

How the IJFM Got Started: The Early Players

IJFM: Born to be Wild?

by Brad Gill

A couple of years ago, I woke up to the fact I was considered a card-carrying member of a missiological “school of thought.” I had barely finished greeting a colleague I had worked with years earlier on the field when he began to tear into the *IJFM*’s editorial promotion of “insider movements” and its irresponsible openness to the “dark side” of Islam. “How could you guys favor such syncretism?” he asked. Well, I guess I felt a bit “profiled.” So, I sputtered a quick response to take the heat off the conversation and left, alerted that the *IJFM* might have a reputation for reckless missiology. I couldn’t help but recall this conversation when I was asked to contribute an article for the 25th anniversary of the *IJFM*.

The Young Demand for Mature Perspective

In retrospect, the *IJFM* was launched 25 years ago to assist “frontier” missiological reflection. The journal was called into being as it were by student mission mobilizers and young mission candidates attending Edinburgh ‘80 who sought the perspective of senior level mission thinking as their generation scrambled into frontier unreached peoples. Not unlike those university students who prayed under a haystack at Williams College in 1806, when younger commitment called into being a more mature sending structure called the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, this *IJFM* also found its place as the mature response to a younger demand. For the past 25 years the *IJFM* has tried to “ride shotgun” on a very energetic mission movement believing for “a church for every people.” The editors should be commended for serving a generation who went to the frontiers, many of whom now find themselves in positions of leadership and influence across the mission world.

No Apology Needed?

But apparently the *IJFM* can be identified with a certain missiological bias, one that causes some like my former colleague to react negatively. As I’ve reviewed past issues of the journal, I’d have to admit the presence of an editorial bias embedded in the selection of articles. It’s an editorial compass which I feel needs no apology, but in the face of a certain profiling could use a reasoned

Editor’s note: While Brad Gill’s active involvement in the *IJFM* was minimal (he was editor for *IJFM* 1:2, 1:4), he and other young people, especially Darrell Dorr (see p. 9), laid a vibrant and solid foundation for the journal in the early years. In this article, Gill speaks, not as a former editor, but as a seasoned field practitioner, having spent the last 27 years working among Muslims in both North Africa and North America.

Brad Gill was the international coordinator for the International Student Consultation on Frontier Mission at Edinburgh in 1980. After interrupting his seminary education to assist in the inaugural years of the US Center for World Mission, he served in church planting efforts in a Muslim country for 13 years and is presently designing Muslim training programs in Detroit, Michigan. Brad was editor of IJFM during its first year.

apologetic. However one might describe this bias, I have personally found it consistently helpful in my work in and around Muslims over 25 years. Indeed, I'd say it's an orientation which is absolutely fundamental to effective "frontier" missiology. I'm not primarily speaking of the actual positions or convictions taken in specific articles, each of which should be evaluated on its own merits. But I'm suggesting a more "taken-for-granted editorial mind-set" which provides a vital and necessary intellectual milieu in which healthy, critical, apostolic thought can thrive. Allow me to suggest just three aspects to this bias.

Aspects of Helpful Bias

Intrepid Belief in God's Creative Movement among UPGs

First of all, *frontier missiology must maintain an intrepid belief in God's creative movement among unreached peoples*. The *IJFM* may seem to venture wildly on the edges of evangelical mission thinking. I'm convinced this venturing is more likely grounded in an *intrepid belief* in God's creative hand in the historical development of unreached peoples. This belief, this expectancy, has oriented the *IJFM* to editorially search, examine and interpret the historic shifts in religious mood among major religious blocs of humanity always with an eye for God's sovereign and surprising hand in it all. The editorial orientation seems always ready, always wanting, to see through the mind of an unreached people or a religious tradition and to discern what God may be doing.

