



MISSION

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CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture

TRANSFORMING APOLOGETICS

Oh Paul, you
can't mean every
book!



How to make interfaith friends and not alienate people

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Contributors
(in order of appearance)



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is a Ugandan photojournalist and native of Gulu in the north of the country, where he recently recorded the lives of small-scale farmers. A childhood toying around with his dad's kit inspired Jesse to buy his first camera - a Canon 1300D - with money made from making bricks.



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was born in Saudi Arabia but raised in rural Ireland. He was director of the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for Freedom of Religion or Belief, working with parliamentarians in Westminster and internationally to protect persecuted religious and belief communities from around the world.



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INTERFAITH FIXES WHEN THINGS FALL APART

A CLASSIC OF AFRICAN AND WORLD LITERATURE IS AN
INIMICAL COMPANION TO A NEW BOOK THAT HOLDS THE
MESSINESS, CONTRADICTIONS AND HUMILITY OF CHRISTIAN
APOLOGETIC RELATIONSHIPS IN RARE TENSION

I have a strong conviction that God compiles and orders my reading list. My wife is not so convinced but gives me the benefit of the doubt every time I return from my local Oxfam with just another few for the shelves. I felt God's influence not long ago. After a conversation with a Catholic friend revealed a shared heart for ecumenism, a book called *For God's Sake...Unity: an ecumenical voyage with the Iona Community* appeared before my eyes while browsing the aforementioned charity bookshop.

God was at play – part librarian, part-bibliotherapist – while I was editing this edition, which sharply draws into focus issues of dominance in apologetic-missional relationships and the theology that underpins the desire to convert. As part of my preparation for hosting a seminar on the theme 'Mission is Racist' at the recent Baptist Assembly (do turn to Natalia-Nana's column on page 19 for her considered response to a challenging afternoon), I read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* for the first time.

With a BA and MA in English Literature, I bridle with shame at that admission. It calls to mind a story I heard Professor Anthony G. Reddie tell recently. Professor Reddie, the director of the Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture at Oxford University's Regent's Park College, explained that when he was in the sixth form, a well-meaning teacher handed him Achebe's masterpiece with the words, 'this is an important book for you to read'. Professor Reddie was one of just two black teens in the class and remembers thinking, 'why is it only an important book for me to read and not everyone else?'

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's fictional Nigerian village of Umuofia disintegrates in the face of exposure to the twin powers of the colonisers and their Christianity:



the Igbo belief system is disempowered; internecine conflict is generated; and the colonial government establishes an administration which protects the converts and harasses the resisters. Clansman Obierika – the thoughtful, intellectual counterpoint to the warrior Okonkwo, whose life is central to the book – articulates the Igbo voice of the indigenous peoples: *“The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”*

Such strength of feeling followed my reading, this time in the Welsh novelist Carys Davies' *The Mission House*, set in a fictionalised version of Udthagamandalam (once Ooty), a town in the Western Ghats mountains, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Established as a British Raj summer resort, the echoes of colonialism and its white man's religion sound a constant note of threat that pulses the plot



towards its violent conclusion: *“the foreign missionaries...are mostly to blame with their hundreds of years of forcing the story of Jesus Christ down people's throats, displacing the rightful gods. They had always been sneakier than the Muslims. Islam had always favoured the sword but the Christians, with their offers of education and food and shelter, had always been sneaky.”*

Kang-San Tan and Benno van den Toren pay heed to that antagonism towards materially-induced evangelism and conversion in their essay on the missiological motivations of apologetics, *“If missions in the past have sometimes used power and manipulation, thus producing what can be called “rice Christians”, the church should repent from it.”*

I bear the scars of time spent working for the apologetics outfit, once known in the UK as the Zacharias Trust. And yet I am encouraged by the honesty and humility behind this call to repentance. Tan and Van den Toren are clear that *“embodied apologetic witness demands that these dark sides of Christian history are recognised, and the Christian community shows a genuine repentance and desire to be a healing presence.”* Amen to that.

Matty Fearon was born in Abergavenny to Scouse Catholic parents. After a career in sports and news journalism that took in stints in Russia, India and across the UK, he made the inevitable move to the Christian charity sector in 2019. This is his third issue as Mission Catalyst editor.

**WE
WANT TO**



**BREAK
FREE**

...from Western thought

DUTCH THEOLOGIAN BENNO VAN DEN TOREN AND MALAYSIAN MISSIOLOGIST KANG-SAN TAN ON THE REMEDY REQUIRED FOR THE GLOBAL NORTH'S CAPTIVITY OF CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS – AND HOW THAT MOTIVATED THEIR NEW BOOK

How did you come to co-author *Humble Confidence*?

This project originated at the launch of Benno's *Christian Apologetics as Cross-Cultural Dialogue* (2011), at which Kang-San spoke. This earlier book provides more of the theological and epistemological underpinnings for this new study, developing this earlier thesis in the field of interreligious dialogue and witness. It also draws on further studies we have written in the theology of religions.... Together, we have a reasonably wide range of experience in different religious and secular contexts. Yet, we realise that there are many other relevant contexts and have wondered whether this book should not have been written by a range of authors rather than just by the two of us. We have come to the conclusion, however, that the need for developing an integrated approach to interreligious apologetic witness outweighed the advantages of a multi-author approach. We have partially compensated for the limitations of our own experiences by seeking comments - from specialists in the field - on all chapters considering specific audiences.

Given your transnational lives, where did you write the book?

