

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE? THE ENCOUNTER OF CHRISTIANITY WITH THE RELIGIONS

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Abstract

With the revivals of the major world religions that began in the late 1800s, which continued throughout the Twentieth Century, mission agencies began to understand the importance of learning about competing religious systems in order to develop effective forms of contextualized evangelism, disciple making, and church planting. Missiological training, however, lagged behind, characterized by a distinct underemphasis on training missionary personnel to compete with the adherents of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese Religions and the like. For instance, in four years of Bible college and two of seminary, there was available to this writer only a single survey course in World Religions.

This essay demonstrates that to function effectively as a modern-day missionary, one must develop expertise concerning the beliefs and practices of religious systems that are indigenous to the geographical location in which one ministers. With adherents of the non-Christian religions presently outnumbering Christians by a ratio of more than three to one and with the top three of these religions growing at rates faster than Christians are growing, the missiological education of the future must revolve around a core of comparative religious studies taught from a realistic as opposed to a “straw-man” approach.

“Extra Ecclesiam...”

“*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*”—“outside the Church there is no salvation.” From the time of its coining in the third century by the bishop Cyprian of Carthage until the last decades of the Twentieth Century, this adage was the practically undisputed confession of the Christian Church in both its western and eastern rites. Thus with respect to the adherents of non-Christian religious systems, it was historically impossible to think of such persons as anything other than “pagans” or “infidels.” Such appellations were rarely challenged before the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which was groundbreaking in its development of a new official viewpoint in *Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (October 28, 1965). This document – which is now the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church and which has been highly influential in many other contexts – maintains that while salvation from the effects of sin is made possible solely by the atoning death of Christ, this work

is applied within religious systems other than Christianity and apart from individuals' knowledge of that work. For instance, devout adherents of Islam may be accounted righteous before the One True God on the basis of Christ's death which atoned for their sins but apart from their individual and personal knowledge of that death and atonement (and despite the fact that Islam denies that such a sacrifice ever occurred).

The "conservative" evangelical wing of Protestantism has historically held to the original exclusivistic interpretation of Cyprian's teaching, maintaining that the dogma contained therein is rooted in the words of Jesus and the apostles as recorded in the New Testament.

Consequently, the worldview of Protestant evangelicals divides the human race into just two groups. One grouping consists of all those who are "true Christians" in the New Testament sense of that term (i.e., "born-again" exercisers of faith expressed in an acknowledgment of the lordship of Jesus of Nazareth over their lives and an active belief in His resurrection from the dead in accordance with the apostle Paul's requirements for salvation stated in Romans 10:9-10). The second group is comprised of a combination of "cultural/nominal" Christians (i.e., those born into a specific country, tribe or family unit designated "Christian" but who have no personal regard for the spiritual implications of this status) and non-Christians (i.e., adherents of non-Christian religious systems or of no religious system at all). It is the belief of conservative evangelicals that neither of the groups in this latter category enjoy "salvation" or its benefits (i.e., exclusion from the eternal punishment administered in what the New Testament terms "Hell, Hades, Gehenna, or the burning lake"). The doctrine contained in Romans 10:9 makes the person of Christ the linchpin with respect to biblical soteriology, and the teaching of the early apostles was that "*salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12).

Jesus left to His apostles a commission to “*make disciples among all the various people-groups of the world,*” implying that any individual NOT already a follower/student of Him personally was to be considered a “target” for evangelism (i.e., the communication of the good news regarding Jesus’ atoning sacrifice of Himself for the sins of all and an invitation to appropriate the benefits of this sacrifice through the confession of Lordship noted above). And because no Hindu, Buddhist, adherent of the traditional Chinese religions, Shintoist, Zoroastrian, Jain, Sikh, Jew or Muslim makes the confession of Romans 10:9, all are excluded from the New Covenant established by Jesus, and all are included in the design and objective of the Great Commission of Matthew 28.