Indeed, most Western mission agencies do recognize God's providence in the remarkable geo-political changes that have opened restricted-access countries to mission efforts. Over the past 25 years the Soviet regime fell, the Iron Curtain collapsed, China and India opened their doors, Western modernity advanced, immigration exploded and once inaccessible unreached peoples were suddenly accessible to mission efforts. Evangelical mis-

sions join hearts in praising God for these 'divine mechanisms'. I can well remember my buddies Bob, Bruce and Bill patiently praying and believing for doors to open back in the 80's, and there they were in the 90's planted inside Kurdistan, northwest China and northern India. We see God's hand in all of these "closed doors" being blown wide open.

But this journal has encouraged a more intrepid discernment of God's hand in the shadowy religious dynamics of non-Christian civilizations. Like a "watchman on the wall," the editors



have encouraged articles that examined seismic shifts within religious minds, minds often in reaction to the Western world, still suspicious of Western religious encroachment, yet minds surprisingly more open and oriented to Jesus than ever before in history. Whether Hindu, Muslim or Animist, the *IJFM* has had an eye for the potential within murky inter-religious encounter and has examined religious traditions for indicators of spiritual receptivity. It even courts the dangerous idea that persons in these traditions can maintain an encounter with Jesus 'inside' these religious traditions.

I have enjoyed the *IJFM*'s forum-like exchange on the massive Jesu Bhakti movement among Hindus, their "get along side it" posture with a discerning ear for its potential. Or the recent coverage of the unprecedented "Common Word" issued by global Muslim leaders, an indicator that needed quick and thoughtful interpre-

tation. The *IJFM* expects God's Spirit to be moving *within* these non-Christian populations, and edits watchfully with what it believes to be the providential hand of God in the broad scale religious promptings emergent in their religious economies.

This orientation, this intrepid belief, easily erodes in the trenches of frontier settings. One loses this perspective in the suffocating local demands of frontier ministry, where one becomes incapable of seeing the connection between macro and micro levels of religious encounter. I know how presumption disappeared when I painstakingly and patiently tried to listen, learn and communicate effectively in the world of my Muslim neighbors. Often while nestled in my mountain town I remember a ceiling descending on my faith and a hardening of my expectations.

I recall when one small seismic shift took place. The previous Pope John Paul II had chosen to visit our Muslim country on his tour, which would have almost gone unnoticed by me if it wasn't for the local reaction. I was sitting in the local café one morning when a friend of mine, a gentleman on the city council, asserted himself into my table and asked if I "had seen it." Seen what? The Pope had spoken to over 60,000 Muslims at the stadium the day before, but it was when the TV cameras picked up his arrival on the plane that this gentleman was rocked. The Pope, he told me, had knelt and "kissed the ground." Kissed "our" ground. One small step for the Papacy, one giant leap for ministry to Muslims! The shift in attitude in my friend, in his understanding of a "Christian," had such a positive impact that extended exponentially across that entire population. The compass of a Muslim people had been reoriented *within* the walls of Islam. I didn't expect it, especially from the Catholics. But I needed a broader periscope to see God active within my Muslim people.

I believe the *IJFM* has had the right posture to match this need of those ministering on the frontiers, a posture

which expects a “Go-Between God” to be actively wooing Muslim and Hindu peoples through the treacherous landscape of their religious rituals, notions and allegiances. If this orientation is to be considered a “school of thought,” a “bias,” then it is mine. It is not to be confused with ‘comparative religion.’ It’s not primarily searching for religious common denominators as much as discerning the footprints of the Spirit under the sacred canopies of other religious systems. “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” (Jn 3:8).

We tend to militate against this spiritual openness by building up our own notions, our own rock-solid assumptions, about how a people should enter the kingdom of God. There’s a little of the Judaizer in all of us, which objectively should suspend reflex judgment. I see a startling lack of presumption in the pages of the *IJFM* as to just what’s required to enter the kingdom. Jesus Christ seems to be “the Gate” through which all men will come to God. He is the absolute, and He alone. There seems an intrepid trust in His creative and imaginative ability “to draw all men to himself.” “But wait,” my mission colleague would say. Loosening of our grip on God’s ‘entry code’ is not the same as believing a Muslim or Hindu can maintain a consistent walk with Christ “inside” the dark recesses of a non-Christian religious tradition. Yes, indeed, there is a difference. Coping with the legitimacy of ‘insider movements’ requires another mode of thought, one that might more easily sustain the uncomfortable antipathy of two religious civilizations.