We wrote a significant part of this book on the fourteenth floor of a modern office building in a booming cosmopolitan city in Southeast Asia. In the same office building, there is a worship space of an international Pentecostal church reaching out to various groups of immigrants. Below us in a radius of a few 100 metres there are Hindu, Buddhist and Chinese temples, a Lutheran and a Methodist church, and a mosque. In the nearby luxury shopping mall, an advertisement invites us to "believe in God, invest in gold", so the worship of the Mammon of modern free-market capitalism is equally well represented.

These couple of streets surrounding us represent a microcosm of the globalising

world in which the community of followers of Christ are today called to give "a reasoned defence (apologia) to anyone who asks for an account of the hope that is in us, yet with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15, translation by the authors). This is a world in which multiple religions present themselves to everyone willing to listen, a world in which both secularising dynamics and religious resurgence can go hand in hand, a world in which religious encounters lead, on the one hand, to deep encounters, but on the other hand to

“ we believe that many of the dominant approaches to apologetics are ill-equipped for the cosmopolitan, multireligious and multicultural environments in which we find ourselves ”

conflict and even interreligious violence, and a world that is still desperately in need of the good news of the crucified and risen Christ.

And why did you write the book?

Though much excellent work has already been done, we have written this book because we believe that many of the dominant approaches to apologetics are ill-equipped for the cosmopolitan, multireligious and multicultural environments in which we find ourselves today. Western Christian apologetics is too often insufficiently contextual, because it focuses on questions Westerners (or a rather specific group of Westerners) might ask, objections they might raise, and points of contact in their specific beliefs and experiences. Christian apologetics are at the same time too often insufficiently Christian because they are - in ways that we will explore - indebted to particular Western ways of reasoning rather than focusing on ways of reasoning that are

determined by the specific content of the Christian message: the foolish wisdom of the crucified and risen Christ.

What is the alternative to the Western way of thinking?

This book wants to contribute to finding a remedy for the Western captivity of much Christian apologetics. It does so by, on the one hand, binding it closer to Christ and the proper nature of the good news, while on the other hand, giving sustained attention to the great variety of

both religious and secular audiences that we encounter today. Contexts are not just different, but differently different. They may not only raise different questions, but they raise different types of questions and do so in different ways. We believe that precisely such sustained attention to what Christian apologetics in interfaith dialogue should look like will also help us to become aware of the Western captivity of apologetic models developed in the context of Western modernity and postmodernity.

How do you distinguish between interfaith and interreligious dialogues?

We interchangeably refer to such dialogues as *interfaith* or *interreligious*. *Interreligious* places a greater stress on religions as complex social constellations. *Interfaith* points to the fact that such human constructs are also responses, however limited, imperfect or even distorted, to what people perceive of God through their traditions and experiences.



“ we focus on ways of reasoning that are determined by the specific content of the Christian message: the foolish wisdom of the crucified and risen Christ ”

Can you be taught apologetics?

This book is intended as a travel guide rather than a manual. A number of writers on Christian apologetics have rightly argued that apologetics is an art rather than a science or a technique. Becoming a truthful and winsome advocate for the gospel is a long process that requires stretches of slow personal growth and leaps into unexpected discoveries. It is an individual and communal journey in deepening our understanding of the radically different perspectives on the world of our neighbours and in growing in confidence in the multifaceted relevance and truth of Christ for ourselves and others. It is a journey toward an increasing sensitivity to the particular needs and barriers of the people we meet, and in finding attractive ways to present Christ in the marketplace of ideas, ideals, and idols. This book is meant to support such journeys of personal discovery and encounter - possibly to jump-start such journeys, but not to replace them.

How have you navigated the pitfall of apologetic intellectualism?

Apologetics receives bad press for being narrowly intellectualist, insensitive

to where people truly are, and for trying to build faith on human reasoning rather than on the power of the gospel. In developing this proposal for a holistic and contextually embedded interreligious apologetic encounter, we will constantly face two opposite, critical attitudes. On the one hand, there is the criticism of Raimon Panikkar and similar thinkers who argue that “we must eliminate any apologetics if we really want to meet a person from another religious tradition.” On the other hand, there will be those who defend more evidentialist, rationalist and other classical Western style approaches to apologetics, who may feel that we give into cultural relativism. For some readers we will be too open and for others too committed, for some too intellectual, and for others too focused on dispositions. We hope that readers who come with such critical questions - from different angles - will

bear with us and critically ask whether this proposal may indeed present a constructive and faithful way forward.

And is this book for anyone?

Apologetic witness is the task of the entire Christian community. The Church in our era does need a new generation of trained apologists, but may God forbid that apologetics becomes the work of those who master the clever arguments and philosophical minutiae of their trade. Such skills and knowledge may be important for specific groups of interlocutors, but we are more in need of ordinary Christians who can meet their neighbours with a confidence in Christ that allows them to be deeply attentive to their beliefs, needs, criticisms, and experiences. We are particularly thinking of Christians in many parts of our global village who are confronted with both alternative religious perspectives and the gifts and pressures of modernization and globalisation, whether students or professionals in Jakarta, Bangladesh, Cairo or Chicago.

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“ contexts are not just different, but differently different ”



SHELF AWARENESS

The books that formed us

KANG-SAN TAN TAKES US THROUGH THE KEYHOLE OF HIS STUDY DOOR TO PEAK AT THE THINKERS WHO SHAPED HIS FAITH AND MISSIOLOGY

I was privileged to go to grow up in a strong Bible church. So when I first studied mission, I wanted it to be rooted in Scripture. If I was to think creatively and missiologically, I needed some real Biblical baselines. So, I got to know Chris Wright's *The Mission of God* and his less academic, more accessible version, *The Mission of God's People*, which has a strong Old Testament foundation. On the New Testament side, the book that most influenced my missiology is Tom Wright's *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*. Those two Wrights really shaped me.

