

Proceedings of the ISFM 2004 Meeting: Insider Movements Church Planting Movements vs. Insider Movements Missiological Realities vs. Mythological Speculations

by David Garrison

The Quest for Anonymous Christianity

Ever since the 17th century Jesuit Roberto de Nobili made his famous contextualizing breakthrough with Brahmins in India, missiologists have been captivated by an elusive quest for that contextualizing philosopher's stone that will magically transform a pagan people group into a Christian one. The quest reached its zenith with the 20th century Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, who postulated the existence of "anonymous Christians" scattered within each of the world's non-Christian religions.¹

Protestant theologian Karl Barth echoed back with a neo-Orthodox basis for a similar conjecture when his *Dogmatics* concluded that the unlimited atonement of Christ extended to all who were saved *whether they were aware of it or not*.

Even the evangelical hero C. S. Lewis got into the act of finding believers where none were thought to exist. In the final volume of his *Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis opened the door to anonymous Christianity when he described the eschatological meeting of a soldier named Emeth who had vigorously opposed Aslan in the name of his god *Tash* all the days of his life. Upon entering the eschaton, Emeth finds himself face to face with his old nemesis Aslan who now stands as Judge and Lord of all. Rather than condemning Emeth for his past opposition, Aslan embraces him pronouncing a startling absolution. "Child," Aslan says, "all the service thou has done to Tash, I account as service done to me."²

This leaves one to ask if Lewis would some day see Osama bin Laden standing before Christ and hearing the words, "Osama, my child, all the service thou has done on behalf of Islam, I account as service done for me."

Given this checkered history of attempts to project a Christian face onto the world's lost billions, the quest for truly indigenous *Insider Movements* should be viewed with caution. We are defining Insider Movements here as popular movements to Christ that bypass both formal and explicit expressions of the Christian religion. The peril to avoid is allowing the search for

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In 1988, Garrison earned a Ph.D. in historical theology from the University of Chicago. He has taught missions and Christian studies at Southwestern Baptist Seminary, Fuller Theological Seminary, and Hong Kong Baptist University. His latest book is entitled Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World (Midlothian: WIGTake Resources, 2004). His previous books include The Nonresidential Missionary (MARC, 1990), Something New Under the Sun (IMB, 1998), and the booklet Church Planting Movements (IMB, 2000).

Insider Movements to deteriorate into yet another attempt to co-opt the lost into the ranks of anonymous Christianity.

Apart from their place as a staple in missiology textbooks, these *Insider Movements* have proven as difficult to find as Osama bin Laden. One routinely hears hints and rumors, usually something about members of the Saudi royal family being secret believers. Upon closer examination, however, these rumors dissolve into the same wishful dreams that have beguiled Christians since the medieval quest for *Prester John*.

And then came Herbert Hofer.

A Case in Point

In the early 1990s, American Lutheran missionary Herbert Hofer published a ground-breaking report on churchless Christianity in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu.³ Hofer made the surprising discovery that up to half of the Tamil Christians in this state had never been in a church and had no intention of associating themselves with a church. Theirs was an autonomous, independent, somewhat atomized movement of millions of individuals who pledged exclusive faith in Jesus Christ without any formal denominational association. It was, in fact, an Insider Movement.

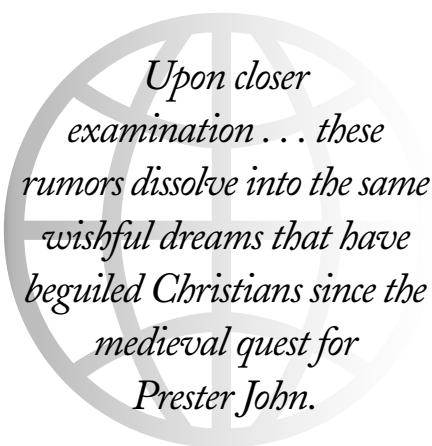
While Hofer's study may or may not be the tip of the iceberg of countless Insider Movements around the world, it does present us with a legitimate, quantifiable phenomenon. However, before we dive into this important case study, let's scan the horizon for other examples of "popular movements to Christ that bypass both formal and explicit expressions of the Christian religion." Surprisingly, one doesn't have to look far.

Other Cases of Churchless Christianity

Two examples immediately come to mind from within the Muslim world: the first in North Africa, the second in the Caucasus. After decades of missionary work in French North

Africa, the civil war of the 1980s and 90s saw the evacuation or martyrdom of most of Algeria's Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Despite this exodus, the past twenty years have seen an unprecedented number of Algeria's Kabyle Berbers come to faith in Christ. Radio broadcasts, *Jesus Film* distribution, and indigenous missionaries shuttling between France and Algeria have produced a harvest estimated at between 15,000 and 20,000.

