

In April of 2011 my wife and I had three weeks left before flying back to a part of the world where I had grown up. After 39 years I would be living among a people and in a culture that spoke my “heart language”. We had become members of Wycliffe Bible translators, reasoning that there could be no nobler an endeavor than to help bring the Bible, God’s word, into the many languages of that region.

Last year we were able to visit the country for three weeks, a visit that confirmed how dear the people are, and that I felt at home there. We spent some time with the team we would be working with. We saw that these are people who are dedicated to the task, who have a heart for those without Christ, and who desire to see the Scripture translated into the many languages of the diverse peoples in this country, despite the danger involved. We were thrilled at the prospect of helping to provide the Bible for those without it, because it is the Bible that tells us clearly what God is really like.

However, in the weeks before we were to leave for the field, what had been a small concern for us earlier on began to loom larger and larger. It was about a movement and methodology that I had first heard about during a trip to a Muslim country in 2004, one that at first sounded reasonable, loving and full of promise for spreading the gospel in the Muslim context. But as I compared it with Scripture, I realized that something was wrong.

Soon I was to find out that the director of the region where we were going to work required us to read a book on Christian mission to Muslims that struck me as highly problematic, with sparse and sloppy use of scripture to prove the validity of this strange movement.

After thirty four years in law enforcement and eight years as a SWAT negotiator, I have learned that things are not always as they seem, or as they are presented to be, and that sometimes people get involved in things that they do not understand, and become facilitators of ends they never intended.

I found that when I asked specific questions about Wycliffe's translation strategy for Muslim audiences, I was not given specific answers, only more material (not scripture) to read about the validity of this method. Soon it became clear to me that this missiology, along with the Bible translation strategy that goes with it, were not just one of many strategies used in that field, as that field entity and Wycliffe publicly claim, but has actually been adopted as the one new paradigm for their future work in the Muslim world. They view it as being missiologically-informed and in keeping with a growing body of research on fruitful practices for Scripture engagement in Muslim communities. This new paradigm is actually *the* paradigm for future projects, and is a key component of the strategy that they say will stimulate and enable creative approaches to Scripture translation among indigenous groups of believers. This paradigm is called transformational and indigenous church translation style, but is designed to fit with a missiological strategy known more widely as Insider Movement (IM) and now, apparently to avoid touching off debate, “Jesus Movements”.

In a nutshell, the insider paradigm encourages followers of Jesus to remain in their cultures, which includes the religious aspects of their culture, and not be extracted from their identities, families and communities. In the Muslim context they should continue to call themselves Muslims and practice Islam. The IM translation style has been called Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT), which often replaces phrases like “Son of God” with “Messiah” (or another phrase that does not communicate the idea of “sonship”) and avoids referring to God as Father. Why? To avoid the offensive idea that God had sexual relations with Mary to produce a son, thus leaving Muslims more open to reading the translated scriptures and becoming followers of Jesus (Isa). Below are my questions, my assessments, and what I see as one who was born and raised in a Muslim country, and who spoke that country’s language before English. The question I will address is whether the IM missiology with the accompanying MIT translation strategy is a question of best practices in spreading the gospel to closed cultures, or is it a deceptive fundamental shift from traditional theology to postmodern theology, even deceiving the elect?

Postmodern thinking denies the possibility of knowing objective and binding truth. “It involves the belief that many, if not all, apparent realities are only social constructs, as they are subject to change inherent to time, place, culture and religion. It emphasizes the role of language... and is often associated with difference, (and) plurality.”<sup>1</sup> Instead of living by objective standards based on knowable objective truths, we instead must live out our own identities and stories in our particular context. There is a new quest for relevance, one that is private and contextual.

My assessment of God’s word is that it has been counter cultural ever since the Fall. He calls a people of His own out of their cultures and many times out of their families, into His household.<sup>2</sup> God’s pattern is to reveal truth. He does not “dialogue” with cultures so truth can emerge or evolve through their religious beliefs.<sup>3</sup> His word stands in contrast to what they believe. Throughout history He confronts people with the truth of his holiness and of human depravity, and then shows us that He has provided himself as a living sacrifice, the only way to life. There is no other name by which man can be saved.<sup>4</sup> That is the gospel, and it is always offensive. His path and way is narrow, not inclusive.

