600,000.⁶ Although the earliest written Hadith can be dated to the ninth century, Islamic belief is that the things they record were done or spoken during Muhammad's lifetime. If it were otherwise, they would be considered of no value.

The Qur'an is interpreted, religious practice is systematized, Islamic law is formulated, and the details of Muhammad's life are all known. Although these early collections of Hadith are recognised by most Muslim scholars, collections continued to be made throughout the medieval period and indeed up to the present day.⁷

Recitations found in documents dated in, say, the twelfth century, were recorded precisely because they were believed to be faithful oral transmissions from the time of Muhammad. Therefore, a Muslim who trusts a specific text is unlikely to be swayed by a critic who argues that the late date of the *collection* reflects a late date of *origin*. This means that if we attempt to uncover a chronology for the development of beliefs about Muhammad's nature and status, in the very act of so doing we are repudiating the whole system. This naturally renders any constructive dialogue about historical sources with devout Muslims problematic.

This does not mean that any and every recorded Hadith is universally accepted—far from it. What it means is that the determination of a particular Hadith's validity is not based on the date of the written record. Much of Islam hangs on the Hadith literature rather than the Qur'an, and the internet abounds with those who declare this or that Hadith valid or invalid. These in-house debates within Islam can be fierce and increasingly take place in the public arena afforded by the web, in either English or in traditional Muslim languages.

The Sira

It was during the same period the Hadith literature was first collated that the Sira literature began to emerge. In this context, the word *Sira* means "biography." The first Sira of Muhammad that we know of is that of Ibn Ishaq (d. 767 CE). No complete copies of the original exist today but Ibn Hisham's (d. 833 CE) edited version is available. The last of the four earliest Siras was composed

by Tabari (d. 923 CE).⁸ These early Siras resembled the Hadith collections in that they collated oral materials and were not authored writings. They are unlike the Hadith collections in the way they organised the material chronologically to form a biographical narrative. Like the early Hadith collections, they sometimes record conflicting accounts without explanation. Tarif Khalidi, a Muslim intellectual who has made a respectful yet candid study of Sira literature, writes:

...the Sira cannot be described solely as an "objective" historical account of what actually happened. True, these founding fathers clearly aimed at accuracy and often expressed doubt about the truth of the stories they relate. But that did not prevent them from including such stories all the same.⁹

The purpose of Sira writing was to edify rather than to simply merely inform. Khalidi remarks:

History for the founding fathers had a moral and educational purpose. If a story was factually doubtful, it would still be included for its moral or ethical value—even for its entertainment value.¹⁰

The first generation of Sira writings did include supernatural manifestations that were not explicitly attested in the Qur'an; but, as an apologist might say, the Qur'an was never meant to be biographical. The Sira of Ibn Sa'd (784–845 CE) refers to a mysterious appearance of light at Muhammad's birth,¹¹ but even though Sa'd has plenty to say about the creation of Adam, he says nothing about Muhammad pre-dating creation. Likewise, the compendious Sira-cum-history of Al-Tabari (839–923 CE) records several accounts of creation and discusses whether "the Pen of Destiny" was created first or whether light and darkness were. He raises the question about whether God's throne was created or not, but he does not talk about Muhammad as the first creation.¹²

An outsider might draw the conclusion that the absence of any reference to Nur Muhammadi in these early

The writing of biographies of Muhammad has continued to the present day, the styles changing in response to the requirements of the age.

works proves that the concept is a later invention. However, as we have noted, the majority of Hadith that had been in circulation were not included in these collections. Al-Hallaj, cited above, was a contemporary of the Hadith collectors and Sira writers, yet he expressed beliefs not found in them.

The early Siras mentioned so far are those within the Sunni camp and were financed by Sunni rulers. Another early Sira-cum-history, "Meadows of God," was compiled by the Shi'ite al-Mas'udi (896–956 CE). From the earliest days of Islam, Shi'ites had a particular interest in the person of Muhammad and his family. They contend that the leadership of the Islamic empire should have stayed with Muhammad's family. The question of how and why Muhammad and his family came to have such a special place in the world was of great interest to them. We should bear in mind that during these early centuries of Islam, Shi'ite beliefs and teachings were not confined to one territory or a particular ethnicity; it was a perspective held by many throughout the Muslim world. It was an important strand of ideological and pious opposition to the Sunni authorities. It may well be that whole swathes of belief were excluded from the officially approved collections for political reasons. Anything that makes Muhammad supernatural must raise questions about his biological family, which the Sunnis had destroyed. Mas'udi's history does refer to Muhammad at creation.

God, when he intended to establish the laws of the universe, to lay the seed of generation, and to produce the creation, gave to it first the form of fine dust before he formed the earth, and raised the heavens. He dwelt in his unapproachable glory, and in the unity of his power. Then

he put down a particle of his light and made lighten a sparkle of his splendour. The dust rose, and the light was concentrated in the centre of this floating dust. This represented the figure of our prophet MOHAMMED, on whom may rest the blessing of God! and God said, "Thou art the chosen and the elected."¹³

This document gives a solid basis for saying that the belief in Muhammad as a supernatural being was already in circulation when the standard historical texts were first written down.

The writing of biographies of Muhammad has continued to the present day, the styles changing in response to the requirements of the age. Through the medieval period, Khalidi detects a progression in which the contradictions caused by multiple narrations were stripped away and the hagiographic elements matured. From the eleventh century onwards, Sufi devotional material multiplied, which included writers such as Jilani cited above, whose poetry expresses loving devotion to the person of Muhammad.¹⁴ One might wonder to what extent one generation's poetic hyperbole was the next generation's doctrinal statement, but such an enquiry is inevitably speculative and does not help us interpret how today's Muslims understand their faith. Despite the distance of these later writers from the original witnesses the conviction of those who believe them is that these narrations are true and date back to the earliest times. Moreover, such confidence is reinforced by Sufi practitioners invoking *ma'arifa*, a secret knowledge (or gnosis in the Greek) that has been passed down from Muhammad through either Ali or Abu Bakr or even received directly via contact with the invisible world by Sufi masters.¹⁵

Qur'anic Support for Nur Muhammadi

To be credible within Islam, all accounts of Muhammad have to be in some way traced back to Muhammad himself and his immediate companions. A number of Qur'anic texts are frequently cited (and then elaborated) to support the belief in Muhammad's pre-existence as light.

O People of the Book! Our Messenger has come to you, clarifying for you much of what you kept hidden of the Book, and overlooking much. A light from God has come to you, and a clear Book. (Sura 5:15)

The word "light" is taken to refer to Muhammad and the word "book" to the Qur'an, even though at the alleged time of this utterance the Qur'an did not exist in book form. Another text is Sura 24:35 which reads

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The allegory of His light is that of a pillar [most translations "niche"] on which is a lamp. The lamp is within a glass. The glass is like a brilliant planet, fuelled by a blessed tree, an olive tree, neither eastern nor western. Its oil would almost illuminate, even if no fire has touched it. Light upon Light. God guides to His light whomever He wills. God thus cites the parables for the people. God is cognizant of everything.

We met the phrase "neither eastern nor western" in the ninth century quotation from Mansur al-Hallaj suggesting that he understood this passage to be about the person of Muhammad. The website of The Sunnah Foundation of America quotes thirteenth century scholar al-Qurtubi as explaining the elements of this verse as follows:

The Messenger of Allah (s) is the niche, the lamp is prophethood, the glass is his heart, the blessed tree is the revelation and the angels who brought it, the oil are the proofs and evidence which contain the revelation.¹⁶

A host of other commentators could have been cited giving similar explanations in which Muhammad is the

light, though each one would vary as to the details of the various elements.

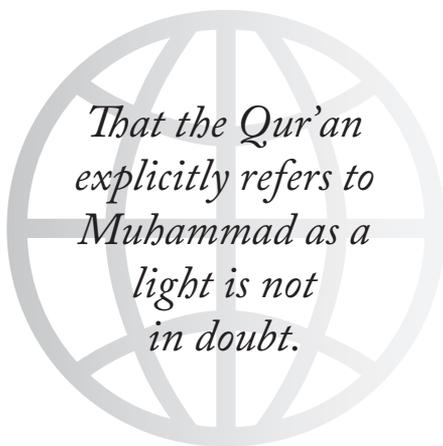
That the Qur'an sometimes explicitly refers to Muhammad as a light or lamp is not in doubt. For example, Sura 33:45–46 reads

O prophet! We have sent you as a witness, and a bearer of good news, and a warner. And a caller towards God by His leave, and an illuminating beacon.

Other Qur'anic texts mentioning light are also interpreted by those so-minded as references to Muhammad.

A text used in relation to Muhammad's pre-existence is Sura 7:172 which reads:

And when Your Lord summoned the descendants of Adam and made



them testify about themselves. "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, we testify." Thus you cannot say on the Day of Resurrection, "We were unaware of this."

Although there is no explicit chronological reference in the text, Islamic commentators infer that it happened at or before the beginning. As with other opaque references in the Qur'an, commentators drawing on the Hadith have elaborated extensively on the text in a variety of ways. The common themes are that, in some way, the souls of all humanity (including Muhammad) were present at creation. Where Muhammad's uniqueness and primacy are being expounded, further elaborations of Muhammad's participation

in the event are also to be found. For example, Sahl al-Tustari (818–896 CE), a very early commentary writer, wrote the following on this verse:

The progeny (*dhurriyya*) comprise three [parts], a first, second and third: the first is Muhammad, for when God, Exalted is He, wanted to create Muhammad He made appear (*aẓhara*) a light from His light, and when it reached the veil of divine majesty it prostrated before God, and from that prostration God created an immense crystal-like column of light, that was inwardly and outwardly translucent, and within it was the essence of Muhammad. Then it stood in service before the Lord of the Worlds for a million years with the essential characteristics of faith (*ṭabā'i' al-īmān*), which are the visual beholding of faith (*mu'āyanat al-īmān*), the unveiling of certainty (*mukāshafat al-yaqīn*) and the witnessing of the Lord (*mushāhadat al-Rabb*). Thus He honoured him with this witnessing, a million years before beginning the creation.¹⁷

Similarly, in Sura 2:30 we find:

When your Lord said to the angels, "I am placing a successor [Arabic *khalifa*, often translated vice-regent] on earth." They said . . .

Tustari's commentary explains:

God, Exalted is He, before he created Adam said to the angels I am appointing on earth a vicegerent, and He created Adam from the clay of might consisting of the light of Muhammad.¹⁸

Many other examples might be given. From an early date, the text of the Qur'an was expounded with the aid of narrations allegedly originating in the earliest days of Islam. The Qur'an is and was read through the lens of the Hadith and some (but not all) commentators teach that Qur'anic texts provide the basis of the Nur Muhammadi narrative.

One of the Hadith most frequently quoted with reference to Muhammad's pre-existence is Hadith Jabir. It is

recorded by a variety of compilers. The Sunni way website lists eleven sources.¹⁹ According to al-Qastalani (1448–1517 CE), in answer to a question, Muhammad himself uttered these words:

Oh, Jabir, Allah created, before anything else, the light of your Prophet (saw) from His Light. That light started to move about by Allah's Divine Power to wherever Allah wished. At that time there was neither Tablet nor Pen; neither Paradise nor Fire, no angels; neither Heaven, nor Earth; neither Sun nor Moon; neither Jinn nor humankind. When Allah (swt) wanted to create His Creation, He divided that light into four parts. From the first part he created the Pen, from the second, the Tablet, and from the third, the Throne.^{20, 21}

The examples cited so far should suffice to demonstrate that scholars who hold beliefs in Muhammad as a cosmic personage can defend them from an abundance of explicit source material. It is no easy matter to determine what proportion of Muslims today understand Muhammad in this way. We can say that the twentieth century *qasida* mentioned above provides evidence from Moroccan Sufism. Similarly, the writings of Sheikh Nuh Keller (who we will meet below) provide evidence of its presence in Egypt and the Levant where he received his Islamic training. Also, the Bareilwi movement of the Indian subcontinent holds it as standard.²² Clearly this belief is not simply a local anomaly in some obscure peripheral region. It is to be found in many different parts of the Muslim world.

However, this view of Muhammad, although widespread, is far from universal among Muslims, and is in fact highly contested in many areas. The debate is all the more emotive because every stream of Islam calls on Muslims to love Muhammad. A well-known Hadith accepted by Bukhari, the foremost Hadith collector, states:

Prophet Muhammad said, "None of you will have faith till he loves me

One is far more likely to offend sensibilities by making negative criticisms of Muhammad than by challenging the truths of the Qur'an.

more than his father, his children and all mankind."²³

For those who highly venerate Muhammad, any attempt to downgrade his status is a failure to love him. On all sides, to be dispassionate about Muhammad would be a failing. As secular academic Ron Geaves attests:

I have observed that one is far more likely to offend sensibilities by making negative criticisms of Muhammad than by challenging the truths of the Qur'an. The latter is likely to lead to an earnest debate...the former is seen as a deep insult and provokes an impassioned response.²⁴

Similarities and Differences with the Biblical View of Christ

A Bible-reading Christian cannot help but be struck by the similarities between these claims made about Muhammad and the claims the New Testament makes about Christ. First, I shall look at some of the similarities and then the key differences. I will cite some representative texts rather than attempting an exhaustive collection of biblical references.

The New Testament teaches that Christ existed before his birth. We read in John's Gospel

In the beginning was the Word, . . . He was with God in the beginning . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (John 1:1, 2, 14)²⁵

This passage speaks of the incarnate word and the Nur Muhammadi teaching also speaks of an incarnation of light. John goes on to speak of Christ as the light.

In him was life, and that life was the light of men . . . The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. (John 1:4 & 9).

The similarities between the Nur Muhammadi teaching and the thought expressed in John 1 are obvious.

Muhammad is described as being intimately involved in the process of creation resembling things stated about Christ in the New Testament. For example, in Hebrews 1:2–3 we find

...in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.

Similar sentiments are expressed elsewhere such as 1 Corinthians 8:6 and John 1:3. The New Testament also speaks of the world being created *for* Christ: "All things were created *by* him and *for* him" (Col. 1:16, italics added). An oft-cited Hadith, with several variants and referred to as the *Law Laka*, has God addressing Muhammad in these terms: "Were it not for you, I would not have created the world."²⁶ Even Ibn Taymiyya, the great thirteenth century iconoclast, declared that the content of this Hadith, while not an authentic narration, was nonetheless true.²⁷

Central to the message of the New Testament is the claim that Christ is alive, never to die again (1 Cor. 15:20–23, 42–49; Heb. 7:16–24; Rev. 1:17–18). Furthermore, it is asserted that he is present with his people (Matt. 18:20 and 28:20; Acts 18:9). In a similar way, many mosques have the words "Ya Allah" and "Ya Rasool" ("Oh God" and "Oh Messenger") inscribed at the front of the prayer hall addressing both God and Muhammad as present.²⁸ As Geaves has documented, many Sufi groups hold that Muhammad is *hazir o nazir*, present and watching.²⁹

The New Testament ascribes an intercessory role to Christ. For example, 1 Timothy 2:5 states, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." Other examples may be found in Hebrews 7:25 and 1 John 2:1. For many Muslims, Muhammad is

wasila, an intermediary or go between.³⁰ They find support in Sura 4:64:

Had they . . . come to you, and prayed for God's forgiveness, and the Messenger had prayed for their forgiveness, they would have found God Relenting and Merciful.

This idea of Muhammad as supreme intercessor is found elaborated in many devotional works, such as the *Shifa* of Qadi Iyad, to quote but one example. It says:

Abdullah, Amr's son reports the saying of the Prophet, . . . Whosoever asks for blessings upon me once, Allah blesses him ten times. Thereafter ask for the rank of go-between [wasila] for me . . . My intercession is granted to whosoever asks for the rank of "wasila" for me.³¹

The Nur Muhammadi teaching and the New Testament's teaching about Christ may have strong similarities but their claims are mutually exclusive. The notions may be similar but the attributions are in stark opposition to each other.

The supreme difference between the Nur Muhammadi-type teaching and the biblical Christ is of course the matter of Christ's deity. Muslims always insist that Muhammad is a created being, intentionally contrasting him with God. The Hadiths we saw earlier all spoke of an ancient but created light. As Keller puts it:

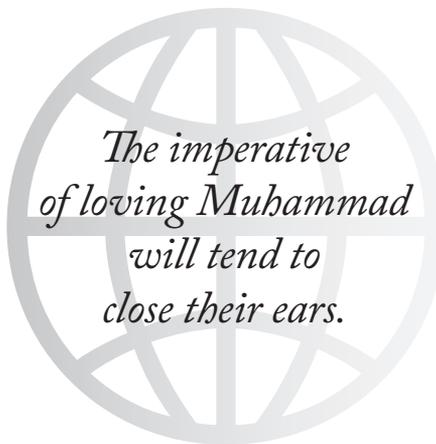
Though the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) is the Light of Allah, he is of course a created light. Someone who believes otherwise has made the mistake of the Christians with Jesus (upon whom be peace).³²

It would be a contradiction of the most basic tenets of Islam to say that Muhammad is divine. Indeed, many Muslim movements view the practice of even offering praises and prayers to Muhammad as a violation of the prohibition on associating anyone with God. In Sura 18:110, God addresses Muhammad:

Say, "I am only a human being [Arabic *bashar*] like you, being inspired that

your god is One God. Whoever hopes to meet his Lord, let him work righteousness, and never associate anyone with the service [Arabic *ibaada*, often translated 'worship'] of his Lord."

This text gives those who teach Nur Muhammadi some real difficulties. It is a proof text for the reformers. Minhaj-ul-Quran International UK recently published a tract explaining how their customary practice can be reconciled with this verse. The tract is addressed to fellow Muslims, of course, not to Christians. Their recently printed English edition of the Qur'an finds it necessary to insert parenthetical notes into its rendering of 18:118.



Say: "I look like you only (by virtue of my visible creation) as a man. (Otherwise just think what congruity you have with me.) It is I to whom the Revelation is transmitted that your God is the One and Only God. (And just see to it whether you have any such divine potential that the Word of Allah may come down to you.) So, whoever hopes to meet his Lord should do good deeds and must not associate any partner in the worship of his Lord."³³

Those who venerate Muhammad affirm that Islam teaches that he is a created being and at the same time they revel in his uniqueness, his proximity to the deity, his power to inspire, and his ability to assist them.

Towards a Christian Response

In my experience, materials written by Muslims to engage Christians do not usually proclaim Muhammad as an incarnation of primordial light. This is probably because groups that are involved in proselytising us are from the reformist wings of Islam. One might also hypothesise that most Sufi-style movements encourage the faithful to humbly receive the teaching rather than to assertively articulate it. The lack of material addressed to Christians on this issue probably explains the lack of Christian material responding to it. I have not found a single Christian website that attempts to address it.

Once alerted to this teaching, a zealous Christian might be tempted to take a polemical route that deploys Qur'anic texts which seem to highlight Muhammad's limitations and fallibility (e.g., 18:110, 48:1–2, 48:9 and 53:19–20). Likewise, the Hadith literature provides plenty of embarrassing material often used by Christian polemicists to attack the character of Muhammad. Such an approach is unlikely to be productive with the devout. First, the supreme imperative of loving Muhammad before all else, which they so zealously nurture, will tend to close their ears. In addition, if Christians use arguments associated with the debate within Islam, they simply invite well-rehearsed rebuttals. Aligning oneself with those who "fail to love Muhammad" will not increase a Christian's credibility. The venerators already have strategies for dealing with potential "proof texts" in the Qur'an.

The most likely scenario for an intentional presentation of a Christian counter-narrative to Nur Muhammadi is that of a dialogue setting, whether informal among friends or in a more formal setting. Such a scenario requires mutual respect and impeccable manners. The dialogue has to take place on the understanding that the parties will not agree as to what is

true but are willing to listen with the intention of understanding. Christians can insist on the integrity of their own scriptures on a Qur'anic basis. Among other texts, Sura 5:46–47 addresses Christians in particular:

... We sent Jesus son of Mary, fulfilling the Torah that preceded him; and We gave him the Gospel, wherein is guidance and light, and confirming the Torah that preceded him, and guidance and counsel for the righteous. So let the people of the Gospel rule [most translations, "judge"] according to what God revealed in it. Those who do not rule according to what God revealed are the sinners.

