

**Salvation, Other Religions, and Asian Mission: Reflections on the  
Legacy of Christendom and Asian Understanding of Salvation.**

**A response to**

**Hidalgo Ban Garcia, “Asian Mission: Towards a Theological  
Perspective”**

©Jonathan Bonk, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>

*God "will give to each person according to what he has done." <sup>7</sup>To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. <sup>8</sup>But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. <sup>9</sup>There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; <sup>10</sup>but glory, honor and peace for everyone who*

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*does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.*

<sup>11</sup>*For God does not show favoritism. (Romans 2:6–11)*

<sup>46</sup>*While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. <sup>47</sup>Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.”*

<sup>48</sup>*He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” <sup>49</sup>Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. <sup>50</sup>For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”*  
(Matthew 12:46–50)

I would like to thank you for inviting me to participate in this important meeting, and I am especially grateful for the opportunity to share my reflections in response to the paper by Hidalgo Ban Garcia.

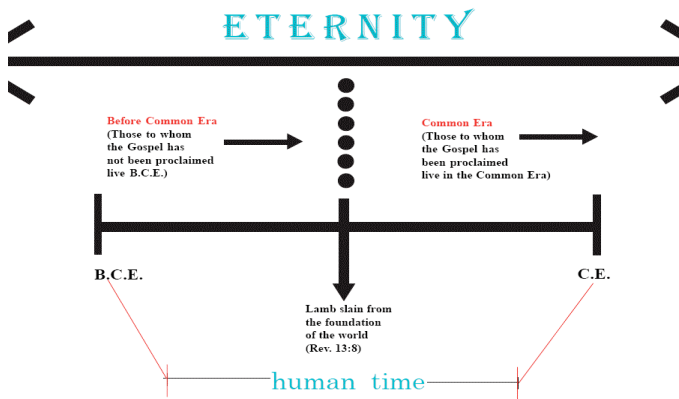
While being in hearty agreement with what our brother has written, I wonder whether a more distinctively Asian theology and Missiology might not be possible by going back to the pre-Constantinian roots of the faith known as “Christianity”? Most institutions that think of themselves as “Christian” seem to me to assume the legitimacy of Christendom, and the universality of the various orthodoxies and traditions that emerged as a result of the troubled intersection of violent European societies with the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. If one were to explore the nature of evangelism and mission without assuming the immutable and universal legitimacy of the religion that was birthed out of the conjunction of violently aggressive European society and ostensibly self-giving Christian faith, what might that faith look like? In particular, what might we understand about salvation and those of other faiths? I ask this question not to avoid addressing ongoing dialectic of the relationship

between “evangelism” and “mission,” but to root that question within a framework that does not assume either the inevitability or the immutability of Christian faith as defined, debated, endlessly refined, and propagated for the past 1700 years. Then one can come back to the questions that Mr. Garcia has so ably articulated in his paper. Would they be framed in the same way?

1. I begin with the presupposition that salvation *is always* and *has always been* a free gift, offered by our loving Creator to all—regardless of the accident of social and religious conditioning that comes with our birth—to all, that is, whose *faith is credited to them as righteousness* (Romans 4; Hebrews 11–12).

For the greater part of human history, according to our own Scriptures, those who have received the gift of salvation have had no knowledge of Jesus Christ. As Jesus told his disciples, “...*many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it*” (Matthew 13:17). Jesus in no way diminishes the secure standing of these prophets and righteous men before God. He simply points out that those who actually get to see and hear Christ are more privileged, not more saved.

The saving grace of God *has always been* and *will always be* extended to his creation on the basis of his mercy. And this mercy is not triggered by mysterious insider doctrinal information. Whether the beneficiary of God’s mercy is a follower of Jesus or simply a righteous person whose inchoate longing is to see what followers of Jesus now see, mercy is a result of God’s action, not ours. The lives of “prophets and righteous men” are refracted through the cross of Christ—the spotless lamb of God who was “*slain before the foundation of the world*” (Rev. 13:8), taking away the sins of the world. This is the central act in the drama of the Creator God’s moral universe. Without it, our faith does not make sense (2 Corinthians 5:11–21).



2. We who call ourselves Christians trace our spiritual lineage to the Son of God incarnate, details of whose life, teachings, atoning death, and resurrection are found in the four Gospels.

As even the most inexperienced traveler can attest, unawareness of one's present location makes arrival at any intended destination a matter of highly implausible chance. I begin the task at hand, then, by locating ourselves as twenty-first century Christians with the post-Constantinian, post-reformation, post-enlightenment stream of rationalistic, Eurocentric religious theory, practice and malpractice known as *Christendom*.

During its Jewish and Gentile genesis as related in Acts of the Apostles, the church engaged in spontaneous and aggressive proclamation of the good news of the risen Lord, inviting men and women to a new way of life as Kingdom citizens (Luke in Acts 2:42–47). As a Jerusalem-based Jewish sect, the gathered followers of Jesus offered teaching, fellowship, prayer, miracles, and a common life.

