Volume 3, Issue 1 (May 2026)
ISSN 3049-9704

Journal of Religion and Public Life

OCRPL
Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.70600/jrpl.v3i1.002

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to Volume 3, Issue 1 of the Journal of Religion and Public Life

Canon Dr Chris Sugden [1]

Articles in this issue come from all three continents of the Global South. They cover solidarity with the poor in eight Latin American countries, mutuality in mission in Colombia, the social identity and position of Christians in Malaysia, the history of Christianity in Indonesia and a discussion of the African rituals of death.

Themes covered are engagement with Islam in East Asia and with ancestor worship in Africa, cross cultural engagement in Indonesia and in Colombia and the role of Christians from other (mainly Western cultures) bringing the gospel.

All represent reflection on vigorous Christian activity seeking to engage with the cultures in which they are set in a distinctively Christian way.

A review is included of a book on current Christian experience in the United States which ascribes its apparent decline less to compromises with the surrounding secular culture than to the church's own internal moral failings and compromising political alliances. Lessons are drawn for the growing church in the Global South. A review of 'Reparations – Slavery and the Tyranny of Imaginary Guilt' examines another aspect of cross-cultural relationships. A study of the growth of the early Church in the Roman Empire is also reviewed.

This volume presents evidence that the Christian faith is alive and well, even though the numbers of adherents may be declining in some situations. The articles provide narratives of how the gospel imperative of neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free plays out in the cross-cultural engagement that is part and parcel of Christian mission, for better or for worse. This is also seen in the New Testament, where while following the command to 'go into all the world', some Jewish Christians required their Gentile converts to become Jews as well. So the process whereby, for example, in Indonesia some Indonesians became Dutch in their Christianity, was not a new phenomenon in the history of the faith. The article from Colombia shows how Christians from different

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cultures can grow through pain to work together in beneficial mutuality. And while indigenous Christianity has grown in some situations following 'independence', that does not mean that cross-cultural mission is to be frowned on. Indeed it is arguable that cross-cultural mission is taking place in Europe as believers from Africa and the Caribbean take their place in European society.

It is a deistic approach that insists that it is inappropriate to 'interfere' in another culture on the basis of Christian ethical standards. This was the clash that took place in India where missionaries in the days of the British Raj, motivated by the way the gospel enhanced the position of women, argued for higher status for women in society. British civil servants, with a deistic view of God, argued that it was not appropriate to interfere in the culture of the day on the basis of Christian ethical standards. The missionaries insisted that the gospel standards were God's intention for all societies. This prompted significant gratitude in Indian society and prompted Hindu reform movements. Consider today what would have happened if all Christians had argued that it was not appropriate to interfere in apartheid, or racism on the basis of Christian ethical standards.

a. Global cross-cultural partnership is the recognition that Jesus taught us to love those who are different from us as evidence of the love of God.
b. Global cross-cultural partnership is the evidence that Christ has broken down the dividing walls of hostility between groups.
c. Global cross-cultural partnership is the demonstration that Jesus has indeed risen from the dead, that his death on the cross overcame the powers of evil, that he has defeated all the powers of death in life, and that given his Spirit to dwell among us and build a community where there is neither Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.

The question that this poses to churches is whether we are able to be partners. Or do we subtly thank God that our nation, whichever it is, is not as other nations; that we have the knowledge and information to make the best decisions, and the resources to ensure they are carried out?

Partnership is not an issue of strategy, or efficiency or resources. It is an issue of the very nature of the Christian community.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.70600/jrpl.v3i1.003

Journal of Religion and Public Life
Volume 3, Issue 1 (May 2026)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70600/jrpl.v3i1.004

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Toward a Cyclical Missional Model of Spiritual Formation in Latin America

J. Omar Palafox [1]

Abstract: Latin American churches stand at a paradoxical crossroads. Across the region, congregations preach against systemic injustice and welcome migrants, the poor, and the displaced with remarkable warmth. Yet, they often hesitate to risk public solidarity with those same neighbours. I describe and measure this tension as a "solidarity bottleneck." Drawing on a mixed-methods study of 14 pastors from eight countries, I employ a 21-item bilingual survey and thematic analysis of open-ended responses to compare three dimensions of missional formation: conscientisation, solidarity, and hospitality. The data reveal a consistent drop from critical awareness and welcome to advocacy, a gap that pastors themselves attribute to fear of political backlash, even when their intent is simply to name sin and call the church to obedience to Christ, limited organising skills, and competing ministry priorities. To respond to this stall, I propose a cyclical Analyse–Accompany–Assimilate (A-A-A) model in which hospitality does not end the church's mission but sparks new rounds of critical reflection and public Christian witness and discipleship in the life of society. A six-month pilot in five congregations showed a medium increase in solidarity scores, suggesting that when A-A-A rhythms are woven into teaching and leadership, Latin American churches can sustain a Spirit-led cycle that links personal spirituality with long-term commitments to justice, God's justice, and the healing of creation.

Keywords: conscientisation; solidarity; hospitality; liberation theology; Latin America; missional formation

Why Latin America Needs a Cyclical Formation Model

On a Saturday night in Bogotá or Buenos Aires, it is easy to believe that revival has won. Soccer stadiums fill with worshipers, testimonies of healing echo through sound systems, and pastors call crowds to renewed personal holiness. Yet, just beyond the

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stadium gates, poverty lines stretch, femicide rates reach record highs, and migrant families sleep in bus terminals (ECLAC 2024). Latin American churches thus inhabit an uneasy intersection: exuberant spiritual vitality amid deepening systemic forms of injustice that disfigure God's good creation.

For decades, liberation theologians have advanced an outward-facing spirituality. Paulo Freire's pedagogy of *conscientização* (critical consciousness), for example, urges believers to read reality through the eyes of the oppressed and to name structural sin (Freire 1970). This lens has influenced how many congregations interpret both Scripture and society, shaping homilies, Bible studies, and pastoral councils. Yet the operational bridge between three movements, critical awareness, public solidarity, and mutually transformative community, often remains implicit. In practice, the three movements usually end up in different ministry "silos." Preaching cultivates awareness, charity programmes shoulder hospitality, and occasional advocacy campaigns gesture toward solidarity. Yet these efforts rarely intersect or inform one another.

Field conversations with pastors from El Alto to Guayaquil made this fracture visible. "We see injustice, and we welcome migrants," a Venezuelan Assemblies of God elder told me, as one pastor summarized, 'We know that God stands with the oppressed, but if I say that too loudly, some members immediately wonder whether I am bringing party politics into the pulpit.' In other words, leaders struggle to distinguish between partisan alignment and prophetic, non-partisan proclamation of God's concern for the oppressed. Similar comments recurred in interviews and workshops. They crystallize what this paper calls the solidarity bottleneck: congregations excel at diagnosing social sin and hosting inclusive fellowship yet hesitate to marshal resources for sustained advocacy. While theologians have described this dynamic anecdotally, empirical confirmation has been scarce, in part because most formation studies in Latin America privilege narrative accounts over quantitative measures (Barros de Carvalho 2018).

I respond to this gap by pairing mixed-methods data with a cyclical missional model of spiritual formation: Conscientisation → Solidarity → Hospitality. The model assumes that sustainable spiritual growth is not linear. Instead, each movement rekindles the previous one in an iterative loop: critical analysis of context leads to concrete acts of solidarity; solidarity brings new neighbours to the table; their stories, in turn, sharpen awareness and restart the cycle. When churches treat these movements as elective ministries that can be pursued independently, formation stalls. When they are intentionally designed to feed one another, personal piety and public justice tend to accelerate together.

The argument follows the movements of this cycle step by step. First, I review interdisciplinary literature on conscientisation, liberationist solidarity, and biblical hospitality, highlighting empirical blind spots that make the solidarity bottleneck difficult to see. Next, I outline the study's methodology, including survey construction and thematic coding, and then present quantitative and qualitative results that highlight the bottleneck across diverse congregations. Building on these findings, I develop an Analyse–Accompany–Assimilate (A-A-A) praxis pathway piloted along the Peru–Bolivia border and read Exodus 2:5–10 as a scriptural prototype of the cycle. Finally, I draw out implications for teaching and leadership, acknowledge the study's limitations, and sketch several paths for future research, treating cyclical formation as a Spirit-empowered exodus from contemporary forms of bondage.

What We Already Know—and Still Don't

Liberationist reflection on spiritual formation in Latin America began by insisting that faith must learn to "read" history. In 1970, Paulo Freire coined *conscientização* to describe a dialogical process in which the oppressed and the oppressor alike become critically aware of social contradictions and commit to transforming them (Freire 1970). Jesuit philosopher–theologian Ignacio Ellacuría extended this insight, portraying education as a "historical task" that frees both teacher and learner for collective praxis (Ellacuría 1990). José Manuel Segundo Galilea likewise linked conscience formation to ecclesial renewal, warning that catechesis without critical analysis risks legitimating social and systemic forms of sin (Segundo Galilea 1976). Within *Mysterium Liberationis*, Juan Luis Segundo and Clodovis Boff further anchor conscientisation in an "epistemology of the poor," arguing that those who suffer injustice possess privileged interpretive access to reality (Segundo 1993; Boff 1993).

Despite this robust theoretical corpus, relatively few studies attempt to quantify conscientisation in congregational life. Carvalho's research on Brazilian youth offers a pioneering example but remains largely isolated (Barros de Carvalho 2018). In response, I developed four awareness items operationalising Ellacuría's "historical task" by asking how frequently congregations interrogate the socio-economic forces shaping their neighbourhoods. They incorporate Segundo's epistemology of the poor by probing whether marginalised voices actually lead that discernment. Turning classic theory into concrete survey indicators makes it easier to connect liberationist pedagogy with the methods described in the next section.

If conscientisation names how believers come to see, solidarity names how they choose to stand. Gustavo Gutiérrez calls solidarity "the definitive faith act," locating it at the intersection of grace and history (Gutiérrez 1973). Jon Sobrino sharpens the

claim by insisting that authentic faith is tested by whether it enters "the crucified peoples'" history (Sobrino 2008). Ellacuría's notion of a "civilization of poverty" and Rutilio Grande's homilies embody this stance, while Óscar Romero's pastoral letters and diary entries trace what ecclesial advocacy looks like under violent repression (Romero 1998; Grande 1977). Drawing on this tradition, the present study defines risk-bearing solidarity as congregational practices such as public advocacy, accompaniment of threatened activists, and concrete redistribution of resources toward marginalised neighbours. At the same time, liberationist authors repeatedly lament that solidarity in parish life is reduced to seasonal offerings or short-term mission trips. This narrowing is the specific gap I attempt to measure in the study.

A third stream of scholarship turns from seeing and standing to sharing life. Hospitality, as recovered in recent biblical and theological work, signals more than a polite welcome. It names the creation of mutually transformative spaces in which the stranger is received as Christ and gradually becomes co-host. Biblical interpreters such as Elsa Tamez re-read figures like Abraham, Ruth, and Lydia through migrant lenses, highlighting how their stories destabilize rigid boundaries of belonging. Pastoral case studies of border ministries, such as *Casa del Migrante*, show how "radical hospitality" functions as both shelter and protest, while Latinx theologians like Robert Chao Romero and Daisy Machado frame hospitality as resistance to nativism and racism. In practice, this stream has given rise to parish-based welcome centres, legal-aid clinics, and liturgies that intentionally blend languages and cultures, flattening traditional host–guest hierarchies.

Taken together, the three movements trace a loose historical arc rather than three isolated doctrines. Conscientisation emphasises Spirit-guided awareness of how social, political, and economic forces can become structures of sin that oppress people, and of the church's calling to participate in God's redemptive transformation of those realities. Solidarity emphasises taking public, risky, and material sides with the marginalised, beyond charity. Hospitality emphasises configuring communities so that strangers are not only received but empowered to reshape the space. Decades of experience have left clear milestones from the 1968 Medellín conference's adoption of Freirean language and the *ver–juzgar–actuar* method in Mexican American *encuentros*, to church-led human-rights offices and sanctuary ministries that seek to defend the God-given dignity of migrants and workers, including efforts to address unjust detention and exploitative labour practices, to hospitality practices that reimagine the parish as a shared home rather than a closed club. Yet most of this history appears in case studies and theological essays, which makes it hard to see how the three movements actually work together as an ongoing process of formation.

Recent work begins to address that oversight by treating formation itself as cyclical. María Clara Bingemer offers qualitative vignettes of Spirit-led cycles in Brazilian favela churches, while José Marins aggregates longitudinal data from Latin American base communities. Essays in *Mysterium Liberationis*, especially those by Luis Carlos Susin and Pablo Richard, provide methodological templates that weave theological exegesis with social-science tools (Ellacuría & Sobrino 1993). More recently, the Romero Institute's national parish survey in El Salvador adds quantitative weight, suggesting that congregations aligned with Archbishop Romero's legacy exhibit higher scores on repeated cycles of awareness, solidarity, and hospitality (Romero Institute 2021). In this study, I draw on survey data, thematic quotations, and pilot-project outcomes to sharpen both the theology and the practice of cyclical formation. To my knowledge, no previous study has measured conscientisation, solidarity, and hospitality together in the same congregations over time. This project is a first attempt to bring all three movements into a single longitudinal frame within congregational life.

Designing the Cycle Survey

I designed a 21-item bilingual questionnaire to move from theological intuition to measurable patterns in congregational life. The instrument traces how pastors perceive spiritual formation across the three movements of the cycle: conscientisation, solidarity, and hospitality. The survey items invite respondents to describe how formation is actually practiced in their congregations—through preaching, small groups, leadership decisions, public engagement, and community life—rather than how they believe it ought to be. The survey uses concrete questions about specific ministry behaviours to bring broad liberationist concepts down to the level of observable congregational habits. One additional forced-choice question asks pastors to identify which movement they believe their church emphasises most and least, providing a quick diagnostic that clarifies their perceptions beyond raw scores.

Fourteen ministers (five women and nine men) from eight countries participated in the study. They completed the questionnaire in Spanish or English, depending on preference, during a period of intensified pastoral reflection marked by recent migration surges, economic volatility, and growing political polarization across the region. The sample includes pastors serving in urban and border contexts as well as those in more traditional parish settings, all of whom are directly involved in preaching, pastoral care, and ministry coordination. Qualitative materials complemented survey data: informal conversations before and after administration, follow-up emails, and my own field notes and monthly journals. These additional materials capture tone, hesitation, and emerging questions that a survey would miss on its own. They also feed into the thematic analysis and the later refinement of the model.

Evidence for the Solidarity Bottleneck

The survey results align with the pattern suggested by the literature and pastoral anecdotes: solidarity consistently lags the other movements of the cycle. When pastors rated how frequently their congregations engaged in practices of conscientisation, solidarity, and hospitality, the solidarity items formed the lowest-scoring cluster across the sample. Pastors report relatively regular attention to systemic analysis of their context in preaching and teaching, and high levels of welcome and care for migrants and the poor, but a noticeable drop when items name risk-bearing advocacy, by which I mean concrete obedience to biblical calls to defend the oppressed, not adherence to any party platform, public accompaniment of threatened neighbours, or concrete redistribution of resources. The "solidarity bottleneck," then, is not only a theological concern but also shows up as a measurable pattern in congregational life.

The forced-choice diagnostic reinforces this picture. After completing the Likert-scale items, pastors were asked to identify which of the three movements they believed their church emphasised most and which it emphasised least. Ten of the fourteen respondents named solidarity as their "weakest link," often contrasting it with comparatively robust hospitality initiatives. In other words, pastors do not simply exhibit lower solidarity scores in the abstract; they recognise and name the gap themselves. The fact that the scores and pastors' own perceptions point in the same direction supports the claim that the bottleneck is real and pastorally significant, not just a quirk of the numbers.

Pastors' own explanations for the gap add texture to the numbers. Three themes recurred across conversations, follow-up emails, and written comments.

First, many described a persistent fear of being perceived as partisan when they named sins such as corruption, discrimination, or exploitative labour practices, considering Scripture. Several had experienced criticism for preaching about these issues as matters of Christian ethics and discipleship, and some saw attendance decline when sermons addressed them as expressions of social sin rather than purely private morality. Others referenced widely publicized cases in which pastors who took strong public stances were labelled partisan or "ideological" and saw attendance decline. For these leaders, the cost of visible advocacy seemed to threaten hard-won congregational stability. As one pastor summarized, "We know that God stands with the oppressed, but if I say that too loudly, some members immediately ask whether I am campaigning for a party."

Second, pastors repeatedly named limited advocacy skills and infrastructure. While many felt confident preaching biblical texts about justice and mercy, fewer felt equipped to translate that conviction into sustained organising. They lacked training in forming partnerships and in helping congregants navigate the complex systems that often block access to justice and basic rights. They sensed that pastoral care now requires some capacity to accompany people through these systems as part of the church’s diaconal ministry. One respondent captured this gap by noting that ‘we can preach Jubilee clearly, but we struggle to translate it into practical support when workers are unjustly treated. Their remarks echo liberation theology’s insistence that spirituality requires technical and organisational capacities to confront unjust structures. At the same time, they expose how rarely ministerial formation includes such training.

Third, leaders cited competing ministry priorities. Evangelistic campaigns, worship events, building projects, and internal pastoral care often consumed most of the congregation’s time and volunteer energy. In several churches, a handful of lay leaders attempted to sustain solidarity efforts, such as visiting detained migrants or supporting workers’ cooperatives, alongside multiple other responsibilities. When crises arose within the church, these fragile initiatives were often the first to be suspended. In practice, many churches treated solidarity as something extra to bolt onto “core” ministries, not as a central expression of discipleship.

Not all the findings were discouraging. A subset of respondents reported modest but noticeable growth in solidarity practices over the previous six months. These pastors were linked, directly or indirectly, to pilot efforts that experimented with cyclical formation, what I call the A-A-A pathway. In these contexts, sermons that analysed local injustices were intentionally followed by concrete opportunities to accompany affected neighbours, and those shared experiences were then brought back into small groups and leadership meetings as occasions for communal discernment and assimilation into the church’s regular rhythms. Pre- and post-survey comparisons in this subset suggest a medium increase in solidarity scores (approximately $d \approx 0.55$), even when conscientisation and hospitality scores remained relatively stable.

Field journals and pastoral reflections help make sense of this shift. When solidarity initiatives were framed as isolated projects, one-off marches, seasonal offerings, or special campaigns, they depended heavily on individual champions and were vulnerable to burnout. When they were integrated into a cyclical process that began with shared analysis and culminated in the assimilation of new practices and stories into the congregation’s identity, they became easier to sustain. Pastors described discovering that small, repeated acts of accompaniment, visiting a shelter, supporting

a workers' meeting, and showing up at a hearing, gradually reshaped congregational expectations of what "normal" ministry looks like.

Together, these findings confirm the presence of a solidarity bottleneck and show where the cycle stalls, while pastors' own explanations highlight the pressures that keep it stuck. The A-A-A pilot cases suggest that when congregations receive both language and practical support to move from analysis to accompaniment to assimilation, the cycle can start turning again. The following section, therefore, turns from describing the bottleneck to examining how the A-A-A pathway functions as both a theological construct and a ministry algorithm for repairing the cycle.

How Analyse–Accompany–Assimilate (A-A-A) Repairs the Cycle

The evidence above suggests that in many congregations, the formation cycle stalls at solidarity. I offer the A-A-A pathway to restart and sustain the cycle. It gives pastors a concrete sequence that turns insight into action and then uses that action to deepen their insight. Instead of adding a new programme, A-A-A rearranges existing ministries so that critical reflection, risk-bearing solidarity, and hospitable community feed into one another. A-A-A therefore functions as a theological framework rooted in liberationist and biblical themes. It is also a practical guide that can shape calendars, budgets, and leadership habits.

In the analysis movement, congregations intentionally read their context through a theological and socio-political lens. Sermons, Bible studies, and leadership meetings are structured to ask not only "What does this text mean?" but also "What is happening in our neighbourhood, and who is most affected?" This corresponds to the conscientisation dimension measured in the survey. However, A-A-A insists that analysis be tethered to specific questions about next steps: Who is suffering? What structures are involved? Which relationships or resources do we already have that could be mobilised? In A-A-A, analysis is meant to send people into action, not to remain a closed exercise in interpretation.

