

# Missio-Logoi, Contextualization





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# American Society of Missiology

Missio-Logoi, Contextualization

Edited by  
Robert A. Danielson  
William L. Selvidge



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# Introduction

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ROBERT DANIELSON

In 2015 the American Society of Missiology took as its primary theme, the topic of *missio-logoi*, which can be understood as the forms of human expression that can portray Christian mission, especially in cases going beyond simple speech. How do Christians communicate the claims of the gospel and encourage discipleship? Is it only through the spoken word or the written text? What kinds of complications might even these traditional forms encounter? In many ways, the theme of *missio-logoi* is also closely related to the topic of contextualization as well, since communication itself must often be contextualized.

This volume of the working papers includes a fascinating discussion of potential problems early missionaries made in the translation of scripture in Burmese mission history by Cope Suan Pau. Marilyn Färdig Whiteley looks at the life and ministry of Isabel Crawford who, though deaf, was able to minister to the Kiowa people through Indian sign language. *The JESUS Film* is the subject of Colin Yuckman's exploration of the communication problems of multi-media in mission. Paul de Neui contributes an investigation into an interesting example of ritual communication and contextualization in Thailand involving tying strings onto people's wrists as a way of blessing. Moe Moe Nyunt presents an Asian approach to meditation as a key corrective to traditional missiological views of the *Missio Dei*, while Stephen Bailey examines the powerful influence of the written text through Gilliland's seminal work *The Word Among Us* and its impact on contextualization.

In this work, we are presenting a new endeavor of the American Society of Missiology. During annual meetings, many professionals, practitioners, and students present informative papers in a variety of different areas. Often these papers are works in progress, not quite ready for publication, or are ideas looking for professional feedback. Sometimes these papers are just areas expressing the many side interests of the presenters. In most of these cases, these works will not be published as formal articles in *Missiology: An International Review* or other academic journals, but they still represent excellent ideas and works in progress that can stimulate the missiological community. To keep these ideas alive and active, the ASM has decided to launch a series of volumes entitled "working papers." These papers have been presented at the annual meeting and the authors have polished

them based on feedback received at the annual meeting, however these papers have not been peer-reviewed and should still be read in that light. They represent current ongoing academic thinking by current and rising missiologists and are presented here to encourage ongoing academic debate and critical thinking in the field of missiology.





# **Reflecting the Missio- Logoi of the First Overseas American Missionary:**

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**Making a Christian Mission Language  
for Burmese-speaking People**

COPE SUAN PAU

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## ABSTRACT

The first overseas missionary from the American Continent reached Burma/Myanmar, Southeast Asia, in early nineteenth century. Adoniram Judson made his missionary translation into the Burmese vernacular at the time. Today after the bicentenary commemoration of the first overseas American missionary's arrival to Myanmar, by sacredly using the Judson version of the Holy Bible in the Burmese language, Christian Burmese has almost disappeared. This paper determines that Judson made his missionary language in the Buddhist Burmese context instead of the animistic traditional Burmese context. Why did Judson employ Buddhist Pali-Burmese in making his mission language? Why did he choose a Buddhist approach in his missionary translation? All the other ethnic groups in Myanmar such as Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lisu, etc., have their rapid and dynamic conversions from their primal religions to the Christian faith through 'translating the message' of the Christian gospel into their animistic traditional context.

This paper argues that translating the message should be made in the traditional context, i.e., spiritism in the religious systems of the primal religions. This paper probes the mission languages employed by the first overseas American missionary in the early nineteenth century in Burma among the dominant Burman tribe. Thereby, it contributes a strategic proposal for the use of the language of Christian mission in contemporary Burmese vernacular in the traditional context.

Key Words: missionary translation, conversion, primal religion, mission language, traditional context

## INTRODUCTION

When the first overseas missionary from America made his *missio-logoi* into the indigenous language, he made his entire missionary translation totally in the context of Buddhism. Adoniram Judson made his missional approach in the Buddhist context instead of the indigenous traditional context i.e. primal religious beliefs and systems.

Why did Judson use a Buddhist approach rather than animist approach in his missionary translation? He was well known as a genius and devout missionary translator. He not only translated the whole Bible from the original languages into the Burmese vernacular at the time, but also made several classic dictionaries such as Pali-English, English-Pali, English-Burmese, Burmese-English and grammar books such as Pali Grammar, Burmese Grammar, etc. His classic usages of *missio-logoi* have been problematic throughout the ages in counterpart with Theravada Buddhism in the Burmese vernacular. This paper claims that an appropriate *missio-logoi* in today's Burmese vernacular is urgently needed for 'missionary translation' among the Burmese-speaking-peoples.

### I. AN IMPACT OF THE MISSION LANGUAGE OF THE FIRST AMERICAN MISSIONARY UPON THE BURMESE VERNACULAR

Adoniram Judson pioneered missionary translation among the Buddhist Burmans in early nineteenth century. [Judson arrived in Yangon (Rangoon) on July 13, 1813.] Judson directly employed *Paya / Paya-Th'kbin*, the title of the Buddha to identify with his Christian God. Why did Judson employ the atheistic term of Burmese Buddhism to designate the theistic Christian God?<sup>1</sup> We shall reflect in more detail on the missionary translation

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1 The present study claims the Buddha as an atheist. Buddha, from the perspective of Theravada Buddhists, is an atheist. He was/is regarded as a great teacher, a guide, a model of moral practice, etc. in Theravada Buddhism.

#### 4 | Reflecting the Missio-Logoi of the First Overseas American Missionary:

of Judson in his Burmese vernacular mission language later. Judson would simply attempt to introduce a new religion to the Buddhist Burmans by identifying the Christian God with the Buddha employing the atheistic term *Paya* / *Paya-Th'kbin*. In fact, it seems that he intended to designate the Christian God or YHWH with *Paya* the title of Buddha as the Most High of the native Burmans—Burmese-speaking people. Technically speaking, it has been a problematic naming of the Christian God among the Buddhist Burmans. The mission languages of Judson in the Burmese vernacular have been confusing receivers confused in terms of converting process from an existing cognitive structure of traditional religion to a new religious cognition through his missionary translation.

For example, a Burman convert has to be baptized in the strange and confused names of *Paya* the Father [Khamitaw *Paya*], *Paya* the Son [Thataw *Paya*] and *Paya* the Holy Spirit [Thanshinhaw Winyintaw *Paya*] into a new religion. Then what does it mean by *Paya* or *Paya-Th'kbin*? From where did the Buddhist Burmans adopt this term for the title of the Buddha? We shall have to trace here the origin of the term *Paya*. As a matter of fact, no one seems to know from where the term *Paya* originated.

In Burmanized Buddhism, there are three precious gems, namely the Tri-ratna: they are 1) *Paya* [*Bubra*]; 2) *Taya* [*Tara*]; 3) *Sangha* [*Thanga*]. *Paya* means the Buddha himself, *Taya* means the teaching of the Buddha—dhamma [Sanskrit dharma], and *Sangha* means the monk—bhikkhu. The *Paya*, *Taya*, *Thanga* in the Tri-ratna is arranged in consequently hierarchical order. Therefore, *Paya* the Buddha is obviously the atheistic Most High in Burmanized Buddhism. From where did the Burmanized Buddhist terms originate, then? Enriquez argues, “The Burmese words *Phayal/Paya* (Buddha), *Sangha* (Assembly); *Neikban* (Nirvana); *Pu-t'o* (Pagoda); *Kyaung* (Monastery); *Shan* or *Shin* (A Novice); *Hlu* (to give Charity); and *Shiko* (to worship) are not Pali or even Sanskrit, but are derived respectively from the Chinese words *Fu-ya*; *Sengchia*; *Niek-p'an*; *Fu-t'o*; *Kung*; *Shang-jen*; *lu*; and *shih-k;ao*.”<sup>2</sup>

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2 C. M. Enriquez, *Pagan: Being the first connected account in English of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century Capital of Burma, with the History of a few of its most important Pagodas*, (Rangoon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1914), 35-36.

When the first American overseas missionary made his missionary translation in the nineteenth century, he employed *Paya-Th'kbin* using the Burmese vernacular name of the Buddha as the Christian God. This has been problematic in proclaiming the Christian gospel to the Burmese-speaking people and also in having inter-faith dialogue between Buddhist intellectuals and Christian preachers due to the employment of the same name for different deities. We shall see a reflection on the nineteenth century Protestant missionary translation later. We argue herewith that in Buddhized Myanmar, even though the people therein technically and/or officially venerate the Buddha in the Theravada tradition, they still practically embrace their primal religious rituals of supernatural beliefs today. We have seen an argument above that the Burmese term *Paya* [Buhra] is derived from *Fu-ya* the Chinese term. If so, does *Fu-ya* imply the Buddha?

Some traditions say that *Paya* is the corrupted word of *Purusha* the Sanskrit term for 'Cosmic Being'— *i.e.* Purusha - pursha - pura - Puhra - Buhra —whereas some would say it is a corrupted word of Buddha— *i.e.* Buddha - Budha - Buhra -Puhra - Buhra [then Buhra is pronounced as *Paya*]. At whatever rate the origins of the word may be, the indigenous understanding of *Paya* has so far been the title of the Buddha in Myanmar. In fact, *Paya* has been regarded as the traditional title for the Buddha in the semantic Burman language spelling such as [Phura], [Bhura]. They call the Buddha as Buddha *Paya*.<sup>3</sup>

Now, we shall have a glimpse of an inscription written in the early time of the Bagan period in order to trace the genesis of *Paya* [Phura], [Bhura] or *Paya-Th'kbin*. It was Rajakumar, the son of King Kyansittha, who wrote the inscription. The famous Rajakumar inscription, rather well known as the Myazedi inscription, was written in 1113 C.E.<sup>4</sup> What is interesting in the inscription is the description of the name or title of the Buddha. In the very beginning, it describes Buddha as *Pusha Th'kbin* and in the end, it

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3 For the term *Paya*, the present study investigates its origin and the derivation via interviews and conversations with Buddhist scholars who are presently pursuing higher degrees in Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka and India. Shan and Siamese term for *Paya* is pronounced as *Phra* [P'ra].

4 Some versions would date it 1112.

describes the future yet coming Buddha as *Ari-madeya Paya-Th'khin* in the vernacular Burmese term.<sup>5</sup> The inscription was written in four languages: Pyu, Mon, Burmese, and Pali on each face.

It is interesting that consequently the king is called *Bayin* [Bhurin], and his queen, *Mi-Paya* [Mi-Phura]. But the queen ruler [ruling queen] is called *Bayin-Ma* [Bhurin-Ma]. Now, in regards of the word [Bhura] *Paya*, we shall have a glimpse at the contribution of a famous Burman historian, namely, Dr. Than Tun, former professor of History Department in Mandalay University. Than Tun thinks first of all that the Burmese word “purhā” *i.e.* [Buhra] *Paya* “meaning the exalted one is probably derived from *vara*.”<sup>6</sup> “Generally,” he explains, “it denotes Buddha himself as a pagoda where the bodily relics of Buddha are enshrined.”<sup>7</sup> He further writes:

But a king is also addressed as *purhā* [*Paya*] and his queen called by that name with a *mi* [or *ami*] prefix denoting female as *mipurhā* or *amipurhā*. To show the difference between the spiritual and temporal lords, some scribes of old Burma took special care to say *mlat cwa so purhā*—the most exalted *purhā*, when they wanted to signify Buddha and *purhā rhan*—the *purhā* who is living, to denote the then reigning king. The king is also mentioned *purhā lon*—the Boddhisattva [Pali Boddhisatta].<sup>8</sup>

The Burman, at any rate, calls or knows Buddha as *Paya* — Bhura and king as *Bayin* — Bhuryin today in their semantic language traditionally. In fact, the origin of the term *Paya* is obscure like *Pathian*. No doubt, *Paya* has been obviously used in the vernacular Burmese language as the title of the Buddha since the early Bagan period in the eleventh century. Whenever the term *Paya* is employed it implies the Buddha himself first, and the kings, and the monks also. The Buddha images and pagodas also are called simply

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5 Pe Maung Tin, “Myazedi Inscription” an article in *Nawarat Ko-thwe* (Yangon: Sabei Oo Sarpay, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1974), 18-27.

6 Than Tun, “Religion in Burma, AD 1000 - 1300 *Journal of Burma Research Society* Vol. 42, part 2. December 1959), 50.

7 *Ibid.* 50-51.

8 *Ibid.*

*Paya*, for example, *Shwedagon Paya*, *Sule Paya*, *Mahamuni Paya*, etc., in the Burmese vernacular. The king is entitled as *Bayin* — Bhuryin similar to Bhura as most high in the hierarchical positions. Thus, the Buddha in Myanmar has been called as *Myatswa Paya*, meaning Glorious *Paya* the Buddha, and the king or the monarch, as Bayin Min Myat meaning Glorious King *Bayin* — Bhuryin.

Then why did Judson employ *Paya* to identify with the Christian God in his vernacular operation? Was it due to being the Most High of the Buddhist Burmans? Alternatively, did Judson invent a combined term *Paya-Th'kbin* regarding this as the theistic Cosmic Lord? In fact, strictly speaking *Paya* has no similar characteristics with the Christian God both in “nature” and in “person”. *Paya* is not a name of any theistic deities in the semantic Burmese vernacular language. It simply implies the Buddha and his images. Therefore, the present study would argue that the employment of *Paya*, the title of Buddha to identify with the Christian God in the early-nineteenth-century-Myanmar is inappropriate. In addition, the invented name *Paya-Th'kbin* meaning *Paya* the Lord for Christian God does neither imply to be a creator nor a god. Rather it has no specific meaning in Burmese vernacular language except its implication of the Buddha as master and lord. Accordingly, one sees that Christian faith has not properly expanded among the Buddhist Burmans in the name of *Paya Th'kbin* in Myanmar today. The missionary churches vista established among the Burmans in the colonial time have to survive today with handful of worshippers who have almost disappeared.

## II. A REFLECTION ON THE PROTESTANT CHRISTIAN MISSION LANGUAGES EMPLOYED AMONG THE BURMANS

The *missio logoi* of the missionary translation among the Burmans has so far been problematic in the cross-cultural process. Adoniram Judson's employment in the missionary translation of the atheistic divine name *Paya-Th'kbin* for the Christian God has been problematic since the very first impression given to the contemporary Burman king at the time in early nineteenth century. When Judson made his first visit to the well-known Ava

palace of the last Burman dynasty, he met King Bagyidaw, who might also perhaps had been called Bagyidaw-Paya, son of Bodaw-Paya, son of Alaung-Paya the founder of Konbaung dynasty.<sup>9</sup> It was by the end of January 1820, after almost seven years since his arrival to Myanmar, that Judson greeted the Burman monarch the first time at the palace. There the first impression of the Burmese vernacular name for Christian God *Paya-Th'khin* made the emperor furious. Judson, indeed, would attempt to submit the Holy Bible already translated into the Burmese vernacular version and a gospel tract covered with gold leaf as a petition to the emperor. The Burman monarch, while reading the first two sentences of the tract in his own hand, would dash it onto the floor angrily. What was the reason that the king responded emotionally? It was obviously due to two facts: 1) the employment of *Htawara-Paya* meaning Eternal *Paya*, that Judson formulated and employed as Christian God, made the king lose his temper. Note that there has neither been eternity *Htawara-tara* in the Pali-Burmese context nor eternal *Paya* Pali-Burmese *Htawara-paya* [Buhra] in the concept of Buddhism; and 2) it also directly counters the monarchical title *Paya*—*i.e.* the king *Bayin* [Buhryin] was regarded as *Paya* [Buhra].

There has been neither eternity nor any eternal thing that is permanent in the concept of Buddhism. The tract that Judson petitioned the king to read went something like this: “There is one Being [eternal God] who exists eternally; who is exempt from sickness, old age, and death; who is, and was, and will be, without beginning and without end. Besides this, the true God [*Paya-Th'khin*], there is no other God [*Paya*] [...]”<sup>10</sup>

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9 The founder of the dynasty was well-known as U Aungzeya, a chief of a village, who became the monarch with the title Alaung-Paya, meaning the becoming or future Buddha. The son of Alaung-Paya, a successor of the dynasty, was named with the title Bodaw-Paya wishing to be Buddhahood. Now, King Bagyidaw also might had been undoubtedly wishing the Buddha-hood as a monarch. Thus, *Paya*, Judson's best choice for the name of God for the Burman encounters with the title of the monarch.

10 Courtney Anderson, *To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson* (Toronto: Little, Brown & Company Ltd., 1956), 251. Also see, Maung Shwe Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle* (Rangoon: Burma Baptist Convention, Board of Publication, 1963), 26.



Thus, the missionary translation of the name of God in the Burmese vernacular was obviously confronted and rejected at the first impression by the Buddhist Burman monarch. Nevertheless, Judson and the Protestant missionaries stubbornly would employ *Paya-Th'kbin*, the Buddhist atheistic term, as the Christian God. We have seen that *Paya* is not a Burmese vernacular term equivalent to the Christian God. It is just the honorary title of the Buddha. Then why did Judson make his choice to employ the atheistic term *Paya-Th'kbin* to designate the Christian God? Were not there any options to designate the Christian God among the deities of the indigenous religious system? It seems that Judson had to choose *Paya*, the atheistic masculine term to identify with the name of Christian God, since he found no other name for a native Supreme Being in the semantic Burmese vernacular language and their religious system. In other words, there has been no Supreme Being in Burman Buddhism to be identified with the Christian God. It is therefore obvious that Judson had no other options for the name of the Christian God when he began his missionary translation. It seems that eventually he had to employ the atheistic term *Paya* regarding the Most High of the Buddhists. The problem is that employing *Paya* as the Christian God in missionary translation leads to controversial interfaith dialogue with the Buddhist Burman intellectuals. Judson himself had the first experience in his interfaith dialogue with Buddhist intellectuals. Unlike the hill tribes, every Burman at the time had already socially professed Theravada Buddhism when Judson attempted to make his missionary translation. Obviously, he would surely find that there had been no ideas of the existence of a Supreme Being or a Creator in the religious cognition of the Buddhist Burmans. Eventually, Judson, in order to prove his gospel message, would claim the existence of an Eternal *Paya*. He then thus formulated a new vocabulary in the semantic Burmese spelling *Htaɽwarah-Paya* in which *Htaɽwarah* is an adopted Pali vocabulary for eternal/eternity—which the Buddhist Burman intellectuals would have never accepted in interfaith dialogue, while he would have approached in person-to-person teaching as his usual method.

Note that the Theravadins do not believe the Buddha to be “a person who exists permanently”.<sup>11</sup> There is no permanent thing in the Theravada

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11 Phra Sriyansophon, Bhikkhu Sugandha, Paul Dennison ed., *Phra Buddha Dhammacakra* (Bangkok: Phra Buddha Dhammacakra Creation Committee, 2001), 29.

concept. Impermanence (anicca) is a critical teaching within Theravada Buddhism.<sup>12</sup>

Until now, we have only reflected on the transliteration of the Christian God for the Burmese-speaking people. There have been many inappropriate terminologies in the missionary translation of Judson in the Buddhist context. This study would argue that the missionary translation in the Buddhist context has been inappropriate in terms of theologizing for the indigenous people. We argue that taking an animistic approach in terms of translating the message of Jesus Christ into the Burman animist context would be appropriate and intelligible.

Christianity has already been contextualized into the early nineteenth century Burmese contemporary vernacular. The present study would argue Christianity is cannot to be contextualized into contemporary Burmese vernacular today, but rather it proposes to theologize the indigenous people through their primal religious cognition. To do so, one needs to comprehend that the Burmese-speaking-peoples are more animistic in their practical life. Now let us take a glimpse of the animistic context among the Burmese-speaking-peoples.

### III. FUTURE POSSIBILITY OF CHRISTIAN MISSION IN THE REGION

The American Protestant Christian missionaries had misidentified the divine name of God when they used the atheistic masculine enlightened one as the equivalent to God for the Theravada Buddhists in the early nineteenth century. Thus after almost two centuries of employing the

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12 For a more detailed study of Buddhist Burman intellectual response on the Christian mission language, see Cope Suan Pau, *Anthropological Considerations for Mission Education among different Ethnic in Myanmar* in *Transforming Teaching for Mission: Educational Theory and Practice: The 2014 Proceedings of the Association of Professors of Missions*, ed. by Robert A. Danielson and Benjamin L. Hartley (First Fruits Press, *The Academic Open Press of Asbury Theological Seminary*, Wilmore, KY: 2014), 230-245.

atheistic term *Paya* as the divine name of God, Christianity in Myanmar has been declining together with its neighboring Theravada countries such as Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. After some centuries-long Christian mission enterprises,<sup>13</sup> today the twenty-first century sees modern Suvarnabhumi still having a very low percentage of Christianity in her 'land of gold' with Myanmar at 4% Christians (3% Protestants, 1% Catholics); Thailand even a less than 1% (perhaps 0.7%); Laos 1.3%; and Cambodia 2.0% out of tens of millions. The status quo of the Christian percentage in the region shows obviously the need of a new way of doing Christian mission. At the same time, it also challenges the viability of the old colonial missionary translations of the Protestant missionaries. In Myanmar, for example, the colonial name of God *Paya-Th'kbin* has been employed throughout the postcolonial era in local Christian mission. Today it seems that Godself needs a new vernacular name so that God can be introduced anew in this new millennium in the region. Then God shall find a proper way to be accessed among the Theravadins with a new and proper name. What shall then be a proper name of God for the future Christian mission in Myanmar and neighboring Southeast Asia?

Regarding the future Christian mission and the cross-cultural missionary translation in the region of Southeast Asia, the present study would like to claim that the colonial name of God should be changed. *Paya*, *Pbra*, *Phayao*, etc. is, in fact, the vernacular name of the Buddha in the region. Not only the name of God, but also the other names of vernacular terms in the missionary translation ought to be revised in the cross-cultural vernacular operation for the twenty-first century Christian mission in the region. A semantic reconfiguration has been needed for today's vernacular language in terms of missionary translation. For example, in Myanmar, "angels" is translated in its literal meaning as the agents of heaven, namely, *Kaung-gin-t'man* which is unintelligible in the vernacular Burmese. There is no *Kaung-gin-t'man*, meaning the angel of heavens, in the Burmese

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13 Myanmar is going to commemorate next year (2013) the bicentennial anniversary of arrival of her first Protestant missionary to her land. Note that Myanmar Protestant Christianity makes up some three percent of that population with the majority being Chin, Kachin, Karen, and other minority hill tribe ethnic groups. The Christian Burman church has to survive with a handful of members who have almost disappeared. There are also other minority citizens' churches such as the Chinese Methodist, the Tamil Baptist, and the Telegu Methodist churches.

vernacular language. Instead, why did Judson not employ *Nat* the vernacular term for angels who are spirits and resides in the heavenly realms, namely Tavatimsa—“(Trayastrimsa in Sanscrit and Tawadentha in Burmese) Heaven of the old Indian and now Burmese Buddhism”<sup>14</sup>—in the belief of the indigenous primal religious system? There are generally two categories of *Nats*: good *Nats* and evil *Nats* in the animistic Burman belief.<sup>15</sup> If Judson and the American missionaries made a survey on the animistic belief of the indigenous people, then they would have surely discovered Buddhism in Myanmar was a mixed religion with animism in Hinduized culture.