Not surprisingly, 'the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.' (Acts 2:47) From the end of the first century the church grew by half a million in each generation so that by the time of Constantine's conversion in 312 AD, Christians constituted a demographically significant proportion of the imperial population.<sup>1</sup> In the words of Ramsay McMullen,

No other new cult anywhere nearly approached the same success. It can only be called extraordinary.... [The Christian credo] was presented in sharply yes-or-no, black-and-white, friend-or-foe terms; and those were unique.... Belief in no other God but Yahweh entailed an obligation to speak in his praise and win over other worshipers to his service.... Urgency, evangelism, and the demand that the new believer deny the title of god to all but one, made up the force that alternative beliefs could not match.<sup>2</sup>

Significantly, this growth occurred in the face of often formidable disincentives. Alan Kreider—mindful of the sporadic, sometimes lethal persecution that awaited converts to the way of Christ—observes that 'if one wanted a soft life, or to get ahead in respectable circles, one did not become a Christian.'<sup>3</sup> Conversion to Christianity was the sure road to marginality.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400)*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 86, 109–110.

<sup>2</sup> Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, pp. 109–110.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1995), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Eduardo Hoornaert, *The Memory of the Christian People*, trans. R. R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis

The Good News, then, in its pre-Christendom days, was *much more than a set of new theories about God*—although it included that. Belief in Jesus resulted in *actual conversion*. People embarked on a new path of behavior that corresponded with their new belief. The Gospels themselves proclaim the good news of Jesus the Son of God, who takes away the sins of the world, but they go on to provide a new direction and practical pattern for life lived here on earth through the life and teaching of the Son of God. The Kingdom of God was among humankind, and those who followed Jesus were taught to pray that this kingdom might come, that God’s will might be done on earth—beginning with themselves—as it was in heaven.

The Sermon on the Mount seems to have been the irreducible core—the essential DNA—marking those who were Christ’s. In ways analogous to the Constitution of the United States today, Kingdom citizens then were obliged to demonstrate that what they did or proposed to do was congruent with the Kingdom charter.

3. Much of what we now associate with the category “Christian” derives not from the teachings of Jesus the Christ, but from an elaborate and highly ingenious use of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures to legitimate, facilitate and sustain Roman power.

Christendom was the mutant produced when the *self-giving Church* was seduced by the *self-serving state*. The result was an increasingly compromised form of Christianity that, despite generating thousands of libraries filled with pious words about God and Christ, bore a closer resemblance to the powers of this dark world than to the One in whose name they warred, committed genocide, robbed, pillaged, tortured, and evangelized all of the world’s inhabited continents.

With the conversion of Constantine, *Christianity* mutated into *Christendom*—the great-grand sire of what is today known as “The *West*”—a civilization in which Christian religious dominance was achieved by a combination of voluntary, social, legal, and violent compulsions.<sup>5</sup> Between the Edict of Milan in AD

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Books, 1988), p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 8, 47. Sasha Abamsky’s superb essay, “Defining the Indefinable West,” explores the term “the West,” and concludes that while in contrast to the “isms” that defined the savage conflicts of the last century, it is a “vague and spectacularly imprecise intellectual organizing tool,” the cognitive equivalent of trying to touch the image of a hologram. “[It] means” in her words, “a state of mind more than a distinct plot of land.” In the end, she concludes, “perhaps the only three constants in Western history are the totemic power of the phrase ‘the West’; the flexibility of the definition and boundaries as it morphs to meet changing intellectual and geopolitical realities; and an assertive self-confidence, a haughty sense of its own infallibility and righteousness. In truth, because we *think* there is a West, as a result there *is* a West; and it *does* somehow encompass both the Inquisition and the Enlightenment; it *does* have room for both Marx and Dante; it *does*,

313 and Justinian's edict of AD 529, Christianity evolved from being one among several equally legitimate religious options, to being the only legal public cult in AD 392. Pagan worship was increasingly marginalized, stigmatized, and finally forbidden. Having moved from the margins of society to its center, the *other* way became the *only* way.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that none of the bishops objected to the deep involvement of Constantine—dubbed *koinos episkopos* [universal bishop] by Eusebius—in the internal affairs of the Christian Church.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while Jesus successfully resisted the temptation to accomplish his mission more efficiently by yielding allegiance to earthly powers (Matthew 4), his Christendom namesakes succumbed to the tempter's lie, embracing earthly power as a legitimate and complimentary means to Christian ends.

4. It is within the cocoon of Christendom that the doctrinal assumptions and theological formulations of the missionary movement from the West were gestated, and these have been inherited, virtually intact, by Asian missiologists and theologians.

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in the information age, even have room to expand into lands formerly considered the heart of the East.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 23, 2007), pp. B6, B7, B9.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Kreider, ed., *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (Edinburgh and New York: T & T Clark, 2001), pp. 22–24. See also Robert Lewis Wilkin, *Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Wilkin observes that the early Christian Fathers lived in a pagan world in which they represented a marginalized minority of the population around the Mediterranean. After Constantine, however, they made their pronouncements as secure spokesmen for a state-supported religion. For a masterful account of how this process influenced contemporary notions of orthodoxy and inspired canon, see David L. Dungan. *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> See David L. Dungan, *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007). In Chapter six (pp. 94–125), Dungan provides an overview of interventions made by Constantine that profoundly shaped Church polity, practice, status, and self-perception. These included such things as making the Roman Sun Day (dies Solis) the legal day of rest across the empire, ordering his soldiers to pray Christian prayers, providing at first moderate and later severe incentives for the conversion of citizens, playing a significant role in the selection of scripture, issuing his Edict against Heretics, and employing violence to subdue, coerce, and marginalize dissident theologians. As Dungan notes, “After the edict of Milan in 313, and as a result of Constantine's bountiful gifts and numerous direct interventions and the eager cooperation of Catholic bishops, virtually all of Catholic Christianity's most important elements—traditions, staff, institutions, regulations, customs, rituals, calendar, places of worship—were replaced by the elaborate customs, values, prerogatives, rituals, calendar, places of worship and governmental machinery of imperial Rome.” (p. 119)

Within the various currents and eddies of this powerful, swift-flowing, dangerously polluted Christendom river followers of Jesus have since tried to keep from drowning spiritually.

