

Current Issue

Vol. 23 No. 2 (2026): April - Witness Amidst Confessional Plurality and Nationalism

This issue takes up the vexing reality of multiple Christian traditions co-existing amidst nationalistic contexts. Many Christians can be perplexed as to why numerous traditions not only persist but seemingly keep multiplying. Moreover, people outside the Christian faith cannot help but ask why Christian groups cannot seem to agree with each other. Also, Christian traditions relate differently to the state(s) within which they exist. Some offer unwavering support, others criticize, some resist, others begrudgingly comply, and many try to ignore. Governments also differ in how they expect or demand loyalty from religious groups—but all states require some measure of compliance. Given today's seemingly rising number of nationalistic settings with autocratic leaders that both demand ultimate loyalty and do not wish for antagonistic religious groups, how churches can best give appropriate witness to Jesus Christ within settings of confessional plurality and nationalism is a widespread and practical challenge.

Published: 2026-04-20

Issue Editorial

Witness in the Context of Confessional Diversity and Nationalism

Ruslan Zagidulin


[DOCX](#)
[PDF](#)
[HTML](#)

Featured Articles

Unity Through Belonging: A Grounded Theory of Division in the Mauritian Church

A. K. Amberg


[DOCX](#)
[PDF](#)
[HTML](#)

Bridges or Roadblocks? Islamic Plurality and Tension in Juxtaposition to Christian Plurality and Unity in Germany

Steven B. Kern



Contextualization

Bayanihan as a Gospel Mission Approach: Strengthening Intentional Communities and Acts of Service to Share Christ with Filipino Communities

Dave Johnson, Angelo Atienza



Missiological Paradigm

One Helpful Theory for Explaining Religious Conversion

Gordon Scott Bonham



Special Issue

Call for Papers for October 2026 Special Issue: "Christian Conversion and Mission"

GME Editorial Team



Call for Papers for April 2027 Special Issue: Christian Unity amid Domestic and International Divisions

GME Editorial Team



Review & Preview

Patrick Kraye, Introducing Intercultural Theology and Ethics: Representing Jesus in a Postcolonial World

Mark Harlan



 DOCX

 PDF

 HTML

[View All Issues >](#)

Platform &
workflow by
OJS / PKP

Guest Editorial

Witness in the Context of Confessional Diversity and Nationalism

Ruslan Zagidulin

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, April 2026

The modern Christian landscape is defined by two realities: the steady diversity of Christian denominations and the resurgence of nationalist political movements. Although confessional diversity has long been recognized as a characteristic feature of global Christianity, its consequences continue to raise acute questions, especially among those outside the church. How is it possible that Christians who profess the same Lord speak in such different voices?

Recent empirical research also shows that divisions within Christian communities are not always primarily theological in nature but are often rooted in deeper issues of identity and belonging. For example, this issue's grounded theory-based study on the church in Mauritius, contributed by A. K. Amberg, demonstrates that fragmentation often occurs when believers try to understand a sense of belonging shaped by social loss, cultural change, and postcolonial dynamics. Using this framework, confessional differences reflect a deeper search for recognition, identity, and one's place in society. This observation encourages a broader rethinking of confessional diversity, not only as a theological issue, but also as a socio-cultural dynamic in the body of Christ.

At the same time, churches are increasingly finding themselves in political contexts shaped by strong national identities and, in some cases, rigid or even authoritarian leadership. States interact with religious communities in different ways: some seek cooperation, others impose strict restrictions, and still others expect clear loyalty to national priorities. In such circumstances, Christian communities are constantly forced to distinguish between how to remain faithful to the testimony of Jesus Christ and at the same time participate responsibly in public and political life.

The intersection of confessional diversity and nationalism creates a particularly difficult context for Christian witness. Confessional plurality affects the perception of the Christian message, while political pressure can encourage churches to either overly align with the interests of the state or to withdraw into privatized forms of faith and isolate themselves. Nevertheless, these challenges also open up space for a new understanding of Christian unity, public witness, and the relationship between church and state.

Our son David, who died after a car accident a year ago at the age of 19, had been comparing Christianity with Islam. While being a faithful follower of Jesus, David learned some discipline from his Muslim friends. He regretted that there were many prejudices on both sides. David, reflecting on Christian ethics in Central Asia, observed: "Unfortunately, people often mistake kindness for weakness." The fear of appearing vulnerable—or losing one's place in a changing social and cultural space—can encourage individuals and communities to be suspicious and exclude others. In many cases, theological justifications appear only later, serving as justification for initial fear reactions. If we look at this scenario through the prism of disputed affiliation, such reactions become clearer: border protection often hides deeper anxiety related to identity and one's place. In other words, the theological division becomes secondary, whereas the national-political tension in society often serves as the foundation of divisions.

However, the Christian tradition suggests a different path. The practice of hospitality has served as an important spiritual discipline for centuries, overcoming fear without the need for compromise. Hospitality does not mean consent and does not require giving up beliefs. On the contrary, it involves creating a space for others—especially where we have influence or responsibility—by opening up the possibility of meeting without coercion and witnessing without hostility. In contexts marked by both confessional diversity and growing nationalism, hospitality can become one of the most compelling and necessary forms of church witness.

The perception of Christianity by those outside the faith is shaped not only by its theological statements, but also by the visible relationships between Christians themselves. In this issue, the article by Stephen B. Kern offers a clear example of this dynamic. By exploring the encounter of Muslim asylum seekers with Germany's diverse Christian landscape, Kern shows how people coming from contexts with internal religious tensions encounter a Christian community that is itself multifaceted. His research raises an important question: will this diversity increase skepticism or, on the contrary, become a bridge to encounter the gospel?

Kern's analysis shows that when Christians belonging to different faith traditions demonstrate mutual respect, cooperation, and shared commitment to Christ, their unity—albeit imperfect—becomes a powerful form of witness in pluralistic societies. In this light, the key question is not so much where the global church stands today, but rather what kind of unity, witness, and fidelity it is moving towards.

Unity Through Belonging: A Grounded Theory of Division in the Mauritian Church

A. K. Amberg

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, April 2026

Abstract

This study constructs a grounded theory that suggests division occurs within the Mauritian Church when believers attempt to reconcile a contested sense of belonging. The study draws upon 30 interviews to uncover how Mauritian Christians experience social loss and institutional invisibility. The interviews suggest that colonial epistemologies exacerbated by foreign influence provide explanatory power to data collected. The article advocates for an adaptive ecclesiology rooted in Mauritian cultural forms and the reimagining of leadership as a dialogical, inclusive practice to foster unity among believers.

Key Words: Mauritius, church unity, contextual theology, grounded theory, religious conversion, colonial mimicry, adaptive ecclesiology, belonging, church leadership, decolonization

Introduction

Christianity in Mauritius has functioned as a tool of colonial power, as well as a cultural movement. But it is currently more divided than ever. Schisms are so frequent one demographer commented, “For a population of 1.3 million, having more than a hundred separate churches and denominations calls for deep reflection” (Phiri et al., 2016).

Local believers agree: “Unity is not yet happening... People have the desire and then the reality of those walls,” said one (U., personal communication (henceforth “pc”) March 30, 2024). “I can see some divisions even if we don’t say it,” said another (Y., pc, March 13, 2024). Sources of division are “not really theological, but more like ways of being spiritual” (C., pc, February 6, 2024), as if Christians are “try[ing] to find what is uncommon... and look at these differences instead of looking at what is common” (Bm., pc, March 13, 2024).

This study begins with a brief history of the island, then proposes a grounded theory to explain the Mauritian Church’s division. It argues that Mauritian Christians experience contested belonging and that their attempts to reconcile this strain are often rooted in inherited colonial epistemologies and result in schisms in local churches. Finally, the study leans on postcolonial theory to support its thesis.

Methodology

This article employed constructivist grounded theory (CGT) to arrive at its thesis. CGT “fits empirical situations and is understandable to sociologists and laymen alike” (Glaser & Strauss, 2006, p. 1), allowing both researcher and subject to mutually engage with theory. The methodology therefore proposes “that both data and analyses are social constructions that reflect what their production entailed... In this view, any analysis is contextually situated in time, place, culture, and situation” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 131). This study’s theory emerged from life experiences of Mauritian Christians, while reflexively acknowledging the interpretive role of its researcher.

Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted. They were semi-structured to elicit exploratory narrative (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 59) and were coded “in-vivo” to stay close to informants’

words (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). When broad categories emerged, formal coding took place and theory was developed based on qualitative saturation (Glaser, 1978, p. 72). The constant comparison method was employed to ensure the theory accurately reflected what Mauritians indicated themselves, and memos were written frequently to aid the researcher in bracketing his own biases (Glaser & Strauss 2006, p. 102).

Additionally, one focus group was held, and an online survey of 125 people was given to provide supporting data through elicited response (Charmaz, 2006, p. 36). Findings were shared with informants to ensure resonance (Charmaz, 2006, p. 183). Demographic information on informants relevant to the study is presented in Table 1 below:

Ethnicity		Broad Denominational Affiliation	
Creole Mauritian	14	Pentecostal	12
Indo Mauritian	12	Catholic	3
Sino Mauritian	4	Other Protestant	15
Gender		Church Role	
Men	18	Pastor/Leader	14
Women	12	Layperson	16

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Informants

History of Mauritian Christianity

Mauritian Christianity is often traced to the nineteenth-century, French Catholic missionary Jacques Laval, affectionately known in Mauritius as *Père Laval*. “Freed slaves in Mauritius were in a very bad situation,” explained one informant. “The life was very not good. And he [Laval] wanted to come here in the colony to be with these black peoples” (I., pc, June 13, 2024). Despite persecution from landlords, Laval was well loved by the people and innovated new forms of liturgy and catechism to meet their needs (Campion, n.d., p. 23).

Roman Catholicism has thus been the dominant expression of Christianity for much of Mauritian history, but Pentecostalism grew explosively in 1968 when Assemblies of God (AOG) missionary Aimé Cizeron arrived. In the midst of an independence movement, Cizeron held healing and deliverance meetings in movie theaters and libraries (Cizeron, 1992, p. 109). Reports of miracles spread quickly, and many conversions to the AOG began.

An informant explained, “Because so many people were being converted, the Hindu community was not happy. And at that time most of the members of Parliament were Hindus... So they just expelled the missionary” (M., pc, January 29, 2024). Since then, AOG has become by far the largest Protestant church in Mauritius but has also seen many groups break ties with the denomination. As another informant said, “Many came out of the Pentecostal church and then actually they became independent. But then afterwards they associated themselves with other churches in other countries.... One example is the LVD—*La Voix de Deliverance*—which is associated with the Full Gospel Church of South Africa” (C., pc, February 6, 2024).

Contested Belonging

A diverse people, Mauritians navigate complex identities. In addition to their Mauritian identity, “everyone has this home community” (C., pc, February 6, 2024) made up of ethnoreligious bonds. According to Patrick Eisenlohr, colonial rulers defined communities racially. In the early twentieth century, however, Indo-Mauritians redefined themselves based on religion (Eisenlohr, 2022, pp. 61-62). Hindus and Muslims could then identify as representatives of an international faith community, restoring a sense of belonging.

One informant explained, “I was a Hindu by birth and very racist... fighting for our community, for our religion” (Q., pc, February 7, 2024). The largest group on the island, Hindus who become Christian give up social privilege: “Here in Mauritius there is the Hindu-dominant culture where sometimes [it can] kind of create issues when you are trying to convert” (S., pc, March 15, 2024). Another noted how Hindu converts become “excluded from society... We had a persecution in the school, in the job, etc.” (P., pc, February 13, 2024).

Hindu-background believers also experience familial tension: “I stopped attending many of the festivities, you know, because of the food sacrificed to idols. It was really hard” (Af., pc, September 15, 2024). Another informant shared, “[My father] didn’t talk to me for many years... I think all of us have to go through that” (Q., pc, February 7, 2024).

The Creole population, however, had no ancestral religion on which to redefine itself, so it remained racially defined (Eisenlohr, 2022, p. 74). Mostly Catholic, Creole Mauritians report a lack of belonging in church: “Like I was part of a community I felt that was lacking in the Catholic Church,” said one informant (At., pc, March, 13, 2024). “I was just like being a Christian in knowledge, but not really being in a church” said another (V., pc, March 1, 2024). Again: “I’m the only one who actually withdrew from Catholic church because I was looking for something more” (Bm., pc, March 13, 2024).

Some associate Catholicism with forced conversion: “They call it *Madras Baptisé* because they worked for white people in their house. So I think those white people made them baptized but then it’s not like immersion in the big water. It’s just the way the Catholics do it” (X., pc, March 12, 2024). Creoles may see their faith only as a “traditional religious background they can follow blindly” (At., pc, March, 13, 2024).

Because Creoles “do not control and own their religious institutions in a way Hindus and Muslims do and are therefore unable to position themselves as a separate religious community in the same way” (Eisenlohr, 2022, p. 66), they experience a lack of belonging. Hindu Mauritians, however, enjoy a privileged place in society, but converting to any form of Christianity is “becoming like Creoles” (Eisenlohr, 2022, p. 74). One informant even described the social ramifications of conversion as a feeling of “being downgraded” (D., pc, December 12, 2025). The phrase *contested belonging* captures both the lack Creoles feel and the loss Hindus feel in the church.

Leadership

When discussing division in the church, Mauritian Christians are quick to bring up pastoral leadership. According to one, “There is no unity in the churches, which is very sad, because it is, to what I understand, the ego of the leaders that are not allowing them to work together” (W., pc, March 13, 2024). “...as I become a leader I forgot where I come from, and I started to criticize

others, saying they are doing wrong and I know better,” admitted one leader (H., pc, December 15, 2025). Many characterize pastors as controlling and motivated by personal gain:

“[Many pastors] take advantage of this and like try to use the name of Jesus for their own personal purpose” (B., pc, October 12, 2025).

“They have complete control over everything that goes on” (E., pc, December 14, 2025).

“The pastor is... the head of everything. He decides for everything” (V., pc, March 1, 2024).

Church leaders sometimes forbid congregants from interaction with other Christians: “When I proposed that, he said, ‘if you do something like that I will write to all the church leaders I know and tell them to boycott you’” (C., pc, October 12, 2025). Another: “I got problems there, because I was also meeting people from other churches, and I got in trouble with the president” (E., pc, December 14, 2025).

