

Beyond Contextualization

Making Disciples, Contextualization, and Inreligionization: Some Reflections

by *Harold A. Netland*

Editor's Note: This article was originally presented at the 2023 Ralph D. Winter Lectureship under the theme, "Beyond Contextualization: Crossing Religious and Cultural Boundaries."

I am very grateful for the opportunity to participate in the 2023 Ralph D. Winter Lectureship. It is a special privilege for me to be here with my friend Dr. Tan. The title of our lectureship is "Beyond Contextualization: Crossing Religious and Cultural Boundaries." Dr. Tan has addressed these matters in a number of significant writings, urging us to move beyond contextualization to embrace inreligionization. My comments here are based primarily upon his 2022 essay, "Contextual Frameworks for Interreligious Communication."¹ His writings are thoughtful and provocative, and they raise important issues. If I understand him correctly, I find myself in broad agreement with much that he says, but I do have some questions about his proposal.

As we consider contextualization and inreligionization, we need to remember that these concepts are intended to enable us to live more faithfully as followers of Jesus Christ and to make disciples of Jesus of all peoples. This includes sincere and pious adherents of other religions. What should this look like in the 2020s and 2030s?

Becoming Disciples of Jesus

Let's begin with the notion of being disciples of Jesus. A disciple is a committed follower of Jesus, someone whose life is characterized by the qualities outlined for us in Jesus' teachings throughout the New Testament. Becoming a disciple of Jesus involves believing certain things about God, Jesus, and humankind to be true; it also includes acknowledging one's sinfulness and casting oneself on God for mercy and forgiveness. It is only through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that one becomes a "new creation" and is able to grow steadily in conformity to the image of Christ.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus involves both continuities and discontinuities with one's past. In becoming a disciple, for example, one does not abandon one's nationality or ethnicity. We cannot entirely escape the collective influences that

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shape us when we come in faith to Christ—nor should we desire to do so. As historian Andrew Walls reminds us, “It is our past which tells us who we are; without our past we are lost.”² At the same time, embracing Jesus Christ as Lord always includes a turning from, or rejection of, some aspects of our past. In determining to follow Christ some things are left behind. Jesus begins his ministry with a call to repentance: “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.” (Mark 1:15) And Paul urges the folk religionists in Lystra to “turn from these worthless things to the living God.” (Acts 14:15) Yet, not everything from one’s past should be rejected. The break with the past must be over the right issues and for the right reasons, and this calls for wise judgment in sometimes perplexing situations.

Religions tend to be dismissed as little more than domains of darkness, falsehood and evil. We have not treated followers of these religions with the respect they deserve.

Contextualization

It is in trying to find the proper balance between continuity and discontinuity that discussions about contextualization arise. By “contextualization” I simply mean the attempt to use symbolic forms which are sufficiently familiar to people within a particular context, and which adequately communicate the message of Scripture, in an effort to encourage acceptance of the gospel and obedience to Christ. Contextualization involves not only issues over linguistic terms used in translation but also concepts, identity markers, patterns of behavior, rituals, and social institutions. As such, contextualization is not an activity reserved for intercultural missionary encounters; it is something every church in any social context ought to be engaged in.

Contextualization is a dynamic process which operates at the tension produced by the polarity of two basic principles identified by Andrew Walls as the Indigenizing Principle and the Pilgrim Principle.³ The Indigenizing Principle maintains that the gospel can be expressed in any language and can be “at home” within any cultural setting; there is no particular culture, language, or ethnicity that is distinctively Christian and thus normative for all people. This principle affirms one’s historical and current social context as a legitimate venue within which to live as authentic disciples of Jesus. One need not be abstracted from one’s broader social context.

But the Pilgrim Principle reminds us that although the gospel can be expressed within any social context it also stands apart from all contexts and judges every human community. The gospel is subversive and challenges patterns of life in every setting which are unjust or idolatrous. In an important sense, then, Christ’s disciples are “aliens and sojourners” and cannot be completely “at home” in any social setting. And therein lies the tension within which every community of Christ-followers must live and within which we endeavor to make disciples.