It is interesting that *Thagya Min*, meaning literally “king of omniscience”—might be understood as an all-knowing and all-hearing spirit, who had been appointed as the chief of the 36 *Nats* by the first monarch Anawrahta in the eleventh century Christian era when Theravada Buddhism was first Burmanized at Bagan city. Together with *Thagya Min*, the modern Burmese societies in Theravada Buddhism, have the 37 lords of *Nats* in their traditional rituals. Then what has been the role of *Thagya Min* in Burmanized Buddhism? Sir Richard Temple would surely no doubt help us understand the role of the King of the *Nats* in Burmanized Buddhism:

The Pali word Tavatimsa means “belonging to the Thirty-Three” and the Thirty-Three compose an Order of supernatural beings with Sakra, *i.e.* Thagya, as their head, just as he is head of the modern Burmese Order of the Thirty-Seven Nats. In another view, which is a confused reference to the old Indian idea of the changing personality from time to time of the chief of a Buddhist heaven, every one of the Thirty-Three is a Thagya, and in this view the head of the Thirty-Seven Nats for the time being is one of the Thagyas.<sup>16</sup>

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14 Sir Richard C. Temple, *The Thirty-Seven Nats* (London: W. Griggs, 1906), 34.

15 Angels are known as *Nat-tha* or *Nat-thami*, masculine and feminine terms respectively in gender in Burmese vernacular language.

16 Sir Richard C. Temple, *The Thirty-Seven Nats* (London: W. Griggs, 1906), 34.

It is obvious that Judson and the Protestant missionaries totally ignored the traditional beliefs of *Nat* in their colonial era cross-cultural missionary translation process. Furthermore, Judson's Burmese version of the Bible is a Pali-Burmese version translated in the early nineteenth century. Consider that the Myanmar church is still using the Judson version of Burmese Bible. Judson was distinguished as the "Bible missionary" to the Burmans spending his whole life, as Elisha I. Abbott narrates, "He spent almost his life to give the Bible to the heathen in their own tongue."<sup>17</sup>

Accordingly, we would like to argue that a new name of God is needed for the twenty-first century cross-cultural missionary translation among the Theravadins, so that the name of God will be appropriate and intelligible. The present study would like to suggest that the name of God should be translated directly in the literal meaning of the creator to the Theravadins, who technically and doctrinally deny the existence of a creator or a Supreme Being. For Myanmar, the name of the Christian God ought to be a kind of *Phan-zin-shin* simply meaning "creator" in semantic the Burmese modern vernacular language. In addition, the Almighty One [Hebrew *El-shaddai*] ought to be translated as *Tago-Shin* meaning the "one who has full power and authority."

It is obvious that approaching the "heathens" through their atheistic Theravada faith was ineffective in missionary translation of the Christian faith. Then in order to designate the Christian theistic God, did Judson attempt to find any theistic name of supernatural beings in the animistic beliefs of the Burmans? We do not know if Judson investigated Burmese supernaturalism. It is therefore rather obvious that Judson absolutely ignored supernatural beliefs and its huge practice in the *Nat*-worship ritual among Buddhists—the indigenous Burmans. What if Judson had made his missionary "vernacular operation" targeted to the belief of the existence of supernatural beings in the *Nat*-worship ritual among the Buddhist Burmans? Could then, for instance, *Thagya Min*, the imported Indra of Hindu [Sakka in Pali], be a candidate for the Christian God for the Burmans? Kachins and Chins, the Tibeto-Burman-speaking cousins of the Burmans, have already

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17 Elisha I. Abbott, "Missionary Sense" in Walter N. Wyeth, *A Galaxy in the Burman Sky* (New York: Ward & Drummond, 1892), 188.

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converted to Christianity worshipping God in the name of the Supreme Being in their primal religious system. A proper name of a Supreme Being is needed for the Christian God among the Burmans today. Like the Kachin terms *Karai-Kasang*, *Phan Wa Ningsang*, *Chye Wa ningchyang*, *Phan tagya*; and the Chin term *Pathian*, Karen term *Y'wa*, Christian God needs a new name in Burmese. It might be *Phan-zin-shin* directly translated as the “creator.”

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# **Preaching in Silence:**

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**Isabel Crawford and Indian Sign Language**

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## ABSTRACT

Isabel Crawford (1865-1961) was born in Canada, the daughter of a Baptist preacher and his wife. A severe illness when she was eighteen caused her to lose most of her hearing, but nevertheless she enrolled in the Baptist Missionary Training School in Chicago in 1891. Following her graduation she was appointed a missionary to the Kiowa in southwestern Oklahoma. Because of her deafness, she learned Plains Indian sign language. Her ability to communicate with signs contributed significantly to the great success of her mission. In 1906 she left Oklahoma, and for many years she did deputations work on behalf of the American Baptist Women's Home Mission Society. She regularly concluded her presentations by signing the Twenty-third Psalm while in Indian dress, thus becoming a bridge between her audience and "the others" who needed their support. Her silent preaching had helped create a strong bond with the Kiowas, and following her death in Ontario, her body was returned to Oklahoma for burial in the Indian cemetery on her mission.

In the fall of 1883, John Crawford left Rapid City, Manitoba, to take up a pastorate in the Dakota Territory. He left behind his wife, Sarah, and his eighteen-year-old daughter, Isabel, to close up Prairie College, which he had founded three years earlier. All Baptist theological education was to be centralized in Toronto, and John Crawford's dream had failed. Isabel worked hard, caring for the requirements of the few students who remained in order to take in the harvest, but later in the fall she became ill. For six months she lay in bed with pain and fever. The doctor put her on a diet of milk and gave her quinine. Gradually she recovered, but the quinine that she credited with saving her life also robbed her of much of her hearing. That impairment would remain with her for the rest of her life.

Yet despite her extremely limited hearing, Isabel Crawford spent thirteen years as a successful missionary for the American Baptists among the Kiowa Indians in southwestern Oklahoma. There she learned to communicate in Plains Indian sign language. After leaving her Oklahoma post, she became a popular speaker on behalf of the Women's Home Mission Society, and she regularly closed her presentations by signing the Twenty-third Psalm. This paper explores the impact of Crawford's use of sign language both in her mission activity and in her long career of deputation work after she left the Oklahoma reservation.

Isabel Crawford was born in 1865 in Cheltenham, Ontario, north of Toronto. Her parents were Irish and had emigrated to Canada in about 1858; her father, John Crawford, was a Baptist minister. Isabel grew up in Woodstock, Ontario, after her father became professor of theology at the Canadian Literary Institute there. At sixteen, she moved with her parents to Manitoba when her father opened Prairie College outside Rapid City, Manitoba. After its closing, she lived with her parents in the Dakota Territory, where her father held a pastorate. Then her parents returned to Canada. John Crawford held a pastorate in Wingham, Ontario, for eight months. Then he retired, and Isabel's parents moved in with one of their daughters and her family in Toronto. Both parents put high values on education and on Christian service, so it is not surprising that, in 1891, when she was no longer

needed at home, Isabel Crawford entered the Baptist Missionary Training School in Chicago.

Crawford graduated from the training school in June of 1893. Hoping for a foreign posting, she was dismayed when the Women's Home Mission Society appointed her to the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache reservation in the Oklahoma Territory. The secretary of the society explained that, unlike foreign missionaries who were expected to learn the local language, missionaries among Native Americans worked with interpreters so, she wrote, "you being deaf wont [sic] interfere with your work." Crawford observed, "Why I never thought being deaf any handicap. I just took it for granted."<sup>1</sup> Reluctantly she agreed to take up her assignment. (Gradually she not only accepted it but became closely attached to the Kiowas and also a strong advocate of Indian rights, but that's another paper.)

Isabel Crawford and another young missionary arrived at Elk Creek on November 23, and a week later they held their first sewing meeting. Lone Wolf, the Kiowa chief whose appeal two years earlier had brought Baptist missionaries to the reservation, interpreted. He did so "with so much feeling," wrote Crawford, "that I could scarcely keep the tears back."<sup>2</sup> But Lone Wolf had his own responsibilities, and Crawford needed a regular interpreter. In August of 1894, as she prepared to end her first furlough and return to Elk Creek, she was happy to learn from the mission society that she would have one who would "go to all meetings" with her.<sup>3</sup> But when she

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1 Notebook 15 [1951], Barbara Cross McKinnon collection, Guelph, Ontario.

2 Journal 1893–1894, November 30, 1893, 37. Most of the writings of Isabel Crawford are found in the Isabel Crawford Collection of the denominational archives of the American Baptist Historical Society (ABHS). The collection includes Crawford's journals and diaries from 1891 through 1948 as well as one unlabeled journal from 1954. In addition, the collection contains a number of notebooks, generally three-ring binders. Any footnote that does not include another specific reference is from the Isabel Crawford Collection of the ABHS. Each note gives the name of the book (e.g., Journal 1902), followed by whatever specific location is provided; sometimes the date of the entry is available, sometimes the page number(s), and sometimes both. (Crawford's final journals are in the possession of her grandniece Barbara Cross McKinnon, of Guelph, Ontario.)

3 Journal 1893–1894, August 9, 1894, 98.

returned, George Hicks, Baptist missionary at Elk Creek, often required the interpreter's services, and Crawford was left without anyone to help her "tell the gospel."<sup>4</sup> She was frustrated.

There was, however, another possibility. Europeans arriving in the sixteenth century in the area that became Texas and northern Mexico observed Native Americans using a sign language that facilitated communication between tribes with different spoken languages. What came to be known as Plains Indian sign language was widely used among the Kiowas and their neighbors.

One of the Elk Creek men, Koptah, felt sorry for Crawford because of her lack of hearing, and he decided to help her. Thus he took it upon himself to teach her sign language, coming from his teepee almost every day to teach her new signs.<sup>5</sup> By the time she left for her first furlough, in June of 1894, she had been able to communicate somewhat using signs,<sup>6</sup> and after she returned, her education continued. During the following months she reported in her journal that she had "carried on quite a little sign conversation" and "had a long talk on different subjects, all by signs."<sup>7</sup>

Crawford preferred to lead meetings using an interpreter, but many times none was available. Sometimes George Hicks needed the interpreter, and other times the interpreter had functions to perform elsewhere. One day, for instance, "[t]wo white men came to buy horses," and the interpreter went to facilitate their negotiations rather than to the meeting that Crawford was leading. She wrote in her journal, "Billy tried it but preferred my signing."<sup>8</sup> Another time an interpreter from another mission was present, but he "wouldn't interpret for he said all could understand my sign talking so I went ahead."<sup>9</sup> Thus she began to use sign language to tell people about what they termed the Jesus Road.

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4 Journal 1893–1894, November 22, 1894, 22.

5 Journal 1894–1896, October 29, 1894, 38.

6 Journal 1893–1894, June 20, 1894, 80.

7 Journal 1894–1896, January 1, 1895, 51, and June 22, 1895, 133.

8 Journal 1893–1894, December 2, 1894, 44.

9 Journal 1893–1894, July 24, 1895, 142.

After she had been at Elk Creek for two years, Isabel Crawford became restless. The small Elk Creek settlement was served by George Hicks and his wife as well as by Crawford, while larger groups of Kiowas had no one. When she was invited by the local chief to move to Saddle Mountain, about thirty miles away, Crawford asked the Indian agent about relocating there. He replied, “It is perfectly safe if you can stand the roughing it, and a good location for a mission.”<sup>10</sup> Without consulting the board of the Women’s Baptist Home Mission Society, she agreed to go alone to begin a mission at Saddle Mountain. In April of 1896, she made the move.

At Saddle Mountain, Crawford found many Kiowas receptive to the gospel message. Among them was Lucius Aitsan. He had been educated at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania and had served as an interpreter for other missionaries, but he had not been converted. He became Crawford’s interpreter. Since there was no other missionary at Saddle Mountain to claim Aitsan’s time, Crawford was able to rely on his assistance more regularly than she had the interpreter at Elk Creek. But Aitsan was not always available, and Crawford continued to sign as needed.

And of course a missionary’s work was not confined to formal services. At Saddle Mountain as at Elk Creek, Crawford held sewing meetings—meetings for both women and men. Crawford used these occasions not only to teach useful skills and to assist the Kiowas in making quilts to sell to support the cost of the church they hoped to build. They also provided Crawford with the opportunity to teach Bible lessons. For this she could use signs.

Crawford lived right among the people of Saddle Mountain, at first in a tent and then in the house of Lucius Aitsan and his wife until eventually a house was built for her. Thus she had close, direct contact with the people and their daily lives. She dealt with death, too, when it came all too often to the camp. When a child died, the parents mourned deeply. Traditionally they cut off their hair and a finger, as well. Crawford tried to bring them comfort. She wrote of the death of a girl about five years old:

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10 Journal 1894–1896, insider the back cover.



The sting of death is the same the world over, and those stricken parents after placing the lifeless body in my arms gave themselves over to uncontrollable weeping, Mingling my tears with theirs I signed: “Jesus has taken your child to sit down with Him. He does not want you to cut off your fingers. He wants you to give your hearts to Him.” The only box that would make a coffin was full of chips. Emptying it I made a lid, lined and covered the whole with white, and printed across the top: “Not dead, but living with Jesus.” The interpreter was away but the wonderful resurrection story was signed into the hearts, bringing for a moment a holy calm.<sup>11</sup>

Crawford’s work at Saddle Mountain enjoyed the success for which she had only longed at Elk Creek. Lucius Aitsan and his wife were the first to be baptized, and they were followed by many others. Crawford formed the converts, both women and men, into a missionary society, and they made quilts to sell when Indians from many camps gathered to receive their government allotments. The money went toward establishing a mission on the Hopi Indian reservation and also toward building a church at Saddle Mountain. The first service in the new building was held on Easter of 1903; the building was dedicated and a congregation organized that August.

At the end of 1906, after thirteen years on the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache reservation, Isabel Crawford left Oklahoma. Because of a dispute in which she was supported by the women’s mission board but criticized by the denomination’s mission board, she felt that her influence had been irreparably undermined and she could no longer provide leadership on the mission.<sup>12</sup> She did, however, remain in the employ of the women’s home mission society, doing deputations work on its behalf, travelling from coast to coast, speaking in churches and at larger gatherings.

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11 Isabel Crawford, *Kiowa: A Woman Missionary in Indian Territory*, with introduction by Clyde Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 57.

12 For details of this controversy, see Chapter 6, “The Jesus Eat,” in my book, *The Life of Isabel Crawford: More Than I Asked For* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015).

Even in her leisure time, Crawford showed her interest in bringing the Christian message to Native Americans. In May of 1908, she went with a friend to a performance of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show in New York City. Upon being introduced to William Cody, she asked in sign language if she might talk with the Indians in the show. He agreed to let her see them after the performance in their dining quarters. In her journal she wrote, "It wasn't long before I was talking with the Indians & they were all attention. How did this white woman learn the sign language? I told them I was 14 years among the Indians & loved them very much. Their white chief only knew their faces I knew their hearts. One old man signed, 'This is good. You talk & laugh & open your heart to us. You are not hiding anything. This is what we like.'"<sup>13</sup>

Later she wrote to Cody, asking whether he would "loan" her his Indians On Sunday, May 24. She explained, "You won't make any money out of the loan for it is only a missionary who is making the proposition & all she wants to do is to give the Indians the gospel & bring to them the sympathy & encouragement of one who has spent 14 years among them & has learned to love them."<sup>14</sup> Cody did not reply, and Crawford had no opportunity to carry out that ministry.

Crawford's desire to work with Native Americans remained strong, and so in 1913 she accepted appointment as General Missionary in eastern Washington. Here, too, she was able to communicate using signs.<sup>15</sup> There was not enough work, however, to justify her long-term appointment, so soon she returned to the speaker's platform. In 1915 she again had the opportunity to work directly among the Indians, this time on the four Seneca and Tuscarora reservations in western New York. She left the New York work in 1921 and returned to her role as a speaker on behalf of the women's mission society. This she continued until her retirement in 1930.

Even after leaving Oklahoma, Crawford remained in contact with the Kiowas, and she visited Saddle Mountain several times. She was always

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13 Journal 1906–1908, May 9, 1908, 379.

14 Ibid., May 24, 1908, 385.

15 Journal 1914–1915, 4.

warmly welcomed, and the people begged her to return. In 1905 the church had been censured by the Oklahoma Indian Baptist Association for allowing one of its deacons to serve the Lord's Supper, an action recommended by Crawford since the congregation had no pastor. Crawford refused to work there unless the "black mark" against the church was erased. Following her visit to Saddle Mountain in 1928, the current minister and his congregation began work toward that end. The offending motion was rescinded the next year, and it looked as though Crawford's return might be possible. The denominational board expressed strong objections to the women's board, however, and the hopes of both Crawford and the congregation were dashed. Her love for the Kiowas at Saddle Mountain remained strong, and their appreciation and affection for her persisted for decades.<sup>16</sup>

Several factors mark Crawford's distinct relationship with the Elk Creek and Saddle Mountain Kiowas. They were painfully aware of the injustices that their tribe had suffered at the hands of white men and so they wanted no white "Jesus man" to work among them. But Crawford was a woman, and she gained acceptance in both communities by working with the women and teaching them useful skills. They also accepted her because of her irenic spirit; early in her days at Saddle Mountain she felt directed by God to tell those assembled "that I had not come to scold them & tell them their road was a bad one but had come to them to help them learn a better way."<sup>17</sup> She lived among them, suffered with them when food supplies were low, and shared their sorrows when disease and death entered the camps.

Yet one of the most significant factors was that she brought them the Christian message in their own language, not the spoken Kiowa language that she could not understand and would not even have heard unless someone spoke directly into her "conversation tube," but Plains Indian sign language

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16 On Thanksgiving Day in 2004, I visited the Saddle Mountain cemetery and took a few pictures. Later I posted one on a web site and mapped its location. In October of 2008, more than a century after Crawford left Saddle Mountain, I received a comment on the photograph by someone who lived nearby and had learned through conversation on my photo's page of my interest in Crawford. He closed his comment by stating "A great lady . . . so much of our history." (Comment to the author, October 8, 2008; ellipsis original.)

17 Diary 1896–1897, April 26, 1896, 106–7.

that she had labored to learn. During her visit in 1930, one of the members testified, “When Miss C came among our tribe there were very few who could speak English. God must have planned for Miss C for she could talk to these people with signs. She was able to talk to any old Indians & understand each other.”<sup>18</sup>

When Crawford left her Oklahoma mission, her activity as a speaker on behalf of the women’s mission society did not signal the end of her use of Plains Indian sign language. As she traveled giving missionary addresses, she drew upon an earlier experience. In 1898, she had attended a missionary convention in San Francisco. There the secretary of the women’s board of home missions announced that Crawford would present something in Plains Indian sign language the next morning. Crawford wrote,

When I woke in the morning I lay in bed wondering what I would give. Not having a good memory I knew few things off by heart. I went over them. The multiplication tables (especially five times) & “Now I lay me down to sleep,” The Lord’s Prayer, The 23rd Psalm. All of which mother had *caused me to know* by constant repetitions. “Five times” would be a crazy thing to give. *Prayers* with signing out of the question. Only the 23rd Psalm was left & with the others in their beds quietly snoozing I thought out how I would give it to the Indians if I had no interpreter. I gave it at the devotionals and the Good Shepherd blessed it.<sup>19</sup>

Crawford recognized the interest raised by her action, and in her deputations work she took up the practice of closing her presentations by signing the psalm. She frequently increased the impact of this by wearing an “Indian costume.”<sup>20</sup> In her exotic performance, she represented the otherness of Native Americans on behalf of whom she spoke, thus becoming a bridge between her audience and those who needed their support, support that those present could offer by contributing to the mission society’s funds.

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18 Journal 1930–1931, December 27, 1930, 94.

19 Notebook California, May, 24, 1898 [*sic*].

20 Journal 1908–1910, January 16, 1909, 35.

Isabel Crawford “translated” back into English the signing she had developed for the psalm. Here are the words:

The Great Father above a shepherd Chief is the same as, and I am His, and with Him I want not.

He throws out to me a rope. The name of the rope is Love. He draws me, and draws me, and draws me to where the grass is green and the water not dangerous; and I eat and lie down satisfied.

Some days this soul of mine is very weak, and falls down, but He raises it up again and draws me into “trails” that are good. His name is Wonderful!

Sometime, it may be in a little time, it may be longer and it may be a long, long time, I do not know, He will draw me into a place between mountains. It is dark there, but I will pull back not, and I will be afraid not, for it is in there between those mountains that the Great Shepherd Chief will meet me, and the hunger I have felt in my heart all through this life will be satisfied. Sometimes this rope that is Love He makes into a whip, and He whips me, and whips me, but afterward He gives me a staff to lean on.

He spreads a table before me and puts on it different kinds of food; buffalo meat, Chinamen’s food, white men’s food, and we all sit down and eat that which satisfies us. He puts His hand upon my head and all the “tired” is gone. He fills my cup till it runs over.

Now what I have been telling you is true. I talk two ways, not. These roads that are “away ahead” good will stay with me all through this life, and afterward I will move to the “Big Tepee” and sit down with the Shepherd Chief forever.<sup>21</sup>

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21 *The Twenty-third Psalm As Rendered by Isabel Crawford In The Indian Sign Language*, (Philadelphia: Judson Press, n.d. [1919]).

In 1919, the denomination's Judson Press published a leaflet. On each page it gave a portion of the text and a picture of Crawford, in costume, signing a significant word. Widely distributed, this pamphlet further reinforced in people's minds the connection of Crawford with Indian sign language. Years later, a woman wrote to her, "[M]any of us have heard and seen you give in the Indian sign language that gem of Scripture, the 23rd Psalm and . . . our responsibility for the First Americans has been made more vivid."<sup>22</sup>

Crawford also saw a way to use sign language to connect people of a younger generation to missions. For one week in July of 1918, she conducted a class in Indian sign language at a camp for girls in Northfield, Massachusetts. She wrote, "I hope some of the girls caught a vision of higher things through it."<sup>23</sup>

In May of 1941, shortly before her seventy-sixth birthday, Isabel Crawford arrived in Wichita, Kansas, for the national Baptist convention. There she participated in a pageant in which she signed the Twenty-third Psalm as she had done so many times before. The following day, a woman said to Crawford's hostess, "I heard Miss Crawford give that Psalm years ago, when I was a girl & I never forgot her or it. The proxy was perfect even the voice sounded natural." When the hostess replied that "it was no proxy it was the real thing the woman put up her two hands & said 'Why I thought Miss Crawford passed away years ago.'"<sup>24</sup> For a whole generation of American Baptists, the psalm and Plains Indian sign language were firmly connected with Crawford's identity.