Mauritian Christians suggest their leaders are defensive of others “stealing” church members. “[They are] kind of wary, kind of defensive, because they said, okay, we will go there, and they will take all our people, you see, and this is continuing still” (D., pc, December 12, 2025). The size of a congregation and the control a pastor wields over it is connected to social status: “There's some fear that they will lose people, they will be mocked, maybe by other pastors, and they will lose the finances” (E., pc, December 14, 2025). “I think it's jealousy plus pride. ‘I want to be in front of the church and do a show,’ things like that” (H., pc, December 15, 2025). One linked the desire for power with colonial history: “The British came and we were like, ‘Okay, you are here, you are the boss.’ So, [Christians] will be like, ‘Okay, you are here, you are the master’” (C., pc, October 12, 2025).

Research suggests people in postcolonial cultures replicate authoritarian styles of leadership, often with exaggeration:

If subjection appears more intense than it might be, this is because the subjects of the *commandement* [sic] have internalized authoritarian epistemology to the point where they reproduce it themselves in all the minor circumstances of daily life—social networks, cults and secret societies, culinary practices, leisure activities, modes of consumption, styles of dress, rhetorical devices, and the whole political economy of the body (Mbembe, 2001, p. 128).

Foreign Interference

Homi Bhabha calls postcolonial authoritarianism *mimicry*. The Empire, he said, believed others were fundamentally different and should become *civilized* like them. But in being civilized they would cease to be fundamentally different. Therefore colonialism required a mimicry that was “almost alike, but not quite” (Bhabha, 1984, p. 129).

Mimicry takes the form of Western expertise through an “epistemic overhaul” in which “a whole set of knowledges... have been disqualified as inadequate” (Spivak, 1988, p. 25). Indigenous ways of knowing have been “defined by the ‘civilized’ laws of Europe. No ‘native’ institutions [are] recognized” (Mamdani, 1996, p. 16). Mauritian pastors project the appearance of expertise: “From what I've seen, it doesn't really depend on education. It really depends on the character of the person like, his way of communicating. Like you know some person that's really

outgoing, and I've seen that those type of persons would be the most important” (G., pc, December 15, 2025). “Most pastors I know... I won't say education, but intelligence, because it's not actual education. If we have someone logical or who knows how to talk, and how to communicate this is very important” (H., pc, December 15, 2025).

Connections with a foreign institution were mentioned in conjunction with church schisms more frequently than any other element:

“I saw many other people coming from other countries and they are trying to help” (R., pc, March 15, 2024).

“I see that they have a lot of missionaries, a lot of pastors from overseas” (X., pc, March 12, 2024).

“...We had either pastors, mission pastors who came from [a foreign organization], or pastors from South Africa” (U., pc, March 30, 2024).

“A preacher or an apostle from America or Europe coming to Mauritius, and people want to go there” (E., pc, December 14, 2025).

“There's a ministry... they've got a big hotel in Hawaii. I was chosen to go there. They paid everything. All the rich American Christians paid for everything. I mean your travel, your hotel. You're treated as a VIP” (D., pc, December 12, 2025).

In Mauritius, a strong sense of belonging is conferred through connection with foreign expressions of Christianity. One informant explains that it “is more international, which gives like more credibility.... Like for example they have a name, they have the recognition” (C., pc, February 6, 2024).

Division often occurs in the Mauritian church when leaders receive training from foreigners, especially from the West:

I think if a leader went to a [training overseas] that will do something. Maybe the leader will come with a mindset to change things. Putting in the church what he learned in the training and things like that. Because some pastors are a bit insecure about their position some of the time. They don't really welcome other opinions because I think they are scared people would listen to someone else more (G., pc, December 15, 2025).

According to an informant, “When a white man here tells you that you're a big thing, it's this psychological ‘wow’” (D., pc, December 12, 2025). Leaders who receive training from foreign sources gain new expertise and therefore higher status. They become a threat to the current pastor who resorts to authoritarian mimicry, responding harshly, forcing other leaders to leave and start a new church. A portion of the congregation follows, increasing defensiveness of leaders, and a vicious cycle begins.

Culturally Ingrained Models of Division

Gaining a sense of belonging in one's community by influencing a large following to switch allegiances has historical roots in Mauritius. On the plantation, indentured servants developed a role called the *sirdar* (Chazan-Gillig & Ramhota, 2022, p. 22). Sirdars were responsible for recruiting immigrants from their own social networks in India and overseeing them upon return to Mauritius. Landowners disliked the role because sirdars could negotiate better conditions. They

often led workers away from a sugar estate, having made a better deal elsewhere, or managed to purchase a small plot of land themselves (Bates & Carter, 2017, pp. 463-465).

Sirdars are strikingly similar to the way groups of Mauritian Christians migrate away from a church under the leadership of someone with status. Said one informant, “He was attracting more people or maybe he was having a lot of miracles... and then being so young he just said ‘everybody follow me’ so we just followed him blindly” (X., pc, March 12, 2024). According to another: “People create[d] churches by taking all from the Assembles. Yeah, it was not church *planting*. He just changed names” (D., pc, December 12, 2025).

Another culturally ingrained situation became the central topic of a focus group. In a Mauritian family unit, “Most of the time there is some elder who is in charge, you know? Like, if they call the family to dinner, you have to go. It’s not a question. No matter what you have to be there” (Cf., pc, September 15, 2024). This revered elder is called a *gran dimun* in the local language, literally “big person.” In both Creole and Indian families, the *gran dimun* is the most important source of authority, as well as their connection to their community: “I think more than folklore, we just talk about the way our grandparents worked hard so that we would not be poor” (Cf., pc, September 15, 2024). The *gran dimun* has also taken on some religious significance as a kind of syncretism of Hinduism and African indigenous beliefs: “Despite the ongoing trend towards modern Hindu reformism with its global ramifications, ritual practices typical for the time of indenture continue to exist today. These are practices that involve worship of minor deities (*gran dimun*) at trees or through non-anthropomorphic objects such as stones and rock” (Eisenlohr, 2022, p. 63).

When the person identified as *gran dimun* dies, the family’s sense of belonging is disrupted: “What usually happens is, once that respected elder grandparent passes away, the family usually ends up fighting” (C., pc, September 15, 2024). Factions form from within the family and compete over inheritance, property, or some other locus of belonging. This *gran dimun crisis* is widespread enough that one informant’s grandmother expected it to happen upon her death: “She knew before she died this would happen, so she recorded a video before she died, telling the family to please, stay together” (Af., pc, September 15, 2024). Through this lens, the breakup of a Mauritian fellowship can be seen as a church-wide *gran dimun crisis*.

Discussion and Conclusion

As this study has shown, Mauritian Christians experience contested belonging, either as historically marginalized Creoles or as Indo-Mauritians who have lost status. To reconcile this contested sense of belonging, leaders mimic colonial authority and demonstrate Western expertise, while laypeople change allegiances to another leader as a sirdar or *gran dimun*, according to those interviewed. This study now concludes with discussion about how Christian unity may be promoted in Mauritius.

Believers on the island must come together to develop a stronger sense of communal identity, not just as Christians, but as *Mauritian* Christians. Adaptive ecclesiology is one way to achieve communal identity as Mauritian Christians. In his book *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklesia in the Early Jesus Movement*, Ralph Korner analyzes every instance of the word *ekklesia* in the epigraphic record as well as all known Greek and Jewish literary contexts and comes to the conclusion that the early church borrowed its model of meeting from the culture, modifying it to provide a greater sense of group identity (2017, p. 12). Mauritians, too, can reconcile contested belonging by borrowing models of church from their culture rather than from abroad.

Adaptive ecclesiology has already shown to be a fruitful strategy in Mauritius. During the Pentecostal movement, “In the beginning, they were going into those private picture theatres because a lot of people could get into it. But because you rented, it cost a lot of money. So then they went into the houses” (M., pc, January 29, 2024). At that time, church structures were further reimagined for the Mauritian context: “Singing in Creole! We were writing our own songs. And preaching in Creole for the first time” (M., pc, January 29, 2024).

Though foreign models confer social power to Mauritian Christians, many interviewees suggested they would like to see church adapted to the feel of a Mauritian family meeting, centered around good food and music. “How many people get up when we go to church right after the service? There's some tea and coffee, but we've got to stay, at least. It's not ideal, but at least [it is something]” (C., pc, October 12, 2025). Others indicated the feeling of family is what draws them to a church: “It's more like a family to me because we know each other very well” (Y., pc, March 13, 2024).

Theology, too, can become contextualized. Missiological parallelisms are “a literary, rhetorical, and missiological device in which a cultural or religious form mirrors a biblical narrative, image, or idea that subsequently both clarifies what God is doing within a culture and confronts the spiritual distortions within the form” (Amberg & Cooper, 2026, p. 8). Christ as *gran dimun* seems a promising parallel for the Mauritian context.

In this role, Christ is the revered elder of His family, the Church (Eph. 2:19-22 NIV). He must be respected and obeyed (John 14:15 NIV) as He passes on His way of life to us, expecting us to pass it onto others (Matt. 28:18-20 NIV). Though functionally the same as a *gran dimun*, His ontological distinction is preserved by casting Him as the *gran dimun* who never dies. In His resurrection He provides a sense of stability. He is the better *gran dimun* for Mauritian society.

Foreign workers, too, should approach ministry in Mauritius more thoughtfully. Rather than employing Mauritian leaders to implement their organization's approach or sending them abroad for training, they should “[focus] on understanding the peculiarities of a people group with a view to seeing how God is at work in those peculiarities” (Cooper, 2020, p. 88). They should practice missiological theology that is “grounded in God's will and multiplies his worshippers as people see that their story and God's story are the same story” (Cooper, 2020, p. 127).

Finally, leadership in Mauritius must reimagine expertise “not as a tool for governance, but a site of negotiation” (Gauthier, 2025). Leaders should amplify the voices of those around them, bring them into conversation, and facilitate greater collective intelligence (Amberg, 2025). In an online survey on the topic of leadership, 47 out of 125 Mauritian respondents overwhelmingly defined good leadership in terms of listening to those under them. Listed here are just a few of those responses:

“Listen to others and ability to lead a team.”

“A good leader listens and helps.”

“I think a good leader should be a good listener...”

“Someone who... cultivates an open mind to listen and act with standard.”

“One who listens to EVERYBODY, not just the one near him and that goes to ask question of those who don't talk to him.”

“A good leader is a charismatic good listener. They are not the smartest person in the room. They are aware of their people’s strengths and relies on others accordingly.”

Although colonial paradigms of leadership are deeply ingrained, responses like these show Mauritians have a clear idea of the kind of leadership that appeals to them.

This study has shown that the Mauritian Church has struggled to maintain unity because of attempts to reconcile contested belonging through colonial epistemologies. Controlling styles of leadership mimicking qualities of former oppressors, and careless foreign ministries exacerbating the problem by conferring qualities that predispose leaders to break away from churches, are some examples of such attempts. Unity can be promoted through adaptive ecclesiology more at home in Mauritian culture, reinterpreting local expressions of theology through missiological parallelisms, and reimagining leadership as a locus of dialogue.

Mauritius is an island of many cultures and a rich history. It has much to offer the global church through its partnership and unique vision of Christ.

References

- Amberg, A. K. (2025). Success, failure, and the mind of Christ: How collective intelligence turns our losses into victory. *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 36(2): 118-130.
- Amberg, A. K. & Cooper, M. T. (2026). Revisiting contextualization: Missiological parallelism as an alternative. *Global Missiology* January, 23(1): 4-13.
<http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/3038>
- Bates, C. & Carter, M. 2017. Sirdars: Intermediaries in nineteenth-century Indian Ocean indentured labour migration. *Modern Asian Studies* 51(2): 462-84.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26358260>
- Bhabha, Homi. 1984. Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse.” *October* 28 (Spring): 125–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778467>
- Campion, M. (n.d.). *Richer than gold: The story of Jacques Desire Laval, priest and missionary of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost*. Bromley, Kent: The Holy Ghost Fathers.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.
- Cizeron, A., Perru, P. L., & Lebel, A. (1992). *Aimé Cizeron: Pionnier de l’Océan Indien*. Deerfield: Editions VIDA.
- Cooper, M. T. (2020). *Ephesiology: A study of the Ephesian movement*. Littleton: William Carey.
- Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Eisenlohr, P. (2022). From race to religion in a Creole society. *Archives de Sciences Sociales Des Religions* Janvier-mars 2022, no. 197 (April): 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.4000/assr.65973>
- Glaser, B. G. 1978. *Theoretical sensitivity*. Mill Valley, CA: The Sociology Press

- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (2006). *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. New Brunswick, NJ: AldineTransaction. Originally published 1967.
- Korner, R. J. (2017). *The origin and meaning of Ekklesia in the early Jesus movement*. Boston, MA: Brill.
- Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizen and subject: contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the postcolony*. 1st ed. Berkeley: University of California Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppkxs>
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. London: Macmillan.

Bridges or Roadblocks? Islamic Plurality and Tension in Juxtaposition to Christian Plurality and Unity in Germany

Steven B. Kern

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, April 2026

Abstract

Animosity within Islam between people groups and sects is often intense. Indeed, some have fled their homeland seeking asylum as a direct result of the opposition they experienced. For many, their flight as asylum seekers has brought them to Germany. Meanwhile, Germany is a country with a diverse Christian community. Although historically marked by tension among the Christian groups, there have been, in recent years, significant attempts to pursue unity. This article seeks to identify the opportunities afforded diverse Christ followers in Germany as they build bridges to one another and unify around the person of Christ in engaging Muslims with the gospel.

Key Words: Muslim evangelism, diaspora ministry, ecumenism, Christian unity, Germany, Europe

Introduction

Twelve men gathered around our lunch table that afternoon in Heilbronn, Germany. Beyond their gender, these men shared only a handful of things in common: their flight from their home country in pursuit of asylum, their ability to speak Arabic, and their willingness to gather to read about the claims of Christ from the Injil. Apart from those commonalities, it seemed that we parted ways on different levels.

Our passports depicted diverse nationalities including Syria, Iraq, and (for me) the United States.

The mother-tongues of those at the table represented a wide spectrum. Although they all were able to speak Arabic, it was not, in every instance, their native language. (I was the exception here, as I only “speak Arabic” with the help of AI tools like Google Translate.) Arabic, Kurdish, Yezidi, and English were the mother tongues.

Religious backgrounds were also like a painter’s palette including Islam, Yezidi, and Christianity. Different shades of color were also present as, among the Muslims, there were those of Sunni and of Shia background. Among the Christians present, there were Orthodox and Evangelical.

On any given day in another context, each of us could have found ethnic or religious reasons to distance ourselves from the others—if not quarrel with or even persecute them. And these religious tensions are not only Christian with Muslim and vice versa. Differences between sectarian groups within Islam and branches of faith within Christianity have created their own conflicts. This paper seeks to briefly describe the historic tensions created by this pluralism and to propose a way forward in seeing Muslims embrace Christ in a multifaceted Christian context.