IM and MIT on the other hand do not match that restrictive and confrontive paradigm; they elevate culture and religion and make the gospel less offensive and more inclusive; so as to be a more “appropriate Christianity”<sup>5</sup>. They elevate human identity and focus on

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, Postmodernism, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernism>

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Josh 24:2-3, Eph 2:19, Col 1:13.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Isa 55:7-9, 1 Pet 1:18. See Lingenfelter’s *Transforming Culture*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992. “Yet these social systems and worldviews become prisons of disobedience, entangling those who hold them in a life of conformity to social images that at their roots are in conflict with God’s purpose for humanity as expressed in Jesus Christ” (17) based on Ps. 14:1-3, Rom. 11:32 and Gal. 3:22. “I reject the notion that culture or worldview is neutral. Analogies such as Kraft’s ‘map’... are inadequate to capture the pervasive presence of sin” (18). Hiebert and Hesselgrave are other missionary anthropologists who accept the sinfulness of culture, while Kraft believes culture is neutral.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 4:12

<sup>5</sup> The Rev. Basil Grafas, “Super-sizing Jesus: Enlarging the Incarnation in Contemporary Missiology,” St Francis Magazine Nr. 3 Vol. III, December 2007

God's love over and above His justice. This is a different paradigm than what the Bible presents to us. It is an extension of the paradigm that I see in the emergent church, extended to missions and other cultures.

A manifestation of postmodernism's low view of objective truth can be seen in a propensity to be vague in definitions and hold what has been called a "...contempt for clarity and authority."<sup>6</sup> In the IM and MIT discussion, people on opposing sides are talking past each other, some intentionally and others unknowingly, with totally different paradigms, even though all claim to be furthering the gospel. Instead of being on the same planet going from point A to point B, folks on both sides are in different solar systems. Many don't seem to know or acknowledge that their foundations are different. I see many who are in denial of this shift, believing they are standing in the traditional historical Christian paradigm, yet unknowingly funding, supporting, and furthering a new and different gospel. Some know there is something amiss and feel uncomfortable, but they defer to "the experts" and follow along. Then there are those who think this is the gospel. They see those of us who are raising red flags and asking questions as simply stuck in a fading divisive dogma. We are simply "critics".

An article by Andrew Walls<sup>7</sup> that was sent to me by the director of the entity to which I was assigned, and who is an IM proponent, particularly caught my attention.

It seems to me that IM proponents pick up on three themes developed by Walls. First, there is the idea that Christianity is "shifting" geographically and substantively as it progresses or is lived out. He says that geographically the "center of gravity of the Christian church has moved sharply southwards. The representative Christianity of the twenty-first century seems set to be that of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific region".<sup>8</sup> In regards to substance he states, that there is "a great retreat from Christianity" and "a massive accession to Christian faith."<sup>9</sup> This is a retreat from what he calls "Western Hellenistic Christianity" to a massive acquisition of "Christian faith" being "born anew in each context"<sup>10</sup> of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific region.

This new acquisition of faith is being expressed and revealed in his second theme that Christianity is an ongoing act of re-translation. It began with God made human, the word made flesh. Walls calls this "*a great act of translation: in the incarnation, God is translated into humanity...*"<sup>11</sup> (italics are mine except for the Greek words below). This process is then re-translated into receptor languages, cultures and religions where it reveals new truth as it is lived out and expressed contextually. Walls' theme of new acquisition through "re-translation" (language) as an ongoing revelation of truth again fits

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<sup>6</sup> John MacArthur's summary of a quote from D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 15-16 in "The Truth War", John MacArthur, Nelson Books, Nashville Tennessee, 2007 p. 191.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Walls, "The Mission of the Church Today in the Light of Global History," University of Edinburgh, Word & World, Volume XX, Number 1 [Edinburgh, Scotland], Winter 2000

<sup>8</sup> Walls, The Mission of the Church 18

<sup>9</sup> Walls, The Mission of the Church 17

<sup>10</sup> Basil Grafas p. 3

<sup>11</sup> Walls, The Mission of the Church 19

the postmodern paradigm well.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting and disturbing that he links incarnation and translation but omits any discussion of inspiration and its place in authoritative revelation. Walls says theology "is therefore *occasional* and *local* in character"<sup>13</sup>. The implication is we should not expect any sort of Christian unity in theology.