Early the following year, in 1942, Isabel Crawford returned to Canada to stay with two nieces. She lived another nineteen years, dying in November of 1961 at the age of ninety-six. She had not been permitted to return to Saddle Mountain to live, but now she kept a promise she had made decades earlier. Following Crawford's funeral in Ontario, one of her nieces accompanied her body to Oklahoma, where it was buried in the

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22 Journal 1940–1941, letter from Martha E. Hoop.

23 Journal 1917–1918, 107.

24 Journal 1941–1942, 12.

Kiowa cemetery at the site of her beloved Saddle Mountain. Six descendants of her converts served as pallbearers, and the service was conducted mainly in English but also in the Kiowa language. At Crawford's direction, the inscription on her grave marker reads "I dwell among mine own people."

Isabel Crawford could not hear the language of the Kiowas, but learning Plains Indian sign language enabled her not only to bring them the Christian message but also to forge a strong bond with them and earn her their trust. They had asked her to be buried among them and intercede for them on the Judgement Day "because," they said, "you can speak better than we can."<sup>25</sup> Isabel Crawford's silent speech had become a powerful agent for communicating the gospel.

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25 *Kiowa County Star-Review*, November 23, 1961.





# **The Jesus Film: Between Global Christianization and World Christianity**

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## ABSTRACT

Though the impact of translated written material in the spread of Christianity has been analyzed at length, less consideration has been given to the more recent turn to evangelistic non-literate media. Evangelistic films, for instance, have become common missionary tools, especially in places which lack technological infrastructure. Their success depends on effective translation so that indigenous communities, in the spirit of Pentecost, might hear the good news in their native tongue. A prominent test case for the vernacular principle is the JESUS film (Sykes/Krish, 1979), which has been translated into over 1300 languages and has reportedly led to more conversions than any other evangelistic tool in history. Its statistical success, however, tends to deflect questions of worth as a medium of vernacular translation. Based on a critical analysis of its content and ambiguous examples of its use internationally, this paper argues that in spite of its success and the ongoing translation of its script into local languages, the film's untranslated visual dynamics—sustained by competing tendencies to universalize and particularize—may potentially perpetuate a Christendom ethos. The paper concludes by drawing attention to an indigenous Indian Jesus film (Karunamayudu, 1978), suggesting a path for the future of visual media in the vernacular spread of world Christianity.

The long shadow of colonialism hangs over the last several centuries of Christian mission. We can point to all sorts of examples of compromise and complicity in this history--ways in which the universalizing tendencies of colonial agendas ran roughshod over local peoples and cultures and languages. At the same time, if Christian missionary enterprise had been so intertwined with imperial power it would have surely died out in the colonial form, and would not be flourishing today. It can no longer be denied, even by the staunchest critics of mission, that mission did in fact largely depart from colonial agendas, and the many unfortunate exceptions only serve to prove the rule. Nevertheless, the long shadow cast by colonial history has in fact led to great shifts in the theology and practice of mission.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the principal point of departure of mission from the colonial narrative has to do with translation. As Lamin Sanneh<sup>2</sup> and Andrew Walls<sup>3</sup> have shown, Christian mission often defied the linguistic uniformity characteristic of colonial rule. By their commitment to translating the Scriptures into the vernacular, missionaries effectively elevated local languages and aided indigenous peoples in recovering or preserving their cultural identity, which may have been suppressed during colonial rule. Whereas colonialism took its direction from the Tower of Babel effort to bring all peoples under linguistic and cultural uniformity, Christian mission at its best developed in light of the Pentecost pattern of translatability under the power of the Spirit. For this reason Sanneh calls translation “the church’s birthmark as well as its missionary benchmark.”<sup>4</sup> Evangelistic efforts are necessarily always wedded to a particular context, bridging the gospel and the culture through vernacular expression. The “vernacular principle” therefore turns out to be the defining difference between “global Christianization” and “world

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1 One can think of the relocation of mission from being primarily rooted in soteriology or ecclesiology to its foundation in trinitarian theology, *missio Dei*, etc. See the standard textbook of David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).

2 Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009).

3 Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; T & T Clark, 1996).

4 Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003): 97.

Christianity.” For Sanneh, global Christianization or Christendom is the establishment of a primarily western religion, replicating western culture and sensibilities and often suppressing local religious expression. By contrast, world Christianity is the movement of indigenous forms of Christianity, expressed through a variety of local idioms.<sup>5</sup>

Much work has been done on the way translation of *written* material has characterized the spread of Christianity outside the West (particularly the Bible). Less consideration has been given to the more recent turn to evangelistic non-literate (visual, aural, and oral) media.<sup>6</sup> Many people groups have developed mixed media cultures, rather than purely literate-based ones, and the missionary tools of satellite broadcasting, internet-based evangelism, and evangelistic films have become increasingly effective and popular. Yet even with non-literary modes of evangelism--like an evangelistic film--their impact depends on effective translation. Instead of thinking of translation merely in literary terms we must consider the aesthetic angle as well. Where do missionary films fit on the spectrum between global Christianization and world Christianity in light of their translatability?

The most prominent test case for the vernacular principle on this score is the JESUS film (1979), which has been seen by more people and reportedly led to more conversions than any other evangelistic tool in history. Its statistical success, however, has tended to deflect questions of worth as a medium of vernacular translation. Triumphalist accounts may offer an incomplete picture of its place in the history of evangelical missions.

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5 Sanneh, *Whose Religion?*, 22-25; see also Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002): ch. 1. Interestingly, in his “puff quote” on the back of Sanneh’s 2003 book, Jenkins praises Sanneh for “his stirring analysis of the growth of *global Christianity*,” either missing Sanneh’s semantic turn or else refusing it!

6 Oral cultures have historically represented most of the world population; in their development they have not simply moved to literate culture (like the West) as if it were an evolutionary continuum (like many in the West might presume), but are moving to a non-literate mixed-media culture, where teaching from books may still be a distant second to audio and visual forms of communication, like movies (Rick Brown, “Communicating God’s Message in an Oral Culture,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 21.3 (2004): 122–128.).

Understanding how mission and film came together gives us some background for assessing tools like the JESUS film today. Interestingly, John Mott--the architect of Edinburgh 1910--may have been the first to express the potential of cinematic media for world evangelization. His famous vision for “the evangelization of the world in this generation” was likely fueled by the prospect of mass media technologies like film. In the wake of Hollywood’s early 20th century emergence on the international stage, mission groups took up Mott’s call to action. Rather than tools of evangelism, however, missionary films quickly became occupied with exhibiting field work to churches and funding sources back home.<sup>7</sup> Mission during this period was by and large conceived as the reproduction of Western Christendom abroad, under the auspices of mission agencies. Not until the 1950s did missionary films begin to take shape as truly missionary in nature--i.e. as more than field reports (Tom Hotchkiss, *Films Afield*). A decade later, International Films (Ken Anderson, 1963) took up the task of making the gospel available to global audiences through indigenously produced films, using local writers and camera operators.<sup>8</sup> Remarkably, very few movies about Jesus were produced for missionary work, even though Jesus films abounded in the US market during this period (*King of Kings* [1961], *The Greatest Story Ever Told* [1965], *Godspell* [1973], *Gospel Road* [1973], *The Passover Plot* [1976], *Jesus of Nazareth* [1977], *The Nativity* [1978], and *The Life of Brian*<sup>9</sup> [1979]).

At the same time we must remember that Christianity in the 20th century also took shape under the shadow of the Fundamentalist controversy. One response to the predominance of the historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation (and liberalism generally) was the so-called “Biblical Theology” movement, which attempted to ground theological dogma in historical certainty. The post-Enlightenment division between “fact” and “value” had effectively relegated religion to the private realm of opinion, no longer self-evident in a scientific world. Reflecting their Enlightenment

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7 Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke. *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986* [e-book] (New York: New York University Press, 2011): 192-3.

8 Ibid., 189-92.

9 The very appearance of a “spoof” movie like Monty Python’s attests the popularity of the genre during this period.

heritage, evangelicals sought to convince modern minds that “biblical” denoted “historical.” Critical tools were helpful to the degree that they confirmed this.<sup>10</sup> Inherent in the way many depicted Jesus were the competing impulses to affirm Jesus’ particularity in historical fact and to commend the universality of the gospel to the non-Christian world.

Against this backdrop, Bill Bright, who founded Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC) in 1951,<sup>11</sup> joined with the Jewish-turned-Christian Hollywood producer, John Heyman, to produce a movie called “The Public Life of Jesus” (directed by Peter Sykes and John Krish, 1979). Based on the gospel of Luke (Today’s English Version)<sup>12</sup>, the film was touted as the most authentic rendering of the gospel to date. Excepting language, strict attention was given to historical similitude—it was filmed on location in Israel, all actors (except Jesus, played by the Englishman Brian Deacon) were of Yemeni descent, and costumes were limited to materials and dyes available in the first century. Around 450 “leaders and scholars” were reported to consult on the film to ensure its historical accuracy and faithfulness to the text.<sup>13</sup>

Originally a “Hollywood” film (Warner Bros.), the movie had a lackluster run in American public cinema<sup>14</sup>, recouping only two of the six million dollars spent to make it. However, as early as the spring of 1980, having obtained the international rights to the film, CCC began dubbing

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10 This accords with what George Lindbeck called the “preliberal” or “cognitive-propositionalist” approach.

11 For more information, see <http://www.cru.org/about-us/index.htm>

12 Except the Lord’s Prayer and Beatitudes which were taken from the KJV. <http://www.jesusfilm.org/questions-answers/making-the-film/version-bible>

13 Paul A. Eshleman, “The ‘Jesus’ Film: A Contribution to World Evangelism,” in *Speaking About What We Have Seen and Heard* (ed. by J. Bonk et alia; New Haven: OMSC Publications, 2007): 147-8; reprinted from *IBMR* 26, no. 2 (April 2002): pp 58-74. See also <http://www.jesusfilm.org/questions-answers/making-the-film/historical-accuracy>

14 See the reviews of the unimpressed Richard Christiansen (“Jesus’ film: Human, Faithful, and Flawed,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 2, 1980, A2) and Judith Martin (“Jesus’ Film: One of the Least of Them,” *The Washington Post*, March 28, 1980, p. 17).

the film's soundtrack into other languages for ministry abroad. It was first telecast in Hindi to 21 million viewers in India. By the end of 1980, the emerging Jesus film ministry had produced 31 language version soundtracks. Paul Eshleman was brought in<sup>15</sup> to head the new division of CCC called the Jesus Film Project (JFP), headquartered in Orlando, Florida. Since then the JFP has renamed the film simply "JESUS," suggesting its definitive status. Not long afterwards Eshleman claimed that CCC's Jesus film "evangelizes, edifies, teaches and makes disciples," an allusion to 2 Ti 3:16, essentially equating the film with Scripture.<sup>16</sup>

Despite its lukewarm reception among American audiences, the JESUS film had an immediate impact on international audiences with less exposure<sup>17</sup> to cinematography. Used predominantly, according to Eshleman, by conservative groups like the Nazarenes, Southern Baptists, Wycliffe Bible Translators, and the Roman Catholic Church<sup>18</sup>, it has also been employed for outreach by Canadian Mennonites<sup>19</sup> and the Salvation Army.<sup>20</sup> Today the JFP both supplies these groups (among 1,000 mission agencies and denominations) with JESUS film materials and also operates its own five-point strategic ministry outreach.<sup>21</sup> Though the estimated viewership of the

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15 Eshleman, 147-9. In "The Making of 'Jesus,'" *The Christian Century*, June 6-13, 2001: 26-31, John Dart (p. 26) says Eshleman's association with the project began in 1985, not 1981 as Eshleman claims.

16 Dwight H. Friesen, "An Analysis of the Production, Content, Distribution, and Reception of *Karunamayudu* (1978), an Indian Jesus Film," Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2009: p. 173; Eshleman, 179.

17 Freek Bakker, "The Image of Jesus Christ in the Jesus Films Used in Missionary Work," *Exchange* 33.4 (2004): 328.

18 Eshleman, 154.

19 Ryan Miller, "Death Fails to Stop Woman's Witness," *Canadian Mennonite* 10.22 (Nov 13, 2006): 20-21.

20 Dart, 28.

21 Included in that global strategy is (1) Mission 865, the JFP's subsidiary working to translate the JESUS film into all languages spoken by 50,000 or more people who do not have it available in their native language—approximately 323 million people—by 2025 (mission865.org); (2) Jesus Film Media, which attempts to maximize The JESUS Film Project's tools and resources through digital media like the free Jesus Film Media app that can stream the JESUS film in any of its translated

film to date is “billions,” Eshleman’s 2004 estimate<sup>22</sup> put that number around five billion, equivalent to more than 80% of the world’s population.<sup>23</sup> The concerted effort to translate and dub the film’s audio into every language has resulted in more than 1300 “translations” of the film’s script, with roughly 700 more left to be done. The JFP uses two processes: in the case of a written language, they work with natives to carefully render an equivalent script which is then dubbed; in the case of no written language, they use an audio/visual strategy called VAST, which translates by audio recording rather than writing, taking less than five weeks in some cases.<sup>24</sup>

Issues of perception, however, complicate the question of vernacular translation in visual media. An audience may recognize the language of the JESUS film as their own, but they more than likely will experience relational distance from the light-skinned Jesus and flat narrative action. The decision to limit vernacular translation to the audio script of the movie, rather than rework the whole movie, presumes that the visual aspect is subordinate to the language, a characteristic of Protestant logocentrism.

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languages (JesusFilmMedia.org); (3) Short-term mission trips to take JESUS to the unreached people groups of the world are also organized by the JFP with the support of Campus Crusade international staff members (jfmt.org); (4) the Global Short Film Network, which has hosted short film trainings in ten countries, equipping 350 people from 27 countries to share the stories that resonate within their cultures (GlobalShortFilmNetwork.com); and (5) The Peoples Connection, a network for assisting American Christians to share their faith with their international friends and neighbors (ReachingTheNationsAmongUs.org). These last two exhibit a tension between enculturation and globalization.

22 Eshleman, 155. Clearly, even if that number were accurate a significant number are repeated viewings. In his interview with the *New York Times*, Eshleman revised the estimate down to 3 billion people, less than 50 percent of the global population.

23 Other evangelical leaders have challenged the JFP’s numbers. For example, Vinay Samuel, Executive Director of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians, insisted that “these numbers are, to say the least, not gathered in a social-scientific way. They have no way of knowing this.” (Franklin Foer, “Baptism by Celluloid,” *New York Times* (Feb. 8, 2004).)

24 <http://www.mission865.org/about-us/>. Note the quick effort to translate the film rather than the Bible. Defenders of this procedure claim that the JESUS film effectively *is* the Bible since it comes directly from the Bible.



Given what we know, for example, about West African audiences,<sup>25</sup> this limits the film's effectiveness. When it comes to the inference of meaning, visual symbolism can have a greater impact than a vernacular script. When they see the JESUS film, non-Western audiences come to the story of Jesus through a western construal of the biblical Jesus story, making them in effect "tertiary audiences."<sup>26</sup> The indigenizing of Christianity is not well served by evangelistic tools that increase rather than decrease distance from the founding text of the tradition. The film's un-enculturated visuals may undo whatever gains the film makes with its translated audio.

In Guinea,<sup>27</sup> for example, audiences mistook Jesus for a priest with fetishes based on his appearance. Because the film draws selectively from Luke's gospel, information necessary for contextualizing Jesus' words and deeds is missing. Some have noted that using the Old Testament would more likely open dialogue with Muslims.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, perceptions of the film's Western origin, compounded by its untranslated visuals, have given rise to Muslim (and Hindu) backlash.<sup>29</sup>

As we weigh the film's merits as a translatable medium for evangelism, we encounter an inescapable tension between universalizing mission and particular history. On the one hand, the film presents itself as a *universal* message of salvation—reflected in the use of John 3:16 and Matthew 28:16-

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25 Karin Barber, "Preliminary Notes on Audiences in Africa," *Africa* 67.3 (1997): 347-362; and Asonzeh F.-K Ukah, "Advertising God: Nigerian Christian Video-films and the Power of Consumer Culture." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33.2 (2003): 203-231; see also Johannes Merz, "Translation and the Visual Predicament of the "JESUS" Film in West Africa," *Missiology* 38.2 (April 2010): 115.

26 Merz, 112, 118-22.

27 Hannes Wiher, "Der Jesus-Film: Sein Gebrauch in der animistischen und islamischen Bevoelkerung Westafrikas unter Beuecksichtigung von Erfahrungen in der Waldregion Guineas," *Evangelikale Missiologie* 13.3 (1997): 66-74.

28 Wiher, 67. See also Eshleman's list of translation problems, "The 'Jesus' Film," 155-56.

29 "Jesus Film Ire: Two Christians Murdered Apparently For Showing The Movie," *Christianity Today* 49.10 (2005): 28-29; and David W. Hendon, Kevin Holton, "Notes on Church-State Affairs," *Journal of Church and State*. 45.3 (Summer 2003): 619.

20 as its bookends as well as in the “Jesus prayer” that follows the film. On the other hand, it claims to capture the *particularity* of the Jesus story by depicting it<sup>30</sup> in its “authentic historical setting.” While the first impulse affirms the endless translatability of the gospel, the second undercuts it, and using the film in cross-cultural settings only highlights the tension.

For instance, the film adds<sup>31</sup> the word “absolute” to an otherwise word-for-word rendering of Luke’s preface (1:1-4): “it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have *absolute* certainty concerning the things you have been taught.” It was apparently inserted to indicate the *complete* historical reliability of the story and, no doubt, to reject any postmodern relativism (a primarily Western concern). Equally illustrative is the decision to add the word “documentary” to the movie’s opening credits, as if the film were simply a clean transposition from text to screen. Fixing the film’s (visual) form in a “biblical setting” but then emphasizing its translatability communicates a contradictory message. If an indigenous Christianity is the film’s putative goal, that aim would be better served by translating the *whole* film, visuals included. Converting only the audio to the vernacular implies that the Western JESUS film is not itself a kind of vernacular translation; rather its implicit claim is to be the *original* version. As Sanneh<sup>32</sup> reminds us, “The mental habits of Christendom predispose us to look for one essence of the faith.” Translation, in the case of the JESUS film, appears to serve a globalizing rather than indigenizing purpose.

In the most extensive critical essay written to date, Johannes Merz<sup>33</sup> further illustrates the tension in the film’s portrayal of Jesus.

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30 Quicke and Lindvall, 193.

31 For a detailed list of the additions/variations see Richard Walsh, “Ch. 12: The Jesus Film” in *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination* (ed. by J. Staley and R. Walsh; Louisville: WJKP, 2007): 90-100.

32 Sanneh, *Whose Religion?*, 35.

33 “Translation and the Visual Predicament of the “JESUS” Film in West Africa.” *Missiology* 38.2 (2010): 111-126.

Jesus is depicted as exemplary and immaculate, merging the conventions of Hollywood with the evangelical pietistic tradition. The makers seem to have tried to remain as neutral, and for that reason inexpressive, as they can, creating an image of human distance...With its evangelistic purpose “JESUS” thus invites its audiences to a private, internalized faith.<sup>34</sup>

The concern for “neutrality” is a false pretension of modern rationality derived from the Enlightenment. Ironically, the objectivity implied here is more characteristic of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal-historical tradition which modern evangelicalism rejects. The more the Jesus of history is fixed in his original context, the wider the gulf between past and present, and the greater the resistance to translation. At the same time, decisions made by the directors/producer show that they were not at all interested in simply visualizing the gospel narrative. For example, the role of female disciples figures much more heavily in the movie than in any of the gospel accounts, while the place of social justice and poverty is noticeably missing, though Luke’s account is saturated with it.<sup>35</sup> Both alterations point to a larger narrative to which modern evangelicalism is beholden. The most obvious critique of the film is in its casting of Jesus. While every other actor is of Yemeni descent, for historical similitude, Jesus is a light-skinned Englishman. A perceptibly white Jesus portrays Christianity as a Western religion in spite of efforts to translate the audio track. Even some evangelical critiques<sup>36</sup> of the film only offer “missiological prerequisites” to consider before showing the film, the critique ultimately being one of strategy not content. The mindset that views the expansion of Christianity as merely a question of strategy rather than principle betrays its captivity to the thought-world of Western Christendom.

As a tool of cross-cultural evangelism the JESUS film, while purporting to be translatable, is very much a Western film with sensibilities

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34 Merz, 113.

35 Bakker, 330; Walsh, 173.

36 Tom Steffen, “Don’t Show the “Jesus” Film: To Maximize the Potential of this Powerful Evangelistic Tool, We Need to Do Our Homework First,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 29.3 (July 1993): 272-5.

peculiar to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century evangelical tradition. On the question of indigenization it is more accurate to think of the film as speaking out of a North American context<sup>37</sup> than to an international one. Granted, a number of films have been released to supplement<sup>38</sup> the JESUS film—movie shorts like “Walking With Jesus in Africa” and “Following Jesus: Follow-Up Film for India” which use indigenous casts to demonstrate discipleship in action. However, their very existence seems to admit of the deficiencies of the JESUS film itself. And it is worth considering examples of alternative evangelistic films that may avoid some of the JESUS film’s pitfalls.

Virtually unknown outside of India is the 1978 full-length film *Karunamayudu*<sup>39</sup> (“Man of Compassion,” directed by Vinay Chander). Though the JESUS film has had great success across the Indian subcontinent since 1979, *Karunamayudu* has arguably been the more effective evangelistic film,<sup>40</sup> even if it was not entirely conceived as one. With a Telugu script that has been translated into numerous, mostly Indian languages (except, notably, English), the film has had broad appeal to those who have rejected the JFP’s “Western Jesus.” The film’s Jesus has distinctly Asiatic features and clothing, ministering in a recognizably Indian village. The Christian evangelistic organization Dayspring International picked the film up for national distribution in 1985 and by 2009, with the use of ministry teams (not unlike JFP), had shown the film in 190,000 villages. In ten years, they

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37 Merz, 114; Mike Wilder, “Group Wants to Send ‘Jesus’ Film Throughout County,” *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News* (Washington, Dec 5, 2005): 1; Teresa Neumann, “Outreach Plan Uses ‘Jesus’ Kiosk at Mall,” *Recorder* (Indianapolis, Dec 3, 2010): B2.

38 “Producer Settles Suit over Jesus Film.” *Christian Century* 120.20 (2003): 14.

39 Dwight H. Friesen, “Showing Compassion and Suggesting Peace in *Karunamayudu*, an Indian Jesus Film,” *Studies In World Christianity* 14.2 (2008): 125-141; and Freek Bakker, *The Challenge of the Silver Screen: An Analysis of the Cinematic Portraits of Jesus, Rama, Buddha and Muhammad* (Leiden: Brill, 2003): 218-223.