Islamic Tensions in Plurality

As illustrated in the opening story, human tendency toward categorization can be both constructive and inadequate. *Arab-speakers*, for example, points to an important shared ability but ignores some

significant differences among the men gathered. Similarly, *Muslim* refers to a common religious foundation but overlooks the value a person ascribes to their faith or the sectarian orientation of their faith. What, then, are some of the important points of unity and distinctions of plurality?

Ethnic and Inter-religious Tensions

While ethnic tensions within Islam are not the primary focus of this article, at least one recent example merits a brief mention (note that even here, the faith-related tentacles are impossible to separate). Kurds have long been the target of attack of many other ethnic groups in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. Recent conflict in Aleppo between Kurdish fighters and the Syrian army stems, at least in part, from these ethnic tensions (Pomeroy, 2026).

Some of the faith-related tensions between religious groups are, for the reader, well known, while others are likely less familiar. Christian/Islamic conflict likely belongs to the former, while the conflict between Islam and Yezidi is perhaps less well known—but no less serious. The most dramatic and bloody demonstration of this hostility came in August of 2014 when Sunni fundamentalists carried out a genocide of more than 5000 Yezidis (Stoker, 2025, pp. 31, 32).

But conflict and tension are not limited to the ethnic and broad stroke religious groups, be they Christians, Yezidis, or Muslims. Friction *within* the multifaceted Islamic and Christian faiths have surfaced repeatedly throughout history. This article addresses how, out of these inner-religious roadblocks, bridges can be built for the sake of the gospel.

Islamic Unity

What are, first of all, the unifying and isolating dimensions of Islam? The four holy books, five pillars, and six articles of faith represent elements universally embraced by Muslims worldwide. Muslims generally unite in embracing the Tawrad, Zabur, Injil, and Quran as holy books given by God. Among these, only the Quran is deemed unadulterated and authoritative in its current form.

Similarly, all Muslims embrace the five pillars. These include the witness of faith that acknowledges the oneness of God and Muhamad as His prophet. Muslims also rally around the second pillar, compulsory prayer to be expressed five times daily. Charitable gifts for the needy represent a third pillar valued by Muslims. Fasting during daylight hours of the month of Ramadan is a fourth pillar. Finally, the fifth pillar is a pilgrimage to Mecca for all who are able to make the journey (Edgar, 2002).

The six articles of Islamic faith provide yet another rallying point for Muslims. These include common beliefs around their doctrines of God, Angels, Scriptures, the Prophets, Future Life, and Divine Decree. When viewed only in terms of doctrinal titles, it might seem that Christianity holds much in common with Islam. The nuanced Islamic perspectives influenced by the Quran, the Hadith, and tradition merit a closer examination (The Six Pillars of Faith and Other Islamic Beliefs, 2006).

Islamic Plurality

Despite the commonalities within Islam, the sectarian differences are significant. Figure 1 graphically portrays the sects and their relationship to the two major Islamic branches: Sunni and Shia.

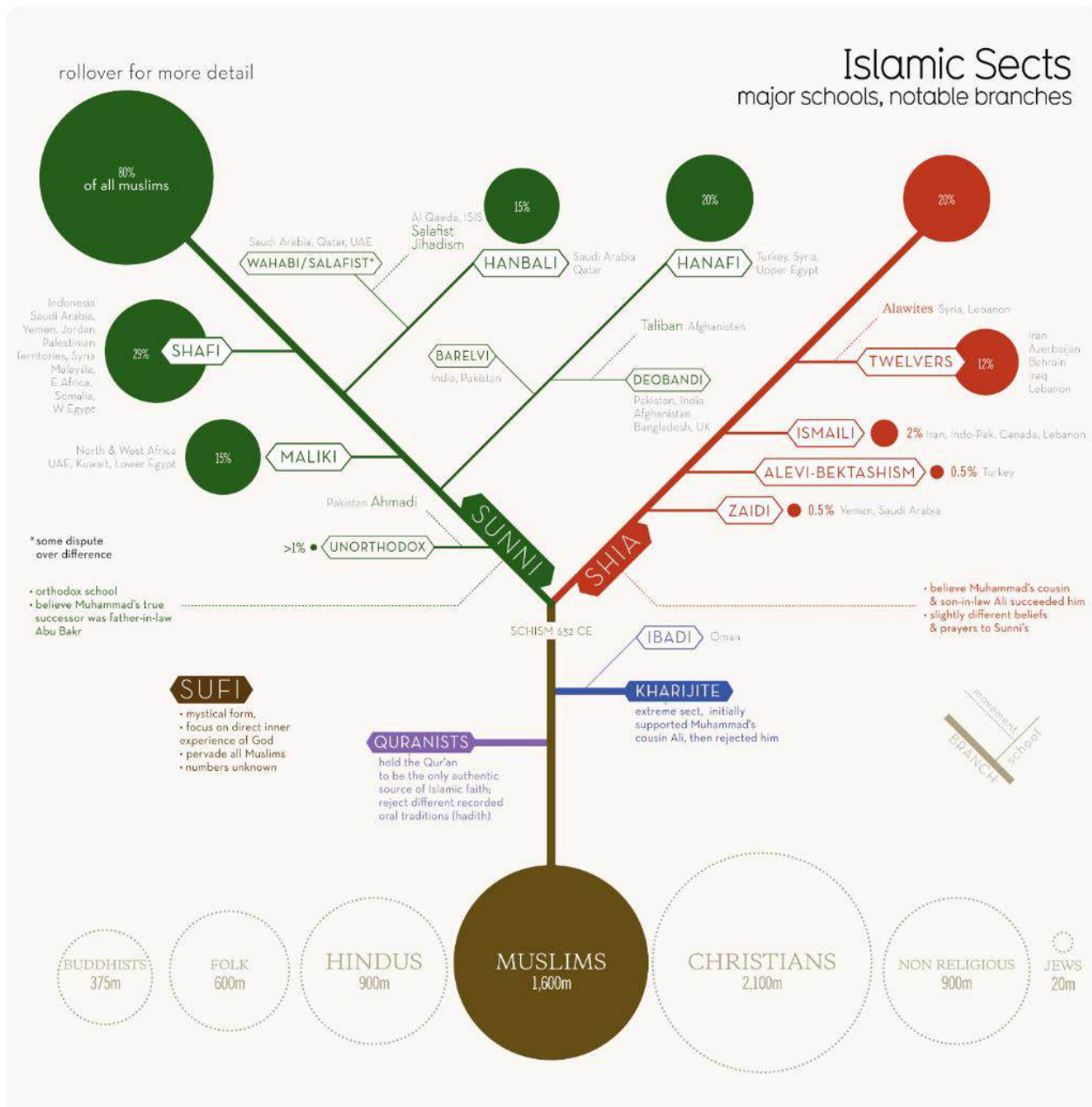


Figure 1: Islamic Sects: Major Schools, Notable Branches (Islamic Sects: major schools, notable branches, 2026)

Islamic Tension

Sunni and Shia distinguish themselves primarily in their recognition of different Muslim leaders after the death of Muhammad. Sunnis recognize Muhammad’s father-in-law, Abu Bakr. For Shias, Muhammad’s son-in-law, Ali, is deemed his successor (Abdulmajid, 2022, pp. 13, 14). Within these two branches are other major schools that distinguish themselves, in part geographically. But the differences within Shi’ism are also rooted in such beliefs as the number and identity of those with spiritual authority in the wake of Mohamed’s passing, the group’s military and territorial focus, and the symbolic vs. literal nature of Islam (Abdulmajid, 2022, p. 17).

Animosity between Sunni and Shia, and well as within each among their respective schools, is real. More than a difference of opinion over their founding fathers, they are also separated by ascribed terms of “orthodox” (Sunni self-perception) and “heterodox or even heretical” (Sunni perception of Shia Muslims) (Abdulmajid, 2022, p. 18). While these terms and historical differences are not often discussed in common conversations, the resultant and historical inferences of right/wrong, superiority/inferiority, or even “infidel”/devout (Holtmann, 2014, p. 144) fuels sectarian tensions. These tensions have contributed to the spreading of Arab-Springs-type conflicts in countries like Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. They have also played a key role in the influence of extremist Hezbollah and Houthi groups. Conflict has also arisen out of Iran’s vision for spreading Shia ideology in the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf region (Rizki, 2024).

But the tensions in these countries are not exclusively sectarian. Recent demonstrations (January 2026) in Iran serve as a case in point. Despite Iran’s relatively monolithic identity as a Shia nation, unrest attracted the world’s attention. (Iran is not only “Shi-ite” in terms of its majority religion, but also in that the regime identifies itself as an enforcer of the faith.) TIME magazine author Karl Vick points to the simmering undercurrent of “long-standing anger over social restrictions enforced by the state, including strict rules governing dress and personal behavior.” This simmer caused by oppression was brought to a boil as Iran’s economy went into a “free fall” on December 28, 2025 (Vick, 2026). [The more recent military attacks by the US and Israel, and Iran’s counterattacks, add to an ever-changing situation. – ed.]

Islamic Flight

Migration of any kind is typically prompted by various push and pull factors. These vary according to individual and type of migration (e.g., employment, education, war, retirement). However, asylum applicants share, in theory, common push and pull factors. The push factor is a sense that they are at “risk of persecution” or that their “life or liberty is placed in jeopardy.” At the same time, they are “pulled” by the desire to be granted protection from these dangers in the form of asylum. In Germany, the Office of Migration and Refugees assesses the validity of each application (The Stages of the Asylum Process, 2026).

With many caught in the crosshairs or crossfire of ethnic tensions, sectarian conflicts, and oppressive conditions, people by the thousands have fled to countries like Germany. In 2023 alone, of the roughly 350,000 asylum seekers coming to Germany more than 78% (275,000) were Muslim (Distribution of asylum applicants in Germany in 2023, by religion, 2025). Moreover, between 2013 and 2019 there were more than 1.4 million Muslim applicants between 2013 and 2019 (Das Bundesamt in Zahlen, 2020, p. 13); (Maddox, 2026, p. 1).

The German Christian Landscape

Despite frequent references to “secular Europe,” Germany has 47.5% Christian religious affiliation (including Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and “other Christians”). Given Germany’s history as the birthplace of the Reformation, one might assume that the religious landscape is a virtual monolith dominated by a Lutheran majority. With grievances with the Catholic Church over topics such as the payment of indulgences, Martin Luther and others faced great opposition in the sixteenth century. Since then, the Lutheran Church (“evangelische Kirche”) has indeed grown to be an influential church. Today, however, the number of Lutheran adherents is slightly lower than its Catholic counterparts. Together, these two faith convictions comprise an estimated 45% of the Germany population. Their rich heritage in Germany have made them the dominant Christian

organizations. Meanwhile, the Orthodox Church and other “free churches” (distinguished by their separation from the state, doctrinal freedom, and the voluntary funding) represent 2.5% of the population, as indicated in Figure 2 below:

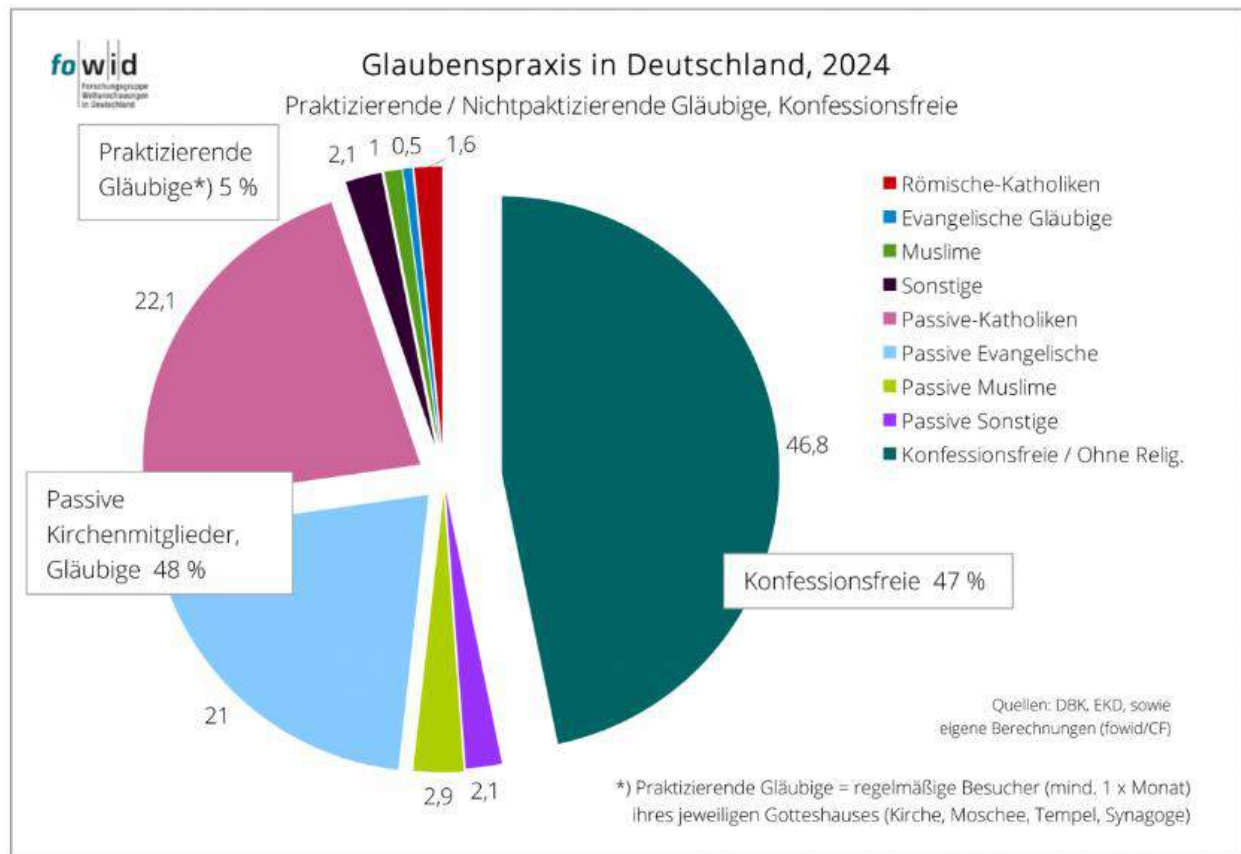


Figure 2: Religious Affiliation and Faith Practice in Germany 2024 (Religionszugehörigkeit 2024, 2025)

Declining State Church Participation

Although nearly half of Germans were members of the Catholic and Lutheran Churches in 2024, these numbers have seen a steep decline over the past two decades. In 1992, 57.0 million Germans (70.4% of the population) were members of these two churches. Meanwhile, research reports issued in 2023 indicated a combined membership of 38.9 million Germans (46.0% of the population) (Entwicklung der Kirchenmitglieder 1992-2023, 2024). Many of those leaving the state church are choosing not to realign with a specific religion. Thus, the number of “nones” has seen a significant increase.

