Evangelism Among Muslims in Cambodia: Recent Research Findings

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Abstract

Communicating the Christian message to Muslims is challenging. And yet, in recent years increasing numbers of Muslims worldwide have decided to believe in and follow Jesus. Cambodia is a country in which evangelism of Muslims has occurred. Qualitative field research was conducted in Cambodia for a PhD dissertation; this paper presents findings from that research. Forty believers in Christ from a Muslim background (BMBs) were interviewed in 2017 regarding their conversion and interaction with the gospel message. This paper examines the narratives and reflections of these Cambodian BMBs in order to understand how the gospel message was communicated and understood. It provides findings connected to one research question: What role, if any, did the contextualization of the message play in clearly understanding it and in the decision to follow Jesus? Cambodian BMS's discussed both how they received the message and how they sought to clearly communicate the gospel to others. Thus, this paper highlights several methods used in evangelization by both cross-cultural workers and BMBs. It also reviews the three primary findings regarding how the message was contextualized: 1) through choice of language, 2) through the use of experience-near terms and concepts, and 3) through communication within the framework of understanding of the listener. Although there is wide interest regarding the evangelism of Muslims, there are few contemporary empirical studies on this topic. This paper contributes to knowledge about how the gospel is being communicated to those from a Muslim background.

Keywords: Evangelism; Muslim; BMB; MBB; Contextualization; Christian Message; Gospel Message; Experience-near

Christians have sought to communicate the gospel message to Muslims in various ways across the centuries. While there are reasons many Muslims choose not to embrace the Christian message, in recent years increasing numbers of people from Muslim backgrounds have become followers of Christ.[1] Some of these individuals reside in the nation of Cambodia. This paper presents finding from qualitative field research conducted in that country. Forty believers in Christ from a Muslim background (BMBs) were interviewed in 2017 regarding their conversion and interaction with the gospel message. This paper investigates the reflections of these individuals in order to understand how the gospel message was communicated, understood, and experienced. It explores findings related to the following research question: What role, if any, did the contextualization of the gospel message play in clearly understanding it and in the decision to follow Jesus? Cambodian BMBs discussed both how they received the message and how they sought to clearly communicate

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[1] Duane Alexander Miller and Patrick Johnstone, "Believers in Christ from a Muslim Background: A Global Census," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 11, no. Article 10 (2015): 1–19; David Garrison, *A Wind in the*

House of Islam: How God Is Drawing Muslims Around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ (Monument, CO: WIGTake, 2014).

the gospel to others. This paper will therefore highlight several methods used for evangelism by both cross-cultural workers and BMBs. It will also review the three primary findings regarding how the message was contextualized: 1) through choice of language, 2) through the use of experience-near terms and concepts, and 3) through communication within the framework of understanding of the listener.

Definition of Terms

I will define three terms and delineate between two others: Evangelism, Christian conversion, Believer in Christ from a Muslim background (BMB), and "Cham" vs. "Muslim." John Stott ties evangelism with information about Jesus and notes that "Evangelism is the announcement of the good news, irrespective of the results."[2] Furthermore, he stresses that "Evangelism is neither to convert people, nor to win them, nor to bring them to Christ, though this is indeed the first goal of Evangelism. Evangelism is to preach the gospel."[3] Michael Goheen adopts a narrower view of evangelism which is defined as "a verbal witness to the gospel that invites people to believe and follow Jesus."[4] For Goheen the communication of the good news is done verbally. The definition of evangelism used for this paper is based on the above two and is as follows: Evangelism is the communication of the good news about Jesus which offers the opportunity for the hearer to believe in and follow him. This communication of the gospel message may be both verbal and non-verbal, including the use of evangelistic materials which are viewed or read.

Although there are many good definitions of religious conversion in general, for this research a more specific description of Christian conversion is helpful. John Stott clarifies that in the Bible the term conversion usually describes change, either a change in direction or a return to a former place. The essence and primary components of conversion are thus seen in his following quote: "Since the turn from idols and sin is usually called "repentance," and the turn to God and Christ "faith," we reach the interesting biblical equation that "repentance +

faith = conversion."[5] Furthermore, Stott clearly delineates between conversion, which is an act of man, and regeneration, which is wholly God's act of providing a new birth "from above."[6] Stott's discussion and "equation" above provides a framework for this study.

Across the globe there are individuals originating from Muslim contexts who have decided to follow Christ. They are genuine believers, living under Christ's authority and for his glory. These people have been commonly referred to as Muslim background believers (MBBs). Miller and Johnstone prefer the use of the term BMBs (believers in Christ from a Muslim background), as this emphasizes the current beliefs of the individual rather than their previous affiliation.[7] I agree and am choosing to use this term as well, instead of the more common MBB.