40 According to Friesen (“Analysis,” 176), Chander produced the film to inspire devotion to Jesus, but not necessarily conversion, which was the later objective of John Gilman and Dayspring International/Enterprises, who distributed it.

estimate, 120 million people have seen this film and 7 million have made public confessions of belief in Jesus.<sup>41</sup>

In contrast to the JESUS film teams who focused mostly on spreading God's Word on film, the Dayspring groups were interested in subversively transforming the political and social structures of Indian society, an agenda reflected in the film. *Karunamayudu's* Jesus is primarily concerned with his community's "untouchables" and placing Jesus in the tradition of non-violence. Judas and Barabbas figure heavily in the film's plot as members of a violent and self-righteous movement of zealots against imperial Rome. Though it may exhibit some traces of the Western Jesus film genre<sup>42</sup>, the film casts the story of Jesus in visual terms and traditions indigenous to modern India.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Dayspring has circulated different versions of the film out of sensitivity to regional differences.<sup>44</sup>

Dayspring has complemented their film evangelism with ministries of food, shelter, medical care, job training, education scholarships, grants, provisions of seed and farming equipment.<sup>45</sup> What an outside film ministry could likely not have achieved—namely, a more holistic and indigenous ministry—Dayspring has accomplished in part through the insistence on a visual vernacular principle. In the last several years it has become clear that the Western JESUS film is regarded by Hindus as a provocative Western import, distributed and funded by Westerners,<sup>46</sup> whereas its contemporary, *Karunamayudu*, appears to respect and encourage cultural tradition. Though reception among the Brahmin caste, for example, has, to my knowledge, not been documented, it may serve as the ultimate litmus for the film's vernacular power.

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41 Lindvall and Quicke, 198-99.

42 Like resemblances to DeMille's *King of Kings*; Friesen, "Showing Compassion," 126.

43 For example, the use of some dance and sung soliloquys.

44 Friesen, "Analysis," 164.

45 Lindvall and Quicke, 200-201.

46 Ibid., 202.

The future of the evangelistic film outside the West may not be clear. What does seem clear, at least on the basis of this study, is that visual representation in evangelistic media matters. And the most effective uses of that media toward the indigenization of world Christianity will likely require more examples like *Karunamayudu*, which do not fall victim to the post-Enlightenment, postcolonial evangelical tensions between the universal and the particular. After all, India was once colonized by a “Christian” nation; the future of an indigenous Christianity in India, therefore, may be advanced by the use of a Jesus film that explicitly rejects the implicit colonial associations of tools like the JESUS film. And what appears to be the case for South India may very well hold true for the rest of the world.





Helping provide media tools, training and strategies for abundant follow-through evangelism in every needed language

**Official Ministry Statistics – April 23, 2015**

**Language Production Progress**

<i>JESUS</i> (classic version).....	<b>1,311</b>
<i>The Story of Jesus</i> (audio) .....	<b>429</b>
<i>The Story of Jesus for Children</i> .....	<b>157</b>
<i>Magdalena: Released From Shame</i> .....	<b>131</b>
<i>My Last Day</i> .....	<b>122</b>
<i>Following Jesus</i> .....	<b>10</b>
<i>Walking with Jesus</i> .....	<b>8</b>
<i>Rivka</i> .....	<b>7</b>
 Total number of languages available <sup>1</sup> .....	<b>1,332</b>

**Cumulative Exposures/Decisions/Products Distributed Since 1979**

Audience <sup>2</sup> .....	<b>billions</b>
Indicated decisions for Christ following a film showing.....	<b>more than 200 million</b>
All products, including film, video and audio <sup>3</sup> .....	<b>more than 60 million</b>

**Ministry Strategies**

Countries where JFP funded ministry activity in 2014 <sup>3</sup> .....	<b>120</b>
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**Jesus Film Media**

2014 Jesus Film Media platform views (all channels, excluding YouTube).....	<b>8,386,267</b>
2014 Jesus Film Media app new installs (includes Android and iOS) .....	<b>163,356</b>
Video clips available .....	<b>78,623</b>

<sup>1</sup> Includes all versions. In some cases, an audio-only version is completed without the classic video to more effectively reach selected language groups.

<sup>2</sup> Includes all versions and multiple exposures per viewer. Based on estimated data.

<sup>3</sup> Based on allocations made.

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# **Issan String-Tying Ritual as Missio-Logoi**

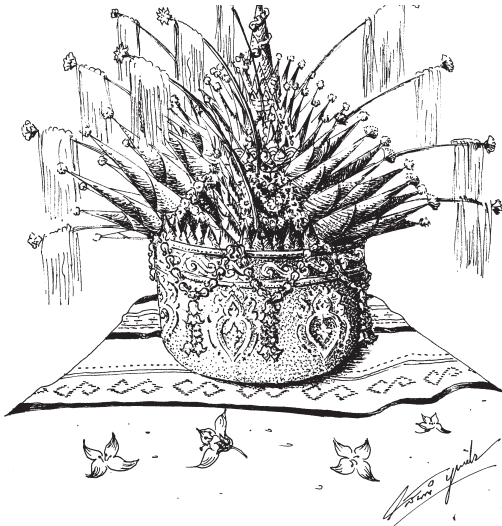
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## ABSTRACT

Within the high-context culture of northeast Thailand, known as Isaan, ritual is essential to life. Any event of significance takes on a deeper meaning when encased in the sacred space of communal ritual gatherings. Ritual combines both discursive and non-discursive communication with a high anticipation from all participants that something is about to happen. In the context of Isaan, I am convinced that there is no better teachable moment for the internalization of the good news of Jesus Christ. Evangelical missiology has tended to shy away from contextualizing cultural rituals for fear of syncretism. There has been a general assumption in much of mission that with time the two sacred Christian events of baptism and communion will eventually serve as functional substitutes for other cultural rituals. But this has not been the case in high context cultures. My paper will briefly review the social functions of ritual in relation to missio-logoi, what its absence means for mission in high-context cultures, concerns raised in utilizing ritual in missio-logoi and will conclude with a case study analysis of string-tying ritual as practiced among the Christ followers in the Isaan region of northeast Thailand.



Traditional Arrangement used in Isaan String-tying Ritual

Drawn by Wasan Boonyen

Nervous and uncomfortable, my wife and I sat on the mat floor completely encircled by strangers. Three months into our Thai language study, we'd been invited up from Bangkok to Udon Thani, a night train ride away, to participate in a special ceremony. In front of us centered on the mat was a floral bouquet with sticks of white strings. Rev. Tongpan, church planter, sat across from us smiling. Somewhere in that room our six month old son was in someone else's arms. We felt like foreigners to all these people and yet we were being welcomed.

There were others in the middle with us, two Thai men. One was moving away to another area and another was returning home from a time in jail. Like us, their lives were also in transition. They were also being celebrated in today's ceremony.

Music began to play. Drums, a wooden xylophone, brass finger cymbals, a bamboo mouth organ, sounds so different from home. Songs of celebration began, praising God with a vocabulary we had yet to learn but with a clear message we could feel. Men and women began to dance in graceful rhythm to the music. There was a rising sense of expectation. Something was going to happen.

With the end of the song, Tongpan raised one of the sticks of white strings from the flower arrangement. It got very quiet and all eyes were raised. Someone translated his Lao language for us.

"Brothers and sisters, we come together on this special day that God has made. We know it is an auspicious day because God has made it so, just as God promised whenever we gather in his name he is here. And so we celebrate.

"Today we are going to bless our brothers and sister. We use these strings to bring our blessings to these of our group in a way that means something to us. These strings do not have any magical power. They have not been enchanted in any way. They are simply white cotton thread that God has made for us to use. We use these strings to symbolize the reality that we

cannot see. This is the love of God that brings us together and binds us as one. Whether we are coming or going, or Thai or Lao or farang<sup>1</sup> or male or female we are part of God's family. Each of these here are moving in new ways and we want to bless them. We invite everyone here to come and tie a blessing on each of these people today. You do not have to pay any money to do so. You do not have to say special words or speak the foreigner's language. We can speak our heart language and God's spirit will help us understand each other. As we sing come and tie each one in the name of Jesus."

Tong Pan closed with a prayer and again the music began to play. People sang. Then he tied each of our wrists with a string while speaking a verbal blessing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Others began to rise from the circle surrounding us. They started to come toward us in whatever order and fashion they chose. Carefully gathering strings from the bouquet, men and women, young and old, approached us. Each came with a string, a smile, a *wai*<sup>2</sup> and a verbal blessing. As they tied our outstretched wrists each spoke a combination of unusual and beautiful words: "Happiness... Love of God... Peace of Christ... Happy New Year... God give you understanding... Health... God help you learn... May you come back to Isaan and speak very well... I tie you in the name of Jesus."

Half an hour later our wrists were covered with strings and our hearts were full. All four of us were in tears and many others wept as well. Something had happened. Using common thread a sacred bond of intimacy was created. Still foreigners but not strangers, our string-covered wrists announced that we were one in Christ. "No longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Eph. 2:19-20).

Tongpan closed the ceremony by saying that the strings would not last forever. They were not intended to. The strings would break, he said, but

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1 The Thai word for white foreigners, generally with big noses.

2 Thai greeting with raised palms.

the love that we share in Christ Jesus, will never break. It will never leave us because God is faithful. *Satu*.<sup>3</sup>

Many years and dozens of string-tying ceremonies later, we are still deeply touched by that memory. Each of the ceremonies built upon a foundation of love and growing cultural appreciation for what this ceremony means and does for Isaan people and for us. When the painful time came for us to move our focus of ministry back to the United States we were given a box full of white string and Tongpan told us to “tie the brothers and sisters in America to us.”

And amazingly enough that has begun to happen. String tying blessings have become part of many churches and Christian fellowships in the United States. It has been used at youth camps, send-offs, welcomings, healing services, house-warmings, hospital visitations, funerals, weddings, confirmations, seminary classes, worship services, infant dedications and other occasions. Tangibly blessing each other in the name of Christ by using the string tying ritual of northeast Thailand has spread farther and farther, so much so that I have been asked to write something to explain about it in more detail. This brief review of Isaan string tying is presented in hopes of stimulating more thought, research, and contextualization into other ritual expressions of *missio-logoi* elsewhere in our wider global community.

## REDEFINING MISSION THROUGH CONTEXTUALIZED RITUAL

God’s good news always comes relationally in ways to which we as humans can relate. This is the core of the incarnational gospel. According to John 1:14, when the Word literally came and pitched her tent among us, the revelation was clear. This was no ordinary neighbor moving in. The putting on of flesh by that man tangibly showed us insight into who God is; divine glory was made visible to humans. And how was it perceived? Full of grace and truth. Grace by itself might be kind, courteous, socially acceptable communication but insufficient to reveal the amazing reality of God’s glory. Grace without truth, is mere nicety. Truth spoken without grace can be murder. One without the other is insufficient; both are part of the

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3 Buddhist word used for “Amen” among this group of Christ-Followers

fullness of God's revelation. In most cultural contexts we experience only partial reflections of God's image among us, that is, one or the other but not both. Relationships that bring both of these together are transformational because they go past superficiality to a deeper level of honesty. Moments of these encounters utilize the best of cultural communication but do not stop there. They are also counter-cultural in ways that both challenge and edify. This John 1:14 incarnational model of reconciliation changes all who participate in it. The transformation is possible because there is a relational connection within my capability to connect.

In the high-context culture of northeast Thailand, the need is not merely for more gracious words but for more worth, proven through demonstration. In a community where face-saving dictates all of social etiquette how does one know what is true? Nice words may be spoken but are they genuine expressions of reality? The answer to this in northeast Thailand requires ritual, a special safe place where spoken words of grace come together with the honesty of truth. If God's mission is truly about reconciliation, and, according to Romans 10:7, faith in the reality of that message comes by hearing (assuming comprehension), that hearing must come about in culturally impactful ways. In the northeast Thai high-context culture comprehensive hearing that allows for response is not only auditory, but also visual and even kinesthetic or participatory. This is what ritual does in a high-context culture. It provides a socially acceptable safe place for grace and truth to come together in transformative ways.

Christian mission in high-context cultures (and all others) must be redefined. It must be freed from its stereotypic foreign baggage. The gospel must be reclaimed as good news again, not more bad news of another form of religiosity.<sup>4</sup> We must reclaim and reconnect Christian mission with its essentially personal focus: God's reconciliation with humanity through Jesus Christ. This redefinition must be biblically theocentric and not religiously ethnocentric - in other words, let's get the order correct. God initiated mission to lost people with the first question in the Bible (Gen. 3:9). This is a radical

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4 Certainly there are enough works-based, human-centric religious practices already extant in Asia (not to mention the rest of the world) without any need to promote more.



redefinition of the direction of reconciliation and the heart of mission. In the normal worldly sense reconciliation starts with the loser seeking to somehow re-establish connection with the victor. But through Christ, God has turned that worldly definition upside down (2 Cor. 5:18-20). Nowhere in scripture is it mentioned that humanity is reconciling itself to God. God takes all the initiative and makes all the arrangements so that humanity can be and is in fact reconciled to God through the work of Christ (Rom. 5:10-11; Eph. 2:14-16; Col 1:19-22).

Contextualized ritual is an opportunity to rescue the core of mission from its historic religious definition. It is a chance to redefine mission not merely as fancy words or foreign practices. It is a way to define the reconciling work of God in my own cultural context in transformative ways. The work of mission enters my world and is available to work in ways that can impact me, my life, my family, my community, and in fact, my entire culture.

In the high culture context of northeast Thailand any practice of mission that is not integrated with the ritual life of the community fails to address the numerous social requirements which that culture has placed upon faith practices. Failure to recognize and address the ritual components of this society will result in unaddressed cultural values and felt needs. It will force the half-helped congregant(s) to seek completion elsewhere - outside the Christian community. Setting up such a scenario opens the door to dangerous dual or multiple allegiances where Christ (as experienced in the limited provisions of a non-ritual embracing Christianity) is experienced as insufficient for all of life since more is needed. This may compel some towards undercover idolatry, completely against God's design and in the opposite direction of human-divine reconciliation.

The biblical model of God's mission incorporates human ritual at all levels throughout scripture. God enters into cultural forms but does not allow them to remain at the surface level. Beginning with the culturally implicit contractual format in Genesis 15, God uses the ritual but takes it to a much deeper level in order to address the deepest agony of the doubting missionary Abram. Contrary to the cultural norm, the contract ritual was transformed into a prophetic promise requiring only observation and belief on the part

of the human participant (Gen. 15:17-18). Jesus did something similar to a very familiar ritual meal when bread and wine were suddenly transformed from cultural routine to a message of deep spiritual meaning (I Cor. 11:23-26). Many other examples could be given of how God employed culturally-recognizable ritual forms and infused them with enhanced depth and breadth of meaning.<sup>5</sup> The good news of Christian mission should be identified in ways that are understandable, expectant, wholistic, inclusive, informative, transformative, and relational. Contextualized ritual incorporates all of this.

## FUNCTIONS OF RITUAL IN RELATION TO MISSIO-LOGOI

Hiebert and others list three main functions of ritual or cultural rites. These are rites of initiation, rites of intensification, and rites of crisis. When ritual is included in the definition of Christian mission the “what” of mission now addresses what does Christian mission do for me? This moves mission from simply a cognitive level to now address the deeper functional levels of human existence whether they are rites of passage (initiation), rites of remembrance (intensification) or rites of problem solving (crisis). In high culture societies these rites are already established and demonstrate God’s gift to all cultures addressing human needs in ways that can point to divine presence when used biblically.

### Rites of Initiation

All humans transition through a variety of positions in our social structures from infancy to childhood, to youth, adolescence, puberty, mating, parenting, adulthood, aging, death. These are the predictable stages describing merely physical status. On a social level personal status is also marked at the

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5 Two specific examples: 1) Circumcision was changed from a rite of passage into manhood at puberty into a physical symbol of God’s Covenant symbol on the eighth day and 2) The Tabernacle replicated exactly the god tents of other nomadic Canaanite tribes with the major difference being that unlike other groups that packed up their god and traveled as they pleased, in this culture God decided when and where to go and the nation followed.

various levels of education, employment, marriage unions, separation and divorce, leadership selection, recognition and promotion, military preparation and service, widowhood. Some social rituals of transformation leave a physical imprint on the body in such cases as permanent tribal markings or impermanent henna tattooing for weddings. Religious traditions also require rituals in recognizing education in the faith, rites of conversion, membership rites, religious ordination for the selected leaders. Some religious rituals are also permanently physical in nature as in the case of circumcision and religious tattooing. All of these rites of initiation socially mark the transformation of the positions of the individuals and parties involved to a previously unattained level in the cultural structure.

Rites of initiation are often repeated in various societies on a regular basis or at regular times in the social calendar due to the predictable nature of these common stages of life but they are always performed only on the uninitiated. For the participants involved these are one-time life-changing events enabling all in that society to recognize that member with the new specified identity. Except in certain emergency cases involving crisis, it is unnecessary (and in most cases unacceptable) to re-enter a rite of initiation a second time and re-participate. This would go against the social order that has determined one's entry level the first time.

### **Rites of Intensification**

As humans we have a tendency to forget. God made provisions for this by instituting repeated rituals that remind us of the works of God, our relationship to God and each other, who we are and what our responsibilities are to each other and all of creation. Rituals that serve as reminders are called rites of intensification. For Christ followers two primary examples would be partaking regularly of communion and even worshipping on a regular basis. The entire system of a liturgical calendar is based on the idea that seasons of the church are reminders of those things that God desires for us to remember.

Rites of intensification build corporate identity as well. Any anniversary of a historic event serves a communal function. Attending a

rites of initiation can be a reminder to those who have already been through that experience. Weddings remind all who are married of their spoken vows. Baptism can be an opportunity for all who are previously baptized to affirm what God has done in their lives.

### **Rites of Crisis**

On the physical level, rites of healing are due to illness or exorcism in the case of spiritual molestation. Rites for freedom from addictions of all kinds are required in every society. On the social level rites of restoration occur after interpersonal and intercultural conflict. Within the religious realm rites of discipline for wayward members (and leaders) also occur. Rites of crisis may overlap in some areas such as funerals which clearly mark a rite of passage of the dead for the survivors but must also address the unexpected nature of the departed member regardless of age. In some cases a shotgun wedding may be considered a rite of crisis as well as a rite of initiation.

Northeastern Thai string-tying ritual incorporates all of the functions listed above and perhaps others as well. When contextualized with the empowering message of the relational reality of the incarnate Word, the culturally understood formational event becomes transformational. In the process, the work of mission becomes culturally relevant good news and still counter culturally challenging. Grace and truth together in these moments reveals the glory of the Father in ways that words alone cannot fully express.

### **OPERATIVE FUNCTION OF RITUAL IN RELATION TO MISSIO-LOGOI**

What causes the ritual to be existentially operative? Here is where ritual in Christian mission fills its greatest role in God's reconciling ministry. The ultimate effectiveness of any ritual in Christian mission does not come from the human recipients, participants, or even the ordained performer of the ritual itself. The effectual power of a Christian ritual recognizes its source as coming from the Creator God who generously gifts each culture

with appropriate forms to express itself in various meaningful and gloriously diverse forms and ways.

Here is the powerful teachable moment of mission where God can be made even more evident. Why is this moment so full of potential? Because the moment of the ritual is the peak of communal expectation. Previous to this moment the society struggles under the waters of cultural uncertainty seeking direction when suddenly, directed together through the ritual moment, everyone breaks through the surface and with a collective gasp float together on a newly restored level of communal harmony.

### CONCERNS RAISED IN UTILIZING RITUAL IN MISSIO-LOGOI

Of all aspects of contextualization within Christian mission, the appropriation of ritual is perhaps most problematic for Evangelicals. There are certainly historic reasons for this. It may be of some comfort to know that even during the period of the Old Testament God refuses to accept the very same ritual which God commanded earlier when that ritual became “ritualotry” (worship of the ritual) and when the ritual became formulaic without any sincerity of heart behind it (Isaiah 9, Amos 5). God refused to accept ritual when it was used as a cover-up for social injustices which the practitioners failed to address and in fact had caused and promoted.

Other oft-cited concerns that will not be addressed here are the concerns that contextualized ritual would create a stumbling block for a Christian sister or brother; that contextualized ritual could fall into the realm of religious magic; that it lays the groundwork for a false or counterfeit form of the truth; and that the required practice of contextualized ritual can become a new form of religious legalism and thus devoid the ritual of its transformational message.<sup>6</sup>

While each of these are indeed important areas of concerns, the most common response that occurs is a fear of syncretism - that in the process of contextualization the gospel message will somehow be diluted

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6 Readers interested in pursuing more information on these areas of concern should refer to my doctoral dissertation listed in the source material.

or polluted to such an extent that it is unrecognizable. Mixture of forms, however, is not the real issue. No practices of Christian faith come divorced from cultural expression. Christianity has freely adopted many forms from pagan religious practices over its history and today the inherent meaning has changed in ways that glorify God, build up the body and promote the work of the kingdom. How can it be that this process has somehow stopped or is no longer possible within the Buddhist context? The danger is not in the mixture, it is what Kraft terms as “dual allegiance” where Christ is not enough. When Christian practices fail to address an aspect important to a member’s life and they seek solutions elsewhere this is dual allegiance. In biblical language it is idolatry, but that individual may not be blamed for all of it. What has caused a particular church leader or Christward movement to fail to address particular worldview issues? Why, for example, would string-tying ritual be seen as ungodly when it can be used to express cognitive truths in non-discursive ways that lead to personal and social transformation? These are the questions I raised in my study and will be briefly reviewed in the section that follows.

### **THE CASE OF STRING-TYING RITUAL AS PRACTICED AMONG ISAAN CHRIST FOLLOWERS**

The origin of the custom of tying protective strings around the wrist in Asia is lost in antiquity (Heinze 1982:77). B.J. Terwiel connects Isaan string tying with the Hindu instructions written in the *Grihya-Sūtras: Rules of Vedic Domestic Ceremonies* (1979:49). According to Krishnakumar, these instructions, written between 500–400 B.C., list uses of the string as blessing for dedication of babies, for mothers after childbirth, for initiation (Benét 1965:888), and for ordination (Krishnakumar 2004). String-tying ritual predates Buddhism and is most commonly linked with Brahmanism. Today string tying ritual has been widely incorporated into Thai and Lao Theravada Buddhism.

As a missionary movement, Theravada Buddhism originally traveled from India to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to Siam (Present-day Thailand) (Tambiah 1970:252). Brahmanism, however, traveled a different direction. From India it came to Cambodia (Angkor) and from there spread throughout

the region of the Khorat Plateau (present day Isaan) on its way to Siam. It could, therefore, be theorized that Brahman rituals of this type were practiced within the Isaan region before they arrived to the Siamese (1970:254).