“...Nulla Salus”

Admittedly, only a portion of those in today’s world who claim the title “Christian” actually fit the New Testament parameters of this term, but it is with the adherents of the non-Christian religions that this essay is mainly concerned. Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Shintoists, Daoists, Confucianists, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Muslims, and Jews all come under our purview. Figures for the number of adherents in each of these religions in the contemporary world are notoriously difficult to determine, but the “best guesses” are as follow:¹

<u>World Religion</u>	<u>2011 Estimated Population</u>
Islam	1.4 billion (20% of world pop.)
Hinduism	950 million (12% of world pop.)
Buddhism	350 million (5% of world pop.)
“Chinese Religion” ²	1.3 billion (21% of world pop.)
Shinto	2.7 million -
Sikhism	23.8 million -
Jainism	4.3 million -
Zoroastrianism	2.7 million -
Judaism	14.5 million (all five = <1% of world pop.)

Christianity	2.03 billion (30% of world pop.)
Roman Catholics	1.1 billion
Protestants	420 million
Independents ³	371 million
Orthodox	270 million
Anglicans	86 million
No Religion or Atheism	900 million (12% of world pop.)

These figures reveal that a minimum of 58% of the world's population adheres to a religion other than Christianity. When combined with the figures for those who claim no religion or who adhere to atheism, the total becomes 70% who are other than Christian. And as intimated above, this is a minimal figure, for it assumes that all persons bearing the label of "Christian" are indeed "born-again" believers of the kind that Jesus speaks of in John 3:3-7.

It would, however, be exceedingly presumptuous to conclude that all of the remaining 30% of the world's population is secure within the parameters of Biblical Christianity. The New Testament contains very exacting standards for inclusion in the category of "true Christian," and speaks consistently of persons who, while claiming membership in the Body of Christ, were nevertheless excluded from such membership due to lifestyle choices deemed to be at odds with the requirements of a "holy and separated" life.⁴ It is, of course, impossible to filter out all "cultural Christians" and "nominal Christians" so that a more exact figure of the truly "born-again Christians" may be ascertained, but this author – along with other Christians of a conservative persuasion – would be far more comfortable with (at least) halving the number of alleged Christians in the world, yielding a figure of slightly over one billion rather than the two billion usually cited.⁵ Adjusting the above figures in light of this claim, only 13% of the world population could then be counted as "Christian," with 87% in need of the Gospel message.

The list above, of course, is only a "still shot" of a situation that is actually one of consistent exponential expansion. Originally it took from the dawn of human history to the year

1800 to reach a population of one billion persons on Earth. In 1960 there were three billion persons; by 1974 there were four; by 1987 five, and by 1999 six. Sometime in the year 2011 the earth's population reached a total of seven billion people, and at the present time, only seven years are needed to add one billion members to the total inhabitants of Earth. This interval will lessen as the century continues. And just as growth rates from country to country vary widely, so also do growth rates among the non-Christian religions, as the following chart shows.

<u>World Religion</u>	<u>Estimated Growth Rate</u>	<u>New Adherents Annually</u>
Islam	Between 1.84 and 2.13%	22, 588, 676
Hinduism	Between 1.52 and 1.69%	12, 533, 734
Buddhism	Approximately 1.09%	3, 687, 527
“Chinese Religion”	Between .73 and 1.00%	69, 547
Shinto	Approximately -1.09%	-31, 993
Sikhism	Between 1.62 and 1.87%	392, 638
Jainism	Between 0.87 and 1.57%	34, 951
Zoroastrianism	Approximately 2.65%	58, 471
Judaism	Approximately 0.91%	124, 515
Christianity	Between 1.36 and 1.38%	25, 210, 195 ⁶

From these figures we can derive the following information:

- Four religions (“Chinese Religion,” Buddhism, Shinto, and Judaism) have smaller growth rates than Christianity.
- Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism all have growth rates higher than the aggregate growth rate for Christians.
- Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism taken together add almost 39,000,000 adherents to the planet's population each year, while Christianity in all its forms adds only 25,000,000.

