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Mission Round Table

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The Global Church and Mission

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Cover image: Artist Bryn Gillette is an artistic ambassador collaborating with the Holy Spirit to “make the Kingdom visible.” Bryn painted the cover illustration as the artist-in-residence for the Lausanne Movement, “The Gospel for Every Person” being the first of four paintings visualizing the missional pillars of the global network’s evangelical leaders and cultural catalysts. In addition to his studio practice, Bryn is a committed husband, father of four, and teacher at Charlotte Christian School in NC. More information about his work is available at bryngillette.com.

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Editorial

Walter McConnell

In 1908, the London Missionary Society put on an exhibition titled “The Pageant of Darkness and Light” to highlight the spread of the gospel to the four corners of the world. This pageant was viewed by more than a-quarter-of-a-million people, many of whom would have been introduced to a poem attributed to John Oxenham¹ titled “In Christ there is no East or West.” Expanding on the words of Paul in Galatians 3:28, that in Christ “There is neither Jew nor Greek ... slave nor free ... male nor female,” he stated:

In Christ there is no East or West,
in Him no South or North;
but one great fellowship of love
throughout the whole wide earth.

Oxenham’s powerful imagery speaks of the global spread of the church. And while many who attended the conference may have thought that this was a new phenomenon, a deeper examination of world history reveals that the Christian faith spread in all directions from the very beginning.

In this issue of *Mission Round Table*, we introduce some of the directions in which the church grew from an early age. We begin with Riad Ghobrial introducing us to the Coptic Church of Egypt, telling us how they received the gospel, and how they have been involved in mission for nearly 2,000 years. What he says will expand our understanding of how God has spread his word about the salvation that comes only through his Son so that it can take root in very different soils.

Mark Oxbrow’s article furthers our consideration of the faith and mission of Orthodox Christianity by querying “to what degree Evangelicals can embrace this as a genuine expression of Christ-centred faith.” While Evangelical and Orthodox believers have sometimes doubted that the other expressed true faith and been guilty of treating the other badly, there are good reasons for us to get to know each other and work together to promote kingdom goals in an increasingly secular and

materialistic world. Our wish is that the introduction of Orthodoxy in both its Coptic and wider forms will give us a broader perspective of what God is doing in the world today and has been doing throughout church history.

The third article is similarly intended to open us up to a broader understanding of how God has worked in church history. In it, I challenge the common refrains that the church used to be “from the West to the rest” and that it is now “from everywhere to everywhere.” While slogans are often used to encourage people to get involved in missions, deeper reflection reveals the limitations of this approach. Without basing our mission thought and practice on solid biblical, theological, and—as this article shows—historical grounding, we may be guilty of painting an incomplete and therefore inaccurate picture of the *missio Dei* and our role in its completion.

In the previous issue of *Mission Round Table*, Ma Tianji introduced the important Chinese medical missionary Gao Jincheng. This issue picks up the story with Ma’s analysis of some controversial issues that create barriers for anyone who wants to accurately tell his story. Beyond the absence of any information on significant parts of his life, it is clear that different storytellers portray him as an ideal example of a man who fits their agenda. Whether it concerns Gao or others, readers must exert great care when reading narrative construction of a life and make sure they weigh other evidence to determine their validity.

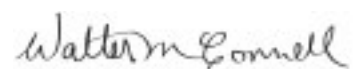
The need to weigh the evidence accurately isn’t exhausted when assessing biographical details. Nathan Martin shows the necessity of evaluating different methods or models for presenting the gospel by considering the attempt to identify a redemptive analogy for relating Jesus to the Buddhist world. While some Christians have tried to build a bridge between the faiths by trying to describe Jesus the Messiah in the terms of a Buddhist

Bodhisattva, Martin demonstrates that it is doomed to failure. As he concludes, “the application of the Buddhist Bodhisattva to the person of Jesus Christ as a redemptive analogy is a dangerous distortion of the doctrine of the incarnation that will make it even harder for a Buddhist to understand the true Christian belief” because the differences between Christ and the Bodhisattva are far greater than the similarities.

Our closing article is the fourth devotional that David Eastwood gave at last year’s OMF Mission Research Consultation. Here, he expounds Paul’s confrontation of Peter as told in Galatians 2:11–21 to give us guidelines for handling disagreements with brothers and sisters in Christ. Despite sharply disagreeing with Peter over his refusal to eat with Gentiles in Antioch after some Jewish brothers came up from Jerusalem, Paul never doubted that his faith was real and attempted to reason with him about his actions rather than simply dismissing him. Paul’s interaction with Peter should move us to show the same kind of humility and desire to dialogue when we meet Christians who act in ways that we feel do not match the standard of the gospel.

No matter whether it is relating to Christians from other parts of the world and different church traditions or co-workers who differ from us in the way they communicate the gospel or treat others, let us learn what we can to understand each other and cooperate in ministry. May we be known as people who act out Oxenham’s exhortation:

Join hands then, Brothers of the Faith,
Whatever your race may be!
Who serves my Father as a son
Is surely kin to me.



Editor, *Mission Round Table*

¹ John Oxenham was the penname of Arthur Dunkerly (1852–1941).

A Historical Overview of Coptic Contribution in *Missio Dei*¹

Riad Ghobrial



Riad Ghobrial was born and raised in Egypt. He earned a BSc in Civil Engineering from Cairo University. For many years he has served as a missionary with the Coptic Orthodox Church in Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, Congo, and Bolivia. He is the founder and director of Mission of Saint Mark for Evangelism, which aims to reach out to the marginalized villages in Egypt. He is the author of *The Journey I and II*, a discipleship program for Arabic-speaking Christians (ASFCS, 2021, 2023), *Look at Me and Have Mercy* (Arabic), a study that examines the Psalms as the cry of the poor (ASFCS, 2022), and headed the team that translated the *Coptic Psalmody* from Coptic and Arabic to Swahili (2016). Riad is currently working on his PhD at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (UK) in the area of Sacramental Theology of the Poor.

Introduction

God does not leave himself without witness (Acts 14:17). This is globally true, particularly in the Egyptian lands. Since the first century AD, Christianity has been alive and fruitful among the Egyptians in various ways. And during various ages, Egyptian voices have gone beyond the borders of their country to reach out toward the ends of the world (Ps 19:4). Known now as the Coptic Orthodox Church,² the Egyptian church, under diverse, and mostly harsh, circumstances, has contributed faithfully to embodying and spreading God's salvific message. Since there is a place for recording the unique contributions each church, according to its gifts and personality,³ has brought to God's universal mission, in this article, I go on a brief journey to explore the different forms of witness expressed by one of the most ancient and yet surviving churches, the Coptic Church.⁴ By looking at the Coptic history of witnessing, this paper seeks to help us identify and reflect on the distinct ways by which a church can give witness to the gospel, and hopefully bring innovative and inspiring changes for other churches.

Throughout history, Christian mission around the globe has experienced significant waves of change in forms, approaches, and practices.⁵ The same is true when examining the Coptic mission, which had its particular paradigm shifts throughout the twenty centuries of Christianity. To help study the history of Coptic witnessing, I divide it into three main eras: (1) The first six centuries, (2) the seventh to the nineteenth century, and (3) the twentieth century to today. During these eras, significant socioeconomic and political changes took place that considerably influenced the witness of the Coptic Church.

First six centuries

Egyptians are deeply religious. As noted by Herodotus: they "are religious

to excess, far beyond any other race of men."⁶ Their religious convictions prepared them, in the fullness of time, to receive the message of salvation and embrace it. Furthermore, some extra-biblical accounts see the coming of the child Jesus with Joseph and Mary to Egypt during their flight from Herod's order to kill the children of Bethlehem (Matt 2:13–15) as mystically paving the way for the gospel to take root and bear fruit among the Egyptians.⁷ It is thus not surprising to find indications of Egyptians who believed in Christ from New Testament times. Egyptians were among those who heard the disciples' testimonies on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10), and Apollos, the prominent teacher of Scripture, was a native of Alexandria, Egypt (Acts 18:24).⁸

Saint Mark

Historically, it is nearly impossible to determine how and when Christianity arrived in Egypt. Nevertheless, the third-to fourth-century historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, asserts that John, surnamed Mark, the writer of the Gospel of Mark and the fellow worker of Peter and Paul,⁹ was the first apostolic figure to evangelise the lands of Egypt beginning with Alexandria. He is thus considered the founder of Christianity in Africa.¹⁰ Since then, tradition has held this foundational story for the Egyptian church.

The story maintains that Mark was a Jew from Cyrene, a city in Pentapolis of North Africa (modern-day Libya). Due to local disputes, the young Mark with his family had to move to Palestine where he got to know Jesus and his disciples.¹¹ Some traditions include Mark among the seventy apostles sent by Jesus. According to the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* (eleventh century), after the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into heaven, as the apostles were preaching the gospel to whomever the Holy Spirit guided them, an angel appeared to Peter in a dream and asked him to preach in two cities—Alexandria and Rome—where

there was a famine, not of bread and water, but from “ignorance of the word of God.”¹² After this angelic call, Peter took Mark and went to preach in Rome. Later, somewhere between AD 58 and 61, Mark arrived alone in Alexandria as a humble, yet experienced evangelist.¹³ As his sandals were torn because of long walks, he turned to a cobbler who, while fixing them, hurt his hand and cried, “God is one!” Mark saw in this cry a divine sign indicating the man’s readiness to receive the gospel. By God’s power, Mark healed Ananius, as the shoemaker was called. After believing in Jesus’ incarnation and salvation, Ananius and his family were baptised. Afterward, Ananius became the first indigenous bishop in Alexandria and his house was the meeting place of the first local church in Egypt. Some years later, around AD 68, when Mark visited the church of Alexandria and planted the seed of the Catechetical School of Alexandria, the local authorities captured him and brutally killed him by pulling him by his neck in the streets of the city.¹⁴ Mark Oxbrow rightly notes, “Planting ecclesial communities of witnessing Christians was the core of Mark’s discipleship and ministry and in a sense a precursor of, if not a contributing factor to, his eventual martyrdom.”¹⁵

Martyrdom

Apparently, Mark’s martyrdom in Alexandria marked the path of the Egyptian church for centuries to come. From that day till now, martyrdom has never left the Coptic Church. Throughout history, a variety of cruel, pagan Roman rulers, some fanatic Chalcedonian Christians of Byzantium, and groups of extremist Muslim Arabs have all contributed to the persecution of the Copts.¹⁶ It is not an overstatement to regard Coptic history as one of martyrdom.¹⁷ Martyrdom, to bear witness with blood, is conceived as God’s gift bestowed to the church. “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil 1:29 RSV).¹⁸ Offering oneself to die for Christ—which is the highest form of love and faith—requires a path of humility and obedience. That is why Matta El-Meskeen affirms that walking on the path of martyrdom is only possible when the believer fully and continuously surrenders to the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ In this regard, Thomas Oden reflects:

Egyptian Christians, through their position of weakness, were able to attract people from other religious backgrounds to join them. Popular Egyptian Christian piety was ... the attracting force of evangelism, rather than social, political, or financial power.

No one generation can subdue the consent of the faithful. No century of persecution can defeat it, not even twenty centuries, as we see in Coptic Egypt. The Spirit promises to guard from permanent error the apostolic witness.²⁰

The Coptic Church calls its liturgical calendar *Anno Martyri*, the year of the martyrs, and its New Year is the feast of the Martyrs. It is “a spiritual preparation for starting a new year.”²¹ Commenting on the words of Tadros Malaty, Myrto Theocharous writes,

One can only admire the faith and devotion of our Coptic brothers and sisters, not only to God, but to their community that transcends death. They call death “a new birth,” thus establishing an image in our minds that we, as Christians, ... are carried in the darkness of the womb, only to be delivered into a new life, a transcendent life.²²

A more recent example powerfully illustrates the witnessing through the blood of martyrdom. On 12 February 2015, the unbelieving world was deeply moved by the faith of the twenty-one martyrs who were slaughtered

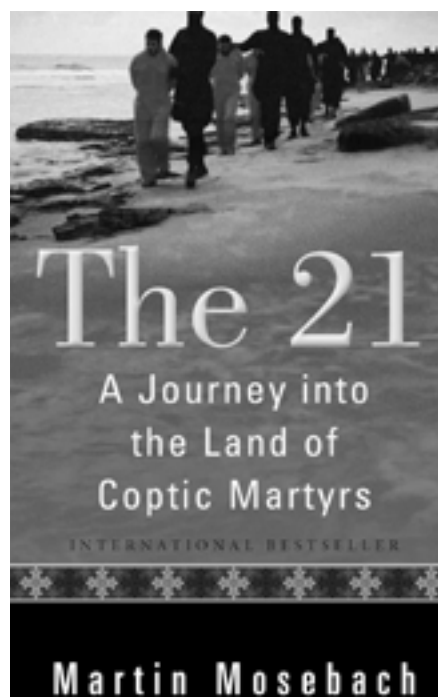
somewhere along the Libyan coast and died calling “Lord Jesus.”²³ Moreover, the whole world could see the martyrs’ families who appeared the following days forgiving and praying for the conversion of the perpetrators.²⁴ Mightily, the martyrs and their families celebrated the victory of their faith over the hatred of their enemies. Core Christian values like forgiveness, humility, and perseverance were in this way made evident in the *life* of the Copts more than their words at death.

Spread of Christianity in the land of Egypt

Although early believers in Egypt were most probably residents of Alexandria, with a majority being Hellenistic Jews, by the end of the second century the church had spread to encompass the wider population. Intriguingly, under one of the harshest periods of persecution during the reigns of Diocletian and Maximian, the Egyptian church grew considerably, as noted by Alan Kreider.²⁵ Based on traditional accounts and recent discoveries, Kreider has concluded that Egyptian Christians, through their position of weakness, were able to attract people from other religious backgrounds to join them.²⁶ Popular Egyptian Christian piety was therefore the attracting force of evangelism, rather than social, political, or financial power.

The conversion from paganism to Christianity of Pachomius the Great (292–348 AD), the father of Christian coenobitic monasticism, is a wonderful example of how the serving love and generous hospitality instinctively demonstrated by the marginalised Christian communities impacted the faith of non-Christians.²⁷ The story tells that Pachomius, then aged twenty (around 312 AD), was pressed into joining a military campaign.

As the conscripts were sailing downstream, the soldiers who were keeping them put in at the city of Thebes and held them in prison there. In the evening some merciful Christians, hearing about them, brought them something to eat and drink and other



Organised monasticism started in the Egyptian deserts. Thousands of men and women filled with God's love obeyed the Spirit's special calling and lived radically by the gospel and for the gospel.

necessities, because they were in distress. When the young man asked about this, he was told that Christians were merciful to everyone, including strangers. Again he asked what a Christian was. They told him, 'They are men who bear the name of Christ, the only begotten Son of God, and they do good to everyone, putting their hope in Him who made heaven and earth and us men.' Hearing of this great grace, his heart was set on fire with the fear of God and with joy. Withdrawing alone in the prison, he raised his hands to heaven in prayer and said, 'O God, maker of heaven and earth, if you will look upon me in my lowliness, because I do not know you, the only true God, and if you will deliver me from this affliction, I will serve your will all the days of my life and, loving all men, I will be their servant according to your command.'²⁸

After he returned safely from that campaign and was released from the army, Pachomius was faithful to his promises, became a catechumen, was baptised, and went on his spiritual journey till he became the famous and inspiring Christian figure. All of that was because anonymous devout Christian women and men had acted generously in humility and love to strangers in distress.

Bible translations and Christian worship

Christianity would not have spread all over the Egyptian lands and survived until this day without the Bible being translated into the local language and the people learning to worship in their mother tongue. Egyptians were predominantly bilingual, speaking Greek and Coptic. Greek was the *lingua franca* of those times, spoken mostly by those residing in cosmopolitan cities like Alexandria. Coptic, the latest development of the ancient Egyptian language, remained the language of the people, mainly in rural areas. Early Christians who were more familiar with Greek used the Septuagint as the Old Testament, since it was translated from Hebrew to Greek in Alexandria, and

gradually adopted the books of the New Testament in their original languages. The growth of the church among Coptic-speaking Christians prompted the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. The Bible was then gradually translated into most Coptic dialects, especially during the times of the Coptic pope Demetrius, who was also known as the Vinedresser (189–231 AD). It is widely accepted that "by the fourth century, the entire canon of the Old and New Testament books was translated in at least the main Coptic dialect."²⁹

Translating the Bible was not exclusively for catechetical purposes, but also for liturgical ones. Praying the Scriptures is the core of Coptic discipleship. Further, "the believers of the Coptic Church encounter the Bible mostly in its liturgical books, and that applies to the Old and New Testaments, both of which enjoy the same stature."³⁰ The church's orthodox doctrines are thus preserved in the people's hearts through the thematic hearing of the Scriptures throughout the year, following certain cyclic lectionaries. On the personal level, the faithful are encouraged to read and meditate on the Word of God as God's personal message for them,³¹ and to pray the Psalms daily according to the Book of Hours (the prayer book of the Coptic Church).

Orthodoxy and heresy

It was expected for an active growing church like the Egyptian one to face, from its early age, strong waves of heresies (e.g., Gnosticism, Arianism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism). Nonetheless, these misinterpretations of the Scriptures and wrong understandings of foundational topics of Christianity, such as the Triune God, the incarnation, and salvation, were confronted by two interdependent forces: (1) Christian popular consciousness and piety, and (2) sound biblical and spiritual teachings. The first is nourished organically within Christian communities and families, while the second is strengthened in the churches and through theological education. This combination produced great figures who contributed to global Christianity in a way that still

leaves us in their debt. During these early centuries, "Egypt [became] one of the most theologically fertile provinces in the history of Christianity. Persons, events, and institutions have exerted an influence which has extended beyond the limits of the country and has influenced the universal Church."³² To name a few of those figures: Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Didymus the Blind, Cyril of Alexandria, Antonius the Great, Pachomius, and Macarius the Great.

Among this cloud of witnesses, one name warrants special attention—Athanasius of Alexandria. Before becoming the twentieth pope and patriarch of Alexandria, Athanasius was one of the leading figures in refuting the Arian heresy. Because of his contribution in presenting the orthodox faith, Athanasius's name has always been associated with the Nicene Creed which was issued during the ecumenical council held in 325 AD. Athanasius's role as bishop and pastor is often overlooked in readings on church history. It is therefore important to note that Athanasius's teachings were mostly liturgical and pastoral; he drew from the people's spiritual encounters and sacramental experiences to defend the soteriological aspect of God's mystery for the edification of his flock.³³ Reciprocally, the people loved him, supported him, and on many occasions protected him from his powerful adversaries, whether emperors or local rulers.³⁴

For common people to demonstrate this kind of attitude was far from rare. Throughout Coptic history, the Egyptian believers acted as the defenders of the faith. At times, they would support their leaders, but at other times, when the leaders deviated from the orthodox spirit and doctrine, they would stand firmly against them. Somehow, their Christian popular consciousness was well-trained by God's Spirit and Word to discern orthodoxy from heterodoxy.

Early monasticism

One additional significant contribution of the Coptic Church to God's mission is monasticism with its various forms. Organised monasticism started in the Egyptian deserts. Thousands of men and women filled with God's love obeyed the Spirit's special calling and lived radically *by* the gospel and *for* the gospel. Living *by* the gospel is perhaps evident in the way early monks and nuns in Egypt structured

their lives. They sold their properties if they had any, lived modestly with barely the necessities, and consecrated their time for praying, meditating on the Scriptures, and engaging in manual labor. Living *for* the gospel, however, often goes unnoticed by outsiders. The primary role of monks and nuns is to intercede for the rest of the church and the suffering world. The fruits of their labour go to cover their basic needs and the rest is offered to the poor.³⁵ In some orders, the monasteries' responsibility is to offer humanitarian aid to the needy, orphans, widows, and strangers to their region.³⁶ Additionally, they may support the church in defending the faith,³⁷ and, when needed, evangelising where no one could go.³⁸ It was through Egyptian monastics that Nubia and Ethiopia were Christianised. Moreover, evidence suggests that Coptic monks evangelised Ireland and other Western nations.³⁹

Seventh to nineteenth century

The Arab invasion of Egypt (AD 641) was a turning point in Coptic history.⁴⁰ The series of dramatic geopolitical changes that happened from the seventh century onwards had a strong impact on the Coptic contribution to God's mission that would last for over twelve centuries. In this regard, Arabic and then Ottoman rule over Egypt closed some doors and opened new avenues for the Coptic witness to walk in.

From Coptic to Arabic

Gradually, the Egyptian community had to adapt itself to the new language brought by the invaders—Arabic. As Arabic became the political and commercial language, Egyptians had to give up their Coptic language, sacrifice their linguistic heritage, and adopt the new language in order to keep their jobs and social status. Within the Christian community, however, a more resistant approach took place. The church became the last refuge for the Coptic language. Prayers, hymns, and Scriptural readings in Coptic have survived until today with some remnant Greek.

Nonetheless, after a few centuries, when the new Coptic generations ceased to understand and communicate using Coptic, the church had to provide an Arabic translation of all its biblical and liturgical books and put them in use for the congregation to be engaged in



Bilingual Coptic-Arabic text of Psalm 15, 17th–18th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Dr. Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, in loving memory of her husband, Professor Maan Z. Madina, 2019

the services.⁴¹ On another level, this transition from Coptic to Arabic played a pivotal role in the church's interaction with the new-arriving culture.

Christian-Muslim dialogue

The coming of Arabic Islam into the Egyptian Christian lands created a fresh theological encounter, an encounter between Christians and Muslims. Copts had, for centuries, held theological conversations with pagans, Jews, and Christians from other traditions. Under Arabic rule, their conversation partners come from a completely new religion and culture. As a result, they needed a profound grasp of the challenging new ideas coming to their lands so they could rightly respond using common language and logic. Numerous deep religious and philosophical dialogues were carried out, in Arabic, between scholars from both sides on topics of agreement and disagreement, such as the possibility of the incarnation, God's oneness and trinitarian nature, fate and free will, the inspiration of Scripture, and many other topics.⁴² It is worth noting that those debates were often far from antagonistic and were at times friendly.