The accompanying movement responds to these questions by initiating concrete, relational acts of solidarity. Here, the focus shifts from describing injustice to standing alongside those who endure it: visiting migrant shelters, supporting organising efforts, attending hearings, or advocating with local officials. The survey showed that such practices are precisely where many congregations falter. A-A-A addresses this bottleneck by building accompaniment into the regular rhythm of congregational life—linking it explicitly to what was previously analysed and scheduling it with the same seriousness as worship or evangelism. Pastors in the pilot reported that when

accompaniment was framed as a natural continuation of Sunday preaching, rather than as an optional "extra," participation increased and fear of backlash diminished.

The assimilate movement then draws the experiences of accompaniment back into the community's memory, identity, and structures. Testimony slots, debriefing sessions, and leadership retreats become spaces where participants narrate what they saw and learned, and where the congregation discerns how these encounters should reshape liturgy, teaching, and resource allocation. In this way, hospitality is deepened: those who were once "guests" become co-interpreters and, eventually, co-leaders. Pilot congregations discovered that this assimilative work was crucial. Without it, solidarity actions remained isolated events, dependent on a few motivated individuals. With it, congregations began to speak of accompaniment as part of "who we are," and budgets, volunteer structures, and preaching calendars were gradually adjusted to reflect that self-understanding.

Insights from social movement theory can illuminate, to some extent, illuminate why A-A-A helps repair the stalled cycle. Scholars such as Sidney Tarrow describe recurring waves of collective action. Theologically, something similar occurs when the Spirit renews the church's life: moments of intensified engagement are followed by periods of consolidation, and new testimonies can rekindle the community's vocation. In congregational terms, hospitality plays that catalytic role. As new people and stories enter the community through acts of welcome, they provide raw material for renewed analysis and fresh calls to accompaniment. A-A-A gives pastors a way to harness this dynamic by ensuring that every influx of new testimonies is intentionally fed back into the Analyse phase rather than dissipating.

The pilot congregations offered an initial test of this logic. Where A-A-A practices were adopted even in modest form, linking preaching series to specific accompaniment opportunities and then to structured times of assimilation, solidarity scores rose while awareness and hospitality remained stable. Pastors noted that the key variable was not individual enthusiasm but structural reinforcement: scheduled reflection moments, protected budget lines, and leadership expectations that each major initiative would move through all three movements of the cycle. These observations point to a practical conclusion: when A-A-A is built into the ordinary governance of the church, for example, into council agendas, annual planning, and budget decisions, solidarity can shift from an occasional project to a sustained expression of spiritual formation. In that way, the pathway begins to repair the stalled cycle described above.

A Biblical Prototype of the Cycle

Exodus 2:5–10 offers a compact narrative in which the movements of the cycle appear in sequence. Pharaoh's daughter descends to the Nile as a member of the ruling household, accompanied by attendants and insulated by privilege. Yet when she notices the basket among the reeds, she does more than satisfy curiosity. She sends a servant to retrieve it, opens it, hears the baby's cry, and recognises both his vulnerability and his ethnicity: "This must be one of the Hebrews' children." In only a few lines, the text shows a privileged woman who lets herself see oppression, feels its claim on her, and responds in ways that disrupt her own household.

The first movement is Analyse. Pharaoh's daughter "sees" more than an abandoned infant; she intuits the structures behind the child's presence in the river. Her own father has issued the decree to kill Hebrew boys. The baby's tears, the makeshift ark, and the location on the riverbank combine to expose the lethal intersection of imperial fear and ethnic domination. Without offering a doctrinal lecture, the story shows conscientisation in embodied form: a member of the royal household reads a concrete situation against the backdrop of state violence. Her recognition that "this is one of the Hebrews' children" signals not mere identification but comprehension of the policy that placed him there.

The second movement is Accompany. Having recognised the child as a victim of her father's decree, Pharaoh's daughter does not remain at the level of insight. She intervenes. She decides to spare the child, accepts the offer of a Hebrew nurse, and commits imperial resources to his survival. In doing so, she takes a limited but real risk: she quietly subverts a genocidal command within the very household that issued it. The narrative does not present her as a revolutionary leader; it presents her as someone who uses the access she has, servants, authority, and economic means, to stand concretely with one threatened life. Solidarity, in this frame, begins not with sweeping declarations but with acts of accompaniment that interrupt the ordinary functioning of unjust structures.

The third movement is Assimilate. Pharaoh's daughter does not simply rescue Moses and then return to business as usual. She adopts him: "He became her son." She names him, brings him into the palace, and allows his presence to reshape her household's story. The Hebrew child, once marked for death, becomes a permanent part of Egypt's royal upbringing and, eventually, the human agent through whom God will confront Pharaoh. Hospitality here is not a momentary gesture of charity. It is the long-term incorporation of the stranger in ways that alter identity, memory, and future

possibilities. What began as an act of accompaniment becomes a reconfiguration of community.

Read through the lens of the A-A-A pathway, Pharaoh's daughter thus embodies the entire cycle. She analyses a situation of oppression from within an oppressive system; she accompanies a specific victim at personal and political risk; and she assimilates that act into her ongoing life by making space for the child to belong and to grow. Her example neither romanticises imperial elites nor ignores the state-sponsored violence of Pharaoh's court. Instead, it shows how people and communities with power can use their access, resources, and voice to move the cycle forward instead of letting it stop at awareness or occasional charity.

For Latin American congregations wrestling with the solidarity bottleneck, this narrative functions as more than an inspirational story. It offers a biblical prototype in which analysis, solidarity, and hospitality are sequential and mutually reinforcing. Preaching and teaching on Exodus 2 can therefore do double work: it can expose mechanisms by which earthly powers inflict death and exclude the vulnerable, reminding the church that all authorities are accountable before God's justice, and it can model a concrete pattern of response that aligns closely with the A-A-A pathway. When churches learn to see as Pharaoh's daughter saw, to stand with threatened neighbours as she did, and to let those neighbours reshape their communal life, the formation cycle moves from abstraction into a practiced, Spirit-led habit.

Seven Tools to Keep the Cycle Turning

In this final section, I suggest practical tools that ministry teams can adapt in their own contexts. Each tool is tied mainly to one movement of the cycle, A-A-A, and to a particular ministry area, so leaders can see where formation is getting stuck. Building on Pharaoh's daughter's pattern of seeing, standing, and sharing, these tools aim to keep the missional formation cycle moving instead of letting it stall at awareness or intermittent charity.

Teaching structures are a natural place to restart the cycle. Instead of "banking" models of religious instruction in which congregants passively receive information (Freire 1970), churches can adopt dialogical *ver–juzgar–actuar* (see–judge–act) modules (Holland & Henriot 1983). Small groups and Bible studies can become spaces where participants read Scripture and neighbourhood realities side by side and then design concrete actions that grow out of that reading. In that sense, teaching becomes a driver of conscientisation that regularly launches the Analyse phase, not just a vehicle for transmitting doctrine.

If congregations measure success only by attendance, giving, or the number of programmes, love of neighbour will remain secondary. A second shift is to broaden what counts as "success." Alongside internal measures, churches can attend to signs of their neighbours' well-being in concrete forms that local communities discern as faithful to Scripture. Framed this way, the goal is not partisan alignment but visible practices of mercy, well-being, and hospitality. Leadership teams might ask each year, 'Where did we accompany our neighbours, and what needs did we help carry?' Treating that question as central privileges accompaniment over inward-facing metrics and reduces the pressure to retreat into exclusively internal goals. This posture does not endorse any party or platform; it names a gospel obligation to seek the good of those nearby.

A third focus concerns who is recognised and empowered. Alongside traditional pastoral and teaching roles, congregations can intentionally commission apostolic and prophetic gifts, those who initiate new works and name injustices, and flatten leadership hierarchies so that lay members, especially women and migrants, can exercise agency. When leadership structures explicitly bless and protect those who organise accompaniment, the weight of solidarity no longer rests on a few informal champions. The church's governance begins to reinforce the Accompany movement itself.

Many pastors in the study named limited advocacy skills and fear of retaliation as key obstacles. A fourth strategy is to develop carefully discerned partnerships, judged by whether they respect the church's confession of Christ and its nonpartisan witness, with organisations that defend the dignity of the poor and the stranger. By collaborating with community groups and legal-support networks, churches can borrow technical expertise while also diffusing risk. Such partnerships allow congregations to stand publicly with marginalised neighbours without acting alone, thus strengthening the Accompany phase and addressing skill and protection gaps that individual churches cannot easily overcome.

To keep the cycle from collapsing back into occasional activism, congregations need practices that regularly assimilate experiences of accompaniment into communal identity. Embedding table fellowship, co-leadership liturgies, and testimony spaces that prominently feature newcomers' voices is a fifth tool. When migrants, workers, and other formerly "guest" participants share how they see God at work and are invited to participate in visible leadership, hospitality becomes mutually transformative. These practices deepen the Assimilate movement and ensure that new stories continually reshape the community's memory, priorities, and expectations of "normal" church life.

Finally, research itself can serve as a means of formation. Longitudinal mixed-methods studies that compare rural and urban settings, examine Indigenous reciprocity cycles, and test the speed and durability of the formation cycle across denominational families would help leaders see where and how the cycle accelerates or stalls. By repeating instruments like the one used here and pairing them with observation of actual practices, churches and seminaries can treat Analyse, Accompany, and Assimilate not only as theological ideas but also as dimensions of congregational life that can be watched and strengthened over time.

Together, these tools invite congregations to see as Pharaoh's daughter saw, to stand as she stood, and to share life as she was willing to share it. When teaching, metrics, leadership, partnerships, community practices, and research all line up with the A-A-A cycle, hospitality can spark renewed solidarity instead of quietly taking its place. The following section situates these recommendations within the study's limitations and outlines research pathways to test and adapt them in other settings.

Conclusion

Latin American churches already see injustice with prophetic clarity and welcome strangers with genuine warmth. What too often stalls is the costly step of standing in public solidarity with those same neighbours. The data in this study make that stall visible: across eight countries and several denominations, pastors reported stronger patterns of conscientisation and hospitality than of risk-bearing advocacy. This pattern supports the claim that a "solidarity bottleneck" exists and moves it beyond anecdote. At the same time, the findings indicate that the bottleneck is not fixed. When congregations experimented with the A-A-A rhythm, solidarity scores rose while awareness and hospitality remained steady, suggesting that intentional scaffolding can restart the cycle. Field journals and pastoral reflections showed how small, repeated acts of accompaniment—visiting shelters, supporting worker petitions, attending hearings—began to recalibrate what members considered "normal" ministry. Hospitality, in these cases, ceased to function as the endpoint of mission and instead became the spark that reignited critical awareness and public witness to Christ's kingdom.

Theologically, the article retrieves Pharaoh's daughter as a scriptural prototype for communities that occupy privileged positions of access and security. Her decision to see, to intervene, and to adopt a threatened child within the very household that ordered his death illustrates how liberation can begin inside the palace when insiders risk proximity and reconfigure their own spaces. For congregations that identify with her social location, Exodus 2 thus becomes not only a story about Moses but a

vocational call: to use resources, influence, and voice to pivot the formation cycle forward rather than allowing it to stall at analysis or intermittent charity.

Methodologically, the study introduces a first instrument for tracking how quickly—and how often, the formation cycle moves in different contexts and over time. The 21-item survey, combined with qualitative materials, provides a replicable way to measure conscientisation, solidarity, and hospitality within the same congregations and to test how changes in pedagogy, leadership, and partnerships affect the cycle. Given the small, purposive sample and reliance on self-report, future research will need larger, randomised samples, behavioural indicators, and longer timelines, as well as careful attention to Indigenous reciprocity practices and Pentecostal worship dynamics that may accelerate or reshape the cycle.

All in all, the findings suggest that Latin American churches do not mainly lack theology or spiritual energy. What is often missing are structures—such as planning processes, leadership expectations, and budget practices—that reliably carry communities from seeing to standing to sharing life. The A-A-A pathway, grounded in liberationist insight and tested in local congregations, offers one way to align teaching, ministry design, and biblical interpretation so that hospitality catalyses renewed solidarity rather than replacing it. Where these rhythms are taken seriously and built into everyday practice, spiritual formation and public justice as God's justice made visible in social relationships begin to move together, and the church's ordinary life starts to look like a sustained, Spirit-led exodus from contemporary forms of bondage.

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To cite (Harvard):

Palafox, J.O. (2026), 'Toward a cyclical missional model of spiritual formation in Latin America', *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 3(1), pp. 5-22. DOI: https://doi.org/10.70600/jrpl.v3i1.004

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.

Journal of Religion and Public Life
Volume 3, Issue 1 (May 2026)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Let Us Return": Enacting Transforming Mutuality Through Duoethnography

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Abstract: In the aftermath of institutional collapse within transnational religious networks, how do former leaders and congregants navigate the complexities of shared trauma? This article frames research not merely as data collection, but as a missiological act of return. Grounded in the biblical mandate of Acts 15:36—"Let us return and visit the brethren"—and the missiological vision of "second missionary journeys," the study traces a shift that is both methodological and relational. Originally designed to analyse a Colombian congregation's post-2003 transition to autonomy through Roland Allen's "three-selves" framework, the research trajectory changed during a series of six talking circles with study participants, a married couple). The initial narrative of institutional success gave way to a more unsettled and candid dialogue about pre-crisis relational dynamics and researcher complicity. In this space, duoethnography emerged not as a preselected method, but as the lived expression of a relationship in which safety made possible critical intimacy. Drawing on Ivan Illich's 'She/It' distinction, the foregoing analysis argues that research itself can cultivate *transforming mutuality*, turning the scholarly process into a site of relational repair and decolonial knowledge production. References to trauma are used descriptively rather than diagnostically, naming relational and institutional harm as narrated and processed over time rather than assessed in clinical terms.

KEYWORDS: transforming mutuality, duoethnography, decolonial methodology, resilient spirituality, religious institutional crisis.

Introduction

1.1 The theological logic of return

"*And after some days Paul said unto Barnabas, let us return now and visit the brethren in every city wherein we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they fare*" (Acts 15:36 ASV).

This biblical invitation marks a pivotal shift in mission strategy. The context of this return was itself amid crisis—the theological controversy described in Acts 15:1-29

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regarding Gentile inclusion, which had led to the Jerusalem Council. It is not a call to conquer unfamiliar territory, nor to impose new structures, but a call to *return*. In his theological proposal on "second missionary journeys," my husband Flavio Uribe (2006) argues that this return is distinct from the initial planting of churches. It requires a different posture: mature Christians returning not to lead or control, but to "become part of the congregations," helping local leadership mature from within and embody a presence that strengthens the brethren rather than managing the institution.

The pattern of crisis demanding transformative response that emerges in Acts 15 reflects what David Bosch identified as central to missiology itself. Bosch frames his body of work—spanning from *True Mutuality* (1978), *Mission to the World* (1980), *Transforming Mission* (1991a), 'Re-evangelisation' (1991b), *The Vulnerability of Mission* (1991c), through to *Believing in The Future* (1995)—around the theme of crisis and even collapse. In *Transforming Mission*, Bosch (1991a:1-4) introduces his whole argument with these subsections: (i) 'Mission: The contemporary crisis'; (ii) 'Between danger and opportunity and the wider crisis'; and then (iii) 'Where the early church failed'- Bosch (1991a:50-52). Bosch's foundational body of work demonstrates that crisis has been a constant throughout church history, making the transforming mutuality advocated in the present study particularly relevant for understanding both the Acts 15 crisis and contemporary institutional challenges.

The following posits that qualitative research, when conducted in the aftermath of a religious institutional crisis, can and should embody the theology of return. It recounts a research journey that began with an academic inquiry into institutional structure but developed into a relational practice of "seeing how they are doing." Such approach aligns with Stackhouse's (cited by Bosch, 1991a:531) call for *poiesis*: "We also need the dimension of *poiesis*, which he defines as the 'imaginative creation or representation of evocative images. People do not only need truth (theory) and justice (praxis); they also need beauty, the rich resources of symbol, piety, worship, love, awe, and mystery.'" Enacting transforming mutuality thus brings praxis and theory together to foster the beauty found in the renewed capacity for relationship amid institutional failure.[2]

[2] The present study is a significantly expanded and refocused version of the analysis and findings originally presented in Chapter 6 (Part 1) of R. Rheinbolt-Uribe (2023), *Transforming mutuality in a theology of mission: A missiological evaluation of a Colombian congregation case study.* Unpublished PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University: South Africa.

1.2 The context: Institutional collapse and the "three-selves"

The context for the return was the Iglesia ICI-Colombia (ICO-CO), established in 1992 by the International Church of Christ (ICOC). As a USA-funded transnational Religious Branded Organisation (RBO), ICOC exemplified the "managerial missiology" (Escobar, 2002 characteristic of late 20th-century megachurch movements. The model integrated a rapid, global disciple-making mission with corporate management strategies, centralised branding, and a high-control "one-on-one discipling" system.[3] U.S.-based financial and doctrinal authority further reinforced this model, driving its worldwide expansion during the 1980s and 1990s.[4]

In 2003, while serving as mission practitioners in Argentina, the RBO fractured due to leadership crises and financial instability. The resulting rupture severed the managerial connection to the centre, thrusting the Bogotá congregation into turmoil. Key Colombian leaders were dismissed, resulting in a significant crisis of authority. Amid such disorder, local grassroots leaders, already part of the congregation, began to step forward to assume responsibility for its direction.[5]

Fast forward to 2018, I began my doctoral research with OCRPL and Stellenbosch University. My analytical lens was Roland Allen's classic "three-selves" concept: self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating churches.[6] From an external perspective, ICI-CO's post-crisis trajectory was a textbook success story of Allen's theory. Seeking to reduce USA funding and oversight, the congregation had successfully pivoted to self-governance, achieved financial independence, and continued to propagate the faith. The original research design sought to document the transition to autonomy, framing the 2003 collapse as the catalyst for a triumphant maturation.

[3] See Chapter 3 of Rheinbolt-Uribe (2023). The ICOC has been the subject of criticism regarding authoritarian practices. In 2003, the denomination publicly acknowledged problematic aspects of its structure, doctrine, practices, and approach. This admission prompted substantial organizational reforms, including decentralization, as outlined in the *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (Olsen, Atwoord, Mead & Hill, 2018).

[4] While radical transformation within movements is possible, the ICOC's path diverges significantly from the Worldwide Church of God's transition to Grace Communion International. Under Joseph Tkach Jr. (1997), that denomination undertook a centralized doctrinal overhaul, explicitly renouncing non-Trinitarianism, Anglo-Israelism, and strict Sabbatarianism in favor of evangelical orthodoxy and salvation by grace. In contrast, the ICOC experienced a systemic fracture rather than a smooth, top-down reformation.

[5] My study of ICO-CO is built on two insiders' research, one historical by Castellanos (2011) and the other missiological by Diaz Castro (2014).

[6] Allen held that mission work should be from its beginnings financially self-funded, self-governing and resulting in self-expansion. This is the "three-selves" concept in a nutshell (Bosch 1991a:378-79). In previous work, Rheinbolt-Uribe (2013) I outline the historical background and the application for ICI-CO.

1.3 The pivot: When the data refused the narrative

However, research—much like mission—often undergoes significant transformation when confronted with real-world complexities. The initial analytical approach evolved during the talking circles with Sara and Manuel, as our conversations transitioned from focusing solely on post-crisis autonomy to engaging in a collective exploration of the pre-crisis 'system' and my involvement within it.

1.4 Thesis: Research as enactment

It was here that duoethnography emerged—not as a method selected *a priori* from a textbook, but as the methodological name for what our relationship had become. Duoethnography creates a dialogic space in which two or more voices explore their shared histories to generate new meaning (Sawyer & Norris, 2012), offering a possible theological and missiological application of "mutual-hospitality" (Heuertz & Pohl, 2010).

The collaborative approach aligns closely with Burleigh and Burm's (2022: n.p.) rationale for applying duoethnography:

> Duoethnography is a collaborative research methodology that invites researchers to serve as sites of inquiry. Through juxtaposition, the voices of each researcher are made explicit, working in tandem to untangle and disrupt meanings about a particular social phenomenon. We gravitate to duoethnography for its evocative power and the opportunity this methodology provides to engage in meaningful self-study in the presence of another.