Michael Stroope's *Transcending Mission* in 1991 was a major shift. It was the necessary new paradigm to drive us into the future of mission. He was attempting to bring closure to 'West to the Rest' missiology and I know is still trying to write *A Way Forward*. We invited Michael over to lead a seminar with us at BMS. For me, he represents real big picture thinking on mission.

Allen Yeh took things to the next level. He argues that if we are going to do mission into the 22nd Century, then every mission agency needs to restructure and recognise that mission is multidirectional. A further part of that journey - and for me, the most exciting part - is to enter into a real encounter, a deep encounter, with other religions. We need to genuinely understand and listen. To do that we need to discover writers like Krishna Mohun Banerjea, a Hindu philosopher in the 1860s encountering Western thought for the first time. His writings have been collected by Indian theologian K. P. Aleaz in *From exclusivism to inclusivism*. Sometimes we may disagree, but other times they will bring fresh insights into our own understanding of being a people of faith within a global context. And on the topic of fresh insights, I have been



struck during my time in the West about how we are still not benefiting from the perspective of those on the margins, especially women's voices. I have learnt a lot about leadership from Brené Brown and *Gospel Bearers and Gender Barriers* is a vital collection of essays by and about missionary women in the 20th century, featuring writing by Christina Tellechea Accornero and Young Lee Hertig.

We still privilege Western mission

thinkers, especially men. As an Asian theological student all my Bible commentaries were Western men. We need to be rooted in Scripture, but interpretation, reading and listening is all part of that rootedness. When we study Scripture, we must not do so just through our Western eyes; Christianity is truly global, so it is time for our pulpits - and bookshelves - to be filled with biblical perspectives from the Global South.



UNSETTLING THE WORD

A Seat at the Table. 2 Samuel 9:1-13

*IN THE LATEST OF OUR SERIES OF EXPERIMENTS IN READING THE BIBLE
THROUGH THE EYES OF ANOTHER, THE REVEREND RUTH CONLON RE-IMAGINES
SCRIPTURE AS INSPIRATION FOR RADICAL INCLUSION.*

We come across the story of Mephibosheth in chapter nine of the second book of Samuel. Mephibosheth was the son of Jonathan, one of King David's closest friends. He became lame in both feet when his nurse dropped him as they fled the scene after his father and grandfather, King Saul, died in battle, leaving him alone and vulnerable.

Years later, when David had become king, he remembered his friendship with Jonathan and asked if there were any surviving members of Jonathan's family to whom he could show kindness. He was told about Mephibosheth, who was living in a town called Lo Debar and had been overlooked because of his disability and his family's history.

David summoned Mephibosheth to his palace and comforted him, saying, "Don't be afraid. I will certainly show you kindness for the sake of your father, Jonathan. I will restore all the land that belonged to your grandfather King Saul, and you will always have a seat at my table" (2 Samuel 9:7). Mephibosheth was stunned and thankful at David's kindness and even referred to himself as a "dead dog" (2 Samuel 9:8). David, however, treated him as one of his own children, and ever since that day, Mephibosheth dined with the king's household.

In the story of Mephibosheth, we witness a tale of overcoming adversity. Suffering a childhood injury, Mephibosheth was forced into isolation

“ a place at the table signifies an opportunity to participate in the powerful decisions that define our collective future ”

after his father's death, leaving him without a seat at society's table. My experiences working with marginalised communities, both in the UK and internationally, have exposed me to diverse populations that share this common struggle – their unheard voices and seats unclaimed at the decision-making table. While the specific tables in these contexts differ – with some akin to David's royal feast and others more modest in stature – they all represent tables of power and influence.

Much of my work has centred around empowering marginalised communities by ensuring that their voices have a tangible impact in shaping projects while collaboratively developing initiatives that lead to substantial community development outcomes. These communities often distrust decision-makers, primarily because they neither identify with them nor have been consulted during the decision-making process. Furthermore, these communities frequently disengage from decision-makers' programmes, as they seem to reflect the biases and detached perspectives of the decision-makers rather

than genuinely understanding the issues faced on the ground.

It is crucial for hidden voices to shape services for several reasons. Incorporating them in service design promotes collaboration and diverse perspectives from various community members, leading to inclusive solutions for marginalised communities. Engaging these voices builds trust between the community and decision-makers, improves programme engagement, and provides valuable insights into systemic challenges. In addition, involving hidden voices combats stigmatisation and fosters social cohesion within communities. Overall, prioritising hidden voices in service design is crucial for achieving inclusive, empathetic, and efficient solutions to address the challenges faced by marginalised communities.

It is essential to make a compelling case for giving these marginalised communities a voice and an opportunity to participate in the conversations that shape their lives. By elevating their voices, we acknowledge that every person deserves equity, respect, and dignity. Moreover, this inclusion benefits these communities



“A Last Supper,” the reinterpretation of the original 15th-century artwork was painted by British painter Lorna May Wadsworth (2009)

by empowering them and enhancing our societies, in a mutually beneficial way, by harnessing the unique perspectives, skills, and experiences they bring. It's all too common for a team of 'experts' to go into a community to review the needs without truly partnering with them. As a friend recently said, “While they consult, they all too often do so without truly collaborating. The power remains in the hands of the powerful.”