Furthermore, in Cairo, towards the end of the tenth century, the Al-Azhar Mosque and its scholar annexes began

to stand as one of the most influential centres for Islamic learning, first following Shia Islam. Then, under Saladin (twelfth century), it was converted into Sunni Islam. Scholars from around the world came to Cairo to learn, study, and research Islam. In this context, Christian Arabic literature of that time was not limited to apologetics, but also served to edify the Arabic-speaking churches in general and evangelise when possible. By the thirteenth century, the church of Egypt stood as the leading church in producing Christian literature in Arabic. During this period, some remarkable Coptic scholars led the movement of “manuscript discovery, copying, translating, and original composition of Christian theology in Arabic.”⁴³

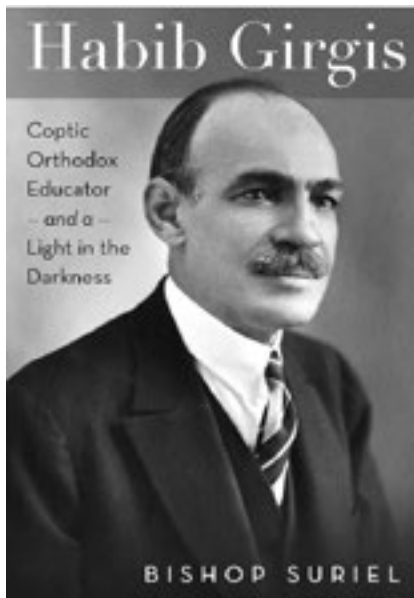
Socioeconomic pressure

Apart from innovative intellectual activities, Christian Egyptian social life also underwent serious changes. The occupiers' laws brought unexpected long-lasting socioeconomic pressure on the Copts who were considered Dhimmis.⁴⁴ For example,

Dhimmis were required to disarm completely and to submit to Muslim rule. Any person found to be armed was either killed or enslaved. Second, Dhimmis were allowed to practice their own faith within churches or synagogues established prior to the advent of Islam, but building of new religious houses was prohibited. It was understood that liturgies would be performed quietly, without ostentation or the organization of open processions or any other function that might prove offensive to Muslims. Each community was under the hegemony of a religious leader answerable to the Muslim governor. Throughout the Middle Ages, Coptic patriarchs bore the burdens of the community vis-à-vis the Muslim caliph, sultan, or governor.⁴⁵

Furthermore, Arabs and Ottomans forced the *jizyah* (poll tax) on subject nations that did not convert to Islam. Originally, *jizyah* was a type of extra tax that was imposed exclusively on non-Muslims in return for providing military security, since the

The coming of Arabic Islam into the Egyptian Christian lands created a fresh theological encounter, an encounter between Christians and Muslims.



army could not include unbelievers. Gradually, it became the only possible way for the Copts to escape from prison, death, or conversion to Islam. Often, local rulers had to induce their superiors, whether sultans or kings, to maintain their position of subservience. Hence, under corrupt rulers, the *jizyah* was driven higher and higher. As a result, the Copts had by the fourteenth century ended up as an impoverished numerical minority in Muslim-dominated Egypt, as they had been before the fourth century.⁴⁶ Moreover, on many occasions, riots would break out and the Christians' properties and churches would be destroyed.⁴⁷ For instance, "the annalist al-Sakhawi stated that (in the year 1448) no church in Egypt escaped some destruction."⁴⁸ Of course, this kind of violence varied in intensity throughout the centuries depending on the rulers' tolerance for Christianity and their understanding and implementation of Sharia law. As for the Copts, usually, the money left after paying the *jizyah* in addition to other types of taxes would typically be spent on supporting their fellow Copts in their immediate needs, and if they had a small sum left to donate to the church, it would go to the support of the clergy and the maintenance or reconstruction of church buildings if local authorities permitted. It was not until 1855 that the *jizyah* was officially abolished as part of national political reforms.⁴⁹

Foreign missions in Egypt

Towards the end of that era, when Egypt gained partial independence from the Ottoman Empire, the Albanian ruler of Egypt, Mohamed Ali (1769–1849),

began to open the country for foreign Christian missions, Catholic and Protestant, to settle in. Most probably, this step was one of the initiatives of Ali's dynasty (1805–1952) intended to strengthen its political and economic ties with European powers.⁵⁰ During that time, Western missions were closely related to colonialism since they mutually benefited from each other. Due to their missional zeal, some mid-nineteenth century European churches saw in the new conditions golden opportunities to spread their presence in the Egyptian lands. Contemporary history of Western missions shows that European and later American missions came to Egypt based on misleading prejudices, namely that Copts are heretics, practitioners of superstitions, and at best nominal Christians. In this regard, Western Christianity has failed, to a certain extent, to grasp the primarily spiritual and experiential Christianity that was alive in Egypt, having in mind their predominantly rational and intellectual Christianity coming out from the Enlightenment period. Further, by doing so, they disregarded the struggle the Coptic Church had to suffer for its survival throughout its long history. Interestingly, when they were unsuccessful in converting Muslims to Christianity, as it was their primary goal, some foreign missions turned their aims to convert Coptic Christians to their own denomination. In the end, instead of learning from them, Western missionaries approached the Copts as objects of study or conversion. Nonetheless, a few Western missionaries chose to cooperate with the local Coptic church with mutual respect and appreciation, especially in providing affordable versions of the Bible, and in poor places, offering substantial humanitarian aid.⁵¹

Twentieth century till today

The end of the nineteenth and the dawn of the twentieth century witnessed another significant change in the Copts' socioeconomic conditions in Egypt. Some civil restrictions have been loosened for the Copts, thus allowing them to contribute anew to God's mission. Refusing to be treated as a minority group in their own land, "the Coptic community has been an important and peaceful agent of cultural, economic and political change."⁵²

Sunday School Movement

At that time, two major movements emerged to renew Coptic witnessing. First, the colonial attitude of foreign missions in Egypt urged the Copts to stand for their forefathers' faith as they had from the early centuries while facing new challenges and using modern tools. Second, taking advantage of some freedom provided by the new political, social, and economic reforms, Copts took part in waves of revival beginning with its own people. This does not mean that the Coptic Church lost its way and needed conversion; instead, like any church in this world, it needed continuous renewal by the Spirit so that its witness can remain relevant to the current context. It is unfair to limit the credits of revival to certain individuals, as has often been the case in historical records. In Egypt, the nameless multitude of devout people were the heroes and bearers of a profound faith. If any name has come up to lead some aspects of the church's renewal, it is because of the prayerful life of a mother, the sacrifice of an older brother, the hospitality of a younger sister, or the modesty of an unknown stranger.

That renewal was exhibited through an active discipleship built on two intertwined streams: spiritual formation and theological teaching. In this regard, one of the most significant initiatives is the Sunday School Movement. Well-prepared, educated, and committed youth went to almost every neighbourhood in Egypt establishing catechetical classes. These youth were led by Archdeacon Habib Guirguis and mentored by Father Mina El-Baramosy (who later became Pope Kyrillos VI).⁵³ In the beginning, this movement was not welcomed by many clerics. By now, however, after more than a hundred years from its beginnings, it is nearly impossible to find a Coptic Church without a Sunday School program for children and youth.⁵⁴ Anthony O'Mahony notes that

the Coptic Church stresses family life and strives to draw groups from different social strata, ages, and levels of education into the Church system. Hence there are groups for women, youth, and different age groups for children, university students, young couples, and the like. Service to the Church and a social life that rallies around the church has become central for most Copts.⁵⁵

Besides stressing conscious participation in the church's mysteries, the catechetical program is usually based on yearly reflection on topics such as biblical studies, Christian ethics, church dogmas, liturgical formation, church history, hymnology, Coptic language, and many other subjects. Sunday School programs are structured in a way to prepare church servants to lead the movement when they reach the appropriate age and level of Christian formation. In addition, regular home visitation is one of the foundational cornerstones of Coptic witnessing. It reflects the profound conviction of pastoral care. Furthermore, the logistics of the whole movement depends on self-funding. Until today, Sunday School teachers in Coptic churches are volunteers who devote most of their weekends and weekday evenings for the service of the church.

Migrating Church

In the second half of the twentieth century, waves of Coptic emigration due to economic, social, or political reasons resulted in the formation of new Coptic communities and churches in Europe, North America, and Australia. Responding to the requests of those communities, the mother church in Egypt sent priests to provide pastoral care to the Copts in their new homes rather than to evangelise in new territories.⁵⁶ In every church, priests depended on local church servants to implement Sunday School programs among other activities with special attention given to children and youth. As happened in Egypt a millennium ago, churches in the lands of emigration engage in cultural conservation. Newly formed churches do not provide spiritual care only, but they become in most places “the primary and most important place of Coptic social (and cultural) life.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Copts gradually began to integrate into society and interact with the wider community in social and political activities. In the last two decades, Copts who were born in the lands of emigration have been ordained priests or bishops and have begun to reflect on their responsibility to witness in these communities. In this way,

Migration has placed Copts in a position of dialogue and explanation regarding their faith, forcing the Coptic Church to formulate its identity in a more pluralistic context rather than against Islam alone. The diaspora has expanded the sphere

With the freedom of movement that Copts began to enjoy in the twentieth century, and due to their exposure to other nations, cultures, and religions, they began to discern the need and the opportunity to engage in spreading the gospel outside their traditional borders.

of Coptic influence in new contexts by encouraging the concretising of identity and the extended hand of ecumenical outreach.⁵⁸

Accordingly, with the blessings of the mother church in Egypt, “missionary-focused” churches were born out of the traditional ones, to reach out to people from different backgrounds and cultures. One of the pressing questions being discussed among the leaders of those churches is what Coptic identity would look like in their multicultural communities.⁵⁹

Evangelistic initiatives

With the freedom of movement that Copts began to enjoy in the twentieth century, and due to their exposure to other nations, cultures, and religions, they began to discern the need and the opportunity to engage in spreading the gospel outside their traditional borders. In fact, moving in an evangelistic direction came first as an answer to African requests. As early as 1918, some Kenyan, South African, Nigerian, and later Congolese independent churches approached the Coptic Church in Egypt asking to join it. It is worth noting that the

Coptic Church was an underprivileged church, devoid of attractive financial or political power. Nonetheless, the African Christians were attracted to it because they saw in the Coptic Church an African church, an authentic orthodox and apostolic church, the historical church of Alexandria, and believed that it would not serve colonial purposes nor would it show the slightest trace of racial discrimination.⁶⁰ Without hesitation, Copts were prompted to respond to their neighbours' calls. However, due to political considerations and economic limitations, early attempts failed. Sustainable actions were delayed until the 1960s. Since then, long-term visits, discipleship programs, and liturgical, diaconal, and clerical training in those places resulted in the permanent establishment of tens of local churches and communities in these countries and other African nations.⁶¹

Towards the end of the twentieth century, other evangelistic steps took place in Latin America. Monks were originally sent to pastor some Egyptian communities in Brazil, Bolivia, and Mexico. While living there, they began to discern the need to widen their service to include locals, from these countries and



Coptic and Arabic inscriptions of John 4:13–14 in an old Cairo church (Public domain), via Wikimedia Commons.

beyond, who were not part of any other Christian community. Consequently, Coptic communities in Latin America are composed mostly of locals.⁶² A decade ago, a similar process took place in some Asian countries, such as the Philippines, South Korea, Indonesia, and Japan.

Wherever the Coptic Church goes, the servants use the most common Bible translation available, and they translate the liturgical books into the vernacular. Furthermore, in most places, Coptic witness often takes a holistic approach. Metropolitan Serapion's views can represent the Coptic Church's understanding of holistic service. He says, "The Coptic Orthodox Church is not merely a school involved in research work and teaching dogma, but also an institution that worships God and serves mankind. It works for the renewal of this world, and hopefully awaits for the world to come."⁶³

Epilogue: Missional reflection

This brief historical overview shows how diverse the forms of Coptic witnessing are. Throughout the past two thousand years, the Coptic Church has experienced significant developments and shifts in its contribution to God's mission while the Holy Spirit has been building up its unique personality.

The foundational story of Mark the apostle reveals how, on the personal level, one's submission to God's call within an ecclesial environment is the basis of missional work. Further, the servants' inner and outer vulnerability is key to planting the seed of faith in people. This voluntary, and in many cases obliged (such as when under foreign rulers), vulnerability remains one of the Coptic features of witnessing that proves well that God's power is manifested through weakness (2 Cor 12:9). From the locals' point of view, a mission that starts from below, from the margins, from the lower strata, from the working class, as happened with the shoemaker, has the potential to become more rooted and indigenised.⁶⁴

Closely related to the rootedness of faith is the organic church growth that helped spread and reinforce the Christian faith in the Egyptian lands. As an often-repressed community, the Coptic Church in most of its history was primarily concerned about the survival of its believers' faith

and less concerned with sharing the verbal gospel beyond its borders. Yet, Copts maintained their faith and their witness is alive and flourishes as they fulfil the Great Commandment: Love your God and your neighbour. Under severe circumstances, Egyptian Christians tried in every possible way to engage positively with their neighbours, mostly by their deeds and, when possible, by words. In any case, the incarnate love continues to be the driving force of Coptic witnessing. Thus, loving God and the neighbour, or, better said, loving God *in* the neighbour can perhaps summarise the Coptic understanding of mission. Serving out of love in any possible way is the fruit of knowing and receiving God's love. This love should remain the attracting force for other people to believe in Christ and join the church.

The same love was shown in the church's treatment of the issue of languages: from Greek and Coptic to Arabic, and recently to numerous modern languages. From its very beginning until this day, the Coptic Church expressed flexibility, care, and priority for the gospel to be comprehended by its people, instead of maintaining a language that is alien to the congregations' minds. Having said that, it remains the Copts' responsibility to preserve the richness of the church's legacy for the coming generations to learn from.

Looking at the continuously changing world, it becomes evident that Copts have a duty to refashion once again their tools of reading and interacting with the new contexts in which they live. On the one hand, without forgetting their past, Copts need to remain attentive to the signs of the times and discern how to respond contextually to current challenges. On the other hand, it is painful to see certain Coptic evangelistic initiatives uncritically adopt colonial Westernised approaches to mission. Therefore, since most Coptic servants are more doers than reflectors, perhaps, while they care for their Coptic rootedness, they also need some training so that they gain awareness in terms of research skills and contemporary methodologies. This may perhaps influence other Christians as well and will enhance the ecumenical relationships that the world needs now more than ever.⁶⁵

In the end, Coptic witnessing is historically a popular ecclesial witnessing. It is not the task of certain individuals but of the whole body of Christ. That

is one of the reasons why the Coptic Church is often reluctant to adopt the word *mission* in its ecclesial vocabulary. Instead, they prefer to use words like service, discipleship, and witnessing to express the church's organic evangelistic responsibility. In that sense, children of light cannot help but shine, even if they are enclosed in a dark prison or worship in a remote desert. Thus, the primary goal of Coptic discipleship is the continuous transformation of its people through the work of the Holy Spirit so that they are shaped into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ, knowing that becoming like him is the only way to redeem the world and extend God's Kingdom. **MRT**

¹ Parts of this article appeared in Riad Ghobrial, "Rethinking or Rediscovering a Theology of Mission? A Response to the Current Challenges of Coptic Orthodox Missiology," *Salt: Crossroads of Religion and Culture* 2 (2023). The focus there is more on the contemporary mission work and is supplementary to this article.

² The word Coptic is a derivative of the Greek word *Aigyptos* which refers to native Egyptians and their language. After the Arab invasion, it refers to the Egyptian Christian community.

³ Cf. Henning Wrogemann, *Intercultural Theology, Volume Two: Theologies of Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2018), 380.

⁴ Exploring two thousand years of history in a short article unavoidably entails some sort of reductionism.

⁵ Cf. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011).

⁶ Herodotus, *The Histories*, II, 37, trans. George Rawlinson (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Media, 2013), 111.

⁷ Cf. C. Wilfred Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity: From Its Origins to 451 CE* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 17.

⁸ In these two accounts, the believers were Egyptian Jews known as diasporic or Hellenistic Jews.

⁹ Acts 12:25, 13:5; 2 Tim 4:11; 1 Pet 5:3. Coptic tradition identifies John Mark as the same person mentioned in those verses.

¹⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 16:1–2.

¹¹ Coptic tradition holds that Jesus celebrated his last Passover in Mark's mother's house and that it is the same house that hosted the disciples after the resurrection and during the events of the Pentecost.

¹² Sāwirus ibn al-Muqaffa', *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria, Part 1: St. Mark - Theonas (300 AD)*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 1, ed. and trans. Basil Evetts (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1904), 141.

¹³ Pope Shenouda III, *The Beholder of God: Mark the Evangelist, Saint, and Martyr*, trans. Samir F. Mikhail and Maged S. Mikhail (Santa Monica, CA: St. Peter and St. Paul Coptic Orthodox Church, 1995), 43.

¹⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *The African Memory of Mark: Reassessing Early Church Tradition* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), 157–59.

¹⁵ Mark Oxbrow, "Mission and Martyrdom: A Reappraisal of Mark in African Context," in *Living the Gospel of Jesus Christ: Orthodox and Evangelical Approaches to Discipleship and Christian Formation*, ed. Mark Oxbrow and Tim Grass, *Regnum Studies in Mission* (Oxford: Regnum, 2021), 199.

¹⁶ E. Amelineau, *Les Actes des Martyrs de L'Eglise*

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- ¹⁷ Maged S. A. Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt: Religion, Identity and Politics after the Arab Conquest* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 133–34.
- ¹⁸ Matta El-Meskeen, *Martyrdom and Martyrs: A Spiritual Study* (Arabic), 3rd ed. (Scetis, Egypt: The Monastery of St Macarius, 1987), 9–10.
- ¹⁹ El-Meskeen, *Martyrdom and Martyrs*, 55–56.
- ²⁰ Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of African Orthodoxy: Return to Foundations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016), 57.
- ²¹ Tados Y. Malaty, *Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church* (Alexandria: St. George Coptic Orthodox Church, 1993), 27.
- ²² Myrto Theocharous, "Understanding the Blessing of Persecution: Reflections on Philipians," in *Living the Gospel of Jesus Christ: Orthodox and Evangelical Approaches to Discipleship and Christian Formation*, ed. Mark Oxbrow and Tim Grass, Regnum Studies in Mission (Oxford: Regnum, 2021), 211.
- ²³ Martin Mosebach, *The 21: A Journey into the Land of Coptic Martyrs* (Walden: Plough, 2020), 11. Twenty martyrs were from Egypt and one was from Ghana. They were all simple workers.
- ²⁴ Mark Woods, "'The 21': The Story of the Coptic Christian Martyrs," *Christian Today*, 15 February 2019, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/the-21-the-story-of-the-coptic-christian-martyrs/131772.htm> (accessed 28 February 2024).
- ²⁵ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 246–47.
- ²⁶ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 247.
- ²⁷ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 116–17.
- ²⁸ *First Greek Life of Pachomius*, 4–5; *Pachomian Koinonia Volume 1: The Life of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples*, trans. Armand Veilleux (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1980), 300.
- ²⁹ Hany Takla, "The Coptic Bible," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Orthodox Christianity*, ed. Eugen J. Pentiu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 83.
- ³⁰ Riad Ghobrial and Myrto Theocharous, "The Bible in the Coptic Tradition," in *Your Word is Truth Volume 2: The Bible in Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosalee Velloso Ewell, Ani Ghazaryan Drissi Gunnar Mägi, Vasile-Octavian Mihoc, and Lyn van Rooyen (Swindon: United Bible Societies and Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2023), 97.
- ³¹ Matta El-Meskeen, *The Communion of Love* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1984), 16–17; Matta El-Meskeen, "The Bible as a Personal Message to You," http://www.coptics.info/Frmatta/The_bible_as_a_personal_message_to_you.htm (accessed 28 February 2024).
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- ³³ George Habib Bebawi, *The Role of Liturgy in Laying the Eastern Theological Foundation* (Arabic), (Cairo: Coptology, 2012), 4; Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 217.
- ³⁴ Samuel Sharpe, *Egyptian Mythology and Egyptian Christianity, With Their Influence on the Opinions of Modern Christendom* (London: John Russell Smith, 1863), 104, 108; David M. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 131.
- ³⁵ Bentley Layton, "Social Structure and Food Consumption in an Early Christian Monastery: The Evidence of Shenoute's Canons and the White Monastery Federation A.D. 385–465," *Le Muséon* 115 (2002): 25–55.
- ³⁶ As in the Pachomian monasteries. It is recorded that Pachomius's death was caused by an infection that was transmitted to him as a result of caring for patients during an epidemic that was raging in his time.
- ³⁷ For example, we learn that during the Arian tensions, Anthonius the Great left the desert and went to Alexandria to support the believers.
- ³⁸ A contemporary treatment of the relationship between monasticism and mission can be consulted in Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, "Monastics as Missionaries of a Subversive Hope," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 13, no. 1 (2022): 9–27.
- ³⁹ Robert K. Ritner Jr., "Egyptians in Ireland: A Question of Coptic Peregrinations," *Rice Institute Pamphlet-Rice University Studies* 62, no. 2 (1976): 65–87.
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- ⁴² Cf. Johannes Den Heijer, "Apologetic Elements in Coptic-Arabic Historiography: The Life of Afrahim ibn Zur'ah, 62nd Patriarch of Alexandria," in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period, (750–1258)*, ed. Samir Khalil Samir and Jorgen S. Nielsen (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 192–202; Ann Giletti, "An Arsenal of Arguments: Arabic Philosophy at the Service of Christian Polemics in Ramón Martí's Pugio fidei," in *Mapping Knowledge: Cross-Pollination in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Charles Burnett and Pedro Mantas-España (Cordoba and London: CNERU – The Warburg Institute, 2014), 153.
- ⁴³ Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 65.
- ⁴⁴ Dhimmis referred to Christians and Jews who agreed to live in Muslim territories.
- ⁴⁵ "Ahl Al-Dhimmah," in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, ed. Aziz Suryal Atiya (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 72–73.
- ⁴⁶ Shaun O'Sullivan, *Coptic Conversion and the Islamization of Egypt* (Chicago: The Middle East Documentation Center in Chicago, 2006), 65.
- ⁴⁷ Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Stead, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 20.
- ⁴⁸ "Mamluks and the Copts," in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5, ed. Aziz S. Atiya (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 1517–1518.
- ⁴⁹ Febe Armanios, *Coptic Christianity in Ottoman Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 151.
- ⁵⁰ Armanios, *Coptic Christianity in Ottoman Egypt*, 151.
- ⁵¹ For more details about the complexity of the relationship between Copts and Western missionaries, please refer to Alastair Hamilton, *The Copts and the West, 1439–1822: The European Discovery of the Egyptian Church*, Oxford-Warburg Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Paul Sedra, *From Mission to Modernity: Evangelicals, Reformers and Education in Nineteenth Century Egypt* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011); Tim Grass, "Evangelicals and Eastern Christianity," in *The Routledge Research Companion to the History of Evangelicalism*, ed. Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2018); Heleen Murre-van den Berg, *New Faith in Ancient Lands: Western Missions in the Middle East in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, Studies in Christian Mission (Leiden: Brill, 2007).
- ⁵² Anthony O'Mahony, "The Coptic Orthodox Church in Modern Egypt," in *Eastern Christianity in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Anthony O'Mahony and Emma Loosley (London: Routledge, 2009), 56.
- ⁵³ For more details about these two figures, see Bishop Suriel, *Habib Girgis: Coptic Orthodox Educator and a Light in the Darkness* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017); and Daniel Fanous, *A Silent Patriarch: Kyrillos VI Life and Legacy* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2019).
- ⁵⁴ It is worth noting that during the lifetime of Guirguis, the Sunday School Movement reached the Coptic dioceses in Sudan. The Coptic Sunday School Movement also influenced other renewal movements in Ethiopia and beyond. See Ralph Lee, "Discipleship in Oriental Orthodox and Evangelical Communities," *Religions* 12, no. 5 (2021): 320.
- ⁵⁵ O'Mahony, "The Coptic Orthodox Church in Modern Egypt," 76.
- ⁵⁶ Wedad Tawfik, "Discipleship Transforming the World: A Coptic Orthodox Perspective," *International Review of Mission* 106, no. 2 (2017): 273.
- ⁵⁷ Sara Lei Sparre, Alistair Hunter, Anne Rosenlund Jørgensen, Lise Paulsen Galal, Fiona McCallum, and Marta Wozniak, *Middle Eastern Christians in Europe: Histories, Cultures, and Communities* (St. Andrews: University of St. Andrews, 2015), 11.
- ⁵⁸ D. A. Ogren, "The Coptic Church in South Africa: The Meeting of Mission and Migration," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70, no. 1, Art 2061 (2014): 3.
- ⁵⁹ Fr. Michael Sorial, *Incarnational Exodus: A Vision for the Coptic Orthodox Church in North America* (Washington, DC: Agora University Press, 2020), 41–42; Shereen Marcus, *An Immigrant Church No Longer: Reshaping Youth Ministry for Coptic Churches in North America* (Washington, DC: Agora University Press, 2020), 19–20.
- ⁶⁰ Cf. David B. Barrett and T. John Padwick, *Rise Up and Walk: Conciliarism and the African Indigenous Churches, 1815–1987* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 33. There is an increasing interest among Sub-Saharan African scholars in Coptic Christianity and its links with the rest of African Christianity. See for example, Victor Masilo S. Molobi, "Drawing a Connection between Coptic Christianity, Their St Mark Tradition, and Contemporary AICs: A Conversation with Coptic Bishop Markos," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 44, no. 1 (2018): 1–16; Agai M. Jock, "The Coptic Origins of the Yoruba," *Theologia Viatorum* 45, no. 1, a124 (2021).
- ⁶¹ Today, the Coptic Church is present in more than eighteen African countries. Rf. Pope Tawadros II, 'The Church and Africa' (Arabic), in *Al-Kiraza* (27–28) (Cairo: Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate, 2019), 3.
- ⁶² Here, Coptic began to refer to the church's faith and not necessarily the nationality.
- ⁶³ Quoted in Tawfik, "Discipleship Transforming the World," 275.
- ⁶⁴ Some hold that the disappearance of the churches in North Africa was due to its lack of indigenisation. Cf. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21.
- ⁶⁵ In the last two decades, serious initiatives took place seeking better cooperation between the churches based on friendship, respect, and mutual understanding. For example, see David P. Teague and Ralph Lee, eds., *Turning Over a New Leaf: Evangelical Missions and the Orthodox Churches of the Middle East* (Oxford: Regnum, 2021); Kenneth R. Ross, Jooseop Keum, Kyriaki Avtzi, and Roderick R. Hewitt, *Ecumenical Missiology: Changing Landscapes and New Conceptions of Mission* (Oxford: Regnum, 2016).

Orthodox Mission in Evangelical Perspective

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In the aftermath of the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, BBC TV produced a documentary that included a brief conversation in a ruined Ukrainian Orthodox church between an earnest young American short-term missionary and an elderly Orthodox believer who was lying on his back restoring the mural of the Pantocrator¹ in the roof of the ruined church. The evident commitment to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people of Ukraine, so recently released from Communist oppression, was inspiring, but as the conversation continued, what was even more moving was the grace with which the older man shared his deep faith that had carried him through years of atheistic oppression. Conversion took place that afternoon, but perhaps not the conversion that the leaders of this mission trip had been expecting. At the end of this brief report, the camera caught the tears in the eyes of a young man who had discovered a whole new meaning to Christian discipleship amongst the dusty rubble of an Orthodox church.