As a decolonial approach (Campbell-Chudoba, 2024), the assumption is that, in the context of spiritual trauma (Oakley, Kinmond & Humphreys, 2020), duoethnography does more than generate data; it enacts transformative mutuality. It moves beyond the descriptive task of sociology into the redemptive praxis of theology. By returning to the field with acknowledged complicity, rather than objective distance, the research process itself became a "second missionary journey"—a site where the hierarchy of the past was dismantled, and a new, mutual way of spiritual togetherness was rehearsed

2. Returning

2.1 A praxis of apology and presence

The "return" described in the present study was not a single event, but rather a complex, multifaceted process of confronting the past. In 2003, when the international RBO collapsed, my husband and I were serving a congregation in Argentina. The global crisis was a "trainwreck" of leadership failure and spiritual abuse, leaving congregations struggling to cope.[7]

During the height of the crisis in 2003, my husband traveled from Buenos Aires to Bogotá on three occasions. He confronted the challenges directly, addressing the congregation to seek forgiveness for our involvement in the systemic practices that had inflicted harm. He enacted the biblical mandate of return both promptly and in person.

For me, the experience of returning was distinct. At that time, I was overwhelmed by the enormity of the collapse and the responsibilities of caring for our young children; as a result, I did not travel with him. Although we eventually relocated to Colombia in October 2004 to support the congregation, the internal process of "returning" to the site of trauma—and confronting my own involvement—proved far more challenging for me to fully engage. The return brought significant personal and economic changes: my husband accepted an 80% salary reduction, requiring a dramatic shift in our family's lifestyle. For years, I lived in the tension of being a "broken healer," present with the community while bearing the burden of the past (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:193).

It was only through undertaking this doctoral research, which commenced in 2018, that I was able to fully confront and resolve that history. The research process itself evolved into my personal version of the "third journey"—a delayed yet essential engagement with the profound relational dynamics that had previously been neglected. Although my husband had issued public apologies some years earlier, the

[7] *Note on terminology:* In the present article, terms such as *harm*, *abuse*, and *trauma* are used descriptively rather than diagnostically. Drawing loosely on Oakley et al.'s (2020) reconceptualization of spiritual and religious abuse as harm arising from the misuse of power, authority, and trust within religious contexts, I employ these terms to describe relational and institutional injury as experienced and narrated by participants. The foregoing study does not seek to define trauma in clinical terms, nor to assess psychological impact, but rather to attend to how institutional collapse and systemic practices were remembered, interpreted, and relationally processed over time.

thesis served as the vehicle for my own appeal for forgiveness. I wrote in my dissertation:

> "*In 2003 I had an awareness of my complicity, but now... I am more aware than ever. I have repented before God... and hope that if there is anyone who continues to be held captive by this past, that they find freedom*" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:225).

2.2 From objectivity to vulnerability

The documented personal history meant that I could not enter the field as a neutral observer. I was returning to a congregation where my "*fingerprints were widespread*" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:225). Adopting a traditional, objective research stance would have been disingenuous, creating a false sense of detachment. Instead, I had to adopt a posture of *vulnerable presence*.
The duoethnographic talking circles with Sara and Manuel were therefore not just data collection events; they were acts of relational repair. They provided a space where the unfinished business of the past could be processed, not by "managing" the narrative, but by listening to how "the system" (as it is commonly termed) had impacted those we led. The context explains why the method shifted from an analysis of Roland Allen's three-selves to a practice of transforming mutuality: the only way to research this history with integrity was to inhabit it together, with all the pain and safety that required.

2.3 Introducing Sara and Manuel

The duoethnographic core of the present analysis consists of a series of six "talking circles" with a married couple, whom I refer to by the pseudonyms Sara and Manuel. To understand the texture of our dialogue, it is essential to know their roles in this shared history.

During the 2003 institutional collapse, Sara and Manuel were young university students in the Bogotá congregation. My memory of them from that period is faint, as the crisis unfolded while I was in Argentina. Manuel, however, was at the epicentre. He had served a summer internship and held other leadership responsibilities within "the system," granting him an insider's view of its operational mechanisms, and he was physically present for the congregation's intense "meltdown" during the crisis. They belonged to a cohort of members whose lives were profoundly shaped—and ruptured—by the previously described structure, yet I had little direct personal connection with them at the time. For Sara, the rupture was also a family matter; her

parents, grandmother, brother, and other relatives were—and for many, still are—part of the same congregational fabric, making the crisis a deeply intergenerational experience.

I truly came to know them only after our family's return to Colombia, when Sara and Manuel were still single. They were deeply committed individuals within the reforming community. Since then, their lives have taken a transnational path. For over a decade, they have lived in Oceania; yet they maintain a profound and active sense of belonging to the Colombian congregation. The geographical distance has made them ideal interlocutors for exploring how relational and spiritual bonds persist beyond institutional structures and physical proximity. Sara described it this way:

> "*For me, I'm still connected, my parents are part of the church and many of my best friends are still a part of the church. Somehow, I find out what is happening. My parents share with what they're doing in the Bible talks. So, there is still a connection*" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:174-74).

Since the collapse, Manuel has devoted himself to rigorous biblical, theological, and missiological study. As a grassroots lay intellectual with postgraduate training, he consistently seeks to understand the system in which he previously participated and contributed, the trauma arising from the crisis he directly experienced, and the facets of a resilient spirituality. Sara's commitment is equally deep but expressed differently. Her faith and community ties are woven into her family lineage; her practical, lived spirituality is nurtured within and extends to a network that includes her parents, siblings, and extended family within the congregation. She explains that her approach to Scripture and faith is shaped by the concrete demands of daily life and familial responsibilities, which brings a meaningful sense of groundedness to their shared theological reflection.

Their lived, transnational inquiry into the past and present of their faith community—shaped by Manuel's operational experience, his direct exposure to the collapse, and Sara's embeddedness in the congregation's familial networks—made them not merely participants but essential co-theorists in the research. The ensuing dialogue, therefore, bridges multiple gaps: between myself ("spiritual mother"), who was absent, and them ("spiritual children"), who were present during the rupture; between Colombia and the diaspora; and between institutional history and the evolving process of personal and familial meaning-making.

3. Theoretical and theological framework

3.1 Theological grounding: Theology of return

The impulse to return is theologically grounded in Acts 15:36, as described in the concept of "second missionary journeys." Uribe (2006) articulates the theology that guided our family's return to Colombia. He argues that while the *first missionary journey* concerns planting and establishing, the "second journey" requires a fundamentally different posture. Mature disciples return not to reassert control or "save" the movement, but to "become part of the congregations," helping local leadership mature from within and embodying a presence that strengthens the brethren rather than managing the institution (Uribe, 2006).

This *theology of return* aligns with what Ivan Illich (2018:43-48) calls "missionary silence." Illich emphasises that it takes "much courage" to "return to the patient silence of interest or to the delicacy of the silence within which words grow" (2018:47). He writes, "As long as he [she] sees himself [herself] as a 'missioner'[,] he [she] will know that he [she] is frustrated; that he [she] is sent but got nowhere; that he [she] is away from home but has never landed anywhere; that he [she] left his home and never reached another" (2018:47).

True arrival, then, required abandoning the missioner's stance entirely. It necessitated a shift from mission-as-management (authoritative teaching, administration, and financial control) to mission-as-presence (accompaniment, listening, and relational solidarity). In the context of the research, duoethnography served as the methodological vehicle for this theological approach: it enabled me to return not as a "founder" overseeing an investment, but as a sister "seeing how they are doing" and willing to be transformed by their response.

3.2 Transforming mutuality: Enacting the Jesus–Mary model

Heyward (2016:155) defines *mutuality* as "a relational process in which all persons, or parties are empowered, thereby experiencing themselves as able to survive, affect others creatively, and make a constructive difference in the world around them." Yet mutuality is often assumed to be "ethically and practically…a slippery concept, hard to define in practice, yet essential to right-relations."

Bosch's personal definition (1978:72) of true mutuality is the need for mutual dependence on each other and acceptance of one another, "We become, to one another, open doors in lieu of doors which have remained shut". The duoethnographic

talking circles literally opened doors that institutional hierarchy had kept closed—doors between 'spiritual mother' and 'spiritual children,' between former leader and those led, between researcher and researched.

Bosch's understanding of mutuality was not merely theoretical but deeply personal and embodied. He illustrates this through a powerful example from apartheid-era South Africa (1979:72): a black minister in Johannesburg physically confronted a white man, grabbing him by the collar and shaking him while unleashing years of pent-up fury about white complicity in systemic oppression. Rather than experiencing this as an attack, the white man recognised he was participating in an act of mutuality—the black minister felt safe enough with one of the few white men he truly trusted to express his authentic rage and pain. This moment revealed mutuality not as polite dialogue, but as the capacity to receive difficult truths within relationships strong enough to bear them.

Inspired by Bosch's embodied mutuality, in earlier work (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2024), I conceptualised "transforming mutuality" through the biblical relationship between Jesus and Mary, describing how Mary shifted from resistance to "leaning in," ultimately accepting a reversal of roles in which the mother learns from the adult child. In foregoing analysis, that theological model is methodologically enacted: as the former leader and "spiritual mother," I intentionally adopt the position of learner with the participants, thus facilitating the emergence of transforming mutuality. This reversal establishes the foundation for mutuality, which is defined here as a triad comprising (i) a personal journey through liminal spaces; (ii) practical mutual transformation; and (iii) theological recognition of interconnectedness, drawing on David Bosch's text and interviews with his widow, Annemie Bosch (see Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:59-60).

3.3 The Illichian distinction: 'It' and 'She'

To interpret the data, I employ Ivan Illich's distinction between the Church as 'It' and the Church as 'She' (Illich, 1970; Uribe, 2024).

- The 'It' is the institutional machinery—the "system" of control, finances, and hierarchy that collapsed in 2003.
- The 'She' is the mystery of the lived faith—the relational "glue" that held the community together when the 'It' fell apart.

Duoethnography enables a differentiation between these two aspects without creating a division. By fostering a secure environment to critically engage with the 'It'

(the system in which I was complicit), we were able to recognise and celebrate the 'She' (the resilient spirituality that endured). Such a distinction ensures that the research does not devolve into a mere examination of a failed institution; rather, it serves as a testament to the enduring community that continues to exist even amid crises.

4. Methodology

4.1 Study design: Emergent duoethnography

The present study adopted a qualitatively driven mixed-methods design, with duoethnography serving as the primary approach through six virtual talking circles. Although the broader dissertation research involved 12 participants in 24 interviews to examine the overall trajectory of the congregation, the article centres specifically on the series of conversations with Sara and Manuel.

The decision to focus on this particular married couple was informed by both pragmatic and methodological considerations. Pragmatically, their residence in Oceania and ongoing affiliation with the Colombian congregation rendered them well-suited for examining how relational networks endure beyond institutional frameworks and geographical boundaries. From a methodological standpoint, duoethnography prioritises depth rather than breadth; the sustained engagement across six sessions fostered the trust required to cultivate transformative mutuality. The triadic arrangement—researcher, husband, and wife—produced a "triangulated duoethnography," enabling the simultaneous unfolding of multiple relational dynamics: those between researcher and husband, researcher and wife, as well as the couple's internal dialogue observed by the researcher.

4.2 Participants and context

As previously discussed, Manuel and Sara were chosen due to their longstanding association with the pre-2003 RBO structure and their ongoing involvement with the post-crisis ICI-CO community. Although they have resided outside Colombia for more than ten years, their deep connections to the congregation persist, representing the "community-at-large" as opposed to a community defined by geographical boundaries.

The decision to adopt a duoethnographic approach stemmed from the participants' intellectual agency. Throughout the broader study, several participants continued to grapple with the question, "what happened?" regarding the 2003 crisis, utilising insights from biblical studies, psychology, sociology, history, and organisational theory

to interpret the collapse. They readily shared these evolving perspectives with me. The talking circles with Sara and Manuel served as a focused space where multidisciplinary, insider reflections were articulated and expanded in dialogue with my efforts to comprehend both my own involvement and the systemic dynamics at play.

4.3 Procedure: The talking circle

The sessions utilised a "talking circle" format, drawing from Indigenous research methodologies (Chilisa, 2020; Wilson, 2008) to respect collective knowledge production. Held remotely via Zoom between January and May 2021 due to the global pandemic, each meeting spanned 60 to 90 minutes. In contrast to standard semi-structured interviews, these circles fostered dialogue and reciprocity. A consistent rhythm was established through an opening or closing prayer, a personal check-in, and thematic exploration that responded to both participants' contributions and the researcher's guidance. The present approach cultivated a spiritual and relational environment capable of supporting the complex institutional trauma under discussion.

4.4 Data analysis

Data analysis followed a spontaneous, iterative process rather than a rigid coding scheme, aligning with the emergent nature of duoethnography.

Phase 1: Simmering (January–November 2021). The initial phase of data analysis involved a sustained period of what Mason (2018:45, 206) describes as a holistic or ecological engagement with the data—an approach that moves beyond linear coding to incorporate imaginative, intuitive, and affective forms of reasoning. I refer to this phase as simmering: a *sentipensant*e (thinking–feeling) mode of mental pre-analysis (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:37) in which interview transcripts, field notes, and contextual memories were revisited repeatedly without imposing predetermined analytic categories. Rather than generating immediate themes, the process allowed patterns, tensions, and resonances to surface gradually through prolonged immersion in the material, aligning with Polanyi's notion of *tacit knowing* (Smith, 2012:171).[8]

[8] The understanding of "dwelling" in the data is drawn from Smith's interpretation of Polanyi's concept of tacit knowing (2012:171), in which understanding emerges through sustained immersion rather than immediate analytical extraction. As a heuristic, I liken this analytic posture to simmering or cooking on a low flame: ingredients are combined and allowed to interact over time, enabling distinct flavors to emerge through attentiveness and delay rather than forced acceleration. I use Smith's reading of Polanyi as a methodological guide for this initial phase of analysis.

Phase 2: Reflexive correspondence. The phase of analysis was dialogic, extending beyond the talking circles into email exchanges that became a key source of data for understanding the relational and emotional texture of the research process. Drawing on Stamper's (2020) discussion of letter writing as a method in qualitative research, these correspondences functioned not only as communication but also as an analytic practice in their own right. In an email to Sara and Manuel (personal communication, 23 October, 2021), written during the simmering phase, I reflected on the challenge of carrying the weight of their testimonies:

> "*I feel distance from what they say about everything that happened before, during and after the 'crisis' but it is strong to live with this information. But I'm already at a point in my life that I'm ready... I still feel like I am participating in a miracle. That we can still talk about what we talk about in the interviews; considering the panorama that you paint of what 'the system' was like... And there's still a part that Participant 114 tells me, 'I feel safe to tell you these things'*" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:162).

Manuel's email response (personal communication, 24 October, 2021) validated the core dynamic, explicitly naming the "miracle" of safe critique:

> "*I appreciate the opportunity to be part of this process... And what you describe of being able to say such strong things against a system and at the same time being able to have intimate relationships within the group... is nothing short of a miracle*" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:162-63).

The exchange documented simultaneous safety and critical intimacy that defined the duoethnographic space and shaped the thematic analysis.

Phase 3: Content analysis (December 2021). To consolidate and triangulate the qualitative insights generated in earlier phases, I employed a hybrid analytic approach that combined content analysis (Neuendorf, 2019; Humble & Mozelius, 2022) with reflexive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014). Using Speakai.co,[9] I conducted a systematic keyword count across the interview transcripts.

Phase 4: Mason's data poems (February 2022). I applied Mason's (2018) method of poetic inquiry to condense lengthy transcripts into data poems. The process functioned as a form of deep listening and pattern recognition, distilling participants' core themes into an evocative, participant-centered form. For example, to capture

[9] Speakai.co is a data analysis tool.

Manuel's reflective disposition and his focus on "*the essence of things*," I crafted the following poem from his dialogue (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:177):

> **Poem 4: Essence of Things** *While not shying away from Bigger questions, bigger trajectories, And the bigger, long-term dynamics. Dynamics of what? in Bible and history. What does it mean to be people of God's land or a Christian today? It comes back to those questions, and those definitions. While it gives a deeper meaning, if you look at and unpack the cultural context. Keeping in view: Big trends Big movements in Biblical history and History of Christians*.

I created a collection of these data poems and initially shared them with Manuel and Sara, as well as with all participants, as a powerful form of dialogic member checking. In June 2022, I also produced a creative output—a multivocal poetic narrative—which I shared with all participants and the gatekeepers of ICI-CO. Such a practice invited further reflection and affirmed participants' experiences in their own conceptual and linguistic cadence.

Phase 5: Member checking. (February–June 2022). Participants reviewed their transcripts and my preliminary interpretations. Their feedback—including explicit affirmations of the research's value in helping prevent future harm—reinforced the study's communal purpose.

4.5 Ethical considerations

The study received ethical clearance from Stellenbosch University. Beyond standard institutional protocols, three ethical dimensions were paramount in the duoethnographic work:

i). Researcher complicity: My position as an insider/outsider and a former leader required explicit acknowledgment in the university paperwork. As shown in Section 5.2, I openly admitted this complicity, validating the participants' critiques of the system I had helped build. This transparency became a cornerstone of the "safety" Manuel later identified.

ii). Emotional safety: To mitigate the risk of retraumatisation, participants were encouraged to use prayer and were given the freedom to pause, stop, or withdraw at any point. The research space was explicitly framed as one of care: free therapy sessions were offered within the interview agreement and reiterated at the start of each talking-circle series.

iii). Confidentiality: Given the close-knit nature of the transnational community, the presentation of data balances transparency with the protection of identities. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and specific biographical markers are omitted where necessary.

My positionality as an insider/outsider—a Latin American researcher, mother, former authority figure, and currently marginal member—was not bracketed off but intentionally mobilised to cultivate the relational safety necessary for deep inquiry. This deliberate stance created space for what Manuel, in a pivotal email exchange, would later describe as a "miracle."

The interaction explicitly names the core of the duoethnographic encounter: the simultaneous presence of safety and critical intimacy that became the defining condition for the findings that emerged. Three co-constructed themes arose from such a dialogic space, as detailed in the following section.

5. Findings

Three co-constructed themes emerged from the duoethnographic dialogue: (1) active prayer as resilient spirituality; (2) "the system" as the pre-crisis congregation; and (3) friendship as sustaining togetherness. These findings reflect not only the content of the conversations, but also the relational process through which they were generated.

5.1 Theme 1: Active prayer as resilient spirituality

The significance of prayer emerged as a primary site of theological processing and mutual care—a "double-blind" discovery, as neither the participants nor I initially treated these moments as formal data. Only through later reflection did the prayers offered at the beginning and end of each session reveal themselves as embodied acts of resilience that often-inverted traditional roles. This dynamic was evident from the very first talking circle, when Sara opened our dialogue with a prayer that set the relational and spiritual tone for the entire process:

> *"Dear Father God, thank you for this time that we can come together and remember our work with you. Sometimes it's easy to forget how much we have worked in our lives to keep us faithful and to be as close to you. Thank you for this time. Please guide Renee in all her research and studies and please keep us close to you, Father God. Thank you for using Jesus. In His name I pray. Amen"* (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:320).

The prayer immediately enacted a form of transformative mutuality. Sara, a congregant, assumed a position of spiritual authority by interceding for me—the former leader and researcher. She situated our academic inquiry ("*guide Renee in her research*") within the sacred frame of shared faithfulness ("*our work with you*"). The prayer acknowledged a history of collective effort ("*how much we have worked*") while reaffirming a present and future longing for closeness to God. In doing so, it established the talking circle itself as a spiritual space for remembering, reconnection, and repair. The pattern continued throughout the sessions, most notably in Manuel's later prayer during the third talking circle, offered as a plea for healing after a discussion of institutional harm:

> "*Thank you God for the opportunity to be together this morning or afternoon... Thank you for Renee and the opportunity for me to be part of this research. Please be with us... Just talking about people and talking about people that might have been hurt or might have bitter feelings against other people, please help everyone heal. Please help everyone become closer to you over time*" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:341).

The prayer enacted the reversal of roles that became central to transformative mutuality: the former "spiritual child" interceding for the healing of the former leader and the wider community. It framed the research itself as a spiritual practice ("*Thank you for this study*"), dissolving the boundary between academic inquiry and faith. Across the sessions, these prayers consistently expressed a resilient spirituality—one that named pain and "bitter feelings" while persistently orienting toward healing and renewed connection with God. The observed resilience was not an individual accomplishment but a communal practice, sustained even after the institutional structures that once contained it had collapsed.