To demonstrate his theme of the role of re-translation, Walls gives as an example the Jewish concept of Messiah not being understood by the Greeks. So "They had to translate, to find a term that told something about Jesus and yet meant something to a Greek pagan. According to Acts (11:19-21), they chose the word *Kyrios*, 'Lord,' *the title that Greek pagans used for their cult divinities*".<sup>14</sup> This same thinking is what drives Muslim Idiom Translations for Muslim contexts. The flaw is that "Lord" was not a new concept to Israel or Judaism, just as "Son of God" is not new to Islam. Applying them to Jesus meant and means He is God on both counts.<sup>15</sup> It is shocking how matter-of-factly Walls equates the inspired writing of the New Testament books to translations into new cultures today.<sup>16</sup> Incarnational missiology and transformational IM translations imply ongoing inspiration, though it is not called inspiration, it is called expression, enrichment, and transformational. It develops new truths in theology and revelation<sup>17</sup>. Walls says, "(translation) issued in an expanded understanding of who Christ is. Christian theology moved on to a new plane *when Greek questions were asked about Christ and received Greek answers, using the Greek scriptures*. It ... *led the church to rich discoveries about Christ that could never have been made using only Jewish categories* such as Messiah. *Translation enriched; it did not negate the tradition.*"<sup>18</sup> A note to be made here is that the IM MIT proponents view culture and religion as being virtually the same and inseparable. So Greek questions of the early centuries are actually pagan questions and correspondingly, Arab or other Muslim cultures raise Muslim questions. So the particular cultural context into which one is re-translating provides the impetus for new ongoing revelation.

"What Greeks wanted to know was the relationship of that ultimately significant Christ to the Father. Thus, inevitably, the language of *ousia* ("substance" in the Creed) and *hypostasis* ("person") enters. Were Christ and the Father of the same *ousia*? Or different as to *ousia*? Or similar in *ousia*? *To find out meant a process of exploring what*

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<sup>12</sup> This is anticipated by Kraft's receptor-orientation and his view that the incarnation is not so much a once-for-all revelation but a model of divine-human interaction and dynamic revelation (p. 169ff. *Christianity in Culture*, Orbis, 1979). This contrasts sharply with the preeminence of God's authoritative communication. (Heb 1:2). Kraft admits to holding the "traditionally liberal concept of continuing revelation" while attempting to fit it into "an evangelical system" (ibid. 179, note 2). The idea behind "God's pre-eminent communication (Heb 1:2)" is sonship ("God has spoken to us in SON" - no article). So if the sentence is clarified, focus should not shift to fact or authority of the communication, but the focus should remain on the MEANS of God's pre-eminent communication - SON.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Orbis, 2000) 10; (emphasis original)

<sup>14</sup> Walls, *The Mission of the Church* 19

<sup>15</sup> In this text, believing Jews use *kyrios* to preach Jesus to Greeks. The Jews at that time had been using the Septuagint for at least 200 years and *kyrios* in the LXX was often used to translate YHWH.

<sup>16</sup> It is also disappointing that Walls fails to consider the history of the earliest Greek translations in regards to *kyrios* and how this might affect his theories.