The Gospel and World Religions

Dr. Tan has suggested that focusing just on contextualization with respect to culture is inadequate and that we need also to ask new questions about the relation between the gospel and major religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Inreligionization is proposed as a necessary step beyond contextualization.

I do agree with Dr. Tan that we need to take the major religions much more seriously and that we must extend questions about continuity and discontinuity beyond just the cultural dimension to include religion. Missionaries and local Christian leaders generally have not taken the time to study carefully religions such as Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism. Missiologists have tended to focus on folk religion⁴ and have largely neglected the intellectual traditions within the great religions. Moreover, when religions are considered, they tend to be dismissed as little more than domains of darkness, falsehood and evil. We have not treated followers of these religions with the respect that they deserve. We need to rethink our approach and to repent of un-Christlike attitudes. Thankfully, there are welcome changes in some sectors. The 2010 Cape Town Commitment, for example, strikes a fresh tone when it states,

In the name of the God of love, we repent of our failure to seek friendships with people of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious backgrounds. In the spirit of Jesus, we will take initiatives to show love, goodwill, and hospitality to them. (11c.1b)

I also agree with Dr. Tan that there are aspects of one’s previous religious life that can be incorporated into one’s new identity as a disciple of Jesus.

Inreligionization

What then should we say about Dr. Tan’s notion of inreligionization? My first observation is that it is not entirely clear to me just what is meant by the term. Although I agree that we need to take the religious dimension more seriously, do we really need a new term for this? What does inreligionization add that could not be included in contextualization?

In what follows, I will make brief comments on five issues, the first two having to do with culture and religion and the last three with the notion of inreligionization.

Culture and Religion

First, part of our problem has been that too often missiologists have made a sharp distinction between the concepts of culture and religion, restricting contextualization to cultural matters while largely ignoring religious beliefs and practices. Although this is not his intention, I am concerned that in introducing a new term such as “inreligionisation” Dr. Tan might be reinforcing this dichotomy between culture and religion in an unhelpful manner. Contextualization focuses on culture whereas inreligionisation moves beyond culture to deal with religion. But this presupposes a neat distinction between culture and religion which cannot be sustained.

Modern Constructs

It is important to remember that concepts such as culture, religion, the world religions, and even the notions of Hinduism and Buddhism, were developed during the past several centuries as Europeans and Americans became increasingly aware of the bewildering differences among various groups of people worldwide. As such, these concepts are in part modern constructs.⁵ But to say that they are modern constructs is not to suggest that they do not pick out real patterns among diverse groups. Nor does this mean that what the terms “culture” and “religion” refer to had no reality prior to the modern era. It does mean, however, that these concepts were developed under particular historical circumstances and for certain purposes.

The concepts of religion and culture are important and, when properly qualified, can be helpful.⁶ These are conceptual lenses intended to help us see and understand general patterns of similarity and difference across groups of people worldwide. To the extent that such concepts enable us to understand the lived realities among diverse peoples, they are helpful and should be utilized. But if they obscure or distort these realities, then they should be modified.

Distinctions and Overlap

Without attempting to define the concepts of culture or religion here, we can observe that if we accept Ninian Smart’s characterization of religion as a multidimensional phenomenon then it is clear that the notions of culture and religion are similar and overlap. Smart suggests that we think of religions

as complex social systems characterized by ritual, narrative, doctrine, ethical norms, social institutions, experience, and material objects.⁷ Although the concepts of culture and religion clearly overlap, they are distinct concepts and neither can be reduced to the other. For example, the same religion—Christianity or Buddhism—can be lived out or find expression in many different cultures. And if we think of culture very broadly, such as American culture or Singaporean culture, then there can be many religious traditions within one culture.