Any exhortation to submit to the Qur'an can always be met with this injunction. The Muslim who takes the Qur'an seriously is obliged to take the gospel seriously. The Christian will need to be acquainted with the standard arguments demonstrating that the scriptures today are not different than those the Qur'an affirms. Christians will need to demonstrate a fervour for their Lord and a real sympathy for Muslim believers, putting into practice Paul's injunction: "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful." (2 Tim. 2:24).

I would argue that Christians need to consider two dimensions inherent in this issue of Nur Muhammadi. One concerns truth. With two such contrasting views, they cannot both be equally true. The other concerns an underlying belief, namely, that human need has been met in a specific way. Which way most fully meets human need? Naturally, a false hope is no good to anyone, but if a hope is attractive, the ear will be more inclined to listen. For apologetic presentations to bear any fruit, there must be some common frame of reference. In this case, the frame of reference is the belief that God has demonstrated his mercy to humankind through the one he has sent. The matter at issue is the identity of the one who God has provided.

The strong attachment to Nur Muhammadi owes much to the way the doctrine addresses the need of the worshiper for a holy yet accessible saviour.

Matters of Truth

Discerning what is true involves relying on sources and, for Muslims especially, a source is trusted on the basis of piety and scholarship more than analytical objectivity. The most powerful arguments from the Muslim side come from the Hadith. The Christian can legitimately say that the Hadith are sayings remembered by men, repeated by men and collected by men. How accurate they are God alone knows and as Christians we are not qualified to discuss them. We keep the focus on our respective Holy Books. When comparing the Qur'an with the Bible, it soon becomes apparent that the New Testament makes much clearer statements about Christ as God incarnate than the Qur'an does about Muhammad as Light incarnate.

The passages that Christians habitually use for asserting claims of Christ's deity such as Thomas's confession in John 20:28 and Jesus' declaration "I and the Father are one" in John 10:30 are probably not particularly suitable texts to use. Narratives such as Luke 5:17–26, in which the Pharisees articulate the responsible Muslim view and Jesus performs two acts that only God can do, are much more useful. Matthew 14:22–37 is another passage that invites serious reflection, but one has to be prepared to explain why Jesus would need to pray. Philippians 2:5–11 addresses both the deity and the humanity of Christ and concludes with a call on the part of God for all to honour Christ.

The Christian needs to recognise the importance of the identity of the speaker within the sacred texts. When it is "a voice is heard from heaven" or an angel is quoted, or Jesus speaks of himself, as in the famous "I am" passages in John's Gospel, that is likely to carry more

weight than if the speaker is merely a follower or the writer. The authority is in the person not the paper.

Islam sets great store by chains of authority, whether it be the transmission of a Hadith, the pedigree of a scholar or the spiritual genealogy of a Sufi. Most of the Sira texts examine favourably the forebears of Muhammad. The genealogy of Jesus, so out of fashion with secular Westerners, is still of interest to Muslim readers.

The Meeting of Human Need

The Letter to the Hebrews addresses Christians of Jewish background and demonstrates in a variety of ways that Jesus is "a high priest [who] meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens" (7:26). It is not unreasonable to assume that the strong attachment to Nur Muhammadi and the unwillingness to yield to iconoclastic scholars owes much to the way the doctrine addresses the need of the worshiper for a holy yet accessible saviour. This is also the thrust of Hebrews, though that particular epistle is not helpful to Muslims, drawing as it does on so much that belongs to unfamiliar Jewish religious rites: but the method is sound. The writer contrasts Jesus favourably with angels in Chapter 1, with Moses in Chapter 3 and with the high priest in Chapters 7 and 8. Within a well-established, respectful relationship, a Christian should be able to revel in the attributes of Christ, indirectly contrasting them with the exalted but lesser claims about Muhammad. Which is better? The created or the Creator? The closest slave or the beloved Son? The recipient of the word or the Word himself? The one who is forgiven or the one who brings forgiveness? Which mediator

is the more desirable, the slave or the Son? The one alive in his grave or the one alive on his throne? The one who is loved by God or the one who is God in the flesh?

This line of approach neither denigrates Muhammad nor disrespects the worshiper. So long as the integrity of the testimony of the Bible has been established, Christians can acknowledge the way Muslims treasure the Muhammad they have been taught to love and trust and at the same time testify to higher and greater treasure that is the biblical teaching concerning Christ, Lord and Saviour. The biblical portrayal of Christ and Nur Muhammad contradict one another and are mutually exclusive, but that need not plunge Christian and Muslim believers into confrontation.

For too long, Christian workers have dismissed as irrelevant this major strand of Islam which is both a lived Islam and a genuine scholarly tradition. This failure to respect the people we seek to reach does not position us well as we seek to present Christ. The degree to which many Muslims venerate Muhammad and the scholarly basis for such practice may take us by surprise and offend us in what looks like a naked appropriation of the attributes of Christ, but I would suggest that simply attacking the falsehood is likely to be unproductive. What is needed is respect and understanding. Such Muslims acknowledge that mere flesh and human effort are insufficient for our salvation and that God's intention has always been to provide a supernatural saviour that meets our need. This should be something we can work with. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Muhammad Ibn al-Habiib, "The Mawlid of the Prophet Muhammad" accessed on June 14, 2019, <http://www.wynchambers.co.uk/pdf/Mawlid.pdf>.

² When writing the name of the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims often follow it with the abbreviation "SAWS," "SAW," or a more

streamlined version, "s." These letters stand for the Arabic words "sallallahu alayhi wa salaam" (may God's prayers and peace be with him). See "The Meaning of Islamic Abbreviations SAWS," <https://www.learnreligions.com/islamic-abbreviation-saws-2004289>.

³ Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, *Secret of Secrets*, trans. Tosun Bayrak al-Halvati, (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 5.

⁴ Qadi Iyad, *Ash-Shifa*, trans. A. Bewley (1992), Chapter 2, Section 6, <https://archive.org/details/MuhammadMessengerOfAllahAshShifaOfQadiIyad>.

⁵ Mansur al-Hallaj, *The Tawasin*, trans. Aisha AbdarRahman At-Tarjumana, <http://www.hermetics.org/pdf/Tawasin.pdf>, 2.

⁶ Sadakat Kadri, *Heaven on Earth* (London: Vintage, 2013), 63.

⁷ Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 51.

⁸ Tarif Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 58.

⁹ Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad*, 62.

¹⁰ Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad*, 63.

¹¹ *KITAB AL-TABAQAT AL-KABIR* Volume 1, Parts 1.24.6-12, <http://www.soebratie.nl/religie/hadith/IbnSad.html>.

¹² Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 198ff.

¹³ Ali Ibn Husain al-Mas'udi, *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*, Volume 1, trans. Aloys Sprenger (London: Parbury, Allen, and Co., 1841) digital archive, 51.

¹⁴ Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad*, 151-174.

¹⁵ See Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 140.

¹⁶ For the explanation of "Allah (s)" see endnote 2. "The Creation of the Life of Muhammad (s)," accessed June 14, 2019, http://www.sunnah.org/history/Life-of-Prophet/Creation_light_Muhammad.htm#_ftnref5.

¹⁷ Sahl al-Tustari, *Tafsir al-Tustari*, trans. Annabel & Ali Keeler (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), 76.

¹⁸ Al-Tustari, *Tafsir al-Tustari*, 16.

¹⁹ "Hadith of Jabir" accessed June 11, 2019, <http://www.thesunniway.com/articles/item/30-hadith-of-jabir>.

²⁰ For the explanation of "Prophet (saw)" see endnote 2. Both "saw" and "swt" are honorifics. Muslims use the abbreviation "swt" when writing God's name to refer to the words "Subhanahu wa ta'Allah" (Glory

be to God). See "I keep seeing 'PBUH' or 'SAW' or 'SWT' when Muslims mention the Prophet or Allah," <https://isb.org/ufaqs/i-keep-seeing-pbuh-or-saw-or-swt-when-muslims-mention-the-prophet-or-allah/>.

²¹ Al-Qastalani, *Light of the Prophet*, trans. As-Sunna Foundation of America, <http://rasulallah.info/id36.html>, 2.

²² Ron Geaves, *Sectarian Influences within Islam in Britain* (Leeds University, 1996), 95.

²³ Abu Abdullah Muhammad al-Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari* Volume 001, Book 002, Hadith Number 014, http://www.mailofislam.com/prophet_muhammad_sallallahu_alaihiwasallam.html.

²⁴ Ron Geaves, *Aspects of Islam*, (London: Dartman, Longman, Todd, 2005), 144.

²⁵ All Bible texts are from the New International Version, 1984.

²⁶ Recent example: Amir Sulaiman, "Make Yourself Sweet," accessed June 11, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_4BeHEXhJg.

²⁷ Ibn Taymiyyah, "Ibn Taymiyyah's Elucidation of Law Laak," accessed June 11, 2019, http://www.sunnah.org/msaac/articles/ibn_taymiyya_law_laak.htm.

²⁸ Geaves, *Aspects of Islam*, 160.

²⁹ "Hazir o Nazir," accessed June 11, 2019, <https://www.alahazrat.net/hazir-o-nazir/>.

³⁰ Perry Pennington explores this theme in greater measure with reference to South Asian Muslims in From "Prophethood to the Gospel: Talking to Folk Muslims about Jesus" 31, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 195-203.

³¹ Iyad, *Ash-Shifa*, 265.

³² Nuh Ha Mim Keller, "Haqiqat al-Muhammadiyah," The Muhammadan Reality, 1995, last modified May 29, 2014, <http://masud.co.uk/the-muhammadan-reality/>.

³³ Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, trans., *The Glorious Qur'an*, English Translation (London: Minhaj-ul-Quran Publications, 2012).

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Contextualizing the Gospel in the Fear-Power World of Folk Buddhists

by James E. Morrison

One day, while sitting on our couch in the afternoon light, Drolma (not her real name) broke down, became emotional, and asked me to pray. She began to tell me about her father, an alcoholic who did not have the power to give up drinking, who had completely ruined his life. Now her brothers were headed in the same direction, drinking too much and wasting all of the money she was earning. She had told me this before, but it was still such a burden. For her this was a spiritual issue, and she specifically asked me to pray that God would give them the power to stop drinking. “Only God is able to do that,” she said. Though a relatively new believer, she knew that God did not always answer immediately and that she would need to be patient. As she cried, I prayed “God, give her father and brothers the power to stop drinking. Help them turn from their sinful ways and follow Jesus.”

Drolma is a believer from a folk Tibetan Buddhist background—a tradition steeped in shamanism, animism and tantric Buddhism. Her story is illustrative because, amongst other things, it highlights a worldview that primarily sees life from a spiritual or “power” dimension. Truth, in the epistemological sense, is of little concern. Rather, the issues of daily life, and the out-working of power, is central. Truth lies in the things that work, that provide obvious benefit. This worldview is the prevailing one of the vast majority of folk Buddhists across Asia, and of folk Tibetan Buddhists as well. As Tsering notes, “Most people in the Tibetan Buddhist world are unconcerned with gaining enlightenment, meditating, or practicing tantric rituals. Like their shamanist ancestors, they see religion as a means to solve problems of everyday life.”¹

In this context, I will explore some possible ways to tailor more relevant presentations of initial expressions of the gospel to a folk Buddhist setting. Folk Buddhists have long proved resistant to the gospel.² There are many reasons for this: geographical isolation, limited missionary access, demonic oppression, cultural pride, and prevailing views of Christianity being a “foreign” religion or being “just the same as Buddhism.” These are some very real barriers.

James E. Morrison (pseudonym) is a graduate student at the Cook School of Intercultural Studies, Biola University. He has lived and worked among Tibetans for more than twenty years.

An additional factor may be that gospel presentations have not been as perspicacious as they could have been—they may have either been speaking to a misinformed set of needs, speaking superficially, or just not speaking at all.

In this article I suggest that an empathetic understanding of the cultural paradigm of fear-power, the predominant worldview of folk Buddhists, may result in more efficacious engagement than an approach which flows from the worldview lens of a guilt versus innocence society. Though I will more specifically focus on the folk Tibetan Buddhist³ people of the Central Tibetan Plateau in the People's Republic of China,⁴ there are certain generic similarities that could apply to other folk Buddhist groups. My approach is to provide: a basic theoretical framework (defining contextualization and folk Buddhism); a theological framework (what the Bible has to say and possible syncretistic concerns); and a brief practical framework (some applications that could perhaps be used by on-field practitioners).

Contextualization: Theories and Models

Many attempts have been made to define contextualization. Common elements include communicating effectively in a cross-cultural setting and a “culturally relevant” gospel. Nigerian Josphat Yego defines contextualization as

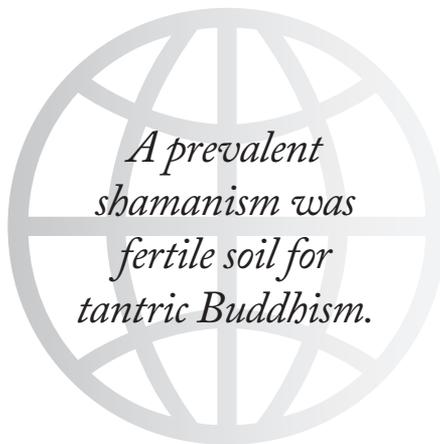
the never-changing word of God in ever-changing modes of relevance. It is making the gospel...relevant in a given situation.⁵

Flemming fleshes this definition out a little more by adding that contextualization is

the dynamic and comprehensive process by which the gospel is incarnated within a concrete historical or cultural situation. This happens in such a way that the gospel both comes to authentic expression in the local context and at the same time prophetically transforms the context.⁶

More than just clear communication (the goal of any good communicator anywhere) contextualization seeks to also develop localized theologies which speak to the needs of the local community. These needs may not necessarily be apparent to the cross-cultural worker. Hiebert's “critical contextualization” has proved to be a significant voice in this regard.⁷ He advocates taking the local culture seriously, discussing the critical needs of the culture openly (as perceived by the receptor culture itself), and yet ultimately still being guided by the authority of Scripture. This approach certainly has merit.

One could say, then, that there are two essential components to contextualization:



communicating in a way that resonates with the host culture without losing the (confrontational and transformational) sharp edge of the gospel;⁸ and establishing theologies that address the concerns of the people. It is on this theoretical basis that I approach the fear-power concerns of folk Buddhists of Central Tibet.

Scott Moreau provides a detailed account of the development of contextualization and has codified various models of its application. The predominant model for evangelicals is the “translation” model,⁹ which is born out of a belief that there is a culturally transcendent message, a kerygma, to be translated, transplanted or re-planted

(depending on one's choice of metaphor). The primary objective is to “convey Christian meanings with minimum distortion to the message of the Bible,”¹⁰ with Scripture as the final arbitrator of both theology and pedagogy.¹¹

What is Folk Buddhism?

And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all. (Luke 6:19, ESV)

According to noted missionary and scholar Alex Smith, “Folk Buddhism holds sway over one billion of the earth's inhabitants,”¹² and in lands where this religion prevails “the gospel languishes in its impact”¹³ the church being “tiny, usually less than 1%.”¹⁴ Folk Buddhism is an eclectic and syncretic mix of the teachings of Buddha with pre-existing, indigenous, animistic, or shamanistic religions. In Thailand,

Folk Buddhism, as opposed to pure “book” Buddhism, would include animistic or primal religious practices as well as Theravada or Mahayana Buddhist practice in a syncretistic mix.¹⁵

In Tibet, folk Buddhism is a mix of native shamanism and tantric Buddhism. Tibet's ancient indigenous religion, known as *Bon*, is a combination of shamanism and animism. In the seventh century, the Indian shaman, Guru Rimpoche (also known as *pad ma 'byung gnas*), paved the way for tantric Buddhism to take root in Tibet and Bhutan. Tantric Buddhism involves magical spells and mantras, as well as occult practices, as it seeks a “fast track” to enlightenment. The shamanism already prevalent in Tibet was fertile soil for tantric Buddhism.¹⁶

Folk Buddhism is characterized by both fear and power. For the Burmese folk Buddhist, his or her fear is the fear of spirits or *Nats*. Peter Thein Nyunt observes that for the Burmese, fear is a constant: “The greatest fear comes from the danger of harmful spirits or evil spirits . . . or being

harmful by . . . *Nats*.”¹⁷ Tibetans often express fear of local deities (*yul lha*), demons (*dre* and *klu*)—ubiquitous spirits that constantly seek to harm humans. As Tsering states, “The world of the folk Tibetan Buddhist is filled with aggressive spirits, capricious gods, malignant demons.”¹⁸ These spirits need placating; they need a higher power to deal with them. Placating them is typically done through practices one can find throughout the Tibetan folk Buddhist world, practices such as: sorcery (*mthu rgyag ba*); divination (*mo rgyag ba*); consulting an oracle, shaman or lama (*lha pa, sngags pa, and bla ma*); reciting mantras (*sngags* or *gsang sngags*); astrology (*rtsi rgyag pa*); making offerings (*mchod pa phul ba*); spinning prayer wheels (*mani khor ba*); and making visits to monasteries and temples (*mchod mjal*).

Tibetans, like many folk Buddhists, are also terrified of going to hell and have an elaborate understanding of eighteen realms of hell (*dmyal khams bco brgyad*). Interestingly, Smith, in his paper, “Missiological Implications of Key Contrasts Between Buddhism and Christianity,” writes that in a survey of many Thais who became Christians, fear of going to hell was a prominent factor in their becoming believers.¹⁹ Since western Christianity has largely filtered out hell and eternal damnation, it is common to think that these teachings are irrelevant to our cross-cultural audiences. In reality, teaching on Jesus being the only one who has the power to save us from hell is thoroughly good news. By excluding this dimension, particularly in fear-power cultures, we are potentially doing them a grave disservice. Although to some degree unavoidable, one must be careful not to transfer one’s own spiritual poverty or inherited theological biases onto the host culture.

As with all folk Buddhists, Tibetans are in search of power (*nus pa*) and empowerment (*byin rlabs*). Griswold notes, “Buddhists, especially folk Buddhists,

In a survey of Thais who became Christians, fear of going to hell was a prominent factor in their becoming believers.

are searching for power.”²⁰ In his section on “Folk Buddhism Promises Power,” De Neui observes that

Folk Buddhism address[es] some of the heart issues of Thai people by providing them with a source of power they believe will assist them in life.²¹

Hesselgrave and Rommen suggest that “. . . contextualization involves knowledge of both a message and an audience.”²² A brief sketch of the audience has been given, but how then is one to present the gospel to folk Buddhists that speaks in a relevant way to a people with a highly developed sense of fear and power?

A Theological Framework

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Colossians 2:15, NIV)

Roland Muller suggests the missionary enterprise exists “simply for the purpose of addressing sin and the results of sin, among the peoples of the earth.”²³ While this is no doubt true, “the peoples of the earth” do not necessarily have a correct understanding of sin. Folk Buddhists are no exception; they do not view sin as wrongdoing or disobedience against a holy God. For a Tibetan, sin (*sdig pa*) or what they understand to be “negativity” or “demerit,” is unavoidable; it is something one accumulates every day, consciously or unconsciously. Indeed, one’s very existence is the result of *sdig pa* and the cruel scales of karmic retribution. Nonetheless, the atonement (how Christ’s life, death, and resurrection deals with the sin issue) does address humanity’s universal problem and is at the heart of the gospel. It is a message that can certainly be relevant to the folk Buddhist as well.