5.2 Theme 2: "The system"

As is common practice, Manuel and Sara consistently referred to "*the system*" as a central category for analysing the institutional context prior to 2003. The term encompassed a triad of control mechanisms that consolidated authority within U.S. leadership. Their characterisations were incisive and multifaceted:

"Results oriented" – THE SYSTEM – "baptize a lot so that it looks good" High boundaries in THE SYSTEM Unspoken 'texts' in THE SYSTEM "whether it was verbalized or not, it was the case" Creating favouritism within THE SYSTEM Leadership in THE SYSTEM Dating within THE SYSTEM Control with THE SYSTEM Dependence in THE SYSTEM

Campus ministry as a strategy in THE SYSTEM Cultish practices in THE SYSTEM (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:169).

Manuel extended his analysis, connecting the system's logic to the elitist social stratifications of Bogotá: "*In a sense you create a pool of influential people that have reach to other people… System can mean method or organization*" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:174). The previously mentioned quantitative pattern corroborated the qualitative finding that financial control was central to the system's dysfunction, a point highlighted by one participant's observation that "money ran the system" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:199-206).[10]

The process of deconstructing the "It" both demanded and revealed the core conditions of our duoethnographic space. The relational safety between us—explicitly named as a "miracle"—made possible a level of frankness that would have been unlikely in a conventional interview setting. Yet this safety was not simply a passive backdrop; it was continually tested and negotiated through my own visceral responses to their candid reflections. Assimilating these insights was a personal struggle, as the following journal entry attests.

> *"Most of the time he referred to cultish practices but then stated that bottom-line he believed it was a cult. And I asked him something along the lines of, 'then Flavio and I you would consider at that time "cult leaders" under your description' and he said 'yes.' I was in a type of shock at that time and did not react at that moment but later it hit me. Soon after, I shared this moment with Prof. Simon, my Stellenbosch supervisor and cried some tears. I also wrote to Manuel and Sara to let them know that it had been a bit of a shock but at the same time thankful for their perspective, as I wanted to keep an authentic relationship with them through this process"* (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:169).

Naming the "*white elephant in the room*"—my pre-crisis role—did not introduce new information, but acknowledging it felt jarring at the time. Doing so was a deliberate enactment of mutuality. By leaning into vulnerability rather than retreating, I affirmed the primacy of the relationship. As participants expressed feeling safe with me, I also came to feel safe with them—a reciprocity that proved essential to the healing and inner transformation that unfolded within me**.**

[10] Allen (1962), Bosch (1978), and Bonk (2006), among others, reflect on the forementioned reality in much of their missionary endeavors.

5.3 Theme 3: Friendship and belonging

Despite living in Oceania for over a decade, Sara and Manuel maintained a profound sense of belonging to ICI-CO. The feeling of belonging was sustained not through institutional membership rolls or formal obligations, but through enduring friendships and family ties.

Manuel explained his continued commitment: "*We're going to sin against each other... it's a group of people... we just have to hang in there and see where this heads... keep going and help the congregation heal*" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:176). The statement reflects a theology of grace and persistence—a "glue" of togetherness that survived the institutional trainwreck. Sara added that relationships formed in the congregation "*were very formative for me and remain a very important component of my life*" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:176).

Critically, many of the post-crisis spaces for connection—informal gatherings in people's rooms "*around the table*"—were "*not created with funds provided from ICI-CO or from the USA*" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:241). The community's relational resilience thus proved to be independent of the financial structures that had once sought to govern and control it. The duoethnographic talking circles themselves became an enactment of transnational belonging, bridging time zones and shared histories through the simple, unfunded commitment to be together.

6. Discussion

6.1 Enacting transforming mutuality

These findings validate transforming mutuality not merely as a theological concept, but as a methodological reality. The Jesus–Mary model—moving from resistance to "*leaning in*"—was enacted through the shift from my former role as authority to that of a vulnerable learner. Manuel's prayer for healing, along with the couple's ability to offer sharp institutional critique, demonstrates that power dynamics were not only examined but fundamentally transformed.

The intrinsic connection between safety and mutuality constitutes the study's central insight. "*I feel safe to tell you these things*" is not merely a statement of comfort, but of capacity. Safety functioned as the relational infrastructure that enabled the heavy burden of institutional trauma to be processed without relational collapse. It allowed us to disentangle the "It" of the abusive system from the "She" of our shared faith, preserving the latter while critically interrogating the former. The findings affirm

Heyward's (1996) definition of mutuality as empowering survival and creative action—in this case, the creative work of re-narrating our shared history.

6.2 A decolonial, relational methodology

The evidence challenges the assumption that rigorous research on religious trauma requires objective distance. Instead, it demonstrates that acknowledged complicity can be a more powerful tool for truth-telling than feigned neutrality. By placing myself within the narrative of the pre-crisis system, I removed the burden on participants to prove the reality of its harm; we were able to begin from the premise of that harm and move toward understanding its mechanics, as well as the forms of survival it produced. The approach offers a distinctively decolonial contribution. It rejects an extractive model in which a Northern researcher mines Global South trauma for data. Instead, it positions grassroots Global South participants as co-theorisers—already asking "what happened?" and drawing on multidisciplinary resources to answer it. In this way, the research process becomes a site of "mutual hospitality" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:223), creating space for healing that benefits the community, not only the academy.

6.3 Implications for research on institutional crisis

The study demonstrates that researching institutional failure requires methodologies that are themselves relational, reparative, and attentive to power. The findings move beyond documenting financial control to modeling a process for engaging it. The duoethnographic enactment of transforming mutuality offers a template for scholars—particularly those with insider/outsider status—to study collapsed or abusive systems without reproducing extractive dynamics. Future research might apply the relational protocol to other spheres of public life where trust has been broken, asking not only "what went wrong?" but also "how can inquiry itself become a site of critical intimacy and repair?" The finding "*money ran the system*" serves as a crucial reminder that such research must remain materially grounded, attending to how resources circulate through—and distort—relational systems. Yet the study's primary implication is methodological: it offers a way of knowing that heals even as it reveals.

6.4 Limitations and strength

The study's limitations concern emotional cost, scope, and historical distance. First, the core methodology of this study—my return to a site of personal complicity in order to rebuild trust and engage in transforming mutuality—exacted a significant emotional toll. It required sustained vulnerability, the navigation of researcher grief, and continued engagement with the weight of the past, a process for which I sought

therapeutic support. This long-term and costly commitment to relational repair presents a substantial barrier to replication. At the same time, it positions the study as a compelling case example that underscores the often-overlooked emotional labour and necessary self-care required in decolonial, trauma-informed research.

Second, the study focuses on a single couple, Sara and Manuel. This narrow scope limits generalisability in a traditional positivist sense. However, within duoethnography, the aim is analytic depth and resonance rather than statistical breadth. The intensive longitudinal engagement with Sara and Manuel revealed layers of nuance regarding institutional trauma and resilience that a broader survey-based approach would likely have obscured.

Third, the eighteen-year gap between the 2003 collapse and the 2021 dialogues introduces the risk of retrospective reinterpretation and memory distortion. At the same time, this temporal distance created space for maturity, reflection, and the development of critical perspectives that made our dialogue as relative equals possible—mirroring the biblical logic of Paul's later return to the churches.
A primary strength of this study is that it does not merely theorise mutuality; it becomes an instance of it. The research enacts the theology of return and repair that it describes. Just as Paul's call to "return" emerged from the early church's institutional crises, today's ongoing crises within academic and ecclesial institutions similarly demand the transformative return outlined here.

These tensions between personal cost and methodological gain reveal the study's central contribution. By integrating the grief associated with return and the rigor of inquiry, duoethnography extends beyond the 'It' of institutional analysis to honour the 'She' of lived faith. The limitations represent an essential trade-off that strengthens the enactment, transforming the research into an act of faithful presence that makes possible the redemptive potential of a second missionary journey.

7. Conclusion

Duoethnography functions not only as a means of data collection, but also as a decolonial approach for fostering transformative mutuality in the aftermath of institutional crisis. This methodological approach embodies what Bosch understood experientially: that authentic mutuality emerges not through theoretical frameworks alone, but through the vulnerable willingness to receive difficult truths from those we have harmed or led—even when that reception requires enduring discomfort, critique, or the dismantling of previous positions of authority.

Three key findings emerged from this dialogic co-construction: active prayer as a locus of resilient spirituality; "the system" as a critical category for analysing U.S.-based financial and structural control; and friendship as the foundation of belonging that endures beyond institutional confines. These insights were facilitated by the distinctive features of the duoethnographic process: my readiness to confront prior complicity, participants' empowerment as co-theorisers, and a collective dedication to relational safety and healing.

Theologically, this approach is rooted in the biblical account of Paul's return in Acts 15:36—a return characterised not by the reestablishment of authority, but by a willingness to share life and gain insight into the well-being of others amid controversy and crisis. It enacts a reversal of roles as conceptualised in the Jesus–Mary relationship, where the former leader adopts the position of learner. This methodology enables researchers to investigate their own communities with integrity, transforming the research process into a context of "mutual-hospitality" in which the 'She' of lived faith can be distinguished from, and preserved within, the remnants of the institutional 'It.'

My return to ICI-CO became a personal account of my own "second missionary journey," by way of "missionary silence", culminating in the "miracle" Manuel identified. The ability to sustain intimate relationships while engaging in candid discussions about "the system" represents the ultimate validation of the duoethnographic method. It demonstrates that safety and critique are not opposing forces, but rather complementary elements. Within the transformative mutuality established, our shared history could be expressed, allowing for the collective envisioning of a resilient future. The described process embodied the *poiesis* introduced at the outset—the imaginative creation of a new relational space in the midst of institutional breakdown. As I mentioned in my PhD dissertation, this method may have impacted me even more profoundly than the participants:

> "*I believe that the research process, and especially the process of the talking circles, led to more profound healing, as I had to confront more deeply my positionality prior to the collaps*e" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:270).

Ultimately, duoethnography is not a one-way extraction of data, but the embodied creation of beauty through transforming mutuality—a praxis that weaves scholarly theory, lived experience, and sacred relationship into a transformative way of knowing.

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To cite (Harvard):

Rheinbolt-Uribe, R. (2026), '"Let us return": Enacting transforming mutuality through duoethnography', *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 3(1), pp. 23-46. DOI: https://doi.org/10.70600/jrpl.v3i1.005

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.

Journal of Religion and Public Life
Volume 3, Issue 1 (May 2026)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Religious Tolerance in Malaysia: A Social Identity Approach

Wong Kee Sing [1]

Abstract: Malaysia encounters constant challenges with racial and religious intolerance. This paper offers an approach to religious tolerance in Malaysia. Previous works have primarily focused on interfaith dialogues and learning about other faiths to increase tolerance. Many acknowledge the effectiveness of the religious dialogue and contact approach in preserving religious toleration. However, religious tolerance in Malaysia has not been adequately studied from a social identity perspective. The paper hopes to fill the theoretical gap in this respect by doing so. The study draws upon previous and existing literatures on inter-religious tolerance and the social identity approach in investigating how identity is relevant in promoting inter-religious relations (tolerance). This paper reviews that superordinate identity (common ingroup identity) is a sound means that can foster religious tolerance in Malaysia. The conceptual framework study proposes that Malaysian, a national identity, as a superordinate identity, is a more inclusive and embracing identity that needs to be emphasised in the Malaysian context, as this identity will improve religious tolerance.

Keywords: Religious tolerance, national identity, superordinate identity, recategorisation, social identity theory, common ingroup identity, Malaysian.

Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious, but Muslim-majority country. The Malaysian 2020 census indicates that roughly 63.5% of the population is Muslim. Christianity (9.1%), Buddhism (18.7%), Hinduism (6.1%), other (0.9%), and unknown (1.8%) make up approximately 36.5% of non-Muslims (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2020, p. 33). In view of this religious population composition, religious tolerance becomes an interesting subject of study since its independence. As for relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia in the late 1970s, ethnic polarisation appears to be sharpening. Although the focus on *dakwah* fosters unity

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within the Malay community, it decreases contact between Malays and non-Malays or Muslims and non-Muslims (Nagata, 1980, p. 436). Whereas the growing Islamic supremacy movement in the late 1990s posed a problem to inter-religious relations. Furthermore, Islamic authorities in Malaysia discouraged interfaith dialogue with non-Muslims. These developments make religious toleration a significant subject of research. Many efforts have been attempted, but religious intolerance remains an issue in Malaysia (see, for example, Muzliza Mustafa, 2022; Lemière, 2023; Yusof, 2025; Yusof and Mahavera, 2023). This paper intends to provide an alternative to improve and increase religious tolerance in Malaysia from a social identity approach by recategorising ingroup membership.

What is Religious Tolerance?

The purpose of this section is to discuss briefly but clearly the meaning of religious tolerance that can be used as a basic guiding principle in this paper. Different people (religion) define and understand tolerance differently, and are based on their holy books (see Abdul Rahman and Shapie, 2023). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO),

> Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. It is fostered by knowledge, openness, communication, and freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Tolerance is harmony in difference. It is not only a moral duty, it is also a political and legal requirement. Tolerance, the virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the culture of war by a culture of peace. Tolerance is not concession, condescension or indulgence. Tolerance is, above all, an active attitude prompted by recognition of the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of others. In no circumstance can it be used to justify infringements of these fundamental values. Tolerance is to be exercised by individuals, groups and States. (UNESCO, 1995, p. 2)

This definition of tolerance does not mention religion; to include religion will not jeopardise or alter the definition in any manner, but to add richness to it. Thus, religious tolerance can be defined and comprehended as recognising, respecting, accepting and appreciating the differences among religious groups in order to maintain harmonious relationships (see Huff, 2018, p. 4). Rationally, it is the duty and right of everyone, religious groups and States to obtain and sustain a harmonious relationships. In the Malaysian context, it is particularly about the state of the relationship between the Muslim community and the non-Muslim communities (Bakar, 2011, p. 624; Wong,

2024, pp. 104-105). Accordingly, and as a result, the centre of the paper on intergroup relationships in Malaysia is on the promotion of religious tolerance between the majority Muslim community and the non-Muslim communities. However, the definitions of religious tolerance should go further to include a more dynamic action, that is, promoting positive and lasting relationships among different religious groups, a duty for every religious group to participate in (see Huff, 2018, p. 5). One of Creppell's arguments is particularly relevant to this paper,

> If toleration is about what connects persons to one another in a significant way despite differences and conflict, then tolerations must pay attention to who we are. Thus, this reconception brings to the foreground that identity is essential to realising the ideal of toleration (2003, p. 6. See also Huff, 2018, p. 6).

Another version of Ceppell's words, as cited above, is intergroup (in)tolerance or religious (in)tolerance concentrates on perceptions of others that are based on their group membership (Main, 2023) or their identity (who they are), which is derived from social identity theory. In other words, in Malaysia, it is the perceptions of membership between Muslims and non-Muslims, who are ingroups and who are outgroups, which will generate either favouritism and tolerance or prejudice and intolerance. In view of the relation between identity and tolerance, this paper aims to provide or more accurately, to suggest a conceptual framework that religious tolerance can be improved through the recategorisation of group membership into a common ingroup identity, that is, Malaysian (national identity or superordinate identity).

Religious Problems in Malaysia

People in Malaysia, on the one hand, contest religious tolerance. On the other hand, there are people who admit there is religious tolerance (Abubakar, 2013, p. 90). Those who agree with the religious tolerance claim that the many factors contributing to religious tolerance are religious understanding pertaining to tolerance (Ghani and Awang, 2017, p. 79), learning about other faiths and dialogue with other faiths (Mohd Khambali et al., 2019; Wan Yusof and Ab Majid, 2013).

Abdul Ghani and Awang (2017) claim that, "It was found that the dialogue was conducive to inculcating the spirit and practice of tolerance" (p. 79). While the study by Al Ramiah, Hewstone and Wölfer (2017) suggests that the knowledge about other faiths is crucial in observing religious tolerance. They outlined four factors for religious tolerance in Malaysia. The first factor is raising factual awareness among Malaysians of other religions. According to them, such knowledge has the potential to help Malaysians become better arbiters in disputed religious topics and less susceptible to

incorrect information. Schools and universities are ideal institutions to carefully convey such knowledge. The second characteristic that they discovered to be connected with greater religious tolerance is allowing people to see core commonalities between their own and other religions. This is partly due to information, but it is also the result of teaching multi-faith religious education in a way that helps individuals to recognise areas of connection and difference. The third and fourth aspects are fostering connections with members of religious outgroups, as well as engaging in deeper and more meaningful talks with them. Friendships are an important approach for people to gain a profound, non-academic understanding and appreciation of many religious traditions. Such firsthand knowledge of other people's religious sensibilities and experiences could be a valuable supplement to classroom-based religious education initiatives (pp. 61-62).

Besides Abdul Ghani and Awang (2017) and Al Ramiah, Hewstone and Wölfer (2017), the effectiveness of religious dialogue and contact approach in preserving religious toleration is recognised by many (e.g. Mohamad et al., 2023; Mohamed Yasin, 2019; Ramli and Awang, 2018; Kanas, Scheepers and Sterkens, 2017; Wan Yusof and Ab Majid, 2013; 2012, and Abd. Rahim et al., 2011). However, as noted, in Malaysia, only other faiths are encouraged to learn about Islam, not *vice versa*. In other words, “Muslims are often discouraged (publicly and privately) from seeking out knowledge about outgroup religions” (Al Ramiah, Hewstone and Wölfer, 2017, p. 47). It is therefore Al Ramiah, Hewstone and Wölfer strongly suggested the four factors as outlined above. Contact, indeed, improves intergroup relations, reduces prejudice, improves tolerance (Verkuyten, Yogeeswaran and Adelman, 2019; Dovidio, Eller and Hewstone, 2011; Paluck and Green, 2009; Green and Janelle, 2008; and Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; 2000). Regrettably, it is discouraged in Malaysian settings by Islamic authorities (Chin and Tanasaldy, 2019, p. 975). The reasons given are that Muslims and non-Muslim are not at the same level to dialogue and that Muslims will be influenced by non-Muslims. In view of these, the mutual inter-religious contact approach is untimely or unsuitable in the Malaysian context, as suggested and encouraged by many.

In addition, although there is multi-ethnicity and multi-identity, Malay-Muslim as a subgroup identity always represented a salient and created a single, highly exclusive identity category (Brewer and Pierce, 2005, p. 428) in which inevitably creating a differentiation between Malay-Muslim and non-Malay Muslim or “us” and “other” (López, 2014, p. 327). The framing of “us” and “other” is an endeavour of the state and Islamic political parties for their political gain (Lemière, 2023; López, 2014, p. 327; Wong, 2024, p. 116). Creation and framing of “us” and “other” would be putting

every citizen at risk because this will always lead to out-groups' prejudice and intolerance.

Finally, while all religious groups exhibit in-group favouritism toward their associated believers, Muslims are particularly prone to carving out exclusive religious worldviews because they appear to be becoming less knowledgeable about non-Muslim religious customs and more socially remote from non-Muslims. In Malaysia, religious identities are highly valued and developed, but the religious "Other" is rarely acknowledged. "Failure in nation-building is given a hint by the finding that Malays and non-Malays do not share the conception, let alone aspiration, of what it means to be Malaysian" (Abdul Hamid, 2018, p. 64).

Past Studies on Religious Tolerance in Malaysia

Thus, so far, religious tolerance in Malaysia has been studied from historical, social, moral and virtue, contact and dialogue, and religious perspectives. The following reviews briefly discuss each perspective.

Historical perspective (e.g. Bakar, 2011; Abdul Ghani and Awang, 2017; Mohd Nor, 2011) basically describes the writings on religious tolerance in Malaysia – an overview. This perspective focuses on religious issues at the different stages in Malaysian history. This perspective also provides substantial information and insight into the practice of religious tolerance in the Malaysian context, as well as the contributing factors to religious tolerance in post-colonial Malaysia (see Abdul Ghani and Awang, 2017, p. 79 and Bakar, 2011).

Social perspective (e.g. Abubakar, 2013; Abdul Rahman and Mohd Khambali, 2013) depicts the religious tolerance in two opposite situations. Abdul Rahman and Mohd Khambali (2013) argue that the main challenges to practising religious tolerance in Malaysia is the lack of understanding of religious tolerance. They further argue that current religious tolerance in Malaysia has emerged from non-guidance module (p. 81). Conversely, Abubakar (2013) claims that there are several factors that contributed to religious tolerance in Malaysia, amongst many are religious teachings and approaches, the Constitution of Malaysia (which guarantees the rights of Malaysians), and the Malaysian government promoting religious tolerance and harmony via Islam Hadhari and One Malaysia (p. 90).