<sup>17</sup> not unlike the views of Emil Brunner and other neo-orthodox theologians of the 1950's

<sup>18</sup> Walls, *The Mission of the Church* 20

*Christians really believed about their Lord, using the indigenous methods of Greek intellectual discourse.*”<sup>19</sup> So are we to conclude that it is the Greek pagans “exploring what they really believed,” and not inspiration, that gave Christianity the truths of *ousia* and *hypostasis*? How wonderfully postmodern for such an ancient people; truth was not given to them by God through the inspired writings of the New Testament, rather they came to truth by exploring what they really believed. Walls continues, “We are *now at the threshold of a time* when new questions will be asked about Christ, arising from the attempt to express him in settings that are *dominated by the venerable traditions of Asia and Africa*. . . . (T)his can only enrich the church’s understanding of Christ and lead to new discoveries in theology.”<sup>20</sup> This is a rejection of the verbal-plenary inspiration of Scripture. This is a theological and missiological paradigm shift from the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Scriptures, something they consider as merely a construct of the modern west, to what they consider a *more modern objectivity* – which in actuality is nothing more than postmodern subjectivity. Consequently, what they describe as “contextual theology” and “self-theologizing” is based on the flawed premise that plurality of cultures validates having a plurality of theologies.

The third theme is that of extraction versus conversion and transformation. Here again we see the postmodern view of plural and relative realities.<sup>21</sup> Walls’ distinction between extraction and conversion is important to grasp in order to understand what validates Insider Movements’ ideas that the “convert” should not conform to what is seen as “another culture’s Christianity”, but live out their own version of “faith” inside their own culture and communities. The only way to impact their own culture is to remain in it. According to Walls a proselyte is one who leaves his own culture and identifies with another by adopting their system and ceremonies. He is extracted and can have very little effect on his own culture. Walls uses the Jewish system of proselytizing as an example. “Proselytes...were circumcised, were baptized, thus symbolically washing away the dirt of the heathen world, and entered into the life of Israel by seeking to obey the Torah.”<sup>22</sup> Walls goes on to say “But the great council described in Acts 15, which considered *how Gentiles who believed in Jesus should be introduced into the community, deliberately rejected the time-honored model of the proselyte.*”<sup>23</sup> He says these “ex pagans” “...*should be left to find a Christian lifestyle of their own within Hellenistic society under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.* They were not to be proselytes, but converts.”<sup>24</sup> I would counter that, however, by pointing out that they were not left on their own; the Jewish theologian and Apostle Paul gave them a great deal of practical and theological guidance that was actually inspired not just translated. The epistle to the Galatians is an example of this.<sup>25</sup>

Walls continues his theme of “conversion and transformation” enriching faith by saying it is not “about substituting something new for something old; that is the proselyte (and

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<sup>19</sup> Walls, The Mission of the Church 20

<sup>20</sup> Walls, The Mission of the Church 20

<sup>21</sup> Wikipedia, “Postmodernism,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernism>

<sup>22</sup> Walls, The Mission of the Church 20

<sup>23</sup> Walls, The Mission of the Church 20

<sup>24</sup> Walls, The Mission of the Church 20

<sup>25</sup> Gal. 1:6-9 speaks of distorting the gospel

extraction) model ... Nor is it a matter of adding something new to something old. *It is much more radical than either.* It is the steady, relentless turning of all the mental and moral processes toward Christ. In other words, it is turning what is already there; turning to Christ the elements of the “pre-conversion setting.”<sup>26</sup> He elevates the pagan religion, culture and language, the “pre-conversion setting”, to a position of medium in shaping theology and truth.

By Wall’s definition if you do anything other than contextualize the gospel, you are proselytizing. IM says that traditional “Western missions” are a proselytizing model, which stymie growth in faith and theology and “have ... *virtually no impact on ... (the particular culture/religion being reached out to)*”<sup>27</sup>; whereas his contextualized “conversion” model is the informed method to convert one’s own society towards Christ from within. Again he gives the New Testament Greek converts as an example. “(They) had to learn to keep turning their ways of thinking and doing things—which, of course, were Greek ways of thinking and doing things—towards Christ, *opening them up to his influence.* In this way a truly Greek, truly Hellenistic type of Christianity was able to *emerge.* Not only so, but that Hellenistic Christianity was able to penetrate the Hellenistic intellectual and social heritage. Hellenistic thought, Hellenistic social and family life, and Hellenistic civic organization were challenged, modified, and put to new uses—but *from the inside...*”<sup>28</sup> Notice he said “*type* of Christianity was able to emerge”.