“What must I do to be saved?” Within the framework of Christendom, with its tight cognitive categories, its narrow exclusivism, its ingenious rationalizations, and its ecclesiastically proprietary self-interest, the question rapidly degenerates into a matter of access to insider information. In order to be “saved,” not only must a person, a people, or a nation consciously embrace Jesus, the son of very God, who takes away the sins of the world, but they must also adopt some form of Trinitarian formulation.

The Council of Nicea, convened in 325 AD took care to touch all of the essential bases, theologically. The result was the Nicene Creed.<sup>8</sup>

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.  
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, light from light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
and became truly human.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

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<sup>8</sup>Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America: Liturgical Texts, Church of Greece: Chrysostom Liturgy

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son],  
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

This, to the bishops who gathered at the behest of the newly converted (but not yet baptized) Constantine, constituted the non-negotiable core of what it meant to be a true Christian. Christianity was fundamentally and unequivocally a matter of correct thinking about the three persons of the Godhead, and about the respective roles of each Person in the salvation of all of creation, especially humankind.

With the survival and administrative integrity of a brutal but now professedly *Christian* empire and its armies at stake, it became essential to divorce Christian salvation from ethics, to give primacy to doctrinal belief and sacrament, rather than to following Jesus and imitating his ways.

Since our theological heritage—including our Missiology, our understanding of evangelism, and various doctrines of what it is that triggers God’s salvific grace and mercy—comes to us through Christendom, rather than from our Lord’s own teaching, we should not be surprised that much of this teaching is inconsistent with the overarching story of God’s communion with humankind, and especially with what Jesus himself lived and taught.

The fusion of church and state produced a hermeneutic that permanently and deliberately marginalized all of the key teachings of Jesus, relegating them to the realm of the sweet by and by, or at most to personal ethics insofar as these practices did not contravene or undermine the state. A primary and continuing function of Christendom theologians has been to explain why the Sermon on the Mount and almost everything else that Jesus taught has nothing to do with his contemporary followers.

As Dallas Willard recently observed, many Christians now practice “*vampire Christianity*.” A vampire Christian says to Jesus, in effect: “I’d like a little of your blood, but I don’t care to be your student. ... In fact, won’t you just excuse me while I get on with my life, and I’ll see you in heaven.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This quotation is from a book review essay by Anthony B. Robinson, “‘Follow Me’: The Renewed Focus on Discipleship,” in *Christian Century*, Vol. 124, No. 18 (September 4, 2007), pp. 23 – 25).

5. In sharp contrast, most of what Jesus taught had to do with behavior in relationship to God and neighbors, rather than with strict observance of doctrinal or religious cult protocols.

Since the life that Jesus advocated and modeled for his followers was rightly regarded as not only impractical but impossible for the survival and maintenance of violent civil society of the day, the category “Christian” came to serve primarily as an indicator of assent to correct doctrinal formulations.

As two millennia of ongoing theological debate attests, achieving doctrinal consensus *was* and *is* a mightily difficult exercise. Orthodoxy, as it came to be understood and imposed, did not leap out at the early church fathers from the pages of their holy book. It had to be inferred, deduced, extracted, and enculturated—if not by force of argument then by force of arms.

Ramsay MacMullen—drawing on extensive verbatim stenographic records, analyzes the ecumenical councils from AD 325 to 553 in which doctrinal orthodoxy was decided by majority vote.<sup>10</sup> It was by means of an estimated 15,000 councils convened during this two-century period—most significantly the one convened at Nicea in AD 325 and another convened at Chalcedon in AD 451—that Christendom Christians came to agree on their understanding of the Triune Supreme Being.<sup>11</sup>

These councils were often raucous, riotous, and violent to the point of bloodshed in their attempts to achieve doctrinal consensus. Not surprisingly, emperors played a significant, often decisive role, in both staging the major councils and in influencing their outcomes.<sup>12</sup> They were certainly not marked by the fruit of the Spirit.

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He cites Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’s Essential Teaching on Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> See Ramsay MacMullen, *Voting About God in Early Church Councils* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006) for a fascinating analysis of the some 15,000 ecumenical councils from A.D. 325 to 553, in which orthodox doctrine was decided by majority vote. This work compliments his earlier volume, *Christianizing the Roman Empire, A.D. 100–400* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984). It is instructive to note that while the oft-recited creed today is in substantial conformity to the original, when it was adopted in 325 at the First Council of Nicaea, the text ended after the words “We believe in the Holy Spirit”, after which there was an anathema. The second Ecumenical Council in 381 added the section that follows the words “We believe in the Holy Spirit.” The third Ecumenical Council reaffirmed the 381 version, and decreed that “it is unlawful for any man to bring forward, or to write, or to compose a different (ἐτέραν) Faith as a rival to that established by the holy Fathers assembled with the Holy Ghost in Nicæa.”