To advocate for the inclusion of marginalised communities successfully, we need to address three key areas:

1. Education and awareness: create programmes that educate the public about the struggles faced by these communities and raise awareness on issues such as systemic inequality, discrimination, and disadvantages. By fostering understanding and empathy within the broader population, we lay the foundation for meaningful change.

2. Representation: promote opportunities for marginalised community members to participate in leadership positions and decision-making processes. Encouraging diverse representation at various levels of government and institutions ensures these individuals have a direct say in shaping policies that affect their lives.

“ my work centres on empowering marginalised communities by ensuring their voices have a tangible impact in shaping projects ”

3. Community empowerment: support initiatives that empower marginalised communities through skill development, capacity building, and access to resources needed for sustainable growth. By equipping them with tools to thrive independently, they move from being recipients of aid to active participants in their own development.

By addressing these areas collectively, we can create a landscape that acknowledges the inherent worth of all individuals and offers a seat at the table to those who have been historically silenced. As evident in Mephibosheth's story, having a place at the table signifies an opportunity to participate in the powerful decisions that drive social change, shape our communities, and define our collective future.

The story of Mephibosheth teaches us about the importance of showing

kindness and inclusion towards marginalised people. Despite being dropped as a child and left disabled as a result, Mephibosheth was given a seat at the king's table because David recognised his God-given worth as a member of Jonathan's family. This act of kindness not only changes Mephibosheth's life but also shows others that people with disabilities and marginalised backgrounds deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. In our own lives, we can follow David's example by reaching out to those who have been overlooked or marginalised and showing them kindness and inclusion. We can give them a seat at the table, both literally and figuratively, by inviting them into our homes, workplaces, and communities. Doing so can help break down barriers and create a more just and compassionate society.





Living life through the lens

ON A 2022 BMS WORLD MISSION STORY-GATHERING TRIP TO NORTHERN UGANDA, LOCAL-BORN PHOTOJOURNALIST **JESSE JOHNSON JAMES** OPENED UP ABOUT THE HEART BEHIND HIS SHUTTER CLICKS

I was born the son of journalist in Gulu and have watched my hometown grow from a municipality and into a city. My father used to come home with his camera, and I'd play around with it. I really connected with the idea of viewing people through the lens. I dreamt of owning a camera of my own. After getting myself a job as a bricklayer, I eventually made enough money to buy my first, a Canon 1300D.

Moving through the different communities for this assignment and seeing so many smiles brought me such joy, which I really tried to capture in these photos. My father reported on the Lord's Resistance Army insurgency that lasted over 20 years and caused so much unrest in this part of

the country. It left people traumatised and without hope or happiness. I love that we are moving now from that point of depression and anger to a point of joy. It gives me hope when I see people happy with the lives they're living. I just hope that we continue progressing until we reach where we want to be.

I felt privileged to capture the lives of women working so hard to change the stories of their families, that really stood out for me. In the past men were the ones who used to work hard in farming, but now the story is changing, the narrative is changing. We are seeing women working so hard to change stories of their families. And as a storyteller, I love being part of passing on the stories of their lives, these stories inform, they educate, and they also build connections between people.







KANG-SAN TAN AND BENNO VAN DER TOREN LAY OUT FOUR CORE REASONS WHY APOLOGETIC WITNESS IS A CRUCIAL PART OF THE BROADER MISSIONAL CALLING OF THE CHURCH IN TODAY'S WORLD

The first reason has to do with the ethics of mission. Christian mission is radically different from propaganda and averse to all forms of manipulation and “proselytisation” in the negative sense¹. If missions in the past have sometimes used power and manipulation, thus producing what can be called “rice Christians”, the church should repent from it. We should repent from it because God never forces God’s love on people but always offers Godself freely allowing for rejection. Prophets could be rejected, as could the message and the gift of the Son himself, who accepted rejection up to the point of going to the cross. God wants us to freely embrace this free gift

“ if missions in the past have sometimes used power and manipulation, thus producing what can be called “rice Christians”, the church should repent from it ”

of love. God might be able to force us to become subjects of a divine king or slaves of a divine master, but God rather wants us to be children of the heavenly Father, friends, and even bride of a heavenly lover. Such gifts can only be accepted freely. The father of the prodigal son was also a parable of God’s character, in that he did not force his son to stay with him, but

allowed him to move to a far land, all the while waiting eagerly for his return. In the same way, the apostles and the evangelist used nothing but an appeal to the truth and goodness of the message of Jesus to bring people to conversion, trusting in the power of the Spirit rather than on clever manipulation.

This appeal to a free acceptance of the

1. Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions* (Wheaton, IL: Tynedale House Publishers, 1987), 152-55.

truth and goodness and the gospel reflects the enduring nature of the relationship God intends with us. It also has a particular importance today. When, as pointed out above, religions are so easily associated with the abuse of power, we need to stress that we invite others to believe this message because of its truth and goodness, not because we want to enlarge our community, feel threatened, or whatever interests people might suspect. We should avoid all manipulation. It needs to be clear first that our evangelistic efforts are not about growing the political influence of our community, but about God and salvation. It needs to be clear that conversion is not primarily a change of political or communal belonging (though it may result in such a change), but primarily a change of allegiance to Christ as Lord and Saviour. It will also need to be underlined, where religious communities use political power and other manipulative means to induce conversions, that this doesn't do justice to what religion should be, at least not insofar as we have come to know God in Christ. Others may not be convinced because the power interests at stake are too great, but we have good reasons to keep challenging them, and to do so with integrity.