Muller and Georges, amongst others, have provided three cultural paradigms by which the atonement can be understood. Accordingly, for cultures that are predominantly guilt-innocence based, penal substitution tends to be the dominant atonement motif. Cultures that are shame-honour based may lend themselves to a “satisfaction” motif of atonement, and fear-power cultures may be more orientated to the “Christus Victor” (also known as the “ransom theory”) atonement motif.²⁴

According to Georges, the Christus Victor motif was the main atonement theory for the first thousand years of church history.²⁵ This motif, with its emphasis on the power of Jesus triumphing over Satan and his army of demons, and the defeat of both cosmic and earthly forces of evil, certainly has a strong potential appeal to the folk Buddhist.²⁶ However, while I believe it is appropriate to emphasise Jesus’ power to triumph over evil, one cannot just gloss over the sin/guilt problem. It also needs to be mentioned that Jesus, by his death and resurrection, not only defeated evil, but made it possible to clear away all of humanity’s wrongdoing. Through faith and repentance in Jesus, one can be set free from the power of sin and evil behavior, escape its deadly consequences, and be completely delivered from all demonic powers. Rather than present exclusively only one atonement motif, and even though focusing on the power aspect is relevant for folk Tibetan Buddhists, my contention would be that one can also present aspects of penal substitution. Colossians 2:13–15 sees the two quite neatly juxtaposed.

The emphasis for the folk Tibetan Buddhist, at least in initial expressions of the gospel, can be more on Jesus’ power to forgive sin and less on having

a “guilty conscience.” Following the legal motif with its images of a courtroom setting and using legal terms such as “guilty conscience” can be quite difficult to communicate in Tibetic languages and may be better left for subsequent gospel explanations.

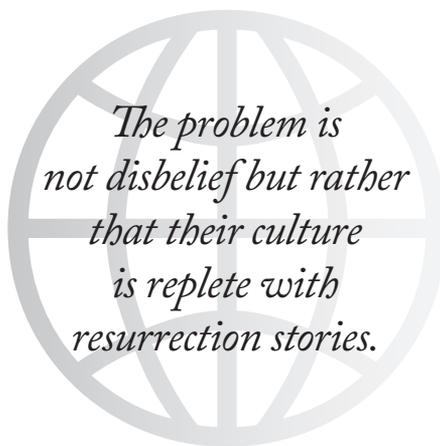
Not wanting to sound contradictory, though, I also believe it is appropriate to mention—even in initial Gospel presentations—that Jesus died in our place. Rather than God rightfully and fairly punishing us for our sins, Jesus took our punishment and by the power of his resurrection we are saved from death and hell. Although folk Buddhist cultures stress that only the individual alone can impact his or her own karmic destiny through individual merit making, it may be surprising that there are examples in folk Buddhist cultures of substitutionary acts whereby someone lays down his or her life for another. And these are always seen as honorable. In Tibetan culture, there are two well-known substitution folk tales and in Thai culture there is a famous legend of someone intentionally forfeiting his life so others could live.²⁷ My point here is that one should not make light of the forgiveness of sin just because it may not fit neatly into a particular atonement motif.

Syncretistic Concerns

Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him. (John 12:37, ESV)

Ever the pragmatists, folk Buddhists can certainly be open to syncretic practices. One must be careful not to highlight the power aspect too much. To do so would give the wrong impression that Jesus would provide all the power and miraculous healings one could possibly want. The folk Buddhist might easily be interested only in the perceived power Jesus might give him or her, and not in Jesus himself nor his salvific work on the cross. In my experience, folk Tibetan Buddhists are very willing to give anything a try, provided

it might work for them. Clear teaching should also stress that believers give their allegiance to a new power, a new authority, indeed the one true power, and that we follow and obey his ways, not our own. De Neui highlights this need for caution as he notes that responses to the gospel tend to be based on pragmatism.²⁸ He recalls a conversation with Charles Kraft where church leaders in Nigeria would still visit shamans “because things happen faster.”²⁹ On the flip side though, De Neui also cautions that many folk Buddhists can remain enslaved to spiritual powers even within the church because “issues of power have never been fully addressed.”³⁰ Clearly, a balanced approach is needed.



Other Approaches?

“Who is this man?” they asked each other. “Even the wind and waves obey him!” (Mark 4:41, NET)

Tom Steffen, in assessing the major evangelism models such as the Four Spiritual Laws, Evangelism Explosion, Any3, C2C, Chronological Bible Teaching, Chronological Bible Storying, The Romans Road, T4T, Storying the Story, found that all of them “present the gospel predominantly from an innocence/guilt frame.”³¹ Newhouse also notes that he could not find any story sets that incorporated a Christus Victor atonement motif in his search for relevancy with folk Buddhists.³² It does seem a little perplexing that alternative

models have not gained currency, especially given that Muller, Georges, and more recently Mischke have described alternative contextualized atonement motifs. That being said, many years ago I happened upon a basic gospel outline that seemed to speak to our fear-power folk Tibetan Buddhists in ways I had not imagined or planned on. I will discuss this further below.

A Practical Framework

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. (1 Corinthians 4:20, NIV)

Missionaries, especially those who are fresh out of seminary, can fall into some common pitfalls. Overly engaging in Christian apologetics is one of them. Although establishing solid evidence for faith is important, trying to “prove” the truth of the gospel through argument can be of relatively no benefit with folk Tibetan Buddhists. I remember one Easter Sunday a new worker was giving an address to a group of expatriate missionaries on the “proofs” of the resurrection. He implored us to consider that this was what our Tibetan friends needed to hear. In fact, Tibetans do not have any issues with believing in the resurrection. The problem is not disbelief but rather that their culture is replete with resurrection stories.

Apologetics may find a place when one is dialoguing with a highly educated and dedicated Buddhist practitioner, perhaps a high-level monk or lama, but he, too, will not question the miraculous elements of Christ’s life.

In my experience, I have never had one Tibetan ever express doubt over the existence of Jesus, his miracles, his death or resurrection. Folk Tibetan Buddhists readily accept these things. They are more interested to know, “What practical difference can Jesus make to my life now?”

In framing an initial evangelistic gospel presentation, I believe that four main areas need to be covered:

creation, the fall, redemption, and restoration. For the folk Buddhist with a fear-power worldview, framing these areas with a “power emphasis,” with Christ as the superior power over all, may prove to have more resonance.

The creation story would focus on God as creator and the source of all power, with Jesus as the ruler and Lord of all (Colossians 1:16–17). Humankind, being originally sinless, lived peacefully and without suffering under the rule and reign of God. People did not live in fear of death or evil spirits.

Recounting the story of the fall would focus on the fact that humankind, through disobedience to the rule of God, gave in to the power of Satan. As a result, people lived in fear of the spirit world and its domination over them. This led to all people living under the power of sin and Satan, and universal suffering entered the world.

The redemption aspect would focus on Christ’s defeat of the power of Satan and the power of sin and death. In so doing, he sets people free from Satan’s power, control, and from the power of sin in

Framing creation, the fall, redemption, and restoration with a “power emphasis” may prove to have more resonance with the folk Buddhist.

our lives (Colossians 2:13–15). Through repentance and faith in Jesus, sin can be swept away, and by allegiance only to Jesus, one can be set free from the power of demons and one’s own evil behavior. This section could be developed further through selective narrative passages as outlined below in the section entitled “Using Power Passages from Mark.”

The restoration story would focus on becoming part of God’s kingdom, living under his rule and authority, just as God originally intended (Romans 14:17). Being set free from the powers of darkness, one now has the power to live a life pleasing to God and beneficial to others (2 Peter 1:3).

Using Power Passages from Mark

... so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. (Mark 2:10, NET)

Some years ago, our team began drafting a translation of a small tract called *Jesus Christ Has Power to Save Us*,³³ based on passages from the Gospel of Mark. In some ways I felt the passages were a little random and out of context for our audience. My concerns at that time were of a linguistic nature and I was not primarily thinking of the predominant cultural worldview and whether I was directly addressing it. It just so happened that the title of this tract, and the subsequent stories in each section, resonated strongly with our audience. In fact, the small tract has remained one of the most enduring resources our team has produced.

What follows (as shown in Table 1 below) is not the result of careful planning or strategy. It was simply baby steps in our translation project that serendipitously (or perhaps, more accurately, providentially) engaged our audience in ways I had not anticipated.

Table 1. Jesus Christ Has Power to Save Us: Passages from Mark which May Resonate with Folk Buddhists

<i>Bible Passage</i>	<i>Key Story</i>	<i>Key Focus</i>
Mark 1:14–15	Jesus Brings Good News	Jesus is king of God’s powerful kingdom
Mark 1:21–28	Jesus Has Power to Drive Out Evil Spirits	power over demonic forces
Mark 1:32–34	Jesus Has Power to Heal All Diseases	power over sickness
Mark 2:1–12	Jesus Has Power to Forgive Sins	power to forgive all evil behaviour
Mark 4:35–41	Jesus Has Power to Calm the Storm	power over nature
Mark 5:21–24, 35–42	Jesus Has Power to Raise the Dead	power over death
Mark 7:14–15, 17–23	Jesus Speaks about Evil in People’s Hearts	power of evil
Mark 9:2–8	Jesus is God’s Son	powerful Son of God
Mark 14:10–11, 44–46	Jesus Betrayed	given over to evil
Mark 15:6–15	Jesus Sentenced to Death	given over to human power
Mark 15:25–26, 33–39	Jesus Crucified	subject to the power of death
Mark 15:42–46	Jesus’ Body Put in a Tomb	subject to the power of death
Mark 16:1–7	Jesus Is Alive	power over death
Mark 16:15–16, 19–20	Good News for Everyone	Jesus empowers all his followers

Conclusion

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. (Romans 1:16, NIV)

Presenting the gospel to folk Tibetan Buddhists, and perhaps to folk Buddhists wherever they may be found, with an empathetic approach to their fear-power concerns may result in the gospel penetrating their hearts more deeply. Although much more could be said about the worldview of folk Buddhists and how to deal with the obstacles of karma and merit-making, what has been presented here is only one small attempt at a more contextualized approach for initial engagement.

The gospel is God's power to save people from darkness, deliver them from fear and demonic oppression, and empower them to live transformed lives under a new allegiance to the most high and powerful God. A transformed life is a real and relevant "power encounter" for the practically minded folk Buddhist.

After being unable to contact her for a few months, I rang Drolma last week. She was eager to tell me that her two brothers had not drunk any alcohol for six weeks and that her father had also reduced the amount he was drinking. Naturally, she was overjoyed. When I told her that I had been praying for her and her family, she burst into tears saying, "Thank you. Thank you so much for praying. God has the power to do these things." **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Marku Tsering, *Sharing Christ with Tibetan Folk Buddhists* (Chiang Mai: Central Asian Fellowship, 2006), 85.

² Alex Smith, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes* (Overseas Missionary Fellowship (USA) Inc. 2001), 27–28.

³ "Folk Tibetan Buddhist" here is used as a more generic category; a fuller understanding of the term is that it refers to a synthesis of shamanism, animism and tantric (Vajrayana) Buddhism imported from India.

⁴ There are three main Tibetan people groups—Central, Kham and Amdo. These designations are a simplification of the ethnic and linguistic groupings of Tibetan peoples but will suffice for the purposes here. Though this paper will focus on Central Tibetans, much of what is discussed could also be applied to the other groupings.

⁵ Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2012), 35.

⁶ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 19.

⁷ Paul Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, July (1987): 104–111.

⁸ I find the search for "relevancy" can sometimes lead to a watered-down version of the gospel that loses its cutting edge. In Acts 14 (Paul's address to the Laconians) Flemming notes that though Paul did address the felt needs of his audience by weaving "his listeners' life experiences into the larger story of God as revealed in the Scriptures," Paul "refuses to dilute the substance of the gospel and its call for repentance and transformation." (Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament*, 71). In Acts 14:15. Paul implores his listeners to, "Turn from these worthless things to the living God."—not exactly what one might call a "seeker friendly" approach.

⁹ Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, 31.

¹⁰ Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, 61.

¹¹ Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, 61.

¹² Smith, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes*, 23.

¹³ Smith, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes*, 28.

¹⁴ Smith, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes*, 28.

¹⁵ Paul De Neui, "Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists" retrieved from: <http://www.thaicrc.com/collect/MIS/index/assoc/D4113.dir/4113.pdf> (2002), 29.

¹⁶ Tsering, *Sharing Christ*, 55–57; David Lim, Steve Spaulding and Paul De Neui, eds. *Sharing Jesus Effectively in the Buddhist World* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 246.

¹⁷ Peter Thein Nyunt, "Christian Response to Burmese Nat Worship in Myanmar," in *Seeking the Unseen: Spiritual*

Realities in the Buddhist World, ed. Paul De Neui (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2016), 258.

¹⁸ Tsering, *Sharing Christ*, 86.

¹⁹ Alex Smith, "Missiological Implications of Key Contrasts Between Buddhism and Christianity," in *Sharing Jesus in the Buddhist World*, eds. John Lim and Steve Spaulding (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2003), 31–56. Also (Work in Progress, 2013) retrieved from: <http://www.thaicrc.com/gsd/collect/MIS/index/assoc/D5643.dir/5643.pdf>.

²⁰ Scott Griswold, "Sharing Jesus with Buddhists," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Art. 8 (2014): 12.

²¹ De Neui, "Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists," 11.

²² David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 128.

²³ Roland Muller, *Honor & Shame: Unlocking the Door* (USA: Xlibris Corp, 2000), 15.

²⁴ Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* (Timē Press, 2014), 50–51.

²⁵ Georges, *The 3D Gospel*, 50.

²⁶ See also Thomas Newhouse, "The Christ Victor Atonement Motif Applied to Evangelism among Folk Buddhists in Mainland Southeast Asia," Master's thesis, Wheaton Graduate School, (2012). Newhouse makes a strong case for the Christ Victor motif but is also balanced enough not to dismiss penal substitution as having no relevance. He suggests presenting both motifs.

²⁷ Smith, *Buddhism Through Christian Eyes*, 26; Griswold, "Sharing Jesus with Buddhists," 102.

²⁸ De Neui, "Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists," 6.

²⁹ De Neui, "Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists," 6, footnote 13.

³⁰ De Neui, "Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists," 22.

³¹ Tom Steffen, "Minimizing cross-cultural evangelism noise," *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. 43 (4), (2015): 415.

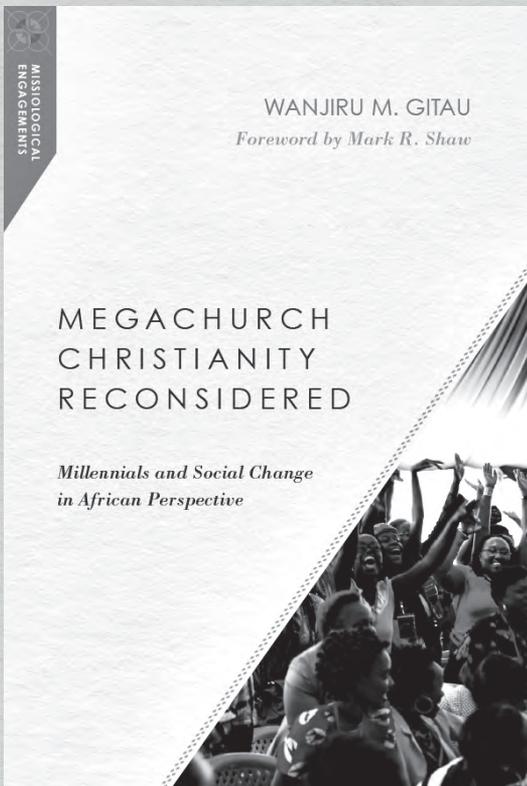
³² Newhouse, "The Christ Victor Atonement Motif Applied to Evangelism among Folk Buddhists in Mainland Southeast Asia," 28.

³³ Our tract was based on the tract from Scripture Gift Mission (SGM) originally called, *Jesus has Power to Save*.

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MISSIOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENTS FROM IVP ACADEMIC



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MORE VOLUMES



Loaded Language: Missiological Considerations for Appropriating Political Rhetoric

by Alan Howell and Jessica Markwood

A few years ago, I (Alan) was preaching at a Makua-Metto church in rural Mozambique. The topic was how God can radically transform lives and as an illustration I used the story of Jesus' encounter with a man possessed by a host of demons (Mark 5:1–20). Because demon possession is such a common phenomenon in this context, our Mozambican friends readily identified with this story. After emphasizing the way this man's life was powerfully changed by Christ, I switched from speaking the Makua-Metto language to Portuguese, Mozambique's national language, to proclaim Jesus as the *Força da Mudança* (the Force of Change). While some church members seemed to miss this reference, I noticed other people sitting up a little straighter as knowing smiles appeared on a few faces in the small crowd. I had borrowed the slogan from Mozambique's governing political party and applied it to Jesus of Nazareth. Was it helpful to use such potentially loaded language? Was it wise to use political rhetoric in cross-cultural Christian discourse in that way?

In our training, we (Jessica and Alan) were taught the importance not only of learning the local language, but also of taking advantage of powerful phrases or concepts for use in our communication. We learned that this is part of "taking every thought captive to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). Hijacking words, concepts, or phrases from normal life that are loaded with meaning is an important part of effective Christian discourse. But what about borrowing language loaded with political meaning? There are certainly risks involved in using that type of speech, especially when speaking as a guest in the culture. How should cross-cultural workers use this type of rhetoric? What principles should be used for navigating this sensitive issue?

In this article, we will look first at the Apostle Paul's usage of politically charged rhetoric¹ in his missionary communication to churches in Macedonia (Thessalonica and Philippi). We will explore his appropriation of theo-political language to call people to life in the Kingdom of God.² Then we will turn to our ministry context in northern Mozambique and share the input

Alan Howell, his wife Rachel, and their three daughters resided in Mozambique from 2003 to 2018 as part of a team serving among the Makua-Metto people. Alan has a MDiv from Harding School of Theology.

Jessica Markwood served with the Makua-Metto team in Mozambique from 2016 to 2018 and is currently pursuing a Masters of Intercultural Studies and International Development at Fuller Theological Seminary.

gathered from interviews with local church leaders. That research has shaped the missiological considerations and principles we've outlined at the end of this paper—how modern day cross-cultural Christian communicators can wisely appropriate political rhetoric.

Paul's Use of Theo-Political Language with Macedonian Churches

As Augustus rose to power and inaugurated the era of *Pax Romana*, Roman emperors encouraged loyalty of their subjects by promising protection and threatening destruction. Allegiance was shown through worship, not merely through submissiveness to the administration. By the time of Jesus' birth, emperor deification was commonplace.³ The reign of Augustus, which ushered in a new age of alleged stability, also cemented this practice throughout Rome. The many copies of the Priene Calendar Inscription declare Rome's hero as

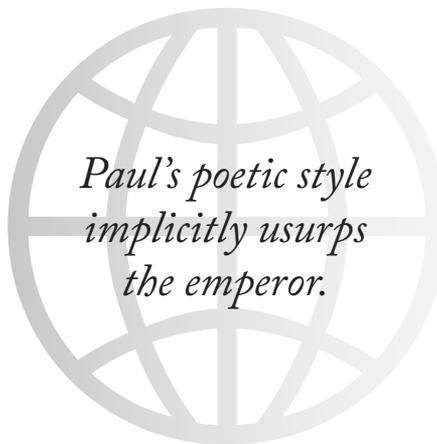
... Savior who has ended war, setting things right in peace, and since Caesar when revealed surpassed the hopes of all who had anticipated the good news [*euangelia*], not only going beyond the benefits of those who had preceded him, but rather leaving no hope of surpassing him for those who will come, because of him the birthday of God began good news [*euangelia*] for the world.⁴

The deceased emperors who followed were declared *divus* (divine) and their decedents *divus filius* (son of divine), so that the royal lineage would be sacred, one that maintained the peace, security, and dominion of Rome forever.⁵

By the time the New Testament texts were written, the imperial *cultus* had infiltrated society far beyond religious spheres. It had reached the point that no community network was disconnected from the divine arm of the emperor.⁶ This was the milieu into which Paul brought a new *euangelion*. While Paul never calls Christians to arms, his theo-political language calls Christian

communities to de-center Rome in favor of Lord Jesus. For Paul, the good news of the coming Lord had socio-political implications in the present, with each advance of the eternal reign of Christ insinuating the inferiority of Rome and other worldly powers. This tension is particularly seen in Paul's letters to two Roman strongholds in Macedonia: Philippi and Thessalonica.

The Roman colony of Philippi was inhabited primarily by Roman citizens living under Roman law.⁷ Luke's account in Acts 16 implies that they adhered to Rome's religious expectations; he records that Philippian residents charged Paul and Silas with "advocating customs that are not



lawful for us" (v. 21). Paul's acts of power in the name of Jesus warranted beating and imprisonment—violations of their rights as Roman citizens (vv. 22–24, 37). It is to the church in this context that Paul writes regarding a new citizenship.