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> MacMullen provides a list of some 250 Synods between the one in Carthage in AD 253 and the one in Constantinople in AD 553.

As MacMullen observes, “How different the course and outcome of church history might have been ... had the church’s intellectual heroes been a little less heroic, had they more often deferred to those of their colleagues who were a little less intellectual!”<sup>13</sup>

Even with all this effort, it was never possible for Christendom Christians to achieve consensus, and Christendom’s posterity remains deeply divided into six parts: Roman Catholic and Arian in the West; Syrian or Assyrian (Nestorian) of the East and the Coptic Orthodox with the Greek or Melkite, and the Syrian Orthodox or Antiochene or Jacobite or Monophysite.<sup>14</sup>

6. That non-Christian religions should ever formulate an understanding of God that in any significant way would resemble the outcome of European interaction with the Jewish and Christian scriptures is highly unlikely.

Given their Christendom heritage, the chief task of Western missionaries was to convince practitioners of other religions to agree with the officially authorized doctrinal formulations of their denominations, most of which, whatever the particular franchise represented and propagated, more or less reflected the Nicene Creed.

Over the centuries, Western advocates of Christianity, from Spanish conquistadors to Protestant missionaries, have used this noble end to justify almost every conceivable means of persuasion and inducement, including military conquest, threatened or actual genocide, and proclamation—often from the secure vantage point of presumed cultural superiority as evidenced by European military, economic, and political hegemony. Christianity was, in the implicit and sometimes explicit thinking of its advocates—one thinks of James Dennis or Rodney Stark—the inner élan giving rise to the European people’s capacity to dominate on virtually every front.

7. Our Lord’s own criteria for determining who are his—almost inevitably having to do with ethics rather than with doctrinal opinions or the protocols of a specific religion such as Judaism—were usually either discarded altogether or else shunted off into an eschatological cul-de-sac.

It is of no little significance that in all of his pronouncements on the final judgment, doctrinal correctness seems to play little, if any, significant role in the fate of the person standing before the Judge. In our Lord’s teaching, the pertinent criteria had to do with personal qualities and relational behavior, as summarized in his

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>14</sup> The terminologies themselves, as Brock reminds us, are the invention of western European church historians, imposed on their unwilling subjects. See S. P. Brock, “The ‘Nestorian’ church: a lamentable misnomer,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Volume 78 (1966), pp. 23–35.

Sermon on the Mount. God's people were and are *only* those who *do the will of the Father*.

In his teaching, Jesus frequently and somewhat surprisingly suggests that those who are "saved" are not self-consciously aware of the relationship between what they were doing in every day life and their righteous standing before God (Matthew 7:21–23; 25:31–46). Surely, this fact must be an important consideration in any discussion of Asian mission—past, present and future.

Restraint from rage, murder and a refusal to hate; fidelity in marriage, trustworthiness, and compassion for enemies; openhanded generosity toward the destitute, genuine piety (as opposed to showmanship) in the spiritual disciplines, and simplicity of material wants; simple and grateful trust in God as the supplier of all that is good and necessary to sustain life, generosity of spirit for those with whom one disagrees, and persistence in prayer; in short, a life characterized by what Jesus calls "good fruit" and built upon the sound foundation of consistency with what he taught in the Sermon on the Mount is the identifying mark of a citizen of the Kingdom over which Jesus presides. This—rather than doctrine—is the DNA material that constitutes irrefutable evidence of paternity.

Given that both old Christendom and neo-Christendom (the United States) have been marked by anything but the good fruit to which Jesus refers, we might legitimately conclude—as Muslims and many other observers frequently do—that Christendom itself is a rotten tree, or a false prophet, or a house built upon the sand. If the behavioral standards outlined in St. Paul's famous fruits of the Spirit passage (Galatians 5:16–26) are to be normative for our Lord's followers, and if our Lord's own frequently reiterated teaching is to be taken seriously, then Christendom and the Christianities associated with it can scarcely be identified as "Christian," except in word. A tree is known by its fruits.

8. This line of thinking has profound implications for Asian understanding of the proclamation of the Good News.

It also directly affects those of us who—because we are professionally religious people who make a living from maintaining and promoting our several versions of orthodoxy—easily slip into the error of the Pharisees, reifying our self-justifying pieties to such an extent that there is no room for God himself. When God came to dwell among our kind two thousand years ago, He had to be destroyed, because He was too unlike the God over whom religious leaders had achieved a theological monopoly. This is at least part of our own Christendom inheritance.

9. What if Christendom had been as concerned with what Jesus taught as with what people should be permitted to think about him? What if instead of, or in addition to, a

creed that distilled the doctrinal essence of Christianity, the council of Nicea had formulated a manifesto or charter of Kingdom Citizenship—the identifying behavior of a follower of Jesus, based on what Jesus himself said?

We will never know. But it is instructive to note that in virtually all respects, the officially sanctioned faith-state mutant was the antithesis of what Jesus himself modeled and taught in the Sermon on the Mount. It was the growingly acute awareness of this discrepancy between words and deeds that issued in the several Reformations to which we modern Protestants trace our roots.

