

Personal Contact:

The *sine qua non* of Twenty-first Century Christian Mission

Todd M. Johnson and Charles L. Tieszen

In recent years, the concept of translation has become one of the significant motifs in Christian mission, not only for Bible translation but for the serial expansion of Christianity around the world (Sanneh 1989; Walls 2002). The starting point of translation is personal contact in which a Christian from another culture or tradition learns the language and culture of the people he or she is trying to reach. In normal missionary practice, this means making friends. With this in mind, we have recently been asked, "How many Muslims have a Christian friend? How many Hindus personally know a Christian? How many Buddhists have significant contact with Christians?" Considering these questions carefully, we realized that the concept of personal contact was built into the measurements we had previously made related to evangelization of ethnolinguistic peoples.

Methodology

For our study of evangelization, we isolated twenty variables measuring evangelization among every ethnolinguistic people in the world (Barrett and Johnson 2001, 756-757). Two of these variables relate very closely with personal contact between Christians (of all kinds) and non-Christians. (Evangelicals are a subset of all Christians and would thus have a lower rate of contact with non-Christians; additionally, one would not want to disparage positive contact between non-evangelical Christians and non-Christians). The first, "discipling/personal work," is an indication of how much contact local church members have with non-Christians. The second, "outside Christians," extends this concept further by looking at the presence of Christians from other peoples who

Todd M. Johnson (left) is research fellow and director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. **Charles L. Tieszen** (right) is a doctoral candidate in Christian-Muslim relations at the University of Birmingham, U.K.





How many Buddhists have significant contact with Christians?

live nearby. Under normal circumstances, the more Christians there are nearby, the more likely the contact between Christians and non-Christians. Thus, for every non-Christian population in the world, there is an indication of Christian presence and contact. A formula was then developed to make an estimate of those personally evangelized (contacted) by Christians. The formula applied to each ethnolinguistic people is shown below. Separate values for these two codes are reported for each ethnolinguistic people. These are added up for each country, region and continent, producing a global total (Barrett, Kurian and Johnson 2001, 30-241). The results of this method are summarized by continental area in Table 1 on page 496-497. While these num-

bers are estimates, we think they offer a preliminary assessment of a critical shortfall in Christian mission.

Main Findings

A careful examination of Table 1, "Non-Christians who personally know a Christian, by continental area, mid-2007," reveals several significant findings.

1. Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims have relatively little contact with Christians. In each case, over eighty-six percent of all these religionists do not personally know a Christian.

2. The nonreligious are closer in touch with Christians than other religionists except in Asia. This finding is not unexpected since many nonreligious or atheists in the West are former Christians reacting against

(Population 2007 * [Disciple Code (0-10) + Outside Christian Code (0-10)])

([100-Christian Percentage] * [Percentage Non-Christian]).

Table 1: Non-Christians who personally know a Christian, by continental area, mid-2007

| Continent | Africa | Asia | Europe |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Buddhists | 162,000 | 380,055,000 | 1,789,000 |
| Buddhists who know a Christian | 78,000 | 51,910,000 | 570,000 |
| % of all Buddhists who know a Christian | 48.1 | 13.7 | 31.8 |
| Hindus | 2,752,000 | 871,175,000 | 1,675,000 |
| Hindus who know a Christian | 643,000 | 121,377,000 | 965,000 |
| % of all Hindus who know a Christian | 23.4 | 13.9 | 57.6 |
| Muslims | 376,428,000 | 961,858,000 | 39,947,000 |
| Muslims who know a Christian | 72,016,000 | 100,148,000 | 7,379,000 |
| % of all Muslims who know a Christian | 19.1 | 10.4 | 18.5 |
| Nonreligious | 6,346,000 | 617,155,000 | 95,078,000 |
| Nonreligious who know a Christian | 4,087,000 | 90,514,000 | 92,068,000 |
| % of all nonreligious who know a Christian | 64.4 | 14.7 | 96.8 |
| Ethnoreligionists | 111,298,000 | 143,307,000 | 1,149,000 |
| Ethnoreligionists who know a Christian | 51,248,000 | 22,703,000 | 657,000 |
| % of all ethnoreligionists who know a Christian | 46.0 | 15.8 | 57.2 |
| All non-Christians | 500,355,000 | 3,624,484,000 | 162,723,000 |
| Non-Christians who know a Christian | 131,133,000 | 482,378,000 | 122,556,000 |
| % of non-Christians who know a Christian | 26.2 | 13.3 | 75.3 |

Source: World Christian Database, www.worldchristiandatabase.org

Christianity.