In this article, I hope to explore the nature of Orthodox faith and mission and to ask to what degree Evangelicals can embrace this as a genuine expression of Christ-centred faith. To put it more bluntly, are Orthodox Christians true believers or is their faith heretical, and is Orthodox mission anything more than nationalistic proselytism?² We cannot deny that in several countries, mainly in Europe, Evangelicals have suffered badly at the hands of the Orthodox Church which has often claimed an hegemony over religious affairs in their nation. At the same time, simple Orthodox believers have been greatly hurt by Evangelical missions that have regarded them as legitimate “targets” for aggressive evangelism, as “unreached” people groups in need of salvation. Persecution has been two-way and hurts have persisted in many of these communities for many generations. Perhaps now is the time to listen more carefully to each

other, to re-examine our assumptions and prejudices and ask whether there might be a new way forward in fraternal mission. This article will propose that—in the light of increasing secularisation, materialism, and individualism in many of the contexts where we minister—Evangelical and Orthodox Christians need each other as we work together to present humanity with a convincing witness to the divine Kingdom to which all daughters and sons of God are called.

But first we must deal with some preliminary questions. Who are the Orthodox? What do they believe? Are the differences between Evangelical and Orthodox believers fundamental to Christian truth or are they more historical, cultural, and related to choices in modes of discipleship? And most critically, in our missions community, is Orthodox mission a genuine expression of the *missio Dei* and perhaps an expression that can complement and enhance our own Evangelical witness?

Who are the Orthodox?

In the 1970s, I spent three years in one of the better Evangelical Anglican theological schools in the UK and left to begin my ministry as an Anglican minister with absolutely no understanding of what, or who, Orthodox Christians were other than the (erroneous) fact that they worshipped icons. It took the fall of the Berlin wall, a request that I serve as Europe Director for the Church Mission Society (CMS), and some long nights of reading³ to change all that. Despite decades of ecumenical encounter, as was vividly demonstrated at the Lausanne II Congress in Cape Town in 2010, many Evangelical leaders and congregation members remain woefully ignorant about the history, beliefs, and daily discipleship of their Orthodox sisters and brothers. This is not normally their fault—there are very significant barriers to overcome. The first is language. Most Orthodox believers speak Russian,

Romanian, Amharic, Greek, Serbian, or Albanian, whereas most Evangelicals speak Spanish, English, Swahili, French, Korean, and a swath of other languages. For this reason, contemporary Orthodox theology, discipleship literature, TV programmes, and conference opportunities are not readily accessible to Evangelicals. While the language barrier also exists between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals or between Korean Evangelicals and those from Nigeria, the Orthodox/Evangelical language barrier is much more pronounced.

The second barrier is cultural. As Evangelicals, we are often blind to the degree to which our faith expression is tied to our culture, be that American, Malaysian, or Nigerian. As mission workers, we are trained and have some expertise in crossing cultures, but the vast majority of missionaries are engaged in cultures that have been significantly influenced by Western Enlightenment thinking, either directly or through centuries of colonial influence. (One important exception here would be China together with some Chinese diaspora communities, which suggests that OMF missionaries may have important insights to bring to working with “pre-Enlightenment” cultures like those of the Orthodox world.) It is important to understand that most Orthodox believers have been born into Slavic, Middle Eastern, or North African cultures that have not been shaped by the Enlightenment or, in the case of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, have been radically reshaped by Communism. We think differently.

The third barrier is that of ecclesial history. Whether we are aware of it or not, evangelical theology is deeply shaped by the Protestant Reformation. Our worship, our discipleship practices, our witness and mission are radically shaped by that sixteenth-century revolution in theology. None of the Orthodox churches have been through the Reformation. Whether that is a bad or a good thing is beyond the point at this stage in our discussion, but it does make communicating theologically that much more challenging.

So, getting back to basics: who are the Orthodox?⁴ The first thing to be clear about is that, rather like Evangelicals, they are a family of churches who recognise a common root but have developed slightly different beliefs and

Christian lifestyles. As with Evangelicals, there are even some Orthodox whom other Orthodox do not regard as being Orthodox! The common root is the apostolic church of New Testament times and every Orthodox Church believes that its leaders (bishops, priests, etc.) are linked back to that early church through apostolic succession—the ordination of leaders by other leaders in a chain stretching back around two thousand years to the first apostles. For most of the first Christian millennium, there was no “Orthodox” Church, just the Church—united in ministry and faith and constantly struggling to gain a deeper understanding of God’s purposes amongst his people, the nature of God, the meaning of Christ’s presence in Palestine, the significance of his resurrection, and much more. It is only after the Great Schism of 1054 CE that we can begin to talk of an Orthodox Church (or Churches) as distinct from Roman Catholics and those of other Christian traditions. This does not mean that all Orthodox Christians were believing the same things, but they made a much better job of holding together their theological diversity in functional unity than Evangelicals have done more recently.⁵

The most significant division within the Orthodox family occurred at the Council of Chalcedon⁶ in 451 CE after a long debate about the two natures of Christ—human and divine—and how these are held together. The definition produced at the Council stated

We confess that one and the same Christ, Lord, and only-begotten Son, is to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division or separation. The distinction between the natures was never abolished by their union, but rather the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person (prosopon) and one hypostasis.

This theological debate has resulted in two major sub-families of Orthodox Churches: the Eastern Orthodox (*dyophysite*, two-nature or Chalcedonian Churches) and the Oriental Orthodox (*miaphysite*, one-nature or Pre-Chalcedonian churches). The more significant members of these two families are shown in the table below.

There is much debate today about the reasons for this split. Some scholars hold that it was primarily a theological dispute exacerbated by the fact that the major proponents were using primarily Greek philosophical concepts that were not fully understood or used by theologians from the East, while others maintain that there were significant geopolitical factors at play as well as cultural issues.⁷ Subsequent history has pulled these two sub-families further apart as one had to face the rise of Islam and the other the power of Catholicism and, more recently, persecution under Communism.⁸

The separation between churches within the two sub-families—it would not be correct to call this division or split—is largely a result of ethnic or national difference and tells us something about how Orthodox faith is tied to a person’s whole identity, including their language and nationality. We see this most clearly in places like the USA or UK where Russian, Greek, Ukrainian, and Serbia Orthodox communities live alongside each other, using their national languages and preserving their cultures, whilst at the same time the Orthodox Church in America⁹ has emerged to serve a new generation of Orthodox believers and converts who feel more American than Greek or Albanian. All of these “national” churches (within a sub-family) share the same doctrine and even the same liturgy.

Sadly, politics continues to play their part in church separations as we have seen during the recent animosity between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Russian

Eastern Orthodox (Chalcedonian)	Oriental Orthodox (Pre-Chalcedonian)
Russian Orthodox	Ethiopian Orthodox
Romanian Orthodox	Coptic Church of Egypt
Greek Orthodox	Eritrean Orthodox
Serbian Orthodox	Syrian Orthodox
Georgian Orthodox Church	Armenian Orthodox
Albanian Orthodox Church	Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church
Ecumenical Patriarchate (Turkey)	Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch

Orthodox Church over the recognition of Orthodox bodies in Ukraine. This is not our concern in this article, but it does draw our attention to a major danger for both Orthodox and Evangelical churches. Saint Paul calls us to pray for the rulers of our nations, and there is a long and good tradition of Christians being concerned for the welfare of their nation, its governance, and people, but when this strays over the line into Christian Nationalism, we run into real dangers. This is true whether we are thinking of Russian Orthodox support for the Russian imperial aspirations of Vladimir Putin,¹⁰ American Evangelical support for a right-wing “America first” agenda,¹¹ or even an unquestioning Zionist support for the secular nation of Israel. Orthodox believers readily accept that nationalism is one of the greater dangers for their church.

The two-thousand-year historical perspective of Orthodox Christians—who still use forms of worship developed by some of our greatest theologians, such as John Chrysostom (347–407 CE)—naturally gives them a particular way of looking at Evangelicals whose church traditions, theology, and forms of worship have only evolved over the past two centuries or less. Orthodox Christians, understandably, regard themselves as the “original” Christians and Evangelicals (alongside Catholics, Lutherans, and others) as “those who left, but are welcome to return” to the true Church. Though older attitudes persist, there is a contemporary shift amongst some Orthodox writers towards regarding our different ecclesial histories as parallel developments that may now be complementary in an enriching way.¹²

We must now move on from historical considerations to an examination of those factors that might draw us together in mission in an increasingly secularised world.

The Evangelical faith of the Orthodox Church

In the Foreword to the recently published book by Bradley Nassif, *The Evangelical Theology of the Orthodox Church*, Professor Andrew Lough writes, “*Perhaps what impresses me most about the book is the note of urgency: in fundamental ways Orthodox and Evangelicals need one another and Professor Nassif is concerned to show us ways in which we can fulfil this need of each other through listening to one another through mutual*

encounter.”¹³ This need for one another had been a growing conviction in my own life during the 1990s and through the early years of the twenty-first century, but matters came to a head, for me and other Evangelical leaders, during the Lausanne Congress in Cape Town in 2010. In one particular plenary session, with over four thousand Evangelicals present alongside just a handful of “observers” from Orthodox, Catholic, and mainline Protestant Churches, a comprehensive survey of “unreached peoples” around the world was presented. It soon became clear that this category of “unreached” included, for the presenter, all of the Orthodox communities from Chicago to Moscow and Addis Ababa to Kerala. Leaving the plenary hall in dismay, a small number of Evangelicals met around the coffee machines with Orthodox leaders who were equally upset, and so began what today has become the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative (LOI), to which Bradley Nassif was an early contributor. Sixteen international consultations¹⁴ and numerous robust conversations later, this initiative of Orthodox and Evangelical leaders, including leaders from mission movements, such as The Navigators, SIM, CMS, Cru, SIL-Wycliffe, and the Bible Societies, has begun to open windows of understanding, repentance, and reconciliation.¹⁵

In the early stages of the LOI, it became clear that Orthodox leaders, who have been in formal theological dialogue with the Catholic Church and so-called mainline Protestant denominations through gatherings of the World Council of Churches and its regional equivalents, had begun to discover that they actually

had more in common theologically with Evangelicals than with the increasingly liberal, traditional non-Orthodox denominations. An early manifestation of this theological alignment was observed in the 1990s when the European Charismatic Consultation of 1988¹⁶ attracted Pentecostal Christians, those amongst Catholics, Anglicans, Lutheran, and others who had been influenced by the Charismatic Renewal¹⁷ of the preceding decades as well as Orthodox Christians, particularly from the Middle East. It is to four aspects of this emerging theological alignment that we now turn.

1. A biblical faith

Evangelicals love their Bibles, or at least that is what we claim. However, it is not totally impossible, in contemporary Europe at least, to find oneself attending an Evangelical worship service in which not one sentence of Scripture is read, even during the sermon. In contrast, Bradley Nassif reminds us that:

Paul Evdokimov observes that the [Orthodox] Divine Liturgy contains ninety-eight quotations from the Old Testament and 114 from the New Testament. Fr Alexander Schmemmann estimates that “more than half of all liturgical texts are biblical.” In these texts the Bible is used in three distinct ways: a) direct readings or hymns taken from the Bible itself, b) biblical words and phrases used throughout liturgical petitions, c) use of biblical images, symbols or expressions (typologies) when making theological statements.¹⁸

The Orthodox faith is deeply rooted in Scripture.



Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative members consult at the 2022 global consultation in Salzburg hosted by the Syriac Orthodox Church. Source: Mark Oxbrow.



Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative members at evening prayers in the Syriac Orthodox Church in Salzburg during the 2022 Salzburg Consultation. Source: Lausanne Movement.

The question arises as to the relationship between Scripture and the Tradition of the Church or, more specifically, the teaching of the Church Fathers and Mothers to whom Orthodox Christians often turn. Despite the ways in which Orthodox Christians treasure the writings of these early theologians, they are never in doubt that the Bible has primacy. In 1972, one of the great Orthodox teachers of the twentieth century wrote an introduction to his book on Scripture that could just as easily have come from an Evangelical pen. He writes:

Christian ministers are not supposed to preach their private opinions, at least from the pulpit. Ministers are commissioned and ordained in the church precisely to preach the Word of God. They are given some fixed terms of reference – namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ – and they are committed to this sole and perennial message. They are expected to propagate and to sustain “the faith which was once delivered to the saints.” Of course, the Word of God must be preached “efficiently”. That is, it should always be so presented as to carry conviction and command the allegiance of every new generation and every particular group. ... But, above all, the identity of the message must be preserved.¹⁹

In later chapters of his book, Florovsky stresses the role of the church (corporate) as interpreter of Scripture, the dangers of “individual interpretation” that is not weighed and received by the whole church, and the importance of a dialogue of interpretation across time (i.e., with the early Fathers and Mothers of the church) and distance

(i.e., across contemporary cultures and linguistic communities).

In symbolic ways also, the Bible and, in particular, the Gospels are valued and given great honour, sometimes in stark contrast to the tatty Bibles that Evangelicals may use to prop up a cup of coffee or support a digital projector! The Orthodox Gospels are often encased in a jewel-encrusted binding, held high in liturgical procession, kissed, and kept in a place of honour. (I well remember working with a Romanian Orthodox team preparing Alpha course videos for use in their context and the horror that was expressed when Nicky Gumbel dropped his Bible to the floor to free up both hands for some gesture!)

Traditions of biblical interpretation differ between Evangelical and Orthodox communities and, to a degree, reflect the absence of Enlightenment and Reformation influences within Orthodoxy alluded to earlier. John Breck explains the principles of patristic hermeneutics by saying that:

biblical scholars of the fourth-century exegetical school of Antioch held that the events of Scripture contain a “double sense,” both literal and spiritual. ... the literal sense [refers] to the “intention of the Biblical author.” This means the message the writer himself perceived through the inspirational activity of the Spirit

Orthodox theology is indeed Christ-centric but also Spirit-centred and centred on the Creator and their perichoresis—mutual indwelling.

and sought to communicate to his readers. The spiritual sense, on the other hand, referred to the Word which God speaks *through the written text* in each present moment, each new generation, of the Church’s life. Yet ... firmly rooted in the events of history.²⁰

Such an approach to receiving the Word of God, it will be noted, is far removed from the liberal critical hermeneutics of European theology in the twentieth century, but much closer to the Pentecostal—especially Majority World—and arguably postmodern communities, with whom many Evangelicals relate today.

The significance of the Bible for Orthodox Christians is also signalled by their very significant contemporary commitment to Bible translation and the work of the Bible Societies internationally.

2. Alive to the Holy Spirit

The second aspect of theological alignment that we should note relates to the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. Mention was earlier made of the involvement of Orthodox leaders in the charismatic movements of the last century, but with the rise of global Pentecostalism, this alignment takes on even greater significance.²¹

Orthodoxy is well known for its strong adherence to rich trinitarian theology that gives equal space to the three Persons of the Trinity, thus avoiding the pitfalls of narrow Theistic or Christocentric theologies. In fact, a better way of expressing this might be to say that Orthodox theology is indeed Christ-centric but also Spirit-centred and centred on the Creator and their *perichoresis*—mutual indwelling. The Spirit of God has a major part to play in the life of every Orthodox believer, not only in worship and private devotion but in every aspect of daily life. In his study of “Spiritual Experience in Orthodoxy and the Pentecostal Concept of the Works of the Holy Spirit,” Ullrich R. Kleinhempel writes:

Pentecostal and Orthodox experience of the Holy Spirit is based on an agreement in cosmology, which does not reject the supernatural as “mythological” or “pre-enlightened”, but accepts it in accordance with the common Christian experience of all ages as a dimension of the action and experience of the Holy Spirit. There is thus a distinctness of the Holy Spirit in the form of experience, based on the notion of the procession of the Holy Spirit in Orthodox theology, and likewise, though on a different doctrinal basis, in Pentecostalism. It is not symmetry in dogma but in spiritual experience and liturgical practice.²²

Also central to Orthodox faith is a mysticism born out of an apophatic²³ faith which humbly accepts that “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor 13:12). The spiritual world is largely unseen but is very real and is experienced as “powers and authorities,” as the exercise of spiritual gifts, as dreams and revelations, as the overpowering presence of the Holy Spirit of God. In contrast to the “realism”, rationalism, and secularist-influenced pragmatism of some Christian traditions, this is a point at which Orthodox Christians and a growing number of Pentecostal Evangelicals find themselves in existential harmony if not doctrinal agreement. Kleinhempel concludes his study with the following encouraging, and indeed, missional, statement.

The two Churches [Orthodox and Pentecostal] are an unlikely pair for comparison, with little reason for amicable dialogue at local levels, where they are fierce competitors, yet close at heart to each other on vital issues of the Holy Spirit and His work and presence, which sets them apart from other Churches on the international level. Seeing however that the experiential approach common to both is essential in the crisis of secularisation, which is critically threatening Christianity in its established homelands, as it provides the experiential validity that is primarily convincing in an age of doubt, there is a challenge, in response to the task of common witness of the Christian faith in our age, to enter into a critical comparison of doctrine and practice.²⁴

And, one might add, exploration of partnered missional witness.

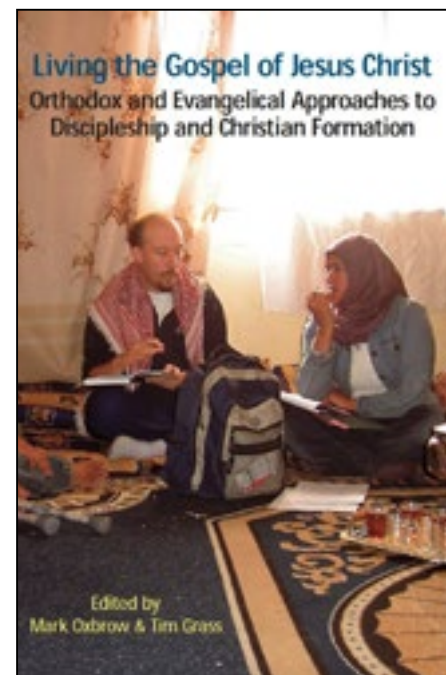
3. A call to holy living

As alluded to above, in contemporary missional contexts, the lived expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ is an essential and powerful witness to a doubting world. Sadly, the witness that contemporary secular society more often observes is that of a church engrossed in internal conflict; struggling to make sense of societal issues, such as medical ethics, the use of AI, and gender self-identification; and failing in matters of sexual misconduct and corruption. In response, there is a call for holy living that comes both from Evangelical (especially in the Majority World) and Orthodox communities. In these areas, the two very different communities find common though not necessarily solid ground.

On New Year’s Eve, 1923, the Romanian Orthodox priest Iosif Trifa was reflecting on his eleven years of village ministry. He writes:

I was thinking with sorrow about the vanity of the past eleven years of shouting in the desert without a trace of fruit. It was late at night. Under the window of my house, just then, passed a boisterous group of drunkards. This only increased my sorrow. I fell on my knees crying and praying to the Lord to help me in the year that lay ahead to labour with more success. In that night, the Spirit of the Lord inspired me with the idea of a revolution. ... With this beginning came what developed into the movement “Oastea Domnului”.²⁵

Through this Wesley-like conversion, Trifa established what was to become a large renewal movement within the Romanian Orthodox Church during the Communist period, based on four “evangelical” principles. These were: (1) the centrality of the Person of Christ, (2) regular personal study of the Scriptures, (3) lay leadership within the church, and (4) the living of a moral and selfless life. It was the last of these that was to have a major impact on the survival of the Orthodox Church in Romania during forty years of communist rule when the public proclamation of faith and, in later years, religious teaching and worship were prohibited and thousands died in prisons for their faith. The outstanding lives of the members of *Oastea Domnului*—literally “the Lord’s Army”—nurtured faith and drew tens



of thousands into the underground community of faith. Trifa himself was excommunicated (by an Orthodox hierarchy in the grips of communism) in 1936, died in 1938, and had his excommunication lifted in 1990, two years after the end of communist rule.

This story has been told at length here as it is unlikely that many Evangelicals are aware of it. It parallels not only the ministry of John Wesley but the numerous Evangelicals whose holy living had drawn far more people towards Christ than any sermon. In his study of the first three centuries of the (united) Christian Church in north Africa, Alan Kreider reminds us that there was no organised evangelism, nor mission agencies or movements, and little public verbal expression of the gospel, but rather it was the quality of the lives lived by ordinary Christians that led to the growth of the Church. He writes:

In the mid-second century, Justin began his First Apology by stating his aim: “It is for us, therefore, to offer to all the opportunity of inspecting our life and teachings.” ... a century later the great intellectual Origen agreed: at the beginning of his apology *Contra Celsum*, he states that Christ “makes his defence in the lives of his genuine disciples, for their lives cry out the real facts.”²⁶

Evangelicals and Orthodox Christians alike know the call of God to holy living, and despite many failures, can experience the conversion of life that gives birth to a true witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

4. The witness of worship, word and life

The fourth and final aspect of theological alignment between Evangelical and Orthodox Christians is not always so obvious but, nevertheless, very real. In fact, while the commitment that both communities have to mission has often led to conflict and misunderstanding, I wish to suggest here that it can also lead to an enriched understanding of the divine invitation to participate in the *missio Dei* for both churches. The key to understanding the alignment to which I refer here comes from Revelation 7:9–12 (NIV).

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”

The passage starts with the primary motivation for Evangelical mission—seen in the pre-occupation of some Evangelical missions with numbers—that of the gathering in of multitudes from every culture and context to stand under the reign of the Lamb of God—and ends with the primary motivation for Orthodox mission—the eternal worship of God “for ever and ever” (even longer than a three-hour Patriarchal

liturgy!). But how do we bring these primary motivations into conversation?

James Stamoolis, the former Executive Director of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship writes:

The bringing together of [the biblical themes of], agape and glory, emphasizes again the central themes of Orthodox theology. Around these themes the Orthodox theological framework is constructed. These are the characteristics of Orthodox theology that form the focal point for Orthodox worship. It is not at all strange, then, that they also form the focal point of Orthodox missiology. For the love of God and the glory of God come together in the redemption of individuals. God, who is the God of love, loves and works towards their redemption. The redeemed in turn praise God for his purpose in redemption and thus spread further abroad the glory of God.²⁷

Is there not something here that Evangelical Christians can embrace? Stamoolis goes on to stress the fact that the redemption of humanity is only one part of the redemptive purposes of God and that “the whole of creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own ... the hope is that in the end the whole of created life will be rescued from the tyranny of change and decay, and have its share in that magnificent liberty which can only belong to the children of God!” (Rom 8:19–21, J. B. Phillips translation²⁸). Here, we see why Orthodox Christians, led by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, have often been quicker to embrace a creation care agenda than many Evangelicals—it is for the glory of God and intimately connected with our own redemption.

Also speaking of mission motivation, Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, himself a former Orthodox missionary to Kenya, writes:

It is not simply obedience, duty or altruism. It is an inner necessity, “Necessity is laid upon me”, said St Paul, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor 9.16). All other motives are aspects of this need, derivative motives. Mission is an inner necessity (i) for the faithful and (ii) for the Church. If they refuse it, they do not merely omit a duty, they deny themselves.²⁹

In his chapter “The rationale and goal of mission,” Edward Rommen³⁰ develops this concept of mission as an “inner necessity” by drawing on Orthodox soteriology and the understanding that the restoration of the image of God in each Christian brings with it the missional nature of God so that it becomes a part of our very nature to reach out *for* the embrace of the triune God and at the same time to reach out *with* the embrace of God to all of humanity and creation who are cut off from that embrace.³¹

As we reflect on the Orthodox theology of mission, it becomes clear why that mission, in practice, often comes in three streams: (1) the invitational mission of a liturgy that points to the glory of God (worship), (2) the proclamational mission of preaching, teaching, and evangelism (word), and (3) the Christ-reflecting mission of holy lives lived *in* the world and *for* the world (life).

A history of Orthodox mission is beyond the scope of this article, but interested readers can find the stories of the early nineteenth-century Altai mission in Russia led by Macarius Gloukharev; the conversion of the Aleutian Islands and Alaska by Bishop Innocent in the same period; the work of Nicholas Kassatkin in Japan towards the end of that century; and missions to China (Innocent Figourovsky) and Korea (Chrysanthus Scetkovskij) in the early years of the twentieth century vividly described in Stamoolis’ *Eastern Orthodox Theology Today*.³² Stamoolis also describes the mission of the Greek Orthodox Church in Africa, but a fuller description of this remarkable twentieth-century church planting mission can be found in Archbishop Anastasios’ own *In Africa: Orthodox Christian Witness and Service*.³³

Revelation 7:9–12 starts with the primary motivation for Evangelical mission—seen in the pre-occupation of some Evangelical missions with numbers—that of the gathering in of multitudes from every culture and context to stand under the reign of the Lamb of God—and ends with the primary motivation for Orthodox mission—the eternal worship of God...