Boundary Markers

Concepts such as culture and religion, or even Christianity and Buddhism, serve as boundary markers, setting off one domain from another. Boundaries of one kind or another are essential to successful living. Engaging with religious others, for whatever reason, involves crossing various boundaries. In a thoughtful and perceptive essay, David Vishanoff observes that “The notion of interreligious encounter presupposes the existence of a boundary across which interaction takes place.”⁸ Boundaries are markers of difference and serve various purposes. But Vishanoff emphasizes that encounters across religious boundaries take place within a broader context of commonalities among those in the encounter. If two or more groups literally have nothing in common, then actual encounter would be impossible. Boundaries between religious groups become significant when particular things are highlighted, thereby calling attention to the differences (e.g., dietary restrictions). If other things were highlighted (respect for ancestors) the groups might be regarded as having much in common.

Boundaries are to some extent socially constructed and changeable. They are the product of certain collective decisions, often implicit, to regard certain things as significant markers of identity, distinguishing one’s own group from the others. Boundary markers can and sometimes do change. But whether certain boundary markers ought to be modified or abandoned is often a controversial and contested matter for a group.

Although missiologists are generally sensitive to the changing dynamics of culture, they often tend to treat religions as unchanging, homogenous, reifications. But the great religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam are vast families of traditions with enormous internal variation, and they are continually undergoing change, especially in the modern era with globalization.

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Furthermore, in many contexts today the distinction between religion and culture is ambiguous and messy, so that it can be difficult to determine whether a practice is cultural or religious. This was certainly my experience in Japan. Is a funeral presided over by Buddhist priests a cultural or a religious event? What about ancestral veneration practices in the home or at the grave site? The problem becomes even more confusing when we consider that the symbolic meanings of institutions or practices change over time, and that during such transitions the meanings are contested and controversial. Who decides the meaning of a ritual in times of transition?

I recall a conversation with an elderly Japanese grandmother after I had given a presentation at a church. She had become a disciple of Jesus as an elderly woman—something that is extremely rare in Japan. But she had a question for me. Why, she asked, do Christians forbid participation in the local *matsuri* or festivals? A *matsuri* is a special festival, a time of boisterous celebration, music and dance. Most *matsuri* began in religious contexts and originally had clear religious meanings. Participants carry elaborate palanquins around town, and traditionally it was believed that special *kami* or deities of the village were housed in the palanquin. After parading the *kami* around the village, the men then escort the *kami* back to the Shinto shrine where they are deposited until the next celebration. But although the origin of most *matsuri* is clearly religious, one can argue that over time the religious significance of the festivals has diminished so that now they are primarily cultural celebrations. And that was this grandmother's point. She did not believe that the palanquins literally housed Shinto *kami*—the *matsuri* was simply an occasion for a fun celebration with her grandchildren and she could not understand why the Christians in her church disapproved of her enjoying the festivals with her grandkids.

I find her question very instructive. She was a new believer and had not yet been socialized in all the ways of the local Christian community. Moreover, she represents the many Japanese today who regard the *matsuri* as a cultural, not a religious, event, whereas her friends at church still think of it in religious terms. This naturally raises the question, whose perspective on the *matsuri* is correct and why? The grandmother's perspective is important—but so too are the perspectives of her fellow believers at church.

Is Culture More Benign than Religion?

My second observation concerns the missiological tendency to regard the domain of culture as relatively benign or neutral, with good potential for successful contextualization of the gospel, while dismissing the religious sphere as inherently

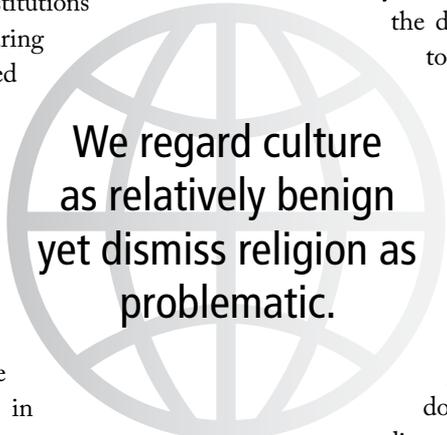
problematic and incompatible with the gospel. Thus, if a belief or practice is “merely cultural” then it is probably alright to use it in contextualization; but if it is clearly religious, then it is not.

