

Profiling Religion, Blurring Identity

Christian identity is facing a predicament. Two centuries of a vast and successful Christian movement may have prevented us from seeing certain implications in how we label our faith. This is especially true where a “Christian” belongs to a people within another great religious civilization. We’re now admitting that the term “Christian” creates ambiguities where it should have defined singular allegiance to Christ. And we’re beginning to suspect that the problem may be deeper than the term. It may involve the way we think categorically about religion.

The veil of modern secularization no longer blinds us to the *force* of religion. We so easily identify aberrant forms of violence as Muslim, Hindu, or Christian. But there’s a hidden assumption in adopting these religious profiles. We might assume that a single religious pattern is internalized thoroughly and consistently across an entire religious civilization. A label like Buddhist is actually a reductionism that fails to represent the variety and complexity of religious experience within its apparent domain. And it’s in this religious complexity that the identity of those who turn to Christ is fashioned. For their sake we’d better get below these broad categorizations to the paradigms that mold the way we think about religion:

Underlying the question of following Jesus within various religio-cultural systems is an understanding of the nature of world religions. An *essentialist approach* suggests that each major religion has a core set of beliefs that differs from all the other major religions. Religions are seen as monolithic, with a prevailing interpretation of core doctrine that defines the worldview of its adherents. A *cultural approach* to world religions, however, holds that they are a conglomeration of diverse communities, defined more by traditions, history and customs than a singular stated core theology. While the essentialist view has traditionally been held, current research in the field of religious studies challenges the essentialist view. Evidence points to a great variety of doctrines and practices within each of the major religious traditions. In practice, many Hindus, Muslims and Christians follow religious traditions with very minimal personal understanding of core beliefs.¹ (*italics mine*)

This more recent working definition suggests that the essentialist construct will fail to sort out the transformed identity of a Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist who turns to Christ. Monolithic religious labels may capture some of the higher and more conscious aspects of a religious civilization, but they cannot represent the unique fusion of religion, culture and identity in personal life. While “Buddhist background” or “Muslim background” may be shorthand for the religious context of a new believer, it fails to capture the scope and relevance of religion in a given believer’s life. Terms like “religio-cultural” and “socio-religious” are being deployed to

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Subscriptions

One year (four issues) \$18.00
Two years (eight issues) \$34.00
Three years (twelve issues) \$48.00
Single copies \$4.00, multiple copies \$3.00

Payment must be enclosed with orders.

Please supply us with current address and change of address when necessary.
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IJFM (ISSN #2161-3354) was established in 1984 by the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions. It is published quarterly.

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PRINTED in the USA

indicate how both culture and religion inform the identity of those who turn to Christ. To what degree does a religious and cultural context determine the formation of the Christ follower? What particular aspects of their religious world might continue to shape them, and which are to be left behind? What will their newfound identity in Christ lead them to make of the ritual, aesthetic, institutional, doctrinal, ethical or material aspects of their religious world?

I'm reminded of a Muslim background believer who stood to his feet at a recent conference and said, "Brothers, when I hear the call to prayer, you don't understand how it draws me into evil." But how does one reconcile his comment with the Lebanese brother in Christ who prefers to sit in the quietness of the mosque to get in touch with God? These contrasts beg our examination. How has each person been shaped by their particular experience of religion and culture? Would we expect a difference for the rural Indonesian Muslim and an urban Egyptian Muslim? How about a Hindu raised in America versus one from a rural village in India? Indeed, we need a term like "socio-religious" that can capture at least some of the contextual elasticity that informs the distinctive identities of those coming to Christ from within other religious civilizations.

This issue of the IJFM will begin to explore "religious culture" as a determi-

nant in "Christian" identity. We've collected a number of articles (two of which were presentations at last year's ISFM meetings) and two lengthy book reviews. In the lead article, N. J. Gnaniah speaks to the tenacious grip of the caste system across the ethnoscapes of the Hindu world. Is there any more candid example of a thorny socio-religious reality than the caste system? Can we allow this deep



and pervasive institution to inform the identities of those who turn to Christ in a Hindu world? This author's heart for reaching the higher castes weaves a convincing argument.

Martin Accad explains how a dominant Western influence has cemented two historic identities among Arab believers vis-à-vis Islamic society. His vivid imagery of the chameleon and the hedgehog adds new color to the classic

typologies of the "Christ and Culture" debate. He also helps us evangelicals see how we perpetuate these same orientations. From his own struggle to overcome debilitating religious constructs erected between Muslim and Christian he offers a new continuum that may better integrate different types of ministry among Muslims.

