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Current Issue

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Editorial

Christian Recessions and Declines: What Might We Learn from Them?

J. Nelson Jennings

DOCX | PDF | HTML

Featured Articles

Eclipse of the Son: The Fate of the 1880s Revival in Meiji Japan

Greg S. Whyte

DOCX | PDF | HTML

Contemporary Practice

Emojis and Visio Divina: Contextualizing the Gospel to Reach East African Youth in the Digital Sphere

David Hirome

DOCX | PDF | HTML

Muslim Studies

How Should Muslim Identity be Determined?

Fred Farrokh

DOCX | PDF | HTML

Resources

RESOURCE CENTER
PAUL G. HIEBERT
LEGACY
RALPH WINTER
LEGACY
INSIDE GM

Publications

ENGLISH
繁體中文
繁體中文 (舊)
简体中文
简体中文 (旧)
ESPAÑOL
FRANÇAIS
PORTUGUÊS
TIẾNG VIỆT
TIẾNG VIỆT (XƯA)

Contextualization

[Mission Dynamics Among Biharis: Toward Contextualized Approaches](#)

Santosh Kumar, Chanchal Gayen, Marcelo Dias

[📄 DOCX]   [📄 PDF]   [📄 HTML]

African Studies

[The Theological Voice of a Poor Man in a Desert: Right for Africa?](#)

Jim Harries

[📄 DOCX]   [📄 PDF]   [📄 HTML]

Special Issue

[Call for Papers for April 2025 Special Issue: "Lausanne IV: Reviews, Analyses, and Projections"](#)

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[📄 DOCX]   [📄 PDF]   [📄 HTML]

[Call for Papers for October 2025 Special Issue: "Diaspora Communities: Relationships, Identities, Challenges, and Opportunities"](#)

GME Editorial Team

[📄 DOCX]   [📄 PDF]   [📄 HTML]

Review & Preview

[Sam George and Askok Kumar, eds., Sharing Jesus with Hindus: Global Witness Among Hindu Diaspora](#)

Prasad D R J Phillips

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Editorial

Christian Recessions and Declines:
What Might We Learn from Them?

J. Nelson Jennings

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Why did we on the *Global Missiology – English* editorial team decide to take up the theme of "Recessions and Declines: Noteworthy Decreases of Christianity and Its Influence"? Is doing so at all helpful, appropriate, or instructive? On one hand, considering revivals and growth provides both encouragement and examples to emulate. What good, though, could come from describing and analyzing Christian losses and shrinkages?

Not surprisingly, there was a tepid response to our call for papers for this issue on Christian recessions and declines. By comparison, there were several more submissions to the previous, companion issue on "Awakenings, Advances, and Revivals: Noteworthy Outpourings of God's Spirit" (Global Missiology – English, 2024). The dictum "Everybody loves a winner" held true, and feel-good stories once again won out over their counterparts.

Another possible factor for more submitted studies about periods of Christian growth than about decline, and conceivably the single most significant reason, could be the fact that advances and revivals have characterized Christian history more so than recessions. Has that actually been the case?

The title of U.S.-American historian Kenneth Scott Latourette's seven-volume *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (Latourette, 1937-1945) suggests an inexorable advance of the gospel throughout history. Indeed, Latourette paints an overall picture of net growth from the first Christian generation up until his mid-twentieth-century time of writing. He uses the image of an "incoming tide" that pulses onto a shore, then retreats. Based on the three criteria of geography, vitality, and influence, Latourette summarizes that "In each major advance [Christianity has become] more widely potent in human life than in the one before it, and each recession [has been] marked by less dwindling of the impact of Christianity than the one which immediately preceded it" (Latourette, 1945, 417-418).

The Christian recessions that Latourette traces occurred in roughly the years 500-950 and 1350-1500. Later, the 1700-1815 period was more of a pause in growth rather than a decline per se, and during Latourette's lifetime 1914-1944 had seen both "severe losses" and "significant gains" (Latourette, 1945, 418-419). Latourette highlights both external and internal factors that contributed to the recessions, including, with respect to the final period during the first recession, invasions and "the poor quality of the Popes" (Latourette, 1945, 425).

In sum, Latourette's outline of Christianity's expansion is seemingly upbeat. He notes that as of 1944,

> More than any other religion in human history it was becoming universal. Its history had demonstrated that it appealed to individuals in all races, nations, and stages of culture and that among those who accepted it specific fruits appeared which were clearly recognizable. Each major forward wave had carried the faith into additional portions of the earth's surface. Each recession had been less marked than its predecessor. In the advances of the

post-A.D. 1500 periods Christianity had become world-wide to an extent attained by no other religion. Especially after A.D. 1815 it had been planted among practically all peoples and tribes and after A.D. 1914 was becoming firmly rooted in the texture of their cultures (Latourette, 1945, 465).

One is left with the impression that Christianity's incoming waves will soon overwhelm all the world's beaches such that neither low tides nor receding waves could lower the faith's waters away from the underlying shorelines. The ultimate triumph of Christian expansion seems sure.

Scottish historian Andrew Walls appreciatively explores the theological depth of Latourette's three-fold analysis (that uses geography, vitality, and influence) of Christian expansion (Walls, 1996). In so doing, however, Walls suggests a "built-in fragility" in each facet: churches have grown and shrunk (or disappeared altogether); Christian communities as kingdom outposts have consistently calcified into kingdom "counter-signs"; Christianity's influence has been mixed, multi-causal, and "not complete and final." Per Walls's analysis, Latourette's insight into Christianity's advance and recession was the genuinely Christian understanding, and accurately outlined a historical pattern, of Christian expansion—rather than an essentially secular optimistic view of inexorable "gains on the map of the world, or … progress toward the final goal" (Walls, 1996, 29).

Readers who know Walls's work will likely recognize the connection with his macro-historical understanding of Christianity's periodic, "serial" cross-cultural transmissions (Walls, 1995). The receptions in new contexts of the Christian gospel that have occurred throughout history have coincided with Christian recessions in the contexts from which the gospel witnesses had come and within which the faith had taken root in earlier generations. The serial pattern begins with early Christianity taking root in all directions outside of Jerusalem and Judea simultaneously with the scattering of Christian communities following the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. More recently, the explosive Christian growth in numerous non-Western settings has been mirrored by breathtaking declines in Europe and in North America—with the pockets of revitalization that have been occurring in the West largely coming from the influx of non-Western Christian immigrants.

The very nature of the Christian faith necessitates fresh translations into its various cultural contexts, including across generational changes. Without such translations, inevitably calcification, self-preservation, and failure to interact with each context at its lived, vernacular level will leave Christian communities vulnerable to decline and even disappearance. The threat of churches' candlesticks being removed is real. To imagine an automatic, ongoing, and progressive growth of Christianity not only reflects a "secular optimism" but resembles, rather than a Christian understanding, an Islamic expectation of the ongoing expansion of seventh-century Arabic language and cultural expressions, a growth pattern in Islam's case that historically is clearly evident.

Even so, Christian fragility and vulnerability do not negate the covenant faithfulness of God. Indeed, the ongoing necessity for Christian communities to interact afresh with their contemporary settings accentuates the fundamental and central role that the triune God plays in redeeming his world—in his time and in his way. God lives among and uses the "humble and contrite in spirit" (Isaiah 66:2), his people who are brittle "jars of clay" (II Corinthians 4:7). God's people have always been tempted toward ungodly self-confidence, self-preservation, and self-promotion. To help resist such temptations, the realization of being like "dust" and withering "grass" points God's

people to "the steadfast love of the LORD [that] is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him" (Psalm 103:13-17).

Christian recessions, declines, and (in similar fashion) widespread situations of minority status can serve to magnify God's love and faithfulness rather than to question him. As Greg Whyte's featured article in this issue demonstrates, Christian communities in the increasingly nationalistic latter half of Meiji Japan—who not only had experienced significant growth in the preceding generation but were also being assured by Western missionaries of the impending Christianization of their modernizing nation—were driven to fresh weakness, to grappling with their loyalty-demanding imperial nation, and to crying out to God for his wisdom and faithfulness. The Gospel of Matthew and I Peter are just two of many biblical examples of inspired documents written to encourage minority and scattered Christian communities to look to Jesus, their Savior who had been given "All authority in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18) and was coming again (I Peter 1:7, 13). Moreover, Welsh historian Philip Jenkins offers the double reminder that God's timeframe is not limited and that remembering earlier churches, for example the now disappeared but once vibrant and substantial churches throughout Asia in earlier times, gives hope and strength to Christian communities of succeeding generations (Jenkins, 2008, 260-262).

Remembering the full, historical scope of Christianity's contextual shifts and translations—indeed, remembering the full scope of the expansions and recessions of God's Old and New Covenant people throughout all of history—points to God's providence and the full range of his redemptive mission for his world. God's mission has always been about "making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). Hence Christian missions, which are Christians' efforts to participate in God's all-encompassing mission, are to be comprehensive as well. Through divinely orchestrated missions efforts, God grants saving faith in Jesus Christ, maturing of the Church, and foretastes of the coming kingdom (Jennings, 2007, 194). Losing sight of any of these three features tilts missions initiatives out of balance. Similarly, historical short-sightedness and selective memory can fail to acknowledge the full redemptive mission of the LORD of hosts.

One strength of the Protestant Modern Missions Movement since the late-nineteenth-century Student Volunteer Movement has been its focus on the urgency of the task of world evangelization. That focus unavoidably bears the contextual highwater marks of Western confidence during the pre-World War I expansion of the Industrial Revolution and of Western colonial influence. It was apparent to Western Christian leaders that the world was becoming modernized and Christianized. With transoceanic ship travel plus European-North American collaboration, mission leaders could therefore envision "the evangelization of the world in this generation," as John Mott published in 1900 (Mott, 1900). Post-World War II Evangelicals, buttressed in large part by future-oriented U.S. influence, have carried forward the urgent anticipation of completing the missions task.

At the same time, Evangelicals tend to suffer from historical amnesia that habitually sees only as far back as the days of William Carey and, with a few exceptional hiccups along the way, inexorable progress in conversions ever since (and until Jesus's imminent return). A strength of contemporary evangelical missions can thus become a weakness insofar as the wider aspects of mission, along with the ebb and flow of Christian expansion and recession throughout the breadth of overall redemptive history, get overshadowed.

Moreover, if the realities of Christian declines and widespread situations of minority status are overlooked—particularly by influential mission participants in situations of relative affluence and self-inflated socio-political status—the urgency to "complete the task of world evangelization,"

even with sincere lip-service to God's mission being his mission, can unwittingly slip into self-reliance. Today's technological advances and collaborative efforts can feed secular optimism just as much as they did in Mott's generation.

Realizing the fuller scope of recessions and contextual transitions throughout Christian mission history can cultivate a more complete, more accurate, and arguably more biblical understanding of God's redemptive mission. Each decline, and each cultural reception of the gospel, has had unique characteristics needing appreciation on their own terms. The recent recession of Christianity among Western contexts is not the same as what took place in North Africa with the advance of Islam. Nor were the pre-modern declines of Christian presence throughout Asia the same as the early scattering of Christian communities from Jerusalem and its environs. All of them, however, are part of the wider Christian story and somehow within God's providential dealings with his world. No recession or decline was caused or controlled by Jesus's followers. Neither were any awakenings, advances, or revivals: God alone causes the growth. He is the LORD of hosts, and there is no other. God's mission is his mission. *Kyrie eleison*, and *Maranatha*.

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Eclipse of the Son: The Fate of the 1880s Revival in Meiji Japan

Greg S. Whyte

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Abstract

Japanese Christianity in the 1880s was experiencing significant growth, so much so that missionaries were proclaiming that Japan would become the center of East Asian Christianity by the turn of the century. However, this trend reversed itself in the 1890s, when Christianity was no longer looked upon with favor by the Japanese people, and the rapid growth of the previous decade thus reversed itself into decline. After exploring Christianity's rapid growth in the 1880s (which is rarely mentioned in "revival" literature, despite its resemblance to other, more famous revivals of the period), this article will explore several reasons for its reversal.

Key Words: Christianity, Japan, reversal, revival

Introduction

Widespread awareness of Christianity's slow growth in Japan has obscured periods of significant growth that have occurred. The 1880s was one of those stretches when Christianity grew enough to cause missionaries to forecast Japan's Christianization and strategic role for Christian advancement throughout East Asia. During the 1890s, however, Christianity in Japan steeply declined. This article explores both Japan's late-nineteenth-century decade of Christian growth and the ensuing decade of Christian recession.

Rebaibaru!: The Japanese 1880s Revival Period

Although not as widely spoken of today in revival literature circles as other, and more famous, Christian revivals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Japanese church experienced a period of rapid expansion and revival during the 1880s. While the Catholic and Orthodox churches were also rapidly expanding during this period (Cary 1994, 353-355, 414-415), the scope of the present exploration is limited to the Protestant churches of Japan. The growth was substantial enough for at least some missionaries of the time to proclaim that Japan would soon become a center for Christianity in Asia. Some of these missionaries, such as Guido Verbeck, even called for a moratorium on additional missionaries because of his optimistic impression that Japan would embrace Christianity within the next generation. He declared,

> Christianity is safe today in Japan, even if we foreigners should all have to leave… I think I am less sanguine than many others, but it is my confident belief that if the missionary societies are faithful to their charge up to the end of this century you need not after 1890 send any more missionaries to Japan. You will need to support the men already there and the institutions for a while, but no new men will need to go. The finishing up of the work can be safely left to the foreign force which will by that time be there, working in conjunction with the ever-increasing number of native pastors and evangelists (Mudge 1889, 411-412).

While we may have the advantage of hindsight in knowing that such an embrace of this foreign religion not only did not happen but would instead reverse itself within a few years, the missionaries of the period had reason for their optimism.

By the 1880s, the earlier social stigma against Christianity seemed to have disappeared, specifically among the middle-class intellectuals, to the degree that several prominent voices began advocating for wholesale adoption of Christianity in Japan. One of these vocal proponents for Christianity was Fukuzawa Yukichi, an influential thought leader, journalist, and editor. Though initially hostile toward Christianity, Fukuzawa became one of its more vocal advocates in 1884, exhorting people to conversion because of the perceived moral and intellectual superiority of Christianity, when compared to the more established Japanese religions. Another proponent was Nakamura Masanao, who declared that nation-wide conversion to Christianity was a necessity for the modernization of Japan, and he even insisted that the emperor should lead the people by example and become baptized. As a final example, Ito Hirobumi, the first Prime Minister of modern Japan, became convinced that Japan would never be perceived as equal to the Western powers unless it became permissive toward Christianity, if not endorse it. Accordingly, the cry of many Japanese Christians became "Christ for Japan and Japan for Christ!" (Drummond 1971, 191-192; Mudge 1889, 411; Ritter 1898, 125-128; Thelle 1987, 48; Yanagita 1957, 39, 45).

The Meiji government had elected to pursue westernization as a policy, so the earlier feelings of suspicion toward foreigners became open curiosity and a desire to embrace the advanced technology and ideas of the Western world. The medical and educational initiatives of the largest Christian denominations thus came into demand, and many of the ruling class of the Meiji period became students of the missionaries. For instance, Iwakura Tomomi, a high-ranking official within the court and student of Guido Verbeck, was the ambassador in the 1871 delegation to renegotiate the diplomatic treaties signed with the Western nations (Drummond 1971, 163; Lee 1966, 90). Thus, during the 1880s, since Christianity was equated in the collective Japanese mind with Western civilization, it also became a subject of open curiosity and its ideas as a philosophical system became fashionable.