Of course, affiliation is not necessarily indicative of sincere personal faith. As illustrated in Figure 2 above, the Research Group for World Perspective in Germany (Forschungsgruppe Weltanschauungen in Deutschland) describe 5% of faith adherents practicing their faith in terms of attending at least one time per month their respective houses of worship. Meanwhile, Joshua Project describes the land of the Reformation as being only 2.1% evangelical (Country: Germany, 2026). Joshua Project defines “evangelical” as “followers of Christ who generally emphasize:

- The Lord Jesus Christ as the sole source of salvation through faith in Him.
- Personal faith and conversion with regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

- A recognition of the inspired Word of God as the only basis for faith and living.
- Commitment to Biblical preaching and evangelism that brings others to faith in Christ.”
(Evangelical, 2026)

Perhaps “secular Europe” (at least as represented by Germany) is an accurate assessment after all.

A Significant Orthodox contingency

Tracing its roots to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD (Council of Chalcedon, 2025), the Orthodox Church in Germany claims nearly 4 million adherents, representing 2.5% of the population (Religionszugehörigkeiten 2024, 2025). Within Germany’s Orthodox community there are both Oriental and Eastern Orthodox churches.

A Growing Free Church Minority

Christian churches outside of the Catholic and Lutheran churches are typically referred to as “free churches,” because of their status independent of the state. Participation in these churches represents a meager 1.5% of German population. Included in this number are (among others) Baptist, Mennonite, Brethren, and a variety of charismatic churches (Religionszugehörigkeiten 2024, 2025). Their growth, slow as it has been, is often the result of evangelistic efforts and engagement of those disenchanting with and leaving the state church.

Tension and Conflict

One dare not sugarcoat the realities of tensions and even conflict within Germany’s increasingly diverse Christian church. As Gutman points out, Europe’s Thirty Years’ War in the first half of the seventeenth century traces its roots, at least in part, to frictions resulting from the establishment and growth of the Reformation (Gutman, 1988, pp. 754, 755). It is difficult to calculate the loss of life resulting from this war. Some have estimated roughly six million casualties as a direct result of war, hunger, and plague during that timeframe (Outram, 2001, pp. 152, 153). Although tensions would continue through the centuries ahead, Catholic and Lutheran churches experience a peaceful coexistence today.

The differences between evangelical adherents and their orthodox counterparts have caused these groups to question the orthodoxy of the other’s faith. Are the Orthodox misguided people to be evangelized or brothers and sisters in the faith to be embraced? Are Evangelicals sincere people, who have erred from the apostolic faith and that of the church fathers? Questions like these have caused tensions over the years.

With the rise of an increasing number of free (non-state) churches in Germany in the 1900’s, misunderstandings and tensions between the Evangelicals and Lutherans were also present. Bauer outlines the roots of this conflict in detail (Bauer, 2012). As an Evangelical in a free church in Germany in the early 1990’s, the author personally witnessed (and unfortunately participated in) this polemic, whereby both groups viewed each other with suspicion.

As one can see, then, the Christian landscape in Germany is diverse. There are significant differences in theology and expression. Tensions between these groups have found their historic highs in both recent and not so recent history. Nevertheless, global and local attempts to bridge the differences for the sake of the gospel are noteworthy.

Pursuit of Christian Unity

In an attempt to foster understanding between Evangelicals and Orthodox, the Lausanne Movement launched the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative (LOI) in 2010 (Initiatives: Lausanne Orthodox Initiative, 2026). The LOI strives “towards mutual respect, support and cooperation in the spirit of our Lord’s prayer for His Church in the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John.” This initiative defines itself as “a movement of Orthodox and Evangelical Christians who wish to respect each other’s beliefs, learn from each other, and support one another as we each obey the call to share God’s mission” (Lausanne Orthodox Initiative, 2026).

Similarly, the “evangelische Allianz Deutschland” (Evangelical Alliance Germany) seeks to reach across denominational boundaries and pursue unity among churches and Christian organizations (especially Lutheran and various evangelical, free churches). This alliance boasts of being the longest-standing association of Evangelicals (Geschichte der Evangelischen Allianz, n.d.). Together, this voluntary network of churches desires to provide “a network for unity, shared prayer, shared faith, shared witnessing of the Gospel, shared pronouncements on socially relevant issues, and taking responsibility in our world based on our shared faith” (Selbstverständnis, n.d.).

The “Arbeitsgemeinschaft christlicher Kirchen in Deutschland” (ACK: “Working Fellowship of Christian Churches in German”) is a voluntary ecumenical network of churches. These churches seek to “travel together along the path towards visible unity of the church” (Eastill, 2025) (Original: “Wir gehen zusammen auf dem Weg zur sichtbaren Einheit der Kirche...”).

Specifically in the city of Heilbronn (where the author lives), a local composite of spiritual leaders from both state and free churches has formed. “Gemeinsam for Heilbronn” (“Together for Heilbronn”) provides a context for the free flow of information and cooperative prayer for the individual churches and their collective impact in the city. In addition to their monthly meetings as leaders, the group plans and executes two annual prayer emphases and an annual “Serve the City” event, all of which incorporate congregants from the respective local churches in their diversity.

In summary, while the differences among Christians are not insignificant, the broad collective efforts to acknowledge, maintain, and pursue Christian unity (Eph. 4:3) are a witness to the origin of Christ from the Father and His love for all people (Jn. 17:20-23). Of course, the willingness to cooperate with the ecumenical, evangelical, and local efforts is an individual decision. For some, the risks seem too great. In extreme cases, the polemic banter through social media, written materials, and debate emphasizes differences and disunity. But in other instances, what is held in common far outweighs the differences and minimizes the risks. In the end, however, it is the perception among Muslims about Christianity as a religion in conflict or a unified faith that may either enhance or diminish their perspective of Christianity. Do they, based on limited or vast information and impressions, have a favorable or unfavorable assessment of Christianity? How does this perception contribute to their movement towards or away from Christ?

Understanding Muslim Conversion

Ultimately, spiritual new birth among Muslims (as with all people) is a work of the Spirit of God (Jn. 3:5-8; Tit. 3:5). From a human vantage point, researchers like Dr. Reinhold Strähler have explored some of the common contributors to Muslim conversion. In his book *Einfach und komplex zugleich: Konversionsprozesse und ihre Beurteilung (Simple and Complicated at the Same Time: Conversion Processes and Their Assessment)*, Strähler points out factors contributing to Muslim conversion. Based on his social science research, he describes both cognitive and

affective elements, which play a significant part as Muslims come to faith in Christ as Savior (Strähler, Einfach und komplex zugleich: Konversionsprozesse und ihre Beurteilung, 2021).

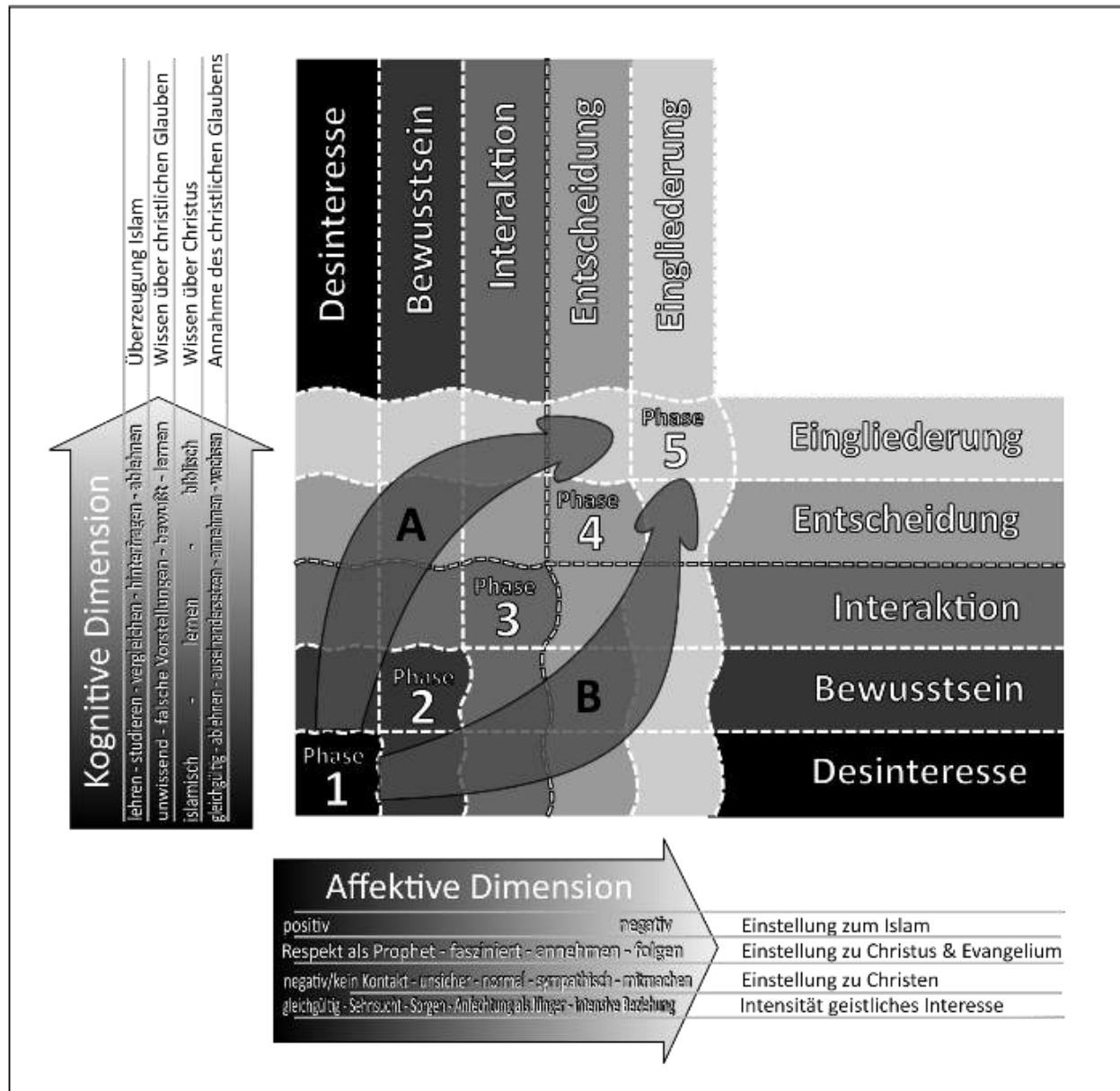


Figure 3: Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Muslim Conversion (Strähler, Einfach und komplex: Konversionsprozesse verstehen Konvertiten begleiten, 2023)

Figure 3 (albeit in German) outlines a Muslim's journey to faith from disinterest (*Desinteresse*) to consciousness (*Bewusstsein*) to interaction (*Interaktion*) to decision (*Entscheidung*) and ultimately to inclusion (*Eingliederung*). While for some the journey may be either predominantly cognitive or affective, it would be wrong to conclude that, for either, the journey is totally devoid of aspects of both.

For the purpose of this article, Strähler's description of the affective elements are particularly noteworthy. The converts' affective responses were influenced by positive and negative contacts

and impressions. Specifically, their attitude towards Islam (*Einstellung zu Islam*), Christ and the gospel (*Einstellung zu Christus & Evangelium*), and toward Christians (*Einstellung zu Christen*) were key (see bottom right of Figure 3 above).

Conclusion

Islam is defined as a “religion of submission.” As a word, “Islam” is also closely related to the Arabic term for “peace” (*salaam*). As such, some also describe the Muslim faith as a “religion of peace.” History, both distant and recent, places that second definition in question. Despite the aspects held in common by all Muslims, Islam’s plurality is not inconsequential. The differences within the different sects of Islam have led to verbal accusations and attacks. Much more, the conflict has led to persecution (including physical) of sectarian groups by fellow Muslims. Over the last 15 years, this cross-sectarian persecution and even oppression of fellow Shias or Sunnis within Islamic countries have resulted in tension, bloodshed, and personal flight whereby Muslims fled in pursuit of asylum. With this tainted backdrop, hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers now find themselves in countries like Germany.

An exploration of Christianity within Germany is also replete with its own diversity. Not unlike Islam, history also reports Christianity’s own internal conflicts that have manifested themselves in arguments, loss of life, and personal flight. Recent history, however, reveals more amicable discussions of differences and a more intentional pursuit of unity around the elements held in common by the respective Christian groups.

Given these realities of Islamic internal conflict and Christianity’s pursuit of peace and unity (nuanced and qualified as both sets of realities are), how can followers of Christ in Germany best engage the Islamic community (especially those seeking asylum)?

First, Christians can help Muslims applying for asylum face the internal tensions within Islam. For some, this might mean raising their sense of awareness (Strähler’s “consciousness”) of the root causes for their flight. Of course, polemicists have long sought to address these Islamic contradictions and points of disunity. But not every follower of Christ is gifted or equipped to engage in such debate. For those who have fled persecution in pursuit of asylum, there is also often a traumatic element. Such pain points to the validity of the use of a gentler conversational approach in the context of relationship.

With many Muslims, little must be done to prompt their personal recognition of Islam’s internal conflicts. They have not only experienced them but are keenly aware of them. This awareness can drive them (among other things) towards nominal Islamic faith, towards atheism, or towards gospel curiosity. Although anecdotal and deserving of further research, the author’s own experience confirms this. The majority of Muslim asylum seekers he encounters in Germany are already nominal in their faith at best. And of those, in witnessing conversions from Islam to Christianity over the past four years, every individual had experienced often unspeakable horrors in the name of their former religion. These experiences led to an abandonment of their faith and, later, to commitment to Christ.

Followers of Jesus must, then, find sensitive ways of enabling asylum-seeking Muslims identify the internal tensions within Islam.

Second, since this approach of pointing asylum seeking Muslims toward Islamic conflict and tension is insufficient without the corresponding good news of Christ, Christians must also share

the gospel. This powerful message (Rom. 1:16) is further validated when Christian unity is its backdrop. In the midst of the global church's plurality, she must rediscover her unity.