But why should we assume this? Is the cultural realm really less problematic than the religious? Is the religious dimension really more likely to contain false beliefs, evil, and the demonic than the cultural? I do not want to minimize what is false and evil wherever these occur, but I do think that we need a more nuanced approach to these issues than is usually found in missiological discussions. Religions can contain remarkable elements of truth, goodness and beauty along with what is false and evil; and cultures can be demonic and evil as well as repositories of beauty and goodness. And yet, having said that, there does seem to be *something* about the religious dimension that elevates its significance when we consider making disciples of Jesus. Religion, as Paul Tillich famously noted, addresses matters of ultimate concern and this brings it into potential conflict with the gospel in ways that culture may not.⁹

Let me summarize this brief section on cultures and religions by suggesting that the most significant issue is not the label we ascribe to a particular belief or practice, whether it is cultural or religious. The most important question is whether adopting that belief or practice will make it easier for people to become disciples of Jesus Christ or whether doing so will actually inhibit disciple making.

Identity and Hybridity

Now several observations about the notion of inreligionization. First, Dr. Tan raises the issue of identity and especially hybrid or multiple religious identity. Can there be a Hindu Christianity or a Buddhist Christianity? A Hindu Christian or a Buddhist Christian? These are complex questions, and they are made more difficult by globalization. Who determines a person's identity? Minimally, it seems, the perspective of the individual is relevant—how does the individual understand his or her own identity? But much more than just the individual is involved. I think of my father in rural Japan when I was a child. My father was from Norway and he was proud of his Norwegian identity. But when Japanese children saw him walking down the road they would point at him and exclaim “Amerika-jin! Amerika-jin!” The only category they had for someone with blond hair and blue eyes was “American.” Although my father would vigorously protest and correct them, they kept calling him an American. Our identity



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is in part beyond our control and is shaped by what others perceive us to be. In my father's case, the issue was national or ethnic identity, but similar factors are at work with religious identity. In addition to the individual, there are many other stakeholders in determining whether one can claim the label Christian Buddhist. Given globalization and the technological revolutions in communication, these stakeholders can be far removed from the local context.

Now, there certainly are those today who identify themselves as both Christian and Buddhist. I think of my friend Paul Knitter, the prominent Roman Catholic theologian who has also taken vows as a Buddhist and who wrote *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*.¹⁰ There are many in Europe and North America like him who embrace dual or multiple religious identities. I do think it is significant, however, that I cannot recall ever meeting anyone in Japan who referred to themselves as Christian Buddhists.

But this raises a related issue: Whose Christianity and which Buddhism? Paul Knitter, for example, represents an extremely liberal form of Roman Catholicism that is certainly outside of traditional Christian theism. Moreover, as one reads his book it becomes clear that he selectively reinterprets key Buddhist and Christian teachings to make them more amenable to his pluralist perspective. In other words, what he embraces is a syncretistic mix that, in my view, is neither authentically Christian nor Buddhist.

To say that two teachings are similar—like Pure Land Buddhist and Christian teachings— is not to say they are identical.

But can one be a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ, as the Christian tradition has understood this historically, and also be an authentic Buddhist as this has been understood within Buddhism? But again—which kind of Buddhism? Buddhist intellectuals—who often insist that Buddhism is a philosophy and not a religion—typically have little in common with folk Buddhists, who often are animistic and polytheistic. In addition to the many schools of Buddhism, there are also the regional differences—Buddhism in Myanmar or Thailand is quite different from Japanese Buddhism. And then there are the many variations of Buddhism in Europe and North America, which minimize traditional metaphysical teachings

and turn Buddhism into a kind of modern therapy.¹¹ Being disciples of Jesus might be more compatible with certain forms of Buddhism than others.