Additionally, the growth rate of Protestant Christianity seemed to double every 2-3 years. To illustrate how dramatic the rate of growth was, in 1872, there were only ten Japanese Protestant Christians; yet, by 1891, Protestant church membership had grown to over 31,000, with most of that growth occurring in the decade following 1881 (Drummond 1971, 159; Uchimura 1971, 92; Yamamori 1974, 31-32).

The first stirrings of revival began at a missionary conference in Osaka in April 1883, then rapidly spread to Tokyo, where continual prayer meetings and the tangible presence of the Holy Spirit were reported throughout the region. Then, in 1884, revivals began to be experienced in several mission schools, the first recorded at the Christian-based Doshisha University in Kyoto. Like the more famous revivals that occurred later in other nations (including its close neighbor, Korea), the revival in Japan began with concerted and sustained prayer and a deep conviction of sin in the lives of the students (Ariga 1973, 11; Cary 1996, 171; Lee 1966, 108; Ritter 1898, 107; Thelle 1987, 55; Yamamori 1974, 62-63; Yanagita 1957, 44). This is how Otis Cary records the events:

> About the first of March, several of the Christian students began a daily meeting, which was held at half-past nine in the evening at the close of study-hours. The numbers in

attendance and the interest constantly increased until, on Sunday March 16, the whole school showed that it was greatly moved. The different classes held meetings in which for hours they engaged in prayer, confession of sins, and praise. Through the following week the young men could think of hardly anything else than their relations to God. But few in the school remained unmoved. The students were eager to go out and tell others of the blessings they had received (Cary 1996, 171).

After a week-long respite, 200 students were baptized, then life returned to normal at Doshisha (Ariga 1973, 11; Yamamori 1974, 63). Simultaneously, a similar movement was occurring in many churches. Cary reports of church prayer meetings "full of tears, sobbings, and broken confessions of sins," with theatres and other large buildings hosting gatherings that filled them to beyond normal capacity, where audiences earnestly listened to preaching of the gospel (Ballhatchet 2003, 46; Cary 1996, 172; Germany 1965, 6; Yanagita 1957, 44). Similarly, throughout 1883 and until 1888, localized revivals were reported across the nation. This is how Kanzo Uchimura described his experience:

> It was unanimously agreed upon that a veritable Pentecost did set in after it had ceased to be a human experience for over eighteen centuries. And there was every sign that such was truly the case. First, there was much groaning for sins. Everybody wept, and was considered a block-heart who could not weep on such an occasion. Some miraculous conversions were reported... We all felt something miraculous and stupendous coming over us (Uchimura 1971, 92-93).

Likewise, H. Ritter records several pages of missionary testimonies of nationwide revivals. For instance, the *Missionary Record*, a Scottish Presbyterian publication, declared about a meeting in Kyoto (no date is given), "While there the presence of the Holy Ghost did not make itself felt by so many outward manifestations, still there was a deeper sense of His presence and of the need of His continued help than before." Charles Warren, a missionary with the Church Missionary Society (CMS), likewise declared, "Showers of blessing which God has graciously granted this year in different parts of the country, and revived by which the native brethren have come to be more closely united in affection and in love," something he had never seen throughout his twenty years of missionary work in Japan. Robert Maclay declared in May of 1883, "A spirit of religious revival, bringing seasons of refreshing through the presence of the Lord, is spreading in Japan, both in the community of foreigners and among Japanese Christians" (Ritter 1898, 108-109).

According to Keiichi Ariga, the revivals (though seemingly isolated) were so widespread that during this period, the term *rebeibaru* ("revival") entered the Japanese Christian vocabulary (Ariga 1973, 11; Cary 1996, 171). Also, Richard Drummond mentions that the emotional intensity was akin to the American tent revivals of the mid 1800s and to the energy surrounding the foundation of the first Japanese Protestant church in Yokohama in 1872, when the local missionaries had gathered for united prayer (Drummond 1971, 160, 192).

Despite the definite growth, Christianity's growing popularity was enjoyed differently across various denominations. The Presbyterian and Congregational churches expanded rapidly; the Methodists also expanded, but at a much slower rate; and, the Episcopal and Baptist denominations, while gaining numbers later, remained stagnant prior to 1887 (Yamamori 1974, 49).

Yamamori attributes the growth differences to several factors. While the Presbyterians and Congregationalists were keen on self-governance of local personnel, and were quick to baptize prospective new members, the Episcopal and Methodist denominations were much slower in this process, with missionaries holding control of churches more firmly. Likewise, the Presbyterians had the most foreign missionaries available, focussed primarily in Yokohama, followed by the Congregationalists, who were concentrated in several key ports; meanwhile, the Baptist and Episcopal churches had the least resources, and were not geographically concentrated. Finally, the connection between evangelism and education was highly important. The churches that invested heavily in education gained access to potential recruits; meanwhile, those who focused more on direct evangelism or high liturgy, or who lacked sufficient funds to start schools, tended to be much slower in growth (Yamamori 1974, 49-51, 54-55, 63).

Fading Light: The Revival's End

With the end of the 1880s also came the end of the rapid church expansion. There are various reasons that are usually cited for the reversal of fortunes that struck in the 1890s, each of which will be considered here. However, descriptions of "difficulty" often attributed to this period should be understood with greater nuance than is typically assumed. While the larger denominations (which benefited the most from the explosion of growth in the 1880s) did indeed stagnate and decline during the 1890s, the smaller denominations continued growing. Also, the lack of growth was not so much caused by the lack of baptisms (which remained high) but largely consisted of defections caused by membership withdrawals, exacerbated by the increasingly anti-Western climate of the time (Ballhatchet 2003, 48; Yamamori 1974, 72-73). The reasons for the defections are various and worth noting individually.

Regarding the socio-economic realities of the day, job insecurity or corporate transfers sometimes forced church members to relocate to other communities for employment—often to communities that lacked churches or missionary presence. Relatedly, graduates from the missionary schools (especially girls) were often wed to unbelieving spouses by their family. Other students felt that upon receiving baptism that they had "graduated" from Christianity, as if Christianity were merely an academic subject. Additionally, the main constituency of the church were either singles or half-families (where only one spouse believed), as the presentation of Christianity championed by the missionaries assumed an individualistic worldview. The values inherent in missionary Christianity consequently came into conflict with the traditional family values and beliefs of Japan—including arranged marriages, communal rituals, and ancestral veneration, so perseverance of individual Christians and retention within the church became more difficult. These realities were exasperated by the insufficient pastoral care of members because of an emphasis on evangelism (with post-baptismal care often neglected) (Yamamori 1974, 78-81).

However, many of the defections were also because of realities external to the church. Japan's increasing connection with the outside world caused a counter-reaction of hyper-nationalism. One of the underlying causes commonly cited is the failed treaty re-negotiations with the Western nations. The original treaties allowed for economic exploitation of Japan by foreign powers as well as granted both residential rights and diplomatic immunity to the citizens of these foreign nations, which meant that the Japanese government was powerless to enforce its civil or criminal legal cases. These rights were not reciprocal, and the Japanese resented the unfair treatment inherent in these treaties. Also, those other nations ignored stipulations of mutual religious non-interference when they pressured the Japanese government to rescind legal decisions considering Christians

and other newer religious groups. An earlier attempt to renegotiate these treaties revealed that the Western powers refused to reconsider if Christianity was disallowed. The Japanese government then (to appease their negotiation partners) legalized Christianity in 1873. While this action, and Christianity's subsequent rise in popularity, was assumed by the reform-minded Japanese to be sufficient to convince the world powers to renegotiate the unfair treaties, their hopes were frustrated when re-negotiation again failed in 1889 (Drummond 1971, 198; Kitagawa 1992, 61; Lee 1966, 93; Murayama-Cain 2010, 213-214; Thelle 1987, 151; Yamamori 1974, 65; Yanagita 1957, 37).

Additionally, there were geopolitical events that discredited the "Christian West" in the eyes of the Japanese, including godless attitudes and behaviors of Westerners (who were equated in the Japanese minds with Christianity) throughout Asia and the Pacific. In addition to personal immorality and scandalous behavior by individuals, Indo-China was seized by France, Kiaochow by the Germans, and the Philippines and Hawaii by the USA, all through military coups, political manipulations, and duplicitous dealing with the local populations (Yamamori 1974, 68).

Furthermore, those Japanese who began to travel for study or business purposes also encountered Western antichristian thought (e.g., Mill, Spencer, Darwin, Paine, Gibbon), providing fodder for those seeking to unite the Japanese nationalists against the monsters of globalization and Christian colonialism (Yamamori 1974, 66, 68). These works were first introduced to Japan by Harvard Zoologist Edward Sylvester Morse, who was appointed as the first Zoology professor at Tokyo Imperial University and became an early anthropologist of Japanese culture (Isomae 2014, 43). Japanese Buddhists, who were threatened by Christianity and sought means to defeat it, actively facilitated the importation and translation of these works. They did this because they noticed through their travels to the rest of the world that modern Christianity was weakened by the anti-Christian intellectual trends of modern academia, in addition to theological unrest (Germany 1965, 10-11; Kitagawa 1966, 242; Thelle 1987, 79, 82).

Speaking of theological unrest, liberal theologies were also introduced in the latter half of the 1880s, which negatively affected the strength of Japanese Christianity. German missionaries from the Tubingen School introduced Higher Criticism, which cast explicit doubt on the veracity of the Bible in 1885. Meanwhile, US-American Unitarians arrived in 1887, whose teachings added doubt to the exclusivity of Christianity, the personhood of Jesus, and "supernaturalism" (Germany 1965, 9-10; Jennings 2003, 191; Thelle 1987, 177-178, 181; Yanagita 1957, 51). Although these teachings infiltrated the continued theological development of Japanese Christianity, their effects were felt differently by the various denominations. Many (though not all) of the Congregationalists, centered in Kyoto, embraced the new teachings. Most of the mainline denominations, centered in Yokohama (now Tokyo) rejected these ideas, preferring the orthodox theologies of their founding denominations. The Mukyokai (Nonchurch) Christians, centered in Sapporo, also rejected the liberal theological teachings (as well Western denominational structures (Jennings 2003, 191; Lee 1966, 122-124; Murayama-Cain 2010, 221-223; Yanagita 1957, 53).

Relatedly, while Christian mission historians point to the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century as being a period of global spiritual revivals within the Christian church, this was also a period of general revival in other world religions as well. For their parts, Buddhism and Shintoism were both re-inventing and re-invigorating themselves in light of continuing modernization in Asia, particularly in Japan.

Despite its institutional monopoly since the seventeenth century, by the nineteenth century Japanese Buddhism, by many depictions, had become a superstitious and idolatrous folk religion, "a dense mass of unenlightened, besotted heathenism" that was generally distrusted (Isomae 2014, 99; Thelle 1987, 61). Also, because of Buddhism's favored status under the Tokugawa regime, it became one of the biggest targets for suppression during the Meiji period. Several of the younger Buddhists began to recognize the weakness of their religion, and they sought to both learn from their enemies and to reform Buddhism to become more robust. This attempt included travelling to other lands (Thelle 1987, 79).

Concurrently, there was a movement to revive Buddhism more widely, to regain ground lost to Christianity. Two influential advocates of Buddhism were Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) and Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933). Dharmapala and Olcott visited various locations in the Asian Buddhist world (including Japan in 1889 and 1891) to unite Buddhists under the banner of the historical Buddha, with their goal being the expulsion of Christianity from Buddhist territories (Isomae 2014, 105, 108-109; Thelle 1987, 109-111).

Meanwhile, a group of Japanese Buddhists participated in the 1893 Parliament of the World Religions in Chicago, USA, representing "Northern Buddhism" to the (primarily Christian) US-American audience (Isomae 2014, 112; Kitagawa 1992, 251; Thelle 1987, 108). As Joseph Kitagawa points out, however, the speakers representing the world religions at the Parliament were not championing the classical forms of their respective religions but were "modern religious reformers" who sought to modernize the religions in question (Kitagawa 1992, 252). Those who presented Japanese Buddhism did so by portraying their religion as rational, secular, trans-sectarian, humanitarian, lay-oriented, and compatible with science and philosophy. They then utilized the enthusiastic response to their presentation, coupled with the fact that they were able to establish Zen Buddhism in the USA, as signs that the so-called "Christian West" was losing interest in Christianity and was now turning to Buddhism as a superior option (Isomae 2014, 112; Thelle 1996, 100-101).

Shintoism had been seeking to reinvent itself since the eighteenth century, especially upon hearing of Western expansionism in other parts of Asia. To reinforce the national identity of Japan, Confucian scholars, such as Motoori Norinaga, Aizawa Seishisai, and Hirata Atsune, began differentiating Shintoism as a separate religious identity from Buddhism (Kitagawa 1966, 170; Lee 1966, 25-27). Since the Meiji Restoration (1868), the Japanese government sought to utilize Shinto religion to unify and galvanize the population, as ideological defense against the aggressive imperialism of the European and American powers, especially because of the international pressure placed on Japan for enforcing the anti-Christian edicts. Japan's political leaders came to realize that the policy of forced prohibition was no longer a viable policy (Murayama-Cain 2010, 213-214). Instead, through a series of national experiments, a new system was developed, where the nationalistic elements of Shintoism—the myth of the eternality of the imperial family, the central importance of the *kami* ("gods," particularly Amaterasu), and Japan's superiority—would be declared as being "non-religious patriotic custom" (State Shinto) in order to protect it from accusations of violating religious freedom (Anderson 2016, 7, 46; Isomae 2014, 52-53; Murayama-Cain 2010, 218). Meanwhile, the more "religious" elements of Shintoism—the rituals, the magico-spiritualistic beliefs, and the mythologies connected to specific deities—were categorized into "Sect Shinto," formed from newer religious movements that had appeared during the nineteenth century.

Although this transformation of Shintoism could be detected earlier, it would become obvious with the introduction of the Meiji Constitution in 1889, then the Imperial Rescript on Education a year later. These documents would exhort all Japanese citizens to absolute loyalty, filial piety, and personal sacrifice for the imperial state. The Imperial Rescript of 1890 became highly problematic for Christians, and there were several incidents where Christians' opposition were widely publicized as assumed proof of treason and disloyalty by the Christians. The most famous and well-known incident connected to the Rescript was a refusal to bow by Uchimura Kanzo, a Christian writer and teacher at one of the more prominent schools at the time. His refusal became fodder for the antichristian nationalists, who insisted on the incompatibility of Christian faith with nationalistic patriotism.

Another, and lesser-known, incident occurred in 1892 at a small Christian school, where one of the teachers, Okumura Teijiro, was quoted by the media as stating, "our school's policy is not based on Japanism, Asia-ism, or Occidentalism, but it is to nurture global human beings through a humanitarian internationalism" (Anderson 2016, 27; Thelle 1987, 125). However, it is possible that these were not actually the words of Mr. Okumura, but rather the impression of the media toward Christianity. Though a minority of voices argued in defense of Uchimura and Okumura, many of those who were attracted to Christianity when it was popular began to abandon this faith that was no longer seen positively (Ballhatchet 2003, 51-52; Drummond 1971, 211; Kitagawa 1992, 56; Yamamori 1974, 76).