Although once again anecdotal, the author's own experience points to the value of gospel witness attested by Christian unity. He works in a team consisting of free and state church members, of charismatics and cessationists. Reasons for polarization are manifold. Even so, while the team has now always worked perfectly and without internal challenges, rallying around their common passion for the message of the crucified, buried, resurrected, and ascended Savior, they have witnessed dozens of Muslims confess Christ over the course of more than two decades.

Similarly, theological and practical differences between groups in the broad Christian community are of importance and should not be washed away in a stream of insignificance. Discussion (even lively debate) about differences is merited. Still, Christ followers must take seriously the command of Paul in Ephesians 4:3: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." By portraying and pursuing the peace that is inherent to our union in one body, Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, and Father (Eph. 4:4-6), the gravity of the Christian message intensifies.

Further Research

Reinhold Strähler's research (referenced earlier) drawing attention to the cognitive and affective elements of Muslim conversion in asylum settings is incredibly insightful. Still, further research on the affective elements is merited. Such research should aid the development of Christians' practical evangelistic skills. Christ's witnesses should also grow in their capacities to sensitively speak to disillusionment with Islam and to pursue and demonstrate greater unity.

References

- Abdulmajid, A. (2022, June 4). Islam and sectarianism: The major split and its manifestations. *Journal of Human Insights*, 6(2), 11-23. Retrieved January 24, 2026, from https://kuleuven.limo.libis.be/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=lirias4133076&context=SearchWebhook&vid=32KUL_KUL:Lirias&search_scope=lirias_profile&adaptor=SearchWebhook&ab=LIRIAS&query=any,contains,LIRIAS4133076&offset=0
- Bauer, G. (2012). *Evangelikale Bewegung und evangelische Kirche in Deutschland: Geschichte eines Grundsatzkonflikts (1945 bis 1989)*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht Verlage.
- Council of Chalcedon*. (2025, July 13). Retrieved January 25, 2026, from Orthodox Path: <https://www.orthodoxpath.org/catechisms-and-articles/council-of-chalcedon-451ad/>
- Country: Germany*. (2026). Retrieved January 2025, 2026, from Joshua Project: <https://www.joshuaproject.net/countries/GM>
- (2020). *Das Bundesamt in Zahlen*. Nürnberg: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge. Retrieved February 1, 2026, from https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Statistik/BundesamtinZahlen/bundesamt-in-zahlen-2019.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=6

- Distribution of asylum applicants in Germany in 2023, by religion.* (2025, November 29). Retrieved February 1, 2026, from Statista: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1107977/asylum-applicants-by-religion/?srsltid=AfmBOoomVo_RIKdwMzHsZ5FOKJVUJ_Fwmg5Y4EksLz3DIJTgKoKQgieK
- Eastill, C. (2025). *Über uns: Die Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen*. Retrieved January 29, 2026, from AKC Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen in Deutschland: <https://www.oekumene-ack.de/ueber-uns>
- Edgar, S. (2002). The Five Pillars of Islam in the Hadith. *Studia Antiqua*, 2(1), 74-79. Retrieved January 24, 2026, from <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol2/iss1/9/>
- Entwicklung der Kirchenmitglieder 1992-2023.* (2024, July 2). Retrieved January 25, 2026, from Forschungsgruppe Weltanschauungen in Deutschland: <https://fowid.de/meldung/entwicklung-kirchenmitglieder-1992-2023>
- Evangelical.* (2026). Retrieved January 25, 2026, from Joshua Project: <https://www.joshuaproject.net/help/definitions#evangelical>
- Geschichte der Evangelischen Allianz.* (n.d.). Retrieved January 27, 2026, from Evangelische Allianz Deutschland: <https://www.ead.de/ueber-uns/geschichte/>
- Gutman, M. P. (1988). The origins of the Thirty Years' War. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XVIII(4), 749-770.
- Holtmann, P. (2014, February). A primer to the Sunni-Shia conflict. *Perspectives on Terrorism*(1), 142-145. Retrieved January 25, 2026, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297127?seq=1>
- Initiatives: Lausanne Orthodox Initiative.* (2026). Retrieved January 27, 2026, from Lausanne Movement: <https://lausanne.org/network/lausanne-orthodox-initiative#:~:text=The%20Lausanne%2DOrthodox%20Initiative%20was,to%20share%20in%20God's%20mission.>
- Islamic Sects: major schools, notable branches.* (2026). Retrieved January 24, 2026, from Information is Beautiful: <https://informationisbeautiful.net/visualizations/islamic-sects-schools-branches-movements/>
- Lausanne Orthodox Initiative.* (2026). Retrieved January 27, 2026, from Lausanne Orthodox Initiative: <https://www.loimission.net/>
- Maddox, A. (2026). *BAMF Kurzanalyse: Religionszugehörigkeit und religiöse Alltagspraxis.* Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge. Retrieved February 1, 2026, from https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Forschung/Kurzanalysen/kurzanalyse1-2025-religionszugehoerigkeit-gefluechtete.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=10

- Number of total asylum applications in Germany from 2015 to 2025.* (2026, January 21). Retrieved February 1, 2026, from Statista: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1107881/asylum-applications-total-germany/>
- Outram, Q. (2001). The socio-economic relations of warfare and the military mortality crisis of the Thirty Years' War. *Medical History*, 45, 151-184. Retrieved January 25, 2026, from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/CBBC1BC21DA83559DBDBEC1C3421A35B/S0025727300067703a.pdf/the-socio-economic-relations-of-warfare-and-the-military-mortality-crises-of-the-thirty-years-war.pdf>
- Pomeroy, G. (2026, January 7). *Aleppo: Thousands flee clashes between Syrian government and Kurdish fighters.* Retrieved from BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn0y1pnq00qo>
- Religionszugehörigkeit 2024.* (2025, April 2). Retrieved February 1, 2026, from Forschungsgruppe Weltanschauungen in Deutschland: <https://fowid.de/meldung/religionszugehoerigkeiten-2024>
- Religionszugehörigkeiten 2024.* (2025, April 2). Retrieved January 25, 2026, from Forschungsgruppe Weltanschauungen in Deutschland: <https://fowid.de/meldung/religionszugehoerigkeiten-2024>
- Rizki, A. M. (2024). Contemporary Sunni-Shia dynamics: Conflict or competition? *Journal of Social Humanities Studies*, 1(1), 9-17. Retrieved January 25, 2026, from <https://www.mabadiiqtishada.org/index.php/SocioHumania/article/view/7/7>
- Selbstverständnis.* (n.d.). Retrieved January 27, 2026, from Evangelische Allianz Deutschland: <https://www.ead.de/ueber-uns/auftrag-berufung/>
- Stoker, S. (2025). An introduction to the Nations International Criminal Tribunal: The case of the Yezidi people. *Fourth World Journal*, 25(1), 29-44. Retrieved January 24, 2026, from <https://fwj.cwis.org/index.php/fwj/article/view/202/193>
- Strähler, R. (2021). *Einfach und komplex zugleich: Konversionsprozesse und ihre Beurteilung.* Leipzig, Germany: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.
- Strähler, R. (2023, January 28). Einfach und komplex: Konversionsprozesse verstehen Konvertiten begleiten.
- The six Pillars of Faith and other Islamic beliefs.* (2006). Retrieved January 24, 2026, from The Religion of Islam: <https://www.islamreligion.com/category/50/six-pillars-of-faith-and-other-islamic-beliefs>
- The stages of the asylum process.* (2026). Retrieved February 1, 2026, from Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge:

<https://www.bamf.de/EN/Themen/AsylFluechtlingsschutz/AblaufAsylverfahrens/ablaufasylverfahrens-node.html>

Vick, K. (2026, January 13). *What's happening in Iran right now, explained*. Retrieved January 25, 2026, from Time: <https://time.com/7345555/iran-protests-deaths-us-trump-israel/>

***Bayanihan* as a Gospel Mission Approach:
Strengthening Intentional Communities and Acts of Service
to Share Christ with Filipino Communities**

Angelo Atienza and Dave Johnson¹

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, April 2026

Abstract

This article will explore how the *Bayanihan* principle, which means working together in harmony for the individual or common good, although changing in its expression remains deeply rooted in Filipino culture. The authors contend that *Bayanihan* can be used to share the message of Christ meaningfully with Filipinos in both urban and rural settings through intentional community-building and engaging in acts of service, in both physical and online communities.

Key Words: *Bayanihan*, social harmony, working together, Philippines, gospel

Introduction

The concept of *Bayanihan*, which means working together in social harmony, is deeply rooted in Filipino culture, and focuses on communal needs. The culture of *Bayanihan* provides an effective strategy for sharing the gospel via acts of service, relationship-building, and intentional community engagement. As Melba Maggay (2015, p. 42) observes, engaging local cultural narratives enhances the relevance of evangelistic efforts, making the Gospel more accessible and impactful in specific contexts.

Furthermore, the challenges of modern Filipino life, including urbanization, economic struggles, and the rise of digital connectivity, have altered the dynamics of relationships and community involvement. While traditional expressions of *Bayanihan*, such as building or transporting small, bamboo homes, have diminished in some settings, its core principles remain relevant, particularly in gospel missions. A *Bayanihan*-inspired approach can address contemporary needs by fostering unity, compassion, and shared purpose within faith communities. Through acts of service, organizing community outreach programs, or providing spiritual and practical support, believers can reflect Christ's love and demonstrate the transformative power of the gospel.

Integrating *Bayanihan* into gospel missions allows for a culturally resonant approach to outreach. By fostering collective service and cultivating relationships, this model encourages sustainable faith communities that reflect Christ's love in both word and deed (York, 2013, p. 57). Such an approach honors the cultural identity of Filipinos while embodying the gospel's transformative message.

Thesis Statement

This article will demonstrate that the *Bayanihan* principle, although changing in its expression, remains deeply rooted in Filipino culture, and can be used to share the message of Christ meaningfully with Filipinos through intentional community-building and engaging in acts of service, in both physical and online communities.

Background

Bayanihan has evolved from rural to modern contexts, reflecting Filipinos' resilience and communal spirit in challenging times. It can be a powerful tool for creating collective identity in both rural and urban contexts, reflecting the Filipinos' resilience and communal spirit.

The *Bayanihan* principle exemplifies communal cooperation, and mutual support (Maggay, 2015, p. 45). In the context of gospel missions, the *Bayanihan* principle may embody the biblical teachings on communal fellowship, as demonstrated by the early church's model of resource sharing and collective worship outlined in Acts 2:42–47 (Bosch, 2011, pp. 153-54). This cultural framework provides a profound foundation for conveying the message of Christ meaningfully (Maggay, 2015, p. 49).

Pentecostal missions has long embraced holistic ministry approaches that address both spiritual and practical needs (Anderson, 2014, p. 67). These efforts reflect the *Bayanihan* spirit, which prioritizes the well-being of and mutual aid to others. By adopting a *Bayanihan*-inspired framework, gospel missions can foster deeper connections within Filipino communities, ensuring that the message of Christ is contextualized, resonating with their cultural ethos.

The challenges posed by urbanization and digital life have reshaped traditional expressions of *Bayanihan*. Despite these changes, the core values of solidarity and service remain vital. Applying the *Bayanihan* principle to gospel missions today requires integrating both face-to-face and digital strategies to foster community and strengthen relationships. As seen in the early Christian church, the emphasis on mutual support and unity provides a biblical model for such approaches (Keener, 2012, p. 505). Contextualizing missions within the *Bayanihan* framework is particularly valuable for fostering meaningful connections with Filipino communities (Stetzer, 2006, p. 112). This approach allows for engaging in culturally and spiritually consistent ways, emphasizing unity, mutual support, and alignment with the community.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine the *Bayanihan* principle as a culturally contextualized framework for gospel missions, emphasizing its potential to promote intentional community-building, acts of service, and authentic relationships within Filipino communities.

This research also aims to address the challenges presented by modern Filipino life. As traditional expressions of *Bayanihan* evolve in contemporary settings, the study seeks to explore how its core values can be preserved and applied in both physical and digital mission contexts (York, 2013, p. 35).

This contextualized *Bayanihan* concept aligns closely with the biblical mandate to love one's neighbor and bear one another's burdens, as seen in Galatians 6:2 (Maggay, 2015, p. 44). Theologically, the *Bayanihan* principle reflects the values embodied in the early Christian church, where believers shared their possessions, met communal needs, and lived in unity (Acts 2:42–47). In the same way, integrating *Bayanihan* into gospel missions provides a practical expression of faith, emphasizing relational ministry and service as central elements of evangelism (Keener, 2012, p. 506). Such an approach resonates deeply with Filipino communities, where collective well-being is prioritized over individual achievements. This can create authentic connections that open hearts to the transformative message of Christ (York, 2013, p. 42).

The concept also acknowledges the evolving nature of *Bayanihan* in contemporary Filipino society, where traditional communal practices have been altered in several ways:

1. *Decline of Close-Knit Communities*: Urbanization has led to the breakdown of tight-knit rural communities as families move to cities, which has resulted in more individualistic lifestyles.
2. *Shift from Physical to Virtual Cooperation*: In the digital age, collaboration has shifted to virtual platforms, with online crowdfunding, community forums, and social media initiatives becoming modern expressions of collective support.

Daniel Slotta (2025) notes:

The constant need for social interaction, particularly in a nation of over 7,000 islands and millions of family members working overseas, made social networking sites popular among Filipino internet users. In February 2025, the Philippines came second to Singapore when it comes to social media penetration rates in Southeast Asia. . . . These platforms offer opportunities to connect with friends and family, find content, be updated with current events, discover brands, and make online purchases.

3. *Time Constraints and Modern Work Demands*: Urban life is often fast-paced, with people balancing long work hours and commutes, leaving less time for traditional communal activities, altering how *Bayanihan* is practiced. Acts of support may now be limited to monetary contributions or digital participation (McGavran, 1990, p.259).
4. *Integration of Global Influences*: Exposure to global culture through digital platforms has influenced Filipino values and practices, leading to hybrid expressions of *Bayanihan* that blend local traditions with international concepts of community service.
5. *Focus on Social Advocacy*: Modern expressions of *Bayanihan* often focus on larger societal issues such as poverty alleviation, environmental conservation, and education, moving beyond the hyper-local focus of traditional practices.

Despite these changes, the core principles of *Bayanihan* remain relevant and adaptable. In digital contexts, *Bayanihan* can manifest through virtual communities, acts of kindness, and coordinated efforts to address spiritual and social needs (Wright, 2006, p. 364).

Christian or Pastoral Engagement

Christian or pastoral engagement through the *Bayanihan* principle emphasizes intentional community-building, acts of service, and fostering genuine relationships as central strategies to convey the message of Christ meaningfully within Filipino communities (Maggay, 2015, 42).