3. Tribal religionists have more contact with Christians. This is likely due to the fact that tribal peoples were the focus of Christian mission in the twentieth century.

4. Non-Christians in Asia are more isolated from Christians than in any other continent in the world. This is likely due to two factors: isolation of Christians under Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim rule; and relatively few missionaries sent

to Asia from the rest of the world.

5. Muslims in Africa are only slightly more in contact with Christians than the world average for Muslims. Christians in the global South face a formidable challenge in their lack of contact with non-Christians, especially Muslims.

6. There is a sizeable difference between Muslims who know Christians in Europe and those who know Christians in North America. This may reflect the tendency of Eu-

| Latin America | Northern America | Oceania | World Total |
|---------------|------------------|-----------|---------------|
| 752,000 | 3,423,000 | 567,000 | 386,748,000 |
| 502,000 | 1,220,000 | 160,000 | 54,440,000 |
| 66.7 | 35.6 | 28.1 | 14.1 |
| 756,000 | 1,738,000 | 473,000 | 878,569,000 |
| 212,000 | 394,000 | 106,000 | 123,697,000 |
| 28.0 | 22.7 | 22.4 | 14.1 |
| 1,808,000 | 5,508,000 | 472,000 | 1,386,021,000 |
| 880,000 | 3,736,000 | 111,000 | 184,270,000 |
| 48.7 | 67.8 | 23.5 | 13.3 |
| 17,167,000 | 39,330,000 | 4,017,000 | 779,093,000 |
| 17,027,000 | 38,519,000 | 3,977,000 | 246,192,000 |
| 99.2 | 97.9 | 99.0 | 31.6 |
| 3,554,000 | 1,535,000 | 333,000 | 261,176,000 |
| 2,944,000 | 1,252,000 | 284,000 | 79,088,000 |
| 82.8 | 81.5 | 85.4 | 30.3 |
| 42,941,000 | 63,571,000 | 6,886,000 | 4,400,960,000 |
| 38,587,000 | 50,124,000 | 5,344,000 | 830,122,000 |
| 89.9 | 78.8 | 77.6 | 18.9 |

ropean Muslims to isolate themselves (or be isolated by others) in Muslim communities.

7. Christians are more in contact with non-Christians in heavily-Christian contexts. The migration of non-Christians from Asia and Africa to Europe and North America represents a great opportunity for Christians to offer hospitality and friendship.

8. Globally, over eighty percent of all non-Christians do not per-

sonally know a Christian. This lack of contact is a fundamental shortfall in Christian mission and evangelism.

Biblical and Historical Reflections

Such statistics compel us to re-examine a biblical theology where personal contact and evangelism are connected. Even within the Old Testament, Yahweh models a characteristic which places him in close, personal contact with his people. As the Israelites journeyed to the Promised Land, Yahweh told Moses, "Then have them [the Israelites] make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell (*sakan*) among them" (Exo. 25:8). This sort of "dwelling" (*sakan*) is different from other types of personal contact in the Bible. In fact, the Hebrew verb used here,

sakan, "...underscores the idea not of loftiness but of nearness and closeness" (Harris 1980, 925). Yahweh is not merely paying a temporary visit to the Israelites. Much more, he distinguishes himself from other Ancient Near Eastern gods by coming down to his people. He was not content to menacingly hover over them from the heavens. Yahweh's desire was to intimately dwell with his people. In the New Testament, this characteristic is extended and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus not only came down to be with humanity, he became one of us as well. In John 1:14 we read that Christ “became flesh and made his dwelling (*skenoo*) among us” (note the etymological similarity between *skn* in its original vowless form and *skenoo* which may point toward an attempt to preserve the theological significance of Yahweh’s presence carried forward through Christ, his son; Carson 1991, 127-128; Beasley-Murray 1987, 14). Like Yahweh, Christ came to be with his people in a unique way that was personal, permanent and divine. In this way, personal contact is a central feature of the person and work of God.