"State Shinto" would continue to solidify during the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. Not only would this war result in increased taxes and military drafts, but Japan's victory, as well as the subsequent Russo-Japanese War a decade later, would feed the rising tide of Japanese nationalism and Pan-Asian imperialism. The imperialists questioned the primary loyalties of Christians, causing an obsession among the Japanese Christians to prove their loyalty to Japan.

Conclusion

This article has explored the 1880s Christian revival in Japan, followed by its sudden reversal in the 1890s. The popularity of Christianity and the energy of the Japanese revival was such that the term "revival" entered the Japanese consciousness, and the missionary community was optimistically hoping that Japan would become the center of Christianity in Eastern Asia. Like other historical outpourings of the Holy Spirit, the optimistic spiritual atmosphere was palpable, so it is easy to imagine what could have been, especially when considering the similarities of the Japanese revival to others that began appearing a decade later around the world. And yet, the vibrancy and growth seemed to evaporate within a few years.

The Japanese reversal, and others like it, are a reminder that the future is not always clear, and lofty declarations of triumph when looking ahead are often premature and short-sighted. True, trends could be learned from historical precedent; yet, history, by its nature, is complex, and the contexts in which that history plays itself out are more interconnected than we often give them credit for.

Despite the setbacks of the 1890s, however, Christianity did continue in Japan and would later influence its culture more than its diminutive size might indicate. This reversal was temporary, and the Church would continue to operate in the pattern of gains and losses until the present day, gaining popularity and societal influence during periods of openness to the outside world and

losing them during times of heightened nationalism. Japanese Christianity has never grown beyond 2% of the overall population. That small percentage makes the churches' persistence, hope, and influence all the more remarkable in light of the ever-looming recession and decline characteristic of Japanese Christian history.

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Emojis and Visio Divina:
Contextualizing the Gospel to Reach
East African Youth in the Digital Sphere

David Hirome

Abstract

This study investigates how East African youth engage with Christian contemplative spirituality through Visio Divina, using digital art and emojis on smartphones. With a qualitative approach, six Ugandan and Kenyan participants enrolled in a three-week Visio Divina exercise via WhatsApp. Results indicate that participants experienced a range of emotions, suggesting that Visio Divina effectively fosters deep spiritual reflections. The study demonstrates the potential of digital art and emojis to communicate the gospel in a way that resonates with African youth. This research highlights the benefits of aligning spiritual practices with contemporary digital communication methods, offering new insights for modern evangelization.

Key Words: Christian spirituality, contextualization, digital evangelization, emojis, Visio Divina, youth engagement

Introduction

Over five decades ago, Nigerian scholar E. Bolaji Idowu argued that "one of the major assignments before those who seek to communicate and inculcate the Gospel in Africa is that of understanding Africa and appreciating the fact that they must learn to address Africans as Africans" (Idowu, 1969, p. 17). Idowu emphasized the need for Christian evangelists in Africa to carefully consider the African cultural context. While several aspects of this context remain familiar today, significant changes have occurred, including the global influence of digital culture on African lives.

Digital culture, particularly among urban dwellers, has permeated activities like banking, transportation, and social events through the adoption of "digital technologies, digital media, and mobile technologies" (Akindès & Yao, 2019, p. 105). This digital shift is especially evident among young Africans and their engagement with social media (Hollington & Nassenstein, 2018, pp. 811–812). As a result, religious content has proliferated on African media channels, with Christianity increasingly leveraging "media for church ministry across major cities of sub-Saharan Africa such as Nairobi and Kampala" (Munyangata & Facker, 2023, p. 117). Pentecostals, in particular, have adapted digital technology for ministry in Africa's digital sphere (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015, p. 163).

However, traditional methods of communicating the gospel to African youth often rely on rational apologetics, attempting to present Jesus Christ as Lord, despite young people being exposed to diverse worldviews (Ndereba, 2022, p. 1). These methods have been adapted for online spaces (Ndereba, 2021, pp. 28-30). While rational evangelism has its merits, it often overlooks experiential approaches to faith, which have proven beneficial for youth (Smith & Denton, 2005). Young digital users tend to prefer personal experiences, frequently expressed through visual elements like photos and emojis in their everyday communication (Buckingham, 2007, p. 157; Hollington & Nassenstein, 2018, pp. 811-812).

Relatedly, the Christian contemplative practice of Visio Divina, involving prayerful reflection on Christian art, has been known to influence an individual's view of God, self, and

others, facilitating a personal encounter with God (Binz, 2016, pp. 16-17). For example, Visio Divina has been contextualized for communicating the gospel to youth in Western societies (Kuchan, 2004) and has been adapted for youth in Nairobi, East Africa, promoting spiritual formation (Selvam and Mwangi, 2014). However, little is known about the missional potential of Christian contemplative practices involving emojis among African youth in online spaces. This article explores how East African youth experience Visio Divina in Christian digital art, incorporating the cross and emojis through their smartphones.

My Positionality

My early exposure to smartphone technology during my teens, subsequent undergraduate studies in Information Technology, and then seminary training are no doubt foundational to my interest in the intersection of faith and technology. My first experience with the practice of Visio Divina occurred during the Corona virus lockdown period, which later led me to explore an online version of Visio Divina.

During this time, I began regularly posting Bible verses from the Book of Proverbs, accompanied by emojis, in a Ugandan diaspora social media group. The mixed feedback from this experience sparked my interest in exploring the missional potential of a Visio Divina practice that combines Christian art and emojis among youth in the East African digital sphere. The hope is that youth ministries in East Africa can innovate in contextualizing historical Christian contemplative prayer for mission.

Theories of Contemplative Prayer

Contemplative prayer, a spiritual practice found across various religious traditions, involves intentionally cultivating deep, silent awareness and connection with the divine. Numerous theories and perspectives have emerged to explain the nature, purpose, and effects of this practice. The following literature review explores some of these theories, shedding light on the diverse understandings surrounding contemplative prayer.

One prominent theory shaping the understanding of contemplative prayer is the apophatic tradition. This tradition emphasizes letting go of discursive thoughts and entering a state of silent communion with God, beyond the limitations of rational understanding. Apophatic prayer is often described as a "negative way" (Keating, 2009, p. 126), yet it is also argued to enable the use of one's "spiritual senses" (Bourgeault, 2004, p. 32).

In contrast, the cataphatic tradition suggests that contemplative prayer can involve positive language and imagery to approach the divine. This approach emphasizes affirming and engaging with divine attributes and characteristics through prayer. Theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Ignatius of Loyola provide insights into this understanding of prayer (McGinn, 1994). A common proposition in this tradition is that actively meditating on God's qualities can deepen one's connection and lead to transformative encounters with the divine.

Christian contemplative prayer encompasses both apophatic and cataphatic traditions, distinct from practices in other religions by its focus on realizing God's presence and enabling communion with God (Bourgeault, 2004). This practice is deeply rooted in Christian history, tracing back to the Bible, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and medieval monks (Ferguson et al., 2010). In modern times, it has been largely promoted by Western scholars, particularly through meditation as advocated by John Main and centering prayer championed by Thomas Keating and Cynthia Bourgeault (Benner, 2012, p. 225).

The growing interest in centering prayer has led some Christian groups to organize lectio divina sessions, which became a "program for contemplative reawakening" (Bourgeault, 2004,

p. 74). These sessions have constituted a recovery of the early Christian monastic practice of lectio divina, which involves "reading the scripture, or more exactly listening to it" (Keating, 2002, p. 20). Lectio divina has four stages: scripture reading, reflection, spontaneous prayer, and resting in God's presence (Keating, 2002, pp. 29-30). Related to lectio divina is Visio Divina, in which art replaces scripture reading.

Contemplative Practice of Visio Divina

Visio Divina is a spiritual practice rooted in medieval church history and involves "attentively and receptively gazing upon an image so that the experience leads us to mediation and prayer" (Binz, 2016, p. 16). Visio Divina, or "holy seeing, is a way to pray with your eyes" (Calhoun, 2015, p. 47). Visual aids in prayer have been part of Christian tradition since ancient times, using "icons, the cross, stained glass, mosaics, art and statues in church as invitations to pray with the eyes" (Calhoun, 2015, p. 47).

But Christian history has also seen resistance to the use of images in worship. Early Christian communities, influenced by Jewish traditions, were cautious about the use of images, adhering to the Second Commandment's prohibition against "graven images" (Exodus 20:4). The most significant early conflict over religious imagery occurred during the Byzantine Empire, particularly in the eighth and ninth centuries with iconoclasts advocating for the destruction of icons (Pelikan, 1974, pp. 91-92). The other major period in Christian history that featured fierce resistance to images was during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Reformers like Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin rejected the use of religious images, stressing that they distracted from the primacy of Scripture and encouraged idolatry (Eire, 1986, pp. 78, 201).

Despite such historical resistance to the use of images in worship, icons are generally justified by some Christians as aids in contemplation of the divine rather than objects of worship or adoration. In this regard, "the mystery of the Incarnation is the greatest argument in favor of icons and legitimizes the depiction of the divine" (Binz, 2016, p. 12).

Visio Divina has traditionally been associated with Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, but the contemplative practices of Visio and Lectio Divina are increasingly practiced across denominational lines, commonly in some Anglican churches in the West. The four steps of Visio Divina are often modeled after the Lectio Divina exercise: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio* (Robertson, 2011, p. 205). This contemplative prayer fosters "an intimate dialogue with a living, present, divine interlocutor" who communicates with the individual (Robertson, 2011, p. xii).

Contextualizing Visio Divina in Christian Ministry

Recent innovative practices of Visio Divina include projects by Eileen Crowley and Morna Simpson that have utilized photographs. Crowley has taught contemplative photography through a course where participants reflected on photographs uploaded to a dedicated website. The course aimed to help participants grow in sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's work within themselves and the world around them (Crowley, 2013). Crowley has also written about a similar practice among Lutheran congregants that promoted participants' faith (Crowley, 2014). Simpson's work has explored the role of contemplative photography in strengthening the missional potential of churches, finding it suitable for enhancing traditional Christian groups as missional communities (Simpson, 2020). Karen L. Kuchan developed a contextualized approach to evangelism using Visio Divina, targeting young people in Western society. Her project assessed the practice's impact on faith, hope, and love among ten young participants (Kuchan, 2004).

In a non-Western context, a study of Christian contemplative prayer among African youth revealed its potential role in youth formation (Selvam & Mwangi, 2014). Given that young people are dominant users of digital spaces in East Africa, and traditional efforts to communicate the gospel to them have often been unsatisfactory, there is a need to explore the missional potential of Christian contemplative practices like Visio Divina among African youth online.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research method to understand participants' experiences. Digital images were sent to the participants, followed by probing questions. A participatory approach was also used, allowing participants to contribute their expertise. Participatory research involves active collaboration between researchers and the community or participants being studied (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Such research aims to empower individuals and communities by giving them a voice in the research process, enabling them to contribute their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1674).

Participatory research also emphasizes the importance of reflexivity and researcher positioning. Researchers in participatory studies acknowledge their own subjectivity, biases, and positionalities, striving to maintain an open dialogue with participants (Hall & Tandon, 2017, p. 17). As a researcher, I maintained reflexivity throughout the research process by:

1) Focusing on interpreting the participants' experiences and highlighting their meanings rather than filtering them through my own biases;

2) Analyzing every detail, even those that seemed familiar to me; and,

3) Maintaining constant awareness of the need to practice reflexivity.

Participants

A total of six participants were recruited using a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling methods. Snowball sampling, also known as network or chain sampling, "involves locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria you established for the participation in the study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 98). These initial participants then refer the researcher to other individuals for further interviews. Four of the six participants were purposefully selected from two social media groups—one Ugandan and one Kenyan—each with a total of 200 members, which the researcher had long observed as a participant. The selection criteria were active communication using emojis in social media activities and regular sharing of gospel-related content. The remaining two participants were recruited through snowball sampling, based on a referral from one of the initial participants.

The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 30; four were male and two were female. Three participants (two females and one male) completed the entire three-week session. One participant completed only the first week, while the other two withdrew towards the end of the first week. The three participants who completed the entire exercise included one Ugandan and two Kenyans.

Intervention

The researcher utilized two digital images featuring a cross overlaid with various emojis, each symbolizing different emotions and themes reflected in the Passion narratives (see Figures 1 and 2 below). As has become common knowledge, emojis are small pictures used to convey

"tone, intent, and feelings would normally be conveyed by non-verbal cues in personal communications but which cannot be achieved in digital messages" (Alshenqeeti, 2016, p. 56). Originally introduced in Japan to convey emotions in internet communication (Skiba, 2016), emojis have become popular in youth digital communication patterns (Hollington & Nassenstein, 2018, pp. 811-812).

The cross was chosen for its significance as one of the most recognizable Christian symbols. One cross was a wooden figure photographed during a visit to a seminary, while the other was a neon cross downloaded under a Creative Commons Zero license, permitting modification. Each image was accompanied by a four-step set of suggested instructions:

- Step 1: SEE. Observe the entire picture, then focus on the part that draws your attention.
- Step 2: INQUIRY. Reflect on your experiences (feelings, desires, emotions).
- Step 3: LED. Contemplate what you have seen. If needed, close your eyes, pray to God about your observations, and seek further communion with Him. Spend a time of silence before the Lord.
- Step 4: WORSHIP. Conclude with gratitude to God. Write down what you believe you have received from Him, commit to acting on it, and share the good news with a friend.

Figure 1: The first digital image featuring emojis superimposed upon a wooden cross

Figure 2: The second digital image featuring emojis superimposed upon a neon cross

Procedure

The first stage of the research involved establishing a relationship with the participants and explaining the study's purpose. This stage was essential because the contact occurred through social media, specifically WhatsApp, and participants needed to feel comfortable with the exercise. Participants were informed about their privacy rights and then introduced to the steps of Visio Divina. The exercise was conducted individually, beginning during Passion Week with the distribution of the first image. Each participant received the image and instructions for Visio Divina on their smartphones. They were asked to take sufficient time to reflect and respond to the probing questions. The second image was sent the following week with the same instructions and questions. In the third week, participants were instructed to create a contemplative image using a photo they took with their phone or downloaded legally, and to superimpose at least three emojis. This image was intended to be created with the purpose of sharing faith with another youth.

Data Collection

The following probing questions were used:

1. Is there a figure or shape that stands out to you?
2. What feelings or desires do you notice?
3. What do these emotions reveal about your relationship with Jesus Christ and with your neighbor?

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis involves "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Reflexivity was a key focus during this process. The following procedures were followed:

1. Focused on interpreting participants' experiences and uncovering their meanings rather than viewing them through the researcher's biases.
2. Carefully analyzed every detail, even those that seemed familiar.

3. A grounded theory approach was used, rather than a theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2008), similar to studies among Kenyan youth (Selvam & Mwangi, 2014). Open coding was performed by reading responses to highlight words related to the research questions, followed by second-level analysis and thematic coding.

Results

Participants' Experience

Lack of Understanding and Time: All participants reported a lack of familiarity with Visio Divina. Three out of six participants were unable to complete the study due to their lack of understanding of contemplative prayer. One participant commented, "I really don't understand this kind of Visio Divina prayer practice." Time constraints were also a factor; two participants later withdrew due to a lack of time, while the three who completed the exercises spent several hours on them. One of the participants who completed the entire exercise shared about having to "scrutinize the image over and over."