Our most significant conclusion, then, is that the growth rate of the largest non-Christian religions exceeds that of Christianity, and therefore Christians as a proportion of the global population must be said to be losing rather than gaining ground.

Leaving aside for the moment the 12-13% of the population that claims no religion at all, what the above statistics mean for those entrusted with the training of missionaries is that the overwhelming majority of the “targets” of modern-day evangelism are religiously-oriented persons. They are men and women whose spiritual beliefs and practices are those of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese Religions, and the like – and among them are also people whose spiritual beliefs and practices are a form of a culturally-based, external and institutionally-oriented Christianity.

Thus it becomes highly relevant to ask ourselves the following question: does the missiological training currently being offered at the leading Christian educational institutions of the Western world provide adequate information and sufficient skills to equip modern-day missionaries to be effective communicators of the Gospel to the 75% of the world’s population who are spiritually misguided persons?

ICS and Missiological Studies at Selected Seminaries

Using online resources provided by various institutions of higher learning (i.e., websites and catalogs), graduate programs designed for missionary training were examined for required and elective courses in comparative religious studies, names of extant courses, and the number of credits required in such studies out of a total program.⁷ Results were as follow:

School	Required Course(s) in Comparative Religion	Elective Courses Offered in Comparative Religion	Names of Courses Offered in Comparative Religion	Total Number of Credits Required in Program	Credits Required in Comparative Religion
1.) Trinity Evangelical Divinity School	MDiv – No MA – No	Yes	World Religions; Eastern Orthodoxy; Roman Catholicism;	MDiv—94 hours; MA—32 hours	7 – 11 cr. of electives

			Christianity's Encounter with World Religions; Islam; African Religions; Theology of Religions		
2.) Fuller Theological Seminary	MDiv (Regular)—No MDiv Islamic Studies MA ICS – No MA Islamic Studies	Yes (Islam)	Intro. To Islam; History of Muslim/Christian Encounter; Popular Islamic Piety; Current Trends in Islam; Women in Islam; Muslim Societies; Quranic Reading; Practicum in Lebanon	96 quarter hours	36 cr. Of electives
3.) Asbury Theological Seminary	MDiv – No MA Int. Studies – Yes MA W. Miss. And Evang.— Yes	Yes Yes Yes	Buddhism; Hinduism; Islam; Folk Religions; World Religions	96 hrs. 60 hrs. 60 hrs.	15 ICS electives; 10 general electives
4.) Dallas Theological Seminary	ThM – No MA CC Ministry—No	Yes	Ministry in Muslim Contexts; in Roman Catholic Contexts; in Jewish Contexts; Christianity and Non-Christian Religions	62 hrs.	6 Missiology electives
5.) Westminster Theological Seminary	MDiv Urban Mission—No; MA Urban Mission—No	Yes	Religions of the World; Understanding the Islamic Challenge	92 – 111 cr. (depending on language); 56 cr.	8 – 13 hrs. of electives
6.) Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary	MDiv – No MA World Miss. & Evan.—Yes (2	Yes	Intro. To Hinduism; to Buddhism; to Islam;		

	required) (Concentration in Islamic Studies)		Evangelical Theology and World Religions; Church Planting in Musl.Contexts		
7.) Alliance Theological Seminary	MDiv – No MA ICS –Yes	Yes	Christianity’s Encounter with World Religions; Engaging the Muslim World; Chr. Witness Among Buddhists	54 cr.	3 cr. req. 6 cr. electives
8.) Talbot Theological Seminary (Biola University)	PhD ICS – No MDiv ICS – No MA ICS – No	Yes	Understanding Worldviews & Culture (1) (Muslims); New Religious Movements; World Religions; Islam and Islamic Theology; Popular & Folk Islam; Topics in Islamic Studies; Approaches to Islam	42+60 units 96-98 units 42 units	6 units
9.) Denver Seminary (Conservative Baptist)	MDiv ICS – No	Yes	Islam and Current Events; World Religions	97 hours	8 hrs. electives
10.) Southern Baptist Theological Seminary	MDiv GCM Islam – Yes MA Miss – Yes	Yes	Hist. & Rel. of Islam; Issues in Cont. Islam; Isl. Thought: Belief & Practice; Islam and Chr. Mission; Major Living World Religions; Cults & Minority Religions in America	88 hrs. 61 hrs.	12 req. + 9 elec. 3 req. + 12 elec.
11.) Columbia	MDiv Gl. Stud. – No	Yes	Intro. To World Religions;	90 hours	15 hrs. electives