Actual dating of the ceremony is less important than the fact that these practices have continued for centuries in this region and can still be seen at Isaan weddings and many other social events. Tongpan Phrommedda, a Christian Isaan who frequently conducts contextualized string-tying ceremonies describes the function of ritual within the Isaan worldview, this way:

Why do we need ceremonies? You need to understand this part of Isaan culture. Ceremony is the traditional way in our culture to officially mark a new beginning. If there is no ceremony then there has been no new beginning. If we do a ceremony, then it means we have now received or started something new. These ceremonies address our cultural need to show that something has begun. They come from our cultural background and address the deep need we have as Isaan people to show “beginning”. (2001:1)

In the Peoples Democratic Republic of Laos and throughout Isaan the string-tying ritual is often referred to as *sukhwan* (for the *khwan*). *Khwan* is a difficult term to define in English but has been described as “the essence of life, a principle vital and essential for all sentient beings” (Heinze 1982:17). It resides (or enters and exits the body) at the tuft of hair at the top of the head (Bailey 2000:21), the area of the scalp referred to in English as the crown and from there travels in and out. It is for this reason that the Thai people will not tolerate without resentment someone (especially strangers) touching their head (Anuman 1962:128). Although there remains a great deal of confusion today as to what *khwan* actually is, it remains distinctly different from the soul. *Khwan* may come and go and the person may feel a certain degree of personal instability, but the withdrawal of the soul can only mean death.

Do Isaan Christians believe in *khwan*? They would say they have it but many would not know how to describe it. Ritual recognition addressing

the cultural worldview needs of *khwan* (whether spoken or not) still remain prevalent among Isaan Christians.

In 1979 a missionary family working in the Isaan province of Udon Thani had decided, for a variety of reasons, to resign and was preparing to return to their native United States. The group of Isaan believers connected with this work wanted to demonstrate to these missionaries their love and concern and decided to hold a ceremony to mark this event using the tying of strings. This decision to incorporate the tying of strings into the ceremony, according to one of these leaders, was based on a deep heartfelt desire to bless this family whom they had come to love in a way that was more meaningful to them than simply a verbal prayer (2004). The focus of the ceremony was changed from calling up the life essence (*khwan*) to a tangible celebration of what God had already done. For this group of believers it was the beginning of openly using the string-tying ritual to express something of deep meaning for them.

Since that time use of the string-tying ritual continues to be used by many Christian communities in Thailand and Laos. When practiced by Isaan followers of Christ the ritual is simply called *phuk khaen* (arm or wrist tying) and not *sukhwan*. The focus was changed but for the most part the forms were not. People were tied but not objects such as house pillars, images, or vehicles. Just as the usual string-tying ceremony has participants and implements involved, so does the Christian ritual. The meaning is considered more important than the physical elements involved.

When we, as followers of Jesus, talk of using our cultural forms in a [string-tying] ceremony we have to evaluate those things that may remain as they have always been done and those things that must change. The things that are the same are the external forms but the things that are different are the meanings attached to them. The forms remain the same but the meaning changes according to the word of God. Those forms that have a good meaning may remain as usual; those things that are not in accordance with the Bible must be changed to follow God's word. (Banpote 1986:161)



In 2000, at the request of the Isaan leaders of this same Christward movement, I was asked to focus my study of research on the Isaan practice of a contextualized string-tying ritual that had developed since 1979. What did it mean and why was it so important? Since our initial introduction in 1987 all of my family members had been the recipients of and had attended countless string-tying events. Before each home assignment we were tied.<sup>7</sup> Upon our return we were tied. Each time we rented a new house there was a ceremony and we were tied. After the birth of our three children in Thailand we were all tied. When our relatives visited us they were all tied. And at all weddings, reconciliation ceremonies, send-offs, welcomes and major rites of passage we, as the body of Christ, tied others in ways that were always meaningful, often emotional, and always filled with the spirit of the love of God. This contextualized ritual expression always attracted many Buddhist neighbors to Christ.

Between 2000 and 2005 I conducted a series of interviews and visits throughout the northeast Thai region to learn more. The results of this research became my dissertation. Obviously the limits of this presentation do not allow me to share all the details, but the dissertation is available upon request. Here I present a summary particular to the theme of *missio-logoi*.

In the process of my studies I used Paul Hiebert's model of concentric circles of worldview starting with behavioral, then cognitive, affective and finally evaluative or central values to determine why this ritual persisted. I also interviewed members of other churches who said that within their movement they would never use any forms of string-tying (at least those willing to talk with me about it). The findings were interesting.

I found that relational influences were the number one factor determining an individual's comfort level with participating in string-tying rituals whether contextualized or not. I found among Isaan believers many

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7 I believe my Isaan sisters and brothers would probably prefer that I say that each time we were "blessed" instead of "tied" however I leave that to the readers to understand. The essential meaning of the string-tying ceremony (contextualized or not) itself is always to bless the recipient. There is a very real sense that those who tie the recipient also receive a non-verbal blessing in the process of giving. Together it is a safe place where grace and truth come together.

who fell within two worldview perspectives towards string-tying which McElhanon and Neibuhr (among others) had developed: corrective and interpretive (McElhanon 2000b:1032-1033). I also found a third position present among Isaan Christians that I labeled the accommodative position. Below is a brief summary of these three positions with the missiological implications of each.

### **Corrective Position**

In this perspective Christians seek a biblical unifying theme or principle from which to structure a systematic theology of the world with which to replace or reform other non-Christian worldviews. Within this biblical unifying structure, “evangelical theologians generally present the Christian worldview as a systematic theology for the defense of the Christian faith ... to confront and dismantle opposing worldviews. In doing so they use philosophical and logical argumentation” (McElhanon 2000b:1032). Strict proponents of this perspective would view it their task as missional Christians to discover the weaknesses of opposing worldviews and convince the proponents of such worldviews of the superiority of the Christian faith.

There are Isaan Christians who would hold to the corrective position towards indigenous ritual to various degrees. This would be demonstrated by their position against the string-tying ritual which they would consider unsuitable and inappropriate for use within the life of the Christian community. They would see it as a continuation of allegiance to a non-Christian worldview. Some respondents stated that the Isaan worldview value that requires ritual in order to cope with the transitions in life is something that Christ followers should change through discipleship, Christian education, and biblical knowledge. Isaan believers holding the corrective position would feel that all values and beliefs that are not clearly in line with the Bible must be confronted in love and changed through God’s power.

Extreme demonstration of the corrective position in Isaan Buddhist society promotes a distinct Christian appearance (and therefore largely foreign). It would stress separation from anything with the appearance of

former non-Christian ways. During interviews, Isaan believers from this position stated that it was their belief that using local religious, and in some cases cultural, forms such as string-tying was a sign of spiritual or even moral weakness on the part of Isaan Christians. Practicing it with the church, even in contextualized forms, might cause a brother or sister to stumble (never clearly defined, nor was a specific example of this ever stated). There was a general fear of syncretism. To them it was “food sacrificed to idols,” giving in to the ungodly Isaan worldview without challenging it with the gospel message. Isaan believers who hold strictly to a corrective position would view the string-tying ritual as one of the former ways that should be either discontinued or replaced for those now claiming to follow Christ.

In low-context cultures where it is commonly accepted that groups of people may engage in deep philosophical discussions without taking personal offense, the corrective approach serves an important function in assisting Christians in sharpening their Christian apologetic. The high-context culture of Isaan, however, for the most part does not engage at this level. Neither elite philosophical or popular Buddhism stresses cognitive religious knowledge. Through the course of their lives Isaan people accrue, rather than formally learn, a cognitive understanding of what their society expects of them in regards to their practices of Buddhism (which would include blessing people at string-tying ritual). They do not attend Buddhist classes to study how this is done or acquire knowledge of a body of religious doctrine.<sup>8</sup> For most Isaan people, the understandings of religious practice cannot be separated from the cultural reality of being a member of Isaan society.

Religious cognitive knowledge is not merely unfamiliar to Isaan people, it can even be repellant. Isaan society values face-saving and conflict avoidance to such a high degree that difficult topics, such as religious issues, are intentionally avoided in public discussion lest someone be offended. Hiebert describes certain cultures where telling people what they want to hear is more important than for them to know the truth (1985:47). This is true within Isaan culture. It is not an overstatement to say that in Isaan

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8 This would include all rituals included under the rubric of popular Buddhism as practiced in Isaan including string-tying and others rituals.

culture social harmony (one might even say grace) is more highly valued than truth. In light of this, in many cases the corrective position cannot successfully demonstrate itself openly on a dialogical level.

A rigid corrective position is difficult for Isaan believers to maintain. Isaan churches that do not practice the string-tying ritual are not completely corrective in their position at all times although it would appear from the survey data that this is the tendency and even the goal for some churches. The reality is that Isaan Christians who are members of churches tending toward the corrective position neither desire nor are attempting to maintain a social disconnect from family and friends. In fact my data startlingly revealed the disturbing number of seventy-five percent of those in the survey who come from churches claiming the corrective position admitted to involvement in string-tying and other rituals *in Buddhist contexts* from time to time.<sup>9</sup> This indicates the stronger worldview value that prioritizes social harmony over truth. However the greater concern is for what Kraft calls “dual allegiance” for those in the allegedly “corrective” position. For many, this seemingly social separation is unsustainable and Jesus, as presented in their church contexts, is not enough. In scripture this would be called idolatry.

### **Accommodative Position**

In contrast to the corrective position, within the accommodative position the string-tying ritual is accepted for the most part at face value. It is considered an important Isaan ritual and given affirmation from a Christian source. Where the corrective position would seek to doctrinally divorce itself from anything seen as a worldview opposing the gospel, the accommodative position would embrace many components of former practices under the rubric of Christian.

In the accommodative position the string-tying ritual might be practiced within a Christian context but without any particular explanation or contextualization towards deeper Christ-ward meaning given. Unlike the corrective position, the communication of meaning in the accommodative

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9 Specificity of the frequency of participation in Buddhist rituals was unfortunately not part of my survey questionnaire.

position is not considered a priority. When an Isaan believer, for example, asks his pastor or priest to bless Buddhist strings with holy water and then uses them *sui generis* for a string tying ceremony without explanation, depending upon the audience, the default social understanding of empowerment of the strings remains. For most uses in the popular Buddhist context the enchanted strings themselves effect the blessing. When the teachable moment is claimed and the message contextualized (even while forms remain the same), the operative source of blessing is fundamentally changed. The accommodative position avoids conflict but at the same time embraces (and may unintentionally reinforce) popular Buddhist meaning. Whenever an explanation of the operative force of the ceremony is not added even during what practitioners may feel is a Christ-centered contextualization of the ritual, meaning falls back on previous levels of surface level understandings and may not reinforce a Christian focus, depending upon the recipient's point of worldview value change.

Opponents of the accommodative position stated that it embraces almost all that is from the old ways and communicates almost nothing new. They would state that within the accommodative position there appears to be little or no questioning of Isaan worldview values. Critics feel that addressing Isaan worldview in what even gives an appearance of traditional ritual ways is a concession to the culture, selling the gospel short. What really needs to happen is to maintain a clear distinctiveness toward the God of the Bible. For some participants the power of the event continues to be in the string itself, however it is no longer empowered through a traditional Buddhist source of empowerment but through a Christian empowerment such as sprinkling with holy water, for example. This could lead to dual allegiance as mentioned earlier. At times there appears to be a willingness to indiscriminately provide whatever is necessary to accommodate to the felt need to connect with spiritual power.

The relational aspect of the accommodative approach presents something that is new but not foreign. Historic Roman Catholic evangelistic efforts in what is now northeast Thailand capitalized on the worldview needs of Isaan people and made available the resources in Jesus Christ to free people from spiritual bondage. The response to this approach of

Christian communication resulted in more respondents than that of any other approaches in the early history of missions on the Khorat Plateau. It would be incorrect to state that all Catholics in Isaan hold a strictly accommodative position towards worldview nor that all Protestants hold the corrective position. There is a surprising mix among Christian traditions. While remaining highly attractive, the accommodative position runs the risk of falling into dual or multiple allegiances that fail to prioritize Christ as the source of power in its focus on forms.

### **Interpretive Position**

This position towards worldview, used by some Christian missionaries, begins with Biblical understanding placed in the cultural context of those they wish to reach (2000b:1032). This is a cultural and relational approach that prioritizes people as they encounter, interpret, and respond to the teachings of scripture from within their own contextual worldview framework. Proponents of this perspective would, “regard the contextualization of the gospel as an expression of the Christian faith through culturally appropriate concepts which are compatible with Biblical truth” (2000b:1032). It should be noted that this understanding of Biblical truth must come from local believers themselves as they interact with the whole of scripture from within their societal and worldview context, so that the resulting response is genuinely faithful to the God of the Bible as well as authentically Isaan. A number of Isaan Christians stated that encountering the message of God’s love through the string-tying ritual was important to them in that it brought together cognitive understanding, affective encounters, and even value challenges in the context of a social and culturally familiar experience.

The interpretive position attempts to bring a faithful communication of the gospel into the deepest core of Isaan worldview in an evaluative way. Isaan believers holding the interpretive position would view the contextualized string-tying ritual as a means of allowing Christ to enter into their cultural forms in order to communicate to Isaan people in ways which can be understood from within their worldview. For this position, use of culturally relevant biblically acceptable forms of communication are a priority. Not only would such practitioners embrace the string-tying ritual,

but they would also embrace the use of certain types of local music, language, instruments, dance, and other cultural expressions that could be used as a means to express or interpret God's message to Isaan people to the inner core of the evaluative level of Isaan worldview.

The interpretive perspective would place importance on the meaning generated within the worldview of the receptors through the various Isaan forms and rituals. Popular Buddhist forms may or may not be rejected depending upon the understanding of messages conveyed and how they stand up in accordance to the teachings of the whole Bible as understood by the practitioners. For example, some Isaan Christians felt that using white strings was acceptable within their Christian community while others felt that the ritual was acceptable if the color of the strings was changed.

Apart from usage to address life's predictable rites of passage, and for the welcoming of new believers, the string-tying ritual with a focus on Christ as used by those from the interpretive position has been used to deal with issues related to power that arise in what Hiebert calls the middle zone of life as evidenced by several cases known to the author. In one case, a member of a Christian family painted a large white cross on what other villagers considered a sacred tree next to his house. A few days later the family's house was struck by lightning that was deflected off of the tin roof and struck the center of the cross leaving red sap flowing from the middle. The believers came together for a string-tying ceremony in the name of Christ to bless the family and to celebrate the protection found in the blood of Jesus. In another incident following a minor car accident that left the author and his passengers physically unharmed, believers were insistent that a string-tying ceremony be held to demonstrate God's power over any mental anguish incurred. Following this, the author was freed from disturbing dreams of ten-wheeled trucks racing at him which had led to stiff legs in the morning from attempting to press down on the brake pedal.

Of the three positions, the interpretive position is the most complex to discern and difficult to maintain which may explain why it appears least among Isaan believers. It requires a high level of biblical understanding, spirit-led direction, and deep cultural insight. Approaching such topics

demands skill and sensitivity to be able to lead a discussion about issues that are neither black nor white and are often highly controversial. There is a sensitive prophetic role required of the leader who could be local or an experienced expatriate.<sup>10</sup> God has prepared and continues to prepare just such individuals from within the communities of Christ followers for tasks such as these. Careful discernment in the high-context culture of northeast Thailand will require evaluating rituals not only for the major transitional rites of life of Christians, such as weddings, funerals, conversion experiences, baptisms, and communion, but equally importantly for those events that fall within the middle zone of Isaan worldview including the relationship of the living with the dead, the role of the ancestors, and the complicated concept of the *khwan*.

The interpretive position can allow local worldview values to be engaged with the gospel message in culturally appropriate ways that encourage transformation without emphasizing the social disconnection found in the corrective position yet are not merely accommodative either. Based on observations in Isaan churches, this approach appears to have more appeal to Isaan people who seek spiritual solutions without leaving their social and relational network. The interpretive position would see the use of God's power as wholly within the context of a relationship with Jesus Christ. The communicative nature of this position seeks to extend from within the Christian community to beyond in ways that remain engaging to those still outside, and still transformative to those who are moving closer to Christ in discipleship. The missiological impact of this approach is one that seeks to transform, rather than accommodate or ignore, the Isaan worldview pursuit of power from personal motivation to a higher level that focuses Godward and extends outward to others. It seeks to reach into the deepest cores of worldview motivational values both individually and corporately and allow those values to be revealed in the light of the gospel for cultural transformation.

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10 God used the apostle Paul as an expatriate in some of the cross-cultural contexts in which he established churches to help encourage believers to stand firm in what the followers of the Way understood to be the teachings of the Law and of Christ in spite of the opposition of the non-Gentile Christian majority.



## Summary of Positions

Each of the three positions has those to whom its approach appears attractive to varying degrees. For those who have been taught the corrective perspective on worldview and culture, a separatist attitude toward forms that externally appear to be Buddhist is extremely important. Such persons might be attracted to a church that brought a message of hope in Christ from a non-Thai or what could be considered a traditionally western Christian perspective. Every culture appears to have a certain element within it of those who want to disenfranchise themselves from their culture, but in the high-context culture of Isaan (and most of Thailand) it would appear that this percentage is very low.

Those that come from a background where their own culture has been or is being somehow repressed, degraded, or marginalized by outsiders appear to have a tendency to stand up for those values which are most under threat. These would include especially threats that might impact the survival of the *boonkhun*<sup>11</sup> network, other family members, friends, livelihood, and society. An example of this in Isaan history occurred during the period when Thai centralization policies forbidding the use of Lao language and cultural expressions were enforced. Today this is not the case. A church in this situation that identified itself with the oppressed and encouraged the use of the language and cultural forms mushroomed in the Udon Thani region in the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> Groups of Isaan people newly arrived from the rural areas to Bangkok also give evidence of this. They are attracted to groups (Christ-centered communities and even churches) that promise a sense of community with the language, food, humor, and values of their own minority culture in the midst of the dominant central Thai culture. For this reason an approach of the gospel that incorporates and prioritizes relational aspects of the gospel message above cognitive knowledge would be one that would appeal to most with the Isaan worldview.

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11 Social structures that bind people to each other in socially obligatory relationships for life. For example, a child is always indebted to parents in this way.

12 A detailed description of this church planting movement in northern Isaan can be found in my work, *The Development of a Multi-Dimensional Approach to Contextualization in Northeast Thailand* (2002).

The preceding discussion of the three positions of Isaan Christians in the survey population toward the string-tying ritual and Isaan worldview is not intended to be prescriptive. It appears from the research data that these three positions are descriptive of the situation among believers in most churches in northeast Thailand and perhaps other regions of the country today as well. It is apparent from the interviews and from the survey data that within churches there are individuals with a variety of positions and these individuals may also change their positions from time to time. Actual numbers of Isaan Christians who held the corrective, interpretive, and accommodative positions would be difficult to estimate precisely since few Isaan Christians are able to stay strictly within one category. It is perhaps more helpful to think of tendencies or directions rather than concrete categories.

Respondents from churches that never practiced a contextualized string-tying ritual indicated that they would be interested in learning more about an interpretive approach regarding its contextualized use if someone would only teach them. Here is the need for leadership willing to work with the community to do the hard work of cultural exegesis and scriptural application.

## CONCLUSION

God used secular rituals and cultural forms to communicate his messages to people throughout biblical history. In each case it can be seen that the goal was not cultural accommodation but to lead God's people deeper into a relational awareness of missio-logoi. God presented cognitive knowledge from within the context of affective feelings and commitments of loyalty and obedience, and required that spiritual inward understandings be demonstrated by outward behavior. God did not affirm all the values of the local worldview in the cultures of his called people. In fact, he especially countered religious worldview values throughout the Old and New Testament when they became obstacles to the understanding and practice of a genuine allegiance to himself. God's correction came not through affirming local cultural forms or from complete separation from all cultural forms, but through the interpretive use of media and methods, including coming

himself in human form, that repeatedly did not appear sufficiently distinct to appeal to the majority of the religious authorities of the time.

It would appear that a similar situation exists today. Each of the positions toward the cultural worldview prioritizes different inner core values, but the religious values on the evaluative level are the most difficult to change, and the most emotionally charged. These are the values to which Isaan believers hold their highest allegiance. In the face-saving high-context culture of northeast Thailand these are not easy topics for anyone to discuss. For this reason perhaps they are the very issues that need discussion most. Kraft writes how important it is to recognize the different areas of allegiance held by people from different cultures. “Of all problems that occur when people of different societies come into contact with each other, those arising from differences in worldview are the most difficult to deal with” (2001:1-8). Would it not be an honest, albeit painful, admission that within the church of Jesus Christ in northeast Thailand, and the rest of the world, there are in reality a number of different Christian subcultures each clinging very tightly to some of their most deeply held worldview themes? For those involved in communication of the gospel, the use of carefully researched cultural rituals infused with the message of the gospel, particularly those not traditionally considered part of the Christian subculture, can provide a powerful means of bridging the division between the presentation of a cognitive message and the internal response of meaning that can point people in the direction of a closer relationship with Jesus Christ.

Reactions to the string-tying ceremony practiced by Christ followers has been overwhelmingly positive in Thailand, Laos, and even in western contexts. In the same way that God affirms cultural forms throughout scripture, God never leaves them at a surface level but desires a deeper work to begin in and through the ritual expressions. This inner connection clearly touches to the realm of values, allegiances, and worldview identity. I close with two examples. I vividly recall the words of one Bangkok Thai woman who after experiencing this ritual as a visitor to an Isaan Christian fellowship said through her tears, “This is the first time in my life I felt I could really be a Christian and still be a Thai.” At another event of string-tying held during a worship service in Pasadena, California one participant told me how moved

she had been. “You know,” she said, “it was one of the first times that we could really speak the truth about each other out loud in church.”

Our social settings may not all be high-context cultures, but certainly we all need to be reaffirmed in who we are in Christ individually and together. Western contexts are starving for honest expressions of real community. God has gifted each culture with appropriate ways to do this that often involve the use of ritual. Let us seek to find more opportunities to reflect the image of our Lord as we partner with God’s initiative transforming missio-logoi full of grace and truth.

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# **Meditation As Mission:**

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## **Recovering Hidden Spiritual Practice in Mission**

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## TERMINOLOGICAL CLARIFICATION:

Orthodox Christian monks and nuns widely applied the spiritual practice of inner stillness since the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup> and St. John Climacus, a 7<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox monk, introduced the Greek word “*Hesychasm*,” which means “stillness,” to this same phenomenon of spiritual practice.<sup>2</sup> According to Guigo II, a 12<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholic monk, the terms “meditation” and “contemplation” are separate phenomena and have different meanings in the process of the spiritual practice of stillness. He also used the Latin words “*Lectio Divina*” for the specific practice of “divine reading.”<sup>3</sup> However, in our age, the terms “meditation” and “contemplation” have been defined in various ways and so they become confusing terms for ordinary people. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the word “meditation” in a secular sense<sup>4</sup> and “contemplation” in a spiritual sense.<sup>5</sup> In the *Oxford Dictionary*, “contemplation” means religious meditation or Christian meditation.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the *Cambridge American Content Dictionary* defines the word “meditate” as a religious activity as well as a secular activity.<sup>7</sup> In fact, both terms are widely applied alternatively to secular as well as religious practices of interior calmness. In order to simplify and communicate this paper in a straightforward manner to contemporary readers from various backgrounds, the term “meditation” is applied in this study to the spiritual practice of stillness.