Gratitude Accompanied by Sadness and Guilt: Most participants initially felt gratitude toward God in response to the images, using terms like "grateful" and "gratitude." However, this gratitude was often accompanied by feelings of sadness and guilt, described as "guiltiness." Participants connected these emotions to God, with expressions such as, "I am really grateful that, as a sinner, God saved me."

Most Popular Emojis: Among the emojis used in the two images of the cross, the bread emoji was the most popular, with most participants associating it with the body of Christ and personal needs such as daily bread. The other emojis that participants related to included the face holding back tears, envelope with an arrow, loud crying, snake, money bag, and wine.

Figure 3: The most popular emojis that resonated with the participants

Participants' Art

Positive Emotions: When asked to create a digital image incorporating any devotional picture and at least three emojis to communicate their relationship with God, participants expressed positive emotions. They described their feelings as "gratitude," "happiness," "strength," and "love," and related these emotions to both themselves and others.

Background Images: The background art created by participants featured religious symbols, nature, and people. Most of the participants used pictures of their family and themselves as background art and then superimposed emojis of their choice.

Common Emoji Expressions: The most frequently used emoji was the smiling face with heart-eyes, symbolizing love from God and family. This emoji was followed by the folded hands emoji, representing gratitude to God, and the flexed biceps emoji, signifying God's power and personal empowerment.

Figure 4: The three most used emojis in the participants' art

Discussion

This study explored Christian contemplative spirituality within an African digital context, specifically examining how East African youth experience Visio Divina through Christian digital art featuring the cross and emojis on their smartphones. The aim was to investigate innovative digital approaches for engaging African youth, including those in East Africa, in online spaces to facilitate their connection with Christ.

The themes emerging from this study offer insights into achieving this aim. Participants expressed a range of emotions, including gratitude and sadness, which are relevant to the process of repentance and salvation, as reflected in 2 Corinthians 7:10. These expressed emotions suggest that contemplative digital art, in particular emojis, may serve as a viable medium for communicating the gospel to African youth.

Anog-Madinger notes that "the message of God's love becomes more meaningful when connected with and expressed through the communication forms that resonate with the recipients" (Anog-Madinger, 2022, p. 54). Given that African youth are prominent users of digital communication, employing various forms such as "videos, music, jokes, audio recordings, pictures, graphics, stylized writing, and emojis" (Hollington & Nassenstein, 2018, pp. 811-812), integrating these elements into spiritual practices can enhance engagement. Besides, connecting with young people requires recognizing their religious and cultural symbols (Ndereba, 2021, p. 28).

Furthermore, visuals are particularly effective in bridging the gap between young people and faith, as "photographic images can operate on a subconscious level to elicit responses about meaning, identity, and spirituality" (Dunlop & Richter, 2010, p. 209). Such an effect suggests that incorporating visual elements into spiritual practices can be a powerful tool for fostering spiritual engagement among youth.

Conclusion

This study investigated the use of Visio Divina in engaging East African youth with Christian spirituality through digital art and emojis. The findings indicate that this approach could effectively resonate with young audiences, integrating their prevalent digital communication practices with contemplative spirituality. Participants' mixed responses—ranging from gratitude to sadness—highlight the potential of Visio Divina to evoke deep emotional and spiritual reflections. Those responses correspond to the broader understanding that digital art, including emojis, can serve as a meaningful channel for conveying religious messages.

By aligning spiritual practices with the digital communication styles of African youth, this study contributes to innovative methods for outreach and engagement. Given the high usage of digital platforms among East African youth, this approach not only meets them where they are but also leverages their familiar communication forms to foster spiritual growth. In a fast-paced digital world, granting young people "permission to move slowly, feel, and attend to both their inner and outer worlds is not only essential, but critical" (Dalton et al., 2019, p. 26). At the same time, "evangelization requires discerning what's really happening in the digital environment, which means listening first" to understand young people's interests (Dailey, 2015, para 3).

A limitation of this study is the small number of participants, but the reflexivity and rigor of the qualitative approach serves as a balance to this limitation. Further studies in this area could employ a quantitative approach and thus include a larger sample of East African youth.

Other studies could also consider building on the insights from this research to create Christian contemplative digital images that feature the emojis of love, praying hands, and biceps. Overall, this study underscores the importance of adapting spiritual practices to contemporary communication methods, offering a promising avenue for reaching and nurturing faith among the next generation.

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How Should Muslim Identity Be Determined?

Fred Farrokh

Abstract

The Muslim world remains the greatest missiological challenge for the global church. Many missiologists are presently wrestling with the issue of identity development for new believers in Christ from Muslim background. The insider movement initiative prescribes their permanent retention of Muslim identity. Controversy has arisen since the global Muslim community has hitherto been unwilling to confer Muslim identity upon Christ-worshippers. This article considers whether Muslim identity should be self-determined or reciprocally determined. The article concludes by stating the perils of an autonomous, self-determined Muslim identity, then offers recommendations for healthy, Christo-centric identity development among new believers who are from a Muslim background.

Key Words: identity, insider, interfaith, missiology, Muslim

Introduction

Fifty years have passed since Charles Kraft penned three watershed papers on contextualization in Muslim contexts (Kraft 1974, 1974a, 1974b). Kraft laid the foundation for a missionary initiative which would become known as "insider movements" (IM). In those movements, believers in Christ would permanently retain the religious identity of their birth, in an indefinite and open-ended fashion, while following the Lord Jesus Christ and the Bible. In an aptly-title article, "Psychological Stress Factors among Muslims," Kraft states:

> My major suggestion is that we bend every effort towards stimulating a faith renewal movement *within Islam*. This, I believe, is Biblical. You might not agree that all of my suggestions are Biblical, and I am not entirely convinced on some of them myself. I do mean to be provocative, not definitive (Kraft 1974b, 143, emphasis added).

Insider advocate John Travis defines an "insider" as "a person from a non-Christian background who has accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior but retained the socioreligious identity of his or her birth" (Travis 2015, 8). As Christians seek to present the saving message of Jesus Christ to Muslims, a major issue has emerged regarded the religious identity of those who are turning to Christ. Can they still be considered Muslims? If so, who should make that determination: foreign missionaries, the new believers themselves, or the existing Muslim community? In other words, should Muslim identity be self-determined (as encouraged by expatriates)? Or must the Muslim community reciprocate by continuing to confer Muslim identity upon new believers in Christ?

This article addresses the quandary of how Muslim identity should be determined. Following a beginning comment on global controversies regarding identity determination, the focus turns to the insider movement proposal of Christ-worshippers permanently retaining Muslim identity (*Retentionism*, for short). The article then considers the historic perspectives of the Muslim community, or *umma*, on Muslim identity. Moving to the contemporary situation, I present field research on Retentionism. The article concludes with recommendations for healthy, Christo-centric identity development for former Muslims who have turned to Christ.

I write as a Muslim-background Christian. I define identity as the way in which people perceive themselves and the groups to which they belong, as well as how these individuals and groups are perceived by others.

The Global Context of Identity Crises

The question of identity determination has risen in global significance in the twenty-first century. The controversy over gender identity constitutes one contemporary example. If a person who was born male decides to become female, is his decision self-determined, or does the wider society need to reciprocate by confirming this identity determination? Should such a person born male be allowed to compete in women's sports? Likewise, if a Caucasian person decides to identify as person of color, is self-determination in the matter sufficient? Or is reciprocity required?

Readers familiar with these Western discussions regarding how various identities are obtained or retained may empathize with the Muslim community, which has been expected by some Western missionaries to accept *as Muslims* those who believe in Jesus as Lord, God, and Savior. However, no evidence exists that Muslims have ever extended present-tense Muslim status to a group that believes in the divinity of Jesus.

The Retentionism Proposal

Rebecca Lewis writes that insider movement (IM) believers "remain inside their socioreligious communities, retaining the identity of that community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible" (Lewis 2007, 75). Joshua Massey envisions the Retentionist insider paradigm as producing believers whom Muslims would view as "a strange kind of Muslim" (Massey 2000, 7). Rick Brown of Wycliffe Bible Translators, a leading IM theorist, coined the term "Biblical Muslims" (Brown 2007, 65), though Muslims have not used this term. Jan Prenger, also of Wycliffe, has researched insiders whom he describes as "Muslim Insider Christ Followers" (Prenger 2017).

Insider advocate Kevin Higgins presents three identity positions for Christ-worshippers which all begin with: "I can say I am a Muslim because the word Islam means submission and a Muslim is one who submits. So, I have submitted to God ultimately in His Word, Isa, and the Word of God in the Taurat, Zabur, and Injil which the Quran confirms" (Higgins 2006, 121).

These statements from IM advocates indicate that Retentionism constitutes a missionary initiative. New believers in these insider movements are taught and encouraged to insist on self-identifying as Muslims. The accompanying ethical dilemma becomes clearer for Christians if they consider the inverse situation: suppose Christians who came to believe in Muhammad and the Qur'an, refused to take on Muslim identity. Rather, they insisted on retaining Christian identity for the ostensible purpose of witnessing of their new Islamic faith. Could either arrangement be considered honest witnessing?

Insider advocates themselves seem to understand the ethical tension within this initiative. Higgins states: "I…believe that authentic Jesus movements within Islam will bring transformation…[to] the meaning of the word 'Muslim'" (2007, 38). Again, how would Christians react if Muslims were publicly contemplating how they might change the meaning of the word "Christian?"

Insider advocates have begun to question whether self-identity is autonomous or whether it must be reciprocated. Mark Harlan reports that a professor who has researched insider movements in an East African country states:

> In my opinion, this is all a matter of semantics. We have been using self-identity as the defining issue; if they call themselves Muslims (even if they have very divergent beliefs to other Muslims) they are broadly speaking (at least socially, culturally and officially) "Muslim." So long as their personal way of describing themselves has the word "Muslim" in it…it is insider (2023).

The professor adds:

> However, we had a follow up question to those interviewed. Since we are saying they are "socially, culturally and officially Muslim" this would mean the voice of the community (society and culture) and even the legal status (officially Muslim) is taken into consideration. So our follow up question was how the surrounding society sees them. Are they Muslim? Christian? Follower of Isa? Something else?
>
>   So again, as long as their personal way of describing themselves contains the word "Muslim" (this was the primary issue and our starting point) and, secondarily, if the surrounding community generally sees them as some type of Muslim, we considered this "insider" in our survey (Harlan 2023).

Clearly the concept of Retentionism has evoked some tension within the missiological community itself. Should Muslim identity be self-determined, or is community reciprocity required? Should self-identity be considered the primary criterion for determining Muslim identity, with community confirmation deemed secondary? If the Muslim community does not extend Muslim identity status, then can insider participants be considered as having retained Muslim identity? The answer to this question threatens to collapse the very definition of insider movements in Muslim community, since that definition requires the permanent retention of Muslim identity.

Historically, some tensions have existed within the Islamic umma regarding who a Muslim is and who is not. A sketch of these intra-Islamic tensions may help inform missiology today.

Intra-Umma Discussions regarding Muslim Identity

Islam, like Christianity, features diversity within its unity. Muslims, like adherents to any religion, have faced challenges to their orthodoxy throughout their history. Al-Ghazali (d. AD 1111) anchored the concept of Muslim identity in acceptance of the inerrancy of the prophet Muhammad. He denounced widespread usage of *takfir* (excommunication) by Muslims. In his classic work on Muslim identity, *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam and Masked Infidelity* (known in Arabic as *Faysal at-Tafriqa*), al-Ghazali states: "If a person knows that another person believes that everything the Prophet brought is true and despite this he brands the latter an Unbeliever, *he himself becomes an Unbeliever*" (Ghazali 2002, 132, emphasis added). This ruling becomes particularly relevant in the *Takfiri* dispute described below.

Writing two centuries after al-Ghazali, Ibn Manzur penned the classic 20-volume Arabic dictionary, *Lisan al-Arab* (*The Arab Tongue*), in AD 1290. Ibn Manzur concurs with al-Ghazali's line of thinking that Islam requires affirmation of the prophetic veracity of Muhammad: "Al-Islam means a demonstration of obedience to everything that the ambassador of Allah reveals so that his

blood will not be shed" (Abd al-Masih 1995, 294). Both al-Ghazali and Manzur raise important points for Muslims regarding religious identity, legal rights, and persecution, particularly since Muhammad had famously declared: "If someone discards his religion, kill him" (Bukhari n.d., 3017).

Space limitations do not allow for a complete historical treatment of all the deliberations of the Islamic umma regarding who remains within and those who are outside. The Wars of *Ridda* (Apostasy), the Kharijite Rebellion, and the Mutazilite Controversy over whether the Qu'ran was created or uncreated—all significant historical emanations—can only be mentioned in passing. I focus now on several intra-umma discussions with greater contemporary relevance.

Sufism and Muslim Identity

Wherever and whenever the strict, shariah-based, implementation of Islamic orthodoxy is enforced, it nearly always precipitates a revival of Islamic mysticism, known as Sufism. Such mystical interpretations of Islam have emerged and re-emerged throughout Islamic history. As mystics, the Sufis press toward a spiritual connection with the Divine. Since orthodox Islam claims that Allah is neither personal nor knowable by humans, the Sufi quest poses a threat to conservative orthodoxy. A famous Sufi, Mansour al-Hallaj, wrote:

> I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart
> I asked, "Who are You?"
> He replied, "You" (Threshold Society 2022).

In essence, Mansour al-Hallaj was stating he attained unity with the Almighty, though classical Islam teaches that Allah has no partners. For this claim, al-Hallaj was hanged by the Caliph al-Muqtadir as a heretic in AD 922. Later, al-Ghazali would try to move Sufism back within orthodoxy, but tensions continue to exist until this present age.

Shi'ism

Shi'ites claim to be followers of Muhammad and the Qur'an. Yet, they feel the charisma of the prophet is so profound that it overflowed into certain of his family members, known as *Ahl ul-Bayt* ("The People of the House" of the Prophet). Different Shi'ite groups esteem various numbers of direct descendants of Muhammad as infallible imams.

The challenge to Islamic orthodoxy posed by Shi'ism is the claim that these imams give revelation and receive intercession. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear Shi'ites call upon the name of Imam Ali or Imam Husayn in a time of distress, or to express spiritual commitment to them. Some Sunnis feel that Shi'ite belief and practice violates the Islamic doctrine of *Khatamiyya*, the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad. The Qur'an, 33:40, states that Muhammad was *khatam an-nabiyeen*, the "seal of the prophets." Therefore, anyone claiming the existence of a later prophet makes Muhammad out to be a liar.

I once met an Iranian who fell out of favor with his government after the Islamic revolution. He ended up as a refugee in Egypt. He was both surprised and shocked when an Egyptian asked him, "Are you a Shi'ite or are you a Muslim?" The Iranian man stated that he was nearly dumbfounded in trying to compose an answer—he had never considered such a question before.

The Ahmadiyya Movement

Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was a Muslim reformer who lived in the Indian subcontinent, 1835-1908. Though his followers self-identify as faithful Muslims who believe in the Qur'an and Muhammad, the wider Muslim community has not reciprocated by conferring Muslim identity upon them. The umma states that the Ahmadiyya (or Qadiani) are legally non-Muslims since they hold to a post-Muhammadan prophet. Even the Constitution of Pakistan legally categorizes them as non-Muslims for accepting a later prophet (Pakistan, Government of, 1974). This controversy underscores the tension of whether Muslim identity can be determined by self-identity or whether it must be reciprocated.