Christian conversion in the early Church carries this characteristic forward as a model for evangelism. For

tional evangelism,” set forth by Christ and demonstrated in the experience of the early Church, prioritizes personal contact between Christians and non-Christians. Personal contact is an intrinsic characteristic of God, forms the core of the gospel message and frames a biblical theology of evangelism. In this light, it is Christ’s desire for us to model the same approach—to personally incarnate his message among those he calls to himself. We do this by being with those people and becoming like them (1 Cor. 9:22).

The rise of media and technology in the twentieth century forces us to face new issues in evangelism and incarnation. As William Nottingham notes, “Evangelism changes and must not be thought of as static and defined dogmatically. It is ever-evolving with

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instance, although Christ alone supernaturally initiates Paul’s conversion, it is Ananias who follows this experience by personally laying his hands on Paul, resulting in the restoration of his sight and his being filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:10-19). Similarly, Philip personally interacts with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39); there is personal contact and evangelism between Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:19-48); and Lydia responds to Paul’s personal message in Philippi (Acts 16:13-15). From these experiences, it is clear that it is God’s desire that we partner with him in evangelism by fostering personal contact with people. This model of “incarna-

the circumstances of history” (1998, 313). In keeping with the need for adaptation, Clarence Jones’ HCJB radio has now been broadcasting the gospel for seventy-five years. Their messages have reached all over South America and into continents even further away. Similarly, the *Jesus* film and other similar presentations can be viewed or listened to via television or the Internet. Such technological developments have made a host of positive contributions. Through these types of technology, audiences across wider geographical areas can be reached with less manpower. Further, because of new developments in media and technology, the gospel can

be preached in areas where Christian missionaries are not able or allowed to be physically present. These positive contributions notwithstanding, unfortunate shortcomings are seen where there are gaps between gospel presentations and personal contact. Nottingham warns,

Increasing technology and the new forms of communication . . . [mean] that life in affluent societies will be spent more and more in physical isolation because of the independence of this source of knowledge. This will result in the rarity and need for face-to-face contact with people, not just "chat rooms" . . . [so that] the gospel incarnated in a loving and serving community will have new relevance for a truly human consciousness. (1998, 314)

In essence, the globalization brought on in part by technology has at once drawn the world closer together and placed individuals in isolation from each other. Without personal contact, our ability to soundly disciple new believers and maintain a healthy community of faith may be compromised. Clearly, our use of media developments and cutting-edge technology must be joined with a biblical theology of evangelism that stresses personal contact.

In the end, of course, it is God who is the ultimate evangelist, the one who alone initiates and omnipotently calls those to himself (Wells 1987; Packer 1991). His ability to do so independently of humans is illustrated, for example, by many Muslims who choose to follow Jesus Christ because they dreamt of him (Musk 1988, 163-172; Woodberry and Shubin 2001, 28-33; Love 2000, 156-158; Sheikh and Schneider 1978) or by Hindus who become Christians after a prayer

said to Jesus results in healing. Such supernatural contact, however, does not mitigate the importance of personal contact. Consider, for example, a Muslim who dreams of Jesus Christ, but is re-directed to Islam after consulting a local imam for an interpretation (Musk 2004, 167-168; Love 2000, 162). Similarly, many Hindus have witnessed Christ's miraculous healing only to count him as one more of their 333 million other gods. Examples such as these show us that it is often God's desire to use believers as his personal instruments to incarnate his message among those who seek to follow him. In fact, a recent survey of Muslim background believers reveals that "by far, the reason found most compelling for the greatest number of Muslims who have turned to Christ is the power of love" (Woodberry and Shubin 2001, 32). This love is further simplified into two categories: love demonstrated directly by God (supernatural contact) and "love by example" or personal contact (Woodberry and Shubin 2001, 32). Personal contact is not only important, but foundational to a biblical theology of evangelism.

Evaluating this Complex Dilemma

If our estimate that eighty-six percent of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists (or eighty percent of all non-Christians) do not personally know a Christian is correct, this raises four important questions.

1. Does this reflect the human tendency to isolate one's self among his or her own social, ethnic and/or cultural group? In the West, increasing diversity brings increasing cultural isolation. A typical

Western metropolis has its Chinatown, Little Saigon, Muslim quarter, etc. Except for a non-personal, cross-town commute, people can live the majority of their lives without really venturing outside of the comfort of similarity. The same can be said in the non-Western world where people can be isolated by tribe, cultural group, religion and/or language.