Paul begins his letter by encouraging the church to *politeuomai* (1:27–30), to participate as a citizen of a free state.⁸ He calls these Romans to be worthy of the citizenship of a new kingdom and to take on the difficult obligations of their new community.⁹ They must fight together for faith in the *euangelion* of Jesus, because true salvation comes from God. But Paul was not calling for a holy war which would imitate imperial

seizures of power by force. Instead, he advocated a far more demeaning, humiliating route. He exhorted them to follow in the path of their new lord—the path of selfless service and suffering.

In chapter two of Philippians, Paul pays homage to his lord with the inclusion of a piece of poetic prose, which perhaps followed the hymn format often used to venerate leaders in Hellenistic and Roman periods.¹⁰ Though there is no certainty as to this passage's genre, Paul's poetic style implicitly usurps the emperor, filling the passage with royal accolades to remind his audience that Jesus, the lowly crucified servant, is Lord (*kyrios*) over all.¹¹

The cross was the instrument that Rome utilized to "terrorize subjected peoples into submission to imperial rule" and deter slaves and political opponents from rebelling against the state.¹² Josephus calls this method of execution "the most unwanted of deaths," not only because of its physical, agonizing torture, but because of the grave dishonor associated with enduring death "in the form of a slave."¹³ Yet, this is exactly the path that Paul upholds for citizens of the new kingdom. Elliott and Reasoner note,

For Paul to have proclaimed as a deliverer one who had been subjected to so humiliating and debasing a death... was on its face both scandalous and incomprehensible.¹⁴

Yet this very scandal and shame is what God "has highly exalted." Before this wounded servant, "every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (2:9–11)—even the emperor. A new kingdom had arisen and had begun to conquer through the cross—Rome's most despised instrument of oppression. Rome's greatest fear—a slave rebellion—had already begun in Jesus the crucified Lord.

Paul closes the body of his letter with a second invitation to take up citizenship in this universal kingdom. He

calls on the Philippians not to be distracted by “enemies of the cross of Christ,” whose “end is destruction,” but rather to remember that the Philippian church is among the colonies of heaven, “and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,” who will “subject all things to himself” (3:18–21). The imperial gods and their fear-based power mongering were fading away. The crucified Lord with his revolutionary community would be taking power forever.

The Thessalonian church emerged in a situation similar to Philippi, in a city loyal to the imperial administration, but free from direct colonial rule. As the capital of Macedonia and host of Olympic and Pythian games, Thessalonica was entrenched in the imperial cult.¹⁵ Cult propaganda was ubiquitous by the mid-first century BCE. The Thessalonian aristocracy frequently engraved their coins and monuments with images of “saviors” and liberators, reminding citizens of the imperial benefactors who had brought them peace and security.¹⁶

“Peace” and “security” were buzzwords of the empire, signatures of Rome’s blessings to a helpless people. Pompey, an early military leader, brought “peace and security” to the land after his military victory over Troy.¹⁷ It was asserted that Augustus’ *Pax Romana* had ended war and inaugurated an era of peace.¹⁸ Monuments declared him the securer of peace, his face often engraved alongside images of a sword-wielding goddess Pax with the inscription CAESAR DIVI F(ILIIUS) meaning Caesar, Son of a God.¹⁹ Depictions of Tiberius were also engraved alongside those of Pax holding an olive branch and a scepter, which symbolized the peace achieved through Roman military might.²⁰ Even Nero’s inscriptions proclaimed “universal peace.”²¹ Caligula’s numismatic legacy is associated with the goddess Securitas, or Security, and was passed on in the currency used during the reign of Nero and his successors.²²

Paul’s rhetoric about a new rule, a transcendent empire of love and service, was powerful enough to warrant his death by a “peaceful” Empire.

Paul’s conviction that salvation, peace, and security could be found in Jesus stood in direct opposition to what most Thessalonians believed would maintain their economic and social stability. Acts 17 records an angry mob attacking community members because their compliance with Paul’s teachings had “turned the world upside down” by “acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus” (vv. 6–8). Paul struck a nerve in the city by revealing that the façade of peace they knew was not so secure.

This new order was being brought by a different divine Son and a different Lord. Paul called on the Thessalonians to be subversive, to turn away from idols to serve the true liberator (1 Thess. 1:9–10). They were in need of deliverance from the current social conflict and the wrath to come, a reality not in line with Rome’s promised peace and security (1 Thess. 2:2). Paul urged the church to live quietly and “walk properly before outsiders” so that the Christian community might be a testimony to the *euangelion* of Christ (1 Thess. 4:11–12).

Paul critiqued the imperial image: “While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them . . .” (1 Thess. 5:3–4). Peace and security would not come to those whose faith is in the militant empire. Instead, those who wore “the breastplate of faith and love” and “a helmet [of] the hope of salvation” obtained “through our Lord Jesus Christ” would be those who would dwell in safety (1 Thess. 5:8–10). For Paul, it was not brute force and economic stimulus that would bring stability and warrant loyalty. Instead Paul invited the Thessalonians into a different community of Spirit-led diligence, encouragement,

rejoicing, prayer, thankfulness, and truth, constructed by “the God of peace,” until “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:12–23). Paul did not put his trust in the violent kingdom of Rome, but a loving community eternally led by the Lord Jesus.

Throughout Paul’s communication with the churches in Macedonia, political language is inherently theological language. To claim the true good news that Jesus is Lord is to defy the Empire’s claim on absolute authority. To proclaim that a crucified slave will be exalted over all powers is an insult to imperial rule. To teach that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God who brings salvific peace and security is loaded language, and blasphemous to the Roman gods. Paul never called for a militant rebellion against Rome, but instead encouraged Christians to be harmonious citizens. Even so, his rhetoric about a new rule, a transcendent empire of love and service, was powerful—powerful enough to warrant his death at the hands of the “peaceful” Empire. Paul’s vision of peace was not maintained by the violence of Rome, but by the love of the Crucified Jesus who called all Roman subjects into a community of true peace and security.

Appropriate Use of Theological language with Mozambican Churches

Mozambique has experienced great suffering, conflict, and political violence. After almost five centuries of Portuguese colonial rule, the nation achieved autonomy in 1975 following the war of independence, only to be launched into a protracted struggle to consolidate national power. The province of Cabo Delgado, where most of the Makua-Metto people are located, is one of the country’s more

complicated political regions. Along with the neighboring province of Niassa, Cabo Delgado “suffered the worst excesses of the Portuguese military onslaught,”²³ hosted most of the country’s re-education camps,²⁴ and was the location of the government’s highest concentration of communist experiments.²⁵ National conflict erupted between military forces and continued until, in the 1990s, they were reformed into Mozambique’s opposing political parties. More recently, in northeast Cabo Delgado, an ongoing local conflict arose, and has been attributed to Islamic-related acts of terrorism. This is the complicated milieu in which the Makua-Metto church is situated.

As cross-cultural missionaries, how do we follow the Apostle Paul’s example? Should we even consider using well-known (politicized) rhetoric in the task of reconciliation in our already politically-charged context?²⁶ To discern how to do that effectively, we began by asking questions and by listening to believers in the churches of Cabo Delgado. We started our interviews by summarizing Paul’s use of Roman Imperial rhetoric. The challenge of using politically loaded language today was illustrated by telling the story of the sermon on Mark 5 (referred to earlier). We went through a list of politically loaded phrases or terms collected from slogans, signs, speeches, and written histories of Mozambique, and asked whether or not they would feel comfortable using these phrases in sermons. Additionally, we discussed the extra difficulties when these politically-loaded terms might be used by foreigners. After conducting qualitative interviews on appropriating political rhetoric in Christian communication and triangulating the principles gleaned from the data in small groups,²⁷ we found that church leaders were only willing to use this type of discourse when certain conditions were met.

Participants typically evaluated the usefulness of politically loaded phrases over against the risk of misunderstanding. One interviewee referenced Paul’s statement, “everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial” (1 Cor. 10:23), to say that the ability to use political rhetoric does not imply that it would necessarily be advantageous. After collating the interviewees’ responses, we found that their counsel for ensuring the effectiveness of appropriating political rhetoric today meant cultivating an awareness of three different contexts:

First, one needs to consider the context of the phrase within the speaker’s discourse or sermon. As one pastor noted, “to the political, all things are political.”



Since it is easy for some people to misunderstand the speaker’s intent, one suggested strategy was to always link the political reference to a biblical text in the sermon. Interviewees noted in various ways that there is a need for caution and, while there is only so much one can do to avoid misunderstandings, clearly connecting what you are saying to Scripture provides a direct defense in case people question the speaker’s intent. One pastor suggested stating, “I’m using this phrase in a different sense or a spiritual sense” or following Jesus’ formula from the Sermon on the Mount: “you have heard it said . . . , but I tell you . . .” Four of the interviewees observed that saying positive things about the current condition of Mozambique

earlier in the sermon could provide the cover for safely appropriating political rhetoric later in the discourse.

Second, interviewees suggested considering the congregational context. As Jesus’ original disciples included both zealots and tax collectors, Mozambican church leaders believed that his followers today should reflect political diversity as well. One church leader noted the importance of respecting the full political spectrum within a local congregation as there may be a variety of political perspectives represented. To use a phrase or slogan from one group may imply support for that party and make others feel isolated or slighted.

Third, Christian communicators should consider the local context. Church leaders need to be aware of non-members in hearing distance and how they could perceive the message, as well as the political dynamics in that particular community. While participants affirmed that political rhetoric should be used in a way that concentrates on addressing church-related matters and being a disciple of Jesus, only one church leader was willing to use this rhetoric as an open critique of the ruling powers. When I asked if Christian communicators should be “equal opportunity,” and borrow rhetoric from the minority political parties as well, the interviewees felt that it was too risky because it could be seen as elevating the status of their rhetoric to be on par with the rhetoric of the dominant party.

Phrases approved by all ten interviewees under the right circumstances:

1. *Nova família* (new family) was used by the government to refer to a redenomination of the currency in 2006. Interviewees agreed that this phrase can be appropriated because it was national rhetoric and not affiliated with a specific political party.
2. *Unidos na luta contra a pobreza* (united in the fight against poverty) can be appropriately

changed to, *unidos na luta contra o pecado, Satanás, morte, etc.* (united in the fight against sin, Satan, and death, etc.).

3. *Homem novo* (new man) was a key theme in the political discourse of the first President of independent Mozambique, Samora Machel,²⁸ and was deemed appropriate since this language fits well with passages like Ephesians 4:26.
4. *Pensamento único* (single thought)

Other phrases/terms were approved by all but one or two of the interviewees under the right circumstances:

1. *A Força da Mudança* (Force of Change)
2. *FRELIMO é que fez, FRELIMO é que faz* (FRELIMO is the one that did it, FRELIMO is the one that will do it), is a slogan from FRELIMO, the governing political party, that can accurately refer to God.
3. *A luta continua* (the battle continues) can be used or adjusted to *a festa continua* (the party continues)
4. *Camarada* (comrade)
5. *Assimilado* (assimilated) was a colonial-era term to refer to Africans with the same status as the Portuguese and could be appropriately adapted to talk about a transfer of allegiance to the kingdom of God.
6. *Congresso do partido* (party meeting) can be changed to *Congresso do Céu* (meeting of heaven) to refer to a gathering of members of different groups because it does not address the content of the meetings.
7. *Abaixo . . .* (Down with . . .)
8. *Viva . . .* (Long live . . .)
9. *Venceremos!* (We shall overcome!)

One phrase was rejected under all circumstances by all ten interviewees:

1. *A linha política do partido* (the political line of the party) is not useful because it is not adaptable.

That which was true in first century Macedonia remains true in Mozambique today: the choice to live by faith is an inherently political decision.

One pastor interviewed was extremely hesitant about using loaded language because “Christians need to be careful in this political climate.” This leader said that appropriating political rhetoric could be useful in working with mature believers, but one must be extra cautious with new believers and new church communities. He argued for “saying what Paul said” in his context, but was not in favor of “doing what Paul did” in today’s Mozambican context. When we dialogued about this, he asserted that it is “not the right time to appropriate political rhetoric” in Cabo Delgado, and that according to church history Paul was jailed and beheaded, so if we use his methods we need to be prepared to suffer the same consequences. All the other interviewees, though, were much more willing to borrow political rhetoric for use in Christian communication.

When I asked about additional considerations for intercultural missionaries serving in Cabo Delgado, some interviewees mentioned the way our mission team typically teaches in the Makua-Metto language, while Portuguese is the language of political rhetoric. They suggested that might give us some flexibility in the way these terms are heard and processed by a Mozambican audience. They affirmed the need for foreigners to be courteous and respectful in these matters since we are guests. Our mission team has suffered from lies and misinformation by others who used political suspicion to cause problems for us, so most of the interviewees reaffirmed the need to do due diligence to avoid misunderstandings. In one interview we talked about how language is not static, with connotations ebbing and flowing over

time, so a meaning in one season may be different than another.

Conclusion

What was true in first century Macedonia remains true in twenty-first century Mozambique: the choice to live by faith is an inherently political decision. From the time of Jesus’ birth, his kingdom caused a disturbance among the powers, and still today God calls communities to an ethic that supersedes any political party agenda. Yet Christians are simultaneously called to live harmoniously and lovingly, seasoning their powerful claims with salt. Paul’s rhetoric is marked by direct and indirect theo-political language, but the advice from Mozambican colleagues and friends echoes Jesus’ instruction to be “wise as serpents and as innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). Many interviewees echoed sentiments that loaded language could be helpful, but it could also be foolish. From a missiological perspective, teachers must be discerning in appropriating political rhetoric, remembering both the importance of proclaiming the new kingdom, and the fates of Jesus, Paul and others. Our research revealed that using theo-political language can make communication more robust and effective as long as it is done respectfully and responsibly. The interviewees’ counsel on missiological considerations and principles makes it clear that intercultural missionaries should be aware of their contexts (at the discourse, congregational, and local levels) to make wise use of loaded language. The *missio Dei* is radically political, but that is not its end. Radical reconciliation is the greater goal, creating a new community united under the leadership of a humble king who rules in love. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ For a helpful introduction to the debate surrounding the impact of political discourse on the New Testament and whether it was specifically aimed at countering imperial powers or merely using the best language available at the time see Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, eds., *Jesus is Lord, Caesar is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

² The proper “term for the Jewish and Greco-Roman language that Paul uses is theo-political—that which is inextricably both religious (theological) and political.” Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 352.

³ Earliest reports of deification of a living person in the Western world originate in the fifth-century BCE when Spartan general Lysander was blessed with divine honors upon his triumphant return to Samos. This was a commonly accepted practice by the time of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE), who was often worshiped by those whom he overtook. This grassroots movement of imperial deification spread from the eastern provinces toward Rome as local peoples began to place their faith in human leaders as well as traditional gods. See Nicholas Perrin, “The Imperial Cult,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 124–134.

⁴ Neil Elliott and Mark Reasoner, *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 35.

⁵ Lawrence Keppie, *Understanding Roman Inscriptions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 43.

⁶ Judy Diehl, “Empire and Epistles: Anti-Roman Rhetoric in the New Testament Epistles,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 10, no. 2 (2012): 223.

⁷ Diehl, “Empire and Epistles,” 245.

⁸ Bruno Blumenfeld, *The Political Paul: Democracy and Kingship in Paul’s Thought* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 296.

⁹ Blumenfeld, *The Political Paul*, 295.

¹⁰ “In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, prose hymns to deities became more and more important and the responsibility for composing them was assigned to those possessing the office or honorary position of *theologos*. . . . A decade or two before Paul wrote to the Philippians, the imperial cult in a city of Asia Minor included the services

of a *sebastologos*, one who composed prose hymns in honor of the emperor. Later on, the term *theologos* was used for such officials in the imperial cults in Pergamon, Ephesus, and Smyrna. Since Paul spent an extended period of time in Ephesus, it is likely that he was familiar with the writing of prose hymns or encomia in honor of the emperor. The Philippians were probably familiar with the practice as well.” Adela Yarbro Collins, “Psalms, Philippians 2:6–11, and the Origins of Christology,” *Biblical Interpretation* 11, no. 3 (2002): 371.

¹¹ Diehl, “Empire and Epistles,” 246. It is at this time impossible to know with certainty that Paul is referencing or has written a hymn. For more on this issue see these recent studies: Michael Wade Martin and Bryan A. Nash, “Philippians 2:6–11 as Subversive *Hymnos*: A Study in Light of Ancient Rhetorical Theory,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 66.1 (2015): 90–138; and Ben Edsall and Jennifer Strawbridge, “The Songs We Used to Sing? Hymn ‘Traditions’ and Reception in Pauline Letters,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 37.3 (2015): 290–311.

¹² Diehl, “Empire and Epistles,” 223; Elliott & Reasoner, *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul*, 102.

¹³ Flavius Josephus and Henry St. John Thackeray, *The Jewish War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 7:203; Elliott & Reasoner, *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul*, 103.

¹⁴ Elliott & Reasoner, *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul*, 103.

¹⁵ Diehl, “Empire and Epistles,” 250.

¹⁶ Metellus, C. Servilius Caepio, Antony, Julius, and Augustus were all declared saviors and bringers of “liberation” on monuments and currency prevalent in Thessalonica. Abraham Smith, “Unmasking the Powers,” in *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004), 57.

¹⁷ Jeffrey A. D. Weima, “Peace and Security’ (1 Thess. 5:3): Prophetic Warning or Political Propaganda?” in *New Testament Studies* 58 (2012): 341.

¹⁸ Elliott & Reasoner, *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul*, 35.

¹⁹ Weima, “Peace and Security,” 334.

²⁰ Weima, “Peace and Security,” 336.

²¹ Weima, “Peace and Security,” 339.

²² Weima, “Peace and Security,” 340.

²³ Sarah LeFanu, *S is for Samora: A Lexical Biography of Samora Machel and the Mozambican Dream* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 172.

²⁴ LeFanu, *S is for Samora*, 220–221. These also ended up being camps where people were sent for punishment.

²⁵ LeFanu, *S is for Samora*, 6.

²⁶ For more on conflict and reconciliation at the civic level in Mozambique relating to the social context of Paul’s ministry, see Alan Howell, “Romans, Reconciliation, and Role-playing in Mozambique: Benefiting from the ‘New Perspectives on Paul’” *Missio Dei: A Journal of Missional Theology and Practice* 9, no. 1 (Winter–Spring 2018).

²⁷ I (Alan) did long interviews (30–45 minutes) with ten church leaders and then discussed these findings with small groups or classes (over 50 participants total).

²⁸ LeFanu, *S is for Samora*, 85.

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From Banerjee to Bediako: Theology of Religions as a Resource for Local Theology

by Donald Grigorenko

The impetus for this study came while teaching a course in global theology during which we read African theologian Kwame Bediako's collection of essays, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*.¹ In some of his essays, I encountered language touching on the relationship of Christianity and African primal religions reminiscent of the words I had seen in the writings of an earlier Indian counterpart: Indian theologian Krishna Mohan Banerjee (alternative spelling, Banerjea) of the nineteenth century, writing on the relationship of Christianity and Hinduism. Consequently, I decided to revisit the issue of the relationship of Christianity to other religious worlds by comparing Bediako with Banerjee. I plan to briefly describe the contribution of Krishna Mohan Banerjee and then go on to describe what I have found in Bediako's essays. Finally, I will conclude with a set of propositions and questions drawn from a consideration of these two which suggest a role for theology of religions in theological construction.

Krishna Mohan Banerjee

Krishna Mohan Banerjee (1813–1885) was an important early proponent of what became known as the “fulfillment theory.”² He was born a Brahmin in Bengal India and educated at Hindu College. He converted to Christianity at the age of eighteen under the influence of Alexander Duff, studied theology at Bishop's College in Calcutta, and then became the first Indian priest in the Anglican Church. He was a man of energy and intellect. He labored as a theologian and apologist for the faith as well as a religious, social and political reformer.