The Takfiri Doctrine

The strict, hardline Islamists who have sought global as well as local domination have introduced an ends-justify-the-means initiative, known as the Takfiri Doctrine. This doctrine constitutes the conferral of *kafir* (unbeliever) status upon otherwise confessing Muslims. Such a doctrine has been employed by Sayyid Qutb and Egyptian militants in fighting their governments and assassinating their Muslim governmental leaders. Ayatollah Khomeini successfully utilized the takfiri approach toward his nemesis Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

Of course, the Takfiris have crossed al-Ghazali's red line. The medieval jurist had stated that it is forbidden for Muslims to consider as non-Muslims those who believe as true all that Muhammad brought forth. Presently, the takfiri controversy has emerged as the most contentious issue facing the global umma.

Muslim Identity and Biblical Christology

Muhammad insisted that Jesus was a mortal prophet. Islamic scholar Smail Baliç explains: "In Islam Jesus, like all other prophets, is reduced to human dimensions. Therefore, in Muslim discussion, Jesus does not possess the importance which is his in Christianity. In the Koran, Jesus is simply a subject of the history of prophets" (Baliç 1979, 2).

Baliç would disagree with the theological rapprochement attempted by Kevin Higgins in his Muslim identity statements which affirm the Qur'an. Baliç underscores that Allah in Islam is impersonal, in contradistinction to the biblical deity: "An intimate connection between God and man based on interaction in history is unknown to Islam" (Baliç 1979, 2).

Retentionism thus faces a theological challenge. Muslim identity is obtained, conferred, and retained through affirmation of Muhammad as the final prophet. Yet, Muhammad rejected Jesus as the divine Son, Lord, and Savior. Indeed, this is the very message Christian witnesses seek to communicate to Muslims! The challenge has come into focus: are those who come to believe in the biblical Jesus still *Muslims* in any appreciable sense of the word?

While it may have become fashionable in the West to downplay or consider outdated the concept of religion, in Islam, the word for religion, *deen*, rises with great importance. Muslims are taught that each departed soul will be asked three questions on the Day of Judgment: "1. Who is your Lord? 2. What is your religion (*deen*)? 3. Who is your prophet?" (Tadrees 2010). The Muslim will hope to answer, consecutively: "Allah, Islam, and Muhammad." Hence, Muslim identity possesses both legal and soteriological significance for Muslims.

Field Research on Muslim Identity

Understanding that some Western missionaries had insisted on permanent retention of Muslim identity for insider believers, I undertook a doctoral field research project to cull indigenous perspectives on the topic. This doctoral research sought, in part, to answer whether Muslim identity should be considered autonomous or reciprocal (Farrokh 2014). My field work included interviewing 20 Muslims, including five imams, in which they reacted to a hypothetical situation, set in their home country, in which a Muslim was straying from Islam. Though I conducted the interviews in metropolitan New York, I stressed to the interviewees that they envision a situation occurring in their home countries.

In the hypothetical, the protagonist begins to explore internet sites about Jesus and the Bible. He or she then comes to believe in the biblical Jesus, the divine Savior who died on the cross and rose from the dead. Finally, he or she then begins to fellowship with other believers who have the same belief.

I then asked interviewees if the protagonist was still a Muslim. If not, they were asked to specify when the person left Islam and why. The following are direct quotes from the 20 Muslim interviewees (Farrokh 2014, 161-163).

ID	Birth country/ ethnicity	Still Muslim?	When Left Islam?
Imam 1	Palestine	No. What he now believes is a contradiction to Islam.	When he came to believe that Jesus is other than a messenger.
Imam 2	Guyana/ Indian	No. From the moment he began to believe that Jesus is Son of God or had any divine qualities.	When he believed that Jesus had divine attributes. To attribute qualities of divinity to any prophet contradicts the Islamic concept of monotheism.
Imam 3	Sierra Leone	Not really.	Anyone whose beliefs contradict the Qur'an and *hadith* is not a Muslim.
Imam 4	Uzbek-istan	No. If he believes in Jesus as a God, of course he is not a Muslim. He's a *murtadd* (apostate). That's the first word of the *shahada*. However, many people in Uzbekistan are not familiar with theological details. All they see are the labels, "Muslim" and "Christian."	When he broke *shahada*. There is one meaning to *shahada* and it's clear cut. The main principle in Islam is *tawhid* (divine Unity).
Imam 5	Palestine	No.	When he believes Jesus is Son of God, it means he has belief that is unacceptable, Islamically.
Female Muslim (FM) 1	India	No. If she believes Jesus is God, the monotheism is gone.	When she believed that Jesus is God.

FM2	Bangla-desh	No.	When she came to believe God came through Jesus, she is no longer a Muslim.
Male Muslim (MM) 1	USA/ Palestin-ian	Yes.	NA
MM2	Bangla-desh	No.	If your belief changes, your religion changes.
MM3	Pakistan/ Punjabi	I don't know. I can't judge anyone.	NA
MM4	Saudi/ Indian	No. If you believe Jesus died, it means you don't believe in the Qur'an. Therefore you are not a Muslim.	When he believed that Jesus died.
MM5	Pakistan	No. He came to believe Jesus is God. Jesus is only a messenger.	When he came to believe that Jesus is God.
MM6	Morocco/ Berber	No.	The condition to be a Muslim is to believe in one God.
MM7	Trinidad/ Indian	No. If he doesn't believe in the Oneness of God and that Jesus, the messenger, is distinct from God, he does not believe in the fundamental creed of Islam. He has associated a partner with God.	When he associated Jesus as a partner with God.
MM8	Turkey	No.	He changed his religion.
MM9	Palestine	No.	Because the Qur'an is God's words. When you say that what God says is wrong, you are saying the Qur'an is wrong, so you don't believe in Islam.
MM10	Bangla-desh	No.	Once he believes by heart and by mouth in another thing, he is no longer a Muslim.
MM11	Morocco/ Berber	No.	If he believes Jesus died on the cross, then he is not a Muslim.
MM12	Jordan	No.	When he believed Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead.
MM13	Turkey	(Implied no)	In the learning time, he is still a Muslim. In the long time, he's not really a Muslim.

The field research with Muslims—including five imams—illustrates the lack of conferral of Muslim identity upon those who have come to believe in the biblical Jesus. A reading of their

responses yields the conclusion that their loss of Muslim identity coincided with assumption of beliefs in the biblical Jesus.

In my field research, I continued the hypothetical scenario by stating that the protagonist continued identifying as a Muslim. I asked the same 20 Muslims to respond. Though space is too limited to provide a complete table again, the reasoning of several of the imams proves instructive. The Indian imam (#2) explains:

> We consider him not a Muslim in the technical sense of the word, even though he may consider himself a Muslim in the general sense of the word. However, he would not have the same privileges as a Muslim. He would get no inheritance from Muslim relatives, while a Muslim would. He will not have a Muslim funeral. When the word Muslim is used in reference to humans, it means they have made a conscious decision to take the Islamic teachings as a whole, not picking and choosing. If you do not believe in Muhammad as the final prophet, you are not a Muslim (Farrokh 2014, 164).

A Palestinian cleric remarked with incredulity, "He is a confused guy! He can call himself whatever he wants, but people won't take him seriously" (Farrokh 2014, 165). Several of the lay Muslims gave similar responses, which raise questions regarding the efficacy of a self-identified Muslim identity as a missiological strategy. Even Joshua Massey's hope that Muslims would see insider believers as a "strange kind of Muslim" may prove elusive. The data indicate that Muslims are not reciprocally conferring Muslim identity upon Christ-worshippers.

The Potential Pitfalls of Insistence on a Self-Identified Muslim Identity

The Peril of Permanent Identity Bifurcation

Those who have ministered to Muslims or planted churches in Muslim contexts will understand that identity transformation is likely to be complicated during transitional stages. In such cases, the inquirer or new believer may have shared about their spiritual pilgrimage with some people but not with others. Secret believers in Muslim contexts often withhold news of their journey to Christ from their family members. In these cases, the new believers may experience "temporary identity bifurcation" in the transitional stage of coming to Christ.

The insider paradigm recommends staying inside Islam as a *permanent* identity state. Indeed, insider advocates insist on identifying Christ-worshippers as Muslims in the present tense. Due to theological factors, such as Islam being a Christ-diminishing movement, and sociological factors, such as the reality of persecution for faith deviance in Muslim contexts, these new believers risk being saddled with "permanent identity bifurcation" (PIB) (Farrokh 2016). For example, they may insist to their families that they are still Muslims. Yet, they may participate in various biblical, non-Islamic practices, such as Christo-centric worship, the Lord's Table, and baptism.

Individuals tend to break down emotionally when living with PIB in the long term. Their consciences may bother them for being duplicitous or deceptive. One new believer in Christ from North Africa refused to tell his wife about his conversion to Christ over the long term. The situation weighed on him heavily. One night, he began talking in his sleep about Jesus. His wife, awakened and startled, asked him why he was talking about Jesus. He confessed to her his spiritual journey. After that, sadly, he was not heard from again in believers' circles, and he had changed his phone number.

The Charge of Deception by Muslims

Muslims are already decrying what they perceive as deception in Christian missions. As early as the late 1980s, the idea of gospel contextualization had caught the attention of Muslims. As far back as July 1987, the *Islamic World Review* warned Muslims that Christian missionaries were using an "underhanded style" called the "Contextualized Approach." They protested, "It means they now speak in the context of the people and the culture of the country where they are operating, and are less honest in their dealings with simple, often illiterate, peasants. They no longer call themselves openly Christians in a Muslim area, but 'Followers of Isa'" (Woodberry 1996, 173).

The Perception of Neo-Colonialism

The term "Muslim" is both dear and important to Muslims. They do not translate it into the local equivalent of "People Submitted to God" in the countries into which they move. They always retain the term "Muslim." As the data above indicates, few Muslims are willing to confer Muslim identity upon those who worship the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Islamic umma was constructed to exclude Christ-worshippers. Therefore, Retentionism, when applied as a construct of self-identity, may actually usurp the Muslim community's main identifier. As such, Muslims may find Retentionism's approach to be an encroachment.

Failure of Believers to Develop Christo-centric Identity

Finally, the most tragic pitfall of Retentionism is the impact on the spiritual identity of persons and groups who insist upon Muslim self-identification. David Owen, a Fuller Theological Seminary student under Kraft, proposed the concept of "A Jesus Movement within Islam" (Owen 1991). While Christian missiologists may debate various aspects of the Qur'anic 'Isa, no basic taxonomy of religions could classify Islam as a Christo-centric religion. In Islam, Muhammad claims center stage. The Islamic prophet sought not to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ but to demote him into his own personal herald. Islam is not a Christ-exalting religion but a Christ-diminishing one.

There is no "come to Jesus" moment in Islam. Thus, attempts to encourage believers in the Lord Jesus to stay "inside Islam" will tend to retard their discipleship in Christ. While "staying inside Islam" might engender rapid "decisions" for Christ, the biblical mandates to evangelize and disciple new believers should operate synergistically, rather than in hostility to each other.

The Christo-centric Alternative

Researcher Duane Miller asserts that believers who are Christians of Muslim background are pursuing a "Christo-centric" identity:

> The discourse, writings and liturgies of the CMB's [Christians of Muslim Background] I studied tend to be *Christocentric*, meaning 'those types of theology in which the person and work of Christ are the bases for all theological and ethical propositions.' There is a strong tendency in these theologies to find all understanding about who and what God is like as seen through the person of Jesus (Miller 2016, 224).

Miller's research among CMBs applies at both individual and collective levels of identity. The new believer is found "in Christ"; the believers, in a collective sense, become part of the body of Christ. Such an identity flows in harmony with the biblical trajectory, though it cuts against the Qur'anic trajectory.

Conclusion

Neither the Bible nor the Qur'an feature *identity* as a stand-alone term. Yet, both holy books seek to promote their respective spiritual identities. Whenever the gospel has reached into previously unreached areas, including Muslim contexts, the resulting frictions will inevitably impact identities.

Historically, the Muslim community has ruled that Christ-worshippers reject outright the prophetic veracity of Muhammad and are thus deemed non-Muslim. Insistence by some missionaries and missiologists that new Christ-worshippers seek to identify as Muslims seems unwise for the reasons noted above. While the term "Christian" may have negative associations in some Muslim contexts, other alternatives exist. Many Muslim-background believers in Christ appreciate that the two millennia "Grand Tradition" of Christ's Church actually surpasses the 1,400-year duration of the Muslim umma.

Returning to our roots as Christians, the New Testament featured a grafting in of formerly pagan Gentiles to the Kingdom of God. Jesus promised that he will build his church. He is able to graft in believers from every tribe, tongue, and nation to himself, the true vine. Since believers are "in Christ" as the body of Christ, he confers upon them individual and corporate Christo-centric identity. This identity includes today's believers in Christ who are from a Muslim background.

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Mission Dynamics Among Biharis: Toward Contextualized Approaches

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Abstract

One of the main reasons why South Asia is among the most challenging contexts for world missions is Christianity's Western heritage. More specifically, Biharis, despite efforts for more than two centuries, are among those who have either adopted Christianity as a foreign religion or completely resisted it. Contemporary missiological understanding has emphasized that approaches that take into consideration local culture are an unavoidable path to a better interreligious understanding of the Christian faith. Based on the concept of contextualization, what are some essential cultural elements of Bihari culture that Christian missionaries have to take into consideration in communicating the gospel to people from that region? This article discusses these mission dynamics from various perspectives, including that of a former Hindu Bihari. The article discusses examples of Bihari religious concepts, terms, and practices that Christian mission should address in order to find relevance in its approaches.

Key Words: Bihar, Christian mission, contextualization, culture, India, missionaries, traditions

Introduction

"Why are you preaching a foreign religion?" is a common question posed to mission workers in India because of how Christianity is perceived to be a foreign belief system. Kanjamala contends that all artistic, cultural, and theological representations are inherently human. Indian Christian artist Jyoti Sahi highlights the difficulty many Indians face in imagining a non-foreign Christ, since the dominant image is of a white foreigner, which obstructs the visualization of a Christ with any other cultural identity, including an Indian one (Kanjamala, 2014, 6). Christianity's Western heritage remains a significant challenge for Indian Christians (Joseph, 2014).

Rupa Vishwanath narrates the early efforts of missionaries, noting that they concentrated on high-caste elites, believing religious change began at the top of the social hierarchy. This top-down method, focusing on belief transformation, educated English-speaking elites, but yielded few actual converts, reinforcing the view that Indian missions were failures. Many Hindus avoided Christianity because Christians, by rejecting caste practices, were often linked to so-called Pariah Christians and foreigners, leading to social disapproval (Vishwanath, 2014, 41).

Over the last half millennium, foreign thought and practices have often been introduced into India through missionary activities. Colonial exploration began with Vasco da Gama's arrival (1498), followed by the Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, French, and notably English regimes (from the early seventeenth century to 1947) (Shulai, 2017). Christianity had actually been introduced much earlier in South Asia. The Syrian Church of the St. Thomas Christians on the Malabar Coast, the oldest, traces its origins to Thomas the Apostle of Jesus (Kanjamala 2014, 6).