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1 Christopher D. L. Johnson, *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer: Contesting Contemplation* (New York, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 31.

2 Archimandrite Lev Gillet, *The Jesus Prayer*, Kallitos Ware. rev. ed. (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press), 32.

3 Guigo II, *Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditation*, trans., Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1979).

4 Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meditation> (accessed June 2, 2015).

5 Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contemplation> (accessed June 2, 2015).

6 Oxford Dictionary. [http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/contemplate](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/contemplate) (accessed June 8, 2015).

7 Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary. <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/american-english/meditate?q=meditation> (accessed June 8, 2015).

## INTRODUCTION: RECOVERING THE GAP IN CHRISTIANITY TODAY

Various research projects have revealed that the Christian population is declining at a dramatic rate in many European countries and in the United States.<sup>8</sup> There is also a clear decrease in the number of professing and practicing Christians in the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches in our post-modern world.<sup>9</sup> Since such research findings generally serve as landmarks for viewing our future reality, it is worth taking the time to analyze them seriously in order to develop an effective missional theology for the church of tomorrow. This section looks into the updated survey of *Religion and Public Life, 2010–2050* by the Pew Research Center study.

The survey looks at the dimension of eight major global religious groups—Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Unaffiliated, Jews, and Other Religions—from 2010 to 2050, based on a variety of demographic factors. The research predicts that in the United States, in general, Christians will decline from more than three-quarters of the population in 2010 to two-thirds in 2050. In Europe, it will become less than two-thirds in 2050. On the other hand, the number of religiously unaffiliated people and other religious groups (except Buddhism) continues growing in the United States and Europe.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, in 2010, 27% of the world’s total population was under the age of 15; 62% was between ages 15 and 59 and 11% are ages 60 and above. In fact, it is more likely for adults to leave their childhood religion (if they

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8 Christianity in its Global Context, 1970–2020: Society, Religion, and Mission, Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon Conwell University (June 2013), 7.

9 Gina A. Bellofatto and Todd M. Johnson, “Key Findings of Christianity in Its Global Context, 1970–2020,” *International Bulletin Of Missionary Research* 37, no. 3 (July 2013):157; Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 15.

10 Michael Lipka, “7 key changes in the global religious landscape,” April 2, 2015, under “Pew Research Center,” <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/02/7-key-changes-in-the-global-religious-landscape/> (accessed June 25, 2015).

are going to convert) in early adulthood, and it is generally exceptional for elderly people to change to another religious tradition. Giving our attention on the age group of “15 to 59,” it indicates that Christians and Muslims share the same rank, 60%, which is the lowest among the percentages of all eight religious people groups (except Jews) in the global population. The other six religious people groups at the same age group are: 62% in Hindus, 65% Buddhist, 65% other Religions, 67% folk religions, Jews 59% and unaffiliated 68%.<sup>11</sup> But what is really significant is the change over time in the U.S. report of the list of age by religious tradition. It shows the membership situation in 2007 and in 2014 for different groups by age. Focusing on the age group of 18-29 year olds, it points out that most of the non-Christian religions in this group rose significantly, while Christianity barely stayed the same.<sup>12</sup>

It is also projected that, by 2050, about 40 million of world’s population are predicted to switch to Christianity and 106 million are predicted to leave the Church. Most people who leave the Church are expected to join the religiously unaffiliated group.<sup>13</sup> An astonishing thing is that, in the United States, although 42% of the total population left their childhood religions, only 3% to 4% of them are atheists or agnostics, and 44% of them said: “religion is very important or somewhat important in their lives.” It can be inferred that these people are still spiritual and finding God in their own ways.<sup>14</sup> Most people leave their childhood religions in order to search for

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11 Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, “Age Distribution of Religious Groups, 2010,” March 26, 2015, [http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/pf\\_15-04-02\\_projectionsoverview\\_agedistribution\\_310px/](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/pf_15-04-02_projectionsoverview_agedistribution_310px/) (accessed June 25, 2015).

12 Pew Research Center, “Appendix D, Detailed Tables,” <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/Appendix-D-Detailed-Tables.pdf> (accessed July 13, 2015).

13 Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050,” April 2, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/> (accessed June 27, 2015).

14 Emma Green, “American Religion: Complicated and Not Dead,” May 12, 2015, under “The Atlantic,” <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/05/american-religion-complicated-not-dead/392891/> (accessed June 27, 2015).



new spiritualities that quench the spiritual thirst of post-modernity, post-Christendom, or life in the post-World War cultural context.<sup>15</sup>

In the West, many people look to the Eastern religions for spiritual direction; consequently, the resurgence of formal world religions has taken place in this era. Some Christians have converted to Hinduism or Buddhism. Some have experienced “double belonging,”<sup>16</sup> and claim such labels as “Buddhist-Christian” or “Hindu-Christian.” Some turn to triple belonging—a combination of Buddhist-Hindu-Christian belief.<sup>17</sup> Some create new religions, such as the New Age Movement and the Unitarian Universalist Church, which focuses on multi-spiritual practices, human rights, and ethics. Some look back to traditional spirituality and traditional folk religions are often revived. Besides these movements, in order to compete against modern Christianity, the Church of Satan also appears in this era.<sup>18</sup>

No matter how different from each other these various religions and spiritual communities are, in beliefs and practices there is the common spiritual practice defined as “meditation.” In fact, meditation practice is popular not only in religious communities, but also in secular society as well. It is appropriate to say that the most popular spiritual practice in the post-modern age is mediation. Various forms and disciplines of meditation practice have become revived in both formal and informal religions. The topic of meditation has been well-received, with the support of scientific studies, both in the East and the West. Its popularity can be traced, not only on

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15 Gailyn Van Rheenen, “Religionquake: From World Religions to Multiple Spiritualities” in *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends*, eds. Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen and Douglas McConnell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), 79-80.

16 Thomas C. Fox, “Double Belonging: Buddhism and Christian Faith”, *National Catholic Reporter*, under “The Independent News Source,” <http://ncronline.org/news/double-belonging-buddhism-and-christian-faith> (accessed June 29, 2015).

17 Rheenen, “Religionquake,” 88.

18 Satanists do not believe all spiritual reality, but acknowledge the power of magic. Lack of aesthetic is one of the nine Satanic sins. Church of Satan, <http://www.churchofsatan.com/>; “Church of Satan” under “ReligionFacts,” <http://www.religionfacts.com/church-of-satan>; <http://www.religioustolerance.org/satanis1.htm> (accessed June 30, 2015).

popular media, but also in various academic disciplines, such as medicine,<sup>19</sup> politics,<sup>20</sup> psychology,<sup>21</sup> neurology,<sup>22</sup> sports,<sup>23</sup> music performance,<sup>24</sup> and beauty,<sup>25</sup> to name just a few.

On the other hand, modern Protestant Christians assume that meditation practice is not for Christians, but for Buddhists, Hindus, and other Eastern religious traditions. However, missiologists and mission practitioners are alarmed with the report that traditional Christianity in the West does not satisfy current spiritual needs within modern Western Christianity in the new era following World War II.<sup>26</sup> Johannes Blauw, the

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19 National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/meditation/overview.htm> (accessed June 1, 2015).

20 Alex Seitz-Wald, "Meet the 'mindfulness' caucus: Politicians who meditate!," Wednesday, Jul 10, 2013, under "Salon News" [http://www.salon.com/2013/07/10/meet\\_the\\_buddhist\\_caucus/](http://www.salon.com/2013/07/10/meet_the_buddhist_caucus/) (accessed June 5, 2015). University of Toronto, "Moments of Spirituality Can Induce Liberal Attitudes, Researchers Find" under "Science Daily," <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/02/130225131532.htm> (accessed June 5, 2015).

21 Emma M. Seppala, "20 Scientific Reasons to Start Meditating Today: New Psychology Today." <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/feeling-it/201309/20-scientific-reasons-start-meditating-today> (accessed June 5, 2015).

22 Joe Martino, "A Neuroscientist explains What Happens To Your Brain When You Meditate," <http://www.collective-evolution.com/2014/06/15/a-neuroscientist-explains-what-happens-to-your-brain-when-you-meditate/> (accessed June 5, 2015).

23 "The Benefits of Mindfulness Meditation and Sport Performance," under "Psychology of Sport," <http://psychologyofsport.net/thebenefitsofmindfulnessmeditationandsportperformance/> (accessed June 30, 2015).

24 Klaus Crow, "How Musicians Can Really Benefit From Meditation," August 18, 2013, under "Guitarhabits," <http://www.guitarhabits.com/how-musicians-can-really-benefit-from-meditation/> (accessed June 30, 2015).

25 Shannon Farrell, "The Beauty Benefits of Meditation," under "Women's Health," <http://www.womenshealthmag.com/beauty/beauty-benefits-of-meditation> (accessed June 5, 2015).

26 Olive M Fleming Drane, "What's the relationship between Mission and Worship?" <https://2churchmice.files.wordpress.com/2008/12/mission-and-worship4.pdf>(accessed June 29, 2015).

late secretary of the Netherlands Missionary Council, mentions that “every age needs a fresh encounter with the Bible, because every age has its own questions and problems.”<sup>27</sup> In the same way, Ajith Fernando, former National Director and presently the teaching director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka, has this insightful thought:

Faced with the charge from postmodernists that Christianity does not fully satisfy human yearning for subjective spirituality, when we look to the Scriptures we find that the Bible was not defective. It was our understanding of the Bible and our practice of Biblical religion that was defective. Every generation misses some vital aspect of Christianity. Sometimes people outside the church discover the need for stressing that. Christians will discover that what these people are looking for is satisfied only through Biblical religion. The challenge from outside may help the church rediscover a treasure that it had buried and neglected.<sup>28</sup>

Going along with Blauw and Fernando, my observation is that people outside the Church have located the vitality of meditation practice in their day to day life, and it is high time for the Church to rediscover the treasure of meditation practice which has been neglected by modern Western Christianity and buried in biblical Christianity. Thus, this paper is an attempt to examine how meditation practice became popular, and why it influences people’s daily life in order to renew a Christian missional spirituality of meditation.

## I. ESSENTIALITY OF MEDITATION IN THE AGE OF SPIRITUALITY

By tradition, modern Christianity has been praised for and satisfied with the social services and gospel message that transforms the lives of individuals and communities, liberates the poor and the oppressed, and gives

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27 Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature Of The Church: A Survey Of The Biblical Theology of Mission* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, INC, 1961), 12.

28 Ajith Fernando, *Deuteronomy: Loving Obedience to a Loving God* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2012), 258.

hope for life-after-death salvation. But Christianity has failed to address the growing need for meditation as an answer for many issues in today's world. In our age, the world proclaims and testifies that various disciplines of meditation practice help change people's lives, dissolve their stress-related physical and mental issues, leads them to peace, happiness, and harmony among fellow human beings, and boosts their capacity to carry on their daily activities in this world.

One of the founders of meditation practice in the West was Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918-2008) who introduced Transcendental Meditation (TM), a practice of Hindu meditation in 1955. The Maharishi believed that spirituality and material life are like two faces of a coin. For him, meditation is the source of knowledge and wisdom, and it is also the science of being (spiritual life) and the art of living (practical public life, or material life).<sup>29</sup> By 1967, his teachings inspired the members of Beatles: John Lennon, Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, and George Harrison. At that time, they were spending their lives by using drugs, especially LSD, in order to have an experience of cosmic subconscious or eternity. The Maharishi promised them that they could reach such a place through TM techniques.<sup>30</sup> In 1968, they even learned meditation techniques under the Maharishi in India.

On October 4, 1967, the Beatles shared their powerful experiences of meditation on the popular British TV talk show, *The Frost Programme*. They witnessed to the world that meditation helped transform individuals and gave them energy for peaceful success in their secular lives. George Harrison stated: "the youth of today are really looking for some answers—for proper answers the established church cannot give them, their parents can't give them, material things can't give them."<sup>31</sup> In the present day, the second generation of the Beatles continues receiving the benefits of

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29 Maharishi University of Management. "About Maharishi Mahesh Yogi" <https://www.mum.edu/about-mum/about-maharishi-mahesh-yogi/> (accessed June 23, 2015).

30 Allan Kozinn, "Meditation on the Man Who Saved the Beatles," *The New York Times* (February 2008), [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/07/arts/music/07yogi.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/07/arts/music/07yogi.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&) (accessed June 23, 2015).

31 Transcendental Meditation News and Mores. "How The Beatles learned Transcendental Meditation—and what they thought about it," <http://tmhome.com/>

meditation. Shadowing his father, John Lennon, Sean Lennon, who is an American multi-instrumentalist, singer, composer, and music producer, shared his testimony this way: “for me, Transcendental Meditation is like a scientific method to calm my brain down and to make my frontal lobe more active. It’s an exercise, really. It helps me to have about 10 per cent more conscious thinking, which is good, because we make a lot of decisions in our subconscious that aren’t always good—like the decision to smoke cigarettes or to eat bad foods.”<sup>32</sup> In the same way, James McCartney, a musician and the only son of Paul McCartney affirms that meditation helps him in his mental balance. He says: “To support me in my daily life, I have already developed a solid self-care routine which involves heathy eating, regular exercise and of course meditation.”<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, diverse disciplines of meditation practice, from all the religions and secular creativity, have mushroomed all over the world in this current age. Popular religious meditation practices are OM, or mantras, yoga, self-enquiry or “I am,” which is attached to Hinduism; and *vipassana*, insight, *zan*, samadhi, or calm and loving kindness, which connects to the Buddhist tradition. It appears that religious meditators gain power for ethical living and generosity through meditation. Additionally, studies expose the reality that Chinese traditional movement meditation practices, such as *chi kung* or *qi gong*, and *tai chi* boost brain activity.<sup>34</sup> In Western culture, there are

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experiences/interview-lennon-and-harrison-on-meditation/ (accessed June 23, 2015).

32 Transcendental Meditation News and Mores. “Sean Lennon: TM’ calms my brain down,” <http://tmhome.com/experiences/sean-lennon-tm-meditation/> (accessed June 23, 2015).

33 Transcendental Meditation News and More. “McCartney, Jr.: Meditation from father, vegetarianism from mother,” <http://tmhome.com/experiences/james-mccartney-meditation-from-father-vegetarianism-from-mother/> (accessed June 23, 2015).

34 Jim Barlow-Oregon, “Chinese Meditation Boots Brain Activity,” August 16, 2010 under “University of Oregon,” <http://www.futurity.org/chinese-meditation-boosts-brain-activity/>; Ore. Eugene, “Chinese Meditation IBMT Prompts Double Positive Punch In Brain White Matter,” June 11, 2012, under “University of Oregon,” <http://uonews.uoregon.edu/archive/news-release/2012/6/chinese-meditation-ibmt-prompts-double-positive-punch-brain-white-matter> (accessed July 1, 2015).

many more psychological meditation practices that differ from their original religious roots and philosophies.<sup>35</sup> Mindfulness, guided, and focus-attention meditation techniques are widely applied in the West by various advocates and promoters such as researchers, medical doctors, neurologists, successful business persons, psychologists, scientists, musicians, and world leaders from many other fields. They propose the idea that meditation provides holistic wellness.

In fact, the aim of meditation is not only for personal wellness but also for communal benefits and world peace. On August 29, 2000, S. N. Goenka, one of the icons of Buddhist *Vipassana* meditation, gave an address to around 1,000 world's religious and spiritual leaders at the Millennium World Peace Summit in the United Nations General Assembly Hall. In his address, he gave a message of peace and harmony to the world from the ancient Buddhist perspective. He highlighted the need of experiential inner peace to bring a real peace and real harmony to the world. Goenka believes that there will be no real peace in the world unless each individual experiences peace within oneself.<sup>36</sup>

In the same way, the goal of Maharishi University of Management (MUM), formerly known as Maharishi International University, is world peace. Dr. Yukio Hatoyama, a former Japanese Prime Minister, delivered an address to 96 undergraduates and 252 graduate students from over 60 different countries at the 2015 MUM Graduation. In his address, he expressed his sadness due to the ISIS attacks in the Middle East, the problems between Ukraine and Russia, and the growth of cyber-attacks. Hatoyama went on to say, "It's my firm belief that bonds of fraternity created between individuals will naturally evolve into bonds of fraternity between countries, between

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35 David S. Black, Joel Milam, and Steve Sussman, "Sitting-Meditation Interventions Among Youth: A Review of Treatment Efficacy," under "US National Library of Medicine, National Institute of Health," <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3195513/> (accessed June 24, 2015).

36 S. N. Goenka, "Universal Spirituality for Peace" <http://www.executive.dhamma.org/en/unaddress0800.shtml> (accessed June 25, 2015).

regions, and then—to peace around the world. I’m deeply impressed by the success of Maharishi in defining a concrete and simple route to that end.”<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, Jacob B. Hirsh, professor at Rotman School of Management, and Megan D. Walberg and Jordan B. Peterson, professors at the Department of Psychology at the University of Toronto, examined the relationship between political orientation, spirituality, and religiousness.<sup>38</sup> The study reveals that, “meditation makes individuals more politically liberal in their outlook and action.”<sup>39</sup> It is also surprising that meditation or the practice of quiet time turns out to be an optional practice in many offices,<sup>40</sup> schools,<sup>41</sup> and prisons<sup>42</sup> in the major cities in the United States.

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37 Transcendental Meditation New and More. “Former Japan prime minister: TM a ‘solid cornerstone’ for world peace” <http://tmhome.com/books-videos/yukio-hatoyama-japan-trascendental-meditation-mum-speech/> (accessed June 23, 2015).

38 Jacob B. Hirsh, Megan D. Walberg, and Jordan B. Peterson, “Spiritual Liberals and Religious Conservatives” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 4. No. 1 (January 2013): 14-20. <http://spp.sagepub.com/content/4/1/14.abstract> (accessed June 25, 2015).

39 Ethan Nichtern, “Warning: Meditation Makes You More Politically Liberal!,” March 3, 2013, “The Inter Dependence Project: Change your mind to change the world,” <http://theidproject.org/blog/ethan-nichtern/2013/03/03/warning-meditation-makes-you-more-politically-liberal>; Liz Klimas, “Do You Meditate? Study Claims This Spiritual Practice Might Make You More Liberal,” Mar 14, 2013, under “The Blaze,” <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2013/03/14/do-you-meditate-study-claims-this-spiritual-practice-might-make-you-more-liberal/> (accessed June 24, 2015).

40 “The Mindful Office” under “Mindful: Taking Time for What Matters,” <http://www.mindful.org/at-work/working-with-mindfulness-brings-meditation-to-the-workplace>; Tom Von Deck, “Office Meditation—12 Meditation Techniques for the Office,” The Deeper Meditation Blog. <http://www.deepermeditation.net/blog/office-meditation-12-meditation-techniques-for-the-office/> (accessed July 2, 2015).

41 “Daily Meditation: A Bold Approach to Reducing Student Stress,” under “Edutopia,” <http://www.edutopia.org/stw-student-stress-meditation> (accessed June 24, 2015).

42 Prison Mindfulness Institute. <http://www.prisonmindfulness.org/about-us/> (accessed July 1, 2015).

Within Roman Catholic Christianity, the practice of meditation was revitalized by American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968). Merton initiated interfaith dialogue and discussed faith issues personally with Asian spiritual leaders, such as the Dalai Lama from Tibet, the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Japanese Buddhist professor and scholar, D. T. Suzuki. His writing on Zen Buddhism reveals that he was very interested in Zen Buddhist spirituality. He tried to lead Christians, through his writings and teaching, to highlight mystical theology and the depth of humanity's spiritual experience in meditation rather than through Christian doctrines and institutions.

Another leading figure of Christian meditation is John Main (1926-1982), an English Benedictine monk. He first learned the practice of meditation from an Indian monk, Swami Satyananda in Malaya. When he became a monk, he looked into the roots of the Christian monastic tradition and the desert fathers, especially John Cassian. In, 1975, Main established the Christian Meditation Centre in London.<sup>43</sup> Laurence Freeman has continued teaching meditation since John Main passed away in 1977. Freeman started the World Community for Christian Meditation in England in 1991.<sup>44</sup> For them, meditation is, “a universal spiritual wisdom and a practice that we find at the core of all the great religious traditions, leading from the mind to the heart. It is a way of simplicity, silence and stillness.”<sup>45</sup> From that time on, both solitary and communal meditation practices have continued to develop in the Roman Catholic Church in the West.

It appears that Zen Buddhist and Hindu spirituality led both Merton and Main to renew Christian meditation practice, creating the disciplines of centering prayer, contemplative prayer and the like, in a global context. Then, some Roman Catholic spiritual leaders looked at the *hesychastic*

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43 The World Community for Christian Meditation. “John Main,” <http://www.wccm.org/content/john-main> (accessed July 1, 2015).

44 The World Community for Christian Meditation. “Laurence Freeman” <http://www.wccm.org/content/laurence-freeman-osb> (accessed July 1, 2015).

45 The World Community for Christian Meditation. “What is Meditation” <http://www.wccm.org/content/what-meditation> (accessed July 1, 2015).



tradition from the Orthodox Church.<sup>46</sup> In Orthodox Christianity, Matta El Meskeen or Matthew The Poor (1919-2006), an Egyptian Coptic Orthodox monk, reawakened this mediation practice in post-modern Christianity. He developed the patristic traditional forms of inward meditation.<sup>47</sup> Besides Matthew The Poor, the resurgence of meditation has been taking place in other areas by other Russian and Greek Orthodox monks and laity; consequently, the practice has spread throughout world.<sup>48</sup>

The spiritual practice of inner stillness can still be found in a few communities and churches in the Anglican and Protestant traditions as well. A very small number of spiritual leaders can trace their Christian traditional spirituality and have revived such ancient Christian meditation practices as *hesychasm* and *lectio divina*.<sup>49</sup> David Bosch recognizes that the Church in the West “only too frequently responds by digging trenches and preparing for a long siege” to the contemporary culture, even though the New Age movement and related groups flourish on it.<sup>50</sup> Ken Gnanakan, a prominent Indian theologian and Christian leader, observes that meditation practice has been neglected in modern Western Christianity, misinterpreting it as Hindu or Buddhist spiritual practice. Gnanakan points out the necessity of a theology that addresses the theme of spirituality, which is central to all other themes.<sup>51</sup>

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46 Johnson, *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer*, 41, 60.

47 Father Matta El-Meskeen (Matthew The Poor), *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Inner Way* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 39-66.

48 Johnson, *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer*, 42-45.

49 Johnson, *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer*, 62-69; Moe Moe Nyunt, “*Hesychasm Encounters Lectio Divina: An Intercultural Analysis of Eastern and Western Christian Contemplative Practices*,” *The Asbury Journal*, 70/1 (January 2015), 84-85.

50 David J. Bosch, *Believing In The Future: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1995), 4.

51 Ken Gnanakan, “Some Insights into Indian Christian Theology” in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theological Perspective*, eds., Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 124, 130.