Incorporating *Bayanihan* into ministries mirrors the practices of the early Christian Church (Keener 2012, p. 500) and resonates with Filipino values. By adopting this model, the gospel contextualized in a way that honors and integrates Filipino values, creating an environment where faith can flourish organically (York 2013, p. 39).

Pentecostal focus on holistic ministry is particularly suited to the *Bayanihan* framework. Holistic ministry integrates spiritual transformation with practical acts of service (Anderson, 2014, p. 78). For example, community outreach programs that provide food, healthcare, and education while sharing the gospel embody the spirit of *Bayanihan* and demonstrate Christ's love in tangible ways. This form of engagement helps build trust, opening doors for deeper spiritual engagement.

Urbanization and substantial digital connectivity present both challenges and opportunities for ministry engagement within Filipino communities. While traditional expressions of *Bayanihan* may be diminishing in urban settings, its principles can be adapted to urban contexts by fostering virtual communities, for outreach, relationship-building and service as well as continuing acts of *Bayanihan* within their churches and communities (Ma & Ma, 2010, p. 112). This ensures that the gospel remains accessible and relevant in an increasingly digitized world, while still rooted in Filipino values.

By engaging with Filipino communities through the *Bayanihan* principle, sustainable and transformative faith communities can reflect Christ's love through service and unity, honoring Filipino identity. Pastoral engagement, therefore, becomes a bridge that connects the timeless truth of the gospel with the realities of Filipino society.

Understanding Filipino Culture

Filipinos place a high importance on relationships, both within the family and the wider community. *Kapwa* (shared identity) underscores the idea of interconnectedness, where one's actions impact the well-being of others (Jocano, 1997, p. 67). Christians who adopt relational approaches through genuine acts of service and consistent presence reflect this cultural principle. This relational approach is particularly effective in establishing discipleship and fostering sustainable faith communities.

The rise of individualism in urban settings and the shift toward digital interactions have altered the dynamics of community life. However, the core values of *Bayanihan* remain relevant. Missionaries and pastors can adapt the gospel mission approach to address these changes by fostering both physical and digital communities, ensuring that the relational and communal ethos of Filipino culture is preserved (Ma & Ma, 2010, p. 112).

Understanding Filipino culture is integral to the success of gospel missions that aims to share Christ meaningfully. By embracing the values of community, mutual support, and relational engagement through the *Bayanihan* principle, churches can connect with Filipino communities in ways that honor their cultural identity while pointing them toward the transformative power of the gospel.

Challenges in Cross-Cultural Missionary Work

Cross-cultural missionary work presents numerous challenges that missionaries must address to be effective. In the context of Filipino communities, cultural differences, communication barriers, and evolving societal dynamics can complicate gospel mission efforts (York, 2013, p. 45). Local pastors face many of these same challenges. One significant challenge is the potential for cultural misunderstandings. Filipino culture places a high value on harmony, relational sensitivity (*pakiramdam*), and respect for elders and authority (Enriquez, 1994, p. 83). Missionaries who are unfamiliar with these cultural nuances may inadvertently offend or fail to connect deeply with the community, hindering the relational engagement crucial to their witness.

Another challenge is navigating the collectivist orientation of Filipino society, where community and family ties often take precedence over individual decisions (Jocano, 1997, p. 67). This dynamic can make it difficult for individuals to commit to faith practices that conflict with familial traditions. Evangelism must be done with cultural sensitivity, finding ways to integrate the gospel without alienating these values.

Urbanization and digital transformation pose additional challenges in modern Filipino contexts. Traditional communal interaction in which *Bayanihan* played a significant role is diminishing in urbanized areas (Maggay, 2015, p. 35). Similarly, the rise of digital connectivity has reshaped how communities interact. The number of Philippine social media identities, 90.8 million out of a population of 116 million, is among the highest in the world in terms of per capita usage (meltwater.com). While digital platforms can facilitate outreach, they may also lack the personal connection central to Filipino culture, making it harder to cultivate genuine relationships.

Lastly, language and communication differences can present barriers in cross-cultural missions. English is widely spoken in the Philippines, but Tagalog, the national language, and others, along with their various dialects, remain dominant (Ma & Ma, 2010, p. 114). Missionaries who fail to learn the local language may struggle to build trust and effectively communicate the gospel message through the concept of *bayanihan*.

By understanding and addressing these challenges, church leaders can better engage Filipino communities in meaningful and culturally relevant ways. The *Bayanihan* principle, with its emphasis on communal unity, mutual support, and relational engagement, provides a framework for overcoming these obstacles and fostering sustainable faith communities rooted in the gospel.

Importance of Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity involves understanding, respecting, and adapting to the values, traditions, and social structures of the target culture while communicating the unchanging truth of the gospel (York, 2013, p. 35). In Filipino society, cultural sensitivity is critical because of its deeply relational, collective nature, which emphasizes harmony, mutual respect, and strong family and community ties (Enriquez, 1994, p. 82). The *Bayanihan* principle, serves as a vital framework for mission work, requiring missionaries respect their culture.

One of the key reasons for cultural sensitivity is its role in building trust and establishing credibility (Maggay, 2015, p. 42). In Filipino communities, trust is developed through consistent presence and community service. Missionaries who violate cultural norms risk alienating the very people they aim to reach. A lack of sensitivity to these values will hinder efforts to share the gospel meaningfully (Jocano, 1997, p. 68).

Furthermore, cultural sensitivity ensures that the gospel is presented in ways that resonate with the lived experiences and identity of the people. By aligning gospel missions with the *Bayanihan* principle, missionaries can contextualize the message of Christ to address both the spiritual and social needs of Filipino communities (Keener, 2012, p. 508). This not only honors their cultural identity but also demonstrates the relevance of the gospel in their daily lives.

Ultimately, cultural sensitivity enhances the effectiveness of gospel missions by fostering genuine relationships and mutual respect. Paul exemplified this culturally sensitive approach, in 1 Corinthians 9:22. By embodying the relational ethos of the *Bayanihan* principle and engaging Filipino communities with cultural understanding, missionaries can share the gospel in ways that are both impactful and transformative.

Strategic Applications of the *Bayanihan* Principle in Gospel Missions

With this cultural sensitivity in mind and with the trust of the community gained, strategic applications can then be made as to how the *Bayanihan* principle can actually be lived out by the local church in its community.

Community-Based Discipleship Programs

One effective strategy for applying the *Bayanihan* principle in gospel missions is through community-based discipleship programs. These programs focus on fostering small, relational groups where members can study the Bible, share life experiences, and support one another. This mirrors the communal ethos of *Bayanihan* (York, 2013, p. 42). In Filipino communities, discipleship flourishes in relational contexts, as trust and mutual respect are highly valued. By emphasizing collaborative learning and shared spiritual growth, these groups reflect the essence of both *Bayanihan* and the early church model in Acts 2:42–47, where believers devoted themselves to fellowship and the breaking of bread (Keener, 2012, p. 509).

Acts of Service and Holistic Outreach

A second strategy is incorporating acts of service and holistic outreach into gospel missions. The *Bayanihan* principle emphasizes tangible assistance and mutual support, making service-oriented activities a powerful way to demonstrate Christ's love. This can include organizing community feeding programs, healthcare missions, disaster response efforts, or livelihood training (Maggay, 2015, p. 35). Such initiatives address the immediate needs of Filipino communities while opening opportunities for spiritual conversations. Pentecostal mission practices have long emphasized the integration of practical service and evangelism, as seen in the holistic ministries advocated by missiologist like Allan Anderson (2014, p. 78). By meeting both physical and spiritual needs, missionaries embody the gospel message in action, reflecting the compassionate ministry of Jesus.

Digital Bayanihan for Modern Evangelism

In the digital age, a strategic adaptation of *Bayanihan* involves leveraging digital platforms to foster intentional community-building and relational engagement. Filipino communities are highly active online, making social media, messaging apps, and virtual gatherings effective tools for evangelism and discipleship (Ma & Ma, 2010, p. 112). Digital *Bayanihan* can include Bible studies, prayer groups, and coordinated acts of service, such as crowdfunding for community needs or supporting families in crisis. This approach maintains the relational and communal aspects of *Bayanihan* while addressing the realities of modern Filipino life (Yong, 2014, p. 89). This approach reaches a broader audience and creates sustainable faith communities both online and offline.

Implications of the *Bayanihan* Principle in Gospel Missions

A church's social programs should never be conceived or conducted as in themselves, nor should they necessarily be seen as just means to an end. Evangelism and even church planting can and should be intertwined with the programs, thereby demonstrating the love of Christ in both practical and spiritual ways. Having now considered the practical, how can the verbal and written message of Christ be integrated?

Emphasis on Relational Evangelism

The application of the *Bayanihan* principle in gospel missions highlights the importance of relational evangelism. In Filipino culture, relationships are the foundation of community life, and trust is built through consistent engagement and shared experiences (Enriquez, 1994, p. 82). The emphasis on fostering genuine relationships aligns with the biblical model of discipleship to teach and nurture their faith (Mark 3:14). This relational approach underscores that evangelism is not merely about proclaiming the gospel but about living it out in the context of authentic relationships. Missionaries and pastors who adopt the *Bayanihan* principle must focus on relationally engaging communities to ensure the gospel is both heard and experienced (Keener, 2012, p. 500).

Integration of Holistic Ministry

Another significant implication is the necessity of integrating holistic ministry into gospel missions. The *Bayanihan* principle prioritizes collective action to address community needs, reflecting the biblical mandate to love one's neighbor in both word and deed (James 2:14–17) (Maggay, 2015, p. 33). Those who do this demonstrate Christ's love in tangible ways, building bridges for spiritual conversations. Holistic ministry not only meets physical needs but also lays the groundwork for spiritual transformation by showing that the gospel encompasses all aspects of life. Pentecostal missions have historically excelled in this area by blending evangelism with social action to bring about transformation (Anderson, 2014, p. 78).

Contextualization of the Gospel Message

The *Bayanihan* principle implies the need for contextualizing the gospel message to resonate with the Filipino worldview. As mentioned, Filipino culture places a high value on communal unity and mutual support, thereby making collective faith practices impactful (Jocano, 1997, p. 67). Contextualization ensures that the gospel is not perceived as foreign or detached from everyday life but as deeply relevant and transformative within the cultural framework. This involves using culturally familiar narratives, such as *Bayanihan*, to explain biblical truths and foster a sense of belonging within the faith community (York, 2013, p. 45). As Wonsuk and Julie Ma note, contextualization allows the gospel to address both spiritual and cultural dimensions, enhancing its impact and fostering lasting faith commitments (2010, p. 111).

Theological Reflection

Theologically, the *Bayanihan* principle embodies biblical values that align closely with the teachings of Christ and the practices of the early church. Central to the gospel mission is the call to love and serve others, which is powerfully demonstrated in the Filipino concept of *Bayanihan*, a communal effort that prioritizes collective well-being over individual gain (Enriquez, 1994, p. 82). This principle mirrors the early Christian church's emphasis on community, as seen in Acts 2:42–47, where believers shared resources, met one another's needs, and worshipped together (Keener, 2013, p. 505). The *Bayanihan* spirit can thus be seen as a cultural expression of the biblical command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31), providing a practical framework for gospel missions that fosters unity and mutual support.

From a Pentecostal perspective, the *Bayanihan* principle reflects the work of the Holy Spirit in building community and empowering believers for service. The Holy Spirit, as described in 1 Corinthians 12:4–7, distributes spiritual gifts for the common good, encouraging believers to serve one another and build up the body of Christ (York, 2013, p. 45). In this way, *Bayanihan* resonates with the Spirit-filled life, where acts of service and relational ministry become tangible expressions

of God's love. Ma and Ma emphasize that mission is not only about verbal proclamation but also about embodying the gospel through actions that transform communities (2010, p. 110). The integration of *Bayanihan* into gospel missions exemplifies this holistic approach, demonstrating the gospel through both word and deed.

Gospel missions rooted in *Bayanihan* emphasize interconnectedness and relational engagement, encouraging believers to work together in unity for the sake of the Kingdom of God. This approach not only reflects God's relational character but also aligns with Jesus' prayer for unity among His followers in John 17:21.

Theologically, the *Bayanihan* principle also points to the eschatological hope of God's Kingdom. It offers a foretaste of the restored community and justice that will be fully realized in Christ's return (Wright, 2008, p. 207). Acts of service and community-building inspired by *Bayanihan* demonstrate God's transformative power in the present while pointing to the ultimate reconciliation of all things. As Allan Anderson (2014, p. 73) notes, holistic mission practices that integrate cultural values like *Bayanihan* provide a glimpse of the Kingdom's renewal, fostering both spiritual and societal transformation.

Conclusion

The *Bayanihan* principle, offers a transformative and culturally resonant framework for gospel missions. Its emphasis on communal unity, acts of service, and relational engagement provides a powerful means of sharing the message of Christ with Filipino communities. Grounded in biblical teachings and aligned with the relational nature of Filipino society, the *Bayanihan* principle reflects the values of love, cooperation, and mutual support that are integral to both Filipino culture and the Christian faith.

This approach underscores the importance of intentional community-building as an essential component of evangelism. By fostering genuine relationships and addressing both spiritual and physical needs, the *Bayanihan*-inspired gospel mission demonstrates Christ's love in practical and meaningful ways. It not only builds trust and credibility within communities but also creates opportunities for discipleship and the establishment of sustainable faith communities.

Furthermore, the *Bayanihan* principle bridges the gap between tradition and modernity, adapting to the evolving dynamics of Filipino society, including digital connectivity. Whether through traditional face-to-face interactions or digital platforms, the relational and communal essence of *Bayanihan* remains relevant, ensuring the gospel's accessibility and resonance in an increasingly complex world.

Finally, the *Bayanihan* principle enriches gospel missions by integrating cultural relevance with biblical principles, fostering intentional relationships, and embodying Christ's message through acts of service. By embracing this culturally rooted approach, Christians can effectively connect with Filipino communities, making the gospel not only heard but deeply felt. Through *Bayanihan*, the transformative power of the gospel can inspire unity, hope, and renewal in Filipino society, reflecting the heart of God's Kingdom on earth.