Arun W. Jones has examined a nineteenth-century North Indian Protestant debate on a suitable Christian culture. At an 1872–73 missionary conference in Allahabad, European missionaries were concerned that Indian Christians had quickly adopted Western lifestyles. Church Leaders in india, such as Rev. K.C. Chatterjee, supported a form of conversion that would blend Western missionary methods with local culture, resulting in a new, mixed Christian identity. Jones cites historical

examples of Indian Christians that have incorporated foreign cultural elements into their faith (Jones, 2022, 11). This response of indigenous converts indicates that foreign missionaries have often carried cultural identities with limited understanding and sensitivity toward them.

The Apostle Thomas, Mother Theresa, and others launched various indigenizing efforts with distinct focuses and methods (Hedlund, 2017). Even so, contemporary missiological analyses show that Christian churches have largely struggled to be recognized as *Indian* churches through their appearance, approach, practice, lifestyle, language, and theology. Schultz identifies Christianity as an alien faith in India and as the main barrier to engaging Hindus (Schultz, 2016).

These perceptions also reflect the historical presence of Christian missionaries in the northern Indian state of Bihar. Bihar is one of the world's oldest inhabited regions, boasting a history dating back to ancient times. During the Maurya and Gupta empires, Bihar was a major center of learning. Bihar's long-standing role as the heart of ancient India has significantly influenced the nation's culture, traditions, politics, and religion.

Bihar is a historically significant region particularly for religion, being the birthplace of Buddhism and Jainism. However, it has been known as the "graveyard of missions" for Christianity due to numerous evangelization challenges (Goh, 2008, 130). A Jesuit mission was established in Patna in 1620, and since 1745 the city has had a continuous Christian presence, with Roman Catholicism notably influencing education and healthcare. The oldest Christian structure in Bihar, the Roman Catholic Church "Padri ki Haveli," was built in 1713. In the eighteenth century, Bettiah saw substantial missionary activity, leading to conversions among lower castes, including Dalits and groups such as Chamars, Dusadhs, Doms, and Musahars (Kumar, 2023, 3-4).

Since its inception in Bihar, Christian mission has had limited success, with Christians comprising only 0.12% of the population (Kramer, 2021). Although Christianity has positively impacted social aspects, it has struggled to fully understand, connect with, and engage the local population. The remainder of this article explores how the missiological concept of contextualization can help identify the essential cultural elements that Christian missionaries must consider when conveying the gospel to the Bihari people.

This article presents diverse perspectives from the three authors, who have varying degrees of involvement in the context. The first author, born and raised in Bihar in a devout Hindu family, provides insights based on his lived experiences with Bihari customs, rituals, traditions, and worship styles. The second author, originally from West Bengal, India, is a senior researcher on mission dynamics among Hindus and has advised on multiple mission projects in India and other countries. The third author, born in South America and trained as a missiologist in North America, has been developing community projects in Bihar and in other regions of India since 2015.

Mission in Bihar

Bihar has been a religious hub for Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Hindus in Bihar worship various deities without a strict identification as Shaivites, Vaishnavites, or Shaktas. The majority of Muslims are Sunni, Buddhists primarily follow the Theravada tradition, and the Jains are divided into Digambar and Svetambara sects. Christian missions have historically faced challenges in Bihar.

That Christianity has faced challenges in Bihar does not imply a complete rejection, however. In 1620, Jesuit missionaries attempted to establish a mission in Patna aiming for Tibet, but the

effort lasted less than a year. Italian Capuchin missionaries reestablished their mission in 1706, using Bihar as their base until 1745 (O'Malley, 1924, 73; Pallavi, 2015, 2474). Protestant missionaries, including the Fellowship of Christian Assemblies (1880), Methodist (1884), Zenana Bible and Medical Mission (1890), Seventh-day Adventist Mission (1898), British Churches of Christ Mission (1909), Brethren in Christ Mission (1914), and Assembly of God (1914), arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing on Bihar's untouched cities and villages (Horo & Kalpura, 2014, 199-213).

Despite initial obstacles related to personnel and finances, numerous educational, medical, and religious institutions have been established by various mission societies, which have also succeeded in forming small faith groups and churches, although challenges have persisted (Horo & Kalpura, 199-213). The Catholic community is the oldest and has the largest following among Christian groups in Bihar. The three major ethnic Christian communities in Bihar are Bettiah Christians, Tribal Christians, and Dalit Christians, primarily located in the West Champaran district in North Bihar, the Chotanagpur Plateau in former southern Bihar, and the central plains of Bihar, south of the Ganges (Pallavi, 2015, 2474).

The Challenge in Bihar

Despite rapid urbanization in recent decades, village roots and rural traditions remain strong, preserving family and community values. Many Bihar residents relocated from villages to cities seeking better livelihoods, with some leaving the state for employment and improved living conditions. However, most migrants wish to return to their ancestral villages after retirement or visit at least once in their lifetime (Jha, 2013). Bihar has India's second largest rural population, with 92.34 million people constituting 88.7% of Bihar's total rural population (Bihar Population Census, 2011).

Christian missionary work in Bihar faces numerous challenges: poverty, the caste system, women's status, social structure, family, pluralism, and fear of Kuladevata—family or clan deities that can be male, female, animals, or holy stones (Selvakumar, 2018). These issues stem from widespread illiteracy, fostering a narrow mindset and superstitions. Bihar ranks lowest in literacy among Indian states, though it has improved from 33.57% in 2001 to 61.8% in 2011 (Bihar Population Census, 2011).

Owing to limited educational opportunities, many individuals in Bihar have a fixed understanding of religion. Hindus typically follow their faith without questioning or exploring their identities. Muslims maintain their religious identity, and this trend persists among other faiths as well. The lack of education in Bihar restricts individuals from engaging in intellectual and rational exploration of religious matters, resulting in religious continuity across generations. Biharis have not learned or been taught to critically reflect on their religions and practices. While some missionaries did not deeply understand the cultures they encountered, many made sincere efforts to respect the local customs, traditions, and beliefs. However, instances of cultural bias or lack of understanding have led some missionaries to impose their beliefs, causing cultural clashes and erosion of native traditions (Ronda, 1977; Yanger, 2017).

Noteworthy mission work, especially among the Maltos (Dhanabalan, 1996), primarily involved tribal groups from regions no longer part of Bihar since the 2000 political division. Currently, Bihar is defined more by castes than by tribes, since the tribal population is now in

Jharkhand. This shift reduced the impact of past efforts in Bihar, as evident from the low Christian population of 0.12%. Bihar is thus one of the least-reached states in India.

In addition, the gospel presented by missionaries, shaped by Western thought and practice, lacked sensitivity to the Bihari context, leading to the perception of Christianity as a Western religion associated with behaviors such as drinking alcohol and consuming beef and pork, and lacking shame as a moral standard. Accusations that new converts are encouraged to eat beef have brought disrepute to missionary work, although it remains unclear which missionary society or church made such offers (Osuri, 2013, 129).

Missionaries who ignored local cultural values made Christian missions in Bihar targets of criticism, accused of eroding local identity. Christian mission societies' expectations for new converts to change their dress, adopt English hymns, and embrace luxurious lifestyles have fueled the perception that converts are losing their "Bihari" identity. Beyond attire and lifestyle, the primary issue is that Christianity is perceived as a foreign religion, distinct in a society that is deeply tied to concepts of shame and honor. Thus, the critical challenge is to align Christianity more closely with the Bihari culture for broader acceptance.

Contextualized Mission Approaches

Twentieth-century studies on Christian missions have highlighted an evangelistic approach focused almost exclusively on verbal proclamation, coupled with a negative view of culture and society (Stott & Wright, 2015, 16-17). This direct evangelistic method undermined local culture, making Christianity seem foreign and disregarding the recipient's worldview and values. Communication studies have significantly influenced the rise of new missionary strategies. As Smith notes, "Communication is a relationship. Involvement is the foundation of all communication, and cultural differences only underscore its importance" (Smith, 1992, 39).

Contemporary mission discussions often address the demonstration of the gospel. Stott posits that social action and evangelism are interrelated; one can be a "consequence of evangelism" and the other a "bridge to evangelism" (Stott & Wright, 2015, 44). Biblically, Jesus's Incarnation serves as the missionary paradigm: "The word became flesh and made his dwelling place among us" (Jn 1:14). Jesus's public ministry exemplifies this combination, as he both fed the hungry and healed the sick, intertwining *kerygma* (proclamation) and *diakonia* (service).

Contextualization is crucial to enhance missionary approaches. Tippett, cited in Gunter Krallman, asserts that "contextualization includes not only cultural forms but also the political, social, and acculturation realities of the present day" (Krallmann, 2002, 166). Scholars have linked contextualization with Christian missionary practices, notably through Andrew Walls's indigenizing and pilgrim principles and Lamin Sanneh's translatability concept. This study refers to these contextualization concepts.

Paul G. Hiebert, a distinguished missiologist and anthropologist, made significant contributions to missiology, particularly in contextualization. His critical contextualization approach stresses a deep understanding of local cultures and a critical analysis of the interplay between faith and culture in disseminating Christianity. Critical contextualization avoids a monocultural viewpoint and rejects the idea of incommensurable cultural pluralism. It aims to establish metacultural and meta-theological frameworks to facilitate the cross-cultural understanding of messages and rituals with minimal distortion (Hiebert, 1987, 110).

According to Hiebert, the initial step of "critical contextualization" involves cultural exegesis, which means studying local culture phenomenologically. Missionaries should uncritically gather and analyze traditional beliefs and customs related to the issue at hand (Hiebert, 1987, 109). The aim is to articulate Christian faith within a specific culture, ensuring that adopting Christianity does not require accepting foreign cultural practices (Hiebert, 1987, 104).

Toward Contextualized Approaches in Bihar

Gideon Petersen observed that spreading the gospel to the Himba people of Namibia has been challenging, particularly insofar as the Himba are an oral people. Petersen emphasizes the need for sensitivity to oral communities, as Western rhetoric often renders the gospel incomprehensible to them (Petersen, 2009, 1). Similarly, Christian missions must carefully consider various Bihari community concepts, terms, and practices in a non-Christian religious context. Since Biharis are an oral people as well, missionaries must adopt contextualized approaches that respect and engage with local traditions, stories, and modes of communication. Failure to do so may result in miscommunication and resistance, as the message would be seen as foreign or irrelevant.

Currently, some Bihari individuals attend churches without a basic understanding of Christian principles and doctrines. Moreover, some people identify themselves as Christians while still practicing their traditional customs, resulting in unique syncretism.[1] Despite numerous educational institutions aimed at societal improvement, Jesuit and Protestant mission societies providing education in suburban and rural areas have largely failed to impart core gospel teaching.

I (the first author) was raised in Bihar's capital and attended Catholic schools throughout my education. Despite this, my knowledge was limited to the names "Jesus" and "Mary." Christian educational institutions have failed to significantly impact society, even with access to young children. The gospel rarely reached their homes, explaining the current Christian population. These families, comprising both literate and illiterate members, seldom heard of the gospel, particularly not through the schools.

Various sources have spread the gospel in Bihar, notably hospitals and small prayer groups. Patients and relatives encounter God through hospital chaplains and staff members. I first learned about Jesus's healing story at the Christian Medical College Hospital, Vellore, India. Despite attending Catholic schools, I have never experienced teachings on love, sacrifice, miracles, or healing. This was unfortunate, as missionaries eventually stopped discussing God directly in educational institutions.

Successful missionaries managed to engage in lower caste division while respecting their cultural values (Marak & Jacob, 2004, 96). Herbert E. Hoefer notes that in South India, some priests advised against baptism because its practice differed significantly from local religious customs and cultural norms (Hoefer, 2001, 12). Permitting natives to comprehend and embrace the gospel within their traditions may significantly enhance a more contextualized gospel.

Recently, missionaries' perspectives have shifted to incorporating more relevant and contextualized approaches. For instance, Augustine Jebakumar, founder of the Gospel Echoing Mission Society (GEMS) in Bihar, has successfully used contextualized methods to engage with the community since the 1970s. In contrast, despite careful planning, Christian missions have struggled to reach the native population, especially the oral population of Bihar.

Christians from various denominations have traditionally used Western-style evangelism, adapting methods, languages, and terminologies suited to these contexts. Although effective in some cases, a uniform approach persists in reaching people of diverse faiths across Bihar and other Indian regions. Given India's linguistic diversity, applying a single language consistently is challenging. Although Hindi is a major language, its forms and meanings vary by region, including in Bihar. Building on critical contextualization in missionary strategies, the authors examined initiatives tailored for Bihar, addressing religious concepts, terms, and practices.

Religious Concepts

Iṣṭadevatā is a deity Hindus worship without disregarding the clan's god *Kuladevatā*. Traditional Indian Hindus maintain ancestral connections through various methods (Kumar & Činčala, 2020, 157). These methods include festivals such as *Pitratarpan*, fasting for ancestors, and offering worship during significant family events, such as marriage and initiation. Such practices link family members to their extended families and the past. Acknowledging the *Kuladevatā* is one such practice, but it does not require the *Iṣṭadevatā*. Devotional expressions, regardless of form, ultimately align with the supreme divine (Prabhupāda, 1986).

Kuladevatā refers to the family god or clan deity, with identities ranging from male, female, animal, and even stone, the last type particularly revered by the Biharis. Regardless of their residence, Biharis seek blessings from their *Kuladevatā* during significant events, such as marriage or death (Selvakumar, 2018). Defying *Kuladevatā* is believed to bring curses and poverty to families. Hoefer noted the deep-seated fear of family gods' wrath, which is thought to curse the family (Hoefer, 2001, 13). This fear can impede the acceptance of the gospel, as ancestral or family gods hold crucial cultural and religious significance. Adopting a new faith, such as Christianity, might be seen as betraying ancestral beliefs, risking social ostracism or familial conflict.

In considering critical contextualization, can the church present Jesus Christ as both *Kuladevatā* and *Iṣṭadevatā*? The Old Testament provides numerous examples in which God identifies Himself as the God of Israel, tribes, clans, and families, urging Israel to teach his precepts to their children, signifying his presence in both nations and families. Drawing parallels between these Old Testament depictions and traditional roles allows for a deeper connection between the new faith and existing beliefs.

Presenting Jesus as *Kuladevatā* acknowledges his role in guiding and protecting the family lineage while also being the personal God for individuals. Balancing cultural integration with doctrinal integrity is essential for maintaining faith authenticity, while making it accessible to the local community. Therefore, presenting Jesus Christ as the head of the nation, tribe, clan, and family could be an effective contextualized approach.

Kulaguru refers to the clan's priest, responsible for all rituals and ceremonies. *Kulaguru* have a higher status than the heads of families, and their words are regarded as commands. This authority presents a significant challenge to evangelizing any family, as defying the *Kulaguru* is believed to bring a curse. The first author's family has a *Kulaguru* who visits annually. Before his arrival, the house is thoroughly cleaned and a special bed is prepared for his stay. During his visit, only vegetarian meals are served, although he smokes cigars, which the parents dislike but do not object to. Upon his departure, items such as shoes, a watch, and clothes typically go missing, taken by the *Kulaguru*; yet, no one confronts him.

Many families share similar experiences of being mistreated and exploited by their *Kulaguru*, but they refrain from opposing him due to fear of repercussions. Gurus in the Hindu community maintain a special bond and respect with families, both living and deceased, as they act as mediators between the devotee and god. If the guru are physically dead, a nominated successor takes on the role. Without a *Kulaguru*, disciples are likened to "sheep without a shepherd."