Evangelical orthodoxy and orthodox evangelicalism

This article has sought to challenge perceptions, to encourage enquiry, and to awaken a possibility that there is an Orthodoxy that is, in a true sense, evangelical and an Evangelicalism that is both biblically and spiritually orthodox and that there may be a conversation to be pursued between the two. Nassif quotes Lev Gillet, long known simply as “a monk of the Eastern Church,” who wrote:

There can be noticed all through Orthodox history the existence of a spirituality which one might call “evangelical”. This spirituality takes care to identify Christian life neither with the rigorous asceticism of the Desert, nor with ritual worship; it lays stress on the spirit and virtues of the Gospel, on the necessity of following Christ, on charity towards the poor and afflicted.³⁴

In like manner, many Evangelicals today are awakening to the fact that the “Early Church”, whose primal fervour for the gospel, the salvation of humanity, and the return of Christ that they seek to emulate, is none other than the Orthodox Church in its pre-schism state. As noted at the start of this article, there is much history, cultural divide, and philosophical divergence to climb over, but, as those called to mission, surely that is our vocation and skill: to learn new languages, new cultures; to listen and to learn; and, in so doing, to discover in the stranger the God we seek to serve. **MRT**

Christian Orthodox Churches (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵ See for example Andrew Louth’s study of the diversity of belief within the context of structural unity in the church of the fourth century. Andrew Louth, “Unity and Diversity in the Church of the Fourth Century,” *Studies in Church History* 32 (1996): 1–17.

⁶ See Richard Price, “The Council of Chalcedon (451): A Narrative,” in *Chalcedon in Context: Church Councils 400–700*, ed. Richard Price and Mary Whitty (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 70–91.

⁷ On the political aspects of Chalcedon and the separation of churches that followed, see, for example, Wolf Liebeschuetz, “Theological and Political Aspects of the Council of Chalcedon,” *Scripta Classica Israelica* 36 (2017): 105–121, and on the challenges of the use of Greek philosophical language, see Stephen W. Need, “Language, Metaphor, and Chalcedon: A Case of Theological Double Vision,” *Harvard Theological Review* 88, no. 2 (April 1995): 237–55.

⁸ Whilst we honour the Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic martyrs of recent years, it is worth recalling that the brunt of persecution against Christians, at least in the last two centuries, but also before this, has been borne by Orthodox Christians living in Islamic and Communist contexts.

⁹ See <https://oca.org> (accessed 9 November 2023).

¹⁰ All analysis of the relationship between President Putin and Patriarch Kirill is, at the time of writing, provisional and written from a particular perspective, but a useful example of such analysis can be found in Marcin Skadanowski and Cezary Smuniewski, “The Secularism of Putin’s Russia and Patriarch Kirill’s Church: The Russian Model of State-Church Relations and its Social Reception,” *Religions* 14, no. 1 (2023): 119. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/1/119> (accessed 19 December 2023).

¹¹ See, for example, Michele F. Margolis, “Who Wants to Make America Great Again? Understanding Evangelical Support for Donald Trump,” *Politics and Religion* 13, no. 1 (March 2020): 89–118.

¹² See, for example, John A. Jillions, “Orthodox Christianity in the West: The Ecumenical Challenge,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, ed. Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 276–290.

¹³ Andrew Louth, “Foreword,” in Bradley Nassif, *The Evangelical Theology of the Orthodox Church* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2021), 12. *Italics original.*

¹⁴ The LOI website (www.loimission.net) contains reports and papers from most of these consultations.

¹⁵ As a direct result of the work of LOI, in 2024, a significant group of senior Orthodox leaders from around the world have been invited to attend the fourth Lausanne Congress in Seoul, South Korea in September, not as “observers” this time but as “guests” of the Executive Director.

¹⁶ See the brief description in Peter Hocken, “The Contribution of the Charismatic Movement to Christian Unity,” in *Pentecostal Theology and Ecumenical Theology*, ed. Peter Hocken, Tony L. Richie, and Christopher A. Stephenson (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 43–64.

¹⁷ See for example, Joshua R. Ziefle, “The Charismatic Renewal: History, Diversity, Complexity,” in *Handbook of Global Contemporary Christianity: Movements, Institutions, and Allegiance*, ed. Stephen Hunt (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 123–45.

¹⁸ Nassif, *The Evangelical Theology of the Orthodox Church*, 40.

¹⁹ Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Orthodox View*, 2nd ed. (Claymont, DE: Thomas Nelson, 2019), 1.

²⁰ John Breck, *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 37.

²¹ For a comprehensive study of this global phenomenon, see Michael Wilkinson, ed., *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Global Pentecostalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2021) and Donald E. Miller, Kimon H. Sargeant, and Richard Flory, eds., *Spirit and Power: The Growth and Global Impact of Pentecostalism* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2013).

²² Ullrich Relebohile Kleinhempel, “Spiritual Experience in Orthodoxy and the Pentecostal Concept of the Works of the Holy Spirit: A Comparative Study,” Essay presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the doctoral dissertation on “The Role of the Body in the Thought of St. Gregory Palamas” at the UNESCO Chair of Interreligious and Intercultural Studies, University of Bucharest, 5–6, https://publikationen.uni-tuebingen.de/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10900/98373/Kleinhempel_007.pdf (accessed 24 February 2024).

²³ Apophatic theology (sometimes unhelpfully called negative theology) is an approach to theology which begins with the assumption that God will always remain partially unknown by his creation; that until the resurrection we will only, as Paul reminds us, see “through a glass darkly,” so that the totality of God, and aspects of his works will remain a mystery. Such theology often begins by saying what God is not and then feels its way towards what God is. Kataphatic theology, its opposite, begins by stating what God is, “God is love,” for example. Both approaches to early Christian theology can be identified amongst New Testament writers.

²⁴ Kleinhempel, “Spiritual Experience in Orthodoxy and the Pentecostal Concept of the Works of the Holy Spirit,” 85–86.

²⁵ Iosif Trifa, *Ce este Oastea Domnului?* (Sibiu, Romania: Editura si tiparul Tipografiei Oastea Dumului, 1934), 231. Romanian text translated by Mark Oxbrow.

²⁶ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 94.

²⁷ Stamoolis, *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today*, 50–51.

²⁸ J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960).

²⁹ Anastasios Yannoulatos, “The Purpose and Motive of Mission,” *International Review of Mission* 54, no. 215 (July 1965): 281–97, 293.

³⁰ Edward Rommen, *Into All the World: An Orthodox Theology of Mission* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2017), 177–208.

³¹ In his discussion of soteriology in this chapter, Rommen explores the Orthodox concepts of deification, or theosis, and the restoration of the image of God in creation, a topic which is beyond the purposes of this article but which deserves careful exploration by Evangelicals who speak rather of Sanctification. A useful treatment of this topic can be found in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2004).

³² Stamoolis, *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today*, 24–43.

³³ Anastasios Yannoulatos, *In Africa: Orthodox Christian Witness and Service* (Boston, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2015).

³⁴ A Monk of the Eastern Church, *Orthodox Spirituality: An Outline of the Orthodox Ascetical and Mystical Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), 4–5, quoted in Nassif, *The Evangelical Theology of the Orthodox Church*, 71.

¹ The painting of Christ as “ruler of all the universe” is often found on the ceiling above the altar in an Orthodox Church.

² On the challenging issue of nationalism and Orthodoxy, see Davor Džalto, “Nationalism, Statism, and Orthodoxy,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 57, no. 3–4 (2013): 503–23. For a longer treatment of this issue in Europe, see Lucian N. Leustean, *Orthodox Christianity and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Southeastern Europe* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

³ One of the key texts I read at that stage was James J. Stamoolis, *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today* (Minneapolis: Light and Life, 1986). James served as Theological Consultant to the World Evangelical Alliance and as Theological Secretary of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students and comes from Greek Orthodox heritage. The book has a foreword by John Meyendorff, one of the leading Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century.

⁴ For a good introduction to the family of Orthodox Churches, see John Binns, *An Introduction to the*

Global Christianity and Global Mission

Walter McConnell



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This is the day of the global church, the age of world Christianity.¹ It is no longer possible to say that the church is only made up of people from one part of the globe. Neither is it right to presume that one race or national church should call the shots regarding how the church should function, which theological issues should be considered, or in which direction mission should proceed. But wait a minute. This has always been so. From the onset, Jesus commanded his disciples to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). Here, “all nations”—*panta ta ethnē*—is a reference to *all* the peoples of the earth—specifically, Jews and Gentiles taken together.²

And the story of how all the nations started to become the one people of God begins in the book of Acts where Jesus, in his final recorded words, told his disciples that “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Luke, the author, then proceeds to fill in the Lord's outline by showing the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and to what was then considered to be one of the ends of the earth.

The gospel—the good news about how the eternal God entered his creation to die as a man and then overcome the grave so that our sins could be forgiven and we could be made right with him—was proclaimed broadly as the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles and others so that their words became effective to convict and to save. From the

time the first sermon was preached on Pentecost, “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians” heard the gospel, believed, and were added to the church (Acts 2:9–11, 41–42). From the very beginning, the church was composed of Jews and other west Asians, Africans, and Europeans. And, though there have been ebbs and flows in different times and different places, the church has never looked back.

Thus, when we hear that mission *used to be* “from the West to the rest” but is *now* “from everywhere to everywhere,” we should pause and consider whether or not this is true.³ The deeper our knowledge of church history, the deeper will be our awareness that mission has never really been from the West to the rest—at least not *solely* from the West to the rest—and oftentimes has been from elsewhere to the West. Oh, there may have been times when it appeared that mission originated from the West, such as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when both Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries joined their European compatriots who were bent on discovery, trade, and conquest, and traveled to distant lands with the gospel because they longed to see people come to faith in the one, true God. But that was only a short period during the long history of the church, and while these Western missionaries were on the move, they weren't the only ones. The impression that Christianity has come from the West—understanding “the West” to mean Europe and

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North America—may be heightened because Western authors have often written to inform the church in their homelands about the advance of the gospel in other parts of the world and challenge fellow believers to join in the work through prayer, finance, or going. But even if these works can be criticized for being more narrowly focused than we might like them to be, the authors sought to engage a particular audience about mission, be they European Catholics, British evangelicals, American fundamentalists, or whoever. And all the while (as these books at times reveal), non-Westerners were also sharing Jesus Christ with their own people and with others.

The fact is, we should never think that the early church, or even the medieval or modern church, was solely a Western church.⁴ Neither should we think that the gospel originally spread toward the west and only turned to the east

have to go back to the very beginning. In fact, we have to go back to eternity past and the *missio Dei*—the mission of God—before we can rightly understand the *missiones ecclesiae*—the missionary outreach of the church. God is both the one who creates and sends, the one who gives life and saves it. It is well known that from the time of St. Augustine, *missio*—Latin for being sent or mission—was used to refer to the sending of the Son by the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son. This unambiguously trinitarian concept became the theological path to follow when discussing the New Testament teaching that the Father sends the Son (Matt 10:40; Mark 9:37; Luke 9:48; John 4:34; 5:24; etc.) and that Jesus is therefore acknowledged to be the Sent One—the *Apostolos*—who was faithful to the one who appointed and sent him (Heb 3:1–2). It is likewise used to expand the New Testament teaching that the Father (Luke 11:13; John 3:34;

family from Spain, was recuperating from a leg injury received while fighting in a battle with the French when he underwent a conversion that led him to found the Society of Jesus. This order, also known as the Jesuits, was devoted to fully obeying the Pope and committed to restoring Protestants and leading others to the Catholic faith. And though it is not clear why Loyola applied *missio* to the church's task, from his time on it has been used for sending people out with the gospel so that others could be converted. And despite pleas that the term mission needs to be replaced as it arose late in history and has been frequently misused, the reasons given are far from convincing.⁸ Perhaps the major reason for this is that the biblical record shows God—particularly, but not exclusively, the Son—sending people to join him in his work of reconciliation. The regular use of *apostellō* and *pempō*—the Greek verbs used for the sending of the Son and the Spirit—for the sending of God's human messengers and the use of *apostellos* for Christ and for his Apostles makes it clear that if there is a *missio Dei*, there is also a *missiones ecclesiae*.⁹ By no means should we feel that we should jettison the term, as long as we use it in a way that reflects biblical teaching. If the *missio Dei* is God's action of sending himself to bring reconciliation to the world, the *missiones ecclesiae* is God's action of sending the church into the world to join his work toward that end.

Mission can only be done by those who join God in his work. It is never something that we can do in our own strength because we think it is a good idea, because we have set particular goals, or because we have devised certain strategies. Since God designed the task, implemented the way forward, and called us to join him in the work, we go in obedience to his command. As recognized by Karl Hartenstein, “Mission is not only obedience towards a word of the Lord. It is not only a duty for gathering the church. It is participation in the sending of the Son, of the ‘*missio Dei*’ with its comprehensive goal of establishing the rule of Christ over the entire creation.”¹⁰ To take part in mission is to join God's work of reconciliation, to advance his kingdom rule in the world. It is to serve as ambassadors of Christ, speaking on his behalf as we share his love with others and urging them to be reconciled with him through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

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and south when there was nowhere farther west to go. As Moffett rightly corrected his readers a half century ago, “It is too often forgotten that the Gospel moved east, and Asianized (if it was not, indeed, already Asian) as early as it moved west, and Hellenized.”⁵ And even though many in the mission community have failed to learn this, whether they express Eurocentric biases or somehow believe the baton of the gospel has been passed on to themselves, it continues to be mistaken and demonstrates our lack of knowledge of mission and church history.⁶

The *missio Dei* and *missiones ecclesiae*

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. If we are to understand mission rightly, we

14:16–17, 26; 15:26) and the Son (John 15:26; 20:22) would give or send the Holy Spirit. The *missio Dei* is thus, from first to last, the work of the Triune God who sent himself into the world to redeem people who could otherwise not know him or come into relationship with him. According to Schirrmacher, “*Missio Dei* means no less than to recognize that sending (Greek: *apostello* and *pempo* and related words; Latin: *missio*, etc.) for redemption is the essence and center of the Christian faith.”⁷

And though, from early in church history, the term *mission* was used for God's action to redeem lost humanity, close to 1,000 years elapsed before Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) applied it to the church's part in God's work. Loyola, belonging to a minor noble

Christianity has always been a global religion

And whether or not all of Christ's ambassadors have been able to phrase it in those terms, that is what has happened since the day of Pentecost. Christians have shared the good news about their Lord with the surrounding world. And though the book of Acts mainly describes the spread of the church toward the west, this does not mean that the church's growth was defined by or limited to that direction. Indeed, from the beginning the church spread to the north and east and to the south just as rapidly as it did to the west, if not more so. Jenkins thus corrects a common misunderstanding when he says that "For most of its history, Christianity was a tricontinental religion, with powerful representation in Europe, Africa, and Asia, and this was true into the fourteenth century."¹¹ The wide spread of the faith from the very beginning should wake us up to the fact that "Christianity is and always has been a global religion. For this reason, it is important never to think of Christianity as *becoming* global."¹² And if we find it surprising to discover that the church has always been global, we may find it equally surprising to discover that the early church centered in Asia—the "Church of the East"—was for many centuries the largest and strongest region of the church, stretching from Syria and Turkey into Persia and beyond and contained far more churches and bishoprics than could be found elsewhere.¹³ The church had even sunk deep roots into African soil before it made much of an impact on Europe. As Jenkins says:

By the fifth century, Christianity had five great patriarchates, and only one, Rome, was to be found in Europe. Of the others, Alexandria stood on the African continent, and three (Constantinople, Antioch, and Jerusalem) were in Asia. After the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, Christianity maintained its cultural and intellectual traditions in the Eastern empire, in Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt.¹⁴

And it was not long after the fall of Rome that the church in the West nearly entered into hibernation for a number of centuries. Strangely, this happened not long after Constantine accepted the Christian faith and it became not only legal for Roman citizens to become Christians, but could often

prove beneficial. Prior to Constantine's ascension, the emperor Diocletian (284–305), who severely persecuted Christians, divided the empire into a Tetrarchy—a reign of four—with two *augusti* and two *caesares*. The eastern part of the empire was split between the Augustus Diocletian and Caesar Galerius and the western part by the Augustus Maximian and Caesar Constantius (the father of Constantine). Taking over from his father, Constantine was engaged in battle against his rival emperor Maxentius when he saw a vision of a cross in the sky with the inscription "*In hoc signo vinces*"—"In this sign conquer." Rather unexpectedly, he won the battle at Milvian bridge (312), solidified his reign, and entered history as the first Roman emperor to embrace and promote Christianity. However, even though he had come from the west of the empire, he chose Byzantium—which would later be renamed Constantinople and then Istanbul—rather than Rome, to be his capital.

While most of the emperors who followed Constantine adhered to the Christian faith, within two centuries the western part of the empire would be no more. Though the causes of the decline are endlessly debated, before the end of the fourth century the empire was at war with itself, by 410 it was sacked by the Visigoths, and in 476 finally fell to the Germanic king Odoacer. Though the once popular idea that Western Europe immediately descended into a millennium-long "dark ages" has been capably debunked,¹⁵ this part of the Roman empire would

never again be unified by a common political power. Eventually, western Europeans were drawn together by their common Christian heritage, but this did not happen overnight. Indeed, it was not until the time of the Crusades (ca. 1095–1291), when Europeans assembled from various parts of the continent to fight a common enemy, that they began to develop a common identity as "Westerners" or members of "Christendom."¹⁶ Before that time, there was little intra-national cooperation or sense of solidarity outside of the church.

The dating here is of immeasurable importance, for it took many years before western Europeans came to an understanding that their common faith gave them unity with other western Europeans. The trigger for this change in mindset can be linked to the loss of much of the Christian world to the incursion of Islam and, separately, the Mongol empire. The desire of western Christians to regain the Holy Land for the church brought them together to fight the Crusades. We should note that it does not matter that they ultimately lost the Crusades or that Christianity in the West at that time was not as strong as it was in the East and in Africa. Neither does it matter that different sections of the Christian world divided along theological lines and accused each other of heresy for rejecting what were, to them, essential doctrines. What matters is that other groups, Christian and not, were recognized as existing. The Christian world was bigger than the Europe, Asia, and Africa, and they all knew it.



Rabban Hormizd Monastery by Hardscarf, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. The ancient monastery, founded about 640 AD by the Assyrian Church of The East, is about 2 miles from Alqosh, Iraq.

Worldwide Christianity

This balanced spread of Christianity in the early centuries is well illustrated in a map printed in Germany in 1581.¹⁷ The “three-fold world”¹⁸ portrayed here in cloverleaf form had existed in popular consciousness from before the fifth century BC. In his histories, Herodotus showed awareness that those who preceded him “divided the world into three equal parts—Europe, Asia, Libya; the whole surrounded by the ‘Ocean.’”¹⁹ And although Herodotus wasn’t personally convinced that this was an accurate portrayal of the world, this balanced perspective was common throughout the ancient and medieval periods. It was so strong that not even progress in cartography during the age of exploration could dull the image. The map, drawn in Hanover during early Reformation times to illustrate a biblical travel book, mirrored the ancient understanding that the world consisted of three continents joined at Jerusalem, which formed the center of the world.²⁰ That the mapmaker took “the center of the world” to mean “the Christian world” is clear in that he has labeled countries and cities where the church could be found. Even in the sixteenth century, European Christians

had not totally forgotten the extent to which the church had spread.

Even though the map shows that the Christian faith encompassed the known world, it ignores the reality, already mentioned, that of the five early patriarchates, only Rome was in Europe, Alexandria was in Africa, and Constantinople, Antioch, and Jerusalem were all located in Asia. This spread corresponds to the nations represented on the day of Pentecost, ten of which were from Asia, two from Africa, and only one from Europe.²¹ To signify the real spread of the church, the map of the early Christian world should have been drawn to emphasize the easterly and southerly directions.

The gospel spreads to the east

That the gospel, from the earliest times, would spread to the east is easy to understand. The first disciples of Jesus all spoke Aramaic. When they moved to Damascus, Antioch, and other cities of Syria where other Jews lived, they could easily communicate as Syriac was a sister-language to their own. By reversing Abraham’s journey to the Promised Land, unknown missionaries spread the faith through Mesopotamia and came

to Edessa—the capital of Osrhoene, which became the world’s first Christian kingdom. They then continued to move along the Silk Road farther and farther east, reaching Nisibis in Persia and even Pakistan. For many years, the main center of the Church of the East was the twin cities of Seleucia-Ctesiphon—near modern-day Baghdad—which was once the most populous city in the world.²² However, neither building churches in cities nor establishing monastic houses in more remote places could dampen the ardent missionary spirit of the Syriac followers of Jesus.

For many of the first thousand-plus years of church history, the Church of the East represented more Christians than any other part of the church—more believers, more churches, more bishoprics, more metropolitans. In addition, it was by far the most missionally active group. By the time Aidan (ca. 590–651) left Ireland to convert “heathen” people in northeastern England and founded the renowned monastery at Lindisfarne and some time before Boniface (675–755) became the apostle to Germany—after cutting down the sacred oak to prove that the God of the Bible was more powerful than Thor, the god



Thinking that Christianity originated in western Europe and that mission has spread from the West to the rest of the world is predominantly an indication that we are ignorant of our history and in need of devoting time to learn from the past in order to understand our present world and prepare for the future.

worshipped by the Germanic tribes—Syriac Christians had already carried the gospel throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, into Africa and India, and as far as the Malay Peninsula and China.²³ Following the path that Chinese Christians would choose more than 1,000 years later, Persian Christian merchants carried the gospel *east* along the Silk Road, converting people to faith in Jesus, starting churches, and translating the Bible and other literature into the local languages.²⁴ Though the Nestorian outreach was rejected on several occasions by Chinese and other rulers, their eastward outreach was only shut down when Timur (1336–1405) closed the Silk Road.²⁵ Even so, many of their spiritual descendants were recognized by the early Catholic missionaries when they reached East Asia in the sixteenth century.

The gospel turns to the south

In addition to stretching out from Jerusalem to the east, the church also turned toward the south. Acts mentions several Africans who expressed their faith in Jesus. In addition to the people from Alexandria who were present on the day of Pentecost and the Ethiopian eunuch who interacted with Philip,²⁶ two others who stand out are “Simeon who was called Niger” and “Lucius of Cyrene,” both of whom were members of the leadership team at the church in Antioch.²⁷ These men originated from northeast and northcentral Africa, and testify that the church was multinational from its very beginning. It wasn’t long before the faith sank deeper roots into the African continent. By the year 200, the church could be found in the major population centers from Alexandria and Memphis to Cyrene and Carthage. By the sixth century, its reach extended to the Atlantic Ocean and far up the Nile, eventually approaching the equator.

Christianity was so strong in Alexandria that the city became one of the five early patriarchates and thus impacted the spread of the gospel to other parts of the continent. Following the example set by St. Anthony (251–356), Egypt became the home to a major monastic movement that arose in the surrounding deserts and spread throughout the Christian world. The ongoing strength of the church can be seen in that, despite centuries of persecution and isolation, the Coptic church today makes up between about five and ten percent of the population of Egypt.²⁸ Moving south, the gospel impacted Cush (modern Ethiopia and Sudan) from before the time of Constantine, with the result that a large percentage of the population came to faith in Christ. The faith of the Ethiopians remained so strong through the ensuing centuries that the Europeans, who came upon “the country in the seventeenth century ... were astounded by the degree of Christian devotion” they found.²⁹ Today, around two-thirds of the population are recognized as Christian.

The church spread along the north coast of Africa, quickly reaching the major cities that were the homes of some of the major thinkers in early church history. Their influence is well summed up by the Kims:

Many of the key doctrines of Christianity were hammered out in the region in dialogue with Berber, Pharaonic and early Coptic and Nilotic cultures (Oden 2007). Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, Athanasius, Didymus the Blind, Augustine of Hippo, Cyril of Alexandria as well as some of their opponents — Sabellius and Arius — were North Africans and key doctrinal debates took place in Carthage, Alexandria, Hippo and Milevis that defined the methods of consensus that would be applied elsewhere.³⁰

The death of a church

Though the church in Asia and Africa developed more quickly than the church in the West and was, for a long period of history, more influential and stronger, it didn’t last. This is, in part, due to the rise of Islam beginning in the seventh century, but it was also impacted by the fractures that widened as the Roman empire dissolved and the invasion of the Mongols in the thirteenth century. All of these worked together so that by the twelfth or thirteenth century, great sections of the church were critically weakened and others entirely blotted out. But despite the pressures that would eventually devastate the church in Asia and Africa, it is almost remarkable to realize just how long it held on. After centuries of persecution, it was still true that

As late as the eleventh century, Asia was still home to at least a third of the world’s Christians, and perhaps a tenth of all Christians still lived in Africa—a figure that the continent would not reach again until the 1960s. Even in 1250, it still made sense to think of a Christian world stretching east from Constantinople to Samarkand (at least) and south from Alexandria to the desert of the Ogaden, almost to the equator.³¹

But even if the church in Asia and Africa still made up more than forty percent of the world Christian population at that time, its demise continued to the point that later generations were often left unaware that the church ever existed in those areas, much less that these were once areas of great spiritual, theological, and missional power. Lamenting the death of large portions of the church, Jenkins says that “Christianity did indeed become ‘European’ but about a millennium later than most people think.”³² Thus, the thinking that Christianity originated in western Europe and that mission has spread from the West to the rest of the world is predominantly an indication that we are ignorant of our history and in need of devoting time to learn from the past in order to understand our present world and prepare for the future.