In summary, I see IM missiology saying that traditional Christianity is a *type* the West has developed through its Hellenistic pagan paradigm and its way of reasoning. But it does not own Christ, faith, or Christianity. It is not about one “Classical Systematic Theology” controlling Christianity, extracting proselytes, but about the plurality of cultures, emergent expansion of new theologies, and enrichment of “*types*” of Christian faith as it is incarnationally re-translated into each new receptor language, culture and religion, by “converts” who use their indigenous methods and terms, retain their identity, and remain insiders. Not to adopt this radical thinking is to hang on to a withering traditional “Western” *type* of Christianity that is not applicable to these eastern cultures and their context.<sup>29</sup> Rather we ought to encourage Insiders “to find a Christian lifestyle of their own within (Muslim, Hindu...) society under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>30</sup> If we do not use this method we will have “virtually no impact on their society.”<sup>31</sup> Wycliffe linguists and their partner organizations have adopted this paradigm. They say that it is the most fruitful, missiologically-informed, “style” for the Muslim world. They are actively enabling and supporting Insider Movements, then working with them in producing these highly contextualized MIT translations of the Bible.

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<sup>26</sup> Walls, [The Mission of the Church](#) 21

<sup>27</sup> Walls, [The Mission of the Church](#) 21

<sup>28</sup> Walls, [The Mission of the Church](#) 21

<sup>29</sup> Here IM proponents face two internal inconsistencies. On the one hand their methodology has not arisen from “inside” but is an imported “Western” idea. On the other hand, IM decries “Western” Christianity as being too “Western” in its own methodologies. Is not IM’s inflammatory talk of “withering tradition” more than a bit hypocritical?

<sup>30</sup> Walls, [The Mission of the Church](#) 20

<sup>31</sup> Walls, [The Mission of the Church](#) 21

In this well-crafted paradigm the rules have been rewritten so that no argument against it is applicable, no matter how well thought out or well-reasoned the argument may be. Any attempts to draw parallels to bad theology or false faith are not applicable to the new context specifically because the western rules do not apply. Contextualizing aspects of God's truth is not seen as relativism, but as revelation. So what critics see as minimizing Biblical truth is actually viewed by IM proponents as enhancing and enriching it. Historical Christianity is looked at and revised through the lens of these re-written, re-invented rules. In so doing, they have 'reset' the foundational doctrines.

Every one of these themes fits well into the postmodern paradigm. This looks more and more like an adoption of new values and even doctrinal definitions rather than a move to more efficient "fruitful practices".

These are the conclusions my wife and I came to and the reason we resigned from Wycliffe. Wycliffe says that they do not have an official position on IM, yet they fund and support staff and projects who have adopted this very paradigm and its resulting translations for work in the Muslim world.

In its mission endeavors the church needs to ask some difficult questions of itself and its workers in the field to insure that its missiological quest for relevance is not leading to increasing *ir*relevance by diluting the gospel and biblical understandings with syncretistic postmodern practices and beliefs. Likewise, mission organizations and field workers need to be willing to be transparent in their reporting relationships with supporters in the sending countries, and be willing to be held accountable by those supporters, and by the broader church and its leaders. Otherwise, we may find ourselves having created a new religion that is not "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints".<sup>32</sup>

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June 16, 2011

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<sup>32</sup> Jude 3 - Even this verse is distorted by IM thinking: "Kraft thinks it a culturally prejudiced Western view when evangelicals regard "the faith once for all delivered" (Jude 3) as a system of doctrine rather than a relationship to God (ibid. 133). But a relationship can hardly be delivered once-for-all; propositional truths can be." Henry, Carl F. H. Review Article - The Cultural Relativizing Of Revelation TrìnJ 01:2 (Fall 1980), 161.