T. V. Phillip remarks that during the nineteenth century India

was the occasion and context for the publication of a large number of Christian apologetic writings, both by western renaissance and by Indian Christians. The apologies thus produced by the Indian Christians marked the beginning of indigenous theological thinking among Protestants in India. Krishna Mohan was the most outstanding of the apologists of this period.³

Protestant missionary approaches to Hinduism at the time were polemical. Duff, who influenced Banerjee toward Christianity, reflected the common

Donald Grigorenko has taught theology and intercultural studies in the School of Biblical and Theological Studies at Cedarville University since 2001. Prior to that he and his wife served in South Asia for close to a decade. He did his doctoral work at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and his major interests are in the development of non-Western theologies, cultural research and missionary training.

attitude toward Hinduism describing it as “a waste and moral wilderness, where all life dies and death lives.”⁴

The perceived missionary task was to wipe the religious slate clean of idolatry and superstition and rebuild with fresh “Christian” material. Contrary to this approach, Banerjee, in his later writings, argued for continuity between ancient Vedic Hinduism and Christianity. Christian material was needed, but the slate need not be wiped clean.

In his book *The Relation between Christianity and Hinduism* (first published in 1913), Banerjee sought to establish two propositions. The first is that,

the fundamental principles of Christian doctrine in relation to the salvation of the world find a remarkable counterpart in the Vedic principle of primitive Hinduism in relation to the destruction of sin, and the redemption of the sinner by the efficacy of Sacrifice, itself a figure of *Prajapati*, the Lord and Saviour of the Creation, who had given himself up as an offering for that purpose. (Emphasis mine)

The second proposition is

that the meaning *Prajapati*, an appellative variously described as a *Purusha* begotten in the beginning, as *Viswakarma* the creator of all, singularly coincides with the meaning of the name and offices of the historical reality Jesus Christ, and that no other person than Jesus of Nazareth has ever appeared in the world claiming the character and position of the self-sacrificing *Prajapati*, at the same time both mortal and immortal.⁵

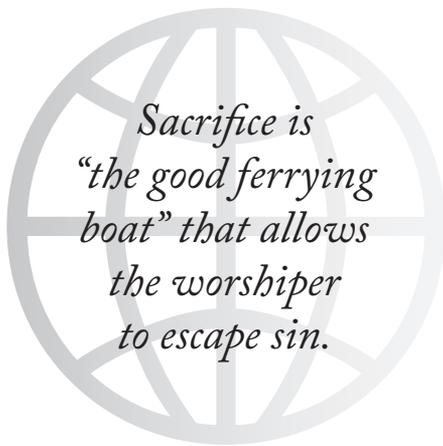
After defining Hinduism in its original form as a religion of the Vedas,⁶ he sought to establish his first proposition. He began by arguing for a theistic creator from causality. He wrote, “The visible universe leads to the conviction of an invisible cause of all things.”⁷ Thus, in Thomistic fashion, he concluded, “There must be a Creator who made all these things and adapted them to their specific ends.”⁸ Coming to the Vedic texts, Banerjee did not simply declare

that ancient Hinduism presented a biblical theism but rather he found that those ancient texts declare

the existence of one unborn or eternal Being as different from and superior to *Devas* and *Asuras*, and far above heaven and earth.⁹

His theological anthropology then followed with the observation that human nature is grounded in the dependence of humanity upon the Creator which accounts for religion.¹⁰ Thus humanity is created or adapted to the specific end: God.

Banerjee’s concern was principally on connections between a biblical presentation of Jesus and the Vedic presentations of the catastrophe of human sin and the



remedy of a sacrifice offered by a unique savior. He began the discussion of his Christology at the point of sacrifice.

Sacrifice (*yajna*) in primitive Vedic tradition is “the first and primary” rite which is attributed to “Creation’s Lord.”¹¹ Sacrificial rites were instituted by the Creator and part of the original creation. It is sacrifice that allows the penitent to break away from the debilitating effects of sin. The Rig Veda presents the worship of and sacrifice to *Varuna* the Supreme Being as a “ship that bears us safely, whereby we may pass over all misfortune.”¹² Sacrifice is the ship or, in other translations “the good ferrying boat,” that allows the worshiper to escape sin and be transported to a heavenly

world of salvation.¹³ So Banerjee argues a properly done sacrifice brings the annulment of sin for humanity and the *Devas*, who are regarded as originally mortal humans but who later populated the Hindu pantheon of deities.

The belief in the efficacy of sacrifice for sin is nothing unique in the world of religions. What was of particular interest to Banerjee was the importance given to the self-sacrifice of *Prajapati*, the One Lord of Creation, in the form of *Purusha*, the cosmic man or being from which humanity and all materiality come. It is this sacrifice of the One that was reenacted in animal sacrifices (of the horse in particular) for the sins of the *Devas* and humanity in primitive Vedic descriptions.¹⁴ Thus, *Purusha*, regarded as a Divine-human person, died as a ransom for sin. Banerjee quotes the Veda saying, “Because all were devoted to destruction, therefore one died for all.”¹⁵

Banerjee then moves to establish his second principle which identifies the *Prajapati*, the self-sacrificing *Purusha* with Jesus of the Bible. He says,

all that has just been shown appertaining the self-sacrifice of *Prajapati* curiously resembles the Biblical description of Christ as God and man, our very Emmanuel, mortal and immortal, who “hath given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savior,” of whom all previous sacrifices were but figures and reflections.¹⁶

Jesus is the true *Prajapati*. Jesus alone fulfills the primitive Vedic ideal of a divine-human sacrifice for sin; one who is both priest and victim. Consequently, no one can be a true Hindu without being a true Christian.

Of interest to us is how Banerjee described the continuity between primitive Vedic religion and Christianity. He said, these teachings about the self-sacrificing *Prajapati* which

appeared in our Vedas amid much rubbish, and things worse than rubbish, may be viewed as fragments of diamonds sparkling amid dust and

mud, testifying to some invisible fabric of which they were component parts, and bearing witness like planets over a dark horizon to the absent sun of which their refulgence was but a feeble reflection.¹⁷

For Banerjee, “The Vedas foreshew the Epiphany of Christ,”¹⁸ imperfectly, and mixed with much confusion and ambiguity, but nevertheless Christ is present. Thus, the Vedas contain primitive revelation “which was scarcely less than that of Jewish seers themselves.”¹⁹ So what is the relation between primitive Vedic teaching and Christianity? Intimate, declares Banerjee, “you can scarcely hold the one without being led to the other.”²⁰ Those who accept Christianity “are only accepting Vedic doctrine in its legitimately developed form.”²¹

Kwame Bediako

Kwame Bediako (1945–2008) was born in Ghana, studied French at the University of Ghana and the University of Bordeaux where he earned a PhD studying French Literature and African literature in French. While at Bordeaux he converted to Christianity. He then studied theology at London Bible College and at Aberdeen under Andrew Walls. He was instrumental in initiating the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre for Mission Research and Applied Theology in 1987 and the African Theological Initiative in 1992. His theological and missional interest was expressed with commitment to both the biblical gospel and the cultures of Africa.²² As with Banerjee, Bediako demonstrated impressive scholarship earning doctorates in both French and English.

Unlike Banerjee who was offering an apologetic to skeptical and even hostile Hindus to accept the biblical Jesus as the true fulfillment of the Prajapati presented in the Vedas, Bediako was set in the context of an extensively Christianized sub-Saharan Africa. His concern was the *identity* of the African church as African, and in doing

How could African religious consciousness become integrated into a unified vision of what it meant to be African and Christian?

so, he affirmed identity as a theological category and proposed that part of the theological task is to wrestle with

how and how far, the “old” and the “new” in African religious consciousness could become integrated into a unified vision of what it meant to be African *and* Christian.²³

Bediako navigated between both radical continuity and radical discontinuity in answering the question of how and how far the old and the new in African religious consciousness can be integrated into the African Christian experience. His own course sought to account for both the past growth of Christianity in Africa as well as to encourage a way forward. The past explosion of the church in Africa can partially be accounted for by the fact that Christianity “is not intrinsically foreign to Africa.”²⁴ This, he stated, is because of the continuity between African primal religions and the biblical worldview and gospel, which provided the key “preparation for the Gospel.”²⁵

The process that allowed the gospel to find fertile ground in Africa began with the translation of the Bible into indigenous languages. Citing Andrew Walls, Bediako agreed that it is the nature of the Christian faith itself which determines that it is culturally translatable. He then went on to draw out the implications of this citing Lamin Sanneh:

The import of Scripture translation and its priority in missionary work is an indication that “God was not disdainful of Africans as to be incommunicable in their languages” (Sanneh 1983:166). This, Sanneh goes on, not only “imbued African cultures with eternal significance and endowed African languages with a transcendent range,” it also “presumed that the God of the Bible had preceded the missionary into the receptor-culture.”

As, through the very process of Scripture translation, “the central categories of Christian theology—God, Jesus Christ, creation, history—are transposed into their local equivalents, suggesting that Christianity had been adequately anticipated.”²⁶

Going further, he commented:

The centrality of Scripture translation points to the significance of African pre-Christian religious cultures, not only as a “valid carriage for the divine revelation,” but also as providing the idiom for Christian apprehension... The God whose name had been hallowed in the indigenous languages in the pre-Christian past was found to be the God of the Bible.²⁷

What is critical in understanding Sanneh and Bediako at this point is that these statements are more than statements about linguistic convenience in translating the Bible; rather it was the *process* of Bible translation that touched on something deeper, something anticipated, and something that prepared the way for the reception of the gospel. Indeed, God had preceded the missionary and had already created “categories of Christian theology.”

Throughout the history of missionary activity in Africa, the “prepared way” was often unrecognized or cast aside.²⁸ But despite this lack of attention to African traditional religions by Western missionaries, African theologians themselves have more recently found theological resources in African traditional religions. Bediako states:

For many years African theologians have refused to accept the negative view of African religion held by western missionaries and have shown consistently the continuity of God from the pre-Christian African past into the Christian present (Idowu, 1962; Mbiti, 1970; Setiloane, 1976). They have, therefore, like the Apostle Paul,

handed to us the assurance that with our Christian conversion, we are not introduced to a new God unrelated to the traditions of our past, but *to One who brings to fulfillment all the highest religious and cultural aspiration of our heritage.*²⁹ (Emphasis mine)

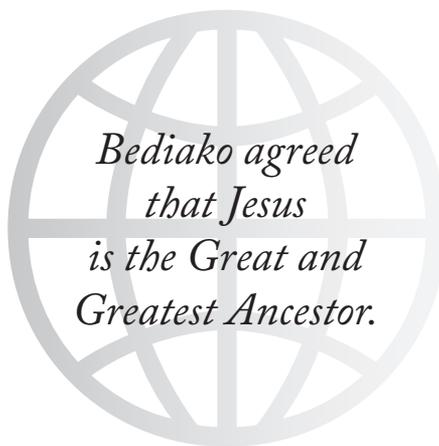
Bediako then explored examples in which Jesus might bring fulfillment to these religious and cultural aspirations. One of the most instructive was his description of Jesus as “ancestor” in the Akan worldview. He began by mapping the Akan spiritual universe and placed first on this map God, the Supreme Spirit Being (*Onyame*) who is the “Creator and Sustainer of the universe”³⁰ Below the Supreme Spirit Being are small “g” gods (*abosom*) and the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*). The gods may be capricious and bring harm, but the Supreme God and the ancestors are respected, worshiped, and appealed to for benefits. Ancestors are clan ancestors but not all the dead of a clan are admitted to the class of ancestors. It is only those who are “considered worthy of honour, for having ‘lived among us’ and for having brought benefits to us.”³¹ Ancestors then function to bring “well-being (or otherwise) to individuals and communities.”³²

Bediako agreed with John Pobee that Jesus is “the Great and Greatest Ancestor.”³³ But how can Jesus, who is not of an Akan clan, be regarded as such? Bediako’s answer was to begin with Jesus’ universality as savior of all people and all nations of which the Akan are one. His anthropology then emphasized the solidarity of all humanity created in God’s image. The Akan notion of clan was then extended to all humanity and Jesus presented as “one of us” through the incarnation. Thus the Akan story becomes a story within the larger story of humanity in relation to God.

Sin is, stated Bediako, in its essence, an antisocial act. This is in contrast to Western conceptions of sin that rest primarily on legal metaphors which emphasize sin as breaking a rule or

law by an individual. For the Akan, another person or the community has been damaged or shamed. Within the Akan spiritual universe, God is an injured party and has consequently withdrawn and is remote.

Jesus is the Great and Greatest Ancestor³⁴ for the Akan as one who “lived among us” through the incarnation and as one who has lived the most honorable and exemplary life. Further, his identity as God, his exultation through the resurrection, make him victor over evil and able to provide benefits to his followers in the form of protection from forces of evil.³⁵ Finally, drawing on Akan ideas of sacrifice, Jesus becomes the sacrifice that heals the social divide between a



remote offended God and the Akan. The soteriological center for the Akan is the restoration of a disrupted relationship or reconciliation, rather than the reformed center of justification, according to which Christ assumes the legal penalty for human sin. With such a process, the task is not to “accommodate the Gospel in our culture; the Gospel becomes our story.”³⁶

Bediako argued that it is just this kind of continuity between features of the Akan spiritual universe, and the biblical worldview and gospel that account for the acceptance of Christianity among the Akan. Reflecting on this past brought Bediako to propose that our theological method be adjusted

to intentionally engage pre-Christian religious traditions in the task of theological construction. To do so demands a theological interpretation of these traditions such that “Christ comes into places, thoughts, relationships and world-views in which He has never lived before” (quoting Walls).³⁷ Addressing Christology, the process also demands reflecting about Christ while reading and hearing the scriptures as well as reflecting on the experience of Christ by the believing community.³⁸ This reflection ensures that the theological result is “recognizable and owned by the world Christian community.”³⁹

This process, Bediako argued, is not new. The transition of the church in the early centuries from a Jewish phenomenon to a Gentile phenomenon is parallel to what is occurring in the African church.⁴⁰ As the church became increasingly Graeco-Roman and less Jewish, issues of identity arose. The church was forced to answer the question, what does it mean to be Graeco-Roman and Christian? The question then led to “bold initiatives in actual theological production;”⁴¹ a “synthesis between Christian religious commitment and cultural continuity.”⁴² The context was one marked by religious and ideational pluralism and so the church was forced to theologially interpret these traditions and offer solutions appropriate to these conditions. The transition was not smooth and the players in the transition proposed differing syntheses.

Propositions

1. Theology is a synthetic task combining biblical, historical, and cultural/religious resources, and therefore the cultural/religious context of the people of God has theological significance.

Cultural and religious traditions have not been allowed a place at the table of theological discussions in the West largely because the West, while under the domination of Christendom, has

not felt the pressure of a pluralistic context. The theological formulation of the early church, nineteenth century India, and twentieth Africa felt that pressure and have responded with creative theological productivity. The challenge to the West is to recognize that its own theological formulations are indeed contextual and to resist the temptation to view other indigenous theologies with suspicion.⁴³ Banerjee and Bediako are both engaged in this synthetic task: the former with Vedic texts and the later with African traditional religions.

2. A theological interpretation of cultural/religious contexts demands a role for the discipline of theology of religions along with biblical studies, historical theology, dogmatics, and ministry studies.

Theology of Religions is the new kid on the block⁴⁴ and as such it is negotiating its relationship with senior members in the neighborhood. The West is further behind in these negotiations than other parts of the world. Bediako notes that, “No self-respecting theological institution in Africa can avoid the study of African traditional religions.”⁴⁵ In the West, we do not yet recognize the demand for the discipline.

3. Creative theological expression grows out of and contributes to the mission of God’s people in the world.

Both thinkers are missional in purpose. Banerjee was an apologist theologically appealing to Hindus of his time with a Christian theological interpretation of the Vedas. Bediako sought both to account for and encourage the continued movement of the gospel in Africa. He articulates a way forward that learns from the past. Theologies generated in mission are theologies of engagement. Bediako, reflecting Martin Kahler’s statement that mission is the mother of theology, states:

Having been forced to do theology in the interface of their Christian faith and the perennial spiritualities of their African primal heritage, and

What did Bediako mean when he said that the “God of the Bible had preceded the missionary into the receptor-culture?”

having to internalize that dialogue with themselves, African theologians have restored the character of theology as Christian intellectual activity *on the frontier with the non-Christian world as essentially communicative, evangelistic and missionary.* (Quoting Verkuyl, emphasis mine)⁴⁶

Questions

1. What are the appropriate vocabulary and theological concepts for expressing the relationship between the biblical and the cultural and religious?

Both authors offer a variety of terms and concepts that beg clarification with careful theological reflection; terms such as *counterpart, coincide, fulfill, foreshow, figure, reflection, primitive revelation.* What did Bediako mean when he said that the “God of the Bible had preceded the missionary into the receptor-culture,” or that “Christianity had been adequately anticipated,” or that God “brings to fulfillment all the highest religious and cultural aspirations of our heritage?”⁴⁷ Do these terms signal no more than a revival of the old fulfillment theory championed by J. N. Farquhar⁴⁸ and opposed by Henrick Kraemer? And what of general, natural, and special revelation? Theological literature coming from African authors has awakened these questions and debates that were the talk of the first half of the twentieth century. We should be once again rolling up our sleeves and going to work on these notions and in so doing, adding resources to our tool box labeled “theology of religions.”⁴⁹

2. What “controls” will keep the task from flying off the rails resulting in theological formulation that ceases to be distinctly Christian?

There is the danger of syncretism with a process that admits to the discussion

cultural and non-Christian religious participants. Once continuity between the cultural/religious context and the Christian thought is allowed, does one step on to that slippery slope that only tilts in one direction: to the compromise of the faith once delivered to the saints? I would not label either Banerjee or Bediako a soteriological pluralist or even an inclusivist. Both came to the task with a high view of the authority of scripture which must remain one of the guard rails for evangelicals.

But another guard rail is suggested by Bediako. He admits that non-Western Christianity

poses all sorts of questions and produces a whole range of problems for which our theological knowledge, gained through study in the West, has not prepared us.⁵⁰

So he asks,

does this mean that in researching non-Western Christianity, we are cast adrift on an entirely uncharted sea, with no guiding instruments of any sort?⁵¹

His answer is Christian history. As mentioned above, the second and the third centuries present a methodological analogue in which Christ “was explored in terms of Hellenistic language and thought.”⁵² And in so doing, according to Andrew Walls, the Gentiles were able to grasp the “full stature of Christ.”

The task is a demanding one. Doing “in-house” theology poses less risk. Stepping into the Indian or Ghanaian marketplace and doing theology there demands greater theological precision and care—much like the handling of an unstable element in the chemistry lab.⁵³ Theology of religions may be that unstable element, but it is an essential one in our theological formulation. **IJFM**

Endnotes

- ¹ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2004.
- ² T. V. Phillip, "Krishna Mohan Banerjee and the Arian Witness to Christ: Jesus Christ the True Prajapati," *Indian Journal of Theology* 29, no. 2 (1980): 74.
- ³ Phillip, "Krishna Mohan Banerjee," 76.
- ⁴ Alexander Duff quoted in Phillip, "Krishna Mohan Banerjee," 76.
- ⁵ Krishna Mohan Banerjee, *The Relation Between Christianity and Hinduism*, First published in 1888 by Oxford Mission Press (Calcutta), in *From Exclusivism to Inclusivism: The Theological Writings of Krishna Mohan Banerjee*, edited by K. P. Aleaz, 181–182. New Delhi: Indian Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1998.
- ⁶ Banerjee, *Christianity and Hinduism*, 181–182.
- ⁷ Banerjee, *Christianity and Hinduism*, 184.
- ⁸ Banerjee, *Christianity and Hinduism*, 184.
- ⁹ Banerjee, *Christianity and Hinduism*, 185–189.
- ¹⁰ Banerjee, *Christianity and Hinduism*, 184.
- ¹¹ Banerjee, *Christianity and Hinduism*, 186–187.
- ¹² Rig Veda 8.42.3 in Krishna Mohan Banerjee, *The Relation Between Christianity and Hinduism*, 188.
- ¹³ Banerjee, *Christianity and Hinduism*, 188.
- ¹⁴ Rig Veda 10.90.1–16 in Banerjee, *Christianity and Hinduism*, 188.
- ¹⁵ I can find no reference to the specific Veda for this quote. Some of Banerjee's quotes of the Vedas appear to be his own translation.
- ¹⁶ Banerjee, *Christianity and Hinduism*, 193.
- ¹⁷ Banerjee, *Christianity and Hinduism*, 196.
- ¹⁸ Banerjee, *Christianity and Hinduism*, 196.
- ¹⁹ Banerjee, *Christianity and Hinduism*, 198.
- ²⁰ Banerjee, *Christianity and Hinduism*, 200.
- ²¹ Banerjee, *Christianity and Hinduism*, 200.
- ²² Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, xiv.
- ²³ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 53.
- ²⁴ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 55.
- ²⁵ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 21.