The use of "Cham" vs. "Muslim" should be delineated. The estimated Muslim population in Cambodia as of 2010 is 340,000 people, with the majority identifying with the Cham ethnic group who descended from the ancient Champa kingdom.[8] Collins distinguishes three major groups of Cham in Cambodia, the traditional *Jahed* or *Imam San*, the large group of *Chang Wang*, and the *Chwia*, who speak Khmer but not Cham, and who do not necessarily identify as Cham.[9] This research included many respondents from the first two groups and a smaller number from the third. Thus, in this paper, the broader term "Muslim" will be used instead of "Cham."

Literature Review

This review focuses on scholarly literature regarding the communication and contextualization of the Christian message. Moreau, Corwin, and McGee provide the following description of contextualization: "The core idea is that of taking the gospel to a new context and finding appropriate ways to communicate it so that it is understandable to the people in that context. Contextualization refers to more than just theology; it also includes developing church life and ministry that

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[2] John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 60.

[3] Stott, 61.

[4] Michael W. Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History, and Issues* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 238.

[5] Stott, *Christian Mission*, 169.

[6] Stott, 168–69.

[7] Miller and Johnstone, "Global Census," 3.

[8] Kok-Thay Eng, "From the Khmer Rouge to Hambali: Cham Identities in a Global Age" (PhD diss., Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 2013), 35–36.

[9] William Collins, "The Muslims of Cambodia," in *Ethnic Groups in Cambodia*, ed. Sokhom Hean (Phnom Penh: Center for Advanced Study, 2009), 60–62, 66, 77.

are biblically faithful and culturally appropriate."[10] They highlight the importance of communicating the message in a way which is easily understood among those in that specific context. In discussing contextualization, Paul Hiebert writes, "While it is true that the gospel is divine revelation and therefore, in one sense, unchanging, it must be communicated in terms of their language, culture, and worldview for humans to understand it."[11]

Clear communication often involves the use of language and terms which are readily understandable. Robert Priest's research among the Aguaruna-Jívaro ethnic group in Peru revealed that the vocabulary used in both discovering and describing their sin is not imported from the outside but rather already exists in their own culture as ordinary words commonly used. He utilized the term "experience-near" to describe this.[12] The "experience-near" concept can be applied not only to terms used but also broadened to include worldview perspectives, beliefs, and topics which are familiar. That is, communicating a message in a manner which acknowledges the perspectives and beliefs of the listener can make it more understandable and personally applicable. This approach reinforces Hiebert's statement above about the importance of communicating the gospel message in "terms of their language, culture, and worldview."[13]

The use of familiar and easy-to-understand metaphors and illustrations aids in clear communication. Craig Ott describes the importance of metaphor in both communicating meaning and influencing emotions and the affect. He identifies four biblical metaphors describing the gospel: law, relationship, cleansing, and deliverance. Ott notes that each of these metaphors communicates biblical truth, but that they may resonate differently in different cultures.[14] Utilizing the appropriate metaphor for a specific context is thus important for proper communication and may powerfully impact understanding and emotions.[15] The use of metaphor is an example of how the biblical message is communicated and potentially speaks to an individual or group.

The message may also be communicated well through stories. Jack Colgate notes the effect chronological Bible storying and point-of-need Bible storying have had in communicating the gospel to Muslims in a manner which is understandable and relevant.[16] Priest also refers to the story method as he introduces two concepts which may affect how one receives a message about personal sin as well as decreasing one's resistance to that message. The first concept is the communication of the message in story form, which allows one to imagine themselves in the narrative. The second is the hearing of sin described in the lives of others.[17] These concepts and those reviewed in the previous literature were discovered to be important in the communication of the Christian message among Cambodian Muslims.

Research Method

This qualitative research was conducted using a phenomenological approach, with the purpose being to "discover and describe what a person actually experienced."[18] Semistructured qualitative questions were used to interview forty BMBs who acknowledge

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[10] A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey*, Second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 16.

[11] Paul Hiebert, "Worldview Transformation," in *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way: Journeys of Faith*, ed. David Greenlee (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2006), 28.

[12] Robert J. Priest, "'I Discovered My Sin!': Aguaruna Evangelical Conversion Narratives," in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, ed. Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 96–97.

[13] Hiebert, "Worldview Transformation," 28.

[14] Craig Ott, "The Power of Biblical Metaphors for the Contextualized Communication of the Gospel," *Missiology* 42, no. 4 (October 2014): 360–62, https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829613486732.