International University	MA ICS – Yes		Intercultural and Muslim Studies: Integ. Seminar; Islam Through Chr. & Mus. Eyes; Isl. Theology; Spirit World of Islam; Ch. Planting Among Muslims; Life of Muhammad; Understanding the Qur'an; Folk Religion; Women in Islam; Approaches to Muslims; Responding to Muslim Concerns; Islam in 21 st Cent.	60 hours	
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Reviewing the above chart, it is seen that the only Master of Divinity programs that require a World Religions-type of course are those with a concentration in Islam (of which there are two). None of the other MDiv programs—including those with an Intercultural Studies emphasis—requires such a course. It is perhaps understandable that “generic” programs would not have such a requirement since these plans of study are designed to prepare pastors and ministers for indigenous, domestic situations rather than overseas assignments. Such ministers, it is most likely believed, will be dealing mainly with Christians or with people of at least a cultural or nominal Judeo-Christian background. Percentage-wise this will most likely be true; it is extremely unlikely that a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, or Jewish person will ever set foot in an American church for purposes of learning about or worshiping with Christians.

However, if the role of a church’s pastoral staff includes the Ephesians 4:12 directive to “*prepare God’s people for works of service,*” then at least a part of that preparation process

should be to educate the laity regarding the religious beliefs of the persons with whom they work and among whom they live. This would be particularly true of urban pastorates, but even rural communities in America are currently experiencing a rapid increase in immigrants with non-Christian religious backgrounds. It would appear from the above statistics that Christian seminaries are not doing an adequate job of preparing ministers to work effectively among adherents of non-Christian religions.

Better results are seen at the Master of Arts level. Here it is seen that in addition to the MA programs with concentrations in Islam (of which there are two), five seminaries require at least one World Religions-type course. Given the demographic needs described above, however, even these figures are less than acceptable.

Elective courses in comparative religious studies are available in each of the selected seminary programs, but such courses are limited and would have to be chosen specifically by students as part of their programs. With respect to such electives, there is again a preponderance of courses in Islamic studies, but almost nothing dealing with Hinduism, Buddhism, or the religions of China. The focus on Islam seen in Western media has most likely led the administrators and faculties of these institutions to the conclusion that courses related to ministry among Muslims will be the most attractive to current students. This may be true, and given the fiscal needs of tuition-driven Christian institutions this is an understandable approach. But failure to provide coursework in the areas of Hinduism, Buddhism and Chinese Religion is tantamount to ignoring the needs of two and a half billion persons.

It is admittedly true that one cannot discern from the above data the content of other missiologically-oriented courses taught in these schools. It may well be that such courses do contain some information regarding non-Christian religions. But even in a best-case scenario, it

is unlikely that such information would comprise any more than a small percentage of an entire course, and it must be questioned whether this percentage would be sufficient to equip missionary personnel for overseas assignments among adherents of other religions.

Recommendations for a Missiological Curriculum

To reach the 70% of the world's population that adheres to a non-Christian religion or to a nominal form of the Christian faith, education and training programs must be developed accordingly. This section, therefore, contains a proposal for a curricular plan that places comparative religious studies at the heart of missiological training. The following courses are designed to provide a 20 unit/credit/hour "core" that has as its goal the preparation of an individual for ministry to "religion-oriented" persons.