And it is not surprising, therefore, that it was evangelicalism—with its acute awareness that faith was expressed in both words and life—should have produced the great social movements of the nineteenth century, including the abolition of slavery, missions to the heathen, prison reform, the war against vice, the emancipation of women, public school child labor laws, orphanages and homes for abandoned women.<sup>15</sup>

The title of a book by the most prominent evangelical of his day is testimony to an acute awareness that the ostensibly “Christian” nations and their comfortably established churches were far from “Christian.”<sup>16</sup> The gulf between official belief and actual practice could be bridged only by genuine conversion. This was the message of the Moravians, the Pietists, the radical Anabaptists, the revivalists, and their heirs, we contemporary Protestants and evangelicals.<sup>17</sup>

10. The question is *whether* we can get beneath the accepted conventions and doctrinal boundaries of Christendom to the Gospels themselves, internalizing and living out the teaching and the example of our Lord. If so, *how* can this be done, and *what might be the implications* for our understanding of salvation through Christ and the followers of other religions? And what would be the implications for Asian Christian mission in the future?

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<sup>15</sup> For an account of evangelical social action in North America, see Norris Magnuson, *Salvation in the Slums: Evangelical Social Work 1865–1920* (Baker 1977); for an examination evangelical social action in Great Britain, see Kathleen J. Heasman, *Evangelicals in Action: An Appraisal of their Social Work in the Victorian Era* (London: Geoffrey Bliss, 1962).

<sup>16</sup> The best known evangelical reformer of all time is probably William Wilberforce, whose book, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes, Contrasted with Real Christianity*, published in 1797. Revealingly, on the face page of the book appear the words “Search the Scriptures!” from John 5:39.

<sup>17</sup> See Ian C. Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness: The Evangelical Impact on the Victorians* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1976.).

My conviction is that the survival of Christianity makes it imperative that we get *beneath* and *beyond* Christendom, to the Gospels themselves, and that some of the most significant movements to Christ in the Muslim and Hindu worlds, and across the continent of Africa, are successful precisely because they have escaped the bonds of Christendom to become followers of Christ their Lord.

11. *Directionality* may be the key—living one’s life in ways that are congruent with the revelation that God has provided in one’s particular social milieu—rather than simply concurring with certain specific Christian doctrines.

Some have referred to this as “orthopraxy” in contrast to “orthodoxy.”<sup>18</sup> Paul Hiebert’s bounded set / centered set categories provide a model of how this might work, but it does not go far enough, stopping short of its own implications. Using ethical directionality as a model, we might identify members of Jesus’ family as those who bear family resemblance to him.

Over several decades of thinking about conversion, culture and cognitive categories, Paul Hiebert (1932–2007), a fellow Anabaptist, helped evangelicals find a way out of the conversion-theology dead end that has bedeviled and misdirected generations of pious evangelical missionaries.<sup>19</sup> Since you are all familiar with his model, I will do no more than outline its essential features.

He observes that human language typically forms categories on the basis of bounded sets or, less frequently, centered sets. A *bounded set* is created by noticing essential characteristics that an object or event must have in order to be within the set.<sup>20</sup> A *centered set*, on the other hand, “is created by defining a center or a reference

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<sup>18</sup> The term *orthopraxy* comes from the Greek for “correct action / activity” and generally refers to behavior that is congruent with religious belief. This is contrasted with the idea of *orthodoxy*, or correct beliefs. Judaism and Islam have historically stressed orthopraxy more than on orthodoxy. Christendom Christianity, on the other hand, has tended to be satisfied with orthodoxy.

<sup>19</sup> For his early thinking on the subject and its implications, see Paul G. Hiebert, “Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories,” in *Gospel in Context: A Dialogue on Contextualization*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (April 1978), pp. 24–29. His more refined and most complete treatment of the subject appeared as chapter six (“The Category *Christian* in the Missionary Task”) in *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), pp. 107–136. It is my personal opinion (shared with Paul) that his conclusions were not entirely consistent with his argument—possibly due to the need to remain evangelical orthodox as an employee of a conservative evangelical seminary, and a member in good standing in an evangelically conservative denomination. But this is speculation.

<sup>20</sup> Hiebert further refines these sets by distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic sets, and between well-formed and fuzzy (no clear boundaries) sets. While this would enhance and nuance this paper’s argument, time and space do not permit their inclusion in the discussion at this time.

point, and the relationship of things to that center.”<sup>21</sup> As a bounded set category, a Christian is recognized because he or she shares those characteristics that we associate with that category: a recognizable set of beliefs, and a recognizable standard of behavior. But how long does the list of essential characteristics need to be? *How many* and *which* beliefs are essential? In what ways will such a person be visibly different from his or her neighbors? What are the cognitive and behavioral boundaries that place him inside the set? These questions cannot be satisfactorily answered when “Christian” is a bounded set category.

What about “Christian” as a *centered set* category? “Christians would be defined as those whose orientation is toward Jesus. In our Lord’s own time, this meant that while publicans and sinners were his disciples—moving toward him—those whose lives were most conspicuously preoccupied with the nitty-gritty implications of theology and its implications for their lives were not. They were moving away from Christ, resisting him at every point, finally arranging for his extermination. The faith of the former—their direction vis-à-vis Christ—was credited to them as righteousness. The impressive self-righteousness of the latter, on the other hand—because of their response to Christ—was taking them in the opposite direction, to damnation.

12. We return, now, to the question around which this response to Dr. Garcia is organized: Can the faith of someone from another religion be credited to them as righteousness? Is it possible for someone who has never heard of Jesus—or who has heard such garbled and conflicted nonsense as to make Christianity incomprehensible or morally reprehensible—to be *saved*? Can they be on a life trajectory that, unbeknownst to them, aims at Christ the center?