Conclusion

Our overview of the spread of the church in the early centuries should help us in a number of ways. First, it should put to rest the refrain that

“Mission used to be from the West to the rest but now it is from everywhere to everywhere.” While this slogan can be said to positively encourage some people who had previously expressed no interest to get involved, it negatively provides a ready excuse for those who would prefer to exempt themselves from the endeavor since “Our people have already done their share.” Worse, it ignores the historical spread of the gospel. From the beginning of the church, all parts of the world were involved. The church didn’t and doesn’t grow from west to east and south. The church grows as people who live where it exists take the gospel to other places. And while this is usually a movement from where the church is strong to where it is weak, the opposite may also happen. The church may grow as believers engage in deliberate missionary activity. It could also happen as Christians engage in trade or when they either move or are moved to nearby or distant lands due to war or persecution. It might happen when people share Christ with their neighbors or in other parts of the world. But no matter how it spreads, the gospel was never set on a perpetual westerly tack. Rather, it has always been more like the patterns made when someone throws a handful of rocks into the water—ripples spreading out in concentric circles, growing in all directions that overlap with waves coming from other directions.

Is it then “from everywhere to everywhere?” Well, not quite. While there is a lot to this phrase that gives people involved in mission reason to cheer, it doesn’t adequately reflect reality. It would be more accurate to say that

While Jesus said that “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18), he was not promising that every local congregation or national church will last forever. Some will be persecuted and forced to flee. Others will apostatize. Yet more will be marginalized or subsumed within a larger culture. This is borne out by church history.

mission extends from where believers are to wherever they end up. And while some believers may decide to move to another part of the world to take the gospel to people who don’t know Jesus, others may be forced to relocate due to war, famine, or something else. In either case, it is highly unlikely that the one who moves with the gospel will be able to go just *anywhere*. Due to global realities—be they political, economic, educational, linguistic, and many others—people from some locations will always find other places inaccessible. It would be better if we could simply do away with the slogans and taglines that are often associated with mission today and simply join God’s work of mission by sharing the good news of Jesus with people where we are and where we might end up—whether a move is by plan or forced upon us.

Another thing that we should learn from this study is that we can never be sure if the church that is established in one place today will remain after one or a hundred years from now. While Jesus said that “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt

16:18), he was not promising that every local congregation or national church will last forever. Some will be persecuted and forced to flee. Others will apostatize. Yet more will be marginalized or subsumed within a larger culture. This is borne out by church history. It happened in first century Judea. It happened to the Nestorian church in China and the Church of the East throughout much of Central Asia. It happened to the Jesuit mission to Japan in the seventeenth century. It happened throughout North Africa. And it has happened in many parts of modern Europe.

Though there are different reasons, the result is remarkably similar. Where once there was a thriving church, there is now only a remnant and sometimes not even that. And though those who are undergoing persecution often harken to the refrain ascribed to Tertullian—“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”—they need to note that the church of his homeland has almost completely disappeared. Again, a good slogan is often not good enough. Rather, we need to consider why some churches fail to take root, others remain stunted, and more flourish for a period and then wither and die. Jenkins rightly alerts us that

Theologians seldom address the troubling questions raised by the destruction of churches and of Christian communities. Most important, we need to realize that such incidents of decline and disappearance are quite frequent, however little they are studied or discussed. Dechristianization is one of the least studied aspects of Christian history.³³

And yet it is one that we may be doomed to repeat unless we rightly understand it.

This brings us to a third point. As the church spreads, the deeper it can set



Photo by Nick Fewings on Unsplash

its roots into the local soil, the longer it will last. The first century churches of Ephesus and Corinth were planted in distinct soils and faced different growing conditions. Each church had its own struggles and its own victories, and yet, as Paul wrote his missionary letters to them, he placed their situations and his role into proper perspective before God. In many ways, Ephesus was the more mature church. Even so, Paul needed to offer up a relatively long prayer for them.

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with

things, compelling Paul to work hard to help them through the issues they faced. One concern that stands out distinctly was their propensity to divide into factions. As Paul addresses this, he reminds them that their growth was due to the grace of God at work in them. And though they delighted in aligning themselves with a favorite apostle the way someone today might support a sports team, Paul needed to remind them that the worker was nothing special, but was just doing his job.

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. (1 Cor 3:5–7)

None of us can take credit for the growth of the churches where we work. We are all nothing more than the servants of the God who gives the growth. We are also, and I almost shudder to think it, the servants of the God who often withholds the growth or allows a church to die. But this is just where the sovereignty of God is most clearly seen. *He* does it, not us.

all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph 3:14–21)

Notice how he prayed that the Father would strengthen them inwardly through his Spirit and that Christ would dwell in their hearts by faith. This unabashedly Trinitarian prayer shows the *missio Dei* in operation so that his church would be “rooted and grounded in love.” And so it was, because God planted them and caused them to grow. And, as the prayer says, for doing that, he deserves all the glory and praise.

As Paul’s letter to the Corinthians makes clear, this church struggled with many

Neither Paul, nor Apollos, nor Peter, nor anyone else could take credit for the growth of the church in Corinth. And none of us can take credit for the growth of the churches where we work. We are all nothing more than the servants of the God who gives the growth. We are also, and I almost shudder to think it, the servants of the God who often withholds the growth or allows a church to die. But this is just where the sovereignty of God is most clearly seen. *He* does it, not us. And as the Lord causes a church to grow, it will put down roots and find that the soil where it is planted is home. The church of Ephesus had to grow in Ephesian soil. The church of Corinth had to grow in Corinthian soil. Neither could grow properly in any other place, and the apostles couldn’t prepare a new soil or a neutral soil for them. Some years ago, Mark Noll wrote about how this works.

In its very earliest decades, the gospel message, which appeared first in a Semitic milieu, moved eastward into

Asia, southwestward into Africa, and northwestward into Europe. Immediately those who turned to Christ in these “new” regions were at home in the faith. When they became believers, Christianity itself became Asian, European and African. And so it has gone for nearly two thousand years. The agents that communicate Christianity to places that had not before known the gospel might come from far away; their understanding of the faith might be defined by cultural patterns from those far away places. But once Christianity is rooted in someplace new, the faith itself also takes on something from that new place.³⁴

This explains why we need to work so hard to learn language and culture. And it also explains why we need to work hard to understand the Bible and the history of the church. Without these tools, and more, we will not be properly equipped to take part in God’s mission to our world. This is the age of the global church. May we all do our best to share the good news of Jesus Christ with people who need his love. And may we trust that the God who desires everyone to be reconciled to him will use us as his ambassadors who entreat the world around us to listen to his words and turn to him for eternal life. **MRT**

¹ It has been said that “The expression World Christianity (also referred to as Global Christianity) came into ascendancy beginning in the 1980s as scholars began to turn their attention to the surprising growth of Christianity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.” F. Lionel Young, *World Christianity and the Unfinished Task: A Very Short Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), 2. It should be appreciated that some distinguish between “World Christianity” and “Global Christianity.” Thus, Sanneh says: “‘World Christianity’ is the movement of Christianity as it takes form and shape in societies that previously were not Christian, societies that had no bureaucratic tradition with which to domesticate the gospel. In these societies Christianity was received and expressed through the culture, customs, and tradition of the people affected. World Christianity is not one thing, but a variety of indigenous responses through more or less effective local idioms, but in any case without necessarily the European Enlightenment frame. ‘Global Christianity,’ on the other hand, is the faithful replication of Christian forms and patterns developed in Europe. It echoes Hilaire Belloc’s famous statement, ‘Europe is the faith.’ It is, in fact, religious establishment and the cultural captivity of faith.” Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity: The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 22. My understanding is that “world Christianity” and the “global church” are analogous ideas, the first referring to the religion and the second to the people involved and their organization and practice.

² Contrary to one popular interpretation, first-century believers in Christ could not have understood *panta ta ethnē* as referring to what we commonly call “people groups”. This idea would have been as incomprehensible to them as would understanding the term in the sense of “nation-states”. For some who understand *panta ta ethnē* as “both Jews and Greeks, see, among others, Dennis C. Duling, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 305; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Hal Freeman, “The Great Commission and the New Testament: An Exegesis of Matthew 28:16–20,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 18; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

³ We should be clear that the phrase “from the West to the rest” was originally used in discussions of economics, politics, civilization, education, literature, and other topics bearing on globalization. In these contexts, it has usually been used in a negative manner. Its application to mission is therefore derivative, and retains the negative connotation. The phrase “from everywhere to everywhere” has become popular as it was used in the title of Michael Nazir-Ali, *From Everywhere to Everywhere: A World View of Christian Mission* (London: Collins, 1991) and in a variant form in the subtitle of Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003). See also Allen Yeh, *Polycentric Missiology: Twenty First Century Mission from Everyone to Everywhere* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016).

⁴ Thus, Mark Noll writes that “The impression that Christianity in its essence is either European or American is, however, simply false. Christianity began as Jewish; before it was European, it was North African, Syrian, Egyptian and Indian. While in recent history it has indeed been American, it has also been Chilean, Albanian, Fijian and Chinese. The gospel belongs to every one in every culture; it belongs to no one in any one culture in particular.” Mark Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 191.

⁵ Samuel Hugh Moffett, “The Earliest Asian Christianity,” *Missiology* 3, no. 4 (1975): 415.

⁶ Vince Bantu recognizes that “The dominant concept of Christian history is now that Christianity went from its multicultural beginnings in first-century Palestine across a Western trajectory of European and North American captivity to only now reflect global diversity. It is this common misconception that requires further conversation. Many contemporary missiologists and church historians would have us believe that Christianity came into Africa and Asia from Europe when the reality is quite the opposite in several significant respects.” Vince L. Bantu, *A Multitude of all Peoples: Engaging Ancient Christianity’s Global Identity* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 2.

For an example of how this mistaken idea greatly impacted a movement of local believers who wanted to take the gospel to others, see Paul Hattaway, *Back to Jerusalem: Three Chinese House Church Leaders Share Their Vision to Complete the Great Commission* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2008). An old booklet produced by CIM includes a world map with a large arrow pointing from the west to the east which is said to have been from the wall of prayer room of the North-West Bible Institute in China and used by students who wanted to continue in a westerly direction to take the gospel “back to Jerusalem”. P.T. [Phyllis Thompson], *Back to Jerusalem* (n.p., n.d.), 2.

⁷ Thomas Schirmacher, *Missio Dei: God’s Missional Nature*, trans. Richard McClary (Bonn: Culture and Science, 2017), 19. Foreign words not italicized in

the original. Schirmacher writes in the context of authors who use *Missio Dei* to refer to a number of different, often unrelated, things without providing biblical or theological support for their usage. As he says regarding this concept, “One gets the feeling that it is a matter of a trendy buzzword and that there is no actual interest in its content or substantive value.” Schirmacher, *Missio Dei*, 14. One cannot more highly recommend his insistence that we rightly understand this essential concept before we (mis)use it. The same could be said for much of the terminology associated with mission.

⁸ For a plea that we should remove *mission* from our vocabulary, see Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017) and, more briefly, “Reimagining Witness beyond our Modern Mission paradigm,” *IJFM* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2019): 163–70.

For a rejection of his reasoning and grounds for holding onto traditional terminology, see Mark Oxbrow, “Book Review of Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition*,” *Transformation* 37, no. 1 (2020): 83–85.

⁹ Schirmacher devotes eleven pages to biblical texts that show how God is involved in sending Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Angels, his message of salvation, the Apostles, prophets, other people (including government authorities), and judgment. Schirmacher, *Missio Dei*, 21–31.

¹⁰ Quoted in Schirmacher, *Missio Dei*, 11. Newbigin expresses the idea this way: “We are not engaged in an enterprise of our own choosing or devising. We are invited to participate in an activity of God which is the central meaning of creation itself. We are invited to become, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, participants in the Son’s loving obedience to the Father. All things have been created that they may be summed up in Christ the Son. All history is directed towards that end. All creation has this as its goal.” Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, Biblical Classics Library (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 83.

¹¹ Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How it Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 3.

¹² Bantu, *A Multitude of all Peoples*, 1.

¹³ The “Church of the East” should not be confused with the Eastern Orthodox Church. The former was primarily made up of Syriac and Persian speakers, while the latter mainly used Greek.

¹⁴ Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 47.

¹⁵ See Seb Falk, *The Light Ages: The Surprising Story of Medieval Science* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020); David M. Perry and Matthew Gabriele, *The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe* (New York: Harper, 2021); Barbara H. Rosenwein, *A Short History of the Middle Ages*, 5th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

¹⁶ Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 130. For the idea that ideas of race began to formulate in Europe during the medieval period, see Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

¹⁷ Heinrich Bünting, “Die gantze Welt in ein Kleberlat, welches in der Stadt Hannover, meines lieben Vaterlandes Wapen,” Magdeburg: s.n., 1581, Norman B. Leventhal Map and Education Center, <https://collections.leventhalmap.org/search/commonwealth:3f462s4k1k> (accessed 26 April 2023).

¹⁸ This descriptive phrase comes from Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 23.

¹⁹ A. D. Godley, ed., *Herodotus II*, Loeb Library (London: Heinemann, 1928), x. What Herodotus and others of his time knew as Libya referred to the whole of Africa.

²⁰ The map probably retains Jerusalem as the center as that is where the expansion of Christianity began.

It is, nevertheless, true that “Since A.D. 70 the Christian Church has never had one local centre; it has learned to look only to the living presence of the Lord within itself.” Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, The Pelican History of the Church 6 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 23. Note that the existence of America in Die Neue Welt—The New World—is acknowledged on the map but that it is relegated to a distant corner.

²¹ I am here treating “the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene” as one location and “Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians” as peoples rather than places (*Acts* 2:10–11).

²² Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 57.

²³ According to the Nestorian Stele (大秦景教流行中國碑) currently found in Xian at the Beilin Museum, the missionary Alopen (阿羅本) arrived in Chang’an in AD 635 where he was welcomed by the emperor. There is even evidence of Christian presence in Japan by the eighth century. See John C. England, *The Hidden History of Christianity in Asia: The Churches of the East before 1500* (Delhi: ISPCK and Hong Kong: CCA, 2002), 105–107.

²⁴ The connection between trade along the Silk Road and mission is not lost on the Kims. “Church and mission are further integrated by the realization that it is not only missionaries who cross borders and travel globally but ordinary Christians, and even whole churches in migration. The spread of early Christianity and Christianity in Asia in the first millennium was closely linked to trade.” Kim and Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion*, 275.

²⁵ Timur is also known as Tamerlane. Nestorianism was denounced as a heresy by some church fathers during the fifth century. More recent scholarship has reevaluated the possibility that neither Nestorius nor his followers may not have been guilty as charged. See J. F. Bethune-Baker, *Nestorius and his Teaching: A Fresh Examination of the Evidence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908); S. P. Brock, “The ‘Nestorian’ Church: A Lamentable Misnomer,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78, no. 3 (1996): 23–35; Richard Kyle, “Nestorius: The Partial Rehabilitation of a Heretic,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32, no. 1 (1989): 73–83.

²⁶ While English Bible versions invariably translate Αἰθίοψ as Ethiopian, there is good reason to believe that the Greek term was used to refer to all black Africans from south of Egypt. It is quite possible that the eunuch mentioned in *Acts* 8:27 was from Cush rather than Ethiopia proper. See J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* (Leicester: Apollos and Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 34–39, 146–50, 172–176 and Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Acts 8:26–40: Why the Ethiopian Eunuch Was Not from Ethiopia,” in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 351–66.

²⁷ As Νίγερ (*Niger*) is the Hellenized form of the Latin word for “black,” this man “was presumably of dark complexion,” and was likely a black African. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 260. Lucius, though bearing a Latin name, was undoubtedly from the Cyrene region of Africa.

²⁸ For some of the difficulties involved in identifying the percentage of Christians in Egypt today, see Conrad Hackett, “How Many Christians are there in Egypt?” Pew Research Center (16 February 2011), <https://www.pewresearch.org/2011/02/16/how-many-christians-are-there-in-egypt/> (accessed 18 March 2024).

²⁹ Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 55.

³⁰ Kim and Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion*, 75.

³¹ Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 4.

³² Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 25.

³³ Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 28–29.

³⁴ Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity*, 190.

An Interpretative Account of Dr. Gao Jincheng

Biographical Gap, Historical Context, and Narrative Construction

Ma Tianji



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1. Introduction

In the first part of the article, I focused on the life and service of Gao Jincheng (高金城), who was, according to numerous Christian reports, a pioneer of medical mission work in early twentieth-century China, including the region that is now Gansu Province.¹ In this interpretative paper, I delve into some intriguing, yet controversial, aspects of his life, particularly relating to his last years and his death. I further address the challenge of narrative construction. This necessitates a deeper engagement with some recent sources and research findings that contribute to Gao's biographical portrait (Section 2). Crucial in this context is the comprehensive historical framework in which Gao's person and work are embedded. Illuminating the complexity of the context allows for a crucial interpretive approach that paints a realistic and vivid picture of his life (Section 3). Certain inspirational aspects of Gao's life only come to light when narrative constructions from perspectives of both Christian sources and the Communist Party of China (CPC) are deconstructed within their historical context (Section 4). A concluding section will sum up the merits of Gao.

2. Gaps in Gao's biographical details

As the previous article shows, details of Gao's life were mainly documented by publications affiliated with the China Inland Mission. These and other Christian accounts conspicuously leave significant biographical gaps. Two examples can be mentioned to illustrate this. In his biographical portrait of Gao, Sik Pui Wong reported the chaotic conditions in the Gansu region from 1928 onwards.² In Wong's view, these were caused by the military campaigns of Ma Zhongying (馬仲英; 1910–37), a warlord during the Republican era.³ Although Wong does not provide detailed information about the historical context, he strongly condemns Ma for the deaths

of 200,000 people and for suppressing the population of Ganzhou and Gansu to the point of extreme poverty in his exploitation of both regions to be used as military and logistical supply stations.⁴ The report concludes with a note that “the Trio”—Mildred Cable (蓋羣英), Eva F. French (馮貴珠), and Francesca L. French (馮貴石)—were only able to escape death with great risk and effort and an extremely vague statement about Gao's activities until the end of his life. He writes:

It is believed that Dr. Gao, this seasoned evangelist, in those days continued to travel through the Hexi Corridor, using the Ganzhou Church as a gospel station, tirelessly journeying to places like Suzhou, Pingliang, and Lanzhou, serving as a devoted medical missionary dedicated to Christ.⁵

Another version of Gao's final years is provided by Li Yading, who seemingly focuses on Gao's activity to rescue missionaries. Li emphasizes that Gao consistently utilized his social influence and relationship with the government for this purpose. Similar to Wong, Li's final remarks on Gao's life and activities in the 1930s are vague.

[W]e can surmise that Gao had freedom to come and go to help people in need and to rescue missionaries, so we may assume that he had left the military hospital by 1929. He probably continued to use his status as a medical missionary, based in the Ganzhou church, to traverse the region of Hexi corridor, all points in Gansu province, and anywhere else he was needed.⁶

In examining Christian sources, we find some final indications of Gao's activities in the 1930s. An interview with Findlay Andrew, who actively assisted people who were victims of famine during the 1920s and 1930s in war-torn China—particularly in Gansu province—reports on Gao's missionary work.

In one district which Dr. Kao visited for the last time at the end of August [1930] he was greeted by the village elders of a certain village with the news that the whole of that district had definitely accepted the Gospel which had been preached to them during the weeks of active relief operations.... Dr. Kao was taken to the ancestral hall of the clan of that village, and there over the main tablet in the centre of the road was a large yellow envelope, and on it was written “To the glory of the true God through Jesus Christ the Son.”⁷

This biographical gap is particularly significant as Gao’s final years, leading up to his presumed martyrdom, have been incorporated into a communist narrative. In a leading article in a publication from the eponymous museum established in Zhangye, it is claimed that Gao began to lose his Christian faith in the early 1930s (and embraced a strong faith in Communism) just months before he disappeared.⁸ (See the discussion in the next section.) Furthermore, his dramatic heroic martyrdom was documented in Chinese secular sources that cannot be independently verified.⁹ Pfister showed, based on a letter from Gao’s youngest son, Kao Shih-chieh, written to the museum, as well as through personal testimony documented in email correspondence with Kao Shih-chieh’s granddaughter, Linda Kao, that these claims from the CPC perspective are unsubstantiated.¹⁰

According to Kao Shih-chieh, the religious activities and devotional habits of his father were tied to his daily routine and included personal Bible reading, conducting regular morning and afternoon worship services, as well as family prayer—including thanksgiving—

before meals and before bedtime. Crucial in this regard is the memory of Kao Shih-chieh that “these routines were deeply etched in his memory because of their consistency and certainly indicate that Dr. Kao was a very serious and disciplined Christian on the eve of his disappearance.”¹¹

This disappearance, which presumably took place in early February 1938, ultimately remains a mystery, as it has not been documented by verifiable sources. Gao’s family members and a Christian friend have testified that he had suffered great personal loss by the early 1930s—the death of his eldest son Ying-chieh and his first wife.¹² Without a doubt, the tragic deaths of two close family members would have had a profound impact on Dr. Gao. However, according to his youngest son, Gao remained a very committed Christian leader to the end of his days.

The claim that Gao gave up his Christian faith can be doubted, as family members and close associates have stated that his second wife, Mou Yuguang (1895–1981), was a Christian.¹³ Throughout the 1930s, he regularly journeyed back to Lanzhou with the purpose of establishing a new hospital. Upon the successful establishment of the hospital, Dr. Gao returned to Ganzhou in the fall of 1934. Resuming his medical-evangelist ministry in the Gospel Hall Hospital, he remained part of the distinctive Christian community amidst an increasingly tumultuous and politically volatile environment. Apparently, during this period, he encountered several Communist military leaders in various places due primarily to his medical work. In this context,

Gao’s youngest son reports that his father willingly provided medical aid to several hundred wounded and needy soldiers of the Western Route Army.¹⁴

Did Gao remain a Christian or become a Communist? It becomes abundantly clear here that the final chapter of Gao’s life story is embedded in a historical context that has not been adequately scrutinized in either Christian or communist narratives.

3. The turbulent 1930s—the historical context of Dr. Gao’s final years

It is noteworthy that Dr. Gao’s last phase of life and work in Gansu coincides with a turbulent transitional period, namely from the Warlord period (1916–27) to the First Chinese Communist Civil War (1927–37).¹⁵ The end of the Warlord period—around 1927—witnessed heightened anti-Christian sentiment, exacerbating challenges for both foreign missionaries and their Chinese congregants across much of the country. The shift in sentiments occurred at a time when Gao’s missionary ministry was thriving, supported by the Trio in teaching and evangelism, as well as various local and itinerant individuals passing through Ganzhou.¹⁶

As extensively discussed in Section 3.5 of my earlier article, it was during this period that Gao encountered some of his most formidable challenges, primarily stemming from false accusations made against him by Wu Tongren. It is notable that this outlandish falsehood generated a widespread sense of public indignation, leading to the case gaining significant attention and was documented in detail



A group of Ganzhou converts with Gao (standing, with an umbrella), *China’s Millions*, North American ed. (1922): 71.



Mission House at Ganzhou, in Mildred Cable and Francesca French, *Dispatches from North-west Kansu* (London: CIM, 1925), 68.

in both Christian and Chinese sources. After this initial tumultuous period, which coincided with the deterioration of his health during captivity, Gao became even more entangled in the political disputes between the warlords, the National Revolutionary Army, and the emerging Chinese Red Army. This happened when he was appointed by the warlord, Feng Yuxiang—"the Christian General"—to support the work of the Red Cross.

In the spring of 1928, the National Revolutionary Army, led by warlord Feng Yuxiang, arrested and executed Ma Bao, a member of the so-called Ma clique, in Hezhou, Gansu. (The Ma clique, or Ma family warlords, is a collective term referring to a group of Hui (Muslim Chinese) warlords in Northwestern China who governed the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, and Ningxia for a decade, from 1919 to 1928.¹⁷) Upon learning of this, Ma Zhongying, who was studying at the Qinghai Military Academy, led some friends in rebellion. They attacked a convoy of the National Revolutionary Army, seized a large number of weapons, and, upon reaching Hezhou, rallied tens of thousands of local people to establish the armed force "Black Tiger Brigade against Feng's army." Ma Zhongying proclaimed himself commander and besieged Hezhou three times, with the result that 10,000 died.¹⁸ After the Warlord Era, the Ma clique aligned first with the Kuomintang and fought against

the Red Army during the Long March and later engaged with the Japanese during the Second Sino-Japanese War.

The complexity of the situation increased with the onset of the first Chinese Communist Civil War that affected the entire nation. Dr. Gao and the Christian community in Ganzhou faced substantial cultural pressure, grave threats, and poignant losses. Drought and famine had struck the area in 1930, making the political situation particularly challenging.¹⁹ The eyewitness account from the Trio reveals the unimaginable horror in Ganzhou that also had a profound impact on the churches there.