Peter Phan's Definition of Inreligionization

A second issue concerns Dr. Tan's use of Peter Phan's definition of inreligionization. Phan advocates that we not only accept in theory certain doctrines or practices of other religions but that we incorporate them, perhaps in modified form, into Christianity, and that Christians adopt in their personal lives "the beliefs, moral rules, rituals and monastic practices" of other religions.¹² But just what is being suggested here?

It is one thing to acknowledge that there are certain similarities between some Buddhist practices or beliefs and those of Christianity. For example, many have pointed out the striking similarities between the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, which is especially popular in China, Taiwan, and Japan, and Protestant Christianity. Indeed, there are remarkable similarities. But to say that two teachings or practices are similar is not to say that they are identical, and I think that despite the obvious similarities in some respects Pure Land Buddhist teachings are significantly different from Christian teachings.

I do find much to admire in Buddhism, especially in its influence aesthetically on Japanese culture. There is much beauty in Japanese culture and art that has been inspired by Buddhism. I think here of Japanese gardens, calligraphy, the tea ceremony, martial arts, poetry, literature, and drama, all of which have been influenced by Buddhism. Significantly, some rituals that emerged within Japanese Buddhism have been adopted within Christian churches—for example, the tea ceremony. But these have been adopted largely because they have lost their earlier Buddhist texture and are now regarded as Japanese cultural practices.

But if we follow Phan's proposal, which Buddhist doctrines should Japanese Christians, for example, accept? The Four Noble Truths, the central teaching of traditional Buddhism? There is an elegant logic to these four core teachings and I find the Buddhist analysis of desire / craving (*tanha*) to be perceptive.¹³ But I cannot accept these as the true teaching about the origin of suffering and its elimination. And if I cannot accept the Four Noble Truths as the correct diagnosis of the causes of suffering then I cannot accept the Noble Eightfold Path as the prescription to its elimination. Nor can I, given the Christian teaching on creation, accept the doctrine of *paticca-samuppada* (variously translated as dependent origination or origination by dependence) as the fundamental principle of things coming into being. I also think the traditional teaching of *anatta*—no self—is incompatible with the Christian understanding of the person. And, of course, until the twentieth century, Buddhism was understood as denying

the reality of an eternal Creator God.¹⁴ If inreligionization means accepting any of these core Buddhist teachings as they are understood within Buddhism, then I must object.

Increasing Secularization and Inreligionization

Finally, I think we also need to ask whether closer identification with Buddhism is necessarily a positive thing for local disciples of Jesus. Much depends upon the particular context. In areas where Buddhist traditions and identity are still regarded positively, perhaps an appropriate form of adaptation can be helpful.

Recent studies show that institutional Buddhism is in serious decline and younger Japanese are rejecting key markers of Buddhist identity.

But in many cases, including Japan, I do not think this will be advantageous. Although most Japanese still identify as Buddhists, recent studies show that institutional Buddhism is in serious decline and that younger Japanese are rejecting some key markers of Buddhist identity. Ian Reader examines a wide variety of evidence—including multiple surveys of religious beliefs, the numbers of temples, Buddhist priests, participation in popular folk rituals, Buddhist funerals, or observance of the Buddhist family altars—and concludes that all indicators show a clear decline in Buddhist affiliation. Reader

states that “organized, established Buddhism in Japan is in a serious state of decline, one that threatens the continued existence of a major religious tradition that for over a millennium has been an important element in the sociocultural fabric of Japan.”¹⁵ Reader observes that public dissatisfaction with Buddhism is so pervasive that a new phrase has been adopted—*bukkyobanare* (estrangement from Buddhism).¹⁶ He contends that Japan today is actually a highly secularized society.