Second, the apologetic aspect of Christian witness is crucial because otherwise we do not have a response to cultural relativism. People embrace cultural and religious relativism for a variety of reasons. It may be that like Pontius Pilate they have a profoundly pragmatist attitude to life and relationships and have pushed questions of truth to the margins of their lives (John 18:38)². This may be because it allows them to live comfortably in the present without considering any questions about the ultimate meaning of life. It may be because they have political interests to push religious convictions to the private sphere. It may be that they have given up on ever finding the truth about God's salvation or ultimate meaning because of the vertigo of relativity induced by the many options. In all cases, a simple claim that Christianity is different will not provide an answer. We will need to argue what is at stake in what religion or worldview we embrace. Religious beliefs and practises are not just a byproduct of other realities such as economics, politics or social and psychological well-being. We will need to argue that the cultural and religious relativism's need themselves to be relativised as particular cultural and



Hendrick van Balen *the Elder, Holy Trinity, 1620s*

“ many Muslims have a strong conviction that Islam is a more rational religion than Christianity, with its irrational beliefs in the Trinity, the atonement and its corrupted scriptures ”

religious positions. And we will need to show that we can take our cultural location with utter seriousness without succumbing to relativism. In late modern cultures, not explaining or showing a readiness to explain why we believe our convictions to be true and good for others will automatically mean that we have no answer to the paralysing influence of relativism. This relativism tends to make any exchange of religious ideas a harmless game rather than a deeply serious affair addressing questions of ultimate truth, significance and salvation.

The third missiological reason to give appropriate attention to apologetic witness in interreligious encounters is that we will otherwise have no message for those who are deeply invested in other religions³. Christian missional outreach

too often invests most of its energy in the disenfranchised and marginalised of other religious communities. It is obvious that those who are well rooted in their own religious traditions may be less open to consider alternatives. If, however, Jesus Christ is not only an answer to poverty and injustice - or a search for a community or identity - but truly the answer to our deepest need for truth and salvation and to our longing for God, then we also (and particularly) have a message for those who are deeply embedded in their religious communities. We can only reach them if we start to dialogue with openness and integrity about their and our religious beliefs, asking whether beliefs are justified and what promises real salvation.

The issue of addressing those who are at the heart of other religious

2. Samuel Wells, *Speaking the Truth: Preaching in a Diverse Culture* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2018), 169-74.

3. Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Cultural Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 247.

communities is compounded by the fourth missiological reason for taking apologetic dialogue seriously as an intrinsic aspect of interfaith encounter and witness: other religious traditions have their own apologetic discourse, both in favour of their own beliefs and against the Christian tradition. Many Muslims, for example, have a strong conviction that Islam is a more rational religion than Christianity, with its irrational beliefs in the Trinity, the atonement and its corrupted scriptures and morals. Consider, for example, the widely available publications of Ahmed Deedat⁴. Our personal experience in interreligious encounter is that these views have such a strong warrant in these communities that many of its members will rarely consider seriously the Christian faith as an alternative, even if they are on a spiritual quest and aware of the Christian message. Many Hindus would not consider conversion because their apologetic for their own religious tradition tells them that everyone should grow spiritually within the religious tradition in which they are born⁵. Some sceptical onlookers would argue that this is precisely why interreligious apologetics does not make sense: Does this not prove that the truth cannot be known? Yet diversity of opinion, even between well thought-through opinions, does not show that truth can never be ascertained. Consider a parallel case. People come up with contrasting views concerning economic policies, concerning vaccination against COVID-19 and about how to best address the climate crisis. A critical debate about these issues is complex and multilayered, particularly if we also consider ideological biases, personal interests and historical loyalties that may be at stake. Yet the complexity of the issue does in no way mean that the debate isn't worth having, and that either side is equally justified in their beliefs.

Apologetics is not about winning arguments, but about winning people. People may still reject it even after they've heard the best possible exposition. This is evidenced when we look to people who encountered Jesus. Though no one represented the love of God more persuasively than he did, the clarity of the conviction it brought could also lead to rejection, precisely because people understood the power and implications of his message.

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An apologia for apologetics

Christianity is a missionary religion that desires to share what has received in Jesus Christ with all nations to the ends of the earth. It does not yet necessarily give a place to apologetic witness. Some argue that faith in this message is only and entirely a gift of the Holy Spirit. Faith is therefore considered a unique form of knowledge. In evangelism, we therefore simply proclaim the truth of the Gospel, praying that the Holy Spirit will allow the hearers to accept it. This position is called fideism because of the central growth of faith (*fides*). Fideism is different from relativism. Fideism rather believes that there is a universal, objective truth for all. But this truth can only be known through the supernatural gift of faith and can never be understood by unregenerate people.

This position may sound pious because it gives such a central place to the Holy Spirit. But it is not biblical. The work of the Holy Spirit is central in evangelism and in people coming to faith. Yet, the Holy Spirit also works through ordinary human means, including ordinary means by which we come to know and judge different truth claims. The Bible itself not only exhorts us to give an account of our hope, but constantly gives such accounts itself. Both the prophets of the Old Testament and the evangelists of the New Testament do not simply invite people to believe the otherwise unbelievable, but constantly plead and reason with their heroes and readers.