I believe the answer must be yes. Both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures—*Constantine’s Bible*—provide abundant evidence in support of this argument. As I mentioned in my first point above, our own Scriptures remind us that for most of human history, those who have been “saved” have had no knowledge of Jesus the Christ. “I tell you the truth,” Jesus told his disciples, “many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.” (Matthew 13:17) We cannot escape the fact that it is entirely possible, indeed probable, that persons today, similarly, who have no actual knowledge of Jesus, or whose encounter with “Christianity” is such as to make refusal to join our ranks a matter of integrity—those who have too much integrity to identify themselves with the category “Christian”—*can be and are being saved*.

The so-called “insider movement” (Appendix II) referred to by Mr. Garcia may prove to be a way of preserving the true Church beyond the life expectancy of

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Christendom and its deeply compromised churches, so closely tied as participants in, sometimes advocates of, and often beneficiaries of its violent self-serving political, economic, and military world hegemony.

Because our Lord's call to conversion is actually an invitation to discipleship, rather than a call to Christianity, we can only agree that those who by diligence and good works learn the ways of God from the available revelation that God has provided are on the right path (Romans 2:6–11).

I conclude by referencing a contemporary example within Islam that fits this model—the Isa Al-Masih movement in Bangladesh and Pakistan. In this movement—tens of thousands strong—Muslim disciples of Jesus follow their Lord as Muslims, and as active participants in their mosques. They study and memorize the gospels, and organize their beliefs and lives accordingly. According to one of the leaders of this movement, Imam \*\*\*\*, in a letter written on March 18, 2007, there are followers of Isa Al-Masih “in all 64 districts of Bangladesh, and they are organized into 16 areas with supervisors of four districts.” They engage in intensive Bible study. The Gospel is preached, but people remain within their own communities.

Sadly, most of the persecution of these followers of Jesus has been instigated by those closely identified with Christendom denominations. Several books have been written in Bengali and newspaper advertisements and flyers originating in these churches have been widely circulated, inciting Muslims to persecute and Christians shun these followers of Jesus. The author of these books and pamphlets is Rev. Edward Ayub, a rural church planter who is himself a convert from Islam.<sup>22</sup> The books identify the movement's leaders, congregations, and organizations by name and place. As a direct result, followers of Jesus in Bangladesh have suffered severe persecution, with several being killed. In the spirit of Matthew 18:15, Abdullah Mannan visited Rev. Ayub in his home. While they were drinking tea, he raised the subject.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Darrell Whiteman who corrected some misinformation in the first draft of this paper in an email on December 10, 2007. Serving on the board of the American Bible Society, and having just returned from an extended visit to Bangladesh, he reported that Edward “Ayub more than any other person is leading the opposition to the Followers of Isa Movement and the ‘Muslim Friendly’ translation of the Injil. He more than anyone else has put pressure on the Bangladesh Bible Society to oppose the translation and to publish their notices in the newspaper threatening the Movement with civil and criminal charges unless they withdraw their translation.” He also provided me with a copy of his “Report of my trip to Bangladesh, October 6-11, 2007” in which he concluded that the controversial translation “is not flawed, either exegetically or linguistically, and that the Movement is not heretical.” (p. 1)

<sup>23</sup> I quote extensively from a lengthy letter sent to Dr. Paul Taylor, Asia Director of Mission to the World (PCA) on March 18, 2007, with a copy to Dr. Paul Kooistra, President of PCA Mission to the World. A copy of this letter was provided to my following the Mission Leadership Forum meeting at

“I told him that ‘Brother, I came to talk with you following the Lord’s advice—Matthew 18:15. I told him that because of your book, our people have been attacked in many places. Our people were beaten in the villages; our children facing rejection in schools; our people facing persecution in the businesses, in their homes and their market, in their families. I requested him to withdraw his book. I also told him about the letters that had been sent to different places, copying same thing that he wrote. I told him the words in the letters and language in his books is the same. He listened to me quietly. And then he replied in this way. Rev. \*\*\* said, ‘I am very happy that my book is working. People are reading my book and acting on it. This is a success of my writings.’ He also said ‘Matthew 18:15 does not apply to you. You are not one of us. You are outside our community. This is for believers and for the community. We cannot apply this to you. We cannot pray for you. We cannot pray with you.’ He said I have written in the books what I think is right. If you can, you go and write against me, and I will answer you by writing.

“After a few days I sent four of our supervisors to meet Rev. \*\*\*. They went and he received them into his house. They told him that they are from the movement and they have been sent by me. They told him that they are coming on the basis of Matthew 18:15. They requested him to withdraw his book from the market, because his books were bringing persecutions. They told him that our leader came to you secretly, but you did not listen to him. Then he sent another person, and you did not listen to him too. Now we came, and we request you to withdraw your books and stop attacking us or any believers. He told them the same way. He said “Matthew 18:15 doesn’t apply to you or your group. You are not one of us. You are not inside. I will not withdraw my book. If you can you write against me. I have no objection.”

“The supervisors came back with broken hearts. They never had this kind of experience before. They never had this kind of rejection from believers. From that time on we are facing persecutions.