Moral or virtue perspective, is to emphasis, politeness, good manners, respect, forgiveness and doing good works (Abdul Rahman and Shapie, 2023, p. 168; Mohd Zawawi, Md Zain, Embong, Engku Alwi and Mohamed El-Khayat, 2022). Using the

qualitative approach, Abdul Rahman and Shapie interviewed 13 leaders and experts from each major religion (Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism). Whereas Mohd Zawawi, Md Zain, Embong, Engku Alwi and Mohamed El-Khayat (2022) interviewed 4 prominent Muslims (three Muslim activists and one academic). They concluded that religious tolerance entails upholding one's own faith, respecting the religious convictions of others, and being prepared to extend forgiveness and perform good deeds for people who practice different religions or care about the welfare of society. These virtues that are promoted in all major religions are able to unite all people from various religions, and as a way to establish religious tolerance in a Malaysian society.

Contact/dialogue approach (e.g. Ramli and Awang, 2018; Wan Yusof and Ab Majid, 2013; 2012). Contact and dialogue always bring positive results in intergroup relations and reduce intolerance in Malaysia and other parts of the world (e.g. Mohamad et al., 2023; Mohamed Yasin, 2019; Ramli and Awang, 2018; Kanas, Scheepers and Sterkens, 2017; Wan Yusof and Ab Majid, 2013; 2012, and Abd. Rahim et al. 2011; Verkuyten, Yogeeswaran and Adelman, 2019; Dovidio, Eller and Hewstone, 2011; Paluck and Green, 2009; Green and Janelle, 2008; and Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; 2000). Nonetheless, almost all Islamist groups in Malaysia say that non-Muslims should not be allowed to participate in any debate of Islamic topics since they are not members of the faith. No notable Islamic organisation in Malaysia encourages formal dialogue with non-Muslim groups. For years, the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism has invited JAKIM (the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia) and other Islamic authorities to an interfaith debate. Each time, these officials declined to attend in their official capacity, claiming that non-Islamic faiths cannot be treated equally with Islam in Malaysia. They further contend that interfaith discussion encourages religious plurality, which they see as anti-Islamic (Chin and Tanasaldy, 2019, p. 975. See Hunt, 2009 for the struggles of Malay-Muslims to engage in interreligious dialogue, which is due to their identity).

Religious perspective (e.g. Fadzil, 2012) studies religious tolerance based on Islamic religious teachings (i.e. Quran) as well as tolerance practised by Muhammad towards other religious followers (i.e. non-Muslims). In promoting religious tolerance, he concluded, "Islam has its limits within the boundaries set by the *shariah*. Regarding the situation in Malaysia, even though the government has tried its best to accommodate the needs of the multi-religious society, there is still room for improvement" (p. 360). Mohd Zawawi et al. (2022), on the other hand, based on the universal values of Islam, advocate that tolerance according to al-Milal wa al-Nihal can accommodate cultural and religious diversity in Malaysia, and national identity is the

expression of such tolerance. Mohd Zawawi et al. conclude by calling Muslims in Malaysia to reflect on the religious tolerance in regards to the teaching of Islam (al-Milal wa al-Nihal) that has been used by many Muslim scholars throughout history (2022, p. 202). Nonetheless, the religious tolerance that is supported by using Islamic teaching is not heading in the expected direction. The development of religious intolerance in Malaysia is well acknowledged by Robertson. He urged, "Malaysian government officials should speak out against the rising tide of religious intolerance rather than contribute to it" (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Lemière (2023) adds, "In a context where religion is highly politicized, each election sets the stage for politicians on each side of the political, racial, and religious divide to stir up controversies against 'the others.' And elections are coming, threatening to unleash the worst of what Malaysia has to offer" (Lemière, 2023). It should be noted that the Malaysian government comprises more than 70 per cent of Muslims. Also, the doctrinal understanding of religious tolerance very much depends on the capacity of individuals and their willingness (see arguments by Bakar, 2011, p. 624). It is easy to be influenced by an imagined community (*ummah* community) due to its social identity. "Which version of Islam is more compatible with toleration?" may not be the best question to ask in dealing with Islamic tolerance in order to advocate that version to serve the purpose. Each version has its negative or positive points. Rather, this paper approaches the subject from the social psychological perspective (social identity approach).

The past studies of religious tolerance reviewed above have not considered the social identity perspective as a way to promote and increase religious tolerance in Malaysia. This study intends to fill a theoretical gap (theory application void gap) on religious tolerance in Malaysia by suggesting a social identity approach to religious tolerance, besides or other than self-awareness, learning, contact and dialogue approaches. Wong (2024) found that those who were identified as Malaysian showed minimal predisposition to others. Therefore, it is sensible to consider promoting national identity for religious tolerance in Malaysia.

Mechanism of the Social Identity Approach

Social identity stretches far beyond simply providing an identity to a social group. It forms the basis of any group's action and reactions – how a social group (ethnic, religious and class) interact with other groups (Walters, 2010, p. ii). Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Social Categorisation Theory (SCT) offer a valuable theoretical framework to understand intergroup relations and group behaviours, such as favouritism, bias, prejudice, discrimination and tolerance in groups' (including religious groups) context.

The social identity approach incorporates SIT (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and SCT (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam and McGarty, 1994; Mavor and Ysseldyk, 2020, p. 190). Social identity and categorisation are the perceptions of people through their membership in social groups or social categories to which he/she perceives himself/herself as belonging. In other words, social identity and categorisation define how a person and others see her or his position in a society, impact a person's self-image, help a person make sense of the world, reduce ambiguity and uncertainty, and lead a person to behave in ways that are consistent with the group (Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Korostelina, 2021, p. 53).

The social identity approach places a strong emphasis on the significance of belonging to a group and the impact that this membership will have on an individual's behaviour. Attraction to other members of the ingroup is likely to be sparked by belonging to a group. Additionally, it may result in negative attitudes toward members of the outgroup and positive biases toward members of the ingroup (Hogg and Abrams, 2001, p. 254). As stated by Tajfel and Turner (1979, p. 38), "The tendency to favour the ingroup over the outgroup in evaluation and behaviour" is referred to as ingroup bias. The need to boost one's self-esteem is what drives this kind of biased behaviour (Herriot, 2007, p. 28). This is an "omnipresent feature of intergroup relations," according to the evidence (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, p. 38). The minimal group paradigm, a model developed based on an experiment by Tajfel and Turner, demonstrates that ingroup bias can be created simply by being a member of a group (Hogg and Abrams, 2001, p. 175). Members of the group always aim to maximise the gains of the ingroup and the losses of the outgroup, as this paradigm has repeatedly demonstrated. It has been demonstrated that when the outgroup suffers greater losses, ingroup members will accept a smaller gain for their own group (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p. 49). This paradigm has led to two conclusions: first, a high degree of outgroup discrimination can be anticipated; and second, intergroup competition and discrimination can exist simply because one is a member of a group (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p. 51).

An individual can become a member of a group in one of two ways. Allport clarifies that an individual may have to struggle in order to become a member of their own group (1954, p. 33). Attained status is the term for this. Allport states that most memberships are "conferred automatically by birth and family tradition" (1954, p. 33). This is known as "ascribed status". When someone has ascribed status, they are born into an already-existing system in which categories/identities are created based on a variety of characteristics, including race, religion, parentage, place of birth, and more. The matter of fact which follows this is that an individual always has not one, but multiple identities. Depending on these variables, people will join certain groups but not others. After that, the person will "internalise the dominant ideology" of their

group and develop a specific social identity that, depending on the standing of the group as a whole, may be positive or negative (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p. 27). Because this identification is such a crucial component of self-definition, people enjoy identifying with or belonging to groups (Hogg and Abrams, 2001, p. 254). Being a member of a group can boost one's self-esteem because "it requires a degree of acceptance by one's fellow adherents" (Herriot, 2007, p. 100). Additionally, a person can enhance their self-esteem by contrasting their group with the outgroup (Herriot, 2007, p. 100). The ingroup will identify specific outgroups once group identity and, consequently, the identities of its members have been established. The social identity approach makes extensive use of the ideas of ingroup and outgroup. The definition offered by Allport (1954) is the most useful for conceptualising the ingroup. He acknowledges that it is challenging to define an ingroup precisely, but he claims that "members of an ingroup all use the term *we* with the same essential significance" (Allport, 1954, p. 31). Followingly, everyone who is not considered a member of the ingroup is considered an outgroup.

It is clear from the outline that certain repercussions arise from ingroup formation. The formation of the ingroup occurs in opposition to or in relation to another group. Members of the ingroup are therefore likely to act discriminatorily against members of the out-group while favouring the ingroup. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), if this "generic norm of behaviour" toward the outgroup is real, then certain repercussions ought to follow. The first is that discriminatory behaviour toward the outgroup may exist even when it is not in the ingroup's best interests to exhibit such behaviour, which implies that the ingroup will not benefit from it. The second effect is that discriminatory behaviour can appear even in situations where prejudice against the outgroup was not previously present. This raises the point that discriminatory behaviour may exist before animosity or prejudice-based attitudes have developed. Even in situations where there is no conflict of interest or a history of animosity between groups, discriminatory intergroup behaviour will be anticipated if these outcomes are true (Brewer, 2007, pp. 696-697; Hogg and Abrams, 2001, pp. 181-182).

Nevertheless, recategorising multiple identities into a single undifferentiated group (a one-group representation) reduces bias (Dovidio, Gaertner and Kafati, 2000, p. 7; Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman and Rust, 1993; Gaertner, Dovidio and Bachman, 1996). Moreover, the inclusion of various subgroups into an inclusive superordinate group rises tolerance (Kalin and Siddiqui, 2020; Mummenday and Wenzel, 1999). The development of a common in-group identity (the sense of "*we*-ness") does not necessarily require each group to forsake its less inclusive group identity or distinctiveness completely. It is within the mechanism of recategorisation of social identities into common ingroup identity (superordinate identity), attitudes

toward former out-group members will improve if members of different groups are persuaded to view themselves as members of a superordinate social group rather than two distinct groups (Gaertner et al., 1993). Conflict between the subgroups is lessened when people identify with a superordinate group because the favouritism that is reserved for in-group members is extended to former out-group members. In a survey experiment, Transue (2007) explicitly adopts the common ingroup identity framework and discovers that making a superordinate identity salient can help overcome the "particularism effect", which happens when members of a dominant majority group have a tendency to oppose public policies that disproportionately benefit a minority out-group, such as affirmative action. Additionally, it increases respondents' general support for the provision of public goods. The constructivist, institutionalist or primordialist paradigms of ethnic identity that are common in political science are not strictly adhered to by the common in-group identity model, which is theoretically flexible. Like constructivist accounts, the common in-group identity model maintains that identities are multiple and malleable, but it is indifferent to their origins. However, it goes on to say that these identities are frequently nested, with smaller, more localised identities contained within larger, more comprehensive identities that can be activated or made salient in an institutionalist manner to serve as focal points to bring together otherwise antagonistic subgroups (Kalin and Siddiquie, 2020, pp. 62-63).

If the recategorisation takes the form of dual identity, the superordinate and subgroups' identities must be both salient. Because it allows the advantages of a common in-group identity to function without generating opposing motivations to achieve positive distinctiveness, establishing a common superordinate identity while concurrently maintaining the salience of subgroup identities is especially effective (Dovidio, Gaertner and Kafati, 2000, p. 9). This common in-group identity model is similar to the social identity complexity model in which higher complexity (acknowledgement of differentiation and difference between in-group categories, that is, each category/identity is salient) reduces in-group favouritism and increases tolerance and positivity toward the outgroup in general (Brewer and Pierce, 2005, pp. 429, 431).

However, it is aware that emphasising group diversity (salient identity or distinctiveness of subgroups) may not always induce positive intergroup relations. In some contexts, emphasising group diversity constitutes a threat which results in negative intergroup attitudes (Ehrke and Steffens, 2025, p. 386). Therefore, the alternative approach suggested for religious tolerance in Malaysia must take this into consideration. The distinctiveness of the subgroups must be maintained, but without emphasising or highlighting them. In other words, acknowledging and appreciating the diversity without sacrificing the common similarity of superordinate identity.

In addition, it is aware that social complexity (e.g. Brewer and Pierce, 2005; Roccas and Brewer, 2002), multiple (e.g. Crisp, Hewstone and Rubin, 2001; Prinyapol, Chaiwutikornwanich and Huansuriya, 2023) and integrate (Huff, 2018) identities can also generate positive intergroup relationships and improve tolerance, but common ingroup identity is prioritised in this suggestion for three reasons: (1) there is already a study which had proven Malaysian as a superordinate identity exhibits least prejudice and discrimination towards the outgroups (shows greater tolerance), (2) common ingroup identity model is simple, straightforward, effective and easy to be understood if compare to complexity identity, multiple identity and integrate identity models, and (3) Malaysian (national identity) is a shared superordinate identity which every citizen of Malaysia inherited and highlighting this identity is much simple endeavour.

Methodology

This study utilised the qualitative approach that encompassed extensive reviews of the literature which are related to the research on intergroup relationships from the perspective of social psychology and literature on religious tolerance. Other secondary sources include mass media and articles related to religious tolerance in the Malaysian context.

National Identity (Malaysian) as Tolerance and Unifying Factors

In Malaysia, society and citizens are deeply divided, differentiated and boundaries are set according to ethnicity and religion since independence. To some, ethnicity is their salient identity, to others is religion. However, to certain is their ethno-religious identity (i.e. Malay-Muslim). These social boundaries obviously divided the society into groups. Groups may not have threat, competition, or comparison, but the differentiation itself already causes prejudice, including religious intolerance (Wong, 2024, pp. 112-119). These divisions and differentiation are caused by education, politicians, and religious leaders. Among these, politicians are the main players. Politicians exaggerate this situation to a greater extent in every election for their political benefits (Lemière, 2023). To put it simply, Malaysian society is greatly divided into ingroup and outgroup (i.e. Muslims as ingroup and non-Muslims as outgroup).

The efforts of creating or making new social boundaries that reduce inequality and exclusion, and promote tolerance, must be taken. It can be done through recategorising the various identities (i.e. Malay-Muslim, Chinese, Indian, Iban, Kadazan, etc.) into a common ingroup identity, namely superordinate identity, that is, Malaysian or national identity. This superordinate identity needs to be emphasised in

every aspect of official and unofficial events. If the society is maintaining the current identity categories, Malay-Muslim, Chinese, Indian, Indigenous People, favourable of ingroup and bias against the outgroup is unavoidable. Tolerance can hardly be reduced because of identitarian. However, in order to promote equality and tolerance among different social identities (for example, national, ethnic and religious) in Malaysia, the national identity, that is, Malaysian, needs to be prioritised. Malaysia is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society; to emphasise different social identities is to increase the social boundaries among groups, and the consequences predicted are ingroup bias and outgroup discrimination and intolerance, especially when outgroups are compared and perceived as a threat (Brewer 2001; Gibson 2006).

Malaysian is an ascribed status "conferred automatically" to all who were born in Malaysia and is shared by every citizen regardless of education level, occupation, ethnicity, faith, and gender. This is quite a concept of One Malaysia (see Abubakar, 2013, p. 95; Ramli and Tengku Jusoh, 2011; Md Jani et al., 2015), but without a political agenda and cognitive. When Malaysians identify with their broader and inclusive group, their distinct religious identities become less central, leading to a decrease in negative perceptions of others and an increase in tolerance.

The findings of Wong (2024, pp. 165-170) supported such arguments. His findings suggested that Malaysian identity demonstrated the slightest prejudice and bias. Therefore, Malaysian identity is what communities should emphasise and promote. Nevertheless, the distinctiveness of each subgroup should not be ignored and suppressed, lest it results in intergroup defiance. Hence, it proposes that while promoting superordinate identity (Malaysian), the uniqueness of subgroups must be maintained, but should not be highlighted all the time. In other words, the society ought to appreciate and acknowledge the differences among subgroups, but at the same time advance the common national identity.

Using one overseas case as an example – Pakistan. The study by Kalin and Siddiqui (2020) shows that prejudice can be overcome by emphasising a superordinate identity (national identity) to which members of different groups belong. Based on what they discovered (see p. 7), highlighting a shared national identity can significantly increase respondents' propensity to express tolerant viewpoints and grant them distributive policies that raise their material standing. This is particularly true for people who are more likely to identify with the country and enjoy a comparatively high social status within the national community. These findings should inspire similar research to be carried out in Malaysia.

Besides religious tolerance, according to Mohd Zawawi et al., "National identity embraces the acknowledgement and identification of ethnic, sectarian and religious identities" (2022, p. 193). Moreover, Mohd Zawawi, Md Zain, Embong, Engku Alwi and Mohamed El-Khayat (2022, p. 1981) claim that "the formation of national identity is an effort in finding common ground".

Magdanovna, Arskieva and Vershitsky (2024) in *Formation of National Identity as the Basis of Intercultural Communication* also claim that in an ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse country, "national identity is a factor that binds a nation as a single spiritual and sociocultural community" (p. 1). Using education as an approach to nurture individuals' national identity, people are strengthened and developed into a unified and cohesive nation. Nonetheless, fostering national identity must not sacrifice their respective cultural and religious traits. In fact, individuals' history, traditions, religious beliefs and ethnic origins must be recognised and honoured (p. 1). Magdanovna, Arskieva and Vershitsky (2024) believe that the better development of individual national identity, "the more respectful his/her attitude towards the culture and traditions of other peoples becomes" (p. 6). In other words, the better the development of national identity, the higher the tolerance level will be. Hence, national identity is a means of tolerance, including religious.

Since there are secular tools available for promoting intergroup (religious) tolerance, it suggests that religious tolerance is too important to be left exclusively to the clerics (Kalin and Siddiqui, 2020, p. 74). The success of this suggested approach depends on the content of national education, politicians and religious leaders. Tengku Maimun, the former Chief Justice of Malaysia, once said, "Political leaders among the biggest threats to the Constitution" (Sinar Daily, 2025). This does not only apply to the Constitution, but also to national unity and toleration. Lemière points out that "In a context where religion is highly politicized, each election sets the stage for politicians on each side of the political, racial, and religious divide to stir up controversies against *the others*. And elections are coming, threatening to unleash the worst of what Malaysia has to offer" (Lemière, 2023). Hence, the religious tolerance in Malaysia ought to start from politicians, education (for good examples, see Chandra and Suleeman, 2023 and Parker, 2014) and religious leaders to promote and emphasise national identity (i.e. Malaysian) for the harmony and profit of the nation, a place of tolerance that brings a better and peaceful future.

Other Alternative Approaches and Future Study

Who is Malaysian? This study has answered it from a birth rights and legal perspective, but not a social psychological perspective. It is a need to answer this question from

social psychology preposition (e.g. ingroup projection model. See Ehrke and Steffens, 2025; Karić, Eckerle and Cohrs, 2025; Wang, Wang, and Kou, 2018; Wenzel, Mummendey and Waldzus, 2007). To answer the question from social psychology prepositions will provide how citizens project themselves into a superordinate category, who are the dominant ingroup members (prototypical positions), and consequently improve the level of religious tolerance by reducing the perceived self-typicality, if applicable.

As Hornsey and Hogg (2000) suggested, increasing the salience of a superordinate identity category can make groups more inclusive by highlighting their similarities with that identity. Dovidio, Gaertner, and Saguy (2007) state that specific intergroup contexts determine whether this effect persists. Future research might think about promoting the development of multiple or dual identities rather than focusing on just one. The dual or multiple identities will also reduce bias and foster intergroup relations – less intergroup bias, less anxiety towards outgroups and less ingroup partiality (Schmid, Hewstone, Tausch, Cairns and Hughes, 2009; Sharp, Shariff and LaBouff, 2020). Also, multiple identities will reduce ingroup favouritism, outgroup bias and increase intergroup tolerance (Crisp, Hewstone and Rubin, 2001; Prinyapol, Chaiwutikornwanich and Huansuriya, 2023). Another possible study is concerning the integration of multiple social identities. In interpersonal and intergroup situations, people who are more inclined to integrate multiple identities are more tolerant (Huff, 2018, p. 93). It is worth studying and applying this method in Malaysia's multi-cultural and multi-religious contexts in order to improve tolerance for groups that hold different values, opinions and belief systems.