At the present time Islam rules and militarism is rampant. It is the peasants' privilege to feed, warm and clothe a large army, while he and his family are often without food, clothes or firing.... Incendiarism, pillage, rape and murder has been the order of the day.... The Kanchow Church has passed through much tribulation since the happy days of our first coming there. We are still too close to events, which broke in a storm of persecution on the Church, to measure the effect on the large number who professed and called themselves Christians.²⁰

It is known that in the same year, other Chinese doctors and Christian citizens were attacked by Muslim-led armed forces in the southern Gansu town of

Qinzhou, resulting in the death of over 4,000 people, including Dr. Wu Baoying (1897–1930), a Christian graduate of Borden Memorial Hospital.²¹

Throughout this turbulent time, Dr. Gao, who remained in the public eye due to his numerous social connections, faced a deep ethical-political dilemma. To what extent should he take sides in such a chaotic time? What is the ultimate ethical responsibility of a Christian, especially a Chinese medical missionary? Xian refers to "necessary compromises" that Gao had to make due to his diverse socio-political relationships, but fails to provide specific examples.²² It was ultimately, though indirectly, his political

entanglements that led to his family tragedy. According to Gao's youngest son, his eldest brother, Ying-chieh, took his own life in anger when the family refused to approve his marriage to a daughter of a warlord with whom he had developed a love relationship. This, in turn, likely prompted the death of Gao's first wife due to depression.²³

The question arises as to why, following his youngest son's statements, Dr. Gao would not openly embrace the Communist Party but would assist the wounded of the Red Army. It can be reasonably deduced that Gao's central concerns likely remained unchanged: the establishment of hospitals in various locations in Gansu, aiding the injured, especially civilians, and evangelism.

Pfister points out that Gao's decision to align himself with Communist armed forces, passing through the Ganzhou region in 1937 and early 1938, is connected with the Second United Front (1937–41) collaboration between the Nationalist and Communist forces to oppose the Japanese.²⁴ Another reason for Gao's possible sympathy for the Red Army is the increasing fear expressed by the broad population about the cruelty of the regionally dominant Muslim political Ma clique and its forces.

There is no indication in the available sources that Gao was interested in the ideological and political conflict between the Kuomintang and the Communist

Party. Rather, Gao seems to have acted out of a kind of Christian-motivated pragmatism. The immense losses of the Communist Army while fighting the local Muslim-led armies prompted him to provide medical support out of Christian charity. According to the narrative promoted by the Communist Party, Gao and other doctors played a major role in helping over two hundred soldiers in the Gospel Hall Hospital recover from their injuries, a feat that ultimately made him a national hero in the history of the Communist Party.

The disappearance and death of Gao in 1938 were also incorporated as constitutive elements of this narrative. It is claimed that Gao was murdered by Han Qigong (韩少功, 1886–1951), a subordinate of General Ma Bufang, who also served as a local municipal leader in Ganzhou. After examining various sources and witness accounts to the veracity and historical reliability of details of Dr. Gao's final days, Pfister concludes that the communist source "does not contain sufficient evidence to confirm how Dr. Kao disappeared and died.... many questions remain about the claim that Han Qigong and those under his authority tortured and murdered Dr. Kao.... It is at best a clever speculation, rather than a confirmed or confirmable historical fact."²⁵ In this context, the problematic aspect of narrative construction, both from the Christian and the Communist Party's perspectives, raises questions about the potential distortion of a historically authentic image of Gao.

4. Gao as exemplary Christian or Communist martyr? – Problematic aspects in narrative constructions

From both Christian and CPC perspectives, efforts have been made to highlight the heroic aspects of Dr. Gao's life, but with different emphases. Whereas Christian sources emphasize his creative and passionate medical-evangelistic missionary work, the communist narrative accentuates his self-sacrificing rescue efforts for communist soldiers and alleges martyrdom despite the lack of concrete evidence. The public shaping and construction of such narratives are built upon certain prototypes and standard schemas of what a hero is like within a particular context. Cultural scripts shape a hero's experiences so that they align

A clear overlap between the Christian and the communist historiographical narratives lies in the depiction of Gao's generous helpfulness and tremendous popularity among the common people.

with preferred cognitive frameworks influenced by political, religious, and cultural biases. These schemas guide interpretation and filter information, potentially leading to overlooking certain information or misrepresenting aspects of a hero's character.

As Pfister rightly points out, the depiction of Gao's life results in "a twofold distortion."²⁶ Christian narratives tend to omit the political complexities he faced in the late 1930s, portraying his Christian heroism without referencing the social challenges he encountered. As a result, the difficult choices that he and other moral leaders, including Christians, must make are passed over without comment. The CPC narrative is designed to exalt Gao as a "Chinese Communist hero" by emphasizing his association with Communist military officials in 1937–1938. This narrative involves mythification, particularly by constructing a cruel death under unverifiable circumstances. Such ideological claims raise concerns about the accuracy and reliability of the historical account.

The common purpose of such narratives is to meet the expectations of the implicit readership through the interpretative "smoothing" of the life story. Thus, Wong's brief biography of Gao traces his childhood encounter with CIM missionaries and his path into medical service are narrated with great storytelling skill and detail (see also Section 3.1 of my earlier paper). Not only are positive character traits such as the intelligence and diligence of the young Gao repeatedly emphasized, but also the first and last encounter with Hudson Taylor shortly before his death is vividly depicted in moving tones. Finally, his commitment to the Christian faith from the beginning is highlighted. The story is permeated with a Christian vocabulary and Christian narrative logic, which highlights Gao's trust in God and presents his life path as steered by divine guidance, whether in his early encounter with Edward Bevis's family

or in other ways. "This is the guidance of the Heavenly Father, leading him to this compassionate and wise family.... Whether in the field, by the roadside, or even under the stars and moonlight, as long as he was alone, he earnestly prayed to the Heavenly Father."²⁷

Interestingly, the communist narrative similarly emphasizes positive character traits such as intelligence and diligence. It also includes the following anecdote which is not found in any of the Christian sources.

Once, while cleaning the room of the British missionary [Mr. Bevis], he found a gold coin, promptly returned it, and as a result gained the appreciation of the British missionary [Mr. Bevis]. From then on, [Mr. Bevis] taught him English.²⁸

Important for this narrative is Gao's personal moral integrity. Indeed, this emphasis not only resonates with the general Chinese moral principle of honesty—拾金不昧²⁹—but especially aligns with communist values. Nevertheless, the portion covering the first thirty years of Gao's life is significantly shorter in comparison to the narrative from the late 1920s onward, which particularly focuses on Gao's multifaceted involvement with the Chinese Red Army.

A clear overlap between the Christian and the communist historiographical narratives lies in the depiction of Gao's generous helpfulness and tremendous popularity among the common people.³⁰ Both narratives similarly relate the warlike brutality of the Ma Clique, as well as the unjust accusations and arrest of Dr. Gao. However, their interpretations and intentions differ significantly. The Christian accounts emphasize Gao's heroic efforts to rescue Chinese Christians and missionaries who faced cruel persecution within the context of political turmoil. By contrast, communist historiography portrays

the Ma Clique—aligned with the Kuomintang—as the enemy of the Red Army, with Gao depicted as their friend, comrade, and eventually a communist martyr-hero. It is important to note that while the Christian narrative remains silent on Gao’s political entanglements, the communist narrative excessively elaborates on the part that seemingly justifies Gao’s shift from Christianity to communism and ultimately his martyrdom.

It is evident that the conclusion, the end of a narrative, plays a prominent role as it not only succinctly concludes the narrative but also prompts a final assessment, whether positive or negative. In Section 3.6 of my first article and Section 2 of this one, various versions of Gao’s final years were discussed from the perspective of the Christian sources. Vague statements suggest that Gao remained a faithful follower of Christ and a medical missionary until the end without acknowledging his involvement in the complex political situation. In contrast, a version from the perspective of the CPC vividly portrays the dramatic end of Gao as an avowed communist.

On September 6th, when Qiu Junpin [secretive member of the Communist Party] learned that Han Qigong had already noticed the frequent activities of Red Army personnel and was preparing to arrest people, Gao Jincheng also received similar news from higher-ups. On the evening of the next day, the party branch still held a meeting in the small building of the Gospel Hall, deciding to send Liu Desheng [secretive member of the Communist Party] to Lanzhou again to report the situation. When Liu Desheng left, he asked Gao Jincheng, “Do you have anything to say to the party?” After a long period of contemplation, Gao Jincheng said solemnly, “I firmly believe in communism. *When you get to Yǎn’an,*



Dr. Gao, in Cable and French, *Dispatches from North-west Kansu*, 68.

please tell the Central Committee that I request to join the Chinese Communist Party!” After sending off the Red Army members around him, Gao Jincheng continued his rescue work. In the early morning of February 3, at 4 a.m., Han Qigong deceived Gao Jincheng into the Grand Yamen for interrogation under the pretext of treating an illness. Gao Jincheng faced death with resignation and fearlessness, and he was finally secretly killed in the garden behind the Grand Yamen, at the age of 52.³¹

Such a martyr’s death fits well into the overall narrative from the perspective of the CPC, although the authenticity of this account cannot be independently verified.

The problematic nature of such narrative constructions is evident. The Christian narrative largely omits the historical-political context, especially in the last decade of Gao’s life, seemingly to maintain the ideal image of a pure Chinese missionary. The communist narrative commits to a one-sided focus on Gao’s political involvement with the Red

Army, glorifying his medical assistance to communist soldiers and his alleged martyrdom. Pfister concludes in his essay that “Both of these dimensions of Dr. Kao Gin-cheng’s virtuous and heroic life should be recognized and appreciated.”³²

As positive as one may want to be towards accepting these vastly different narratives, a significant question arises regarding the justification of emphasizing certain aspects of his story. The omission or amalgamation of the actual context provides a tendentially easily understandable identification-friendly black-and-white narrative but obscures inspirational elements of Gao’s life. In this context, the crucial question arises as to which truly heroic aspects are reflected in his life.

It is evident that the heroism of Dr. Gao did not only emerge in the last two years of his life, as the communist perspective suggests, but was already evident when he and his first wife made the decision to move to Gansu and become medical evangelists. This heroic aspect underwent development over time, though it was obscured by narrativization. As the political situation escalated with the transition from the Warlord period to the First Chinese Communist Civil War and later the Second Sino-Japanese War, Gao found himself increasingly in a political-ethical dilemma. His commitment to justice led to six months of imprisonment. As a physician with a good reputation, he had to serve warlord Feng Yuxiang and navigate dealings with various political figures, which likely required wise flexibility that transcends existing ideological-political divides. Herein lies the genuinely heroic aspect of Gao. Amidst all the political turbulence, he did not lose courage. He continued, with all his ability, to advocate for the vulnerable, needy, and oppressed out of Christian mercy. This mercy was expressed toward communist soldiers, despite the option of doing nothing and the great risk of making ethically questionable decisions due to deep political entanglement.

Conclusion

Dr. Gao, as a medical-evangelistic missionary, undoubtedly stands among the legendary figures of China in the 1920s and 1930s, a period marked by political turbulence during the Warlord period, the First Chinese Communist Civil War, and the first few years of

Herein lies the genuinely heroic aspect of Gao. Amidst all the political turbulence, he did not lose courage. He continued, with all his ability, to advocate for the vulnerable, needy, and oppressed out of Christian mercy.

the Second Sino-Japanese War. The available data is insufficient to produce a reasonably accurate reconstruction of his entire life story, especially with regard to his mysterious disappearance and death. Narrative constructions from both Christian and CPC perspectives affirm Gao's medical capabilities and moral integrity in the form of justice and mercy. However, they sometimes present a distorted, idealized image due to contextual confusion and obscure inspirational moments in Gao's life. From the testimonies of family members and friends, it is evident that routine Christian practices played a central role in Gao's life until his disappearance. It is also clear that his life and work, his family, his Christian community, and medical co-workers in Ganzhou, had an undeniable impact on the lives of numerous people throughout the region of central Gansu Province during this turbulent period. His courage, keen sense of justice, and compassionate love for the poor, wounded, and oppressed inspire us to do the same amidst the turbulent changes we face. **MRT**

¹ Ma Tainji, "Pioneer CIM Medical Missionary or Communist Martyr? The Unusual Story of an Influential Chinese Christian Dr. Gao Jincheng (高金城)," *Mission Round Table* 18, no. 3 (October-December 2023): 34–39, <https://omf.org/resource/mrt-18-3-dec-2023-one-people-uniting-in-gods-mission/> (accessed 21 February 2024).

² 黃錫培, 捨命的愛: 中國內地會宣教士小傳 [Sik Pui Wong, *Sacrificial Love: Portraits of CIM Missionaries*], 2nd ed. (Petaluma, CA: CCM, 2007), 193–94.

³ Ma Zhongying grew up in Gansu in the 1920s, experiencing earthquakes, droughts, famines, the widespread use of opium, and battles of the Chinese Civil War, especially by Feng Yuxiang's armies. In contrast to the Christian General Feng, Ma supported the Yihewani movement, which was closely associated with the Muslim Brotherhood at the time. At a young age, Ma commanded troops during the so-called Muslim conflict in Gansu from 1927 to 1930. See Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 65; James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 192. Lipman describes the turbulent period.

"It did not escape unscathed, however, from the warlord battles that plagued the region. After Feng Yuxiang took titular command of the northwest, local commanders of all ethnicities scrambled to accommodate his powerful outside army. Hoping to drive Feng away from Taoxi and Huangzhong, Ma Zhongying, the Little Commander, a Xining Muslim adventurer from Ma Qi's family, raided the entire Hezhou region in the late 1920s, attacking Hezhou three times, and then fled southward toward Taozhou with thousands of young Muslim men, eager to plunder." Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China*, Studies on Ethnic Groups in China (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 196.

⁴ Wong, *Sacrificial Love*, 193–94.

⁵ Wong, *Sacrificial Love*, 194. The original Chinese text is: "高医生这位福音老将，深信当日还在河西走廊上以甘州教会为福音站，继续奔走来往肃州、平凉和兰州等地，作忠于基督的医生传道。"

⁶ Li Yading, "Gao Jincheng," trans. G. Wright Doyle, *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, <https://bdconline.net/en/stories/gao-jincheng>; 李亚丁“高金城”，*華典*, <https://bdconline.net/zh-hans/stories/gao-jincheng> (accessed 11 December 2023).

⁷ "An Interview with Mr. Findlay Andrew," *China's Millions*, British ed. (1932): 6–7.

⁸ 陳金榮, 姚興宏 主编, 祈連忠魂高金城: 高金城與張掖人民營救紅西路軍將士事蹟 (張掖: 高金城烈士紀念館, 2012) [Chen Jinrong and Yao Xinghong, eds., *Qilian's Faithful Gao Jincheng: An Account of Gao Jincheng and the People of Zhangye Rescuing the Red Army* (Zhangye: The Hero Gao Jincheng Memorial Museum, 2012)], 13.

⁹ "高金城," 百度百科 ["Gao Jincheng," *Baidu Baike*], <https://baike.baidu.com/item/高金城/6316801> (accessed 11 December 2023).

¹⁰ Lauren F. Pfister and Jihua Liu, "An Indigenous CIM Medical Missionary and National Hero: Unveiling Complexities in the Story of Dr. Kao Gin-Cheng," in *Shaping Christianity in Greater China: Indigenous Christians in Focus*, ed. Paul Woods, Regnum Studies in Mission (Oxford: Regnum, 2017), 135–36.

¹¹ Pfister and Liu, "An Indigenous CIM Medical Missionary and National Hero," 136. Details of the correspondence with Linda Kao are given at the end of that article.

¹² Pfister and Liu, "An Indigenous CIM Medical Missionary and National Hero," 141–42.

¹³ Chen and Yao, *Qilian's Faithful Gao Jincheng*, 112–13, cited in Pfister and Liu, "An Indigenous CIM Medical Missionary and National Hero," 142.

¹⁴ The Western Route Army, formed in October 1936, refers to the main force of the Red Fourth Front Army of the Red Army. In compliance with the resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the Western Route Army crossed the Yellow River in order to occupy Gansu and Ningxia. However, due to command errors, obsolete equipment, and the lack of a base, the majority of the Western Route Army was routed near the Qilian Mountains five months later. 李菁, "曾经被遮蔽的西路军历史与还原历史的艰难历程," [Li Qing, "The Obscured History of the Western Route Army and the Challenging Process of Restoring the Historical Narrative"], *四川在线 - 文摘周报*, 2009年07月14日, https://news.ifeng.com/mil/history/200907/0714_1567_1248517.shtml (accessed 11 December 2023).

¹⁵ The periodization follows Christopher R. Lew and Edwin Pak-wah Leung, *Historical Dictionary of the Chinese Civil War*, 2nd ed., Historical Dictionaries of War, Revolution, and Civil Unrest (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2013).

¹⁶ Evangeline French, Mildred Cable, and Francesca French, "The Far North-West: A Circular Letter (From Liangchowfu, Kansu, April 11, 1924)," *China's Millions*, British ed. (August 1924): 126–28; Evangeline French, Mildred Cable, and Francesca French, "Progress in the Far North West: A Circular Letter (From Kanchow, Kansu, July 8, 1924)," *China's Millions*, British ed. (November 1924): 170–72.

¹⁷ Jonathan Neaman Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1998), 258. After the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912, the region fell under the control of Chinese Muslim warlord Ma Qi until the Northern Expedition by the Republic of China established centralized control in 1928. The Ma clique, named after the common

Hui rendering of the Muslim name "Muhammad," consisted of three families, each controlling specific areas: Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia. The three most notable members were Ma Bufang, Ma Hongkui, and Ma Hongbin, collectively known as the Xibei San Ma (西北三馬—"the Three Ma's of the Northwest"). Other prominent figures in the Ma clique included Ma Buqing, Ma Anliang, Ma Qi, Ma Lin, Ma Hushan, and the aforementioned Ma Zhongying.

¹⁸ Lipman, *Familiar Strangers*, 196.

¹⁹ "The Advance Challenged," Editorial Notes, *China's Millions*, British ed. (July 1930): 115, <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/digcoll/221953> (accessed 4 January 2024).

²⁰ Mildred Cable, Francesca French, and Evangeline French, *A Desert Journal: Letters from Central Asia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), 156–57, <https://archive.org/details/dli.pahar.2557> (accessed 4 January 2024).

²¹ Wong, *Sacrificial Love*, 198–208.

²² 咸娟娟“传教、医疗与政治：博德思医院的创建与西北基督教传播研究”，*国际学刊*2014年第六期，91–100 [Juanjuan Xian, "Missionary, Medicine and Politics: On the Creation of the Borden Memorial Hospital and Research of Northwest Christian Propagation," *International Journal of Sino-Western Journal* 6 (2014): 91–100], <https://www.sinowesternstudies.com/back-issues/vol-6-2014/> (accessed 5 March 2024).

²³ These statements are derived from the email correspondences between Pfister and Linda Kao. See Pfister and Liu, "An Indigenous CIM Medical Missionary and National Hero," 142.

²⁴ Pfister and Liu, "An Indigenous CIM Medical Missionary and National Hero," 143.

²⁵ Pfister and Liu, "An Indigenous CIM Medical Missionary and National Hero," 146. Detailed arguments on this point can be found in the corresponding section in Pfister.

²⁶ Pfister and Liu, "An Indigenous CIM Medical Missionary and National Hero," 148.

²⁷ Wong, *Sacrificial Love*, 184. Chinese: "這是天父的引导，讓他走進這個既仁慈又有智慧的家。...無論在田裏、路邊、甚至繁星月下，只要是獨自一人，他便懇切地向天父祈求。"

²⁸ "高金城," 百度百科. Chinese: "一次打扫英籍传教士赵立民房间，拾到一块金币，随即归还，因此受英国传教士赵立民的赏识，自此赵立民一直教他学英语。"

²⁹ The Chinese expression "拾金不昧" (*shíjīnbùméi*) can be translated as "pick up gold without revealing it" or "finding money and not keeping it for oneself." This idiom is often used to praise someone's honesty and integrity. It reflects the virtue of a person who, upon finding valuable items or money, chooses to return them to their rightful owner instead of keeping them for personal gain. In essence, it signifies a high level of moral character and a commitment to doing what is right, even when it may be tempting to act otherwise.

³⁰ See "高金城," 百度百科 and Wong, *Sacrificial Love*, 192.

³¹ "高金城," 百度百科. Chinese: "9月6日，邱均品得知韩超功已察觉红军人员活动频繁，要准备抓人，高金城也从上层人物那里得到类似消息，次日晚，党支部仍在福音堂小楼召开会议，决定再派刘德胜去兰州汇报情况，刘德胜走时，问高金城：对党有什么要说的？高金城沉思良久，郑重地说：“我坚信共产主义。到了延安，请转告中央，我要求加入中国共产党！”高金城送走了自己周围的红军后，继续开展营救工作。1938年2月3日（旧历正月初四）凌晨4时，韩超功以治病为由将高金城骗到大衙门内进行审讯，高金城视死如归、临危不惧，最后被秘密杀害在大衙门后花园内，终年52岁。"

³² Pfister and Liu, "An Indigenous CIM Medical Missionary and National Hero," 150.

Redemptive Analogies: Jesus Christ and the Buddhist Bodhisattva

Nathan Martin



Nathan Martin served for ten years in Cambodia with OMF International. For eight of those years, Nathan and his family served on a rural church planting team in Snuol, Cambodia. Alongside ministries of visitation, Bible teaching, and church planting, the Martins worked closely with the Cambodia Department of Education to run a literacy and library project. The Martins moved back to the United States in 2019. Nathan is now a regional mobilization manager and coach for those considering long-term service in Cambodia with OMF. Nathan was initially trained at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and served as a pastor in Iowa. Nathan has been accepted into the PhD Intercultural Studies Program at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

In the practice of mission, it is important to try and build bridges of understanding so that the gospel can be incarnated in new cultures and contexts. Humanity is culture-bound and God reveals himself within culture.¹ In Christian dialogue with Buddhism, one bridge that has been considered is to connect the concept of the Buddhist Bodhisattva and the Christian Messiah. To many, this comparison seems like a good idea because the Bodhisattva has similarities to Jesus Christ. However, upon closer examination, the bridge is found to be weak and misleading. While the similarities can be helpful, the worldviews of Buddhism and Christianity are so divergent that to call Jesus Christ a Bodhisattva creates even more problems for understanding Jesus' identity and mission than if the bridge was not used. The comparison between Jesus and the Bodhisattva should be carefully distinguished because the Christian understanding of the incarnation does not find expression in the concept of the Bodhisattva. The purposes and goals of the Messiah in Christianity and the Bodhisattva in Buddhism head in opposite directions philosophically. Even so, there is an area where the Buddhist concept of the Bodhisattva has the potential to build a bridge. This is the open door to reconsider individualistic efforts as the only way out of the cycle of sin and suffering known as *samsara*.² And though the Buddhist concept of Bodhisattva falls terribly short as a comparison with Jesus Christ, it creates space for resonance and dissonance in talking about being redeemed versus redeeming oneself.

Redemptive analogies

In his book *The Peace Child*, Don Richardson introduces the idea of redemptive analogies. Reflecting on his work among the Savi people of West Papua, Richardson admitted how incredibly difficult it was to communicate the gospel with them. Richardson writes:

Clearly, a great deal of groundwork has already been done to prepare the Hebrews to recognize their Messiah ... and even when the gospel came to the Greeks, John the Apostle was able to introduce Christ to them as the Logos ... it seemed that God had not troubled Himself to prepare the Savi in any similar way for the coming of the gospel.³

The Savi worldview was so different that the first time they heard Richardson share the story of Jesus Christ, the elders of one village thought Judas was the hero. After years of work learning language and culture, it was by witnessing a tribal peace process that Richardson found the redemptive analogy he was looking for to help the Savi understand the gospel of Jesus Christ. Two tribes made peace by sending one of their children to be adopted by the other tribe. As long as the children lived, the two communities were bound to peace. "If a man would actually give his own son to his enemies, that man could be trusted," notes Richardson about the "peace child".⁴ Richardson later presented Jesus as God's peace child. It is through Jesus that God makes peace with humanity. Jesus is the sin-bearer, and the peace is permanent through the power of the resurrection. This analogy between Jesus and the peace child was a breakthrough moment for the Savi people and over time many professed faith in Christ. Richardson comments: "from now on, any Savi who rejects Christ would see himself not as denying an alien concept, but rather as rejecting the Fulfiller of the best in his own culture!"⁵

Is there potential for the Bodhisattva concept to help Buddhists better understand Jesus similar to the way the "peace child" concept was helpful for the Savi people? Steve Cioccolanti is a pastor, evangelist, and speaker who grew up as a Buddhist in Southeast Asia and later converted to Christianity. In his book *From Buddha to Jesus*, Cioccolanti

To call Jesus a Bodhisattva seriously confuses the worldviews of Buddhism and Christianity. To say that the Maitreya is really a prophecy about Jesus overflows with ontological problems for anyone who takes the worldviews of Buddhism and Christianity seriously.

writes for a popular lay audience and seeks to illustrate connection points between Buddhism and Christianity as tools for evangelism. Much of the book encourages readers to look for cultural connections and then move to the gospel. In a chapter entitled, “The Last Words of Buddha,” Cioccolanti argues that a Buddhist prophecy about a coming Bodhisattva—the Maitreya—can also be used in dialogues with Buddhists to point them to Jesus. Many Buddhists are looking forward to the Maitreya as a final incarnation of the Buddha who will bodily appear at the end of this age.⁶ Though he doesn’t state his sources, Cioccolanti suggests that a monk in Cambodia told him in reference to the Maitreya: “The Holy One will rescue the world and have scars on his hands and scars on his feet.”⁷ Cioccolanti recommends that we can turn this hope to Jesus. This book is an example of a Southeast Asian seeking to use a Bodhisattva—the Maitreya—as an evangelistic strategy. Cioccolanti is not alone in seeking to make this connection. From a more academic perspective, three Christian and three Buddhist scholars wrestle with connections they see between the Christ and the Bodhisattva in *The Christ and the Bodhisattva*. The commonalities include the ideas of mutual compassion and beings who seek to help the suffering. The Maitreya is again selected as a connection point. For example, the Maitreya’s name means “loving-kindness”, the Maitreya is usually depicted standing or sitting in Western style instead of the lotus position, and the Maitreya is ready to enter the world and help take beings from suffering.⁸

At first glance, the idea sounds like an exciting way forward. The similarity between the Maitreya and Jesus Christ is that they both vicariously suffer for the good of others. The Bodhisattva approaches the brink of Nirvana and decides to turn back in order to transfer his merit and teaching energies to help

other beings progress along the eightfold path to enlightenment.⁹ The idea of the Bodhisattva is quite remarkable in Buddhism because the traditional Theravada Buddhist position is that no one can help anyone else with their karma. Only the person who committed a sin, or an evil deed, can pay for that sin.¹⁰ “Each of us is responsible for our own lot in life. We each cause our own suffering, and each of us is ultimately responsible for our own liberation,” notes Buddhist scholar Jose Cabezon.¹¹ The development of vicarious suffering in Buddhism is important for Christianity because it opens a way to understand the vicarious suffering of Jesus. It is very hard for the Buddhist to understand the idea of Jesus dying for our sins if their worldview does not allow for one being to suffer for the benefit of another.