- ²⁶ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 16.
- ²⁷ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 16.
- ²⁸ Bediako appears to misrepresent the section on Animism in the 1910 Edinburgh report on "The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions" when he states that "the general feeling was that there was 'practically no religious content in Animism', nor was there in it 'any preparation for Christianity' (*Missionary Message*, 1910:24) in Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 78. This position is stated to be a minority opinion and the majority was one in which "points of contact" are allowed. These include "belief in the existence of a Higher Power or Supreme Being," the afterlife, practice of sacrifice, consciousness of sin, etc. Certainly, "points of contact" fall short of what Bediako is suggesting as the "preparation" for Christianity found in African primal religions. Yet on the level of missionary practice, what Bediako states is most certainly true.
- ²⁹ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 21.
- ³⁰ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 22.
- ³¹ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 30.
- ³² Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 23.
- ³³ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 24.
- ³⁴ One of the difficulties of communicating Bediako's proposal that Jesus as ancestor as a valid Christological claim is the different meanings attached to the Akan term and that term translated into English. One is an appropriate designator for Jesus and the other (the translated term) is not. The semantic ranges overlap but are not identical and further, there is a differing connotation attached to each term. Consequently, "Hardly anyone will pray in English to 'Ancestor Jesus' or 'Chief Jesus,' but many will pray in Akan to 'Nana Yesu.'" Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 78. Thus acceptance of Jesus as ancestor by a native English speaker is more a problem of identifying an acceptable English term.
- ³⁵ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 27.
- ³⁶ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 25.
- ³⁷ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 117.
- ³⁸ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 81.
- ³⁹ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 81.
- ⁴⁰ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 63.
- ⁴¹ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 63.
- ⁴² Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 67.
- ⁴³ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 67.
- ⁴⁴ Although theology of religion(s) is evident through the 19th century, it has not been a welcome participant in theological formulation. Rather, it is biblical studies, and dogmatics, often in dialogue with

Western philosophy, that have been the exclusive participants.

- ⁴⁵ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 69.
- ⁴⁶ Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978): 277 as in Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 59.
- ⁴⁷ Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, translated into English as "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions Proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965" and last modified June 4, 2019, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

From *Nostra Aetate*, Point #1: "Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?"

From *Nostra Aetate*, Point #2: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ 'the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself."

- ⁴⁸ J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Oriental Books, 1913, 1971).

⁴⁹ One more recent, but not contemporary thinker who has done this is Lesslie Newbigin. Joe M. Thomas has helpfully put Newbigin and Kraemer side by side in his "Continuity, Discontinuity, and the Finality of Christ: a Theological Essay on the Thought of Lesslie Newbigin and Henrick Kraemer" in *Dharma Deepika* January 2009, 25–34.

- ⁵⁰ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 79.
- ⁵¹ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 79.
- ⁵² Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 79.
- ⁵³ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 69.

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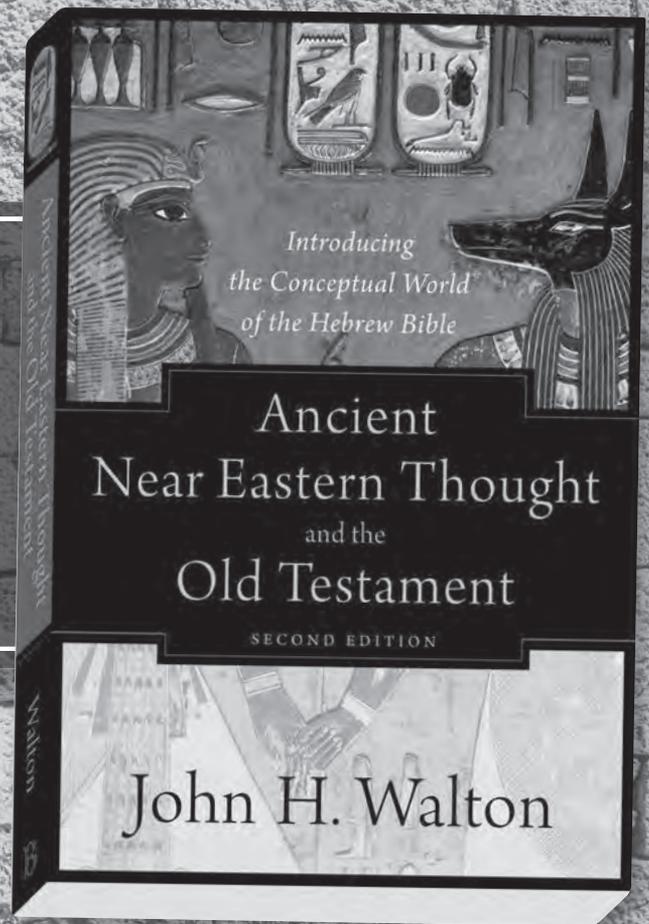
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"And the Lord Appeared": Missiology Meets Ancient Near Eastern Religions

by Kevin Higgins and Joel Hamme

Kevin Higgins has served in two Muslim regions of South Asia, where he helped to develop work in emerging movements to Jesus that now extend to a dozen language groups. He served as International Director for Global Teams from 2000 to 2017, and is still involved in Bible translation, the subject of his doctoral study (PhD, Fuller Seminary). In 2017 he became President of William Carey Int'l University, and since January 2019 also serves as the General Director of Frontier Ventures. He and his wife, Susan, have three daughters, Rachel, Sarah, and Emma.

Joel Hamme has served churches in rural Kansas, and worked with Filipino immigrants in the Los Angeles area. He is the associate professor of biblical and ancient Near Eastern Studies, and chair of the MA program committee for William Carey International University, where he has served since 2006. He also chairs the biblical studies department at SUM Bible College and Theological Seminary. His research includes Israelite religion and the Old Testament in the context of ancient Near Eastern, particularly Mesopotamian religion (PhD, Fuller Seminary).

In one sense, this article grew out of a conversation between Joel Hamme and me in September 2017. However, in another sense, that conversation was itself possible because we had each been independently thinking about our topic for a long time—and in our own particular fields.

As a missiologist I have frequently reflected on the incarnational realities of God's revelation, salvation, and his engagement with his own creation, especially humanity in all its varied cultural and religious expressions. That has shaped my reading of the Scriptures and I have searched for passages and texts from which to gain insight.

I met Joel Hamme soon after I became president of William Carey International University. In an early conversation he mentioned his studies of the Old Testament. As he described his convictions, arrived at by applying (among other methods) a religious studies approach to the Old Testament, I found that we were both postulating a similar theory: namely that the religion of Israel as a totality—not only in isolated texts or in the borrowing and reusing of it—is an expression of God's ways of meeting human beings within their cultural contexts.

We agreed to co-author something that would approach this thesis from within our two respective disciplines: Old Testament studies (or, to be more accurate, Ancient Near Eastern Religious Studies), and missiology. The result is this article.

Our approach will be dialogical. We decided for the Old Testament to lead the way, and so in each stage of the discussion, apart from this introduction, Joel will offer his perspectives first. I will then respond, typically asking a missiological question for the next section. We will hereafter identify our respective contributions by *KH* for myself, and *JH* for Joel.

As such, beyond just writing an article we trust will stimulate the thinking of others, we also hope to model a methodology for missiological reflection on the

Scriptures, and a biblically informed missiology. As a starting point, Joel will describe his approach to the text.

JH: The basic starting point of my methodology in comparing the ancient Near East with the Old Testament is a cultural-anthropological one, especially building on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and his idea of the *bricoleur*. Simply put, the bricoleur is someone who takes what is available in his or her environment to create myth systems. I would expand this, as well, to rituals and other thought constellations, such as royal ideology, which is embedded into myth in the ancient Near East. This does not mean that nothing new emerges in the religious life of Israel, but that the building blocks for what is new are what is at hand in Israel's cultural sphere, the broader cultural and religious context of the ancient Near East.

The evidence at hand in the Old Testament Scriptures indeed bears this out. It is commonly argued that Deuteronomy is similar in structure and content to the common literary form of the Suzerain-vassal treaty that remained basically the same from the Late Bronze Age to Iron Age II (roughly 1400 BC–600 BC), the time period for which we have evidence of it. A number of the laws in Exodus 20–23 have close parallels in other ancient Near Eastern law codes, both in content and structure; the most famous is the Code of Hammurabi from the eighteenth century BC. This similarity extends to the rituals in Leviticus, for example, the leper cleansing ritual in Leviticus 14 compared to purification and exorcism rituals from the Mesopotamian sphere. Close affinity with other Near Eastern contemporary religious material can also be found in a number of the Psalms concerning confession of sin (Ps. 51), and those concerning slander (Pss. 11–14; Pss. 52–55).

Thus, there is much that the Old Testament has in common with the larger ancient Near Eastern cultural sphere. In the past, some Old Testament scholars

argued for the distinctiveness of Israel's religion (for example, G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament against its Environment*). However, this approach represents an overstatement of the distinctiveness, based on the convictions of such scholars rooted within their own historical context. For example, Wright and others wrote to counterbalance the valid concerns about the use of natural theology to defend political developments in the official German church of Nazi Germany.¹ This is what the Confessing Church had to combat when the (official) German Christian church began to consider Adolf Hitler "A New Word from God."²

Maintaining distinctiveness in that historical context was crucial. The danger



in contemporary missions movement is different. Some people think that believers need to be cordoned off from their cultural environments. This belief is boosted by a misunderstanding concerning the Old Testament's relationship with its larger ancient Near Eastern environment. It can sometimes lead to the planting of churches that seem alien to their larger environments, and thus have little, if any, transformative impact on their communities. Although there are differences between the Old Testament and the larger ancient Near Eastern culture (explored later), there is much that is the same, down to the level of concepts and worldview. Even what is different is delivered through shared rituals, concepts, and materials.

KH: Thank you, Joel for your opening remarks about method in approaching the Old Testament. Reading through the comments with my missiology lenses, I was struck by the phrase, "the building blocks for what is new are what is at hand in Israel's cultural sphere." This is very much akin to what relevance theory would call the *cognitive environment*: the whole constellation of ideas, experiences, memories, values, and assumptions through which we all understand and interpret the world and the various types of communication we use.

I think I am understanding you to say that Israel's corporate and communal cognitive environment was largely shaped by Ancient Near Eastern Religion (ANE). God's communication to Israel would have taken place within that cognitive environment, not by dropping new religious forms and expressions in from some pristine outside world, but by actually meeting Israel where they already lived, within a world they already understood, and through which they already made sense of life.

If that represents your perspective correctly, I would like to explore some specific examples. But before that, I can imagine that some readers will want to ask,

If this is true, then what is unique about God's communication and revelation to Israel? Within that ANE world, what is distinct and new?

JH: There are numerous small variations on common themes, but when it comes to large distinctions, I would like to start with the Old Testament view of humanity because it leads to a chain of other distinctions. However, even in these subsequent distinctions the Old Testament uses basic ideas from the larger ANE cultural sphere.

My basic method inclines me to start from what is well-known and documented and proceed to the less well-known and documented. Thus, I will first start with ideas from Mesopotamia

that have been evident for virtually all of its documented history. In the Mesopotamian world view, there were basically two creations of humanity, both in mythic times. The first creation involved the creation of a wild, uncivilized humanity, *lullu-amēlu*. That humanity was not ruled over nor controlled by a civilizing force, nor did it rely on that civilizing force for survival. The second was the creation of *malik-amēlu*, the human or the wise person who was to be in control.

See the Mesopotamian mythic text from the Neo-Babylonian period (first millennium BC) below, in figure 1.

In Mesopotamia, the human, free of an overarching power (the king), defied the created order, and could not survive. This idea is timeless in that it is derived from the myths that formed the Mesopotamian worldview.

That a similar idea was current in areas close to Israel is evident from the Me-sha Stele, from the ninth century BC. In this text, the Moabites are depicted as helpless until King Mesha ruled over them and gave them the where-withal to survive. The depiction of the creation of humanity is similar to that

Rather than God's will being carried out by the exercise of some kingly power, God's will is carried out through the extended family.

found in the Mesopotamian creation epic, *Atrahasis*, in which *lullu-amēlu* is created to serve the gods by doing their manual labor.

In the Old Testament, the creation of humanity *as a whole* as a partner of God is the mythic vision.⁴ This is clear in both Genesis 1 and 2. When Kingship is mentioned it is not given a mythic origin in the Old Testament; instead it is stressed that the king was to be one from among his brothers (Deut. 17:15). Based on biblical history, its institution can be dated to the early Iron Age (eleventh century BC). Kingship is not central to the Old Testament's depiction of two orders of humanity, but the depiction of the human in general is in language drawn from ancient Near Eastern royal ideology—common language and thought constellations are transformed to say something powerful and new about the person's relationship to God: there are not two levels of humanity; all of humanity is created as God's "partner."

KH: Thank you, Joel. So, in the wider ANE context, this view of humanity was in a sense two tiered. There was a higher level, divinely created, and a lower level (the masses) also divinely created but clearly not held in the same level of "esteem" by the deity. You also make it clear that there is a very different view of humanity in the Old Testament texts.

This is important for our discussion. From a missiological standpoint, I am interested to understand culture and the gospel and their interplay. What in the culture is distinct? What needs to change in the light of the gospel and what is often called a biblical world view? This also begs the question of what does *not* need to change. And, of course, how do we know and decide (and who decides). But those are for another discussion!

You have argued that the particularly unique insight in scripture, when compared to the wider ANE context, is scripture's view of humanity. We might say that one dimension of what is unique in the biblical worldview is its anthropology. Can you elaborate on that further? What is Genesis (for example) saying about humanity, that is distinct from the wider ANE worldview?

JH: Kevin, in reply, I will explain how Genesis 1–2 rearticulates some aspects of ANE royal ideology in its depiction of humanity as a whole, but I will also comment on how it makes three significant distinctions. 1) In a large part of the OT, rather than God's will being carried out by the exercise of some kingly power, God's will is carried out through the extended family. 2) God's covenant is made with all of God's people, and all the people are addressed rather than just the king, as is the case with the Code of Hammurabi. 3) As God's covenant partners, all of Israel is

Figure 1. Creation of the King³

(30) Ea began to speak, addressing Bēlet-ilī
 "You are Bēlet-ilī, lady of the great gods!
 It is you who have created *lullū-man* (*lullu-amēlu*)
 now create a king, a man to be in control (*malik-amēlu*)!
 Encircle the whole of his body with something fine.
 (35) Finish perfectly his appearance, make his body beautiful!"
 So Bēlet-ilī created the king, the man to be in control (*malik-amēlu*)
 The great gods gave to the king the power of battle.
 Anu gave his crown, Enlil his [throne].
 Nergal gave his weapons, Ninurta his [terrifying splendor].
 (40) Bēlet-ilī gave [his] beautiful countenance.
 Nusku gave directions, gave counsel and stood in service [before him].
 Anyone who speaks with the king [deceitfully or falsely],
 if a notable [...]

addressed by the prophet, rather than just "special people" such as the king, and occasionally the Queen Mother, the Crown Prince, etc. This is very different than prophetic literature among other peoples in the larger ANE context.

Unlike the surrounding cultures, the Hebrew Scriptures speaks of humanity, both men and women, as made in the image and likeness of God. In other ANE materials, similar language is used of the king, and rarely of someone like a high priest, but never of humanity in general. In fact, Genesis 1–2 uses a lot of standard ANE royal imagery in describing *humanity* and the remarkable stature they have in the created order. Humans are made in the image of God. Humans are guardians of the tree of life. Alternatively, in Mesopotamian kingship, it is the king who, at times, is depicted as caretaker of the tree of life, or even as the tree of life itself. As a whole, Genesis 1–2 depicts humans as priest-kings in a temple. They can hear God's will and carry it out. In the OT the sociological mechanism for carrying out the divine purposes is not the kingship but rather the extended family.

This idea that God has a relationship with people, rather than merely a special person, (someone who is separated from the masses by his very nature), explains why God addresses a whole people in giving the covenant in Exodus 20–24, rather than addressing the king alone. This contrasts sharply with documents like the Code of Hammurabi, where the Sun-god *Šamaš* gives the law-code to the king, and the people as a whole are not involved.⁵ It is the *people* of Israel who are responsible for hearing and obeying the revealed will of God.

Finally, in the examples of prophecy from cultures around Israel, prophecy too was for the very elite, especially the king and the other members of the royal family.⁶ For example, there are no surviving prophecies to the Assyrian people as a whole. As is evident from the Hebrew Bible, classical prophecy is addressed largely to the people as

a whole, although in earlier periods prophecy was generally given to kings (Nathan to David, Elijah to Ahab, etc.). The prophet Isaiah is generally viewed as a transitional figure between these two types of prophecy.

To sum up, the view of humans in the Hebrew Bible is unique, for it gives everyone a special dignity that is generally lacking in the rest of the ancient Near East. This special dignity means that anyone and everyone can hear God's will and carry it out.

KH: Joel, to me, these seem to be profound issues. I find myself leaping to a number of connections as I read your contribution, but I want to somewhat randomly select two of them.



First, your comment that God's will is in large part carried out through "extended family." Recently, I participated in a conference of some very perceptive Asian mission practitioners who were reflecting with a number of us who work in Asian contexts. The entire gathering really focused on *oikos* ("household" and "house" in Greek), and family as a primary theme in mission and at the core of our understanding of *ekklesia* or church.

I see in your work that this theme is not something that suddenly appears in the Genesis 12 account of the Abrahamic blessing for "all families of the earth" but is in fact woven into God's purposes for humans in the

very beginning. This calls to mind Paul's reference to the church as "the household or *oikos* of God." When I thread all these themes together, I cannot help but conclude that the original "Eden Family" could be said to form the roots for all we think *ekklesia* should be. It is certainly full of application for mission contexts relative to "church planting," that is, God's re-forming of his Eden Family, the original household or *oikos* of God.

Second, your mention of the first humans in Genesis 1 and 2 as "priest-kings" in a temple also presses my imagination forward to Peter's reference to the saints in Christ being "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9) and all of the other images in the New Testament of the new temple, a dwelling place for God in the Spirit, which is, of course, a temple made of people.

Let me make a comment on that image of the temple. An oft cited verse from Paul refers to our bodies as a temple of the Holy Spirit. I estimate that 99% of all references to that verse made by Christians today apply it *individually* and tie it to specific practices an individual believer should either undertake or avoid in order to keep his or her body (singular, private) pure, as a temple. But Paul is referring to our bodies (plural) as the temple (singular). We are the temple. The newly remade Eden Family, God's household family, is the place of God's dwelling.

Again, all of this ANE insight into anthropology seems ripe with rich fruit for missional application, Joel.

In one final section I want to pick up from a comment in your endnote (3) about the fact that "people were considered the children of these lesser deities." In the Bible, Israel is seen as *God's* son—and evidently divine beings are called sons of God (though Jesus applies it to his critics as well in John's gospel); the King is God's son, especially in the Psalms; believers are God's children (by adoption in Paul's writing; by begetting

in John 1); and, of course, ultimately Jesus is called God's son. How much of that theme is drawn from, then modified, and transformed by the Bible from this original ANE context?

JH: The context in which "the son of his god" occurs in Mesopotamian texts is in prayers that accompany various rituals dealing with the reconciliation of a person to his or her personal god. The basic rhetoric involves the re-establishment of a strained or broken family relationship that the supplicant has had with the deity. The personal god and goddess give the power of generation to a family and were believed to inhabit both the father and mother.