High Tolerance for Apparent Contradiction

Secondly, *frontier missiology must maintain a high tolerance for apparent contradiction*. Mission frontiers are cultural landscapes strewn with multiple conflicts and contradictions. You find yourself between two worldviews, two cultures, two civilizations, two religions. It’s a dynamic encounter, where

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the two worlds move, overlap, compete, recede or advance. Nothing static about frontiers, nothing tidy and orderly. Western colonialism may have receded, but modernity has advanced like a tsunami and created an even greater mixture of ideas and cultural change. The contradictions are not just between two religious traditions, but actually more like a three-ring circus which includes modern secularism. But as missionaries it’s the two religious systems that seem to force us to take certain positions which ultimately represent “camps” of opposing *missiological bias*.

We can accept that we all feel compelled to resolve these contradictions in a biblically responsible manner. It would relieve the nasty side of my ministry to Muslims if somehow we could resolve their antithetical ideas about God, Jesus, mankind and sin. I believe, for the sake of discussion, that these contradictions constrain and ultimately divide our missionary force into two logical orientations (one of which seems to me the primary editorial bent of the *IJFM*). I can almost automatically assign every article or book on Muslim-Christian relations to either of these logical orientations (permit me to call it a *bias*). One bias is to accept what certain scholars have called a “corrective” logic that seeks to reconcile apparent contradictory propositions. The other direction is to “eliminate” one side of the competing contradiction.

These two logical orientations can share the same frontier situation, face the same set of theological contradictions, but have one missionary whose bias is to appreciate the ‘syncretic’ nature of the encounter, and another missionary who automatically eliminates all religious associations and derivatives from the opposition. Again, I see the *IJFM* articles as critically and energetically trying to think in the corrective mode, to contain the sharp contradictions by unpacking the his-

torical, cultural or exegetical nuances of the disagreement. They don’t immediately, forthrightly, precipitously eliminate “the other” side, but display a manner which suspends judgment while seeking ways to deal with the contradiction. It’s what I would call a *high tolerance for apparent contradiction*.

One of the primary reasons I feel this bias is helpful in frontier situations is the large amount of *apparent contradictions* bred in the centuries-long encounter of two religions. The dissimilating nature of linguistic and cultural antipathies have been so apparent between Muslim and Christian, promoting more cultural antipathies which then morph into religiously charged identities. Members of each tradition might unfortunately hold opposing sides of an apparent contradiction, propped up by centuries of cultural antipathy, and hardened intellectually into predispositions of combat.

It was a privilege to recently hear another colleague stun those of us in Muslim ministry with his own research into the contradictory Islamic view of the crucifixion of Christ. Now this is a sticky contradiction if there ever was one. How could virtually only one half of a verse in the Qur’an create such antagonism and hostility? One takes either one side or the other, right? Well, his research has “unpacked” how fourteen centuries have increased the gulf between Muslim and Christian over this apparent contradiction.

Great Muslim commentators are cited as actually more open to the Christian interpretation, way more intellectually sympathetic, way more balanced in their reasoning than modern antipathies would have it. This is a corrective logical mode, tolerating apparent contradictions in order to uncover the unperceived sympathies and agreement. This is not an eliminative mode, but critically, carefully remains open to

other avenues of building agreement and appreciation. Too often this “corrective” logic is conflated with “syncretism” prematurely. The tolerance for apparent contradiction is not an uncritical acceptance of distorted belief. The *IJFM* tends toward this corrective logic by suspending judgment and pursuing avenues of critical appraisal without castigating the orientation precipitously as syncretistic.