Implications

Positive emotions like appreciation, empathy, and trust are reserved for the ingroup and denied to outgroups, which can lead to many forms of prejudice, bias, and intolerance, rather than because outgroups are repulsive (Brewer, 1999, p. 438). This is particularly true for Malaysia. Abdul Hamid's (2018, p. 64) view should be appreciated: "Religious identities in Malaysia are highly valued and cultivated, but in a way that hardly appreciates the religious 'other'. Failure in nation-building is given a hint by the finding that Malays and non-Malays do not share the conception, let alone aspiration, of what it means to be Malaysian." Therefore, the decision-makers, politicians, religious leaders, and contents of education ought to promote not only the superordinate identity, but also the virtue of appreciation among groups in Malaysia that need to be cultivated. According to the implications of this social identity approach, no Malaysian should be superior to themselves. Last but not least, Muslim leaders should value the plurality or diversity of Malaysian society to avoid forgetting

that all Malaysians are equal, as stated in Article 8(2) of the Federation Constitution (Wong, 2024, pp. 191-192).

Limitations

It has been observed that creating a sense of common ingroup identity can help to foster intergroup tolerance and lessen intergroup conflict. However, there are aspects of the strong sense of common ingroup identity that could make members of the disadvantaged group less motivated to work together for social change. According to Ufkes, Calcagno, Glasford, and Dovidio (2016), the problem is not recategorisation in itself, but rather an exclusive emphasis on common ingroup identity that erodes enthusiasm for social change. It is hoped that religious tolerance does not come at the expense of a decrease in in-group collective action. Although precaution measures have been considered (see the second last paragraph on the section on the mechanism of social identity approach), an empirical study needs to be carried out in order to find out the level of the impact (great extent or low extent) of a strong sense of shared ingroup identity on collective action for all groups and influenced areas of such impact.

Conclusion

Intolerance based on race and religion is a persistent problem in Malaysia. Although contact, dialogue and knowledge about other faiths are effective ways to reduce intolerance, it is deemed inappropriate in the Malaysian context. This paper suggests an alternative approach to improve tolerance in general and religious tolerance in particular. Malaysian as a national identity or shared superordinate identity minimises differentiation, boundary and categorisation between various religious communities. Malaysian is a more inclusive identity which exhibits greater tolerance, less bias. Much work is needless to be done; this identity has already been conferred automatically to every citizen. Since there are secular tools available for promoting intergroup (religious) tolerance (i.e. common ingroup identity model), it implies that religious tolerance can be accomplished by common people or every citizen, and it is too crucial to be left to the clerics alone. However, the challenge is always on politicians who stir up tensions between different communities, regardless of race or religion. The education ministry, politicians and all others should promote a Malaysian (superordinate identity or national identity) over other identities.

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To cite (Harvard):

W. K. Sing. (2026) 'Religious Tolerance in Malaysia: A Social Identity Approach', *Journal of Religion and Public Life,* 3(1), pp. 47-71. DOI: https://doi.org/10.70600/jrpl.v3i1.006

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.

Journal of Religion and Public Life
Volume 3, Issue 1 (May 2026)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Surprising Success of Christianity in Indonesia[1]

Revd Ray Porter [2]

Abstract: The article discusses Indonesia as the largest Muslim majority country which also has the largest percentage of Christians in any majority Muslim country. It looks at the history of Christianity in Indonesia beginning with the presumed activity of the group Church of the East also known as the Nestorian church and then the effects of colonialism by Portuguese the Dutch and for very short period the British and the influence that had on missionary activity noting also the tole of indigenous evangelism. It then looks at the process to Independence and notes the involvement of Christians in both the initial Independent Movement and also the subsequent nation building. It notes certain specific providential activities such as the time of revival in the late 1960s and proposes the future of Christianity within the country will be found in the continuing activity of the current Christian community rather than any missionary activity.

Keywords: Nestorianism Colonialism Missionary Indigenous Independence Revival

Indonesia is an archipelago of over 17,000 islands in Southeast Asia. It is by area the 14th largest country in the world and the fourth largest by population at 280 million. About half that population live on Java (about the same size as England and Wales) making it the most populous island in the world. It is the world's largest Muslim majority country with the largest percentage of Christians in any Muslim majority nation at 10.47% comprising about 20 million Protestants and 8 million Catholics. Despite the predominance of Islam, Indonesia is not an Islamic nation, but nor is it secular. The first point of the constitution, the Pancasila, is Ketuhanan yang Mahaesa - belief in one God.

[1] This article is not fully footnoted. Some material is from verbal information or representing personal impressions.

[2] The Revd Ray Porter worked in Indonesia from 1973 to 1986 as a member of OMF International and a minister of the Protestant Church in West Indonesia. Before retirement in 2013 he was Director of World Mission Studies at Oak Hill College in London.

Early History of Christianity in Indonesia[3]



There is a belief that the first place in Indonesia where a Christian church was established is Barus on the North West coast of Sumatra in the 7th century. Barus was an important port and was particularly noted for Camphor. Later it is believed that it was through the same port that Islam entered the archipelago. The Christians entering were most probably from the Great Church of the East, commonly referred to as Nestorian in Western sources and usually regarded as part of Oriental Orthodoxy. In this period the church had begun to expand into China and other parts of Asia. Another possibility would be the Mar Toma church, but by this period the church had already come under Syrian influences and therefore related to the Great Church. Certainly, the message came from Southern India possibly by merchants and Tamil speakers.

The writings of Shaik Abu Saleh al Armini, writing in Arabic in the twelfth century, also mentions the presence of a Christian church in Pancur near Barus.

In the 14th century, the first Catholic mission that reached Indonesia was led by Italian Franciscan friar Mattiusi. In his book "Travels of Friar Odoric of Pordenone" he visited several places in today's Indonesia between 1318 and 1330. He was sent by the Pope to launch a mission into the Asian interiors. In 1318 he departed from Padua, crossed the Black Sea into Persia and then to Calcutta, Madras, and Sri Lanka. Then he headed to Nicobar Island and Sumatra, before visiting Java and Banjarmasin.[4]

In 1347 the Catholic Bishop Marignolli OFM visited Palembang in South Sumatra and reported that there were Christians there.[5] Palembang had been the centre of the Sriwijaya Empire that controlled much of Southeast Asia from the 500 AD to the 11th century.

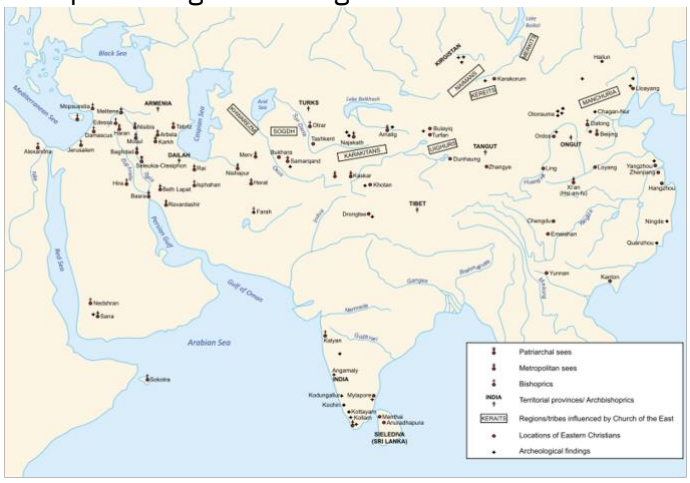
A Frenchman, Lois of Varheme, met two Nestorian merchants in Burma en route to Java, Borneo and the Molluccan Islands in 1506.[6] Patriarch Mar Eliyah consecrated a Metropolitan for Dabag (presumed to be Java) in 1503.[7]

So, the assumption can be made that Nestorian Christianity was found in parts of Indonesia from the 7th to the 16th century. It was Asian Christianity from its Syrian base mediated probably through Indian merchants and possibly monks as found in

[3] I will use the name Indonesia throughout even though it only applies to the country from 1945
[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church_in_Indonesia
[5] http://www.acts.edu/oldmissions/indonehist1.html
[6] Nau. L'expansion Nestorienne en Asie. Annals du Musee Guimet Bibliotheque de Vulgarisation, Tome 40. p.27
[7] http://www.oxuscom.com/COTE_Timeline.pdf and http://www.nestorian.org/nestorian_patriarchs.html

other parts of East Asia. There were two periods of expansion of the church to China and East Asia – the first during Tang Dynasty as testified by the Xian stella and then in the period of Mongol control, the Yuan dynasty.

A map showing something of the extent of the church.



Roman Catholicism

Indonesia is home to the spice islands that were eagerly sought by western merchants. Christopher Columbus was attempting to find a westward route to them when he stumbled on the Americas. The first maritime power was the Portuguese who established their control over Goa in India, Malacca in Malaya and the Moluccan Islands in Indonesia. With Portuguese control the path was open for Roman Catholic missionaries of whom the most notable was Frances Xavier, one of the founders of the Society of Jesus commonly known as the Jesuits. Xavier baptised several thousand and my suspicion is that these were not pagans but Nestorian Christians.

The Dutch East Indies Company

The Dutch arrived in Indonesia in 1596. Their conflict with the Portuguese and the English continued into the next century. The Dutch conquest was a commercial enterprise run by the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC – Dutch East Indies Company). It was under their auspices that the conversion of the Eastern islands of Indonesia took place. As Latourette reports[8], the Company "regarded Christianity as one of its functions". In the renewed "oktroi" (monopoly) in 1622 it was bound to carry out Article 36 of the Dutch Confession of Faith that reads "The government is to care for the Holy Church, to oppose and to destroy all false religions and idol worships, to ruin the kingdom of Antichrist, and to advance the Kingdom of Jesus[9]". This meant a

[8] Latourette 1970 p. 303

[9] Quoted at www.acts.edu/oldmissions/indinehist1.html from Müller Krüger Sedjarah Geredja di Indonesia Badan Penerbit Kristen Jakarta 1959:26

banning of Catholicism and the baptising of many Indonesians[10]. The Company's motive was to have compliant natives. From the Indonesians' point of view, there advantage in being baptised was that it opened the way to great privileges from the Dutch, even though it was not equality. These Christians were regarded as black Dutchmen. Ministers were appointed to Indonesia, but their main concern was to pastor the Dutch people. The number of ministers in 1776 was only 22 who had declined to 4 by 1810. 30,000 Catholics were (re)baptised, but there was no confirmation for most of them and no provision for Holy Communion.

The ministers were appointed, controlled and paid by the Company. It presents a picture of the worst aspects of colonialism using religion for its own ends. And yet, there were true Gospel initiatives. Many of the classes of the Dutch church examined those who were going out as missionaries and kept in contact with them. In the 1620s and 1630s, a seminary was maintained in Leiden, at the expense of the Company, to train ministers for the Indies. The church did not need to raise funds, but there was a missionary interest. There was a concern to present the scriptures in local languages. Indonesian, in the guise of Bahasa Melayu Ambon (Ambonese Malay), can claim in the post-Reformation period to be the first non-European language into which parts of the scriptures were translated. The New Testament was produced in 1668 although some Gospels had been produced before that[11]. The full Bible was published in Malay in 1734 in Roman script and in 1759 in Arabic script[12]. Several ministers learned Malay. Many of these were godly and dedicated men.

Before the Company was abolished in 1799, the Christians of the Dutch East Indies were more numerous than in any other country east of India. Latourette reports estimates of as many as 200,000 Christians[13]. However shallow their faith might have been, which we are in no position to assess, the presence of large numbers of Christians was an important factor in the evangelisation of the largest Muslim nation. The Company was happy for the Gospel to be preached where it was advantageous to trade, but there were two areas where it banned Gospel preaching. The first was in those Kingdoms like Ternate where commercial agreements with local Muslim Sultans included the promise of no attempts being made to change the religion of the population. The other was in the Kingdoms of Java outside of Batavia (Jakarta)[14]. This was similar to the agreements that the British made with the Sultans in Malaya[15] and which still in law forbid the evangelisation of Malays.

[10] The term is used for convenience to describe any of the diverse peoples of the archipelago, but it is anachronistic before the Twentieth Century. Likewise, the use of the term Indonesia when the true title should be the Dutch East Indies.

[11] Albert Cornelisz Ruyl in 1603 produced the first translation of the Gospel of Matthew.

[12] Roman script has predominated for Indonesian, but Malay has used Arabic script extensively. Other Indonesian languages, like Javanese, have used a Sanskrit based script.

[13] Latourette 1970:306

[14] Jakarta is spelt Djakarta in documents before 1974. This Dutch orthography is also found in the use of "oe" to represent the sound "u" and "tj" for the sound "ch" represented by "c" in modern Indonesian, but by "ch" in Malay.

[15] Pangkor Treaty 1874

How should we regard this period? First, we may rejoice in the entrance of the Gospel to many parts of Indonesia and the godly Dutchmen involved in this work. There were those churches and individuals from Holland who had a true understanding of the need to preach the Gospel to the heathen and were ready to use the opportunity presented by the Company. We may note how, despite the college in Leiden, few made it to the East Indies. Some had health that failed. Others failed morally. At one stage, the Company sent new ministers, soon after they arrived in Batavia, to Bali, whose women were regarded as the most beautiful in the colony, to obtain a wife! The Dutchness of the church left little room for indigenous theology to develop. The Company was always more concerned for the spiritual welfare of the Dutch than for native inhabitants. The foundations were laid that could produce church growth after Independence in a similar way to the growth of the church in China after missionaries had left.

Coolen and the Church in East Java

The different ways in which Christianity became established in Indonesia is well illustrated by the saga of Coolen and the establishment of a church in East Java. It is important to know the nature of religion in Java[16] before attempting to understand the ways in which the evangelism took place.

Java has an ancient civilisation. Hinduism and Buddhism have dominated the culture since before the building of the great Candi of Borobudur in the Eighth Century and the Hindu shrines of Prambanan at about the same time. The Kingdoms of Java dominated the island as first one and then another held the greater power[17]. Despite the adoption of Islam and the conversion of the kingdoms into sultanates, this influence is still apparent. The magical practices from the animistic past have been combined with ideas from Hinduism and Buddhism under the general umbrella of Islam to produce what is best called "The Religion of Java"[18]. This strange syncretism results, for instance, in the Sultan of Jogjakarta (officially a Muslim) going each year to the southern coast to celebrate his ritual marriage to Dewi Loro Kidul, the Queen of the Southern Ocean. Underlying all this belief and practice is the panentheistic and mystical concept of menyatu dengan semesta alam (being at one with the universe). Javanese traditionally would describe their religious quest as mentjari ngelmu (the seeking of mystical knowledge) to unlock the secrets of relating to the universe. Various means of achieving this are called kebatinan (inwardness). The court background of Javanese culture has produced dance, music, shadow puppets (wayang kulit) and the visual arts which have developed from its Indic base into something distinctively Javanese. The most Hindu part of Indonesia today is Bali. The remnant of

[16] Although the whole island is called Java, the Javanese people are to be found primarily in Central and East Java.
[17] The Sumatran kingdom of Sriwijaya should not be forgotten!
[18] A book of this name by Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (New York, The Free Press, 1959) is still regarded as an authoritative guide to the beliefs of the Javanese although some of his conclusions have been questioned by subsequent scholars.

the old East Javanese kingdom of Majapahit which fell in 1478 is preserved there. After that Islam became the major religion of East Java.

Because of the Napoleonic wars[19], from 1811 to 1815 the East Indies were under British control with Stamford Raffles as Governor. He permitted missionaries to come to Java. 1st May 1813 marks the arrival in Batavia of William Robinson as the first known missionary to the Javanese. He was a Baptist and had spent time with Carey, Marshman, and Ward in Serampore. He was sent to Java with instructions to learn the Javanese language first and after that Malay and Dutch. Robinson was plagued with ill health and never learned the complicated Javanese language in which there are about nine ways of saying anything depending on who you are and to whom you are speaking. He left Java in 1821, never to return.

On 26th May 1814 Joseph Kam, Gottlob Brückner, and John Supper arrived in Batavia as members of the London Missionary Society. Kam was from Flanders and had buried his parents, wife, daughter and two unmarried sisters before he was free to proceed as a missionary at the age of 45. Kam was to have his main ministry in the Moluccan islands where he would earn the sobriquet "The Apostle to the Moluccas". On his way there he stayed in Surabaya for six months. He was given charge of the European Christians there and under his ministry the group grew spiritually so that they were nicknamed "The Pious of Surabaya". Amongst the group was Johannes Emde a German watchmaker who became the leader after Kam left. Many of the group were Eurasians[20]. Emde's wife was Javanese and she and her daughter were also converted. The group was vigorous in evangelism which did not fit into the plans of the Dutch after they had taken back the government in 1816. "The Pious" were often taken to court and in 1820 Emde was imprisoned.

David Bentley-Taylor, who has written this history[21], seeks to steer a clear path through the different people and missions who became involved in Java during the British interlude and the subsequent years under the Dutch. Kam, Brückner and Supper were all ordained in London as Dutch Reformed ministers, and it was expected that they would work in the Reformed Church in the Indies. However, Brückner changed his mind on baptism and resigned from LMS to join the BMS[22]. As a German trained in Holland, he was allowed to continue after the restoration of Dutch control. Based primarily in Central Java (but also for a while in India at Serampore) he began translating the New Testament into Javanese. As he completed sections, he sent them off to Emde. His wife and daughter copied the text out and then handed them on to Javanese they met. Amongst these was Kiai Midah, a Madurese maker of wooden sheaths for keris (short ritual Javanese sword). He was illiterate, but he took the text to a group of devout Muslims that met in the village of Wijung in the house of Dasimah,

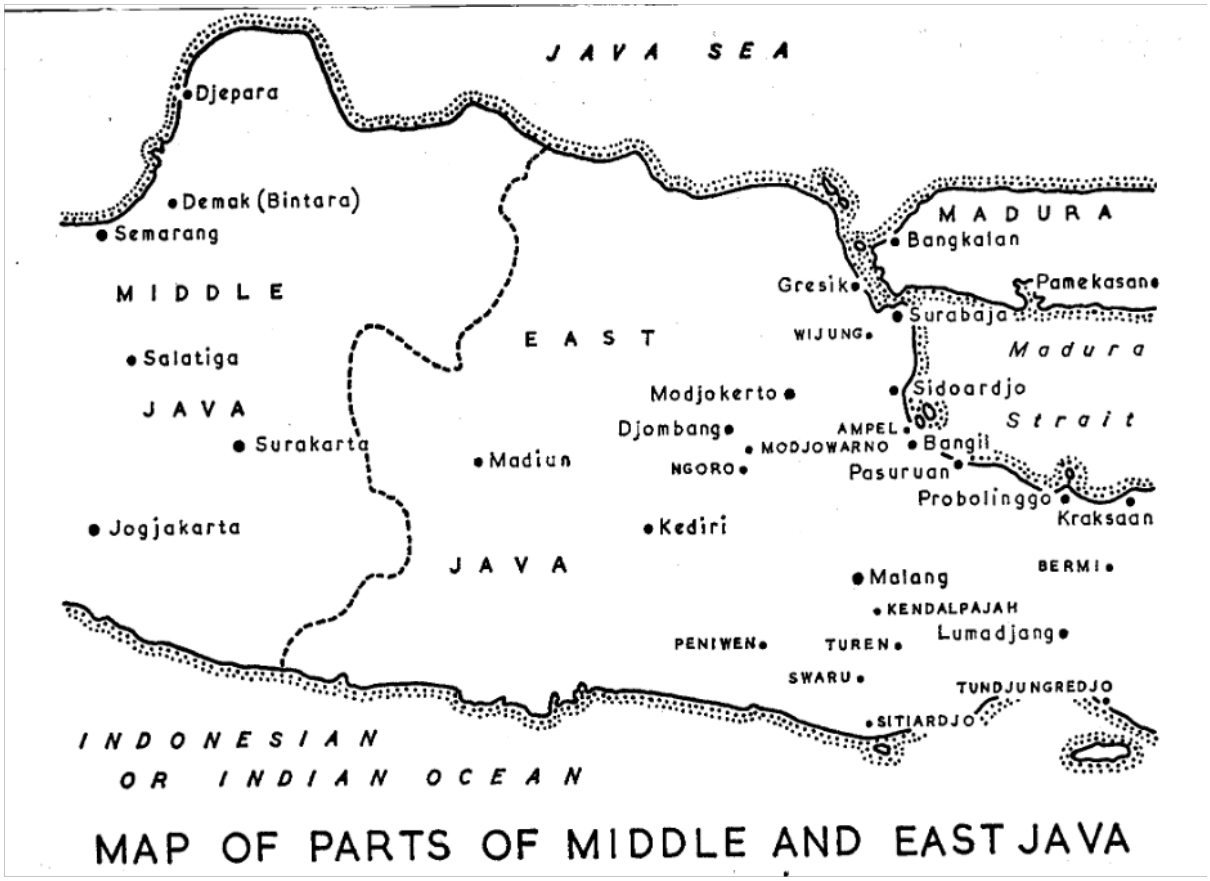
[19] The French had controlled the East Indies from 1806-1811 after they captured Holland

[20] The term Eurasian has been used to describe anyone with mixed Asian and European parentage. Indonesians would call such a person "Indo". There have been many such people in Indonesia. Since Independence some have managed to connect with their Dutch ancestoral families and moved to Holland. Many struggled both linguistically and culturally in the new Republic.