The prayers were generally for one of the greater deities to intervene on behalf of the supplicant who has a broken relationship with his personal deity, who, in a real, tangible sense, is responsible for the supplicant's life. The god is generator, provider, protector, and guide—so in a very real sense, he is a part of the family. The deity that inhabited the parent is viewed to then inhabit the child. It is easy to see how the family unit influenced Mesopotamian domestic religion. Whereas royal ideology has left its stamp on quite a bit of the Old Testament and Israelite religion, this other sociological arrangement has as well. Domestic religion is a fruitful vantage point from which to view quite a number of the Psalms, and the book of Genesis. It also gives a clue on how interpreters should view the idea of "God of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," and the switch of understanding in Exodus 6:3, "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as *El Shaddai*, but by my name, *Yahweh*, I was not known to them." Rather than "God Almighty," perhaps a better translation of *El Shaddai* would be "El, my family God."⁷

KH: Joel, there is not space here to pursue every line of thinking that your last section suggests to me, including one more pass at the "children of the gods" discussion related to ANE as the context in which much of the

Several Muslim believers and I were reflecting on the profound mystery of the intertwining of Jesus' sonship with ours.

Old Testament is imbedded. But now I want to jump to some of the New Testament uses of that.

The idea of being God's children is very important in the New Testament. John's Gospel speaks of this in the first chapter and he returns to that in his epistles.

Just today, I was discussing Galatians 4:6 with several Muslim believers in Jesus who lead movements. We were reflecting on the profound mystery of the intertwining of Jesus' sonship with ours. The spirit of Jesus is in us crying out "Abba."

Tracing this back to the Old Testament context and Israel as God's child ("Out of Egypt I have called my son . . ." Matt. 2:15) is important. Seeing how that also was communicated within the ANE context is what you are opening up for us. Looking at this as indicative of how God uses human context as a means of communicating deep spiritual realities is the missiological theme I am trying to pry loose as we interact.

Conclusion

KH: Joel, thank you for interacting. Perhaps this can spark a series of deeper dives into some of the themes we have barely touched upon here.

JH: Thank you, Kevin, for the invitation to interact. What we see here—that even the Hebrew Bible's witness itself is contextualized—can serve as a model for helping believers contextualize the gospel for their own contexts. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ G. Ernest Wright was an American counterpart to German scholars, such as Gerhard von Rad, who was concerned about the anti-Semitic tone in German theology in the early to mid-twentieth century. Wright was a leading figure in the American Biblical Theology movement in the 1940s–60s, which had a distinctive Hebrew worldview

focus. Though not an Old Testament scholar as such, Karl Barth was a lead figure in a repudiation of natural theology, largely in response to troubling developments in German theology in the first half of the twentieth century. His main work that does this is *Nein*, which is a full onslaught against natural theology and his colleague, Emil Brunner. Barth's later work, especially as seen in *The Humanity of God*, pulls back to an extent of such an attack on natural theology.

² Paul Althaus was one of the more prominent German Church theologians. For a good survey of his thought in the context of mid-twentieth century Christian thought, and Lutheran thought in general, see Robert P. Ericksen, "The Political Theology of Paul Althaus: Nazi Supporter," *German Studies Review* 9, no. 3 (October 1986): 547–567.

³ The coronation hymn of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal has a very close parallel. Alasdair Livingstone, "A late piece of constructed mythology relevant to the Neo-Assyrian and Middle Assyrian coronation hymn and prayer (1.146)," in *Context of Scripture*, eds. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Leiden/New York: Brill, 2003), 477.

⁴ I am not using this word *mythic* in a sense that means untrue, but in the sense that it presents a timeless truth that informs worldview.

⁵ One note here, however, is at the level of domestic religion, and the worship of family and personal deities, people were considered the children of these lower level divinities, and there were various taboos and so forth that the average person was to follow, and these divinities could be sinned against, and exercise wrath of various sorts against transgressors.

⁶ There are two rather large collections of ancient Near Eastern prophecy outside of Israel. From the early second millennium BC there is a large collection from the Northern Mesopotamian city of Mari, and from the seventh century BC, there is a large collection that generally revolve around the Assyrian kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal.

⁷ This formulation of the etymology of *El Shaddai*, is not without controversy, as the Akkadian term, *Shedu*, crosses over into the later strata of biblical Hebrew, and even later, Rabbinic Hebrew, as a term meaning "demon."

The Religion of Science: A Timely Excerpt on a Global Frontier

by Ralph D. Winter

Editor's Note: This an excerpt from part 2 of Ralph Winter's "Eleven Frontiers of Perspective (7-11)," printed in IJFM 20:4 Winter 2003.

The largest remaining frontier is, ironically, the result in part of the very intellectual vigor of the Christian faith. This frontier is the science community, *which is now as global as the Christian faith itself*. It is a faith. All effective scientific endeavors are dependent totally, not on a "method," but a *faith in the existence of order in nature*. This is a uniquely Biblical insight. It came with the Christian faith.

However, it is as though the Book of Creation and the Book of Scripture have each spawned a global faith community, and that to most of the adherents of either faith, the "other" is clearly—if not fearfully and harmfully—invalid. Millions of earnest souls around the world have been challenged and awed by each of the two books, and have been captured by profound belief in them. They are often so confident of the glory they have found that anyone from the "other" side who questions the glory they perceive is automatically assumed to be blind and or faithless.

This is not to say that a large minority of each of these two faith communities does not partake in various ways of the cultural tradition of the other. There are, for example, many scientists who are church goers. They may have nowhere near as profound a faith as they do in the truth and beauty of their scientific experience. There are also many Bible believing people who are happy with science and technology but who do not regard it as a holy experience comparable to what they find in the Word or at church.

More troublesome by far are those zealots on each side who actually seek to tear down faith on the other side. We think of people like Carl Sagan or Richard Dawkins, for whom confidence in the Bible is ridiculous, or some of the zealous believers in the Book of Scripture who actually twist scripture in their attempt to dethrone science. I refer to a quoting of Psalm 19:3 as saying (speaking of the handiwork of God in creation) that there is no speech or language where their voice is [not] heard. By leaving out the negative the Bible is on their side against science!

Obviously, the Book of Scripture extensively attributes a revelation of God's glory to what we call *general revelation*.

Paul, in Romans chapter one, seems to present the ultimate summary of the power of *general revelation*. He goes on to imply in chapter two that there are gentiles that "do by nature the things the law requires" without ever seeing or hearing from Scripture.

Whether or not we can readily make these statements congruent with our popular formulas for getting to heaven, these gropings of faith are extremely significant in missions in regard to foundations on which to build. Various religious faiths contain ambiguous mixtures of truth and nonsense. Yet we do not do well to ignore anything which is true, no matter where we find it.

In fact, perhaps the most classic of all missionary mistakes is the perspective with which Abraham dealt with Abimelech. Why, Abimelech asked, did Abraham tell a lie and try to deceive him? Because, Abraham said, "I said to myself there is no fear of God in this place." Instead of expecting to find that the Holy Spirit is in contact with all peoples, and building upon that foundation to the extent he might, Abraham presumed that all virtue was on his side and that Abimelech could not have possessed any spiritual foundation to build upon.

Thus, in crossing this frontier into the realm of science we must not ignore the presence of the Holy in the very world of science. If we can be people whose devotion to the living God is richly nourished by both books we can respect the genuine beginnings of belief in the lives of many if not most scientists, we can rejoice in the faith they have, which will give them reason to hear of another kind of faith.

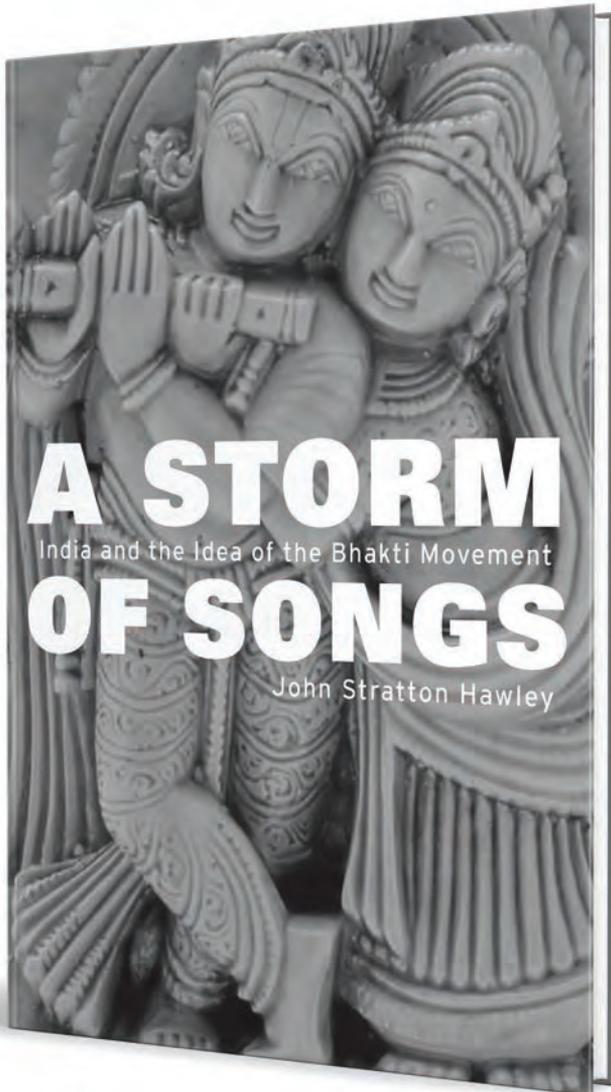
But it is not as simple as that. Zealots on both sides have erected high walls to dichotomize and polarize the two Books. Simple, honest inquiry across this frontier is thus as uncommon as it is unusual.

On the other hand, it would seem to be, inherently, the easiest of all frontiers to cross, as well as having the greatest potential in terms of communicating with the entire world. Just think—no translation needed! We need ourselves to love His Word and His Works, and we need to share the manifest glory from both of those books if we wish to cross this huge, gargantuan frontier. **IJFM**

Ralph D. Winter was a Caltech-trained civil engineer who studied theology at Princeton (BDiv) and Linguistics, Statistics, and Anthropology at Cornell (PhD). Beginning at Lausanne '74 he helped the Christian world to rethink evangelization in terms of peoples. As founder of the US Center for World Mission, now Frontier Ventures, he helped launch a global mission transition over the past four decades. In later years, he turned his mind to bridging the divide between evangelicals and the scientific community.



Harvard University Press



A Storm of Songs

*India and the Idea of the
Bhakti Movement*

John Stratton Hawley

**“Comprehensive . . . A model of
meticulous intellectual history
of modern India.”**

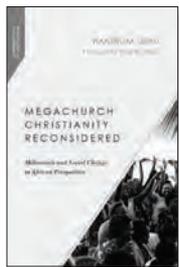
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Book Reviews

Megachurch Christianity Reconsidered: Millennials and Social Change in African Perspective, by Wanjiru M. Gitau (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2018), xiv, 188 pp.

—Reviewed by Darren Duerksen



I remember the experience of attending a Pentecostal megachurch in a large city in south India. Up to that point, most churches I had visited were either smaller village churches or larger churches which held traditional worship services in the local language. This megachurch, however, was comprised primarily of young urban call center workers and other professionals dressed in the latest urban Indian fashion, chatting with each other in English and texting on their cell phones. The pastor's English-language sermon was being live-streamed for people to watch around the world, and a band with guitars and drums led the congregation in the latest English-language praise songs from Western churches. At one point I closed my eyes and could almost imagine myself singing in a church in my home in California.

As a missiologically-oriented Western visitor, and one who had spent a great deal of time contemplating and critiquing the colonial and foreign legacy of Christianity in places like south Asia, it was a perplexing experience that left me with many questions. This was intensified by my own personal critique of the megachurch model and its consumerist tendencies, particularly in the U.S. and other Western countries. But I couldn't deny that the church I attended was obviously popular among a segment of young, urban, middle-class Indian professionals in that city. Why? Were they mainly Christians "hopping" over from more traditional churches? Was its attraction part of the overall allure of shopping malls, night clubs, coffee shops, fancy cinemas, and other signs of growing affluence to which they now had access? Was this a bad thing? Was the church's embrace of Western church styles exacerbating the reputation of Christianity as foreign and disconnected from the cultural and religious traditions of the region? And, if so, why didn't these people care?

Though I couldn't answer these questions fully, my criticism of megachurches, my postcolonial lens, and my concerns for (traditional) cultural relevance predisposed me to view such churches with a degree of skepticism.

But Protestant megachurches such as these continue to develop and grow throughout the Global South, and because of this they deserve more careful analysis than the surface-level critiques that I was drawn to make. In light of this, Wanjiru Gitau's book *Megachurch Christianity Reconsidered* is an insightful and important contribution to the conversation of ecclesiology in the Global South. Gitau traces the origin and development of Mavuno church, a megachurch in Nairobi, Kenya that was started in 2005. It grew from an initial congregation of 400 people (who had branched off from another church) to approximately 4,000 people by 2012. By 2015 it had started five additional campuses across Nairobi, five in other African countries, and one in a European country.

Though its astoundingly quick growth could be attributed to any number of programs and innovations that the church had initiated, Gitau does us the favor of looking for a broader explanation. Her thesis and main explanation for the growth of megachurches like Mavuno is that "they provide a map of reality for [millennials] to navigate a world that is otherwise experienced as deeply volatile" (5). The millennials of Mavuno's context are educated and upwardly mobile, and have

found themselves in transition through several worlds all at once—the vestiges of the traditional world of their grandparents, the modernizing and largely urbanized world of their parents, and the global, technologically advanced world of their own time. (5)

Nairobi, and African countries in general, have experienced rapid and deep economic, political, and cultural changes that have destabilized successive generations and left them to feel that their maps of reality do not work. And, Gitau argues, it is this sense of dissonance and volatility that helps us understand the rise and growth of megachurches like Mavuno.

To make her argument, Gitau, in Chapter 1, traces the origins of Mavuno church against the backdrop of the wider trends and shifts in Kenyan and African Christianity. For example, she discusses how African churches in the 1960s and '70s were rightly focused on transitioning Christianity and its structures from missionaries to African leaders. Gitau also assesses various economic, political, and cultural changes in Africa and how different "generations" of Christians and churches, such as the initial converts, the

Darren Duerksen is Associate Professor of Intercultural and Religious Studies at Fresno Pacific University, USA. He has authored Ecclesial Identities in a Multi-Faith Context: Jesus Truth-Gatherings (Yeshu Satsangs) among Hindus and Sikhs in Northwest India (2015) and with William Dyrness has co-authored Seeking Church: Emerging Witnesses to the Kingdom (2019).

By the 1990s “there was not so much a foreignness problem as a generational one” where young people felt the church was out of touch with the ongoing and rapid changes occurring in wider society.

African Indigenous Churches (AICs), those who grew under the colonial church, and those who transitioned the postcolonial church helped develop and renew Christianity in important ways for their times (Chapter 2). By the 1990s, however, “there was not so much a foreignness problem as a generational one” where young people felt the church was out of touch with the ongoing and rapid changes occurring in wider society (23). Churches by and large had failed to adapt to the particularly rapid changes and stresses brought on by a large population of young people who had access to good education, technology, and media but less access to guaranteed jobs. This created a “social homelessness” among middle-class millennials that begged a response.

As a result, Mavuno’s founder, Muriithi Wanjau, started Mavuno in a middle-class district of Nairobi. He and his team created a “profile” of the type of person they wanted to appeal to—persons who did not attend existing churches, had consumption habits and corresponding social norms like partying on the weekends and sleeping on Sundays—and called these “Mike” and “Makena.” Recognizing that “this person is a consumer,” (73) and using these profiles to guide them, they developed styles of worship, preaching, activities, classes, and programs to attract and challenge such persons to follow Christ and become part of the church (Chapters 3 and 4). Through these programs, Muriithi has challenged people to rise above complacency and has sought to turn them into “fearless influencers of society” (66).

The impact of Mavuno can be seen not only in its rise in membership and congregations, but also in the impact its “fearless” members have had on the wider society (Chapter 5). For instance, though the church uses Western music (African American songwriter Kirk Franklin was an early favorite), the church has also developed its own songwriters who have in turn produced music that is listened to more widely. Others have started leadership programs seeking to influence future political and business leaders, and organizations seeking better to rehabilitate prisoners.

Though Gitau’s main focus throughout the book is on helping to interpret the growth of Mavuno against the backdrop of its context, she suggests that Mavuno and other megachurches are also offering something important to the global Christian community (Chapter 6). The Western church, and the church as a whole, “lacks a consistently developed theology of how to be Christianly prosperous” that engages and nuances—but doesn’t reject wholesale—the prosperity theologies that have risen in recent decades (151). Though economically successful Christians in the

West tend to idealize those who have chosen downwardly mobile lifestyles or opted for monastic-like living, most people in places like Nairobi

want to know how to make it in a cutthroat workplace, secure a future, raise kids in the world of contemporary education structures and media...and handle whatever other mundane issues come with living, especially in the city. (152)

Here again she says critics of megachurches need to realize that these churches are working out a needed theology that helps people navigate these changing realities, even if imperfectly.

Some of the strengths of this book have already been hinted at. Gitau provides an important perspective that frames megachurches in light of the way they help their people orient themselves in the midst of a destabilized context, particularly those in the Global South. As a member of the church herself, Gitau is able to provide valuable insider perspective while also analyzing the church’s place in its wider context.

But at times Gitau’s closeness to the church also creates some weaknesses in the book. One missing element is that she provides very little, if any, actual critique of the church or its leaders. She acknowledges that the leaders did not have all the answers for what church should look like and were learning as they went, but we hear little about any failures or shortcomings they may have encountered. And although she admits that many people do leave (and have left) the church, the only reason she gives for this is that they inaccurately perceive Mavuno as not teaching a “deep word” (118).

Gitau’s reluctance to scrutinize her own church may also be why there is a curious lack of discussion about the origins of some of Mavuno’s ideas and programs. There seems to be an apparent influence from churches such as Saddleback and Willow Creek. Nevertheless, despite briefly mentioning that Muriithi studied at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California for five years just prior to launching Mavuno church, Gitau places little emphasis on that experience of his. Instead, she frequently presents Muriithi’s innovations as coming purely from his own experience. While Gitau’s emphasis on Muriithi’s agency is understandable and important, it would not invalidate this to discuss whether some of his ideas were adapted from other sources, including other megachurches.

A final critique regards the place of Mavuno, and the place of megachurches in general, in the ecclesial landscape. Though Gitau acknowledges and values the ecclesial adaptations of past generations and the ways these provided a “renewing influence” on Christianity for their time (37),

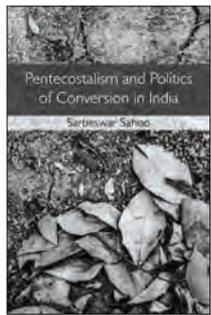
Are churches like the AICs, or those that were birthed out of concerns for contextualization, still important for the Kenyan context? Or was their import solely in what they offered in their time?

she does not seem to indicate whether these churches still have a place in Kenyan society, or how megachurches relate to these (older) churches. Are churches like the AICs, or those that were birthed out of concerns for contextualization, still important for the Kenyan context? Or was their import solely in what they offered in their time? Here Gitau, in her focus on interpreting and legitimizing megachurches, perhaps unintentionally glosses over the diversity existent in modern-day African countries and the ongoing need for various ecclesial responses to these differences. For while Mavuno's style of megachurch may be important for certain segments of Nairobi and other cities, it may not have the same relevance among, for example, some of the Muslim urban contexts in neighboring Ethiopia and Somalia.

This does not negate or seriously detract from Gitau's overall point. Megachurches in the Global South are best understood not as the result of the application of an effective church growth strategy, or as an over-accommodation to capitalist consumerism. Rather they are important, local responses to wider changes and forces. Similar research can and should be done on other megachurches, particularly from other parts of the Global South. Gitau points the way towards a better and more nuanced understanding of this form of church.

Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India, by Sarbeswar Sahoo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), xviii, 205 pp.