On the other hand, prominent scholars such as Martin Kahler, David Bosch,<sup>52</sup> Andrew Kirk,<sup>53</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, and Roger P. Schroeder,<sup>54</sup> recognize the essential role of mission in doing theology. They believe mission is the mother of theology. It can be inferred that a theology of meditation needs to locate where it attaches to the theology of mission. In fact, meditation, one of the spiritual practices, generally highlights the essential nature of quietness and silence, as well as solitude. Contrary to this view, Christian mission is easily commonly understood as activities, or sending people out to the world with assigned tasks such as proclamation, witnessing, social justice, and social work. Theological and practical connections between meditation and mission are rarely encountered under one discipline, and so these two disciplines are sometimes considered mutually exclusive. Even so, the following is an attempt to position meditation within the theological and practical aspects of mission as a part of mission theology.

## II. MEDITATION AS *MISSIO DEI*'S INWARD-SENDING MOVEMENT

The Latin word for “mission” in English is best translated as “sending.” Even though the word “mission” does not appear in the Bible, it has been widely used in Western Christianity since in the sixteenth century. In fact, the theological background for mission derives from the doctrine of Trinity. David Bosch, an influential missiologist in the twentieth century, understood that the traditional understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity in Western Christianity is: God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit. To extend this doctrine further, there is another

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52 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 16.

53 J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission?: Theological explorations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 10.

54 Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants In Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Book, 2011), 35 - 72.

“movement” as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are sending the church into the world.<sup>55</sup>

From this point of view, there is only one direction of the *missio Dei*'s movement, which flows from the Trinitarian God toward the world (all creation), or to the world through the church. As a consequence, the *missio Dei* is traditionally understood as the Church's participation in the Trinitarian God's sending-out active movement to all creation. The goal of mission is to reach the world, the nations, and all creation. In reality though, within Christian doctrine, God is the center of the paradigm, and as such he enables and empowers the balancing of all creation. Therefore, God is not simply the One who saves the world in one direction; rather, he also brings the world back to himself, thus indicating the *missio Dei* is really a two-way directional movement of God reaching out and also bringing back.

The Creator God sends the Spirit of the Triune God towards all creation in order to bring it back towards himself. To put it in different way, the first *missio Dei* movement in God's salvation plan is found as the Spirit of God sends the church toward all creation in order to make God known, and the second movement of God's salvation plan is found as the church, through the power of the Spirit, sends all creation toward the Creator God, in order that the creation might come to know God. These two directions of the *missio Dei* concept is uncovered by Jesus Christ in his prayerful dialogue with God the Father for his disciples in John 17. One of the directions of mission for Jesus is to glorify God on earth by finishing the task that is to make the name of God known to those whom God gave him (4, 6). Another direction of mission for Jesus is to be with God and gloried in God's presence (5). In the same way, the disciples were sent, by Jesus, to the world in order to make the Father's name known (19) and 'to be one with God, the Father, and Jesus, the Son, is the purpose of this mission (11).

It can be understood that 'to be one with God, the Father, and Jesus, the Son, is another direction of *missio Dei*. As a matter of fact, the second *missio Dei* movement is an eschatological sending movement. It is invisible, eternal and can be achieved only by faith alone. On the other hand,

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55 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 399.

the Christian spiritual practice of meditation is an inner experience of this *missio Dei's* movement. It is part of the here-and-now experiential reality of salvation. Through the spiritual practice of meditation, the Spirit of the Trinity sends the meditator/Church from the cosmic world to the meta-cosmic world as well as from human culture to God's culture, so that the meditator/Church becomes converted into the light of the world.

### 1) Cosmic to Meta-cosmic: Meditation As Territorial Crossing Mission

Traditionally, mission is interpreted as the responsibility or mandate of the Church or Christians to *go* with the purpose of proclaiming the gospel to a foreign land. History reveals that Roman Catholics were the forerunners who interpreted and used the term “mission” and the Jesuits were the first ones who used that term in order to spread the Roman Catholic faith to non-Roman Catholics in the early seventeenth century.<sup>56</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century, this territorial crossing missionary theology and practice was revived by William Carey in Protestant Christianity. Carey read Matthew 28:18-20 and understood that the verb “*go*” in the Scripture was the main imperative verb saying, “Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. This commission was as extensive as possible, and laid them under obligation to disperse themselves into every country of the habitable globe, and preach to all the inhabitants without exception, or limitation.”<sup>57</sup>

Later, evangelical scholars revisited the Bible and developed the theology of the missionary nature of God and his territorial crossing mission. John R. W. Stott, an influential evangelical theologian, and Walter C. Kaiser, the Colman M. Mockler Distinguished Professor of Old Testament,

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56 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1; David J. Bosch, *Believing In The Future: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1995), 29.

57 William Carey, *An Enquiry Into The Obligation of Christians: to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heartens*, (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, 1961), 7, 66. <http://www.wmcarey.edu/carey/enquiry/anenquiry.pdf> (accessed June 10, 2015); Evangelical Protestant follows William Carey's missiology. See, James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, *New Directions In Mission and Evangelization I: Basic Statements* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 256.

reviewed Genesis 12:1-3 and recognized within it the centrality of God's call to Israel through Abram that they *go* to all nations with blessing/promise. They also believed that God is calling the Church today to *go* and announce the gospel in every nation on earth.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, it seems that for Conciliar Ecumenical and post-Vatican II Roman Catholics, "mission" is more meaningful if they follows Jesus' example (John 20:21), focusing on peace and justice<sup>59</sup> as they go to the nations.

In any case, the center of traditional missiology, to all appearances, is on God's outward sending movement, that is the Church, with a global message through Word and deed, is sent to cross the geographical frontiers toward the ends of the world.<sup>60</sup> It is indisputable that the Church is called to be a witness to the nations near and a far in word and in deed. That is a means of biblical, historical, and theological mission. On the other hand, especially in the Old Testament, from time to time, God also calls his people to enter his presence and the people of God turn their faces upon him by entering his presence, or his realm, or his territory (Ex. 28:30). They seek his face (2 Chr. 7:14, Ps. 27:8, Hos. 5:15); mediate upon him (Ps. 77:6), his promise (Ps. 119:148), his love (Ps. 48:9), the Law or his Word (Jos. 1:8, Ps. 1:1, 119:15, 119:23, 119:48), and his wonderful deeds or creation (Gen. 24:63, Ps. 77:12, 119:27, 143:5, 145:5). In the same way, we can understand that God wants us to cross from our cosmic realm to the meta-cosmic or spiritual realm, where we can see him through our spiritual eyes and personal experience.

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58 John R. W. Stott, "The Living God is a Missionary God" in *Perspectives on The World Christian Movement: A Reader*, eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2009), 3-9; Walter C. Kaiser, "Israel's Missionary Call" in *Perspectives on The World Christian Movement: A Reader*, eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2009), 10-16.

59 James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, *New Directions In Mission and Evangelization I: Basic Statements* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 38, 132; Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1978), 5.

60 James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, *New Directions In Mission and Evangelization I: Basic Statements* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 37, 133.

In the New Testament, the practice of meditation is not noticeably mentioned, but it appears that Jesus often observes the same phenomenon of spiritual practice in a deserted place (Lk. 5:16). He usually prayed to the heavenly Father in a solitary place (Mk. 7:24) in the very early morning while it was still dark (Mk. 1:25). He regularly withdrew from the world and took time with God on the Mount of Olives (Lk. 22:39). He often left his disciples and the crowd and went to a mountainside (Mt. 14:23; Lk. 6:12) or the countryside to pray. It is understandable that, when he was on earth, Jesus crossed from the cosmic realm to the meta-cosmic realm in order to communicate with God the Father, who is in heaven, which is in the spiritual realm.

The author of Hebrews noted: “For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one: he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence (Heb. 9:24). God went across the meta-cosmic realm to the cosmic realm, through his Son, Jesus Christ, in order to show how these two realms are interconnected and crossing each other. Through Jesus’ life style of prayerful meditation in stillness and solitude in prayer, he taught his disciples that one can cross over these two territories through the spiritual practice of stillness.

Moreover, Jesus taught his disciples about the Father in heaven, which we encounter 27 times in the NRSV. He also taught them to address the Father, who is in heaven, when they pray (Mt. 6:9). It appears that only after the mission of “*waiting*” can the mission of “*going*” come. Before obeying the Great Commission to ‘go’ to the nations, and experiencing Pentecost’s mystical event, the disciples were called to “*wait*” for the gift that God the Father promised (Acts 1:4-5). It can be understood that they were instructed to take a time of stillness in their relationship with God through prayerful meditation until the Spirit of God visits in power. In obedience to their Lord Jesus, the disciples went back to Jerusalem and were constantly devoting themselves to prayer in the upper room (Acts 1:12-14). It is expected that the disciples followed Jesus’ way of prayer; they silently entered into the presence of God.

The Bible reveals that the disciples' mystical experience of Pentecost only happened after taking some time and waiting for the power of God through centering on prayer. The inference here is that, in the apostolic church tradition, the disciples launched their outward geographical-crossing mission only after their inward-crossing mission of the spiritual realm through prayerful meditation. They waited upon the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit in meditative prayer by means of the interior mission of God in advance of the outward mission of “going” to the nations. They received power and wisdom from God through the Holy Spirit in advance of geographically crossing the nations with the gospel message. It becomes clear that the inward mission of spiritual territorial crossing enhances and empowers the outward mission of physical territorial crossing.

Traditionally, Evangelicals articulate this eschatological movement of mission very well and give their attention to this eschatological reality. On the other hand, Evangelical Christianity is born in the West where there is an action-oriented culture. In the West, spirituality is normally measured by spiritual action and ministry action. For example, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, is also known as one of the leading figures of evangelism and as a Western spiritual revivalist. He is also well recognized for his balancing of theological reflection based on four essential elements in Christianity: Scripture, reason, tradition and experience. Yet, Wesleyan spirituality started off from his experiential and gracious love of God through justification and sanctification *by faith* in the Holy Spirit. The purpose of being justified for a person in Wesleyan theology is “to be zealous of good works.”<sup>61</sup> It appears that there is no room for sanctification through experiencing mystical union with God in Wesleyan theology.

Wesley's holistic view of good works, furthermore, is all works of piety such as prayer, searching scripture, as well as all works of mercy which are related to the body or soul of human beings. To grow in grace or in the image of God and to grow in the mind which is in Jesus Christ, a person needs to be justified and involved in good works.<sup>62</sup> Well-known Wesleyan scholar Howard A. Snyder observes Wesley's theology of life and ministry

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61 John Wesley, Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation”.

62 John Wesley, Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation”.

and notes that “the Christian life is lived in the light of eternity—actively, not passively.” “Wesley’s emphasis on grace and on final judgment gave him a dynamic rather than static view of redemption.” One of the disciplines of the Methodist Movement is that “a person could continue as a Methodist only if he or she submitted to Methodist disciplines and lived a life of faith and good works.”<sup>63</sup> It is appropriate to say that evangelicalism has strongly focused on the outward-sending message of the *missio Dei* by proclamation of the message of eschatological reality and other outward salvation movements. As a consequence, they gradually neglected to see a inward-sending message as mission.

By tradition, the desert fathers and mothers, many of the saints, as well as many monks and nuns from the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, as well as some spiritual leaders from the Protestant Church support and practice the spiritual disciplines of Jesus and the disciples. They admit that by the grace of God and the assistance of the Spirit, they are able to achieve the process of meditation,<sup>64</sup> and to have a mystical experience of God.<sup>65</sup> In the Orthodox tradition, the spiritual practice of meditation is an inner journey, a spiritual way to enter into the meta-cosmic realm of God, in order to share divine love, energy, and wisdom.<sup>66</sup> These spiritual leaders have found the hidden treasure of the *missio Dei* in the process of inward stillness through their first hand experiences. One wonders if the spiritual experience that they have gained is able to fill the gap found in today’s modern Christian spirituality. Does Christian meditation have the possibility to address the

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63 Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley: The Patterns and Practices of a Movement Maker* (Franklin, Tennessee: Seedbed, 2014), 97.

64 Moe Moe Nyunt, “*Hesychasm Encounters Lectio Divina: An Intercultural Analysis of Eastern and Western Christian Contemplative Practices*,” *The Asbury Journal* 70, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 84.

65 Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 231.

66 Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), 214; Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *On Prayer*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s seminary Press, 1996), 33; Matta El-Meskeen (Matthew the Poor), *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 65.



questions the Church is facing in the age of spirituality? If it does, then it carries immense possibilities for mission outreach to a modern generation searching for spiritual experience.

## 2) Human Culture to God Culture: Meditation As Cross-Cultural Mission

After World War II, missionaries and missiologists from the West were aware of changes in the world's political culture that brought changes to the religious culture. They realized that the world had become a multi-cultural world through the effects of globalization and the nature of Christianity had become global.<sup>67</sup> Thus, "mission theorists and practitioners adopted more culturally sensitive approaches."<sup>68</sup> In fact, most parts of Asia and Africa had been multi-cultural communities since the pre-missionary era and missionaries took notice of this and communicated with focused groups within these communities.

Nevertheless, in the post-modern world, missiologists and mission practitioners extensively listened to the phrase "all nations" which is a key part of the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20, Mt. 24:14, Acts 1:8), and realized that the emphasis of the Great Commission is not to cross just the geographical boundaries of nation-states; rather, it is to reach "people groups." As stated by Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch: "The 'nations', Jesus was referring to, are not countries or nation-states. The wording He chose (the Greek word *ethne*) points to the ethnicities, the languages and the extended families which constitute the peoples of the earth."<sup>69</sup>

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67 James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, "Introduction" in *New Directions In Mission and Evangelization II: Theological Foundations*, eds. James A Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), xi.

68 Harold A. Netland, "Introduction: Globalization and Theology Today" in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, eds., Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 28.

69 Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch, "Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge" in *Perspectives On the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthoren, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2009), 533.

As a result, mission leaders rallied around the idea of reaching people groups. “In order to work together strategically, mission leaders have been refining the concept of ‘people groups’ as a rough measure of our progress toward completing the entire task.”<sup>70</sup> Hence, the term “mission” is gradually equated with “cross-culture” or “inter-culture.”<sup>71</sup> Missiology thus became a theology of crossing anthropological cultural barriers. Andrew Walls, one of the most significant scholars of Christianity, notes “the determining factor in the contemporary Christian situation is the cross-cultural diffusing of the faith.”<sup>72</sup>

Bevans and Schroeder recognize the emphasis of “culture” in Protestant Evangelical and Pentecostal mission. They mention that: “the great advantage of this strain of missionary theology is to be found in its power to motivate Christians to undertake explicit evangelizing and cross-cultural missionary work.”<sup>73</sup> The document of the National Conference of U. S Catholic Bishops in 1986 also reveals the importance of culture in a dialogical approach to mission and evangelism. The statement reads, “In this work of dialogue and evangelization, the church must be a leaven for all cultures, at home in each culture.”<sup>74</sup> While I totally agree with the work of contemporary missiologists who have addressed the various cultural issues that the Church faces in our current postmodern context, the approaches they focus on for doing theologies in context are primarily religious holism, social identity, social change, social anthropology, linguistics, political science, geography, and history.<sup>75</sup>

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70 Winter and Koch, “Finishing the Task”, 534.

71 James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, *New Directions In Mission and Evangelization I: Basic Statements* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 257, 263; *Mission Studies As Intercultural Theology and Its Relationship to Religious Studies*, 2. <http://www.dgmw.org/MissionStudies.pdf> (accessed June 11, 2015).

72 Andrew Walls, “Globalization and the Study of Christian History” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, eds., Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 75.

73 Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants In Context*, 346-347.

74 James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, *New Directions In Mission and Evangelization I: Basic Statements* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 140.

75 Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 42-49.

Still, there are some moral issues that go astray from biblical truth, but are widely acknowledged as truth within the broader society, issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion, and corruption, just to name a few. There may be many more moral and ethical questions in people's day-to-day activities that the Church needs to address in each cultural context and in its generation. For example, today same-sex marriage has been legalized in twenty-one countries<sup>76</sup> and most of them we formerly known as Christian countries, or missionary sending countries from the West. The acceptance of homosexuality has encroached into Western culture since the new millennium. Since it is legally recognized by various governmental authorities and increasingly influences the rest of the world, it is understandable that the paradigm on homosexuality has shifted within many of the world's cultures. Some local churches have chosen to follow the world and give some support to this cultural shift. This is one of the many challenging issues for which the Church needs to give a proper answer.

On the other hand, what is accepted by the Western understanding of culture seen as a disease for Asian culture. Another well-known Hindu guru, Swami "Baba" Ramdew, believes that homosexuality is a disease, and he affirms that it is curable. For him, it can be cured through meditation. On the word of the Swami: "It can be treated like any other congenital defect. Such tendencies can be treated by yoga, pranayama and other meditation techniques."<sup>77</sup> It is interesting that life-change-testimonies of gays through meditation can also be encountered on some internet web sites. I am of the same mind as the Swami, that the Christian practice of meditation is able to help men and women find the reality of their true nature as men and women.

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76 Ariane de Vogue and Jeremy Diamond, "Supreme Court rules in favor of same-sex marriage nationwide," June 27, 2015, under "CNN: Politics," <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/26/politics/supreme-court-same-sex-marriage-ruling/>; Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life. "Gay Marriage Around the World," <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/06/26/gay-marriage-around-the-world-2013/> (accessed July 7, 2015); Map: Same-sex marriage in the United States, <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/us/map-same-sex-marriage/> (accessed July 7, 2015).

77 Dean Nelson, "Hindu guru claims homosexuality can be 'cured' by yoga," July 8, 2009, under "The Telegraph," <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/5780028/Hindu-guru-claims-homosexuality-can-be-cured-by-yoga.html> (accessed July 7, 2015).

Today's popular culture of same sex marriage can be overthrown by God's culture, which is a true image of God that reveals God's glory in each person.

One influential anthropologist, L. L. Langness states, "Culture is shared behavior and ideas that are cumulative, systemic, symbolic, and transmitted from generation to generation extragenetically."<sup>78</sup> At the same time, anthropologists also generally believe that culture is changeable. Theologically, God created man and women in his own image and he knows the imperfect nature of human culture in this fallen world, so he has revealed his saving plan from the beginning. One recovers his or her own original image, or the authentic moral image, when he or she encounters God, and this full image of God will be recovered at the end of time.

According to the Scripture, every now and then, the people of God were reminded that they are made in the image of God and crowned with glory and honor (Ps. 8:5, Zech. 12:8, Ps. 82:6, John 10:34-36). In the Old Testament, when the people of God were filled with the Spirit of God, they were filled with wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and all kinds of skills (Ex. 31:3, 35:31). Joshua was filled with wisdom in Deuteronomy 34:9. Micah was filled with power, justice, and might when he was filled with the Spirit of God (Mic. 3:8). It appears that when people become full of the Spirit, they receive wisdom in order to live as the people of God, and receive skills in order to serve God and his people. Since human beings are made in God's image, they are responsible to follow God's culture.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul taught the early Church to put on Christ, to clothe themselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and not to think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh (Rom. 13:14, Col. 3:12, 1 Cor. 12). This means the Church needs to be united with Christ and put on the godly characteristics of Christlikeness on a daily basis. The Apostle Paul also taught about spiritual gifts such as knowledge, wisdom, and understanding (Eph. 5:18; Col. 1:9); and the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), in order to live according to a godly culture within the world, and other spiritual gifts (Rom. 12 and Eph. 4, 1 Cor. 12) in order to continue the

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78 L. L. Langness, *The Study of Culture*, 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. (Novato, California: Chandler & Sharp Publishers, Inc., 2005), 291.

mission of God. Protestant Evangelicals and Pentecostal Christians widely believe that these spiritual gifts and fruit of the Spirit can be attained by faith. Nevertheless, a faith-oriented gospel message often does not work in a post-modern culture that appeals to mystical experience in disciplinary practice.<sup>79</sup>

On this point, the theology of meditation in the Orthodox tradition addresses the question as to how one can have an experience of transformation that will proceed to a godly culture. *Hesychasm*, the Orthodox spiritual practice of inward stillness is normally associated with ascetic practice. For Orthodox *hesychasts*, the goal and final state of inward silent meditation is *theosis* (Greek) or *deification* (Latin), which means, “becoming like God.” Matta El-Meskeen shares his experience of *theosis* through prayer in this way: “The more the mind is quiet and silent, the more divine truth radiates, shines, and is transfigured within it.”<sup>80</sup>

At the initial stage, one meditates upon short scripture verses or the Jesus Prayer. Matta El-Meskeen said that at that moment, “all his (her) senses would be controlled by, and his will focused upon, prayer. His (Her) heart would also be spiritually ready for receiving any directions from the Holy Spirit.”<sup>81</sup> Then, the mind goes to the heart and it reaches a totally silent stage. At this stage, the *hesychast* loses his or her self-awareness and experiences the visit of the Divine Soul; the spirit of the *hesychast* attaches to the Divine Spirit. Finally, he or she comes under the control of the Divine Spirit with shared Divine energy and wisdom, but not the Divine essence. Matta El-Meskeen admits that the whole process of meditation requires the support of Divine grace,<sup>82</sup> which we can understand as the grace of the *missio Dei*, where the Holy Spirit has sent us on an inward journey toward God, but empowering us in our outward mission to the world at the same time.

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79 Thomas C. Fox, “Double Belonging: Buddhism and Christian Faith”, under “National Catholic Reporter, The Independent News Source,” <http://ncronline.org/news/double-belonging-buddhism-and-christian-faith> (accessed July 7, 2015).

80 Matta El-Meskeen, *Orthodox Prayer Life*, 56.

81 Ibid., 41.

82 Matta El-Meskeen, *Orthodox Prayer Life*, 57.

The phenomenology of Orthodox meditation enlightens the Church in the post-modern world, so that meditation, the inward missionary movement of *missio Dei*, can make visible the invisible image of God (Col. 1:15). Meditation helps empower the meditator to put on a godly culture and Christ's likeness for missional living and being. Metropolitan Emilianos Timiadis of Sylibria helps us understand the missional spirituality of the monk who practices meditation in this way: "The monk, without saying it, shows to the world that the great virtues which Christ taught are accessible in spite of the obstacles of the world and in spite of the resistance of our fallen nature."<sup>83</sup> That is why monks and early Church Fathers possessed the spiritual gifts, and why one of their significant gifts was discernment. They discerned "the evil of their times, an evil that was much more serious than the heresies and attacks to which the Church was subject."<sup>84</sup> Christian spiritual practice of meditation are one of the solutions for the Church as it encounters the ethical crises of today.