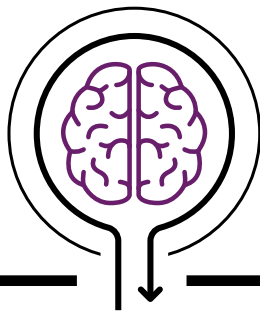
However, they do not use the supposedly universally valid arguments that modern Western apologists might expect. They point to God's decisive actions in the history of Israel and Jesus Christ, and addressed the specific issues of their particular audiences. The prophets explain why not all prophets are to be trusted equally and how to distinguish between false and true prophets (e.g. Jer 23: 9-40). The four evangelists all tried to persuade their particular audiences that their testimony was trustworthy. This biblical practice is reflected in the long history of Christian apologetic witness that in each generation and context addresses new challenges.

Furthermore, God holds people accountable for their unbelief in Jesus. They will even be judged for it. *"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I will tell you, on the Day of Judgement, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon side than for you"* (Matthew 11: 21). Faith is not a gift presented to some and denied to others. The gospel is presented to all, and people are invited to make up their minds - and they will be judged if they will not embrace the truth in their unwillingness to come clean with this God. Yet this biblical apologetic witness is far from narrowly rationalist. It addresses the entire person with its deepest desires; it calls for conversion of the will; it takes relational bonds seriously and is aware that the call to conversion also involves a spiritual battle in which we need to depend on the power of the Holy Spirit who is able to overcome strongholds.

The Roman Catholic philosopher Paul Griffiths argues that the above arguments do not just hold for the Christian faith, but for all religious and secular worldviews that claim to have an understanding of what true salvation means for all humanity. They have a moral obligation to share this salvation with others, and to try to convince others that this salvation is available and where it can be found. That is why interfaith dialogue that involves missionary religions will regularly and naturally lead to apologetic interchange. The truth question is inevitably on the table: is what we believe to have received concerning salvation indeed the greatest conceivable gift, or is it rather something of limited value, or even a figment of the human imagination?

4. David Westerlund, "Ahmed Deedat's Theology of Religion: Apologetics through Polemics", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33, no.3 (2003): 263-78.

5. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 256-59.



A TIME I CHANGED MY MIND

‘BUT ARE YE A CATHOLIC MUSLIM OR A PROTESTANT MUSLIM?’

IN OUR AGE WHERE OPINIONS MASQUERADE AS TRUTHS, THIS COLUMN
CHERISHES THE COUNTERCULTURAL HUMILITY REQUIRED TO CHANGE ONE’S
MIND. IN THIS ISSUE, BUDDHIST AMRO HUSSEIN LOOKS AT THE EFFECT OF
GROWING UP IN A MUSLIM FAMILY IN RURAL CATHOLIC IRELAND

I think it’s fair to say that my religious education was a wee bit unorthodox. Born in Saudi Arabia to Sudanese parents but raised in Ireland, I grew up in a devout Muslim family in a rural Catholic town near the border of Northern Ireland during the Troubles - a cute name for a not so cute time (it evokes a challenging developmental period for a toddler more than a sectarian conflict).

Catholics and the minority of Protestants in my town were effectively segregated. Protestants were discussed in hushed tones, treated like monsters from children’s books who would snatch you up if you crossed into the wrong part of town. However, despite the town and people being so outwardly Catholic, many were essentially atheist. It was history and identity, and often fear of the judgement of nosy neighbours, that took many to Mass, rather than belief. Still, the polarisation between Catholics and Protestants was intense and ever present. Upon revealing that he was Muslim to a colleague, my father was asked, “Well, OK, but what kind

“ you can imagine my surprise when I learned that Catholics and Protestants were both Christians ”

of Muslim are you? A Catholic Muslim or a Protestant Muslim?”

There were few Muslims of either variety in my town, so my father was concerned about the influence of Christianity on his children and keen to impress upon my siblings and I the righteousness of Islam. My experience of religion was therefore one of competition. At home, I learned about Islam and the dangers of loose western morals. At school, I learned about Catholicism and how it was superior to wicked Protestantism and barbaric Eastern traditions. Through friends and television, I learned about atheism and how religions were supposedly delusional tales for the

unintelligent, and from Protestants I learned, well, almost nothing because I wasn’t allowed to talk to them.

One day, aged 11, my father told me the Quranic story of Ibrahim, which was expressed as revealing the inherent goodness and superiority of Allah and Islam. By coincidence, at roughly the same time, the priests at school (in Ireland this isn’t weird) told me the biblical story of Abraham, which was expressed as revealing the inherent goodness and superiority of God and Christianity. It was the same bloody story! Maybe that is obvious to adult minds who understand terms like “Abrahamic faiths”, but for me this was mind blowing, so you can imagine

my surprise when I learned that Catholics and Protestants were both Christians!

After years of competition and polarisation, I learned that these different groups were saying basically the same thing, and in some instances exactly the same thing, but they were desperate to convince themselves and others that they possessed the one truth. The impact of growing up with these varied, competing religions and beliefs was that it was difficult to see religion as anything but a means of tribal identification and a source of conflict. It was only through exposure to yet another religion much later that I learned that I was wrong.

Roughly 10 years ago, in a moment of extraordinary anxiety and despair, of feeling trapped and hopeless without anywhere to turn, I was suddenly struck with an overwhelming feeling of unconditional peace and love. I had been lying motionless on the floor when, without warning, I was absolutely fine. It felt like everything was fine and always would be. There was infinite love and nothing to fear.