2. Are Christians simply unaware of the major world religions?

This lack of awareness includes not only religious knowledge, but an unwillingness to learn the languages and cultures of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists as well. In the West, if Christians have little knowledge of non-Christians in their own communities, what can we say of their knowledge of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists in their traditional homelands? Of course, this Western unawareness has its non-Western counterpart. This is true, for instance, in Nigeria, India or Indonesia, where peoples are split linguistically, religiously and geographically. If non-Christian peoples are to hear of Christ, Christians must be willing to cross cultures, learn languages and become religiously aware.

3. Does the unawareness described above extend to an unawareness of the world's most unreached people groups?

The majority of unreached peoples are Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists located in areas where access to the gospel, not to mention personal Christian contact, is limited, if not totally inaccessible. Even if we are aware of unreached people groups, the fact that nearly ninety percent of Christian resources for mission are directed at Christians tells us that we need to re-focus mission and evangelism on care-

fully defined unreached people groups (Barrett and Johnson 2001, 40). Such a re-focus may allow for increased personal contact between Christians and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists.

4. Among hard-to-reach people groups, do our ministries rely too heavily on non-personal methods of evangelism?

The importance of incarnation in a biblical theology of evangelism suggests that the positive contributions of media and technology in evangelism cannot be utilized at the expense of personal contact. Among Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, we must emphasize placing personal contact alongside our appropriate use of non-personal methods of evangelism.

Moving Forward

With these reflections in mind, we offer four suggestions that may help to bridge the current gap between Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists and personal contact with Christians.

1. Stress the importance of engaging the Majority World religions by learning what adherents of such religions believe, why they believe it and where they live

(lists of resources can be found at <http://www.beliefnet.com> and <http://www.mislinks.org>). It is perhaps not only our unwillingness to interact with Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists that accounts for a severe lack of personal contact, but an ignorance of these religions and their followers. Of course, this does not imply that all Christians must be experts on religion. What we are advocating is that Christians become religiously informed in ways that foster healthy, inspired and personal contact. Additionally, engaging

religions is important for those who live in areas dominated by Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism. For instance, some Pakistani Christians, given an abhorrence of Islam, have refused to reach out to Muslims. The same can be said for some Arab Protestants or even of some Western missionaries in the Middle East, historically and presently, who insist on ministering only to Arab Orthodox Christians.

2. Stress the importance of language learning. The inability to communicate represents a barrier for personal contact, healthy dialogue and mutual understanding. This is true for North American Christians who are largely mono-lingual. This is equally true, however, for Christians in other parts of the world who are hesitant to learn the languages of neighboring tribes and/or communities, thus impeding personal contact and cross-cultural witness. Further, "incarnational evangelism" demands that personal contact be fostered in a receptor-oriented environment. One such example is Insider Movements, which can be defined by their incarnational presence among a people.¹ In other words, North Americans cannot depend on a Muslim's, Hindu's or Buddhist's ability to speak English in order to foster a relationship. Likewise, Christians in Indonesia cannot depend on a tribe's knowledge of Chinese or *bahasa* Indonesian in order to cultivate personal contact.

3. Look for ways to come alongside God's supernatural contact so that we might confirm, affirm and disciple. Do we pray that God will use us to connect with Muslims who dream of Jesus so that we might be involved in directing them toward a bib-

lical Christ? Do we pray the same for Hindus and Buddhists who are the recipients of Christ's miraculous healing? As we seek to add personal contact to non-personal methods of evangelism, so too must we seek to be personally a part of God's supernatural contact.

4. Stress the importance of personal, cross-cultural witness, whereby we maintain a presence among carefully defined unreached people groups. Personal contact among such peoples is difficult.

Non-personal methods of evangelism and mission begin to help us overcome barriers, but we cannot depend on these at the expense of personal contact. Like Jesus, we must dwell among the people he wishes to call to himself. When we do this, we draw closer to the vision of Revelation 7 where a multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language will stand before the throne "and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent (*skenoo*) over them" (Rev. 7:15).

Endnote

1. The October-December 2004 issue of *International Journal of Frontier Missions* is devoted to Insider Movements.

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