In the face of this great turning to Christ, one is struck immediately by how few actual churches have been formed. Reports from workers in the country blame many causes including the high cost of land,



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high unemployment, civil war, and fear of persecution. Whatever the reason, the result has been a variety of churchless Christianity. So, is this an Insider Movement?

We find another case to consider in the post-Communist Republic of Azerbaijan. During the decade of the 1990s Christianity began building steady momentum as hundreds, and then thousands professed their personal commitment to Jesus Christ. In a published Baku newspaper article, government officials expressed concern that 5,000 Azeris in the capital city had converted to Christianity. By the year 2000, estimates ranged from 12,000 – 20,000 Azeris had been baptized. With this remarkable turning, there should have been hundreds of new churches started. Instead, there were only a handful to be found.

One example illustrates some of what was occurring in this Azeri indigenous movement.⁴ A new convert to Jesus, an Azeri named Shamir (not his real name) started a small fellowship in the Azeri language meeting each week in a local Baptist church after the Russian language service was concluded. By the year 2000, Pastor Shamir's flock had grown to 300 adults packed into an aging facility designed for half that number. In an interview, Shamir admitted that he had personally baptized 500-600 Azeri adults over the past three years. Shamir was at a loss to explain where these believers might now be found. The church structure was simply unable to contain all that God was doing.

In both Algeria and Azerbaijan, there were thousands of unchurched believers, with insider momentum and little visible expression in terms of church buildings. Were these, too, Insider Movements? Let's turn back to Tamil Nadu. Is it unusual? Is it typical? Is it an Insider Movement?

Back to Tamil Nadu

We should first note that the Tamil movement may reveal something peculiar to religion in the Indian subcontinent. An Indian Christian leader with years of experience relating Indian and Western Christianity has pointed out that "unlike the West where religion is highly structured and society is very unstructured, India is quite the opposite." While Indian society is tightly ordered with myriad endogamous castes and communities, religion tends to spill over its banks like the Ganges in monsoon. Hindus flow easily from one festival to the next and feel no compulsion to exclusive loyalties. In South India, even popular Islam exhibits an unparalleled generosity of spirit as seen in the annual Festival of St. Mary which draws millions of Christians, Hindus, and Muslims into the streets for worshipful celebrations.

Reducing Tamilian churchless Christianity to mere syncretism, though, is to miss a second more significant point that demands our

attention. According to Hoefler most of these Tamilian churchless Christians are not polytheistic at all. Rather, they are exclusive devotees of Jesus Christ. What is most peculiar about them is that they have come to this allegiance outside the church and continue to feel little attraction for the thousands of churches that they see around them every day.

What are we to make of this rejection of the local church? While it may be true that this phenomenon is unique to India's religious nature, one is struck by the Tamil parallel to what we have seen in Algeria and Azerbaijan. This parallel points to some shared missiological, sociological, and ecclesiological characteristics.

Missiologically, the enormous number of churchless believers testifies to the effectiveness of evangelism outside the church through such avenues as Bible distribution, *Jesus Film* showings, and widespread radio and television evangelism. Given the ultimately foreign origin of these gospel channels, one wonders if the term "Insider Movement" is even appropriate.

Sociologically, it is evident that South India's local churches still pose barriers of caste for these churchless converts. The majority of Tamil Nadu's churches are filled with members who come from low caste backgrounds. While these brothers and sisters have demonstrated the very social uplift that the gospel promised them, they continue to be viewed by those outside the church as *low caste*. Though Algeria and Azerbaijan do not share this caste consciousness, they are challenged by the perception that the Christian faith is a Western religion, which we'll develop further below.

Traditional ecclesiology also presents several challenges that deter the unchurched of Tamil Nadu as well as the unchurched of Algeria and Azerbaijan from assimilating into local churches. These challenges include church buildings that cannot be indigenously reproduced, leadership that is non-participative, appalling attrition rates, and

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Western patterns of church. Let's briefly review each of these elements before shifting our attention to an alternative in the form of Church Planting Movements.

As one inquires across South India today, it is striking how few of the region's church buildings have been constructed with local resources. The great majority originated all or in part with resources from the West. Today, with Western missions in decline, many of these funding sources have dwindled as well. In Tamil Nadu, as well as in Algeria and Azerbaijan, the inability of locals to indigenously produce new facilities leaves the unchurched with little hope of incorporation.