[21] David Bentley-Taylor *The Weathercock's Reward* (London; OMF books,1967)

[22] The opening of China in 1842 meant the end of the Java Mission for the LMS. The BMS left in 1847.

a modin (a minor Islamic official). The text was part of Mark's Gospel and they were all puzzled by the opening words, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". Over subsequent months the group discussed the strange contents of the book.



MAP OF PARTS OF MIDDLE AND EAST JAVA

Then one of the group, Saminah, attended a wedding feast in the house of Kiai Kunti where an unusual prayer was used. Kunti said that he had learned it from a wise man in Ngoro, a Eurasian called Coolen. The "prayer" was in fact a Javanese translation of the Apostles' Creed. Dasimah realised that this prayer was related to the text they had been studying. After further enquiry to Kiai Kunti about Coolen's teaching, ten of the group walked for 25 hours to cover the sixty miles to Coolen's house.

Coenrad Laurens Coolen was the son of a Dutch father and a Javanese mother, who was related to one of the royal families. He combined Dutch vigour and the mysticism of Java. He became expert in the wayang, the gamelan (gong orchestra) and Javanese dance. He acquired land in Ngoro and began clearing the jungle to cultivate it. This gave him a spiritual character so that he was regarded as sakti (spiritual) by the Javanese, who were attracted to join him[23]. He left his wife and five children in

[23] To enter the forest and build a settlement was regarded as a bold step that risked the enmity of the spirits. Coolen, by establishing such a community, he was identified by the Javanese as someone having peculiar spiritual power. A modern Indonesian account can be found at http://www.pikiran-

Surabaya and lived with a Javanese woman by whom he had more children. His settlement with its wayang performances, and the prosperity of the village he established, was attractive to Javanese who came to live there. At one stage in his career, he had met the "Pious of Surabaya" who made a lasting impression on him. He began to teach the ngelmu of the prophet Jesus and the spiritual power that could come from him. He translated extemporarily from his Dutch Bible into Javanese and used the wayang to tell Bible stories. Sunday worship followed Javanese religious patterns. Hymns and prayers were intoned in the Javanese reciting style known as tembang. Converts were accepted on their recitation of the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed. Coolen rejected the sacraments ostensibly because he feared that Baptism would cause the Javanese to regard themselves as Dutch and lose their own culture.

Dasimah and his group stayed ten days at Ngoro and were instructed in the Christian faith. They returned to their village and began to practice Christianity in the same way as Coolen. Over the next five years they returned annually to Ngoro and had further instruction. From Wijung the message went out to others and many Javanese were attracted to this new ngelmu. One day Mrs Emde was talking to a tradesman in Surabaya whom she discovered knew something about Christianity. Upon enquiry he told her that there was a group in Wijung of which Dasimah, his father, was the leader. Enthusiastically the Emdes expressed their desire to meet Dasimah. The next day he was in contact with the "Pious of Surabaya".

Emde and the Pious of Surabaya were working on a very different basis to Coolen. Those who joined their congregation embraced Dutchness with Christianity. They wanted Javanese believers to cut their hair, replace the sarong with trousers and stop carrying their keris. The Malay-speaking congregation of the church worshipped in that language which the Javanese barely understood. They were town dwellers and the Javanese came from a village culture. In addition to the Javanese aspects of the Christian life in Wijung and Ngoro, Coolen's own marital situation aroused the concern of Biblical Christians. Conflict between the rival claims of Emde and Coolen was bound to occur as soon as the new believers in Wijung were in contact with both. The additional factor was the missionaries.

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rakyat.com/cetak/0703/10/khazanah/lainnya01.htm (accessed in 2006) "*Hutan bagi orang Jawa juga menunjukkan kesaktian seseorang apabila ia berhasil bertahan di hutan itu beberapa lama. Banyak pertapaan dibangun di tengah-tengah hutan. Pertapa yang berhasil keluar dari hutan tentulah seorang yang sakti mandraguna lantaran berhasil menaklukkan kekuatan-kekuatan jahat dalam hutan. Hutan adalah hunian roh-roh jahat, jadi harus dihindari. Inilah sebabnya ketika seorang bangsawan Jawa keturunan Rusia, Coenraad Laurens Coolen, yang meminta izin pemerintah kolonial untuk membuka hutan dan berhasil tanpa gangguan apa pun pada dirinya, ia dianggap sakti dan banyak para petani lain daerah berbondong-bondong ikut hidup di desa "percobaannya" itu. Itu terjadi sekira tahun 1835 di Ngoro dekat Surabaya".* Translation: For Javanese the forest is the sign of the spiritual power of someone if he is able to clear the jungle and stay there for a period. Much asceticism is developed in the midst of the forest. An ascetic who succeeds in escaping the forest is certainly a spiritual person, invulnerable because he has succeeded in overcoming the evil forces in the forest. The forest is haunted by evil spirits that have to be avoided. This is the reason why a noble Javanese man of Russian descent, Coenrad Laurens Coolen, who asked permission from the colonial government to open up the forest and succeeded without any difficulty, is regarded as spiritual and many farmers in the area in great numbers followed to live in that trial area. That happened in 1835 in Ngoro near Surabaya.

The first missionary to visit Wijung and Ngoro was Medhurst[24], another missionary from the London Missionary Society. He was a Malay speaker and knew no Javanese. He was not impressed with the two groups and seemed to have been more concerned with those areas in which they had not distinguished themselves from their neighbours than the fact that here were the first Javanese believers. The continuation of circumcision for young men entering puberty[25], the use of the confession "There is one God and Jesus Christ is the Spirit of God[26], the comparisons of Jesus to Krishna[27] and the use of the Javanese prophecies of the coming of a righteous king, were points that Medhurst noticed., Coolen's own marital arrangements in particular caused Medhurst to ask him whether he was himself the recipient of grace. Brückner never visited Ngoro but did see the little group in Wijung. He was more positive about them and rejoiced in meeting for the first time a group of Javanese believers. Both Medhurst and Brückner were concerned that they should know the Christian faith more accurately. They were concerned especially about baptism. Under the influence of Emde many of the group were baptised. Coolen for many years would not allow people who had been baptised to remain in Ngoro.

The events in Java in the nineteenth century raise many issues for modern approaches to Muslim peoples. The Javanese were not classic Muslims. Traditional Javanese values and beliefs had a stronger influence. Coolen did not seek to reproduce Islamic patterns of worship but rather took aspects of Javanese culture as the vehicle for Christian worship. Bill Musk has drawn attention to the folk element in Islam in many countries[28].

[24] Medhurst left Java for China in 1842 and is chiefly known for his work there.

[25] A survey in my congregation in Central Java in 1984 showed that amongst believers there was every view represented from those who misapplied Galatians to forbid all circumcision to those who accepted circumcision in a way that differed little from their Muslim neighbours. The position of consensus that we reached was that anything Islamic was not acceptable; that circumcision should be carried out by medically qualified people and that it was acceptable to have a celebration feast. I enjoyed preaching on the circumcision of the heart to almost a complete village community. The starting of a preaching post in that village was not unrelated to this "compromise" with culture. One of my colleagues, in another church which was more opposed to circumcision, was publicly asked, as the father of three sons, whether he was circumcised as a counter to the argument that uncircumcised men could not beget children!

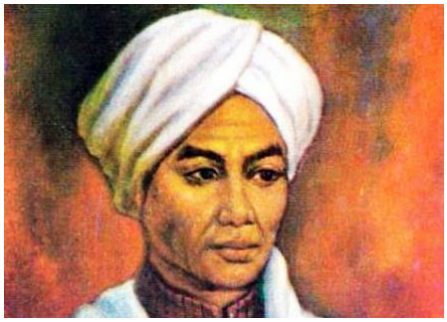
[26] There have been missionaries more recently who have advocated either the saying of part of the syahadat and stopping before the confession of Mohammad, or, for Muslim Background Believers, the replacement words, "And the prophet Isa is his Son"

[27] Coolen may have been wiser than he appears in these comparisons of Jesus and Krishna, since there is the argument that the Krishna legends were created as a counter to the advance of the Gospel in India rather than predating the Christian era as is usually claimed.

[28] Bill Musk *The Unseen Face of Islam* Monarch Publications Eastbourne 1989

Although the rest of the history of the church in East Java really belongs to a period later than the British interlude, it is convenient to conclude here the nineteenth century history of this church. The Dutch authorities, whilst not favourable to missionaries, began to see the value of establishing more churches in Central Java for Dutch people at a time when Diponegoro, a Prince of the household of the Sultan of Jogjakarta, mounted a rebellion against colonialism between 1825-30. In other parts of Indonesia there were also rebellions. The one in the Moluccan Islands was led by Pattimura, a Christian (1817). He was executed by the Dutch but went to his death singing psalms and hymns. It is important to note that whilst Coolen and Emde, Brückner and others were seeking to bring the Gospel to the Javanese, there had been colonial uprisings, which in Java were Islamic and syncretistic, whilst elsewhere it was the Christians who rebelled.





Paulus Tosari (1813-1882) was from Madura and he sought wisdom from Coolen. He later resided in Wijung and then in Sidoardjo. Sidoardjo became another village of believers alongside the land of Gunsch, who was one of the Pious of Surabaya. Paulus Tosari was one of those who were baptised in 1843. In 1844 he established a new village at Modjowarno near to Ngoro. Tosari was a bold evangelist who sought to bring the Gospel to his native Madura as well as to Javanese leaders. Just as Coolen had established a new settlement in which the "ngelmu" of Jesus might be taught, so other Javanese believers established new villages for the converts.

This pattern of establishing Christian villages was to continue in East Java. Dutch missions[29] were finally admitted and the key person in East Java was E J Jellesma. He arrived in East Java in 1849. Two years later he moved to Modjowarno. He succeeded in bringing together the results of the work of Emde and Coolen. Before his death in 1858 he had baptised 2500 Javanese. New villages had been established throughout East Java. Javanese were trained as preachers of the Gospel. The foundations of the church were laid. It was not until the 20th century that the church really moved into the cities of East Java.



[29] Nederlandsche ZendingsVereniging – the Dutch Missionary Society

Other contextualised evangelism is that of Sadrach Surapranata (1835-1924) to whom David Garrison has drawn attention in his book 'A Wind in the House of Islam[30]'. Notable was the form of building for worship that he constructed which was like that of mosques in Java, and his pattern of evangelism through protracted debates.

The Age of Modern Missions

Once the Dutch permitted mission agencies to work In Indonesia there was a lot of activity. As was the case in many other countries, parity agreements meant that different mission agencies and different denominational loyalties concentrated on specific ethnic groups.

The progress of Christianity in Indonesia can be summarised as follows:

- Timor, Manado, Moluccan Islands – from the work of the official state church. Conversions and baptisms but too few clergy so very little discipleship. Worship in Dutch and Bahasa Melayu (Indonesian)
- East Java – Bible translation into Javanese. Coolen's indigenous (syncretistic?) church. East Java church based initially in villages
- Bataks in N. Sumatra – work of German Lutheran Nommensen led to a church of 3 million today
- Toraja – evangelised by Gereformerde Missionary Bond-Holland
- Kalimantan (Borneo) Rhenish Swiss mission
- Papua – various evangelical missions
- Chinese churches - growth especially from visits of John Sung
- Many older churches linked to specific tribal groups

Indonesia has the largest Christian community in any majority Islamic country and, with some exceptions, tribal and religious groupings are not identical unlike Malaysia where Malays are Muslims and most Christians are Chinese, Indian or Tribal. Christians in Indonesia are to be found in most ethnic groups. Statistical analysis of the ethnic origin of Indonesian Christians is probably not to be trusted in that Indonesian churches treat members as Indonesians and not record their ethnic origin[31].

Independence

May 1908 is usually regarded as the beginning of the struggle for Indonesian Independence, but in October 1928 the direction of the struggle was set at a congress of Indonesia youth which promulgated the Youth Oath (Sumpah Pemuda). This had three points:

[30] Garrison, David *A Wind in the House of Islam* Berlin: Wigtake resources, 2014. See also Sutarman Soediman Patronadi *Sadrach's Community and its Contextual Roots* Leiden: Brill,1990 (which is also available in Indonesian at a much cheaper price).

[31] American mission publications of ethnic responses to the Gospel cannot be relied on. One recorded that no one from the Dilly people of North Sumatra had ever become a Christian. I knew that I had baptised one, but her ethnic group would not be recorded in Indonesian church records!

> *Firstly*
> *We the sons and daughters of Indonesia, acknowledge one motherland, Indonesia.*
> *Secondly*
> *We the sons and daughters of Indonesia, acknowledge to be of one nation, the nation of Indonesia.*
> *Thirdly*
> *We the sons and daughters of Indonesia, uphold the language of unity, Indonesian*

Christians were part of this movement. After the Japanese occupation, revolutionary leaders saw that independence was nearer. As the allies' victory seemed assured, they realised that there would be a short opportunity for a declaration of Independence. On 1st June 1945 Sukarno gave his Pancasila speech setting out the five principles of the new nation – Pancasila.

1. Belief in one supreme God
2. Just and civilised humanity
3. Indonesian unity
4. Consultative democracy
5. Social Justice

Japan surrendered on 15th August 1945, and Indonesians believe that God gave them the short gap before the Allies re-entered Indonesia, so that Independence could be declared on 17th August 1945. There was a turbulent period of conflict as the Netherlands and their allies sought to regain control until they agreed to Independence on November 7th, 1949, which was effective from 29th December 1949.

The period of Sukarno continued until 1965 with varying experiences for Christians in Indonesia as he sought to establish a united nation amidst the competing factions not only in Indonesia but also in the world order. Many Christians were active in political life as is illustrated by perhaps the most outstanding among them, Johanes Leimena.

Johanes Leimena (1905-77)

Leimena is probably the most outstanding example of an Indonesian Christian's participation in the political life of Indonesia.

Born in Ambon, he grew up in Cimahi and Jakarta. He studied medicine and worked at Immanuel Hospital Bandung. He served in the Indonesian navy from 1945. Appointed Minister of Health from 1955 and Deputy Prime Minister in Sukarno's 1960 cabinet. He was one of the longest serving ministers in successive cabinets. Chairman of Parkindo (Indonesian Christian Party).

The Leimena Institute named after him continues Christian political and social engagement and has worked with several leading Imams to develop cross-community understanding within Indonesia and the popularisation of moderate Indonesian Islam worldwide.

Christians were part of the nation building and during this period churches disassociated themselves from links with Holland. The establishment of the Council of Churches in 1950, affiliated to the World Council of Churches, was not only part of the theological and ecclesiastical ecumenism found worldwide but also part of the movement to establish a united nation by breaking down the barriers between churches that were based in ethnic divisions. This was also in the context of some Christians being involved in separatist movements like the South Moluccan Republic (RMS) which was also formed in 1950 and did not cease completely until 1966 when the majority of the remaining followers moved to Holland.

The final years of Sukarno saw the advance of communism throughout the archipelago with Communist cadres being established in many areas. During this period, it was expected that Communism would spread successfully throughout Southeast Asia domino fashion and this alarmed many Christians.

Suharto (1965-98)

Suharto seized power from Sukarno in 1965 to avert a supposed attempted Communist coup. He established a military dictatorship which lasted till 1998. This was a period of stability because of strict controls. Church growth continued. Christians and Catholics held positions in government which sometimes caused Muslim resentment[32]. Some Christians involved in government did not realise the corruption that was at the heart of it. The beginning of the Suharto era was the time of the "Indonesian Revival".

[32] At one period the Minister of Defence, the Heads of the Army and the Secret Police were all either Christians or Catholics

The Indonesian Revival

In the mid 1960s there occurred what has been termed 'the Indonesian revival'. Two separate happenings are often erroneously collated. In the aftermath of the supposed coup, many people found themselves considering what they believed. There was a re-emphasis on the first point of Pancasila = belief in one God and everyone was required to have a religion. Not to believe was equated with identifying as a Communist, now proscribed. Many had forsaken Islam as they followed the Communist ideology and did not want to return to it, Villages particularly in Java would meet to decide what they would believe and identify with. Many would then seek out a pastor or missionary to make the move to becoming Christians. There were insufficient personnel to disciple them all and how deep or sincere the conversion was has been questioned. In the late seventies a research project in Central Java found that many who had converted at that time had left Christianity to follow Javanese mystical sects stating that they had not found a depth of spirituality in Christianity. However, despite these reservations during the mid to late sixties the number of Christians in Indonesia grew. It has been suggested that some of those who converted at this time had been secret disciples previously.

At the same time in West Timor many miraculous events were reported. These were popularised in the West by books like Mel Tari's Like a mighty wind (London: Coverdale House,1973). Questions have been asked about the veracity of every detail of this account, but a spiritual outpouring in the church during the sixties cannot be denied with some events still being reported in the seventies.

Supernatural events continue to be part of Indonesian Christian life and particularly in accounts of conversions from Islam where often visions and dreams begin the journey to Christian belief. On other occasions there are direct confrontation with occult powers.

Under Suharto

In general, this was a time of stability when the Christian church could grow and flourish. Various restraints were put on Christian evangelism but these often paralleled similar restrictions on Muslims. During these years an Indonesian Evangelical Fellowship was formed in 1971 and an Indonesian Pentecostal Fellowship in 1979. They reflect both the growing diversity of church life in Indonesia and also alignments with movements reflective of movements in other parts of the world.

In 1974 a new translation of the scriptures was published making them more accessible to many people.

After Suharto

Since Suharto was ousted in 1998 Presidents were now elected by universal suffrage.

- 1 May 1998 – 20 October 1999 B J Habibie

- 20 October 1999 – 23 July 2001 Abdulrahman Wahid aka Gus Dur
- 23 July 2001 – 20 October 2004 Megawati Sukarnoputri
- 2004-2014 – Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono
- 2014-2024 Joko Widodo
- 2024 - date Prabowo Subianto Djojohadikusumo

In the immediate aftermath of the ending of Suharto's regime, the relaxation of controls coinciding with the increase of aggressive forms of Islam from the Middle East led to serious persecution of Christians. In the Moluccan Islands the tradition of pele that governed relations between Muslim and Christian villages broke down and many Christians lost their lives.

Summary

Why is there such a large Christian community in Indonesia?

- Continual Christian presence since the seventh century with many indigenous developments alongside missionary work from outside
- Christians took part in the growth of nationalism and the independence movement
- Pancasila protected the right to believe in One God as Christians and Catholics
- Conflict with Holland (1945-49) separated many churches from their colonial inheritance and gave them an Indonesian identity
- It is not non-Indonesian to be a Christian
- Converts have a viable identifiable community to join
- Indonesian Islam is, in the main, tolerant of other faiths
- Significant providential and spiritual events
- With some notable exceptions religious and ethnic divisions do not overlap

The future of Christianity in Indonesia is bound up with the strength of the community whose full potential is still to be realised.

To cite (Harvard):

R. Porter. (2026), 'The Surprising Success of Christianity in Indonesia', *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 3(1), pp. 72-87. DOI: https://doi.org/10.70600/jrpl.v3i1.007

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.