I set out to understand my experience, but my mind was closed to religion. My childhood experiences led me to hoist my flag in the atheism camp, to attach myself securely to the identity of a smug, modern, liberal intellectual and to dismiss ancient wisdom that has helped countless others. I left religion because of tribalism and close mindedness only to embrace a different kind of tribalism and close mindedness. I eventually found meditation, but only via an app that was secularised and stripped of any overt connection to religion. However, through this blessed tiny opening, I was eventually exposed to another religion which led me to challenge my views about faith - Buddhism.

Buddhism isn't free of the baggage of the traditions with which I grew up (try telling persecuted Rohingya Muslims that Buddhists don't do conflict) but my total ignorance meant that I had no pre-existing biases. Plus, my initial exposure to the religion was to a form that was tailored to critical Western minds, focusing on the core philosophy, and divorced from talk of deities and hungry ghosts. Slowly learning to open to this tradition helped me to slowly open to the wisdom within the traditions of my childhood. I learned much about Buddhist principles of acceptance of one's fate and unconditional love from the story of Jesus, about surrender and diligence on the spiritual path from Islam, which literally means to surrender, and



“ growing up with competing religions meant it was difficult to see them as anything but a means of tribal identification and a source of conflict ”

about selflessness from the non-religious whose altruism was non-transactional; there was no divine reward for their behaviour and yet still they were kind.

This exposure to another religion taught me that I was wrong in concluding that conflict was inherent to religiosity. It taught me that yes, religion could be, and is often, used without skill and maturity to strengthen the ego, to make rigid and unyielding tribal identities that are threatened by the existence of other tribes and identities, but it could also be wielded skillfully to soften, to forgive, and to open hearts and minds to encompass all of creation in loving awareness.

Recently, I saw both these paths living together in the same physical space. I was in Venice exploring beautiful churches. There I saw insecure displays of obscene wealth - gold and silver and vanity in every corner, as well as the constant challenging reminder of men so emotionally and spiritually small that they built their monuments to the Divine on the backs of unfathomable suffering and had to literally change the colour of their saviour's skin to be able to hear his message. But amidst this opulence, there was also reverent silence, humbling great halls, and sunlight

streaming through stained glass windows illuminating Jesus on the cross, suffering profoundly but without a drop of hate in his heart. In those churches, behind the mask of ego, there was awe, stillness and infinite depth. My life eventually taught me that this is also true in great religions and philosophies, and people.

The unorthodoxy of my religious education initially presented a challenge to my faith but as so often is the case, that challenge taught me something incredibly valuable, namely that which religion or philosophy one adhered to was mostly irrelevant. The question was whether you could find its depth, whether your way of life opened you to others or closed you off from creation, whether you turned to fear and insecurity when confronted with difference and difficulty, or whether you endeavoured to always open your heart and to see that the absolute needs no protection. It almost doesn't matter where you go, whether it is to a mosque, church, temple, town hall, university, party conference, pub, football match, or bowling alley, there you will find people who answer that question differently. No group has a monopoly on morality. It's up to each of us to decide which path to walk.

How is ~~IS~~ MISSION RACIST?



*DRAWING ON HER FAMILY'S OWN MISSIONARY HISTORY, COLUMNIST **NATALIA-NANA LESTER-BUSH** INVITES US TO WRESTLE WITH THE OXYMORONS EMBEDDED IN OUR FAITH AND IN WESTERN THOUGHT*

My grandfather was a Church of England vicar. In his younger years, he was a Christian missionary in Kenya. My mum, his beloved daughter-in-law, has often told me the story of when granddad was accosted by the freedom-fighting politician Jaramogi Ajuma Oginga Odinga. Pointing his finger at Alfred, Odinga passionately declared that one day the white men would be out of his (then-still colonised) country! It was bizarre for me to hear of this happening to my dear grandfather who was in Kenya with only kind and loving motivations of service.

Yet the story illustrated to me at an early age how our behaviour on a micro, personal level is invisibly entwined and impacted by wider systems and behaviours beyond our immediate reach. It introduced me to the heavy truth that one's good intentions don't negate or protect you from having an unintended negative impact. I discovered you can be a kind and well-intentioned person, faithfully trying to help people on the micro-scale of personal service and simultaneously be participating in something which is eroding and damaging countries and cultures.

This heavy but helpful awareness has been fundamental in emboldening me to critique my Christian faith and to question the concepts and outworking of 'mission'. I imagine Jesus would be proud of this questioning. The Pharisees and Sadducees meant well - their calling was to help

people obey the law and thus stay in right relationship with God. And yet we see time and time again how Jesus corrected and challenged their teachings, rules and behaviours. In questioning how race and racism can, and sadly often do, show up in mission, we need to be bold and lean into discomfort like Jesus.

The original title of this column - taken from the BMS seminar at Baptist Assembly, where I was a panelist - asks if mission is racist. A better question would be: 'How is mission racist?'. This is an exploration not an accusation. It takes as its starting point that just as, sadly and sinfully, racism and racial inequality are entrenched across vast areas of life, globally and locally, interpersonally and institutionally, racial inequality and racism are a part of mission. On a deeper level, this question is underpinned by a recognition that every single country has been affected by the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism. And that these two historic evils have made the Global North's white-majority countries the power-holders of the world. The question 'How is mission racist?' accepts the reality that our attitudes and practices of mission, based on the whiter parts of the world travelling to brown and black-majority countries, are inevitably affected by race and racism.