Within these traditional church buildings the leadership typically follows a pattern laid out by missionaries, with a single pastor guiding a flock of congregants. Though seemingly logical and efficient, this model immediately subordinates new believers under an already established leader who, in the case of Tamil Nadu, is probably of a lower caste than those unchurched believers who consequently remain outside the church.

A less visible barrier is the appalling attrition rates experienced by traditional churches both in South India and around the world. Studies by the Southern Baptist International Mission Board have revealed the extremely porous nature of traditional church structures. Investigations by Southern Baptist IMB researchers in numerous fields reveal attrition rates as high as 50–80%. Even an attrition rate of only 50% could explain the unchurched status of Tamil Nadu's churchless millions.

Finally, there is the foreign expression of South India's churches. Even today one finds Western-style clothing common among South Asia's church-going men as they pay

silent homage to their missionary founders. Despite sweltering climate of Tamil Nadu's subtropical setting, building designs look remarkably like their European and American counterparts. Congregants sit on wooden pews and listen to a message delivered from behind a wooden pulpit, just as in the West. Though Tamil Christians have arguably grown accustomed to these Western forms of church, they remain quite alien to those who are outside the church's cultural cocoon.

Compare with Church Planting Movements

Let us now contrast this Tamil Insider Movement with what we are seeing in Church Planting Movements. Church Planting Movements are defined as movements of indigenous churches planting churches that sweep across a people group or population segment. They are characterized by small house or cell groups with local, lay leaders. Because they are not dependent on buildings, they are able to reproduce rapidly. Because they depend on local, lay leadership and remain small, they typically share leadership responsibility between several members. This small size and shared leadership responsibility closes the back door to attrition and fosters a training and development environment that is conducive to raising up multiple new leaders which, in turn, fuels new church starts.

Lessons Learned

So what do we learn in this brief comparison of Insider Movements and Church Planting Movements?

First, we learn that Insider Movements are difficult to define, confirm or characterize. They range from the real to the ambiguous to the illusory. Where one has been well documented, it raises questions of whether it is unusual or typical.

Church Planting Movements on the other hand are increasing in number each year. The Southern Baptist International Mission Board is now tracking scores of Church Planting Movements or *near* Church Planting Movements around the world.⁵ These movements are common enough that we can derive from them clear lessons about what stimulates them and why they are increasing in frequency today.

One point of convergence between Insider Movements and Church Planting Movements would appear to be the inadequacy of traditional church models to capture the harvest that is accompanying the great outpouring of salvation that both movements report. What separates the two movements is how they respond to that outpouring. Insider Movements respond positively to Christ but refuse to identify themselves with public expressions of the Christian religion. Church Planting Movements, though opting for indigenous house church models rather than traditional church structures, nevertheless make a clean break with their former religion and redefine themselves with a distinctly Christian identity. The resulting movement is indigenously led and locally contextualized.

As the world's remaining unreached people groups languish outside the walls of conventional churches, the quest for how to reach them must continue. Insider Movements pose one possibility, but I believe it is not our best option. Neither is it reasonable, though, for us to expect these unreached peoples who have struggled for centuries with "Christendom" to surrender their cultural identity to those they perceive to be their enemies.

What is needed is a new wineskin—one that is truly indigenous, rapidly reproducible, and locally sustainable. What is needed, in short, are Church Planting Movements. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Rahner's concept of "anonymous Christianity" is probably his most influential contribution to the thought of Vatican II.

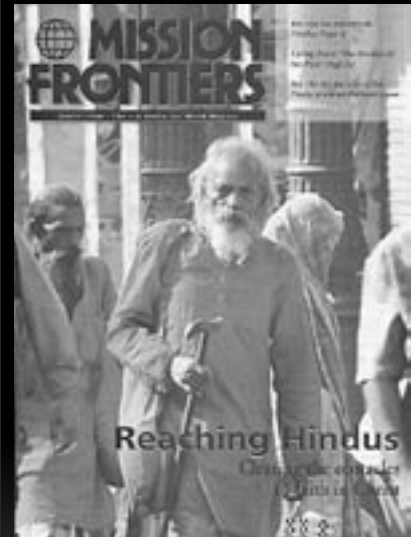
² *The Last Battle*, from C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicle's of Narnia*.

³ Herbert Hofer, *Churchless Christianity* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002), 352 pp. Hofer's original report was published inside India in 1991.

⁴ As told to the author during a visit in the year 2000.

⁵ See the author's *Church Planting Movements: How God is redeeming a lost world* (Midlothian: WIGTake Resources, 364 pp. Available on-line at: www.churchplantingmovements.com

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