I want to commend the journal for allowing this more “corrective” bias for two more reasons. First, the corrective orientation is the primary logical mode of the majority of those from the major religious traditions who would be attracted to Christ. Secondly, I see a Jesus in the gospels who appreciates and discerns this orientation in people attracted to Him. Their process of conversion forces them into a “corrective” logic. Especially in John’s gospel, written most likely later than the synoptics, and contending with a more mature Judaism, we see in Nicodemus (John 3) and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) the manner in which Jesus copes with hardened religious traditions. As they come to Jesus they begin to recognize religious ideas, values, habits and rituals which are *apparently* in contradiction with the person of Jesus even as they are attracted to Him. Jesus keeps the focus on himself, not the religious systems in combat. They are trying to reconcile all their religious ambivalence as they move closer to Christ. This most common of indignant logic is appreciated in the *IJFM*’s frontier missiology, and one that is too often anathematized prematurely.

Horizons Beyond Current Paradigms

Finally, *frontier missiology must explore horizons beyond present mission paradigms*. The recent amending of the *IJFM* name to “frontier missiology” seems to clarify that the primary contribution of this *IJFM* over 25 years has been in the realm of *thought* more than *action* (which is better understood in the original *frontier “missions”*). Now, admittedly, the “ology” in missiology can carry different connotations for different folks.

To some it can seem abstract, distant, analytical, and “ungrounded” in real mission work. How can cold concepts bring order out of the heat and chaos of frontier realities? We all applaud the appeal to “ground” our missiology in the realities of life. We know that theory must be tested in the day-to-day clinic of ministry, that the messiness of practical frontier missionary endeavor should shape and modify even our most successful of missionary paradigms.

On the other hand, certain intellectual maladies can overtake a mission whose programs, action, results, success and



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momentum inhibit a full perception of their frontier mission context. The understandable reductionism required in administrating mission programs can limit perception. When missions champion successful methods they inadvertently reduce the data perceived to be relevant to future ministry. This journal has been a fine antidote to the intellectual reductionism that can inflict missionaries grounded in frontier ministries. The broad range of the journal has challenged the “group think” of missions who think solely within the perimeters of their own local mission work. To read the journal and think laterally of distinct but similar challenges is always helpful in locating the unperceived triggers of innovative data that may trigger innovation.

It’s the *successful paradigms*, those models of ministry that represent biblical fidelity and a proven track record, that may be the greatest impediment to realizing more of what God wishes to do

on the frontiers. The Pauline model of church planting is by far the most salient model promoted in my mission, and we sort and sift our missionary experience according to the contours of this paradigm. We’re actually thinking paradigmatically as we probe the messy field of frontier realities. But any model, even the most biblical of models, will narrow the field of perception, and critical data irrelevant to the paradigm will go unnoticed. Could it be that God is present in the seemingly irrelevant data we have failed to notice? We must accept the tenacious way our paradigms narrow our perception and force our reflection onto certain activity and away from where His hand may have chosen to work. When something doesn’t fit our paradigm, God might go unnoticed.

I’ve appreciated that the *IJFM* has chosen to push us beyond present paradigms, especially as we attempt to minister within the large religious civilizations of Hindu and Muslim peoples. The journal’s bias is to act as if there’s nothing better than a new paradigm. It pushes new models so as to challenge or complement the reigning assumptions of how God is working. But some will say *newness* is not the same as *trueness*. We Americans can be faulted for primarily valuing the new over and against the tested and true. Yet, even if we suspect the longevity or validity of any new popular model of ministry, we must admit it perceptively exposes new things we had failed to notice before.