Journal of Religion and Public Life
Volume 3, Issue 1 (May 2026)

BOOK REVIEW

A review and response to 'From Mortality to Memory: Death and Ancestorhood in African Spiritual Systems' by Dr Amos Chewachong

Chris Sugden [1]

Keywords: African Ancestorhood, Death and Afterlife Theology, Western Secularism and Death, Biblical Perspective on the Dead, Christian Missiology in African Contexts, Resurrection and Christian Hope

Dr Amos Chewachong in an article 'From Mortality to Memory: Death and Ancestorhood in African Spiritual Systems' in *Global Missiology* for January 2026 contrasts the dimensions of death in African thought with dominant Western paradigms which see death solely as the purely biological end of life. His study investigates how in the African worldview death functions as a transition to ancestorhood and how the dead remain active agents in communal life providing guidance and ethical norms. Such ancestorhood is sustained by rituals, memory and social ethics.

He critiques Western secularism for limiting personhood and identity to living rational beings. It also cloaks the reality of death to the extent of practically ignoring it. He notes that Western Christian understanding is sometimes infected by this Western secular view.

Dr Chewachong does an important job in explaining the rationale that underlies the African view of ancestors and the rituals related to death. He highlights the role that becoming an ancestor plays in encouraging moral behaviour; the memory of the departed is preserved in myths and rituals to set examples and ethical norms for the living.

[1] Canon Dr Chris Sugden is head of the Ph.D. programme at OCRPL, member of the OCRPL Academic Council, and a member of the JRPL Editorial Board.

Such a role for the departed is not totally absent in Western culture, however, as Dr Amos appears to suggest. Westerners remember the examples of people who have gone before - whether of our parents or praiseworthy people. And, to reflect on both cultures in the light of the scripture, the writer to the Hebrew Christians spends a whole chapter setting out the examples of those who have died in faith. Could not Hebrews 13 be cited as a biblical framework for evaluating the role of forebears on our lives in the present? But, in the light of the Bible also I cannot see how Christians could affirm a claim that dead should have a major role in the life of the living. Surely the biblical view is that our accountability is to God and that we should be sensitive to the movements and prompting of His Spirit.

A second area where his thinking can be reflected on in the light of biblical faith is to reflect on the nature of the afterlife in Christian thought. We look for and expect the resurrection of the dead at the return of Christ and the coming of his kingdom in fulness. Till then those who have died 'sleep'. In 1 Corinthians 15:51 Paul affirms that "we shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed". I take that to mean that in their own experience the next awareness Christian people have after their death is that they are with Jesus and that it is resurrection day. It is like going to sleep at 1030 and the next thing we know it is 7.30. From the view of those alive on earth they have ceased to have activity or agency. But they continue to have personhood and identity in relation to God and will have a future existence in his new heaven and earth. This and other aspects of addressing Christian view of death in Western culture are explored here in https://talkingaboutdying.org/

A dimension that could be explored further is how to engage missiologically with the African worldview. Some aspects can be affirmed in the light of the Bible - that death is not the end, and that people who have died serve as an example - or a warning, and can in many cases be remembered with love and respect. The African worldview provides a starting place for sharing the gospel - not by cancelling and displacing it - but by building on it and modifying it in the light of Jesus' resurrection. Thus the desire that there is more to existence than this earthly life is fulfilled in the final kingdom of God; the desire that personhood and identity is not finished at death but is affirmed by the resurrection of the dead. However the negative aspect that the life of the living is now subject to the power of the ancestors or their spirits is at an end. Hebrews 2.14-15 is perhaps apposite here Jesus " too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— **15** and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death".

A parallel with how that view can be built on and modified in the light of the Christian faith is how Christians developed the European festival of Winterval with its themes of light in darkness to be a celebration of the birth of Jesus the light of the world.

To cite (Harvard):

Chris Sugden. (2026), 'A review and response to 'From Mortality to Memory: Death and Ancestorhood in African Spiritual Systems' by Dr Amos Chewachong', *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 3(1), pp. 88-91. DOI: https://doi.org/10.70600/jrpl.v3i1.008

Disclosure Statements

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The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.

Journal of Religion and Public Life
Volume 3, Issue 1 (May 2026)

BOOK REVIEW

Reparations – Slavery and the Tyranny of Imaginary Guilt.

Forum 2025 216 pp Nigel Biggar

Chris Sugden [1]

Keywords: Church Commissioners, Reparations, Queen Anne's Bounty, South Sea Company, Abolition of Slavery, Transatlantic Chattel Slavery (TCS), Anti-racism, Colonialism, Virtue signalling, Historical truth, African complicity, Industrialisation, Neo-Marxist dogma, Overseas aid

'Reparations' should be required reading for all members of the Church Commissioners who wish to retain any reputation for competence, integrity and acknowledging reliable scholarship before they dispose of £100 million of their assets, legally devoted to supporting parish ministry, for 'reparations' for the slave trade. Lord Biggar, the author of 'Colonialism' takes apart limb from limb the arguments put forward by a campaign for making such reparations, sponsored by an Irish billionaire to combat alleged racism, that began following Black Lives Matter in 2014 and the murder of George Floyd in 2020.

In 160 pages, with 33 pages of notes and 16 pages of bibliography Nigel Biggar, Emeritus Professor of Moral Theology at Oxford makes a closely argued and evidenced case based on extensive reading of current reports and scholarly works on the issue.

His case is that Britain spent far more on suppressing the slave trade globally from Brazil, across Africa to India and Australia than it ever gained through those engaged in it. It was 'the most expensive example (of costly international moral action) recorded in modern history' according to Kaufman and Pape cited on page 86. The neo-Marxist dogma that colonialism extracted wealth from the colonies and hoarded it in the imperial fatherland does 'not survive contact' with the evidence (page 109). Its profits did play a 'significant' – somewhere between marginal and modest - but not 'decisive' part in the industrialisation of Britain.

He notes that the justification advanced for reparations makes no mention of African complicity in European slave trading, or of the British Empire's commitment to suppressing slavery from 1807 and asserts that the transatlantic slave trade as a human atrocity has never been surpassed. It holds that transatlantic chattel slavery (TCS) and colonialism are directly responsible for structural modern day racism, but ignores the fact that the suppression and abolition of the slave trade since 1807 was

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premised on the conviction that 'all persons are basically equal under God, regardless of race and cultural development' (page 115)

The gap between the economies of former colonies and their colonisers owes much to the policies of post-colonial governments and, and in the case of the UK, while owing something to the profits from slavery, owes much more to industrial, financial and institutional creativity.

As to compensation he asks the obvious questions: "Can we be sure that the descendants of slaves would have been better off had their ancestors remained in West Africa – some as slaves and sacrificial funeral fodder? Are there not some descendants of slaves who prosper rather more than some descendants of slave owners." (p 121). Many more suffered from the states of earlier centuries, women, children, industrial workers, so why pick out black slaves in particular? And why should not the descendants of African chiefs and Arab slave traders also be presented with a bill?

As for Queen Anne's Bounty, the forerunner of the Commissioners' Funds, it made no money at all from the slave trade which the South Sea Company, in which it invested for no more than nine years, operated at a loss.

Having rehearsed the arguments and evidence in detail, Lord Biggar ends helpfully with a chapter summarising his ten arguments why the Church Commissioners are so wrong and misguided in their efforts. "The racially discriminatory fingering of the British is unfair and politically opportunistic".

In closing he writes "genuine saints will not waste their time proclaiming their 'anti-racism' in defiance of historical truth about slavery and empirical truth about racism today. Rather, they will be intent upon diagnosing its actual causes in the light of all the evidence, in order to craft an effective remedy. Because they care more about solving the problem than signalling their virtue".

He proposes that by the criterion of historical association, rather than try to save the whole world, since Britain had responsibility for welfare of the West Indian colonies for several centuries and retains cultural, institutional, legal and sometimes constitutional links with post-colonial Caribbean states, it would make sense to target its overseas aid there.

His book is a tightly reasoned argument against the current proposals for reparations, which he regards as unjustified, based on the involvement of the Church Commissioners and Queen Anne's Bounty. Other aspects of the slave trade and the involvement of Britain in it, such as the growth of the ports f Liverpool and Bristol, would need to be examined if a fuller discussion of the subject was to be undertaken. But that is material for another book.

Forum Press 2025 216 pages £20.00

To cite (Harvard):

Chris Sugden. (2002) 'Reparations – Slavery and the Tyranny of Imaginary Guilt. Forum 2025 216 pp Nigel Biggar', *Journal of Religion and Public Life,* 3(1), pp. 92-94. DOI: https://doi.org/10.70600/jrpl.v3i1.009

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.

Journal of Religion and Public Life
Volume 3, Issue 1 (May 2026)

BOOK REVIEW

Why Religion Went Obsolete

The Demise of Traditional Faith in America by Christian Smith. Oxford University Press, 2024. $35.00. pp.352.

Review by Renee Rheinbolt-Uribe [1]

Keywords: Secularization, American religion, institutional religion, Global South, religious self-destruction, Christian Smith

Smith's Scholarly Trajectory

Christian Smith, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame, has produced a body of work remarkable for its range and rigor. Coming from an Evangelical background and now a Roman Catholic, Smith has consistently brought sociological precision to questions of profound theological and cultural significance. His early work, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (1991), offered crucial insights into the social dynamics the liberation theology movement. His later explorations established him as a scholar explaining religion's persistence and transformation rather than its demise: *Souls in Transition* (2009) examined emerging adults and faith, *What Is a Person?* (2010) engaged fundamental questions about human existence, *Religious Parenting: Transmitting Faith and Values in Contemporary America* (2017, co-authored with Bridget Ritz and Michael Rotolo) explored intergenerational faith transmission, and *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters* (2017) demonstrated his capacity to analyze how religious practice endures and adapts.

That makes the present volume all the more striking. *Why Religion Went Obsolete* represents a significant shift in Smith's analysis. The book has received widespread attention, with reviewers praising it as "required reading for theologians and pastors" (*World Magazine*), offering "a new and important way of understanding" (*America Magazine*), and providing "an important corrective to theories of secularization" (*Marx*

[1] Dr. Renee Rheinbolt-Uribe, is an independent researcher and Research Fellow at Stellenbosch University. She completed her Ph.D. through the OCRPL partnership with Stellenbosch University. Based in Bogotá, Colombia, she and her husband engage in mission work across North and South America.

and Philosophy Review of Books). Yet true to form, the book does not disappoint, offering not despair but a call to discernment.

Smith's focus remains narrowly on the United States, and he deliberately does not address the global implications of the trends he documents. This is both a strength and a limitation. The strength lies in his refusal to overextend his sociological analysis beyond the United States context. The limitation is that these dynamics carry profound implications far beyond that demand missiological attention.

Religious Self-Destruction, Not Secular Assault

Smith combines quantitative empirical measures of big-picture changes over time with exploration of the larger cultural environment, what he terms the cultural "zeitgeist." Drawing on extensive qualitative and quantitative data including over two hundred in-depth interviews, he argues that traditional American religion has become obsolete not through secularization's triumph but through institutional displacement.

Christian Smith posits that the convergence of world events around 1991, especially the end of the Cold War and the triumph of neoliberal capitalism, catalysed a decisive cultural shift and birthed a "Millennial Zeitgeist." This new era, characterised by radical individualism, consumer choice, and an earthly focus on markets and personal well-being, stripped traditional religion of its society binding functions and rendered it culturally "obsolete" by ceasing to be essential. Crucially, Smith refuses reductive explanations, arguing against classical secularisation theory that the decline stems from compounding specific forces including technological transformation, economic restructuring, shifting family dynamics, and evolving cultural attitudes, while he dismisses standard explanations like the influence of liberal universities as insufficient.

While many conservative commentators blame external forces like secular culture for religion's demise, Smith reframes this narrative by insisting a primary—though not sole—culprit is religious self-destruction. Linking this to the cultural shifts after 1991, he documents how sexual abuse scandals across Catholic, Southern Baptist, and megachurch traditions, financial improprieties, and damaging political entanglements directly undermined institutional trust and community. This internal corrosion aligns with the broader "Millennial Zeitgeist," where such failures became fatal for an institution already losing its social necessity. As sociologist Gerardo Martí notes in his *Commonweal* review, Smith argues that scandals, abuses of power, and exclusionary practices have crucially fuelled religion's obsolescence, demonstrating

that its decline resulted less from a direct secular assault than from a profound internal institutional failure that accelerated its cultural irrelevance.

Global South Implications

For Global South scholars and church leaders, this represents a crucial warning: the greatest threat to Christianity's future may come not from hostile cultures or liberal education but from the church's own moral failures and compromising political alliances.

The cultural dominance of the United States, amplified through media and social media, ensures that what happens to American Christianity reverberates globally. Moreover, declining US church participation directly affects mission funding, theological education, and denominational partnerships throughout the Global South. Many churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania remain organisationally and theologically tethered to North American denominations. As US church attendance dwindles and giving declines, the financial architecture supporting global partnerships faces unprecedented strain.

Yet the implications extend beyond finances. For over a century, American Christianity has exported not merely resources but institutional forms, theological frameworks, and organisational models. What Latin American missiologist Samuel Escobar (1991) termed "managerial missiology" has shaped Global South Christianity through religious branded organisations (RBOs). Smith's analysis, while never explicitly engaging this genealogy, inadvertently documents the obsolescence of the very institutional Christianity that American mission exported globally. This dimension requires missiological engagement that Smith's sociological framework cannot provide.

A Call to Hopeful Discernment

Importantly, Smith offers the book not as cause for despair but as call to discernment. He encourages readers not to seek simplistic answers or become discouraged by institutional decline. Rather, he invites careful attention to what God might be doing in this moment of history. Youth may not be engaging in organised religion, but God remains moving among them, as understood with the missiological term, missio *Dei*.

Shane Morris, reviewing the book for The Gospel Coalition, critiques Smith as "too fatalistic," pointing to emerging and hotly debated data showing Gen Z men trickling back into church. Yet Morris may misread Smith's intent. Smith's refusal to offer easy

predictions or prescriptive solutions reflects not fatalism but humility—a sociological realism that leaves room for the Spirit's surprising work. The book's hopeful posture points to the *missio Die* and invites discernment precisely because God's action in history exceeds sociological categories.

Smith's deliberate focus on the American context, however, leaves crucial work for missiologists: to continue to explore how these dynamics affect global Christianity, to discern what forms of faith emerge when freed from dependency on Western institutional models, and to identify what God may be doing in contexts where Christianity has never been as institutionally dominant. The future of global Christianity may depend less on reviving what Smith documents as dying in America than on recognising and nurturing the forms of faith already being raised up. These may look less like the institutional Christianity exported from the West and more like the vernacular, relational, and embodied practices that have always existed at its margins but may now be moving to its centre. *Bottom line: I encourage you to read this fascinating and vital book***.**

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To cite (Harvard):

Rheinbolt-Uribe, R. (2026) *Why religion went obsolete: The demise of traditional faith in America* (Oxford University Press, 2024).', *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 3(1), pp. 95-100. DOI: https://doi.org/10.70600/jrpl.v3i1.010

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

The research received no specific funding.

Journal of Religion and Public Life
Volume 3, Issue 1 (May 2026)

BOOK REVIEW

More than Conquerors – the Churches and the Early Christians in the Roman Empire from Jerusalem to Chalcedon

by Nigel Scotland. 227 pages Sacristy Press 2026 £20

Dr Solomon Amao [1]

Keywords: Early Christianity History, Church History Book Review, Ante-Nicene Church Development, Nigel Scotland More than Conquerors, Early Christian Heresies and Persecution

The following analysis judges Nigel Scotland's More than Conquerors' strategic relevance, methodological rigor, and contribution to early ecclesiastical studies. This history of early Christianity from the day of Pentecost to the fifth century is easy to read, and accessible because it avoids academic language (incorporates contemporary vocabularies and quotations). Yet the work remains theologically sound and adequate for seminary use.

1. Author's Thesis Statement:
   The author argues that Christ successfully built His Church during its first five hundred years despite internal heresies (particularly Gnosticism in the second Century and Arianism in the fourth) and external Roman persecutions.

2. Strengths:
   a. The synopsis highlights the processes of structuring church leadership, the impact of Church Councils, the formulation of the doctrine of God as Trinity (expressed in the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian creeds), and overcoming the threats posed by false teachings and teachers, and Roman persecution.
   b. The author presents arguments from different schools of thought.
   c. Key ecclesiastical and doctrinal evolution, and environmental factors for early expansion are addressed sequentially.

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d. A unique feature of the work is the consistent use of the double titles for each of the fifteen chapters. These pair a catchy, timeless theological theme with a specific subordinate clause that delineates historical issues, significant real-life persons and crucial events. This ensures that while the reader engages with the "conquering" nature of the Church they remain anchored in the main historical shifts of the period.
e. A timeline provides appropriate dates (lists of emperors, theologians, church councils and significant events) and an index.
f. The bibliography lists both early Christian texts and modern sources.

3. Appraisal
    a. The non-academic language is designed for a general audience rather than scholars. This limits its use to being a supplementary text at seminary level.
    b. Ten of the fifteen chapters do not have conclusions. Some of the five chapters with conclusions have gaps between the chapter arguments and the respective conclusion. Except for chapter 9, the conclusions usually lack depth, are too brief and do not adequately make implications for the contemporary church. For example, the conclusion on the contemporary relevance of Arianism, in chapter ten, has great value but is too brief. Each chapter would have benefitted from a conclusion section to restate the thesis statement and explain the broader meaning and significance (so what?) of the arguments. Besides, only five sections provide closure and resolution to topical issues. This book could have had more such sections on other topical issues. Finally, the absence of pedagogical tools such as maps, charts, and timelines hinders the reader’s ability to track the geographical spread of missionary journeys.
    c. Critical source interaction is lacking. The text frequently presents information from reputable sources without vigorous engagement. Taking source documents "at face value" limits their critical utility. Furthermore, the work lacks primary source depth. It requires more reliance on primary patristic sources rather than secondary summaries to enhance its historiographical depth.
    d. While the book mentions the multi-cultural nature of the early Church—citing Nelson Mandela's observation that the gospel chose "all mankind"—the narrative remains largely Western-centric. Thus, it misses the opportunity to bridge ancient history with non- Western contexts.

e. The bibliography is dated; less than one-fifth of the cited books were published within the last twenty years, with one book in the "modern source" category dating back to 1894.

4. Recommendation

More than Conquerors is a valuable resource for clergy and lay Christians seeking a theologically sound synthesis of the early Church's foundational roots. The book has doctrinal and ethical integrity. Its overarching focus on moral uprightness of the "conquering" Church in a changing world remains a timely and relevant contribution. The book is highly recommended. It provides a concise synthesis of the foundational creeds and structures of the Christian faith.

To cite (Harvard):

Amao, S. (2026) '"More than Conquerors – the Churches and the Early Christians in the Roman Empire from Jerusalem to Chalcedon" by Nigel Scotland. 227 pages Sacristy Press 2026 £20', *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 3(1), pp. 101-104. DOI: https://doi.org/10.70600/jrpl.v3i1.011

Disclosure Statements

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The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.

Journal of Religion and Public Life
Volume 3, Issue 1 (May 2026)

BOOK REVIEW

2084 and the AI Revolution by John Lennox. Zondervan 384 pages

Dr Phillip Giddings [1]

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Future of Humanity, Technology & Ethics, Christian Perspective, AI and Society, Human Identity

Zondervan have published an 'updated and expanded edition' of John Lennox's book '2084 and the Al revolution'. Sub-titled 'How artificial intelligence informs our future', it comes with strong endorsements in information technology and computing from distinguished senior academics at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

The book has 4 parts - Mapping Out the Territory; Two Big Questions; The Now and Future of AI; and Being Human, together with a Scripture index, a General Index and 38 pages of Notes. Its 359 pages include Questions. So this is a book to study, to challenge and provoke our thinking about - to quote the dust cover - 'Emerging Technology and the Future of Humanity'.

This book is weighty in every sense. A big book and good book to read and discuss with other thinking people in a small group who are prepared to think hard and 'stay with it' for a sustained period - months rather than weeks.

[1] Dr Phillip Giddings, Former Lecturer in Politics, University of Reading and Former Chair of the House of Laity of the Church of England General Synod.

To cite (Harvard):

Giddings, P. (2026) '2084 and the AI Revolution by John Lennox. Zondervan 384 pages', *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 3(1), pp. 105–106. DOI: https://doi.org/10.70600/jrpl.v3i1.012

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.