References

Anderson, A. (2014). *An introduction to Pentecostal missions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

- Bosch, D. J. (2011). *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission*. Rev. Ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Enriquez, V. (1994). *Kapwa: A core concept in Filipino social psychology*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.
- Horton, M. (2011). *The Christian faith: A systematic theology for pilgrims on the way*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Jocano, F. L. (1997). *Filipino value system: A cultural definition*. Manila: Punlad Research House.
- Johns, C. B. (1998). *Pentecostal formation: A pedagogy among the oppressed*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.
- Keener, C. S. (2012). *Acts: An exegetical commentary, volume 1*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- McGavran, D. A. (1990). *Understanding church growth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.
- Maggay, M. P. (2015). *Transforming society: Pentecostal missions and cultural engagement*. Manila: OMF Lit.
- Ma, W. & Ma, J. C. (2010). *Mission in the Spirit: Towards a Pentecostal/Charismatic missiology*. Oxford: Regnum Books International.
- Slotta, D. (2025). Social media in the Philippines: statistics & facts. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/topics/6759/social-media-usage-in-the-philippines/>
- Stetzer, E. (2006). *Planting missional churches: Your guide to starting churches that multiply*. Nashville: B&H Academic.
- Wright, C. J. (2006). *The mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's grand narrative*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Wright, N. T. (2008). *Surprised by hope: Rethinking heaven, the resurrection, and the mission of the Church*. New York: HarperOne.
- Yong, A. (2014). *The missiology of the Spirit: Pentecostal currents in contemporary world missions*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- York, J. (2013). *Missional contextualization: Pentecostal practices in diverse cultures*. Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House.

¹ Angelo Atienza is the main author.

One Helpful Theory for Explaining Religious Conversion

Gordon Scott Bonham

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, April 2026

Abstract

The author finds the theory of religion developed by Stark and Bainbridge useful in understanding his own faith journey, findings from four research projects in the Muslim world he has conducted, and findings from other research that contributes to Christian's knowledge of spreading the gospel. This article focuses on how the theory employs three theoretical spheres: the social and cultural context surrounding the presentation of the gospel, the gospel as understood by the recipients, and what is meant by conversion.

Key Words: religious theory, socio-cultural context, gospel presentation, Muslim conversion

Introduction

I am a follower of Jesus, a social scientist, and a missions information worker. How do these three identities fit together, and what might that fit mean for you? I find *A Theory of Religion* by Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987) useful in understanding my personal faith journey, findings from my missions research, and how other missions research studies contribute to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. Within each of these three areas, I focus in this article on three theoretical spheres: the social and cultural context surrounding the presentation of the gospel, the gospel as understood by the recipient, and what is meant by conversion.

As I retired from a 45-year career in social research and program evaluation that was guided by theoretical models, the Lord opened the opportunity to join the mission agency One Challenge (One Challenge, 2026) as a research associate. My research during the past 17 years has focused on ministries with Muslims. That research has consisted of individual projects to assist various ministries, but I felt there must be commonalities that could help guide current and future ministries. I sensed the need of a general theory to identify and communicate the contributions of these projects to missions.

In my search for such a theory, I read the Silliman (2022) obituary for Rodney Stark in *Christianity Today*. I did not know Stark personally but had used his textbook (Stark, 1989) when I taught introductory sociology. I was also impressed with his book on how Christianity spread from an obscure sect of Judaism to a dominant world religion in three centuries (Stark, 1996). Next, I discovered that he had developed a complete theory of religion with William Bainbridge, who was chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Towson University while I was there as a researcher.

Stark and Bainbridge derived their theory from seven sociological principles of exchange theory and network analysis. Central to exchange theory is that humans seek rewards and will give up something they value less for something they value more. However, some things desired by humans, such as eternal life, do not exist in the natural world. The Stark and Bainbridge theory defines the term "compensators" for desired things which can be obtained only in the supernatural world (e.g., eternal life) and uses the term "rewards" for that which can be obtained in the natural world (e.g., belonging). Since humans have no way of knowing the true value of compensators,

their value is largely based on the value placed on them by the cultural context, religious professionals, and people in their social networks.

When a person hears a new religious message, the person must evaluate whether the compensators offered are worth the cost of changing religious affiliation. A major change in religious affiliations based upon a religious message is often referred to as “conversion.” Stark and Bainbridge define conversion as “affiliation of a person to a new religious group conceptualized as a positive transformation of the nature and value of a person.” This definition makes no assumption or statement about what God did, nor over what period of time conversion occurred. It is limited to the testimony of the person and observable actions. Scientific theory, whether social, physical, or biological, applies only to phenomena in the natural world that can be measured and tested by human senses. Humans cannot predict or measure how God accomplishes his supernatural work.

Understanding My Faith Journey

My faith journey began at age ten, and I have reconstructed how my social environment made me open to the gospel message. My parents divorced two and a half years earlier, and I was devastated when my father left town. My oldest sister soon married and moved to the mountains. My next oldest sister had a small scholarship that let her attend college in another city. There she joined a Baptist student group and came back with them to our hometown for a one-night Billy Graham crusade. These two older sisters made public decisions that night to accept Jesus while I played in the sawdust, oblivious to the gospel message. Sickness struck me a short time later, and an incorrect diagnosis of polio quarantined our house and closed my mother’s in-home daycare business. The financial strain meant my sister had to return home to finish college. I was soon correctly diagnosed but confined to bed for three months. After that, the doctor would not allow me to walk ten blocks to our former church. Besides, no one at that church seemed to know or care that I was sick. My mother thought we should go to church even though God was not a topic of conversation in our home. Since we had no car, my mother accepted a neighbor’s offer to take our family of four with them to their Baptist church. I made friends in this new church, and Jesus became a topic in our home after my sister returned home. The following fall I felt the hand of God reach down and touch me while attending the small mission in the mountains with my married sister. I then heard the message that Jesus loved me and would guide me in my life. I committed my heart to Jesus in the mountains and made my decision public the next Sunday at the church we were attending. I was soon baptized.

Why did I hear the gospel message in the mountains when I ignored Billy Graham’s message the year before? Stark and Banbridge’s theory of religion says that the values we place on rewards are primarily influenced by the people in our social networks. I desired love and guidance not available from an earthly father. The people in my social network—mother, older sisters, neighbor, new church—valued Jesus as the way to obtain these desires. In this social and cultural context, the gospel message became salient to me.

The gospel message offered me love and guidance. I might obtain limited love and guidance in my natural life without any reference to God, which Stark and Bainbridge label as “rewards.” However, perfect love and eternal purpose are impossible to obtain in natural life, and these promised “compensators” can only be obtained in a supernatural life. All religions deal with compensators, the rewards not available in our natural world. The gospel message I heard was that

God is love, he offers guidance for a meaningful life now and eternally, and following Jesus is the way.

I believe God reached down and touched my heart that Sunday morning. Can I prove scientifically what God did? Can any human prove or falsify what God does in what is generally called “conversion?” No, but I believe God saved me and that I committed the rest of my life to following him. Scientific theory predicts what happens in the natural world and can be judged false if that prediction does not occur. Stark and Bainbridge carefully define conversion as what people believe God did that changed their nature, values, and conduct. People can question my conversion, however, if I do not testify about the value of what God did for me and do not change my behavior. Their theory gives no time frame for conversion, whether it happens at a single event in time or is progressive development. I experienced conversion at a single point in time and always wondered if my three children were converted at ages five, eight, and eight when they asked to be baptized. My daughter and one son now describe their following Jesus as a series of commitment steps over the years. Their testimonies and values attest to their conversion, even though they may not point to a specific event. The other son chose to affiliate with the church for a couple of years after he moved into his own apartment but gives no testimony nor change in behavior and values that I can see. I still wonder, but only the Lord knows his heart.

Understanding My Mission Research

In countries without a state religion and where churches are generally in low tension with the surrounding culture, following Jesus might not bring a Muslim into conflict with the surrounding culture like it would in a country where Islam is the state religion and following Jesus is a deviant religious belief that may have a high cultural price (e.g., losing one’s children). Stark and Bainbridge’s theory predicts that fruitful practices of ministries with Muslims would need to differ in different contexts. I found evidence of this need for various ministries in research that compared what workers with Muslims identified as fruitful practices in Europe (Bonham & Hewitt, 2021), in the Muslim-majority world (Allen et al., 2009), and in North America (Kronk, 2018). Some practices, such as having an intimate walk with God and being bold in witness, were fruitful in all three regions (Hoskins, Bonham, & Hewitt, in press). Sharing the gospel in ways that fit learning preferences and encouraging seekers to share what God is doing in their lives were equally fruitful in Muslim-majority and European regions, but less so in North America. Helping seekers and believers find appropriate ways to identify themselves as followers of Jesus was equally fruitful in the Muslim-majority and North America regions, but less so in Europe. Mentoring leaders who in turn mentor others was about the same in the two diaspora studies, but less so in the Muslim-majority world. The context makes a difference.

Another of my studies found that the value placed on fellowship and community was higher among believers with Muslim backgrounds than among believers with Christian backgrounds. This differing value makes it difficult for many with Muslim backgrounds to feel supported by historical Christian churches, and they desire churches with other Muslim background believers (Bonham, Daniels, & Hewitt, 2026).

The issue of conversion has come up in several of my studies. Does conversion occur at a single point in time when people first realize that they are following Jesus, or is it a developmental process as they learn more about Jesus and his teachings? In the most recent study (Bonham, Daniels, & Hewitt, 2026), the question was whether Muslims who express belief in Jesus revert to Islam. Some leaders in fellowships of Muslim Background Believers (MBB) said that it is

impossible for a Muslim who has ever accepted Jesus as Lord to revert to Islam. Others said they know of some who have gone back. However, our recent research has found that many more have simply fallen out of contact, left traditional churches and desire a fellowship with other Muslim background believers, or maintained their faith yet have no relationship with any Christian church or fellowship. There are many other questions. Can a Muslim retain relationships in the Muslim community while still following Jesus? How can one tell if a person has been truly converted? Stark and Bainbridge say that humans cannot directly measure what God has or has not done. Humans can only measure whether people believe God has changed them and that their actions reflect the change.

Understanding Others' Research

A book about Muslim conversion to Christianity in Cambodia starts with two inquiries: how the religious message was communicated, and how the message was both understood and compelling (Seckler, 2020). Most Cambodian Muslims belong to the small Cham ethnic group within the predominately Buddhist Khmer ethnic group culture. The book's only discussion of how this context might affect the communication of the message was noting that the use of the Cham word for the Muslim God, Allah, made the message more relevant than when the Khmer word for the Buddhist divine was used. An effect of being a minority appears when the book reports one believer who valued the Christian message because Jesus does not "discriminate." The report focuses on the importance of the religious message, with no discussion of the importance of social networks. Another example is given of a wife who became a believer several years after her husband. She knew her husband loved her and the value he placed on following Jesus. Seckler attributes the woman's becoming a Christian solely to the religious message. He does not consider that a husband has a prominent place in a woman's social network and that the value the husband placed upon Jesus would influence how his wife understood the message. Stark and Bainbridge's theory, however, explains that people develop their values, particularly of a compensator, through exchanges with other people who are important in their lives. Stark and Bainbridge further note that both the social context and the content of the message are important to a religious movement, and emphasizing one over the other can affect whether a movement grows or dies.

I found that the discussions in Seckler's book fit well in Stark and Bainbridge's theory that people will not leave one religious organization for another unless they see greater value in the new religious organization. The most helpful portion of Seckler's study for me was his identifying what Cambodian Muslims valued most in the Christian message compared with the Muslim message. The prominent themes he found were sin and cleansing; heaven and judgement; what Jesus did, does and will do; and the Bible. Also helpful was a list of the ways the message was presented.

Seckler recognizes that conversion is complex. Sometimes it happens quickly, and sometimes it occurs gradually over time. God also does not seem to work the same way in everyone's lives. Conversion is easier to understand if it is limited to Stark and Bainbridge's definition that people "believe" God has made a change in their lives that is reflected in a change in their values and behaviors.

Conclusion

The theory presented by Stark and Bainbridge applies to all human religions past and present, not just to Christianity. They developed it after studying many historical and contemporary religions and how these religions grew or declined over time. Although their theory is derived from seven axioms of exchange theory and social networks, they provide about 350 propositions that can be tested using about 100 definitions of important terms. Like any scientific theory, this theory of religion cannot be proved correct, but propositions derived from it can be falsified. Until their propositions are found false, I recommend the theory. I have described in this article how the theory has helped me understand my own faith journey, some of the missions research in which I have participated, and how to understand the value and limitations of what other missions researchers have found. I hope you will be helped in similar ways.

References

- Allen, D., Harrison R., Adams, E., Adams, L., Fish, B., & Martin, E. J. (2009). A closer look at fruitful practices: A descriptive list. *The International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, Fall 26(3): 111-122.
https://ijfm.dreamhosters.com/PDFs_IJFM/26_3_PDFs/26_3FruitfulPracticesList.pdf
- Bonham, G. & Hewitt, S. (2021). Fruitful practices with diaspora people in Europe. OC Global Research Team. http://www.fruitfulpractice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/DPE-Fruitful-Practices-Report-2021_Combined.pdf
- Bonham, G., Daniels, G., & Hewitt, S. (2026). Muslim-background believer attrition survey. *Global Missiology*, January, 23(1): 27-40.
<http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/3040>
- Daniels, G., Bonham, G. & Hewitt, S. (In press). An analysis of three studies of fruitful ministry practices among Muslims. *International Journal of Frontier Missions*.
- Kronk, R. (2018). God's divine plan for Muslims. *Christianity Today*, April 10.
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/2018/04/gods-divine-plan-for-muslim-immigrants/>
- One Challenge. (2026). *One Challenge*. <https://onechallenge.org/>
- Seckler, T.W. (2020). *Experiencing the gospel: An examination of Muslim conversion to Christianity in Cambodia*. Pickwick Publications.
- Silliman, D. (2022). Died: Rodney Stark, sociologist who said religion is a rational choice. *Christianity Today*, August 30. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2022/08/obit-rodney-stark-sociology-religion-rational-choice/>
- Stark, R. (1989). *Sociology*. Third Edition. Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Stark, R. (1996). *The Rise of Christianity: How the obscure, marginal Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the western world in a few centuries*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Stark, R. & Bainbridge, W. S. (1987). *A theory of religion*. Lang.

Call for Papers:

Christian Conversion and Mission

For Publication in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, October 2026

Andrew Walls's posthumous *Christian Conversion and Mission: A Brief Cultural History* offers a nuanced and incisive overview of the history of Christianity's encounters with Judaism, Roman Hellenism, Germanic custom, the modern West, and the cultures of the global south from the first century to the twentieth century. The recurrent pattern in the gospel's interaction with successive cultures through the ages is conversion, understood at its most fundamental level as "turning," that is, turning to God in response to God's saving activity. By taking Christian history as a whole and inviting the reader to see it from the perspective of conversion, Walls challenges Western theology in several striking ways. First, he decenters Western theology as the standard by which to judge authentic or orthodox Christian faith and expression. Second, he suggests theological frontiers to be explored as Christianity enters the cultures of the global south. Third, he proposes a fresh way of seeing historic Christianity that is not defined by the creeds of Roman-Hellenistic Christianity.