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard



This is a highly recommended study on the controversies surrounding conversion in India today, and it is striking that it is written by a Hindu academic. Sarbeswar Sahoo did his doctoral research in the southern tribal region of the state of Rajasthan, looking at NGOs among tribal peoples. He returned there again to research the present work, as explained in the Preface.

This is not a broad theoretical approach to conversion, but a focused case study of the players and issues in south Rajasthan. The introductory chapter outlines the history of violence against Christians in India and the controversy over conversion. The difficulty of gathering data from Christians as a Hindu is discussed, and Sahoo had to rely on Christian leaders to give him access to local people in order for the latter to trust him (with the danger that he mostly heard what locals thought their leaders would want them to say). He acknowledges that “when I presented parts of this book at various academic conferences I was often told that my analysis is sympathetic to the missionaries’ perspective” (18).

In his second chapter Sahoo presents an overview of Pentecostalism and then focuses on the spread of this version of Christianity among the Bhil tribe. “Spreading Like Fire” is the chapter title, and Sahoo searches out reasons for this growth. Tensions between Roman Catholic and Pentecostal versions of Christianity are indicated. Sahoo never discusses the meaning of “missionary” despite often using that term, but it is clear that these are not internationals, rather south Indians; and yet the term is also used of local tribal people who, it is stressed, are most effective in winning others to Christ (35–36).

The key to Pentecostal growth is not only signs and wonders, although that aspect is prominent (37), but also a transformative ethic against bad habits including alcoholism, immorality, and violence (38). Yet development is also important, as educational centers and health care are also part of the church planting program (40). Sahoo concludes his second chapter saying that “Pentecostal conversion has positively transformed the lives of the tribals and helped them develop a new identity that is assertive and empowering” (48).

In his third chapter Sahoo looks at various perspectives on tribal conversion, particularly that of the Hindu nationalists, the Christian missionaries, the tribal converts, and the unconverted tribals. His book shows clearly that much of the development work being undertaken by Hindu nationalists is a direct response to Christian work. The Christian missionary case for conversion as spiritual transformation is well presented. Their accusations against the Hindu

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

To their pleasant surprise, the compassionate and humane atmosphere of the church and the unique intermixing of daba (medicine) and dua (prayer) have acted as an alternative system of healthcare. —Sahoo

nationalist programs as true attempts at coercive conversion are presented. Sahoo concludes that

such accusations and counter-accusations by both Hindu nationalists and Christian missionaries have intensified tensions at the local level, which is often manifested in clashes between the two communities. (75)

Sahoo is sensitive to the perspectives of the local converts, and points out that most are not converts in the legal sense of having declared a new religion in court. There are various approaches to relating to unconverted tribals, ranging from a superiority complex in some cases to secret believing in others, alongside types of cultural hybridity (80–81). Conversion disrupts families and undermines social solidarity (85) but the movement continues on as real needs are met by the new churches in contrast to expensive and ineffective tribal sacrifices (82). Sahoo's lengthy summary of this chapter is worth quoting:

What these four narratives show is that conversion is not a straightforward practice in which Christian missionaries go in and seduce people with material benefits, but that there are multiple and contradictory discourses surrounding it, which makes the practice complicated. For example, though Hindu nationalists reject conversion as violence and as a threat to freedom of religion, they have actively carried out *gharwapsi* or reconversion programmes. Similarly, while missionaries advocate spiritual transformation and self-transcendence, they have justified their role through the idea of civilizing the savage, which undermines adivasi [tribal] agency and freedom. The converts' rights and freedom to change their religion have often followed an instrumentalist approach in which the call of modernity, the moral economy of miracles and material benefits have justified their shift to a new-found faith. Finally, Hindu adivasis, despite being victims of the failure of the state, are caught between their moral responsibility to protect their community identity/traditional faith and their desire for modernity. (86)

Why tribal women convert to Pentecostal Christianity is the focus of the fourth chapter. One of the strengths of the book is the interaction with sociological literature related to Christian tribal ministry, and this bibliographical data alone makes the book essential for libraries of Christian mission where such material is easily overlooked. Again, Sahoo is very sympathetic to these convert women, and references literature about Pentecostal women across the world. He allows some women to speak for themselves, and this chapter is a strong testament to the validity of tribal Pentecostal ministry. Healing of course is central, as both modern and traditional tribal medicine are expensive and

ineffective. But women are also empowered and see changes in their marriages:

Such life-transforming spiritual and material changes do not just defy the "material incentive hypothesis" of conversion; they also stand as testimonies and credible explanations of why tribal women take a deliberate decision, in spite of knowing the adverse consequences, to "become believers" of Pentecostalism and "make a break" with the traditional belief system that they followed for generations. (119)

This chapter is a powerful case study of what Donald McGavran called "redemption and lift," the positive changes that come in life and society when people recognize Christ as Lord.

The fifth chapter then focuses on the Hindutva opposition to conversion. Historical and political factors related to the problems of tribals are also outlined: "The tribals of Rajasthan as well as India suffer from widespread poverty and marginalisation and are deprived of citizenship and welfare entitlements" (126). The relationship of state power, Hindutva ideology and missionary activity is explained historically with many helpful nuances. Sahoo clearly shows that state power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been on the side of the anti-conversion forces of Hindu nationalism in Rajasthan in recent decades:

The BJP has provided ideological, political, economic and legal support to the organisations of the Sangh Parivar [family of Hindu nationalist organizations] that are active at the grassroots. The BJP has also considered conversion as a threat to its electoral support base among the tribals. It has therefore passed the anti-conversion law that has empowered activists of the Sangh Parivar to resist conversion, often leading to conflict and violence between the two communities. This shows how the BJP-led state in Rajasthan was also partially responsible for the rising violence against Christian communities. (157)

In a brief concluding chapter Sahoo provides a helpful summary of his findings. A clear summary of his perspective on the centrality of healing is quotable:

In a context where the indigenous shamanic system as well as city-based modern healthcare systems have been exploitative and the state has failed to provide basic health care services in the villages, the tribals have, as a last resort, visited the Pentecostal church for cure and blessing. To their pleasant surprise, the compassionate and humane atmosphere of the church and the unique intermixing of *daba* (medicine) and *dua* (prayer) have acted as an alternative system of healthcare. (159)

But much more than this has kept many tribals true to their Pentecostal faith. Again, there are various levels of

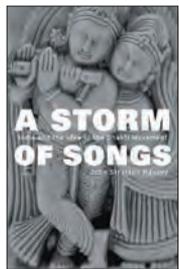
In the idea of the bhakti movement the nature or number of the deity/deities is secondary. What matters is the heartfelt, intrinsically social sense of connectedness that emerges in the worshipper. —Hawley

disconnect from traditional society, and there are various levels of opposition to the Pentecostal program both from traditional Christianity and from Hindu nationalists.

From an outsider to Christian denominational sparring, Sahoo has done a remarkable job of understanding and explaining the inner workings of Christianity and its missionary concern and functions. He has documented state complicity in anti-Christian activity and has allowed tribal Pentecostal women to speak for themselves about the validity and integrity of their faith. This is not an apology for Pentecostalism, as weaknesses are apparent and criticisms are aired. But it is a valuable analysis of the conversion controversy in south Rajasthan which frames the national (and international) debate on this topic.

A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement, by John Stratton Hawley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), xiv, 438 pp.

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard



Bhakti (devotion) has come to be recognized as a central concept in Hindu traditions and practices. This was a rather late discovery in the history of ideas, as nineteenth-century Indologists (encouraged by mostly Brahman informants) tended to focus on philosophy.¹

One of the pioneers of academic study of bhakti traditions, John Stratton Hawley of Columbia University, has written a history of the idea of the bhakti movement. This is a landmark study worthy of wide reading and deep discussion.

Hawley begins with an explanation of his “storm of songs” title, a phrase from Rabindranath Tagore. He then moves into an important discussion of bhakti:

“Bhakti” is usually translated as devotion, but if that word connotes something entirely private and quiet, we are in need of other words. Bhakti is heart religion, sometimes cool and quiescent but sometimes hot—the religion of participation, community, enthusiasm, song, and often personal challenge, the sort of thing that coursed through the Protestant Great Awakenings in the history of the United States. It evokes a widely shared religiosity for which institutional superstructures weren’t all that relevant, and which, once activated, could be historically contagious—a glorious disease of the collective heart. (2)

The focus on a community of bhaktas is important as it contrasts with sterile Christian analyses of Hindu traditions. Hawley specifically rebukes an aspect of this once-popular misrepresentation:

Outsiders like the great linguist George Grierson sometimes confused it [bhakti] for personal monotheism, and modern-day Hindus have often followed suit, but in the idea of the bhakti movement we have the affirmation that the nature or number of the deity/deities concerned is secondary. What matters is the heartfelt, intrinsically social sense of connectedness that emerges in the worshipper. That socially divine sense of connectedness traces a pulmonary system that makes the nation throb with life.² (4)

But “the idea of the bhakti movement” is the focus of this book, and Hawley finds the idea lacking in historical validity. In the process of examining this idea and its historical roots, far too many interesting insights are developed for mention in this review. This is truly a book that must be read by anyone interested in the idea of bhakti.

Hawley’s alternative history to the idea of the bhakti movement is rather nuanced; he proposes a “bhakti network” (295–312, referred to as a “crazy quilt,” 310) comprised of numerous bhakti movements rather than a single bhakti movement. This might seem rather trivial, but it represents a significant shift in thinking, and some of Hawley’s suggested reasons (see later in this review) for the widespread acceptance of the standard construct of “the bhakti movement” are certainly not trivial.

Hawley presents the case that the idea of a singular bhakti movement can be traced to Hazariprasad Dvivedi (1907–1979).³ The standard form of the story is increasingly well known from the *Bhagavata Mahatmya* (a short poem of praise for the *Bhagavata Purana*), how bhakti was born in south India and grew up in Karnataka before migrating to Maharashtra and Gujarat. Then after a weakening phase there was renewal in Brindavan (Krishna’s holy land, in what is now the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh). Chapter 2 of this book is a fascinating discussion and deconstruction of this presentation, particularly pointing out that the idea of a single bhakti movement regardless of the focus of devotion (i.e., one movement whether the focus is on Krishna, Ram, Shiva or *nirguna brahman*) is very far from the intent of the *Bhagavata Mahatmya*, which is a distinctly Vaishnava text (89).

Hawley shows that the great omission in the *Mahatmya*’s account of bhakti moving from south to north is the centrality of the Muslim role in the development of Brindavan

Hawley raises crucial issues in modern India like the Hindutva and Dalit movements. His book is deconstructing a paradigm of “Hindu history,” and it undermines the Hindutva effort to homogenize Hindu traditions.

itself (74ff.) This writing of the Muslim period out of Indian history helped motivate the embracing of the idea of a bhakti movement that united India. The British had developed a rather simplistic pattern of history whereby ancient Hindu empires were taken over by Muslim rulers and the British came in to restore proper rule after the decline of the Muslim period. The bhakti movement idea tied together ancient and modern India while also providing a unifying basis for the movement towards independence. Such nationalistic concerns continue to be important in sustaining the idea of a bhakti movement, and these broader concerns are indeed of interest and importance.

Yet the focus on many aspects of many bhakti movements provides the true treasures of this book. Central to the history, as Hawley sees it, are Surdas and Kabir. (Ramanand, esteemed by tradition as the main link between south and north Indian bhakti traditions, is investigated and the traditions of his centrality are shown to be without historical foundation.) The followers of Surdas and Kabir were so many and so prolific that Hawley concludes “the poets we know as Sur or Kabir are actually bhakti movements in themselves” (274).

There is no evidence that northern poets knew of the earlier southern bhakti poets (307) but there was much borrowing of ideas, styles and even whole poems across the various bhakti movements (297–305). Even these are important ideas that leave one far from the heart of the bhakti network. Throughout the book, stimulating comments appear like the following on the centrality of music to the bhakti idiom.

Consider, too, the musical idiom. Isn't it striking that the principal nodes in bhakti's remembered network—the bhaktas of this world—are communicators who operated in a universe where ordinary words ride frequencies of sound that set them apart from their quotidian existence? Here is a mode of interpersonal connection whose very existence depends upon auditory frameworks that set it apart from conversational speech. In this realm of heightened feedback antiphons are frequent, refrains are repeated, and audiences are not only implied but participate in the work of the singer. The way we know who Mirabai or Namdev “is” is to enter into the world they are believed to have created. We pipe into the patterns of vibration—songs—that end with the announcing of their names. Because we do so, this musical network is never really past; it is always present. The fact that these bhakti songs are so often addressed to God, giving plot to divine actions or otherwise relating the bhakta to bhagavan through a process of “puranic” recycling, creates a shortcut for memory. It invites the hearer to act as a character in the story—to reenter

it, absorb it, and in a way become the story itself. Thereby, as Christian Novetzke has pointed out, the singer-saint in question turns out to be, on closer inspection, a public. (296–7, referencing Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Saint Namdev in India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008; Indian edition *History, Bhakti and Public Memory: Namdev in Religious and Secular Traditions*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009).

In his closing chapter, almost necessarily, Hawley raises crucial issues in modern India like the Hindutva and Dalit movements. His book is deconstructing a paradigm of “Hindu history,” and it undermines the Hindutva effort to homogenize Hindu traditions. He clearly feels empathy for Dalits who share the low caste status of Ravidas (333); but this is not a book denigrating the marvel of the bhakti movements that arose and still thrive across India. The standard historical paradigm of a single bhakti movement may be too simplistic and contrived to withstand scrutiny, but Hawley's closing words reveal his true sentiment about bhakti:

Every nation requires a narrative of itself. This one, incubated in a nation, pushes well beyond that nation. It touches and tests every heart. (341) **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Geoffrey Oddie wrote that “There was, indeed, comparatively little discussion of *bhakti* among European scholars for the greater part of the nineteenth century and it was only in the 1880s and 1890s that Ramanuja's philosophy, ‘dualism,’ and the ideas implicit in the *bhakti* movement appear to have received much more systematic attention” (*Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793–1900*, New Delhi: Sage, 2006, 270).

² A “socially divine sense of connectedness” sounds like an excellent phrase for the New Testament ekklesia, but of course refers to bhaktas in Hindu traditions; one might be permitted to wish that this was a death knell to the idea that Hindu traditions have no community reality that resembles the church. Of course, the idea that the experience of bhakti is more important than the object of bhakti goes against biblical thought, which focuses on God and Christ as the object of bhakti.

³ Hawley uses a rather pedantic transliteration/spelling; more common is “Dwivedi.”

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.

South Asia: Redefining Unreached People Groups

For an interesting article looking at the statistics about unreached people groups and in specific a new term called "Frontier People Groups," see "[Why Mission Experts are Redefining Unreached People Groups](#)," in *Christianity Today*. Published in the May print issue, this *CT* editorial includes a link to Rebecca Lewis' color article in *IJFM* 35:4 (Winter 2018), "[Clarifying the Remaining Frontier Mission Task](#)." One of the more arresting facts from Lewis' article is that 82% of the world's frontier people groups are in Central and South Asia. Notice that the eight countries at grave risk referred to below are almost all in South Asia (the other country being China).

Why Melting Glaciers Matter in South Asia

Besides wars and violence, a major factor triggering migration flows appears to be climate change. A May 8, 2019 piece in *The Diplomat* entitled "[Why the Melting of the Hindu Kush and Himalayan Glaciers Matters](#)" cites some challenging predictions for eight primarily South Asian countries.

By the end of this century, however, climate change will have become the single biggest driver behind an unprecedented scale of migration and displacement across the Indian subcontinent, potentially with destabilizing effects. Already vulnerable to natural disasters, South Asia could be left grappling with millions of "climate refugees," regional conflicts, and militarized contests over precious resources like food and water... The landmark research predicts the mountain chain stretching from Pakistan to Myanmar will lose two-thirds of its ice fields by 2100 if global greenhouse gas emissions are not drastically curbed... The study, authored by 210 scientists from 22 countries over five years, warns that the loss of ice at this scale will have serious consequences for up to 2 billion people living across the region, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, China, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh.

In a January 2019 article in *National Geographic*, "[Climate Change Creates a New Migration Crisis for Bangladesh](#)," Tim McDonnell writes that

the number of Bangladeshis displaced by the varied impacts of climate change could reach 13.3 million by 2050, making it the country's number-one driver of internal migration, according to a March 2018 [World Bank report](#).

That does not take into consideration the number of external migrants (many Rohingya) hosted by Bangladesh. Genocidal actions by militant Buddhists in Myanmar led to close to a

million Rohingya to flee Myanmar for Bangladesh last year bringing the total number in that country up to 1.2 million. See "[For Rohingya Refugees, There's No Return in Sight](#)," in Human Rights Watch, June 5, 2019 (www.hrw.org).

Libya: A Refugee Hot Spot

Refugees are on the move in unprecedented numbers. "The risk of migrants and refugees becoming shipwrecked in the Mediterranean and dying at sea is the highest it has ever been." Find out why in an article in *The Guardian* June 9, 2019 called "[Mediterranean Will Be 'Sea of Blood' without Rescue Boats, UN Warns](#)." For a haunting pictorial essay on what it's like on board a rescue boat in the Mediterranean, take a look at *Time's* "[Rescue at Sea: A Week on Board a Rescue Recovery Ship](#)."

India: Aftermath of a Landslide

In language reminiscent of the Rwandan genocide (where Hutus called Tutsis "[cockroaches](#)," bbc.com, April 15, 2016), the *Associated Press* reported May 31, 2019 that the newly appointed Home Minister of India, former BJP party president Amit Shah and a Hindu nationalist hardliner, "referred to Muslim migrants from neighboring Bangladesh as '[termites](#)' and pledged to pass a [controversial citizens registry](#)" (npr.org, May 10, 2019) stripping millions of (Muslim) Indians of their citizenship. The context for this is Prime Minister Modi's landslide victory. See "[India's New Government Signals Hindu and India-First Goals](#)" (apnews.com, May 31, 2019). Minorities all across India are fearful of what's in store this next term. This is especially true of the 172 million Muslims (13.4%) and the [29 million Christians](#) (2.3%) in India (factsanddetails.com, "Christians in India"). Don't miss a highly personal article written in *The New Yorker* in March 2019 entitled "[The Violent Toll of Hindu Nationalism in India](#)." For a Christian reaction to Modi's victory, read Open Doors USA's director David Curry's response in "More Persecution in India? 4 Things to Know about Modi's Win," May 27, 2019, *The Christian Post*: it's "[an absolute tragedy](#)" for Christians. He goes on to say,

Since 2014, Hindu extremists have actively promoted hate toward [India's] Christian and Muslim minorities which has led to a tragic escalation of violence... Open Doors' local partners recorded 147 incidents of violence against Christians in India in 2014, but they have recorded 216 violent incidents in India in the first quarter of 2019 alone, including two murders.

The Gospel on Camels

From the William Carey Publishers comes a new book about nomads worldwide called *To the Ends of the Earth*, written by Scottish nomad expert Malcolm Hunter. See the ad in this issue on p. 68. At www.missionbooks.org/blogs/news/ he is featured in a video, "Author Malcolm Hunter Shares Jesus Across Africa." For background, check out the April 2019 article on the history website ThoughtCo entitled, "[The Great Rivalry Between Nomads and Settled People in Asia](#)." **IJFM**

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

Articles in IJFM 36:2

	Lesson 1: The Living God is a Missionary God (B)	Lesson 5: Unleashing the Gospel (B)	Lesson 10: How Shall They Hear? (C)	Lesson 11: Building Bridges of Love (C)	Lesson 14: Pioneer Church Planting (S)
Who Is Muhammad: Dead Man or Living Light? Colin Bearup (pp. 59–67)			X		X
Contextualizing the Gospel in the Fear-Power World of Folk Buddhists James E. Morrison (pp. 69–75)			X		X
Loaded Language: Missiological Considerations for Appropriating Political Rhetoric Alan Howell and Jessica Markwood (pp. 77–83)		X	X		
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"And the Lord Appeared": Missiology Meets Ancient Near Eastern Religions Kevin Higgins and Joel Hamme (pp. 93–97)			X	X	
The Religion of Science: A Timely Excerpt on a Global Frontier Ralph D. Winter (p. 98)	X		X		

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