1. The Challenge of the World Religions (4 Units/Credits/Hours)

This course is designed to provide a general survey of the history, doctrines, and practices of the major faith systems (i.e., Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Chinese Religions, Shinto, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy) accompanied by a brief analysis of the apologetical challenges connected with each. Such challenges would include the difficulty of obtaining access to various people groups (i.e., Orthodox or Hasidic Jews, fundamentalist Muslims, Muslim women in general, Buddhist monks and nuns, Sikhs, Jains, Zoroastrians and the like) and the communication of religious concepts and terminology across linguistic and religious lines (i.e., connecting with the adherents of Eastern religions with respect to concepts such as "God," "sin," "salvation," "redemption," "afterlife," and the like). This course would also distinguish between "world religions" and "alternative religious movements" (i.e., "sects and cults") as well as make note of eclectic, non-formalized systems of spirituality such as the New Age Movement.

2. A History of Christianity's Encounter with the Religions (3 Units/Credits/Hours)

Ultimately, all of the major historical events included in traditional "History of Missions" courses revolve around encounters either with world religions or indigenous "pagan" religions. The New Testament itself contains numerous accounts of the apostle Paul's encounters with members of the Jewish faith who refused to adopt the New Covenant, as well his dealings with the worshipers of the Greco/Roman pantheon (Acts 14). From St. Patrick's ministry to the Celts to Ramon Lull's encounter with Muslims, from William Carey's work among Hindus to Hudson Taylor's adaptation to Chinese religions, the history of persons involved on the "front lines" of the Great Commission is rife with inter-religious experiences.

Even modern events such as the rise and influence of the Ecumenical Movement revolve around the theological categorization of the world's religions, as evidenced by the rhetoric surrounding the so-called Hocking Report of 1932 (i.e., *Re-Thinking Missions: A Layman's Inquiry After One Hundred Years* by William Ernest Hocking) and the response of Hendrik Kraemer (*The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*). Recent missiological concepts such as the Unreached People Groups and the 10-40 Window involve strategies for reaching adherents of non-Christian religions, and even controversial concepts such as Spiritual Mapping relate to this subject as well.

3. Theology of Missions 1: A Theology of Religious Encounter (3 Units/Credits/Hours)

This course would examine as many as possible of the various issues involved in forging a biblical theology of missions using the world religions as a central starting point. Examples:

- A section such as "Missions in the Old Testament" would revolve around a discussion of the Israelites' constant forays into idolatry, defined here as the worship of the gods of other religions. It would also include a discussion of the role of the Israelites in being

“witnesses” of the One True God in the midst of religious competition from the belief systems of other peoples.

- “Missions in the New Testament” would be discussed from the standpoint of the connection of the Great Commission with the various religious perspectives of the “nations” that Christians were and are to make disciples in/of. From Paul’s condemnation of the Greco-Roman religious beliefs as “*worthless*” (Acts 14:15) to his categorization of idols and false gods as “*demons*” (1 Cor. 10:19), the New Testament’s description of competing religious systems is wholly negative.
- The Exclusivism/Inclusivism/Universalism debate would be cast in terms of the theological condition of the adherents of other religions before God. What, for instance, are the implications of the insistence of the apostle John that “*God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life*” (1 John 5:11-12)?
- A biblical demonology would be constructed around discussions of Paul’s insistence that the worship of false gods in other religions is actually the worship of demons (1 Cor. 10:19-21), as well as the theories concerning “territorial spirits” being the driving forces behind world religions.⁸

4. Theology of Missions 2: Issues of Missiological Contextualization (3

Units/Credits/Hours)

“Contextualization” has been a missiological buzzword since the second half of the 1970s and remains a vital aspect of missionary education. Using comparative religious studies as a springboard for discussion, the study of this subject would involve such issues as the following:

- The necessity of distinguishing between “religion” and “culture,” seeing that Biblical principles recommend adaptation to purely *cultural* aspects of a people group (i.e., 1 Corinthians 9:20-23) while forbidding the people of God from adapting to or borrowing the *religious* aspects of a culture (Deuteronomy 12:4).⁹
- The existence – or lack thereof – of “redemptive analogies” of the kind suggested by Don Richardson and others. In his classic *Eternity in Their Hearts*, Richardson makes a strong case for the existence of such analogies in primal and animistic religious groups, but evidence for such within the higher-order world religions is lacking.
- An examination of such strategies of contextualization as “Christian ashrams,” “Messianic synagogues,” and “Jesus mosques.” Are such institutions helpful innovations in light of the difficulties of reaching adherents of non-Christian religions, or are these approaches essentially in violation of the principles of Deuteronomy 12:4?

5. World Religions and the New Testament: The Teaching of Romans, Hebrews, 1 Corinthians, and 1 John (2 Units/Credits/Hours)

The curriculum being proposed has been developed on the basis of an assumption that general knowledge regarding evangelism, disciple making, and church planting would already have been acquired at some point in the student’s educational career. If this has not been the case, however, the New Testament documents explored in this course would supply at least some of that lack. As a background for a practical approach to communicating the gospel to the adherents of non-Christian religions while at the same time defending the Christian faith against objections by such adherents, exegetical studies of these four books in their entirety are essential. These are certainly the most useful New Testament documents for encountering the World Religions.

The letter to the Romans concludes that all human individuals and people groups alike are under the judgment of God, but also positively describes the Gospel message in great detail. The letter to the Corinthians relegates pagan religions to the realm of the demonic, but also provides seminal details for the establishment of an assembly of Christian believers and the development of worship practices. The book of Hebrews demonstrates the absolute uniqueness and superiority of the Christian faith to all other pretenders, and highlights the necessity of faith in Jesus the Christ as the only viable avenue to salvation. And the first letter of the apostle John is perhaps the most exclusivistic document in the entire Bible.

6. Ministry to and Within Limited or Restricted Access Countries (2 Units/Credits/Hours)

Because so many of the countries in the modern world that exhibit the greatest need of the Gospel are “closed” in the sense of not permitting official entry by Christian missionary agents, and since a majority of these countries limit such access because of their citizens’ adherence to a non-Christian religion (or religions), it is necessary to devote an entire course to the issues associated with such situations. Among the items to be discussed would be the following:

- The necessity of (essentially) obtaining two educations in order to be able to work effectively in “closed” countries. One education would be in a useful field or trade in order to gain access to the country, and the other education would be necessary for functioning as an effective missionary evangelist, disciple maker and church planter.
- The ethical implications of being essentially an “undercover” missionary agent. Under this rubric would be discussed biblical teachings regarding subterfuge and dissimulation (i.e., the implications of being “*shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves*” (Matt. 10:16).

- The “mechanics” of gaining entry to limited access or “closed” countries/areas and maintaining Christian fellowship under such conditions.
- The challenges of educating converts and developing church structures in locations where such education and structures are illegal.

7. Applied Linguistics (3 Units/Credits/Hours)

The adherents of the non-Christian religions are not, in general, speakers of English or of Western languages in general. For instance, in India – birthplace of the South Asian religions – there are 1652 languages and dialects, eighteen of which are “official.” The only one of these that comes even close to being spoken by a majority (43%) of persons on the subcontinent is Hindi – of which there are eleven dialects. To read the Hindu Vedas, on the other hand, a knowledge of Sanskrit is necessary, just as to read the Buddhist scriptures one must acquire competence in Pali.

Chinese religions cannot be mastered without knowledge of (at least) Mandarin Chinese. Muslims claim that Allah speaks only Arabic – and therefore no translation of the Qur’an remains the “word of Allah.” While most of the world’s Muslims speak a language other than Arabic, it remains the standard that defines Islamicity.