That is an uncomfortable truth against which you may recoil. Yet to recognise that racism plays a role in mission is not to say that all missionaries or mission organisations are "racist" - my gramps certainly wasn't! Instead, it recognises that

some ideas about race and racism infect us all. Unless we bravely let the Holy Spirit guide, challenge and correct, we are likely to perpetuate what we are too proud to see, or too scared to hear.

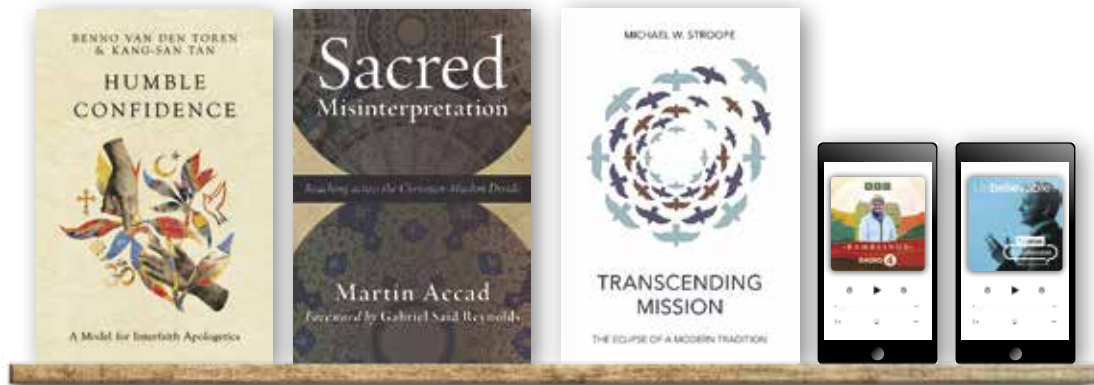
The Holy Spirit is expanding my picture and understanding of the Church and strengthening me to wrestle with how Christianity and Christians - including good, kind, Christians like my beloved grandfather - bless and burden the world. It's a messy and uncomfortable reality. We reflexively want to defend missionaries' good intentions and to list the vast good that Christianity brings to the world. I encourage us instead to sit and wrestle with the messier truth that mission has been, and continues to be, a mix of blessing and burden. It reminds us that our faith is full of wonderful, confusing oxymorons - a Lord who is a baby and God; an executed Messiah who is a saviour king. It is not only safe but natural and good for us to explore the oxymorons in our mission; to boldly consider that, while we seek to be bringers of the gospel across the world, because of the racism we have absorbed we can all too often also be bearers of inequality.

I leave you a challenge and a liberating invitation, extended by Kang-San Tan and Benno van der Toren:

"People need to be able to see and experience the fruits of healing and liberation in the Christian community ... In the context of colonialism, Christianity has been associated with powers that oppress and enslave rather than liberate. Embodied apologetic witness demands that these dark sides of Christian history are recognised, and the Christian community shows genuine repentance and desire to be a healing presence. It also begins with recognition that community itself remains in need of healing."

BREAKING OPEN THE WORLD OF CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

If what you have read in this issue has nudged you to go deeper into that fertile space where mission meets apologetic witness meets interfaith dialogue, I hope the resources below will provide a launch pad for exploration.



READ

HUMBLE CONFIDENCE: **A Model for Interfaith Apologetics**

Benno van den Toren and Kang-San Tan

What do you get when you cross a Malaysian missiologist born into a Buddhist family with a Dutch theologian who's taught in French-speaking Africa and at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford? The answer is a Christian apologetic guide that genuinely breaks free from the captivity of dominant Western practices of interfaith dialogue.

SACRED MISINTERPRETATION: **Reaching across the Muslim-Christian Divide**

Martin Accad

A work by one of today's most influential Evangelical scholars of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations. Accad writes out of deep personal experience

of Muslim-Christian conflict in his native Lebanon, where he is involved in peace and reconciliation initiatives alongside academic work. This book is a gift of an opportunity for Western readers to encounter a scholarly Arab Evangelical approach to Islam.

TRANSCENDING MISSION: **The eclipse of a modern tradition**

Michael W. Stroope

A book that featured in Kang-San Tan's Shelf Awareness (see p.7), Stroope's provocative study asserts that mission is a modern invention, which blinds us to the gospel and its full implications. Stroope has no desire to rehabilitate or reimagine the language of mission, but wants to abandon it altogether: "it is not that mission has a problem, mission is the problem."

WATCH

INCEPTION

Dir. Christopher Nolan

This 2010 film by British-born Nolan picked up four Oscars and works beautifully as a close examination of a framework where it is the idea that has ultimate power, creating and shaping even the "real world." The implantation of one thought, the smallest seed of a well-formed idea, into a single receptive consciousness radically and creatively (or destructively) shapes that person—and the world. Ideal fodder for considering the art of apologetics.

LISTEN

RAMBLINGS: Herefordshire Interfaith Group on the Malverns

Clare Balding

For this episode of her podcast, the BBC Radio 4 presenter takes

a stroll, with many pauses to reflect and share readings on the themes of pilgrimage and nature, in the company of group that draws together Muslims, Quakers, Buddhists, Bahá'ís, Methodists and more. A gentle, thoughtful entry into complex territory.

CONVERSION, CULTURE AND THE CROSS: are we ready to believe in God again?

Hosted by Justin Brierley

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury engages with author Paul Kingsnorth on his adult conversion to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, a journey that encountered atheism, Buddhism and paganism along the way. Paul and Rowan talk about the spiritual longings that still exist under the surface of secular culture and ask whether ancient forms of Christianity may provide answers to today's generation.

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