I remember a number of years ago just how we tested the model of *redemptive analogy* in our field situation. We energetically probed the cultural landscape of our Muslim people through the lens of this paradigm. We were processing the same field of data very differently, noticing things we had never seen before. I recall how Jon, one of my coworkers, hit pay dirt with the *naming ceremony* of this people. It was a ceremony which adopted the child into the Muslim family through the sacrifice of a sheep. The shedding of the blood was absolutely central to the

acceptance of the child into the family. The biblical and evangelistic power of this indigenous image was so fruitful amidst the embattled predispositions and theological quagmire we so often faced in communicating the gospel. While it did not meet all our highest expectations, it was a different probe, a different model, that pushed us to see new things, to turn over our common experience and notice hidden potential. It is this bias for new paradigms that is critical for frontier fields and one that I believe the *IJFM* must maintain.

Conclusion

Finally, may I make a suggestion. Since we can so easily harden our missiological biases, I would encourage the *IJFM* to continue using biographical articles about young believers and apostolic personalities which ground theory in the more real negotiation of frontiers. It's hard to argue with a testimony. The *IJFM* issues on Hindu realities have utilized this genre more than others, but we are starting to see some useful biography in the Muslim sphere. Paul-Gordon Chandler's recent book, *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road*, on the life and witness of Mazhar Mallouhi, is a spectacular fusion of missiological theory and incarnational ministry. It illustrates the difficult negotiation of Christian and Muslim worlds, the syncretic nature of the Muslim conversion process, and the attitudes which best navigate religious "camps" and allow Muslims to find Christ. It breaks down any artificial theory by grounding ministry in the messy particulars of frontier situation.

So, if I'm a card-carrying member of a school of thought, let this statement be at least one apologetic for its intellectual bias. And may the *IJFM* continue its intrepid venture in those messy and fertile frontier regions. **IJFM**

How the *IJFM* Got Started: The Early Players Facing Tests of Specificity

by Darrell Dorr

Congratulations to the *IJFM* on its 25th anniversary of publication! Since I had a hand in the *IJFM*'s early development, I find a special satisfaction in seeing the *IJFM* reach this milestone.

As I look back over the past 25 years, I am reminded that the *IJFM* has "grown up" in the context of the overall growth of the frontier mission "service industry." In the mid-1980s only a handful of publications or other ministries gave focused attention to the particular challenges of frontier missiology; today such ministries are still relatively few but nonetheless more numerous. In the 1980s a common felt need was for "more information" about unreached peoples; today's activists face a flood of information about unreached peoples, and thus today's growing need—amidst a clamor of media voices and service providers—is to get the right tools to the right people in the right time and manner to accomplish priority objectives.

While the growth of the frontier mission "service industry" has its advantages, it also has its perils. One such peril is that commentators on frontier missiology may sometimes discover that they are talking primarily to each other rather than to those working on the "coalface." Beware lest the "industry" expends disproportionate energy in chasing its own tail!

Today I think it can be healthy for *IJFM* editors and readers to occasionally review what I would call "tests of specificity." These are simple questions

intended to keep us from inadvertently making publications and other "service industries" into satisfying ends in themselves. Such questions could include:

- Can I identify which unreached peoples have received which benefits as a result of *IJFM* articles in the past year? During the past 3–5 years?
- Can I identify which *IJFM* readers (especially field missionaries) have changed their minds on particular subjects as a result of particular *IJFM* articles and have subsequently taken specific steps of faith and obedience?
- Can I identify particular obstacles (including vested interests) that particular subsets of *IJFM* readers face in their attempts to be more fruitful?

Facing such "tests of specificity" can be healthy but humbling. The temptation to avoid or minimize such questions can be strong, and thus we need to exhort one another to press beyond our comfort zones.

May the Lord of the harvest lead the *IJFM* into the next 25 years of fruitfulness and blessing. **IJFM**

Editor's note: In response to Darrell's challenge, if you have any stories of how the *IJFM* has impacted your life and ministry among unreached peoples, please contact us at ijfm@wciu.edu.

*Darrell Dorr served as Managing Editor of the *IJFM* during 1984–1989. He has since worked with *Frontiers* in a variety of leadership roles, served as Managing Editor of *Mission Frontiers* magazine, and coordinated two partnerships of mission agencies.*