Religious Terms

The term "grace" (*anugraha*) is largely incomprehensible in Bihari dialects. The term *anu-grah* signifies "to support, uphold, provide, or treat with kindness, favor, or oblige" (Malkovsky, 2001, 162-163). Among Bihari Christians, phrases like "grace of God" or "saved by grace alone" are nearly meaningless, except for those familiar with mainstream Hindi, where words like *dayā* or *kṛpā* hold more significance.

Dayā signifies "sympathy, compassion, or pity." Malkovsky cites Panikkar, defining *dayā* as "mercy": "*dayā* is the mercy prompted by the sense of compassion and sympathy." Śaṅkara, an early eighth-century Indian philosopher and theologian, used *dayā*[2] to convey divine grace but distinguished that from *anugraha* and *prasada*, which are non-Vedic (Malkovsky, 2001, 163).

Parameśvara, or *Parmeshwar*, denotes the supreme being and is well-known among Hindi speakers, but not in Bihari dialects. In Bihar, *Bhagwan* is a common term for God and is easily understood as the supreme being. As Hindi-speaking Christians often use *Parmeshwar*, this term may alienate or confuse new believers, disconnecting them from God because of their unfamiliarity with the word.

The Persian term *Khuda*, originating from the ancient Zoroastrian concept of God, is widely used by Muslims and Christians in northwestern India. Many Christians in this region use *Khuda* or *Rabb* to refer to God in the Bible. In Bihar, however, the term is predominantly used by Muslims, causing confusion among the new Christian converts.

Religious Practices

During my upbringing, I (first author) observed the significance of music in Bihari culture. Temporary tents were erected and large crowds gathered to listen to stories in song form, known as *Birha* in Bihar. *Birha*, an ethnic Bhojpuri folk genre, is particularly popular in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand. Derived from the Sanskrit word *Viraha*, meaning "separation," *Birha* primarily depicts the separation of lovers (Narayan, 2016, 134). In Indian poetry, *Birha* often conveys themes of pain, separation, and suffering. This genre serves both entertainment and social teaching purposes, and it is popular in both urban and rural areas. Notably, *Birha* singers are amateurs without specialized training. This musical form has also spread to the Caribbean and Suriname among Bihari immigrants (Manuel, 2015, 43).

Birha can be used to depict the separation between humans and God in Genesis, disobedience in Exodus, and God's unconditional love on the Cross. Numerous songs can be created to convey the gospel using this popular singing style. An evangelistic gathering featuring *Birha* singing, prayers, and testimonies could be held instead of preaching. This oral gospel presentation can significantly impact the community. It is essential to use simple terms understood by Biharis.

Katha, an Indian storytelling style, is highly cherished in India. The major Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabharat, along with the Puranas, are classic examples of story repositories. The

Sanskrit term *Katha* means "narration" or "story" and is derived from the verb *Kath*, meaning "to tell." Historically, *Katha* has been used to convey religious or social messages (Singh & Saxena, 2023, 228). In religious contexts, the functionary imparts the message. *Puja* (worship) often accompanies *Katha* in many households, and numerous temples organize *Katha* events. They are an integral part of Indian life. In 1932, *Akashvani* (All India Radio) broadcast a two-hour and 15-minute *Katha* program, *Mahishasumardini*, in Kolkata (Mukerjee, 2014). Remarkably, this *Katha* remains popular in West Bengal even after nine decades. In the mid-nineteenth century, indentured laborers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh introduced the *Katha* tradition to the Caribbean.

In 2013, three ministries of the Seventh-day Adventist Church implemented this *Katha* method. The Center for Southern Asian Religions (General Conference) collaborated with the Caribbean Union Conference and the School of Theology and Religion of the University of the Southern Caribbean, Trinidad, to launch a program called *Yeshu Jeevan Katha*. The stage was elaborately decorated with a podium for the preacher and a platform to enact gospel events while projecting the texts. A choir, called the *Bhajan* Group, was seated on stage; *Bhajan* in Hindi and Bhojpuri refers to worship through singing. The two-week program featured a preacher in Indian attire, narrating the gospel melodiously and drawing lessons from the Bible story. The narration was accompanied by enactments and Hindi songs from the *Bhajan* Group. Scripture portions were read in English, with another individual reading selected portions from the Hindi Bible. Utilizing these traditional methods bridged the gap between the church's message and the community's beliefs, fostering an understanding, acceptance, and trust. The church in Bihar should consider training teams to communicate messages through *Katha*, *Bhajans*, *Kirtans*, and *Birha*.

Hindu worship manifests in two forms: domestic and corporate. In Bihar, most Hindu households feature either a shrine or *Pooja* room for daily worship. Some homes also have a Hanuman flag as a place of worship, and occasionally both are present. Corporate worship occurs in temples and tents.

Typically, one family member conducts rituals, while others join in worship or receive blessings. For special *Poojas*, a priest performs rituals at home with the participation of family members. Corporate worship involves a priest, with worshippers standing alongside them. I (second author) noted the participatory nature of Hindu worship, where the priest conducts rituals but the devotee offers *Pooja*, makes offerings, and often recites chants with the priest. The priest assists, but the devotee receives blessings. Teaching (*updesh*) was conducted separately.

Tangibility is crucial for Hindu worship[3] and typically involves seeing the deity (Darshana), making offerings, worshipping, and receiving blessings. Hindus prefer the divine presence at home or in temples, conducting many rituals like *Satyanarayan Poojas, Lakshmi Poojas, and Diwali Poojas* at home. Temple visits are usually reserved for special occasions.

Hindu worship contrasts with traditional Christian Church settings. The Church's challenge is to offer a tangible divine experience. In the Old Testament, Israel encountered divinity tangibly through the temple, the Ark of the Covenant, and through sacrifices. In the New Testament, this tangible experience occurred at Pentecost, with church members baptized by the Holy Spirit. Thus, there is a parallel between Hindu worship and biblical worship.

The Church's worship in Bihar requires further contextualization to better resonate with local believers. The worship format should be revisited to ensure that it remains sacred, while being more meaningful to Biharis. As G.,T. NG suggests, worship should be presented in a familiar

contextual mode (Ng, 2005, 62). One approach is to make worship more participatory, involving devotees in every aspect, so they feel the worship is their own and not conducted on their behalf.

The current Christian worship format primarily includes cottage prayer meetings or church worship, typically involving sermons. For over half an hour, the attendees listened without participating. The Bible does not prescribe a specific format for worship but offers guiding principles. Worship should be conducted "with solemnity and awe, as if in the visible presence of the Master of assemblies" (Dunham, 1968). It is essential to recognize that "a basic missiological principle is that God can be worshipped in ways relevant and understandable within each local culture" (Bauer, 2009, 39). Through contextualization, Christ's followers perceive their faith as fulfilling Hinduism's aspirations and truths, discovering God's true nature in Jesus (Hoefer, 2001, 9).

I (second author) recall attending three house Poojas hosted by three families. An informal group comprising four Hindu families and my own participated in each event. This experience exemplifies the notion of a house church within Indian Hindu communities and highlights their community-oriented nature. The Poojas are celebrated with close relatives and friends, and the flow of attendees was seamless. People find comfort and enjoyment when conducting religious activities at home, occasionally alternating between corporate worship and temple visits.

Recently, churches have recognized that small groups are crucial for the future. Don James asserts, "Small groups are among the most effective ministries for equipping, discipling, and growing the church, and they are adaptable for restricted access countries and urban contexts. Small groups are the model for urban churches" (James, 2014, 142). Although James's comment referred to New York City, it also applies to Bihar. The COVID-19 lockdown shifted church activities from buildings to believers' homes. Hindus worldwide already practice their faith at home, indicating that house churches should be the church's foundation: "Today, eight of the ten largest churches globally are based on small groups, and many rapidly growing world-class churches are small group-based" (James, 2014, 138).

Conclusion

Bihar has historically resisted the Christian faith, partly due to the Westernized forms of Christianity introduced there, which lack cultural relevance and sensitivity. For the Christian faith to be seen as indigenous, the concepts, terms, and practices of Bihari religious culture must be considered. The Church must understand that the gospel aims to transform faith, spirituality, and life without eradicating cultural practices by integrating Jesus within the cultural context while adhering to biblical principles. Various mission approaches have been attempted globally; however, significant areas remain unexplored. Effective engagement requires missionaries to understand cultural and social dynamics and tailor their approach to recipients' cognitive and communicative capacities, thus enhancing mission dynamics through cultural responsiveness.

Endnotes

[1] I (first author) conducted a comprehensive research project in Bihar among a Bhojpuri speaking community and discovered the issues of low biblical understanding and of syncretistic practices. That research was part of my doctoral program and was funded by Andrews University Graduate Grant Aid.

[2] *Adi Śaṅkara or Śaṅkara* is credited for solidifying the doctrine of *Advaita Vedanta*. *Advaita Vedanta* is a school of Hindu Philosophy and religious practices. It is the most popular, studied, and practiced religious school of classical

Indian thought. Brannigan, M. C. (2010). *Striking a Balance: A Primer in Traditional Asian Values.* Lexington Books.

[3] When the Bihari people reached the Caribbean in the late nineteenth century, they missed this component of their religious life. They did not hesitate to accept a statue of Mary as the Indian incarnation of divinity. For more details, read Gayen, Chanchal (2013). Siparia Mai: An Illustration of the Tangibility Factor in Faith by Hindus in Trinidad. *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*. Vol. 9, No. 1: 31-44. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.32597/jams/vol9/iss1/5/

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The Theological Voice of a Poor Man in a Desert:
Right for Africa?

Jim Harries

Abstract

Abba Matta revitalized the monastery of St. Macarius in Egypt, leaving it thriving at his death in 2006. His books demonstrate a life marked by deep devotion to prayer and holy living, from youth. Conflict in the church contributed to his passing through harsh conditions. His writings, spiritually guided and deeply rooted in the Bible, offer profound insights into Christian living, in theological depth and commitment. His implicit critique of the prosperity gospel combines with deep insights relevant to African contexts. Translating some of his key texts into prominent African languages like Hausa and Swahili could provide healthy ways forward on the continent.

Key Words: Africa, contextualization, missions, Church, Monasticism, Egypt, theology

Abba Matta, or Father Matta El-Meskeen, is often translated into English as "Matthew the Poor." *Meskeen* is an Arabic equivalent to the English "poverty." In this article I will use the Arabic designation *Abba Matta* ("Father Matthew").

My Experience of Abba Matta

I first came across Abba Matta's writings in March 2015 during a four-night visit to the Monastery of St. Macarius (Dayr Abu Maqar) in northern Egypt. Having already been living and working closely with Coptic Christians in Kenya for three years, my visit gave me opportunity to put "flesh and bones" to my understanding of ways the Copts had described their monasteries to me. This ancient monastery had become extremely dilapidated, with a population of just six old monks, when Abba Matta was asked to revive it in 1969. He oversaw the massive task of rebuilding the monastery into "a work of wonder" (Helmy, 2012, 17-18). Despite his passing on in 2006, when I visited the monastery in 2015 it was clearly still a thriving place, populated by over 100 monks. My visit was during Lent, which probably gave me less opportunity than I would have had otherwise to interact with those monks. Their having Arabic as their first language and Coptic as their liturgical language, neither of which I speak, made communication difficult anyway. Upon arrival I soon changed my routine to accommodate 4:00 a.m. beginnings in prayer, and I could not help but be enormously impressed by the evident profound dedication of the monks to their chosen life of relative solitude, celibacy, and intercession.

It was six years later, when in 2021 I was gifted a copy of Abba Matta's book *Sojourners: Monastic Letters and Spiritual Teachings from the Desert* (Matthew the Poor, 2019), that my more personal and appreciative encounter with Abba Matta's writings began. It took me about two years to read *Sojourners*. Small doses on a periodic basis sufficed to give me a new depth in understanding Jesus, while in-between continuing to focus on other things. In other words: Abba Matta's recommendations to his monks made me feel like a spiritual weakling, so as to inspire me to persist in being faithful to my calling to serve through any "desert" experiences I might have been having. I did not need to read the whole book through all at once. I just read two or three pages periodically.

Abba Matta has frequently enabled me to release some pressures of cross-cultural missionary life through a flow of tears prompted by the impact of his words on my heart. In this sense, my interest in him has arisen primarily when I have been in difficulty! He has also helped me to better understand myself, at least as my Egyptian colleagues comprehend me. There are three alternatives in life, Abba Matta tells us in his book *How Do We Build Up Ourselves in the Most Holy Faith*. First is marriage, which should be a dedication to the glorification of God in one's relationship with one's spouse, especially in rearing godly children. Second is consecration. This alternative is an anointing to a life of celibate service, oriented to the poor and less able, and in plain clothes. (Unlike monks, consecrated servants do not have a uniform.) Third is the monk, who is not expected to serve amongst a community outside of the monastery itself but devotes himself to prayer, often in a very solitary way. This third option shames me, through the realization that being alone should not be feared. Rather, it can be seen as a very positive experience contributing to devotion and prayer. The second option, a plain-clothes celibate servant who is active in promoting Jesus in human community, describes my own role. (In hindsight, I did not design my role with any Coptic teaching in mind!)

Abba Matta's Life and Message

Reading an autobiographical history of the life of Abba Matta further increased my respect for him. From his own descriptions in his book *Word for Our Time*, from boyhood he became highly devoted to prayer and holy living. Before long, once grown, his gifts were recognized by church leadership. He was given to occupy some key posts in the church while still young. Then a disaster struck, described as being motivated by envy on the side of those who resented his success. Abba Matta's ordination, that as a typical act of his deep humility he had resisted in the first place, was revoked. Abba Matta was banished. He and a group of his close followers retreated to what by all accounts sounds to be a harsh location in the Egyptian desert. There, in a way reminiscent of the ancient fathers described in the book *Paradise of the Holy Fathers* (Budge, 1888/1978), he barely survived hunger and other desert challenges over a number of years. Eventually, the church leadership relented. The Coptic Patriarch himself made a prostration in front of Abba Matta, asking for forgiveness (Helmy, 2012, 17). Afterward Abba Matta was asked to revive the monastery of Macarius, which he very effectively did, of which monastery he was to be the spiritual head until his death.

While much of my published writing has been academic (Harries, n.d.), and while I endeavor to follow some academic procedures here, this article is very personal. I doubt whether Abba Matta himself would have favored his lifework receiving academic treatment, as "he speaks to the heart rather than the head," as the publisher's introduction to his book *Word for Our Time* comments (Ancient Faith Publishing, 2024). My reading has chanced upon a foreword to some of Abba Matta's writing by the well-known late Roman Catholic theologian, Henri Nouwen. Nouwen rightly describes Abba Matta as "a very perceptive observer of human behavior." Nouwen adds, "My joy comes from the deep conviction that we of the Western world must listen to this penetrating message coming to us from the Egyptian desert" (Nouwen, 2004, 9). Clearly Nouwen was vastly impressed with the Christian lessons from the desert that he was happy to review. To Nouwen, Abba Matta came from faraway Egypt. My close affiliation with the Coptic Church over 14 years to date helps me to appreciate Abba Matta more as a close neighbor.