Despite this link, to call Jesus a Bodhisattva seriously confuses the worldviews of Buddhism and Christianity. To say that the Maitreya is really a prophecy about Jesus overflows with ontological problems for anyone who takes the worldviews of Buddhism and Christianity seriously. The Jesus of biblical Christianity must be allowed to engage with Buddhism at the crucial level of Jesus’ core identity. There are at least three major areas where the Buddhist doctrine of the Bodhisattva and a Christian understanding of Jesus Christ are incompatible: (1) the doctrine of the incarnation, (2) the doctrine of Jesus being without sin, and (3) the nature and purpose of salvation.

The doctrine of the incarnation and the Bodhisattva

One of the initial problems related to associating Jesus with a Buddhist Bodhisattva is the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Christianity understands Jesus to be fully God and fully man, but the Bodhisattva is neither. When it comes to the concept of divinity, Buddhism and

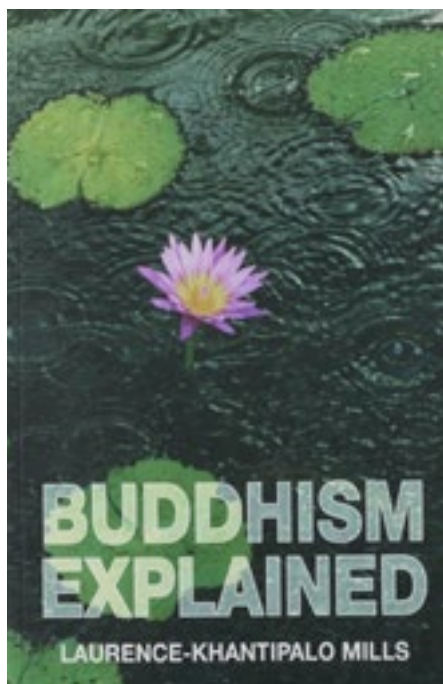
Christianity are not on the same page. They are not even in the same book. The Bodhisattva exists in a worldview that does not recognize anything like the monotheistic God of Christianity. As one example, the word for “god” in the Buddhist country of Cambodia is ព្រះ (*preah*). *Preah* can refer to anything from an idol to members of the royal family to a human with supernatural powers. By contrast, the Christian God of the Bible is unique, personal, self-existent, self-sufficient, eternal, immutable, transcendent, all-knowing, all-powerful, omnipresent, and the Creator of the cosmos.¹²

This overall picture of God is absolutely essential for a correct understanding of the person of Jesus. Jesus is a full member of the Trinitarian Godhead of Christianity. As Boice writes, “The Lord Jesus Christ is fully divine, being the second person of the Godhead who became man ... There is but one living and true God who exists in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”¹³ Many biblical passages highlight Jesus’ identity as a full member of the Trinity from eternity. The introduction to the Gospel of John states:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:13–14 ESV).

The Apostle Paul similarly states, “There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist (1 Cor 8:6 ESV).”

In Buddhism, the Bodhisattva becomes functionally “divine”, but no Bodhisattva is comparable to the Creator, Ruler, and Sustainer of the universe. Buddhism and Christianity are divided by a chasm between recognizing one God and countless “divine” beings. For example, in *The Lotus Sutra*, the Maitreya is pictured as a wise “divine” Bodhisattva, one of countless Bodhisattvas. *The Lotus Sutra* frequently talks of thousands of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. “Then there was another Buddha who was also named Sun Moon Bright, and then another Buddha also named Sun Moon Bright. There were 20,000 Buddhas like this, all



with the same appellation ...”¹⁴ Likewise, in another passage, the Bodhisattva Maitreya states, “And some bodhisattvas numerous as the dust particles of a thousand minor worlds are assured that after eight more rebirths they will be able to complete the Buddha way.”¹⁵

The Maitreya is not pictured as having the attributes of the Christian God. Even a Buddha does not have the attributes of the Christian God, except for possibly an acquired omniscience.¹⁶ Most Buddhists would probably accept Jesus Christ as a Bodhisattva-type figure: a being who is very wise, able to work miracles, and a teacher of the right way. What is in dispute are Jesus’ attributes as the monotheistic Creator God of the Bible. Biblical Christianity identifies Jesus as the Creator God; Buddhism recognizes no such being. Boice, writing about Jesus from a Christian perspective, says: “For if Christ is not fully divine, then our salvation is neither accomplished nor assured. No being less than God himself, however exalted, is able to bear the full punishment for our sin.”¹⁷ In contrast, Buddhist scholar Jose Cabezon writes, “There is no god who is the creator of the universe, who is originally pure and primordially perfected, who is omnipotent and who can will the salvation of beings. Jesus, therefore, cannot be the incarnation of such a God....With what deity is Jesus then to be associated?”¹⁸

A Christian view of the incarnation doesn’t work if Jesus is accepted as a Bodhisattva or any other enlightened being in Buddhist thinking because

the Bodhisattva is not analogous to the monotheistic God of Christianity. From a Christian viewpoint, Jesus is fully God; the Bodhisattva is not. Similarly, seeking to understand Jesus as a Bodhisattva fails because the Bodhisattva is not fully man. A Bodhisattva is in the process of becoming a Buddha and yet the Buddha “denies that he is a man or a god.”¹⁹ Once Bodhisattvas become enlightened and gain “divine” characteristics, they enter a transcendent state, shedding their humanity.

According to Paul Williams, there are ten stages of ongoing perfection for the Bodhisattva. The first state requires insight into emptiness. From this stage, the Bodhisattva is able to control future rebirths and has multiplying “powers and attainments.” Subsequent stages add insight and supernatural powers like flying, clairvoyance, passing through objects, and appearing in various forms.²⁰ The final stages of the Bodhisattva include being immune from demon attack or evil, near omniscience, and the ability to “split his body into infinite forms, and ... appear in the form of a Buddha if he wishes for the benefit of others.”²¹ These manifestations are not

that Jesus is fully divine. As Gonzalez says, Jesus is

the Son of God, the only-begotten of the Father; that is, from the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father; through whom all things were made, both in heaven and earth, who for us humans and our salvation descended and became incarnate, becoming human, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to heaven, and will come to judge the living and the dead.²³

Jesus did not *become* divine, and Jesus did not merely *appear* to be human. The concept of the Bodhisattva falls markedly short of these two truths that are foundational to Christian understandings of the incarnation. The fact that beings *become* Bodhisattvas completely distorts who Jesus is. The Bodhisattva gained his “divine” attributes, but Jesus was always God and did not become “divine”. Paul Williams writes, “Divinization, investing a being with divine attributes, was common in Ancient India, and by no means carried with it the dramatic

Comparing Jesus to the Bodhisattva distorts the identity of Jesus as fully God and fully man in the incarnation.

“reality” as in the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. The Bodhisattva only *appears* to be human when visiting people. The Bodhisattva who appears as a human is using expedient means to help people move toward enlightenment. *The Lotus Sutra* comments:

When the Buddhas of the future make their appearance in the world, they too will use countless numbers of expedient means, various causes and conditions, and words of simile and parable in order to expound the doctrines for the sake of living beings.²²

Hundreds of years of church history were spent clarifying the biblical doctrine of the incarnation. In opposition to groups like the Gnostics, the early Christians affirmed Jesus was fully human. The Apostles’ Creed made clear that Jesus cannot be understood as non-material. Likewise, the Council of Nicea affirmed

implications which we assume in a monotheistic culture.”²⁴ In other words, if Jesus is thought of as a Bodhisattva, anyone can become Jesus, and Jesus is not at all unique! This idea of becoming like a “god” has no place in Christianity. The Buddhist worldview also allows countless Bodhisattvas, but Christians recognize only one Jesus. Furthermore, the Bodhisattvas needed other Bodhisattvas to guide them to enlightenment.²⁵ To suggest that Jesus Christ had to earn his “divinity” and that he needed the help of a Buddha or Bodhisattva to become enlightened is at odds with Jesus’ identity as outlined in Scripture. The uniqueness of the incarnation is irrelevant if Jesus is understood as a Bodhisattva through Buddhist lens. Jesus as anything less than both fully the Creator God and fully man destroys the heart of Christian faith. The importance of both of these aspects related to Christian salvation will be further discussed below.

The doctrine of Jesus as being without sin and the Bodhisattva

If Jesus is thought of as a Bodhisattva and Christian monotheism is not allowed to stand in contrast to the Buddhist worldview, additional problems readily surface concerning the origins of sin and the identity of Jesus Christ. To begin with, the Bodhisattva has his origins within the cycle of samsara. Even though he is working his way out of the cycle, he is still in samsara. Thus, the Bodhisattva is part of and inextricable from the cycle of suffering and sin. In a limited way, the Bodhisattva remains subject to suffering and evil until he realizes Nirvana. The point becomes clear when it is realized that since all Bodhisattvas originated in samsara, they all can be said to sin. They committed evil deeds in their past lives, which are overcome with their merit, through seeing the evil done in their past as illusory, and through developing compassion.²⁶

The first stage of becoming a Bodhisattva has to do with meditations focused on compassion, on becoming a Buddha for the sake of all beings.²⁷ From a Christian perspective, the compassion of Jesus is inherent as an attribute of his being as Creator God, not as a goodness Jesus discovered on his journey. As Christians understand the concepts, Jesus never had karma. Jesus always had perfect merit. That Jesus subjected himself to suffering through the incarnation was his choice, not because he arose within samsara. It has been suggested that the vicarious suffering of the Bodhisattva in refusing Nirvana is actually a part of their striving to leave samsara. Therefore, even the good the Bodhisattva does in refusing Nirvana in order to serve others may be a part of earning merit to exit the Wheel of Samsara.²⁸ Jesus, on the other hand, comes from outside the evil and suffering of the world, and he does not gain any merit by denying himself and suffering for others. In Christianity, it is crucial to the incarnation and the atoning work of Jesus on the cross that Jesus never sinned. Hebrews 7:26–27 thus teaches about Jesus Christ:

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners,



Relief image of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara from Mount Jiuhua, Anhui, China. Nat Krause at English Wikipedia (Public domain), via Wikimedia Commons.

and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

Jesus became human to identify with humanity and only as a sinless mediator between God and man was Jesus able to make propitiation²⁹ for human sin on the cross.

The nature and purpose of Christian salvation and the Bodhisattva

Comparing Jesus to the Bodhisattva distorts the identity of Jesus as fully God and fully man in the incarnation. The Bodhisattva's origin in the Wheel of Samsara is also problematic for Christianity because Jesus is not on a journey out of suffering and sin. Thirdly, the nature and purpose of salvation in Christianity are distorted when the saving work of Jesus is likened to the saving work of the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva leads a person or persons along their own path of enlightenment. The goal of the Buddhas in appearing in the world, according to *The Lotus Sutra*, is "to cause living beings to awaken to the Buddha wisdom and

enlighten them to it."³⁰ As noted by Williams, the Bodhisattva had sin in past lives that held him back. The Bodhisattva overcomes samsara both through action and by seeing that evil deeds are "ultimately illusory and no real barrier to spiritual progress."³¹ In Christianity, people individually have souls, and the moral law describes the conditions and limits that the Creator God made for people. Going outside of these limits has consequences that cannot be overcome by changing one's view of reality. In contrast, the reality of the soul and the nature of reality itself are impermanent and insubstantial in Buddhism.³²

The end goal is important in considering the salvation path as well. The Bodhisattvas/Buddhas help people along the path to Nirvana, but what is Nirvana? Nirvana is certainly not a new heavens and a new earth in the presence of the resurrected Jesus Christ.³³ In Buddhism, there is

a question over whether anyone really needs to be "saved". The Buddhist doctrine of anatman teaches that there is no soul. Buddhist writings include the idea that the Bodhisattvas are seeking to save all, "knowing full well there is no one to save."³⁴ As Walpola Rahula points out, "Nirvana is definitely no annihilation of self, because there is no self to annihilate."³⁵ In Christianity, ethics and salvation are grounded in a personal God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Christianity similarly sees people as embodied souls. The Savior, Jesus Christ, has a resurrected body. Christians have the hope of resurrection as well and life forever with Jesus. In Buddhism, we don't know where the path is headed or if anyone is really on it. Even the noble compassion of a Bodhisattva is potentially just a means to an end. The compassion is not rooted in any ultimate reality. In the introduction to *The Christ and the Bodhisattva*, the editors note these distinctions in "salvation" goals between Christianity and Buddhism. From the perspective of the Christian faith:

Human beings are in bondage and in need of salvation by a savior who is both fully human and divine. The relationship of creator and creature requires mediation by Christ and requires that this mediation occur

in history. In Buddhism, human suffering is a problem of ignorance, which is not ultimately real... The goal is not the establishment of a kingdom in history but liberation from the bonds of time, which bring with them suffering and death... There is no creator, there is no self.³⁶

The purpose of Christ's work is not compatible with the goals of the Bodhisattva. In the incarnation, Jesus leads people to a real and personal God and Jesus delivers people from suffering and evil that are not illusory, but real. Another difference is the scope of the work of the Bodhisattva and the work of Jesus Christ. The Bodhisattva reached his position to transfer merit to others by acquiring more merit than was needed to enter Nirvana. This is similar, in many ways, to the storehouse of merit that some in the Catholic Church understand to exist. Similar to the way saints can transfer some of the extra merit they have earned to help others exit purgatory sooner, the Bodhisattva helps the person who puts their faith in him by adding his good merit to theirs. In a sense, the Bodhisattva works along with people who are working to save themselves. Significantly, the Bodhisattva has a limited supply of merit to give. From a Buddhist perspective, if one could say Jesus defeated karma and the whole wheel of samara, we would be getting closer to a Christian understanding of salvation. However, from a Christian perspective, Jesus *defeated* sin, Satan, and death (1 Cor 15:55–57). He defeated “karma” by dying in our place. From a Christian perspective, Jesus took all the karma and the entire Wheel of Samsara on himself and died to pay for the evil things done by all beings. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ defeated evil and the hold karma has on all beings once and for all. Although Jesus never once did wrong, he took all the suffering we deserved upon himself and he transfers his perfect merit, his righteousness, to anyone who puts their faith and trust in him. Thus, Christians believe that they can do nothing to help their salvation

other than having faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus as understood through the lens of the Bodhisattva would simply be a Jesus among many Bodhisattvas who offer limited merit to help a limited number of people.

Moreover, the people who put their faith in a Bodhisattva have it as their goal to become a Bodhisattva themselves. In many forms of Mahayana Buddhism, all beings are said to have the seed of Buddha, or the dharma-kaya, within them and the goal is to become fully enlightened Buddhas themselves.³⁷ Christians, by putting their faith in Jesus, never become elevated to the same status as Jesus Christ who is God incarnate. The purpose of Jesus' life and ministry was not to help people become “gods”, but to bring people into fellowship with God.³⁸ While the Bodhisattvas attained their position through merit and through special knowledge, Jesus is in the position to save by nature of his identity from all eternity. The mission of Jesus is about restoring fellowship with the Creator God. Jesus accomplished this by removing the barrier of sin through his death on the cross so that faith and trust in God are all that are needed. The Buddhist seeks to become a Bodhisattva and then to realize Nirvana.³⁹ The Christian, through Jesus, seeks to come to God and, after death, to have fellowship with a personal God through all eternity.

At the heart of these salvation issues is the different understandings that Christianity and Buddhism have

of reality. In Buddhism, neither the Bodhisattva, the Buddha, nor the people being helped are ultimately real. “Existence is illusion. Understand and go beyond. This is the way of clarity,” is one of the sayings attributed to the Buddha.⁴⁰ The Bodhisattva helps people escape the illusion of suffering and evil, but, in the end, there is no sufferer, no Bodhisattva, and only an empty destination, which was all that actually existed in the first place. In Mahayana Buddhism, the Bodhisattva and the people being “saved” are ultimately either emptiness or part of a storehouse of consciousness that projects itself into an illusory world through our “minds”. The result is the same: we experience suffering and evil and deliverance, but it is all emptiness, none of it is “real”. The Bodhisattva uses expedient means to guide people to the other side, but the means and the journey essentially don't matter.

In the Buddhist school of Madhyamika, “all beings labor under the constant illusion of perceiving things where in fact there is only emptiness.”⁴¹ From a Christian perspective, by contrast, the incarnation of Jesus Christ is historical and ultimately real. Neither Jesus Christ's incarnation nor his death and resurrection can be viewed as expedient means to help people get to enlightenment. They are the *only* means through which a person can come into relationship with the holy Creator God. Enlightenment, as Christians understand it, is not connected to illusion. Enlightenment is about



Paulus in Athen, unknown author (Public domain), via Wikimedia Commons.

knowing and being known by a God who actually exists and is knowable. Jesus is the personal, real God who has existed forever. The people being saved are real, and the suffering and evil Jesus defeated are also real. Jesus delivers people from evil and sin that are not illusory and Jesus brings people into a relationship with a real, transcendent God.

In summary, the differences between the worldviews of Buddhism and Christianity cannot be adequately addressed by comparing Jesus to the concept of the Buddhist Bodhisattva. Adding Jesus to the list of Bodhisattvas is more amenable to the pluralistic worldview of Buddhism than it is to Christianity. If Jesus Christ can be interpreted through the lens of the Messianic Bodhisattva, then some foundational tenets of Christianity are nullified because Jesus, as Bodhisattva, would be just one of many teachers using expedient means to move people towards enlightenment. The Buddhist could even reinterpret Jesus' statements, such as "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6 ESV) as expedient means that need not be taken literally. Christianity is grounded on the belief that Jesus is fully man and fully God in the incarnation, but the Messianic Bodhisattva is neither God nor man. Moreover, the Christian understanding of the purpose of Jesus' incarnation and the goals of the Messianic Bodhisattva are at odds. Jesus was incarnated to decisively defeat suffering and evil and to reconcile people with a real and personal God. The Buddhist Bodhisattva, on the other hand, assists people in becoming Bodhisattvas and he leads them on the road to emptiness.

The Bodhisattva and the need for redemption

Even though a comparison of the Bodhisattva and Jesus Christ falls apart if orthodox Christian and Mahayana Buddhist worldviews are taken seriously,

there is room for a connection on a more basic level. In Theravada Buddhism, each person pays for their own karma and only for their karma. The concept of the Bodhisattva gains traction for both an orthodox Christian and a Buddhist when wrestling with the idea of individualistic salvation. Traditionally, Buddhism claims that you are the only person who can save yourself. The concept of a compassionate Bodhisattva bends that idea.

Acts 17 serves as a kind of rubric for this type of connection. Acts 17:16 describes Paul walking around Athens while waiting for Silas and Timothy and says that his spirit was provoked by all the statues of gods and goddesses that he saw in the city. Paul is burdened by what, from his perspective, are false gods. Paul does not view these statues as expedient means to understanding deeper reality but as dangerous idols. Even with a strongly contrasting worldview about who is God, Paul's address to the Athenians in Acts 17:22–31 begins by finding a smaller point of connection. In his speech, Paul builds resonance before he moves to dissonance with the Athenian worldview. Paul notes the statue to the unknown god and praises the Athenians for being very religious. After finding a point of resonance with the Athenians, Paul shows an area of dissonance between Athenian and Christian views on the statues he sees all over the city. Paul explains how one Creator God made all the cultures and languages and this Creator God does not live in what we make. This Creator God doesn't need anything from humanity but is the One who supplies humanity with all they need. Paul then finds another point of resonance, quoting their own poets to show that they realized that "In him we live and move and have our being... For we are indeed his offspring" (Acts 17:28 ESV)." As Paul sees it, there is another point of contrast. "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere

to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man he has appointed: and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30–31 ESV). The Athenians may have been wondering: "If this is all true, then why hasn't this God judged us?" Paul's answer is that God has been merciful and patient, but now calls all peoples and cultures to repent, by focusing on the man God raised from the dead—Jesus.

Using Paul's approach in Acts 17 as a rubric, there are smaller connection points in the idea of the Bodhisattva and the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul did with the Athenians, the worldview of the gospel has both resonance and dissonance with the worldview of the Bodhisattva in the areas of sin and redemption. The first smaller connection is to recognize the common ground of concern about suffering in the world. The Bodhisattva is concerned about more than his own suffering, but the suffering and sin of others. The next connection point is the idea that someone could be helped with their burden of sin. There is a recognition that one may not be able to liberate oneself in looking and hoping for the help of a Bodhisattva. These connection points do not have to hold any more weight than recognizing suffering and sin is a heavy burden and people long for outside help for liberation.

The point of resonance with the idea of the Bodhisattva is that sin is a deep problem, too deep for each person to be dependent on only themselves for salvation. Following Paul's example, a possible Christian response moves from connection to contrast. In Christianity, there is ultimate reality, and ethics are grounded solidly in an infinite and personal God who is himself the standard of right and wrong. The Bible teaches that God is perfect in every way. God is all-powerful, loving, good, merciful, just, compassionate, holy, and sovereign. It is God who created the heavens, spiritual beings, the world, animals, and people, and they were all created distinct and evaluated as being "good". God's evaluation is not that they are "good" in contrast to being "bad" or that they exude an "esthetic goodness," but that they are "good" in that they do what God created them to do. From a biblical point of view, this means that they are not a passing illusion, but real and that they exhibit intrinsic value.

If Jesus Christ can be interpreted through the lens of the Messianic Bodhisattva, then some foundational tenets of Christianity are nullified because Jesus, as Bodhisattva, would be just one of many teachers using expedient means to move people towards enlightenment.

People are special in that we are created in God's image—like God in some ways though finite and separate from him. In Buddhism, the cycle of suffering arose and people arose as a part of that cycle. But in Christianity, people are actually real and they are created by God. Evil and its results—suffering and pain—entered the world through people who rebelled against God and sought to set themselves up as gods.⁴² The Buddha teaches the value of detachment.

The Creator God demonstrated his attachment to his creation in becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus did this to rescue humanity out of a pit of sin too deep to climb out of. The Bodhisattva comes to help a few; Jesus came to help all humanity who will put their trust in him. The Bodhisattva relies on a limited store of merit and wisdom; Jesus, being fully God and never having sinned, has no limits on the extent of his perfection and ability to cover all sins of all people. It does not matter the weight of sin, because the weight of Jesus as holy God is greater. It does not matter the depth of sin, because the reach of Jesus as holy God is longer. Using Acts 17 as a guide, the final point of contrast is the historical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Unlike the illusionary world of the Bodhisattva, the biblical concepts of salvation, liberation from sin, and the hope of resurrection all hinge on a single historical event. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are at the center of history and redemption for the Christian. His resurrection is not a philosophy, it is history. The resurrection of Jesus is the most important event in the history of the universe. Fully human and fully divine, Jesus fully defeated sin and evil in a single historical event.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the application of the Buddhist Bodhisattva to the person of Jesus Christ as a redemptive analogy is a dangerous distortion of the doctrine of the incarnation that will make it even harder for a Buddhist to understand true Christian belief. There is a need to clearly state the difference in identity between Christ and the Bodhisattva and the differing goals and purposes of their saving work. That being said, there is room for comparison of the weight of sin and hope of deliverance in the Buddhist concept of Bodhisattva and the Christian gospel. A smaller connection can be made in recognizing the common

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ground of suffering and sin and the hope of redemption outside one's individual efforts. Connecting and contrasting their perspectives about Christ and the Bodhisattva is necessary for both Buddhists and Christians to engage one another at their core. Finding a point of resonance is important in dialogue. It is also important to honestly face the dissonance in religious worldviews for true dialogue. It is the opinion of this paper that the Bodhisattva fails to serve as a redemptive analogy along the lines of the "peace child". Positively, from the Christian perspective, the concept of the Bodhisattva creates space for talking about the question of being saved versus saving oneself. **MRT**

¹ Charles Kraft, *Culture, Communication, and Christianity* (Pasadena: William Carey, 2001), 35.