Allen Yeh and Gabriela Olaguibel revisit the powerful Latin American religious movement surrounding the Virgin of Guadalupe. They're particularly sensitive to the "socio-religious" realities that go so easily unnoticed due to the centuries-old charge of syncretism. Try to suspend your worries about "christopaganism" and grant the authors some space to tease out the indigenous aspects of this Latin American religious movement.

Jeff Nelson reminds us to counsel wisely in contexts of religious totalitarianism. He takes us beyond the relatively free Greco-Roman context of Paul to that diaspora of Jews who lived amidst a foreign religious monarchy. He finds a simple and inspiring lesson in the life of Esther, whose story displays the vital role of public confession in the identity of believers within oppressive situations.

H. L. Richard's survey of seven new books in the field of religious studies

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The IJFM is published in the name of the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, a fellowship of younger leaders committed to the purposes of the twin consultations of Edinburgh 1980: *The World Consultation on Frontier Missions* and the *International Student Consultation on Frontier Missions*. As an expression of the ongoing concerns of Edinburgh 1980, the IJFM seeks to:

- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate "A Church for Every People."

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, "to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the IJFM (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the IJFM for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.



Whether you're a Perspectives instructor, student, or coordinator, you can continue to explore issues raised in the course reader and study guide in greater depth in **IJFM**. For ease of reference, each **IJFM** article in the table below is tied thematically to one or more of the 15 Perspectives lessons, divided into four sections: Biblical (B), Historical (H), Cultural (C) and Strategic (S). *Disclaimer: The table below shows where the content of a given article might fit; it does not imply endorsement of a particular article by the editors of the Perspectives materials.* For sake of space, the table only includes lessons related to the articles in a given **IJFM** issue. To learn more about the Perspectives course, visit www.perspectives.org.

Articles in IJFM 28:4

	Lesson 2: The Story of His Glory (B)	Lesson 6: The Expansion of the World Christian Movement (H)	Lesson 7: Eras of Mission History (H)	Lesson 9: The Task Remaining (H)	Lesson 10: How Shall They Hear? (C)	Lesson 11: Building Bridges of Love (C)	Lesson 14: Pioneer Church Planting (S)
Caste, Christianity, and Cross-Cultural Evangelism Revisted N. J. Gnaniah (pp. 161–167)		X	X	X	X	X	
The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Study of Socio-Religious Identity Allen Yeh and Gabriela Olaguibel (pp. 169–177)		X	X		X	X	X
Mission at the Intersection of Religion and Empire Martin Accad (pp. 179–189)			X		X	X	
Going Public with Faith in a Muslim Context: Lessons from Esther Jeff Nelson (pp. 191–194)	X						X
Book Reviews: Wrestling with Religion: Exposing a Taken-for-Granted Assumption in Mission H. L. Richard (pp. 196–203)			X				X
Book Review: A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology and Ecclesiology Bradford Greer (pp. 204–209)					X		X

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portrays an academy grappling with their own categorical assumptions about religion. Richard has pressed this issue at two previous ISFM gatherings. Here in this more sophisticated treatment it's important not to miss the forest in the trees: scholars are wrestling with the essentialist interpretation of religion. Lo and behold, it may be that the academy, which usually trots off in the opposite direction from those of us in missiology, is actually serving our interests at this time. We may need them to help us unpack crude and inaccurate assumptions.

Bradford Greer's critique of Doug Coleman's recent dissertation engages us in another pertinent academic field: the theology of religion. Coleman has given us an historical and analytical review of the past few decades of literature on Insider Movements,

and Greer is quick to point out the presuppositions which carry over from Coleman's academic discipline. Again, an essentialist interpretation of religion seems to raise its head, and Greer feels this subtracts from a more full and accurate interpretation of movements to Christ within other religious worlds. (We hope to hear a response from Doug in the next issue).

These four articles and two reviews hopefully will stimulate and inform your study of religion and identity. The bottom line is whether or not it helps us understand the formation of "Christian" identity on the religious frontiers. Stay tuned for more on this subject in future issues of the journal.

Finally, the obvious "anachronisms" in my editorial and in the *In Others' Words* section betray the fact that our October–December 2011 issue is very

late in getting to you (late Spring 2012). We apologize and want you to know that we're working hard to get caught up by the end of 2012. While the date on the cover may not be current, please rest assured that the material in this issue is very much up-to-date.

In Him,

Brad Gill
 Editor, IJFM

Endnotes

¹ I don't normally cite Wikipedia, but I found this quote from the insider movements page exceptional. Wikipedia contributors, "Insider movement," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Insider_movement&oldid=490903202 (accessed April 25, 2012).