As southern expressions of Christianity increasingly become the dominant forms of the faith, new themes and priorities that never occurred to Western Christians or to earlier Christian ages will appear. As Walls notes, "for it is the mark of Christian faith that it must bring Christ to the big issues closest to men's hearts," and it does so "through the structures by which people perceive and recognize their world," which are not universally the same. And as Christian faith is worked out within accepted views of the world in all their diversity, "those worldviews... are transformed, yet recognizable" (130).

Global Missiology invites submissions for this theme issue on "Conversion," as sketched above, from any of the following angles:

- Descriptive reports of Christian conversion in your locale: What themes and priorities are emerging? What are the big issues closest to local Christians' hearts? In what ways are local structures and worldviews being transformed, yet recognizable?
- Theological frontiers that need to be explored to reflect local realities and meet local concerns: What new issues need examination that Western theology overlooks entirely? What old issues need re-examination that Western theology addresses inadequately?
- Historic Christianity not defined by credal formula: Walls proposes a few essential convictions and responses that are observable when Christians of any culture express their faith.

1. The worship of the God of Israel.
2. The ultimate significance of Jesus of Nazareth.
3. That God is active where believers are.
4. That believers constitute a people of God transcending time and space.

Along with these convictions and responses, a small number of practices or institutions have continued across the generations, namely, the reading of a common body of Scriptures and the special use of bread and wine and water (128-129).

Do these traits accurately reflect your local congregation? Is this framework of convictions-responses and practices-institutions a satisfactory way of seeing or understanding historic Christianity? Why or why not?

Proposed titles with approximately 100-word abstracts are due May 31, 2026. Full manuscripts of approved paper proposals will be due July 31, 2026. 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:

Christian Unity amid Domestic and International Divisions

For Publication in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, April 2027

The history of the Church is full of contentious issues. Our day seems no different. The strains run both internally and externally, and they are true for local churches as well as churches and denominations with broader identities, be they national or even international. Mission agencies and missionary orders—including missionaries, administrators, and supporters—face the same intense divisions wherever they are serving.

Shifts in geopolitics contribute to the divisiveness. Among Christians many are appalled, while others approve, as longstanding international alliances frazzle. Similarly, there are different Christian reactions to various military conflicts which often are characterized by unbalanced levels of armaments and of human suffering. Christians' feelings about immigration issues fall on vastly different points on a spectrum that ranks justice, legality, economics, and compassion (not to mention fear and prejudice). How Christians should relate to changing sexual values and other social and cultural issues that often morph into political battles over the future of a country or even of "Christian civilization" can also be divisive.

How is Christian unity affected by these tensions among individual Christians, churches, and mission organizations? How is Christian mission affected? Jesus prayed for his followers that God the Father would keep them one as the Father and the Son are one (John 17), and the historic creeds affirm that the Church is one. The April 2027 issue of *Global Missiology* will wrestle with these multifaceted dilemmas and questions.

The Editorial Team thus invites submissions related to this theme issue on "Christian Witness amid Political Divisions." Manuscripts solely devoted to arguing for or against certain political positions are not the goal. Rather, the following types of topics, especially as addressed by case studies, are welcome:

- What is Christian unity, to which all Christians are called by Jesus and the creeds, and what does such unity look like?
- What are historical examples of how political divisions among Christians were handled?
- How are people outside Christian circles affected by Christian disunity over political matters? Put differently, how important is Christian unity for gospel witness?
- What issues underlie "proof-texting" the Bible for political positions?
- What issues underlie how Old Testament examples are applied differently to today's issues?
- How should the Church universal and/or local congregations address the divisive issues of our day? What should be the process of discernment for reaching a position and for deciding if and when a public stance should be taken?
- How is Christian unity to be preserved or restored without becoming a cover for sin and/or injustice?

- What role does theology play in preserving or restoring Christian unity? What theological gaps exist in our day?
- How might church and mission leaders pastorally address political divisions among members?
- How might expatriate missionaries address political divisions among indigenous Christians?

Proposed titles with approximately 100-word abstracts are due July 31, 2026. Full manuscripts of approved paper proposals will be due November 30, 2026. 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

Patrick Kraye, *Introducing Intercultural Theology and Ethics: Representing Jesus in a Postcolonial World*

Reviewed by Mark Harlan

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, April 2026

Kraye, Patrick (2026). *Introducing Intercultural Theology and Ethics: Representing Jesus in a Postcolonial World*. Oxford: Regnum, ISBN: 978-1917059756 (paperback), \$16.00, pp. 177.

Many intercultural workers and organizations still operate with unconscious cultural arrogance and theological naivete. They assume that, because their theological understandings and ethical applications derive from the Bible, they are universally applicable. This sobering observation is what Patrick Kraye aims to address in *Introducing Intercultural Theology and Ethics*. Kraye judiciously explores the daunting but incarnationally necessary enterprise of encouraging new expressions of theology and ethics by indigenous believers. With three decades of experience living in Pakistan and Afghanistan, strong academic qualifications, graduate-level teaching experience, and service as executive director of an international organization, Patrick Kraye is well equipped to address theology and ethics from an intercultural perspective in the post-colonial era.

Summary

In the Introduction, Kraye observes that workers from the former colonizing countries continue to favor their culturally bounded grasp of the gospel, traditions, and religious practices as they traverse other cultures. This “coloniality” is undergirded by “biblicality,” which Kraye defines as “the universalising of one’s biblically rooted yet culturally bounded interpretation of Scripture and the unwitting sacralising of one’s own religio-cultural assumptions, norms, and values” (p. 4). This unconscious preeminence undervalues local cultural perspectives, standards, and values, eliciting anti-colonial reactions. Kraye’s book, consisting of eight chapters, aims to sensitize cross-cultural workers to this tendency and provide a biblically and theologically grounded alternative path.

Chapter 1 explores whether Western Christians’ theology is culturally bounded or interculturally open. Kraye highlights the challenge of representing Jesus across cultures while distinguishing the gospel’s essence from cultural attachments. Many faith communities in the West resist reexamining beliefs shaped by enculturation, fearing that doing so would lead to compromised beliefs or syncretism. However, engaging other cultures can deepen and enrich faith. The author critiques rigid reliance on systematic theology for creating limiting boundaries and commends biblical theology for recognizing Scripture’s diverse cultural expressions. Ultimately, he calls for a humble, discerning approach to mission—one that remains faithful to the gospel while being culturally relevant.

Chapter 2 examines how biblicality and coloniality hinder intercultural theology and ethics. Biblicality elevates culturally shaped interpretations of Scripture as universally binding, whereas coloniality imposes them on others. Drawing from Acts and Galatians, Kraye shows how early Jewish believers struggled to accept Gentiles without enforcing Jewish norms—tensions that persist today. The author urges humility, cultural immersion, and awareness of interpretive limits in mission work. By valuing local thought worlds and embracing an incarnational approach,

missionaries can minimize these barriers. Such attentiveness fosters richer theological understanding and more authentic, culturally rooted expressions of Christian faith.

Chapter 3 advocates Abraham Kuyper's theological position, which leads to humility and teachability when entering new cultures. Kraye warns against subconscious superiority rooted in theological knowledge or support systems, which can breed frustration with cultural differences. Rejecting dualistic labels of "Christian" and "non-Christian" cultures, Kraye affirms that God is active in all cultures as Creator, Preserver, Revealer, and Redeemer. A positive theology of culture recognizes both beauty and brokenness everywhere. By discerning God's prior work within communities, missionaries can present the gospel more meaningfully while honoring cultural distinctives and resisting dismissive or judgmental attitudes.

Chapter 4 argues that Christians must overcome fear of other religious cultures and recognize God's work within them. Just as first-century Jews viewed Gentiles as religiously unclean, many Christians today are wary of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Matthew's Gospel addresses a similar form of ethnocentrism by presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise to bless all nations. Through 14 narrative steps—such as including Gentiles in Jesus's genealogy, highlighting the Magi, praising a Roman centurion's faith, ministering in "Galilee of the Gentiles," and ending with the Great Commission—Matthew reveals God's heart for all peoples. Adopting this global, Kuyperian perspective today means valuing the good within other cultures. A pastoral example involving a Muslim convert shows how affirming cultural goods can reduce fear, maintain family ties, and embody Christ within religious communities.

Chapter 5 uses Ephesians 5:22–33 to model intercultural theologizing that avoids rigid biblicality and colonial imposition. Employing the historical-grammatical method, Kraye distinguishes between transcultural gospel truths and Paul's contextual applications within the Greco-Roman household. While Paul worked within existing structures—such as patriarchy and slavery—he transformed their underlying assumptions through creation theology and the new creation in Christ. In marriage he upheld monogamy, permanence, and voluntary submission, reframing hierarchy through Christ's self-giving love. Husbands are called to sacrificial service and empowerment, not domination; wives are honored as equal in nature, countering views of female inferiority. Marriage becomes a sacred reflection of Christ's union with the Church. Paul's approach to discipleship affirms culture while reshaping worldview from within, fostering Spirit-led, locally grounded, transformative theologies.

Chapter 6 examines how to present the gospel meaningfully in intercultural contexts, particularly among Muslims. Kraye argues that common Western formulations—emphasizing original sin, substitutionary punishment, and forgiveness—often create misunderstanding. Muslims reject inherited sin but acknowledge personal wrongdoing and moral weakness, so insisting on "sinful nature" can become an unnecessary barrier. Likewise, describing the cross only as substitutionary punishment conflicts with Islamic assumptions about prophecy, justice, and honor. Scripture also portrays the cross as victory, redemption, and a new exodus—metaphors that may communicate more clearly. Forgiveness, often heard as moral license, should instead be framed as reconciliation and transformation. The chapter urges listening to felt needs—such as fear, oppression, and desire for moral change—and highlighting the Spirit-empowered, transformed life made possible through the whole Christ-event.

Chapter 7 introduces intercultural ethics, distinguishing cultural influence from moral relativism. While rejecting situational ethics, Kraye affirms the enduring authority of biblical

commands summarized in love of God and neighbor. Yet applying these commands requires wisdom, since Scripture includes both universal laws and context-specific applications. The Torah functioned as more than a legislative code for Israel. It was instructional wisdom shaped by its cultural setting, pointing beyond details to enduring ethical principles that promote human flourishing. Jesus fulfills and clarifies the law through “grace and truth,” providing the transcultural standard embodied in the cross and empowered by the Spirit. Thus, believers must mine Scripture for wisdom and apply Christ’s law of love appropriately within diverse cultures to form communities that reflect God’s kingdom and foster shalom.

Chapter 8 presents intercultural ethics in action. The Pentateuch’s laws were culturally bounded, intended to form ethical wisdom reflecting God’s character within specific contexts. Intercultural workers must recognize that neither their own nor their hosts’ moral frameworks perfectly align with God’s standards. Cultural perspectives shape conscience, making moral sensitivities variable across societies. While cultures share broad moral values through common grace—integrity, justice, mercy, and respect—their expressions differ, often causing misunderstanding, unnecessary obstacles, and harm. Krayer illustrates from a Pashtun context that what foreigners considered “bribery” was sanctioned by respectable locals as an alternative taxation system, “corruption” was reciprocity, and “lying” was face-saving communication. Ethical categories formed in one culture are not automatically transferable to another. Incarnational living fosters mutual understanding, enlarges moral awareness, and helps believers grow together toward God’s vision of shalom, avoiding judgmentalism and representing Christ faithfully in diverse cultural contexts.

The book concludes that intercultural theology and ethics are an ongoing, humbling journey that deconstructs assumptions, deepens dependence on Jesus, and enriches community. In a postcolonial world, believers must value all cultures, read Scripture together across differences, and pursue God’s kingdom through mutual, transformative relationships.

Analysis

In my experience, a great many global workers need to heed Krayer’s challenge to set their sights beyond merely adapting to local cultural ways of communicating and living. Instead, cross-cultural missionaries must engage, understand, and work within others’ worldviews. With cultural sensitivity, theological insight, and spiritual mettle, Krayer unmask missionaries’ mistaken assumptions. Chief among them are the universalizing and hallowing of one’s own tradition’s theological and ethical formulations, which, although true or beneficial in one’s own context, are culturally bounded and often irrelevant to other cultures.

The breadth and depth of scholarship, informed exegesis, and sound hermeneutics should pass muster with academics, yet the clear and plain style makes this work wholly accessible to practitioners. While contextual theologizing has gained a hearing in some theological circles, Krayer’s proposals on how missionaries think theologically and present the gospel need to be heard by global workers. Western theological training institutions require multiple theology courses, but ethics courses are often optional, and intercultural ethics is absent altogether. The analysis and endorsement of alternative ethical behaviors in Krayer’s final two chapters are extraordinarily insightful, uniquely challenging, and likely disconcerting.

Krayer is attuned to fears, concerns, and potential sources of resistance and addresses them astutely. Nevertheless, I expect his book will elicit criticism and negative reactions in some

quarters. Questioning culturally shaped interpretations may sound like questioning Scripture itself or undermining biblical inerrancy or clarity. Some may view critiques of “coloniality” as politically driven or influenced by secular academic trends rather than grounded in Scripture. Some will react to any mention of deconstructing theological assumptions, a process that they deem destabilizing and threatening to long-held beliefs and communal identity. Those deeply influenced by confessional or systematic traditions may resist prioritizing biblical theology or contextual reinterpretation. Seeing that missionary movements shaped by Western theology have borne much fruit in many contexts, some will attribute lack of fruitfulness primarily to the hardheartedness of resistant peoples. Affirming cultural beauty and God’s activity in all cultures may appear to blur boundaries between Christianity and other religions.

I am comfortable with Kraye’s rationale for giving token gifts to government administrators as an expression of reciprocity and not as bribery, but I expect that not all will agree. Kraye might have added a caveat that, in some other non-Western cultures, the lines of bribery and reciprocity may be drawn differently than they were where he lived. He might also have reminded his readers that factors beyond biblicality and coloniality may contribute to disagreements regarding appropriate intercultural ethics. For instance, individuals in the same culture and faith community may have different *personal* convictions over ethical situations, just as they do about drinking alcohol, eating meat, or frankness versus politeness. However, these are mere quibbles, given the outstanding and unique contribution this book makes.

Those who are crossing cultures to serve Christ with unconscious coloniality will likely be frustrated, censorious of local culture, and limited in their effectiveness if they ignore this book. Brave the challenge and wrestle with it!