“We have no objection to his theology. He is free to write his theology. It doesn’t matter if anyone accepts his theology or not. I myself have been through theological college in England. I was ordained as elder and pastor by the oldest and largest Presbyterian Synod in India, then Pakistan, and now Bangladesh. Also I was elected general secretary of the Synod. One of my

responsibilities was to develop and lead the Theological Education by Extension program for all Presbyterian pastors. These courses were used widely throughout the country.

I never found anywhere in my study of the Bible that if any one disagrees with my theology or my approach or my strategy then I have the right to attack him in public, or put him in peoples hand to kill him, or say that Matthew 18:15 doesn't apply for you, or say that I cannot pray for you. Our Lord said that we must pray for every one. I see your people using the name "Presbyterian Church", but there is a Presbyterian Synod in Bangladesh from 1948. That Synod was established by Welsh Presbyterians.

As this tragic, ongoing episode in the history of Christendom religion illustrates, and in ways that parallel the experience of our Lord when he walked among his people in Palestine, the harshest critics of movements of the Spirit have always been those from within the religious establishment. Vested heavily in the notion that our faith is primarily about creedal orthodoxy, their reaction to God's work on the borders of their proprietary ecclesiastical domains brings great disgrace to their Lord, and great harm to his body on earth.

And I believe that it is here that a possible future for Asian Christian mission lies. If Asian theologians and missiologists can put Christendom doctrinal formulations in their rightful place—in subordination to Sermon-on-the-Mount behavior as the most reliable marker of who is and who is not acknowledged by Jesus himself to be a kinsman (Matthew 12:46–50); if Asian followers of Jesus can help the rest of us to understand the fatal gaps in Christendom formulations of inclusion and exclusion; if Asian Christians can begin to think of family resemblance in terms of ethical behavior rather than mere theological cognition; of doing what Jesus says rather than simple assent to the Nicene Creed—Christ's Body on earth will be more whole. We will be helped to recognize our brothers and sisters whose faithful lives are credited to them as righteousness, even though they worship in Mosques and Temples.

13. Missiologically, such an understanding would take us back to the original commission, not to make converts or save people, but to make disciples who—with us—learn of and from Jesus, and who follow him in communities of faith that are significantly, redemptively countercultural, a palpable expression of their genuine "longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them." (Hebrews 11:16)

All of this, I believe, is consistent with what Mr. Garcia has written in his paper about "mission board-less missionaries," about "theology of mission as [more than] simply a justification for the traditional and current practice in mission," about

the “Insiders’ Movement,” about the “which Asia?” question, about “religious extremism,” “cheap grace,” and about suffering. I would encourage Mr. Garcia and my academic brothers and sisters in Asia to continue to go beyond the Procrustean strictures of Christendom, to our Lord’s teaching and example. I hope that something in this response will be an encouragement.

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#### Appendix I:

##### What Must I do to be Saved?

- Must a follower of Jesus be a Trinitarian to be saved? It is not as though the doctrine of the Trinity leaps from the pages of scripture. It came about as a result of prolonged and hard fought wrangling and battling, sometimes to the death. It was initially a very controversial teaching because arguments for and against it could be made from Scripture—which was never intended by its several authors to provide a definitive, comprehensive guide to systematic theology. The goal of scripture is discipleship. The great commission pointedly does not say go and make converts to the refined Trinitarian doctrines of Nicea, but *make disciples, teaching them to observe whatsoever I have commanded you*. Most of what Jesus commanded had to do with following him in our relationships to other people, to material things, to religious authority, to God, and to Him.
- Must the follower of another religion know about Jesus in order to be saved?
- Must a follower of Jesus identify with a Christendom church in order to be saved?

If the answer to any one of these questions is “no,” there are serious implications for Asian Christian mission and theology.

The Good News is that “the Lamb” was not God’s final, desperate, hastily improvised rescue plan to redeem all of creation after all of his other schemes had failed, but an integral part of the all encompassing cosmic drama. The Lamb “was slain from the creation of the world.” (Revelation 13:8)

(1) God is self-disclosed to human kind. No amount of human searching can result in the discovery of God. God must take the initiative, and does so across time and cultures.

(2) God's self-disclosure is not uniform across peoples and time. Some have only the general revelation of creation and of their own consciences. Others have the Law, or portions of it. Still others have fragments of revelation handed down to them... often in corrupted, distorted and diluted form...from their ancestors.

Persons in each of these categories are held responsible for this light. No one is held accountable for the light he or she does not have and could not have had.

(3) Some are aware of God's self-disclosure through Jesus Christ, and have learned that no one comes to the Father except through Christ (John 14:6-7). Such persons are responsible for this knowledge and its implications.

(4) The difference between some revelation and much revelation is not superior virtue, but understanding. The one with limited knowledge has some, albeit more limited understanding. Child and the scientist see the same stars, breath the same air, respond to the same medicine, etc., despite the fact that the child's understanding of astronomy, oxygen, or pharmacy is virtually nil.

(5) A person is not righteous because the quantity of correct information possessed has achieved a certain level. Rather, the one who lives by faith, in accordance with the measure of knowledge that the sovereign God has chosen to reveal to him or her, is credited with righteousness.

(6) A person with much light can be unrighteous; a person with little light can be righteous.