² Samsara is the Buddhist understanding of an eternal cycle of suffering, birth, death, and rebirth. This cycle is believed to have no beginning or end. Buddhism seeks a way out of this cycle of suffering. Jeff Wilson, "Samsara and Rebirth," *Oxford Bibliographies*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195393521/obo-9780195393521-0141.xml> (accessed 5 March 2024).

³ Don Richardson, *The Peace Child* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2005), 182.

⁴ Richardson, *The Peace Child*, 206.

⁵ Richardson, *The Peace Child*, 234.

⁶ Timothy C. Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Round Table: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 94.

⁷ Steve Cioccolanti, *From Buddha to Jesus* (Oxford: Monarch, 2010), 143–48.

⁸ Steven Lopez and Donald Rockefeller, eds., *The Christ and the Bodhisattva* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 29.

⁹ Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Round Table*, 93.

¹⁰ Buddhist and Christian concepts of "sin" are different at their roots. For example, while breaking the five precepts—killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and fermented drink—might have something in common with Christian ideas of "sin", the basis of "sin" in Buddhism is ignorance and false views. In Christianity, the basis of good and evil is the character of God. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove, 1974), 3.

¹¹ Rita Gross and Terry Muck, eds., *Buddhists Talk About Jesus, Christians Talk about the Buddha* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 26–27.

¹² James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the*

Christian Faith: A Comprehensive and Readable Theology (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986), 103, 105, 117, 134, 142, 162.

¹³ Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 113–14.

¹⁴ Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 14.

¹⁵ Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 14, 235.

¹⁶ Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge, 1989), 212–13.

¹⁷ Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 114.

¹⁸ Cabezon continues: "The most charitable alternative a Buddhist could offer is one that identifies Jesus as a nirmanakaya – that is the physical embodiment of an enlightened being." In other words, at best, Jesus could be understood as a Buddha. Gross and Muck, *Buddhists Talk About Jesus*, 26.

¹⁹ Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*, 170.

²⁰ Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*, 206–207.

²¹ Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*, 212.

²² Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 31–32.

²³ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day* (Peabody, MA: Prince, 1985), 164–65.

²⁴ Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*, 169.

²⁵ Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*, 177.

²⁶ Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*, 167.

²⁷ Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*, 203–204.

²⁸ Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Round Table*, 127.

²⁹ Propitiation is Jesus Christ receiving the just wrath of God for humanity's sin on the cross. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 290.

³⁰ Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 31.

³¹ Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*, 167.

³² Laurence-Khantipalo Mills, *Buddhism Explained* (Chiang Mai, Silkworm, 1999), 71.

³³ See Revelation 21.

³⁴ Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Round Table*, 125–26.

³⁵ Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 37.

³⁶ Lopez and Rockefeller, *The Christ and the Bodhisattva*, 39.

³⁷ Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Round Table*, 99–100.

³⁸ See Revelation 20 and 21. The vision is God and people living together in a new creation, a new heavens and new earth, eternally free from sin, evil spirits, and death.

³⁹ Nirvana could be understood as emptiness and eternal truth. However, the concept is very difficult to nail down. Walpola Rahula writes, "Nirvana is beyond our conceptions of good and evil, right and wrong, existence and non-existence... Nirvana is beyond logic and reasoning." Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 43–44.

⁴⁰ Thomas Bryon, trans., *Dhammapada: The Sayings of the Buddha* (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), 74.

⁴¹ William Theodore de Bary, ed., *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan* (New York: Vintage, 1969), 77–78.

⁴² Paul Helm, *The Providence of God: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 194.

Galatians 2:11–21

Paul Rebukes Cephas (Peter): How to Confront Another Christian

David Eastwood



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¹¹ When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. ¹³ The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

¹⁴ When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

¹⁵ "We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles ¹⁶ know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

¹⁷ "But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! ¹⁸ If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker.

¹⁹ "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

I have always been nervous about preaching from Galatians. I think it is because I spent long hours at Bible college writing a tedious essay discussing the North/South Galatian hypothesis regarding where exactly these churches Paul was writing to were, how that affects the dating of the letter, and why it matters.¹ Somehow, all that put me off digging into the very profound theological material in the letter. But our focus in this study is on Paul's report of an incident that has been a big source of

debate in modern scholarship. Paul gives an account of how he publicly rebuked Peter, an apostle from Jerusalem and one of Jesus' closest companions. Paul does not report the result of that rebuke.²

This has led some scholars to propose a strong theological division split the early church, that Paul's gospel of salvation was different than Peter's.³ Of course, if you want to follow that kind of thinking, you also have to question quite a bit of what Paul says earlier where he implies that his theology had been approved by the Apostles in Jerusalem and you also have to dismiss the authorship of 2 Peter where the writings of Paul are commended by Peter. What is interesting is that in trying to propose a difference in understanding of the gospel in the early church, scholars are attempting to confirm the very thing that Paul is writing to prevent, that is, a varying understanding of the gospel in the early church.

I think, though, that this passage of Scripture contains some interesting things for us to pay attention to, both on the subject of race and culture but also on the topic of when Christians disagree. Firstly, Paul is addressing the issue of a version of the gospel that associates Christianity with Jewish culture and traditional Jewish religious practices. That is one that Paul says in 1:7 is really no gospel at all, but a perversion of the gospel of Christ. People who Paul calls "false brothers" (2:4) had infiltrated the church and their teaching about the necessity for Gentiles to be converted to Judaism, be circumcised, and follow Jewish food laws and other religious practices had been debated in Jerusalem. Clearly, even though the church in Jerusalem had ruled against their teaching, there was still a strong group within the church who were opposed to the freedom that both Gentile and Jewish Christians were experiencing in Christ. Perhaps some were still proposing that Gentile Christians should adopt the Jewish law. Others, perhaps, were simply insisting that Jewish Christians should

maintain their cultural practices. And I'm sure that tied up with the theological debates were racial and cultural pride and personal feelings of superiority.

In the early part of the letter, Paul argued about his authority as an Apostle (1:1)—that it was from God (1:11) but recognised by the Apostles in Jerusalem (2:7)—and that the gospel that Paul had preached—which he received as a revelation from Christ—was the same gospel as taught by the church in Jerusalem. Indeed, Paul tells them that Peter himself came to Paul's sending church in Antioch, the first church with a significant Gentile membership. We should remember that it was in this church—where such a unique multicultural community of Jewish and Gentile believers had been planted—that people needed to invent a new term to describe them, and they chose the term “Christians”—people who are like Christ! It is important for Paul to emphasise the gospel message—which is the source of their faith—because his key point here will be that the church of Jesus Christ is to be unified by the gospel that has brought salvation to its members and not by a uniform cultural interpretation of how their faith should be practiced or imposed by one dominant culture on another.

It is important to look at what Paul is saying and what he is not saying in this description of his interaction with Peter. In Galatians 2:12, Paul says that Peter was “afraid” and, in 2:13, he describes what Peter and those who emulated him were doing as “hypocrisy”. It would have been very easy for Paul to throw accusations of pride, cultural superiority, and racism against Gentiles at Peter. It would have been easy for Paul to imply that Peter and those who followed him were exactly the same as the false brothers or false teachers that he has already mentioned. We live in an age when casual ascribing of labels to people based on how we perceive their actions or speech is common, but I doubt if in Paul's day people were any calmer when it came to conflicts and disagreements that touched on religion, ethnicity, and culture.

Paul clearly says the issue here is not that Peter doesn't understand the gospel—that he has misunderstood justification by faith. The issue is that he is failing to act consistently with what he believes. We know that God went

Paul clearly says the issue here is not that Peter doesn't understand the gospel—that he has misunderstood justification by faith. The issue is that he is failing to act consistently with what he believes.

to great lengths to teach Peter that the gospel was for all humanity, that God does not show favouritism, and that, as shown in Acts 11, Peter explains clearly to the other apostles about the revelation he received in Joppa and Caesarea as recorded in Acts 10. Peter's revelation immediately preceded the scattering of the Jerusalem Christians that resulted in the establishing of the Antioch church in Acts 11. Our passage tells us that when Peter visited the church at Antioch, prior to the arrival of the circumcision group, he was eating with Gentiles and, in Paul's words, “living like a Gentile and not a Jew” (Gal 2:14).

Peter's problem was not heresy—failure to understand the gospel. His problem was cowardice—fear of the consequences of living the gospel. Paul says that Peter “was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group” (2:12). So, what was going on here? What was Peter's fear? Commentators fail to agree. Some say that Peter was concerned for his personal credibility as a church leader in Jerusalem. This view states that the Christians who wanted to associate Christianity with Jewish cultural practice were a powerful group in Jerusalem and Peter was afraid of his reputation and position.⁴ Others more charitably suggest that Peter's concern was with Jewish persecution of the church in Jerusalem and that the news that a prominent church leader was living like a Gentile would add fuel to the attacks and accusations of those wanting to attack Christians in Jerusalem.⁵ Whichever one of these was the case, neither would be that surprising, as Peter had in the past denied Jesus out of fear (John 18:17, 25, 27), and Paul has clearly discerned fear to be a factor here.

But before I smugly condemn Peter in this passage, I need to remember how often when reading the Gospels I have recognised that Peter's weaknesses are the same as my own—including his failure to speak up for Christ. How much more have I failed to live out or speak up for fear of the consequences of my faith in society today? Even those of us

who are known as Christian leaders can still be tempted to keep quiet or back off from speaking up about things that we know to be true, especially when it could affect our personal reputations with non-Christians (or even with Christians), and especially in today's world of Christian academia. We can also go silent out of fear of putting others, or our organisations, institutions, or churches at risk. If I, as a leader, speak up on what I see to be a clear biblical teaching, will it lead to others being attacked, labelled, criticised, cancelled? This is a real dilemma for many Christian leaders today. I know, for example, of two evangelical Christian organisations that have deliberately put off writing a section about gender in their policy documents for fear of the adverse attention it could attract.

But notice that by publicly confronting Peter about this, even writing about it, Paul is taking the very same risk. Theologically, he may be in the right, but it is risky to publicly rebuke Peter who was a companion of Jesus, a leading apostle of the church in Jerusalem, the very apostle whose revelation from God opened the doors to Gentile ministry in the first place. I think we can all understand what Paul was risking both to his reputation and to the reputation of others who were associated with him. Paul was exercising bravery and trust in God even as he admonished Peter for his fear.⁶ Where did Paul find the bravery and confidence to do this? We live in a context in which we are all encouraged to be so self-reflexive and conscious of our own bias that we almost dare not criticise anyone for fear of being accused of either displaying hatred or hypocrisy. Often speaking up against false teaching is left to those who seem so uncaring or lacking in personal humility that, even if we agree with what they are saying, we are almost embarrassed to admit it.

For that reason, it is worth considering Paul's approach here.⁷

Firstly, Paul reminds us of what he knows Peter believes to be true: that

his relationship with God is based on faith in Jesus Christ, which alone leads to justification before God. As Peter himself will write in his first Epistle, there is a good reason to praise God who mercifully gives us “a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). This is a salvation by grace that the prophets of old predicted and that would redeem people from the empty way of life handed down to them by their forefathers (1 Peter 1:10, 18). Paul reminds his readers that this salvation—which he and Peter, as Jews by birth, have come to embrace through Jesus—is entirely due to faith and that it fundamentally removes all sense of privilege and power that comes from their Jewish birth. It is inconceivable, then, that the Christian faith should be lived out in a way that prejudices us against another person based on race, culture, or tradition.

Paul is not directly attacking Peter based on what many would see as his sin—whether said to be prejudice, cultural superiority, or racism. He is aware that the consequence of Peter’s actions could easily be used by others to justify these. He is not even directly confronting Peter with what his sins are—cowardice, hypocrisy, and disobedience to God’s revelation (as recorded in Acts 10) and failure to trust in God. Instead, Paul gets to the core of the problem—the *root* of the sin—a self-righteous pride that rejects the core of the gospel of grace. And honestly, at this point, the Scriptures turn into an accusatory mirror because each of us can see ourselves in this. I dare even to say that Paul could write confidently because he had to struggle with this as well.

There are a few things that should challenge us here. When we are discussing difficult subjects with fellow Christians, do we focus on the surface issues—be that race, gender, spiritual gifts, eschatology, morality, cultural issues, biblical authority, or whatever—and tackle them by rebuking others and trying to force them to our perspective? So often, when the starting point is our perspective, others are automatically disempowered and alienated.

Two years ago, I attended an online conference in which the topics included race, gender, and colonialism. Every speaker was either black, female, or gay, and some were all three. Every speaker began their talk by explaining where they were coming from—the starting

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point of their theological perspective. For some, it was their personal journey and experiences of hatred, prejudice, and marginalisation both in society and sometimes, sadly, in the church. For others, it was the historical experiences of their church whose practice and expressions of beliefs had been moulded by political power and racial bias associated with European colonialism. In most cases though, they didn’t really get beyond that. There was no suggestion that this reflexive process not only established their perspectives but also their possible bias and that this should open the doors to dialogue and discussion with Christians who acknowledged different perspectives.⁸ Though it was a Practical Theology conference, there seemed to be very few practical suggestions and almost no mention of God or the Bible. Instead, most papers seemed to conclude with defining problems as the speaker saw them, the need to be aware of historical or current prejudices, and a suggestion that “theology” should take on board the things that had been mentioned, without any real suggestion of how that should occur. I found myself as a white, straight, male marginalised because there was no way I could comment or ask a question without feeling I was somehow questioning their truth. Though I also felt there was so much I wanted to explore and be challenged by, I pretty much had to do it quietly in my own head.

So often when Christians address issues such as racism, gender issues, and other controversial topics, the approach is not that much different from a secular approach. There is an assumption that anyone whose view is different is motivated by some kind of sinful attitude for which they need to be condemned and repent of. The problem with such an approach is that, often, we ourselves seem to display a high degree of self-righteousness, especially when our starting point is our own experiences.

Can you imagine a conference in Antioch where some Gentile theologians point to a case in which new believers have been pressurised into circumcision by abusive imposition of power by Jewish believers in Jerusalem? Can you imagine them pointing out that Christianity is no longer a religion exclusive to Jewish people and going on to argue that imposing a prohibition against roast pork and rejecting sexual liaisons with temple prostitutes are a denial of Greek culture and an imposition of a Jewish culturally-biased Christianity that prevents Gentile Christians from experiencing their true freedom in Christ? Can you see them complaining that this view shapes how they interpret their past, present, and even future by forcing them to live with a myopic version of future hope based on theology solely concerned with the preservation and propagation of a cultural, philosophical, and theological identity at dissonance with the experience of the Gentile church? Can you imagine a Jewish believer keeping silent for fear of being accused of racism? Can you imagine a whole conference in which the gospel is barely mentioned, and everything is discussed at the level of cultural practice and personal feelings of disempowerment? If Paul had handled this differently, and if Antioch had been a post-modern instead of an ancient society, then something like that could easily have been a possibility.

Paul’s starting point is the core of the gospel: something he knows that both he and Peter agree on.

¹⁵ “We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles ¹⁶ know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

Paul goes on to write down some sentences that have become so precious to



Saint Paul, Saint Peter, and Saint Paul by El Greco (Public domain), via Wikimedia Commons. Oil on canvas, 116 x 91 cm.

us evangelicals. Galatians 2:20 is a verse we have probably all memorised at one time. But Paul's aim here is not to write out a definition of the gospel to correct Peter's mistaken version. In verses 15–21, he reminds his readers of the precious truths that both Peter and he held as crucial, as apostles of Jesus Christ, leaders of the church, and authors of Scripture. He seeks to show how Peter's behaviour threatens an understanding of that gospel core. In this case, anything that creates a hierarchy of humanity that claims any people can be more acceptable to God based on cultural practice, religious ritual, or ethnicity must be an anathema to a gospel of grace, and any behaviour that seems to imply or support such an idea—even if those doing it do not themselves support that view—is also wrong and threatens the core of the gospel. Paul's concluding words in verse 21 are striking. If we set aside the grace of God in our assumption that righteousness can be gained by the law, then Christ died for nothing!

I wonder if we can be as charitable in our disagreements with other Christians? Can we seek to understand their fears, their experiences, their contexts, and what might motivate them to behave in ways or say things that we find disagreeable? We should firstly try to establish if we have a common understanding of the core of the gospel, and, if we do, base our conversations

on that. This would mean we all humbly stand as condemned sinners before the cross of grace rather than as self-righteous crusaders seeking to condemn others as sinners.

Of course, we may find that we are, in fact, trusting in a different gospel. But if that is the case, then I would argue that that is also a better starting point. Because if I am having a discussion with someone who calls themselves a Christian but doesn't understand the gospel as "by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law," then I will need to know that from the start or the resulting discussion will probably

lead to even greater misunderstanding and frustration.

So, how do you handle disagreements with other Christians? If you find your dearly-held views being challenged, do you lash out because your opponents are not as enlightened as you? Or do you keep quiet but inwardly maintain a feeling of smug superiority? Do you keep conversations at a surface level so that people's backgrounds and life experiences give them the right—more or less—to speak up and where disagreements can only either add importance to or devalue those experiences? Or are you prepared to affirm the faith of those you disagree with and humbly invite your brother or sister to dialogue with you starting with the core of the gospel and with a concern that Jesus be glorified?

Modern debates are often caught up with questioning the right of anyone to critique another person's beliefs if they don't and can't fully understand that person's cultural and historical perspective. So, a white person may not comment on colonialism, a straight person may not comment on homosexuality, etc. In contrast to this anthropocentric approach, the core of the gospel looks at us all from God's perspective. Instead of creating multiple hierarchies of "us" and "others", all of humanity is placed in

the same category of created, fallen sinners. The gospel then invites us to interact as forgiven sinners who know that solutions to human problems are to be found in the grace of the One who created all humanity, who sees us all fully, and loves and understands us without prejudice or bias. **MRT**

¹ See Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1970), 450–52.

² Some, such as Dunn, have proposed that Paul lost the argument with Peter because he does not tell us Peter's response. J. D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Black's New Commentaries (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 130.

³ F. C. Baur, the founder and leader of the Tübingen school of theology, is credited with originating this view. Many variations of this view can be found. For example, Dunn proposed that Peter forms a link between opposing factions of Paul and James the brother of Jesus. James D. G. Dunn, "Echoes of Intra-Jewish Polemic in Paul's Letter to the Galatians," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 462.

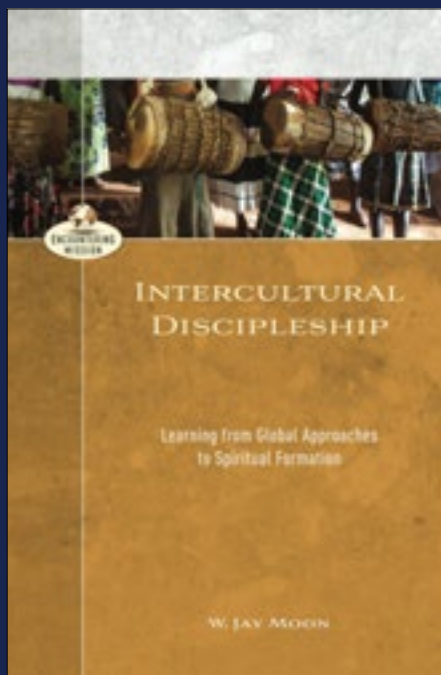
⁴ "Peter perhaps felt that if the members of the embassy went back and told the Jerusalem church that he was eating with Gentiles it would compromise his position with the leading church." Leon Morris, *Galatians: Paul's Charter of Christian Freedom* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 74. A key issue is the dating of this incident. Scholars are divided as to whether Paul is describing an event that occurred before or after the Jerusalem council recorded in Acts 15.

⁵ See T. Scacewater, "Galatians 2:11–21 and the Interpretive Context of 'works of the law,'" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56, no. 2 (2013): 307–23. Scacewater argues against Dunn's interpretation, claiming that "Peter's actions were sociologically not soteriological motivated" and his fault was "fear induced, implied ethnocentrism rather than an attempt to maintain covenant righteousness." Scacewater, "Galatians 2:11–21," 309.

⁶ Wiersbe comments: "today's Christians need to appreciate afresh the courageous stand Paul and his associates took for the liberty of the Gospel. Paul's concern was 'the truth of the Gospel' (Gal 2:5, 14), not 'the peace of the church.' 'Peace at any price' was not Paul's philosophy of ministry, nor should it be ours." Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Vol. 1* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 692.

⁷ I am indebted to Tim Keller's discussion of this passage in his article, "The Bible and Race," *Life in the Gospel* (Spring 2020), <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/the-bible-and-race/> (accessed 10 April 2023).

⁸ Pillow observes that mere reflexive understanding, while assumed to offer greater "ethnographic authority" is often deployed in a very weak "monological" sense that allows the researcher to be released from the weight of misrepresentation that inevitably accompanies any exercise in which one is attempting to name, classify, and analyse a social field of study. The mere act of being reflexive can often be assumed to have released a researcher from suggestions of bias whereas the reality is that it can often be an academic box ticking exercise with little impact on the researchers work or conclusions. Wanda Pillow, "Confession, Catharsis or Cure? Rethinking the uses of Reflexivity as Methodological Power in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 2 (2003): 186.



Intercultural Discipleship: Learning from Global Approaches to Spiritual Formation

By W. Jay Moon. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017.
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Reviewed by Nathan Keller

Whenever the gospel enters a new culture, it brings with it the power of transformation. It also brings with it the difficult challenge of how to represent this life-changing message of transformation in a way that is both consistent with biblical revelation and culturally relevant to the people. This is the goal of the intercultural discipler.

Moon defines *intercultural discipleship* as “the process of worldview transformation whereby Jesus followers center their lives on the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33) and obey Christ’s commands in culture (Matt. 28:19–20), utilizing culturally available genres” (53).

Moon warns cross-cultural disciple makers of two extreme errors that can occur when the gospel is not contextualized well. *Split-level* Christianity happens when there is a clear distinction between the spiritual and secular life of a Christian disciple. *Syncretism* happens when there is a mixing of non-Christian beliefs and practices with Christian teaching and discipleship.

In order to prevent these two negative extremes of split-level Christianity and syncretism, Moon, building upon Paul Hiebert’s “Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” takes the reader on a journey of understanding how to identify, challenge, and transform the excluded middle issues in a disciple’s life that, when not adequately addressed, can potentially lead to unhealthy discipleship manifested in one of the two negative extremes.

Drawing again upon Hiebert, Moon encourages disciplers to apply the four-step process of critical contextualization (phenomenological study, ontological critique, critical evaluation, and missiological transformation) to various cultural items. The critical contextualization process of cultural symbols, rituals, stories, proverbs, music, dance, and drama can open doors to effective communication of the gospel that can lead to worldview transformation and growth in discipleship. Moon touches

on each of these cultural items individually throughout the book. As he writes, “For intercultural disciplers to transform worldviews ... they must identify existing forms in the culture into which they can instill a Christian meaning in order to shape a Christian worldview” (116).

This book is richly illustrated with practical examples. The author, having served as a missionary in Africa, draws upon many of his personal experiences and those of local pastors with whom he served to help readers understand how theory relates to practice. Every chapter includes sidebars that further illustrate and enrich the missiological theories or practices discussed and ends with a succinct summary of the content discussed, followed by suggested activities that can be done with those being discipled. This includes case studies that help readers think through and critically apply what has been learned.

While some readers and practitioners of mission will greatly appreciate and benefit from the wisdom of this book, others may find fault with the strong reliance upon Hiebert’s “excluded middle” theory and model. Once ground-breaking and significant in missiological studies, Hiebert’s understanding of the “excluded middle” is not without critique. Many missiologists today argue that the “flaw of the excluded middle” is too simplistic and is a misrepresentation of the theology and practice of Western Christians who have a biblical view of the spirit world that is not tainted by Enlightenment thinking. Though this critique is warranted, it does not detract from the fact that any person being discipled has deep spiritual needs that should be identified, challenged, and transformed as they grow in their discipleship to Jesus. The one who is privileged to do the discipling needs to understand how to engage those being discipled with God’s truth in a way that speaks to them at their deepest sense of identity. For this reason, I warmly recommend this book to those who want to be reflective makers of disciples of Jesus Christ.