Secularization (in terms of the idea of a “decline of religion” and a public withdrawal from engagement with the religious sphere) is a growing force to be reckoned with in Japan today. Moreover, there are clear correlations between modernisation, urbanisation and higher levels of education (factors often cited as formative forces in the secularisation process), and declining levels of religious belief and practice, whether individually or institutionally.¹⁷

To the extent that other traditionally Buddhist societies also are being impacted by modernization, urbanization and globalization, we might expect that they too will undergo declining public attraction to Buddhism. If so, this raises the question whether, in such societies, a closer identification with Buddhist teachings and practices might actually be counterproductive in making disciples of Jesus. **IJFM**



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Endnotes

- ¹ See especially Kang-San Tan, “Contextual Frameworks for Interreligious Communication: An Asian Perspective,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 39:1 (Spring 2022): 5–14.
- ² Andrew Walls, “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture,” *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1996), 13.
- ³ Walls, “The Gospel as Prisoner,” 13.
- ⁴ By “folk religion” I mean the beliefs and practices of ordinary lay believers rather than those of the scholars, theologians, priests or other “gatekeepers” of the religious tradition.
- ⁵ The literature on the development of the concept of religion is vast, but helpful discussions include Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Guy Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). See also Kevin Schilbrack, “Religions: Are There Any?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78:4 (December 2010): 1112–38.
- ⁶ See Harold Netland, *Christianity and Religious Diversity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), chapter 1.
- ⁷ Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- ⁸ David R. Vishanoff, “Boundaries and Encounters,” in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, eds. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt and David Thomas (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 342.
- ⁹ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 4.
- ¹⁰ Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009). See also Robert B. Stewart, ed., *Can Only One Religion be True? Paul Knitter and Harold Netland in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

- ¹¹ See David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and idem, ed., *Buddhism in the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 2012).
- ¹² Peter Phan, as quoted in Kang-San Tan, “Contextual Frameworks for Interreligious Communication,” 5.
- ¹³ See Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 45–60; and Paul Williams with Anthony Tribe and Alexander Wynne, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 30–54.
- ¹⁴ On the question of the compatibility of Buddhism with an eternal creator God see Keith Yandell and Harold Netland, *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 181–92; Paul Williams, “Aquinas Meets the Buddhists: Prolegomena to an Authentically Thomas-ist Basis for Dialogue,” in *Aquinas in Dialogue: Thomas for the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Jim Fodor and Christian Bauerschmidt (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 87–117. See also the debate among Perry Schmidt-Leukel, “‘Light and Darkness’ or ‘Looking Through a Dim Mirror’? A Reply to Paul Williams from a Christian Perspective”; José Ignacio Cabezón, “A Buddhist Response to Paul Williams’ *The Unexpected Way*”; and Paul Williams, “Buddhism, God, Aquinas, and Morality: An Only Partially Repentant Reply to Perry Schmidt-Leukel and José Cabezón,” in *Converging Ways? Conversion and Belonging in Christianity and Buddhism*, ed. John D’Arcy May (EOS: Klosterverlag Sangt Ottilien, 2007), 67–154.
- ¹⁵ Ian Reader, “Buddhism in Crisis? Institutional Decline in Modern Japan,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 28:2 (2011): 235.
- ¹⁶ Ian Reader, “Secularisation, R.I.P.? Nonsense! The ‘Rush Hour Away from the Gods’ and the Decline of Religion in Contemporary Japan,” *Journal of Religion in Japan* 1 (2012): 16.
- ¹⁷ Reader, “Secularisation,” 10–11.

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Response

Response to Dr. Harold A. Netland

by Darren Duerksen

I've long appreciated Dr. Netland's work in theologies and philosophies of religion, and it is wonderful to have him here and to be able to respond to his excellent paper. He has raised some important questions and issues that spur thoughts and questions of my own.