(7) In both instances, salvation is through the Lamb "that was slain from the creation of the world." (Rev. 13:8)

(8) The difference between (a) the one who has trusted explicitly in Christ, and (b) the one who has never heard the name of Jesus but who responds obediently to God's revelation, is the degree of understanding. The former knows how reconciliation with God has been achieved; the latter can only fear and worship God, with more limited understanding. The faith of such persons – "a great crowd of witnesses" (all the people of God in B.C.E. times) is credited to them as righteousness (Genesis 15:6; Psalm 106:31; Ezekiel 18:20; Galatians 3:6; Romans 4:3-5, 9, 23; Hebrews 10, 11, 12; James 2:23). An informed Christian knows that salvation comes as a gift from

God through Jesus Christ. While Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and their B.C.E. counterparts could not know, they could—and their contemporary counterparts today can—live lives of faith in accordance with the light that God has given them. By grace they are saved, through faith, and that not of themselves. It is the gift of God!

(9) This does not detract from the evangelistic impulse of the Body of Christ any more now that it did when Christ came to earth. The Good News is that Jesus Christ came to save sinners...including Adam, Noah, Abraham, and all pre-advent people of God. "...Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" Jesus told his doubtful contemporaries (John 8:56).

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## Appendix II

### *The C1–C6 Contextualization Spectrum*

This tool, developed by John Travis (a pseudonym), has proven helpful and is widely accepted as a tool for differentiating different kinds of “Christ-centered Communities” in Muslim contexts.

C1 – Traditional Church Using Outsider Language. These are traditional Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant churches which may pre-date Islam. Many reflect Western culture and are significantly different from the surrounding Muslim culture. Some Muslim-background believers may be members. They call themselves “Christians.”

C2 – Traditional Church Using Insider Language. Essentially the same as C1, but using an insider language. Theological language is distinctively Christian. Often there are more Muslim-background believers than in C1 churches. Believers call themselves Christians.”

C3 – Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Religiously Neutral Insider Cultural Forms. These may adopt local forms of dress, folk music, and art. The aim is to reduce the foreign atmosphere by “contextualizing to biblically permissible cultural forms.” The meeting place may be a church building or another location. Believers call themselves “Christians.”

C4 – Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Biblically Permissible Cultural and Islamic Forms. Forms adopted may include praying with raised hands, kneeling, keeping the fast (Ramadan), avoiding pork and alcohol, or not having dogs and cats as pets. Meetings are not held in church buildings. These communities are comprised almost entirely of Muslim-background

believers. Believers identify themselves as “followers of Isa the Messiah” (or something similar).

C5 – Christ-centered Communities of “Messianic Muslims” Who Have Accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. These believers remain largely within the Islamic community. Islamic theology that is incompatible with the Bible is rejected. Some will attend the mosque. When entire villages convert, they may form “Messianic mosques.” They are perceived by the community as Muslims and refer to themselves as Muslims who follow Isa the Messiah.

A much earlier advocate of what has since been labeled C5 was John Anderson, who suggested that the traditional “Cultic,” that is, formal and sectarian, approach by missionaries had been ineffective. Instead of being perceived as holy people, Christians were perceived by Muslims not as true worshipper of Allah, but as blasphemers; not as good citizens of their country, but as quislings; not as men who honor father and mother, but as reprobate sons. He argued that conversion to Jesus as Savior was the aim, not acceptance of formal Christianity. Anderson argued that believers in Christ could remain within the Muslim community and even recite the Creed (“There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Prophet of God”), while they sought to convince their family and friends of the Lordship of Jesus.

Anderson acknowledged that a Muslim believer’s confrontation with conservative Muslim theology would come, sooner or later, but when it comes the only issue on which they may feel justified in killing and persecuting him, will be his confession of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and on no other; and in this way the true issues of discipleship will have become clarified.

C6 – Small Christ-centered Communities of Secret/Underground Believers. These believers meet in secret to avoid governmental or community legal action. They are usually silent about their faith. For a time, they are perceived as Muslims and identify themselves as Muslims. C5 is by far the most controversial of the above approaches. In some cases, Christians become “Muslims” in order to win Muslims. Phil Parshall, a pioneer in C4 Muslim evangelism, has argued strongly against the C5 approach, believing it to be syncretistic.

Theological objections – Parshall sees the mosque as “pregnant with Islamic theology. There Muhammad is affirmed as a prophet of God and the divinity of Christ is consistently denied.”

Ethical objections – We would resent a non-believing Muslim coming into our assemblies and partaking communion in an effort to gain our trust in order to promote Islam. Muslim’s abhor hypocrisy and would be especially offended by a foreigner coming in as a “C5 missionary.” In defense of a C5 approach, Travis has argued:

- Continuing to attend the mosque compares with early Jewish followers’ habit of meeting both at the temple and in homes. Like temple attendance, a C5 modality may also be a temporary situation, until such time that the Muslim community forces a separation, in the same way that Christians were driven from Jerusalem.
  - Just as some “evangelical Catholics” attend mass but do not pray to saints or exalt Mary, Messianic Muslims may attend with the same mindset. As many nominal Muslims do not attend prayers at the mosque, it may not be necessary for the believer in Jesus to do so either.
  - Some Muslim-background believers change *shahada* to exalt Jesus, some pray silently or not at all when others are reciting it, while others reinterpret the word “prophet” in a way that they are comfortable applying it to Muhammad.
  - There is a need to develop an apologetic which affirms the Qur’an without putting it on an equal standing with the Injil.
  - Muslims are more likely to attend Bible reading sessions if the Qur’an is also read.
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