Knowledge of Farsi is necessary to master the Zoroastrian religion, and Shinto cannot be truly understood without learning Japanese. Punjabi is the official language of the Sikhs, and knowledge of Jain Prakrit would be necessary to read the scriptures of the Jains in their original form.

Thus we find that the study of religious texts may require mastery of a specific set of written languages, while the ability actually to speak with adherents of these religions would require acquisition of a completely different set of language skills.

In addition to the core courses listed above, more “standard” fare from current missiological curricula could be offered as electives, including courses such as Cross-Cultural Communication, Cross-Cultural Adjustment, Ministries of Relief and Development, Issues of Social Justice, and the like. Beyond these, however, it is recommended that additional elective offerings include such courses as the following in order better to equip missionaries to deal with the adherents of non-Christian religions:

- The Psychology of Religion
- The Sociology of Religion
- The Phenomenology of Religion
- Contextualizing the Gospel for the Hindu/Buddhist Worldview
- Contextualizing the Gospel for the Muslim Worldview
- Contextualizing the Gospel for the Jewish Worldview
- Contextualizing the Gospel for the Chinese Worldview
- Contextualizing the Gospel for the Shinto/Buddhist Worldview
- Contextualizing the Gospel for the Animistic/Shamanistic Worldview
- Contextualizing the Gospel for the New Age/Spiritualist Worldview
- Contextualizing the Gospel for the Agnostic/Atheistic Worldview

Admittedly, the major shortcoming with respect to the above proposal is the fact that so few missiologists have been educated in comparative religious studies. Teachers who have missionary experience among the adherents of non-Christian religions doubtless have much to offer in the way of practical apologetics, and this experience will be invaluable in providing illustrative material for classroom lectures. But piecemeal and anecdotal experiences are not in the long run an adequate substitute for the knowledge that can be dispensed by persons who have

dedicated themselves to mastering the complexities of the non-Christian religious systems at the highest levels of academia. Church and mission agency personnel would therefore do well to encourage and support carefully selected individuals to pursue the advanced training necessary to enter the professoriate, for as Christianity's chief competitors continue to expand at a rate that outstrips the number of Jesus' followers, the Church will need to be prepared to meet those competitors on their own ground.

NOTES

¹ Sources for these figures are a combination of the following:

- *Encyclopedia Britannica (15th edition)* (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2005).
- Sarah Janssen (ed.), *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2012* (World Almanac, 2012).
- David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia (2nd Edition)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- Qassem Zein, "The List: The World's Fastest-Growing Religions," *Foreign Policy* (May 14, 2007): 1.

² By "Chinese Religion" is meant the amalgam of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism that forms the current worldview of a majority of the Chinese people.

³ The designation "independent" refers to Christians who do not categorize themselves in any of the historic denominations or rites.

⁴ See, for instance, such passages as 1 John 2:19, 3:7-10; Hebrews 6:4-8, 10:26-31; 2 Peter 2:20-22.

⁵ On this subject, see Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is The Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). See also Daniel B. Clendenin, "Why I'm Not Orthodox: An Evangelical Explores the Ancient and Alien World of the Orthodox," *Christianity Today* 41 no. 1 (January 6, 1997): 32-38.

⁶ These figures were derived from the same sources listed in note 1 above.

⁷ A majority of established mission agencies now require long-term missionary personnel to hold a graduate-level degree or its equivalent in coursework. Also, generally speaking, it is at the graduate level that specialized studies such as those designed to prepare a person for a specific Christian ministry are undertaken. For these reasons it was decided that graduate programs in Missions and Intercultural Studies would be examined.

⁸ See, for instance, George Otis, Jr., *The Last of the Giants: Lifting the Veil on Islam and the End Times* (Chosen Books, 1991).

⁹ See, for instance, Larry Poston, "You Must Not Worship in Their Way: When Contextualization Becomes Syncretism," in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, edited by Gailyn Van Rheenen (William Carey Library, 2006).