What did Abba Matta write about? Clearly he addressed a wide variety of topics. The kinds of themes to which he guided his pen are illustrated by the variety of titles listed at the end of this

article (all translated from Arabic into English). "How to live as a Christian" comes to mind as a way of describing the orientation of his writing. To Abba Matta, life as a Christian requires both theological depth and profound commitment. According to his own frequently offered testimony, Abba Matta acquired his teaching not from classes, study, lectures, or even listening to sermons in the churches but directly from the Bible. In a way his testimony is reminiscent of the Apostle Paul (Galatians 1:17-18). Through prayerful fasting and all-night vigilance, the Holy Spirit guided Abba Matta. His penetrating mind was able, with the guidance of God's Spirit, to acquire insights that often throw fresh and inspiring angles onto the meanings of well-known texts.

Relevance to Africans

Since most of my writing emerges from deep exposure to day-to-day life with African people over many years, one question that arises concerns whether my reviewing of Abba Matta's work here is intended for Africans, for me personally, or for those I could call "my people" of heritage and upbringing, namely Brits and Germans. (My mother is German, I am a German speaker, and I have many relatives in Germany where I frequently visit—but I was born and raised in the UK.) I cannot entirely splice the above three identities apart. I can confidently say that, at least in part, this article represents a very personal appreciation of Abba Matta's writings. Also, this article advocates for promotion of his work in sub-Saharan "Black" Africa, which is where I have lived for 36 years. (Egypt is of course also in Africa but in north Africa.)

Are Abba Matta's writings particularly relevant to African contexts? I have two answers to that question. The first is, "Yes." The second is, "I do not know." That is to say, while I see much relevance, my 36 years of living in African community still leave my understanding of Africa's people very limited. I live in Western Kenya where most of my ministry is with people of the Luo tribe, whom I engage using their own language. I also work more widely, especially in Tanzania. I have recently drawn on Abba Matta's work in various ways in my own teaching and preaching among Africans. Most of the rest of this article constitutes a discussion of the relevance of Abba Matta's writings for native African people, as I understand them, mediated through my own spiritual pilgrimage.

One major way in which Abba Matta trumps alternative devotional and theological texts is in his powerful and continual, albeit implicit, critique of the prosperity gospel. I am not aware that Abba Matta overtly mentions the prosperity gospel anywhere in his writings, although he may do so at some point. It is his own powerful articulation of how he meets Jesus in decades spent in the desert that provides this critique.

One factor that detracts from Abba Matta's relevance to much of Africa is the extraordinary and peculiar history of his home context of Egypt, which Black Africans on the whole do not share. This historical difference can be discovered, for example, by browsing *Paradise of the Holy Fathers* (Budge, 1888/1978), a book apparently considered second only to the Bible in Egyptian monasteries. Set in the years following Constantine's declaration that Christianity be practiced in the Roman Empire, *Paradise* is filled with numerous extraordinary accounts of efforts by the forefathers of today's Egyptian monks to live secluded lives of extreme asceticism in desert places, in fulfilment of what they considered to be their Christian calling. Black Africans, including Christian Black Africans, outside of Ethiopia, do not share that type of historical experience (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024).

The second trait that gives me pause in promoting Abba Matta in Africa today is his orientation to theological content rather than to heart-rending expression of the gospel. Not that Abba Matta's words do not speak to the emotions. They very much do. In my understanding, it is the content of what Abba Matta shares that speaks to the human heart, which is somewhat unlike my experience of much of Africa, where the emotional communication of dramatic oral expression is also key. Of course, Africa is diverse. Yet the wide spread of Pentecostalism and widely known incorporation of what in English could be called "emotionalism" into sensual Christian worship and communication of the gospel in Africa does not seem to be one of Abba Matta's emphases.

Given the above provisos, my own evaluation would suggest that many in Africa could learn very helpfully from the Coptic Orthodox Church in general and from the writings of Abba Matta in particular. To facilitate such learning, the translation of some of Abba Matta's key texts into an African idiom could be extremely helpful.

My own knowledge of Arabic being extremely minimal, I have only been privileged to read some of Abba Matta's writings that have been translated from Arabic to English. Although widely used in official circles, European languages are not the right medium for the future of the continent of Africa, as I have argued elsewhere (Harries, 2013). This linguistic conundrum leaves much of the continent in a very difficult epistemological jam, one that is not easily resolved. Perhaps an effective way to promote Abba Matta's work in Africa would be to encourage Arabic-speaking Africans to read his works in the original language, then disseminate some of his wisdom orally (through YouTube videos, for example) using one or more of today's prominent African tongues. Some of those tongues, including Hausa (World Translation Center, 2023) and Swahili, already have deep roots in Arabic, which could potentially be taken advantage of.

Abba Matta's desert context is, with little doubt, one of his works' greatest strengths. My own experience of alternative Western articulations of theology and the Christian life is that, when it comes to an African readership, they fall short in some important ways. Western theologians generally articulate their theologies, for example through illustrations they use, with reference to what to them are "normal" ways of life with respect to possessions and economic levels. (I recall a visitor to my mission context in Kenya saying they were having a significant conversation with a child as they drove him to school—but all our children walk to school. Also a lady once told us of God's saving her from a crisis: arriving by bus late at night and having nowhere to stay, amazingly she got hotel rooms for herself and her children. She related this episode to us about a month after I had arrived in a Tanzanian town by bus at 2.00 am, and found that women and children simply slept in their seats on the bus till morning.) Abba Matta is in this respect vastly different. He comes across as oblivious to or openly resisting the draw of wealth, power, prestige, and fame. This detachment from such allurements is a vast benefit when it comes to engaging Africa. Westerners' contributions to the thriving of the church in Africa are usually implicitly pro-prosperity gospel, whether they realize this or not (Reese, 2010). Their own depiction of their personal lives just oozes with what, in traditional African terms, comes across as extravagant prosperity.

To illustrate what I mean, Abba Matta eats in no restaurants, owns no computer, has no wife or children, flies to no international conferences, keeps up with no Jones's, is not a successful senior minister of a mega church, promotes no analytical methods, presupposes no knowledge of German theologians and philosophers, is answerable to no women, drinks no coffee, sidles up to no politicians, follows no American spelling and has no American accent, shows off no smart suits

or even elegant robes. Abba Matta's type of "normal" lifestyle means that the poorest African receiving his message is more likely to be proud of the ways that his own so-called poverty enables his proximity to Christ, rather than to be ashamed of his lack of material things.

Concluding Summary

So what is Abba Matta's theology? Clearly it is Orthodox, and more precisely it follows the Egyptian tradition in Oriental Orthodoxy. As such Abba Matta's theology presupposes the seven sacraments of Orthodoxy as well as the "literal" transubstantiation of the elements of the communion, as Westerners would see it. Prayers may call upon departed Saints as well as Mary the mother of Jesus. Abba Matta does not require all to share in poverty, but he recognizes that some can benefit from ascetic discipline. Abba Matta's theology promotes an ideal of a man (or woman) devoting their whole life in prayer and service of others, rooted in the love of Christ, understood through the Christian Scriptures, preferably in the context of an isolation that monastic community can provide. Abba Matta does not even claim to preach, or even teach. He rather just speaks from his heart. In his book *How Do We Build Up Ourselves in the Most Holy Faith?*, Abba Matta tells us, "If you wish to be a perfect and learned monk, then go into your cell, shut the door behind you and keep your back to the door, from the inside of course, and the cell will teach you everything."

Finally, it must be said that perhaps the greatest value of Abba Matta's teachings is for men who find themselves "alone." That aloneness could be within a marriage, in which communication with a man's spouse may for a myriad of reasons be limited. More likely such an alone man would be a divorcee or a widower. He may be a consecrated servant or a dedicated monk. In each case, some "desert spirituality" could help each of these kinds of men to engage in more fervent prayer and in general to be a more valuable asset to whatever community they find themselves in.

Books by Abba Matta

An extensive list (with live links) of Abba Matta's writings translated into English is available on the Orthodokairos website (Orthokairos, 2015). Below is an alphabetical list of the titles of books, or of chapters in books, by Abba Matta that I have read, at least in part, in preparation for the writing of this article:

An optimistic vision of divine justice

Asceticism and purity

Be transformed. A message to those who look forward to a better life

Coping with spiritual paralysis

Emmanuel, which means "God with us"

Guidelines for prayer. Book 1

How do we build up ourselves in the most holy faith?

How to read the Bible

Mystery of God's love in relation to renewed mankind

On love

On the mount of temptation

Our need for Christ

Repentance

The aim of the Christian life

The Bible as a personal message to you

The birth of Christ and the birth of man

The communion of love

The desire of all nations

The immortal church

The kingdom of God: clear vision versus illusion

The righteousness of humility

The true art of successful living

The wedding in Cana of Galilee

Words for our time: the spiritual words of Matthew the poor

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Call for Papers:

Lausanne IV: Reviews, Analyses, and Projections

For Publication in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, April 2025

The April 2025 issue of *Global Missiology - English* will examine the Fourth Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, or "Seoul-Incheon 2024," that took place in September, 2024. Lausanne I-III gathered in 1974 (Lausanne), 1989 (Manila), and 2010 (Cape Town), hence Lausanne IV (Seoul) marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Lausanne Movement. The following topics are examples of requested articles:

- The Lausanne Movement and the Worldwide Christian Movement

- Preparations for the Lausanne IV Congress

- Participant Experience of Lausanne IV

- Analyses of Lausanne IV: Historical, Biblical-theological, Missiological, Religious, Socio-economic, Political

- Immediate and Future Effects of Lausanne IV

Proposed titles with approximately 100-word abstracts are due October 31, 2024. Full manuscripts of approved paper proposals will be due January 31, 2025. Manuscript guidelines, including a template for formatting, can be found on the *Global Missiology* website at

http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/about/submissions#authorGuidelines.

Please address all submissions and questions to globalmissiologyenglish@gmail.com.

Call for Papers:

**Diaspora Communities:
Relationships, Identities, Challenges, and Opportunities**

For Publication in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, October 2025

The October 2025 issue of *Global Missiology - English* will examine an array of topics related to diaspora communities. The important roles played by diaspora peoples in Christian mission are recognized today more than ever. Much study of diaspora phenomena has been conducted, but more is needed in specific relation to communities of people living in diaspora. For example, relations between diaspora churches and local indigenous churches and communities is a topic ripe for further research. Diaspora communities face challenges with respect to their changing identities, including those associated with language and generational differences. Many diaspora communities have experienced stirring revivals and desire further theological and leadership training. The possibilities for research topics expand rapidly upon exploring connected themes.

The following topics—in particular case studies—are examples of requested articles:

- Case Studies of Diaspora-Indigenous Relations

- Case Studies of Changing Diaspora Identities

- Case Studies of Generational Adjustments in Diaspora Communities

- Case Studies of Revivals in Diaspora Communities

- Case Studies of Diaspora Theological and Leadership Training

- Other topics related to Diaspora Communities

Proposed titles with approximately 100-word abstracts are due April 30, 2025. Full manuscripts of approved paper proposals will be due July 31, 2025. Manuscript guidelines, including a template for formatting, can be found on the *Global Missiology* website at

http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/about/submissions#authorGuidelines.

Please address all submissions and questions to globalmissiologyenglish@gmail.com.

Book Review

Sam George and Askok Kumar, eds., *Sharing Jesus with Hindus:*
Global Witness Among Hindu Diaspora

Reviewed by Prasad D R J Phillips

This recent addition to the series edited by Sam George on Christians in diaspora missions is distinct for its singular focus on witnessing among diaspora Hindus. Co-edited by Ashok Kumar, the book delves into a theme that is increasingly relevant as the Hindu community grows in different parts of the world. The volume offers a snapshot from a diverse group of Christian scholar-practitioners, each with a unique global context and involvement in Christian ministry to and among Hindus. This unique focus on witnessing among diaspora Hindus will surely captivate the reader, providing a fresh perspective on Christian missions.

The editors, drawing on the resources from their vast network of sixteen contributors, have contributed seventeen chapters. Each chapter focuses on particular areas, bringing insights from first-hand experience and compelling the reader to seriously engage with the Hindu community, which is slowly beginning to influence the geographical and human landscape worldwide. Time and again, the book provides a historical snapshot of how the Hindus from India moved to various locations, firstly during the colonial era as indentured labourers and then during post-independence, to seek employment and business in the West and other places of opportunities. Although significant research in recent years on the role, impact, and both socio-religious and cultural impact of Hindus has brought considerable interest in migration studies, this volume focuses on Christian engagement with them but from a practitioner's point of view. The book primarily focuses on Indian Christians engaging with the Hindu community, which makes this publication unique.

The book also provides further insights into how first-generation Christians now witness among Hindus in the diaspora by sharing some of their best practices. For example, Patel (Chapter 4) looks at India's internationalism under Modi's rule, Subramhmanyan (Chapter 9) writes about how to deal with Hindu families after conversion, and Moorthy (Chapter 10) brings insights into how the Hindu worldview is based on community and religion and thus how to minister to Hindu families and not individuals alone. Moreover, Sankaran (Chapter 11), Lazarus (Chapter 13), Sathyadass (Chapter 6), and Ramsunder (Chapter 15) introduce the readers to ministries among four significant Hindu populations outside of India: students in Western universities, home church movements among Hindu households, engaging with Malaysian Tamil women, and witnessing among Hindus in the Caribbean, respectively. All these authors and others are practitioners sharing their experiences and best practices.

Other authors who are academic scholars, such as Aghamkar (Chapter 1), Paluri (Chapter 2), and George (Chapter 3 and the concluding Chapter 17), attempt to unpack concepts such as the Hindu diaspora, interfaith encounters or dialogue with Hindus, and the meaning of Christian witness mean. Interestingly, while considering the challenging landscape of using the words evangelism and mission within the Indian context, the editors have sensibly replaced them with "sharing" and "witness." In the last chapter, George provides considerable space to explain the term "witness" as a more authentic term, providing insights from the Bible and early

Christianity, which is a significant contribution for Indian Christians in this book. Still, the book does not shy away from using the word "conversion," an important theme but a challenging reality for many Hindu individuals and families who have become disciples of Jesus Christ through various faith encounters globally.

This book introduces a whole new group of Hindus who need not be reached in India. They are living outside India in diaspora in the neighbourhoods of many Christian communities who often are insulated within their own communities and contexts. The book offers practical insights and principles for Christians to minister among Hindus right in their own neighbourhoods. This volume not only can help Indian transnational churches and leaders but also others in the global church. As the global church is suddenly seeing a surge of Hindus living among them, the book's various chapters become a valuable resource for those who find themselves unsure of how to witness and engage with their Hindu neighbours. Since in many Western or other contexts communities are becoming more pluralistic, it is becoming important that the global church begins to understand that Christian engagement occurs not only in sending people to India but that opportunities have risen now for Christians to engage Hindus in their own local contexts. In short, this book provides some very useful insights and concepts to readers for whom this area of ministering to Hindus would be a new topic.

If one is trying to find serious academic literature or research, this book, at least regarding a majority of the chapters, would not suffice. Readers will find at the end of most chapters a list of tips and simple principles, in a few sentences or a paragraph, of how to conduct Christian ministries among Hindus. That more practical goal very well appears to be the purpose of this book, and as such I recommend that every church and Christian organisation and individual who is seriously wanting to witness among Hindus and is passionate about sharing Jesus with them would find this book to be an excellent read and welcome addition to their library.