### CONCLUSION:

Christians believe that God created the universe with his amazing power. One of his incredible creations is the human brain which governs the whole body and mind. He created the human brain in a complex and unique way. Neuroscientists have uncovered that the brain controls millions of our daily functions such as visual and auditory processing, memory, emotions, sensation, learning, as well as motor control. They also notice that there are two hemispheres of a brain so that it has two different ways of thinking and processing information; however, these two halves work together for our daily activities. There is a common conclusion of neurologists: "Both hemispheres of the brain are capable of some kind of awareness, but their methods of experiencing and expressing it are very different. The generation

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83 Emilianos Timiadis, "The Missionary Dimension of Monasticism" in *Martyria/Mission: The Witness of the Orthodox Churches Today*, ed. Ion Bria (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980), 38.

84 Ibid., 39.

of human conscious awareness, in all its multilayered fullness, depends upon the harmonious integration of both sides of the brain.”<sup>85</sup>

The analogy of how the brain functions may help us see that there are two ways of thinking, experiencing, and expressing the theology of the *missio Dei* in terms of its sending movements: outward sending activities and inward sending experiences. When we explore God’s mission from a bird’s eye view, it can be inferred, that modern Christians in the West are gifted in outward action-oriented mission and people in the East are gifted in terms of the inward experiential mission. In fact, God’s mission as a whole has two directions—to the world and to God himself—that the people of God need to use together in harmony. In order to do this, it is high time for the present day Church to balance its outward action based mission with the inward stillness of experiential mission of meditation that people through our age are longing for.

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85 Andrew Newberg, Eugene D’Aquili, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science and The Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), 23.





# **The Role of Contextualization for the SWM Faculty:**

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*Gilliland's **The Word Among Us***

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The faculty in the School of World Mission (SWM) at Fuller Theological Seminary began to set the standard for evangelical missiological reflection on contextualization in the 1970s and 80s. To date The School of Intercultural Studies (formerly SWM) “has graduated more missiologists than any other U.S. Seminary” (Moreau 2012, 149). The publication of *The Word Among Us* (WAU) in 1989 was the faculty’s collective statement endorsing contextualization for evangelical missiology. WAU was an important endorsement of contextualization at the time since some Evangelicals were still cautious about the concept, fearing it overly emphasized culture to the detriment of the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

Of course the faculty did more than simply endorse contextualization. WAU deals with many aspects of contextualization including examples of contextualization in the Old Testament (Glasser) and the New Testament (Gilliland), a “biblical theology of covenant as a model for knowing God in multiple contexts,” (Van Engen, 77), the relationship between form and meaning (Hiebert), person centered communication (Kraft), translation (Shaw), contextualized media (Sogaard), cross-cultural leadership (Clinton), social transformation ministries (Elliston), contextualization in American society (Wager), nominalism as a western contextual problem (Gibbs), the ethical particularism of Chinese culture (Che-Bin), and contextualization for Muslim contexts (Woodberry). Dean Gilliland, the book’s editor, was “the only professor on a seminary faculty with the term contextualization in his official title” (Kraft 2005, ix), underlining how important SWM felt the problem and opportunity of human culture was for Christian faith. Even before WAU was published several SWM faculty had published significant works on contextualization, including Charles Kraft (1979), Paul Hiebert (1985) and R. Daniel Shaw (1988).

In this article I reflect on how the SWM balanced its ideas about contextualization by affirming the supracultural nature of the gospel with a position of epistemological humility. I hope to show that SWM’s view of contextualizing theology was both progressive and traditional in that Evangelical, idealist notions of culture and truth shaped it. This

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1 Moreau uses Gilliland’s map of contextualization models in his own mapping and assessing of Evangelical models (2012, 327ff, 355ff).

combination opened up the promise and challenge of theological diversity that asks questions about ecclesiastical authority in the face of the conflict of interpretations. The contextualization theories of SWM were emblematic of a larger evangelical focus, on how culture shapes understanding, that often neglected social analysis of how local and global social systems and institutions frequently dominate cultural beliefs and values. Today the power of contemporary global social forces makes it necessary for missiologists to find theories of culture that allow missiology to more fully describe and study these social influences on local theologies and Christian practice.

My reflection on WAU and the work of SWM faculty on contextualization is intertwined with my own academic journey. I have been deeply influenced by the authors of WAU. I read their books and articles in seminary (1982 – 1985) and later studied with seven of the book's twelve authors while earning two academic degrees at SWM (1996 – 2002). Like most evangelical missionaries I found that their insights affirmed the Evangelical concern for faithfulness to scripture and were progressive with regard to serious engagement with culture. The thinking of SWM honed my skills in cross-cultural communication of the gospel and liberated my understanding of how to do theology in context. While not everyone in the evangelical world endorsed Fuller's ideas on contextualization, even the disagreement led to insightful discussions and debates. Evangelicals today think differently than they did in 1989 and I suspect that most would endorse the ideas in WAU more easily than when it was published. Whether we agree or disagree, the missiological world owes a large debt to the careful and creative thinking of the SWM faculty on contextualization. In celebration of this rich legacy I would like to invite my former SWM professors to respond to some questions about contextualization that reading WAU in our present context forces to the surface.

First, in proposing the supracultural nature of the gospel together with a critical realist epistemology, have Evangelicals been willing to fully address the resulting conflict of theological interpretations and resulting questions about ecclesiastical authority? The term supracultural was used by evangelical missiologists to argue that the gospel is independent of culture and should not be compromised for the sake of cultural relevance. This term

emerged in a context in which Evangelicals were fighting to maintain the authority of scripture and resist abandoning biblical truth to personal and cultural preference. For some time before *WAU* was published Evangelicals had been energetically arguing against theories that would relativize biblical truth and in missiology this translated into the idea of the supracultural gospel.<sup>2</sup>

SWM regularly endorsed the concept of the supracultural nature of the gospel and at the same time moved past an epistemology characterized by naïve realism. According to this view the Church cannot triumphantly declare that it possesses or can articulate absolute truth. This qualified the concept of the supracultural by admitting that no one's perception of truth was absolute or free of the limits of her or his cultural point of view. SWM articulated this epistemological humility as critical realism (Kraft 1996 and Hiebert 1994).

The authors of *WAU* had a different, nuanced, understanding of culture and contextualization yet they shared a common commitment to the supracultural truth of the gospel when doing contextualization. Yet in almost every SWM published work that discusses the supracultural gospel the reader cannot help but notice hesitancy. Consider this comment by Peter Wagner in his contribution to *WAU*,

I myself hesitate to draw up a catalog of supracultural truths lest they be successfully challenged by someone who knows something about some of the world's cultures that I do not and shows that I have guessed wrong. Nevertheless, there are certain concepts that emerge from Scripture which *probably* would be universally recognized as supracultural principles of Christianity, . .

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2 While the term only appears a few times in *WAU* the concept was I believe assumed by all the authors. According to Kraft the term, "supercultural" was coined by William A. Smalley and Marie Fetzner in "A Christian View of Anthropology." F.A. Everest ed. *Modern Science and Christian Faith*. Wheaton, IL. 1948. Linwood Barney spoke of "supracultural" in "The Meo – An Incipient Church." *Cultural Anthropology*. 1957.

He then lists a number of general Christian principles that might qualify as supracultural but then comments, “But as words, they are so abstract that they have very little intrinsic meaning.” (Gilliland, 230-31).<sup>3</sup> Kraft and Hiebert used the term supracultural numerous times in their writings and this same epistemological humility can be seen.<sup>4</sup>

Though the differences do not appear in WAU, Kraft and Hiebert defined the relationship between the supracultural and critical realism somewhat differently. Kraft understood supracultural to identify the functions and meanings behind the forms of the gospels that are the “constants of Christianity” (1979, 118). He focused on the function and impact of the gospel in a person’s life through encounters with truth, allegiance and power (Kraft 2005). These functions and meanings fill the gap between the ideal supracultural gospel and specific cultural contexts. God overcame the gap through the revelation of His life-transforming message, which is personal, interactional, and receptor oriented. Receptors receive messages but create their own meanings.<sup>5</sup> He states clearly that human perceptions of the supracultural are adequate but never absolute (Kraft 1979, 129). This bold and honest observation was partly responsible for a number of evangelical objections to his approach to contextualization (e.g. Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989, 192ff).

In Hiebert’s famous article “Critical Contextualization” he wrote, “...if the gospel is contextualized, what are the checks against biblical and theological distortion? Where are the absolutes” (1994, 84-85)? In an article discussing his concept of metatheology, Hiebert commented that, “The goal of theology is not simply to apply the gospel in the diverse contexts of human life. Theology’s nature also revolves around the goal to understand the unchanging nature of the gospel – the absolutes that transcend time and cultural pluralism” (1994, 102). Hiebert seemed to feel that it might be possible to achieve some consensus on the supracultural through

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3 I am sympathetic with his frustration but perhaps these Christian principles seemed too abstract because they were missing the social context needed to be translated into Christian behavior.

4 See Kraft (1979, 116f; 2005, 96) and Hiebert (1994, 102-103).

5 See Moreau’s helpful discussion on Kraft’s view (2012, 80).

international dialogue (he mentions conferences) that would agree on the essentials of the supracultural gospel (1994, 103). Later, in a more qualified comment he states that it is not possible to know the gospel absolutely and that knowledge is always connected to social power which must be taken into account (1999, 74). Showing even more concern for the tension between the supracultural and epistemological humility, Hiebert defined metatheology as a set of procedures. This procedure included the test of scripture, humility and willingness to be led by the Spirit, and the hermeneutical community seeking consensus on theological issues (1994, 101-102).

These two claims – that the gospel was supracultural and that no one had access to the supracultural gospel – have always created an uneasy tension. It is a parallel argument to the one that Evangelicals have made about the inerrancy of scripture as originally given. While the effort to protect the authority of scripture is a worthy one, it seems odd that in this argument scripture's authority is based on original manuscripts no one has ever seen. Evangelicals would do better to simply confess faith in the authority of scripture on religious grounds. In both cases however the goals in these arguments are worthy ones even if they seem to use faulty rational arguments to defend what are ultimately religious convictions.

This dual argument moved contextualization theory ahead. Yet it is my observation that many missionaries and students who embrace it have consequently concluded that the task of contextualization comes down to overcoming cultural bias in order to ascertain God's truth. While becoming culturally aware is important for increasing cross-cultural communication it simply does not lead to objectivity in theology. I fear that the idea of the supracultural has left many focused on the wrong problem. The incarnation, (a doctrine frequently used by SWM faculty as a model for contextualization) demonstrates that it is God who comes into our social worlds to reveal Himself in the midst of culture.<sup>6</sup> God does not ask us to critically fight through biases to finally see a cultureless, supracultural truth. If the incarnation tells us that

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6 There are ten uses of the term incarnation as the model for contextualization in WAU and it is routinely referred to as the ultimate model for contextualization in the faculty's writings. For example see Gilliland (2005, 493ff), Hiebert 1985, 91ff), Kraft 1979, 173ff), and Shaw (1998, 14ff).

God's revelation comes in the midst of cultural and social life, then perhaps culture is as much an asset as it is a problem in theology. "In all situations the gospel seems to find its natural congruence within the cultural stream while at the same time encountering there its most serious obstacles" (Sanneh 1995, 49). This is not because God is equal to nature or culture but because God is the prior and primary category before both. Culture does not feed on itself "to produce a sacral category" (1995, 51). The SWM faculty would agree with this and yet rightly remain concerned about the question of validity in the diversity of local theologies.

Clearly the faculty of SWM has supported the ever-widening insights of new theologies. In support of theological diversity Van Engen writes, "As the gospel continues to take root in new cultures, and God's people grow in their covenantal relationship to God in those contexts, a broader, fuller, and deeper understanding of God's revelation will be given to the world church" (Gilliland 1989, 95). Hiebert affirmed the right of all local churches to read and interpret the Scriptures in their own cultural contexts and urged the west to face the fact of theological diversity (1999, 97). But he also felt it important to identify the supracultural gospel. He continued to argue that, "there is objective reality and objective truth (reality as God sees it – as it really is)" (1994, 98). By acknowledging that cultural bias could be an obstacle in cross-cultural communication the faculty clearly did not intend to say that culture was the primary problem in doing theology. Our only chance of understanding God is in terms of what God has revealed to us in the biblical texts that are embedded in ancient cultures. I have two observations to offer about the tension of affirming an objective gospel while admitting that it cannot be objectively known.<sup>7</sup>

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7 I have other misgivings about the notion of the supracultural and speaking about objective truth in relation to the gospel. If truth emanates from God as revelation then it is by its very nature subjective truth. God is God in three persons and the source of all personhood, and thus the primary subject before all others. Rather than speaking of objectivity in theology Christians above all people should be taking up the subjective view of Christ. In this sense Christian commitment should be characterized by a self-aware bias in that we intentionally seek to have the mind of Christ.

First, once we say that the supracultural gospel cannot be known outside of culture, we cannot escape the problem of cultural relativism no matter how many times we affirm the existence of supracultural (absolute) truth. SWM and those who do not believe in the existence of absolute truth at all are both faced with the problem of a “conflict of interpretations.” In other words, once there is no standard, or a standard that cannot be known, all interpretations may rightly compete for validity. Contemporary hermeneutics has taught us that to read is to interpret, so pointing to the Bible as the standard only postpones the problem. It seems that there simply are no meta-perspectives from which we can judge and validate theology.

Looking back it is ironic that the battle Evangelicals were fighting for the authority of the scripture and theological absolutes on an intellectual level has largely been lost in the west due to social and economic shifts. These shifts vastly increased personal autonomy and eroded institutional, and especially ecclesiastical, authority. It may be that propositions of absolutes are only effective when a community’s institutions have the power to bring human behavior into compliance. The battle in the west has been lost because the authority of personal choice is now a social fact (in the way Durkheim meant social fact). Heresy was only an operational concept when the Church had social authority to judge competing views as invalid. Consequently appeals to absolute truth today have little relevance for Christian or non-Christian social life. This does not mean that they are not made every Sunday. But today Churches in the west possess only market appeal and influence but very little actual authority in the lives of Christians.<sup>8</sup> In the west only impersonal bureaucracies have the power to coerce individual behavior against the consumer culture of individual preference and belief.

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8 Today there is still lip service given to the notion of absolute truth but little evidence that Christians would submit to its demands on their lives. I recently asked a class of 35 evangelical students if they believed that the gospel represented absolute truth. Most of them said they believed this was true. I then asked if they could think of any issue that they would allow a local church authority to overrule their own convictions or behavior. No one could think of any circumstance at all in which he or she would submit to a church ruling. Of course this does not prove that there isn’t a supracultural gospel but it does show us how social forces have shaped the way we actually appropriate faith and practice.



This leads into my second observation. Once we take a critical realist view and give freedom for a multiplicity of theologies we must then ask who will validate theology and by what standard? We are now on the doorstep of the deeper issues of social and ecclesiastical institutional power that lies behind efforts to define truth. WAU and the faculty of SWM did not fully address this issue. For Kraft the standard for validity is theology functioning in our lives in dynamically equivalent ways to the way the gospel functioned (impacted) in Christian lives in the first century. It is unclear however who will evaluate the level of equivalence in our theologies.

Hiebert went the furthest by suggesting that hermeneutical communities seek consensus on theological issues. On the other hand he was not necessarily comfortable with local churches doing this work. He seemed to prefer international conferences where dialogue about a meta-theological grid could take place (1994). He was well aware that critical realism invited multiple theologies and that in practice “most evangelical missionaries and sending churches are deeply threatened when national leaders begin to develop their own theologies” (1994, 97). This default tendency to standardize western theology has of course quickly given way to the expanding global independent church movement. These churches, birthed without dependency on, or obligation to the older churches, are now free to explore God’s revelation in the Bible as they read it in their contexts. In the wake of the expanding diversity in theology, Sanneh makes the following comment.

[While religious people] employ culture to represent God as transcendent being, the God who is so represented may not be identified with some cultural manifestations to the exclusion of others, so that partial cultural representation does not become the comprehensive criterion of God. Such a Christian position would allow cultural access and utilization without making end and means synonymous... This may sound at once threatening and inconclusive, threatening because it rejects cultural systems as in any sense definitive of truth, and inconclusive because it perceives culture as inseparable from the truth (Sanneh 1995, 51-52).

Sanneh argues that cultural pluralism lies at the heart of the Christian gospel. “No culture is the exclusive norm of truth and...no culture is inherently unclean in the eyes of God” (1995, 52). If this is true, are Evangelical churches and mission organizations able to embrace the social and ecclesiastical freedom that this implies? But even if they are not ready, is ecclesiastical authority strong enough to resist the global marketplace of churches where members are consumers who choose? Sanneh challenges us to come to a deeper understanding of incarnation; one in which plural understandings of the gospel reflect the nature of the gospel itself. We continue to face the temptation to use social power to silence theologies that understand the gospel differently than we do.

Some might reply that this kind of freedom can lead to false gospels and confusion. While there are many valid interpretations of scripture, not all interpretations are valid. We should recall however that alternative readings of the gospel have always been with us and today more than ever the Church lacks the social authority to silence alternative interpretations. In this situation our peaceful and loving response to diverse gospel understandings can become one of the greatest means by which we validate our adherence to the first century gospel. We will be known as Jesus’ disciples by the fruit of our interpretations and our responses to the interpretations of others (Matt. 7). It may be that the influence of a well-lived Christian life is more effective than trying to resurrect ecclesiastical authority. Like headmen in small-scale communities we must now persuade and impress without the authority to make people act.

This leads me to another important question. Has Evangelical missiology adequately considered how social systems and institutions impact how the gospel is interpreted and practiced? Did our American distaste for communism and liberation theology’s close association with it, leave us with distaste for social analysis? More than twenty-five years after its publication, I read WAU very differently than when I first read it. My view of culture and contextualization has undergone a change that began even before I left SWM. Daniel Shaw talked to me about the social anthropology of Mary Douglas

and the inference communication theory of Sperber and Wilson (1995).<sup>9</sup> Charles Kraft was saying, “After all we have said about contextualization it may be that social issues may be more important than cultural issues.”

While the missiological world focused on SWM’s culture theory in contextualization, the articles in *The Word Among Us* do in fact wrestle with social realities. Gilliland reminds us that theology is done in “time and place” (11), Van Engen describes the covenant as “historical contextualization” (83), Hiebert criticizes asocial and ahistorical views of symbols (106-107), Shaw insists that, “History cannot be ignored or passed over” (152, 156), and Kraft argues that “God’s messages need to be conveyed through life not simply words” (135). In one provocative moment Che-Bin writes, “...any alternative that is offered as a solution to the Chinese problem [of achieving a universal ethic for the nation] must include options for a new political system” (278). Regardless of their attempt to remind us of the importance of social forces, most Evangelicals missionaries have focused on how to translate theological concepts and worship forms cross-culturally. This tendency agrees with the Evangelical bias in favor of cultural study over social analysis.

Yet in today’s globalized world social and economic systems and institutions are overwhelming cultural beliefs and values. Meanwhile postmodern thinkers have powerfully critiqued the hidden agendas and ideologies latent in metanarratives and institutions that shape cultural ideals. Today many postmodern thinkers find metanarratives impossible to accept given their suspicion that they are Trojan horses laden with hidden agendas that benefit the powerful. While many of us recoil from these critiques, missiology must begin to more fully address the challenges of social analysis in contextualization. Marshal Sahlins suggests, “We have to talk about the way that cultural meanings are put at risk by [social / historical] events” (2014).

The social forces of globalization and the critique of institutional linkage between power and ideology should reframe discussions on

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9 See Shaw’s excellent article on this, “Beyond Contextualization: Toward a Twenty-first-Century Model for Enabling Mission” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34, No.4 (October 2010): 208 – 215.

contextualization. Rather than propose how contextualization should be done, it might be prudent to first *describe how theology is being done* in order to analyze patterns being practiced. We might consider doing an ethnography of contextualization. In a sense this is what Andrew Walls (1996, 2002) and Sanneh (1989) have done in studying the cultural transmission of the gospel over time.<sup>10</sup> How have various peoples received, resisted and contributed to reshaping the gospel even as the gospel transformed them and their societies. We must learn from their ability to analyze both the structures of power and the resistance of those “from below.”

While globalization makes the study of social power and resistance urgent, these dynamics have always been in play. Lamin Sanneh argues that recipients of the gospel were never passive audiences. Missionaries might have been receptor oriented but the receptors were always pushing back, shaping and at times resisting the gospel in pursuit of their own cultural projects. Both messenger and audience mutually influenced each other and the message, and this happened while being part of larger complex social processes (2003, 18). As Shaw and Van Engen have pointed out, the contextualization of the gospel has always emerged out of the dialogue and interrelationships of missionary and local audience (2003). Sanneh expands this view to include the interaction between larger institutional, social structural and geo-political processes in which local people participate.

My final question is, do we need a broader understanding of culture; one that takes into account the social environment of global and institutional constraints on people’s cultural pursuits? The school of culture as agency (or practice) articulated by Marshall Sahlins (2005), and especially Sherry Ortner (2006), may be useful to Evangelicals in thinking about contextualization. Ortner describes human agency in the pursuit of cultural projects lived within social constructs of power and resistance. Her theory of culture attempts to link culture to social structure, power and the agency of individuals (Ortner 2006, Loc 2714). As she explains, culture as practice is

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10 At SWM Kraft was always more concerned with the process of contextualization than other Evangelicals writing on contextualization (Moreau 2012, 150). But his work focuses mostly on the social encounter between messenger and receptor rather than the individual in the midst of social systems and forces.

“...the framework of practice theory within which neither ‘individuals’ nor ‘social forces’ have ‘precedence,’ but in which nonetheless there is a dynamic, powerful, and sometimes transformative relationship between the practices of real people and the structures of society, culture, and history” (Ortner, Kindle Locations 24912493). Furthermore,

... the point of making the distinction between agency-in-the-sense-of power and an agency-in-the-sense-of (the pursuit of) [cultural] projects is that the first is organized around the axis of domination and resistance, and thus defined to a great extent by the terms of the dominant party, while the second is defined by local logics of the good and the desirable and how to pursue them (Ortner, Kindle Locations 2725-2728).

Here individuals pursue cultural projects (such as I want to be Christian, or I want to reach the world for Christ) as members of groups who have status and relative amounts of power (e.g. within a local Christian community and society). These projects are selected from a group’s cultural menu of desired projects. The pursuit of these projects is subject to their place within the network of social relationships, local and global, and in this network they both exercise and resist power. These social networks present people with opportunities and constraints that shape their pursuit of cultural projects.

Missionaries did not simply hand off the good news to local people. They were participants in larger social networks of relationships and institutions that included Christian and non-Christians, local citizens and foreign expatriates, all with different statuses, degrees of influence, power and social obligations. This situation requires that missiologists use a culture theory that accounts for social power and individual agency as cultural projects are pursued. The fact that the gospel is received in the midst of social relationships and institutions seems to be at least as important as the way meaning is conveyed through forms.

I recognize that my questions are not particularly new. Yet the social conditions of our global situation – a situation characterized by the contradictions of neo-liberalism on a global scale alongside religious

fundamentalism, obscene wealth alongside desperate economic inequality, expanding individual freedom alongside dominating bureaucracies - make the questions of the social implications of our epistemological choices and the role of social power in shaping Christian faith urgent ones.

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