First, I appreciate and agree with Dr. Netland's discussion on the relationship of culture and religion. He rightly warns us to not reify or reinforce an artificial divide between culture and religion, or at least to try not to as best as we're able with the limitations of our language. But, while we should recognize the deep relationship between culture and religion, he also reminds us that they are not completely the same. Religious practices and beliefs are distinct from other aspects of culture, but also certainly part of and deeply connected to culture. I also appreciate his admonition to not vilify religion as evil while gracing culture as neutral. Rather, we need to see that God's goodness resides in both the cultural and the religious, and that both are also broken by sin.

And yet, and perhaps I'm wrong and can be corrected, I sense that it is important for Dr. Netland that Christ-followers clearly discern what is religious and what is cultural. He shares how Christians in Japan forbid participation in the *matsuri* festival, which puzzled an elderly, new Christ-follower. Netland suggests that, because she saw it as a culturally fun celebration with little popular association with its Shinto origins, it might be acceptable for her and other Christians to celebrate it. But what, I want to ask, if it did have some "religious" significance? Might a group of Christ-followers discern some aspect of God, his goodness, wisdom, or truth, in it, thereby providing another reason for which they could and should celebrate it?

Along these lines, I think one of the more important topics that Netland directs us to is the question of the "adoption" of practices and beliefs. He critiques Peter Phan's proposal that Christians incorporate in their personal lives "the beliefs, moral rules, rituals and monastic practices" of other religions. He suggests this is fine if the practices have lost some of their explicit religious orientation, as with the Japanese tea ceremony, but what about teachings that would run counter to historic Christian theology, like certain tenets of Buddhism? Does inreligionization mean that Christians adopt these?

I certainly appreciate that some teachings and practices could be found by Christ-followers to not be consistent with following Christ. But I think we need to move beyond what missiologists used to discuss as "form and meaning." In this framework, the

central aspect of Christianity is its meaning, its doctrines and ideas. The forms that housed and expressed this meaning could be adapted and changed—or contextualized—so long as the meaning was preserved. I agree that meaning is important. But, I want to ask, whose meaning is to be preserved? The Calcedonian Christian meaning? Sixteenth century German Christian meaning? Twentieth century American Christian meaning? I'm not suggesting there is nothing central to the Christ following traditions. Certainly, faith in Christ as Son of God, his birth, death, and resurrection, its importance for salvation, and Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom of God are all things I would argue are essential for Christ following faith and communities. But Christ-followers understand these in various ways depending on their hermeneutical cultural and religious lenses.

Perhaps one of the problems is again our terminology. Dr. Netland rightly suggests that it is perhaps a distraction to try and parse out whether something is cultural or religious. To think of dual religious belonging, or of someone being both Christian and Hindu gets us into these quandaries of if, and how, Christians can be more Hindu, or Hindus can be somewhat Christian. I wonder if it could be more helpful to consider how persons in other religious communities interpret, make sense of, and follow biblical scripture and Christ through and in light of their community's religious beliefs and practices. In other words, how do they read Christ in light of the four Noble Truths and the eight-fold path? No doubt, biblical scripture and Christ's leading may cause them to affirm, modify, challenge, and perhaps not accept some of these, or aspects of them. But beyond the question of picking and choosing is the question of, not if, but how, their religious traditions shape their understanding of Christ, and how Christ by his Spirit is at work in this process.

Might a group of Christ-followers discern some aspect of God, his goodness, wisdom, or truth in the Shinto celebration?

I want to recall a statement that Anna Travis made in her presentation. To paraphrase—the goal is not to try and retain a religious identity or set of beliefs or practices. The goal, the attraction, is the magnetic reality of Jesus. What will help persons grasp this? For some, perhaps for many, it will be to follow and make sense of Jesus from within their religious tradition, whatever they decide to call themselves. As Netland suggests at the end of his paper, perhaps some will not find this desirable—they might not *want* to identify and interpret things from a Buddhist perspective, because they do not do that anyway. Perhaps they've adopted a secular viewpoint, and *that* is now their hermeneutical lens. In this case we're still talking about inreligionisation, except that the gospel is engaging a Buddhist-tinged secular framework. The goal is still the reality of Jesus. **IJFM**