[15] Ott, 370.

[16] Jack Colgate, "Bible Storying and Oral Use of the Scriptures," in *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims*, ed. John Dudley Woodberry (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008), 219–31. Chronological Bible storying is described as "a method of presenting scriptural truth through telling a series of Bible stories that maintain the chronological flow of Scripture," whereas point-of-need Bible storying is when "a single bible story is told to address a particular need," Colgate, 221–22.

[17] Robert J. Priest, "Tell Me About a Time You Were Bad," *CIU Quarterly*, Winter 1994, 5.

[18] Lewis R. Rambo and Lawrence A. Reh, "The Phenomenology of Conversion," in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H. Newton Malony and Samuel Southard (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education, 1992), 230.

that they are followers of Christ *(Isa)*.[19] I (the researcher) conducted interviews in Cambodia from July-November 2017. Twenty-four of the interviewees were male, and fourteen were female. The average age of the interviewees was 41(median 43), and the average length of time of following Christ was 7 years (median 5). Sixteen interviewees (40% of total) identified themselves as belonging to the *Imam San* Cham group, Twenty-one (52% of total) with the *Chang Wang* Cham group, and three (8% of total) with the *Chwia* group (or *Khmer Islam)*.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify people who met the interview criteria. Attempts were made to interview a balanced representation of individuals according to gender, age, and place of residence. A snowball approach (or network sampling) was also used to identify potential interviewees.[20]

Three interviews were conducted in the capital of Phnom Penh, with the remaining occurring in small towns or rural locations.[21] Individuals from eleven provinces and Phnom Penh were interviewed. Efforts were made to conduct the interviews in locations in which the respondents felt most comfortable and free to communicate without restraint. Most interviews were conducted in the home of the interviewee, but others occurred in neutral locations such as the home of another person or a hotel or office.[22]

The interviews were conducted in the language preferred by the interviewee. In most instances, the Cham language was used. In four cases, the interview was conducted in the Khmer language (the researcher worked in Cambodia for seventeen years and is fluent in both the Cham and Khmer languages). The average recorded interview lasted 45 minutes. Each interview began by asking the interviewee to simply tell the story of their conversion. Additional questions were asked

afterwards, based on the initial response of the interviewee.

Four Cambodian university students were hired part-time to transcribe the interviews and translated key portions into English. As there is no standardized way to write the Cham language, the transcription of the interviews was done using phonetics (International Phonetic Alphabet [IPA]).[23] Interviewees were informed that their personal information would not be shared, and that a generic code would be assigned to each individual (F1 for female number one, F2 for female number two, M1 for male number one, etc.).[24] NVivo was used to code and assist in the analysis of data.

Methods Used for Evangelism

Interviewees reported several practical methods used by others to communicate the Christian message. The most common method was simply that of speaking, which ranged from personal dialogue to teaching to answering questions or explaining. Four other prominent practical methods of communication will be reviewed here: use of the Bible, studying in groups, use of diagrams, and the use of multimedia tools.

For a large portion of interviewees, their early exposure to Christianity came with exposure to the Christian Bible. Six individuals specifically talked about being given a Bible to read. Aisah is a middle-aged mother whose son is a young adult.[25] She was given a Bible by her son. She recounts how he, referring to his mother's struggles with spirits and sickness, handed her a Bible with the following words, "Mom, you have been sick too much, so please read this Bible, so that you can get better and have victory over Satan. If you read and finish this book, you can feel free from the sickness." Another female, Fatimah, recalls the visits of Isak and

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[19] Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 88.

[20] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 78–79.

[21] Most of the interviews occurred where people were currently living. Some interviews, however, occurred in a different province. The home locations of those interviewed are indicated as follows according to province: Kampong Chhnang - 11; Tbum Khmum - 9; Kratie - 5; Phnom Penh (city) - 3; Battambang - 2; Stung Treng - 2; Kampot - 2; Koh Kong - 2; Kampong Cham - 1; Kandal - 1; Pursat -1; Rattanakiri -1.

[22] During several of the interviews, other family members or friends were present. This is natural as often conversations,

even of a serious nature, take place in the presence of others. In instances where others were present, the interviewee was asked about and specifically gave consent for their presence.

[23] The students were trained in phonetics by the researcher. A Cham dictionary exists in which the words are written using the IPA. This was an important resource.

[24] This was the method utilized by Ant Greenham, "A Study of Palestinian Muslim Conversions to Christ," *St. Francis Magazine*, February 2010, 117. The Cambodian staff were only aware of the codes of individual respondents.

[25] The name "Aisah" is a pseudonym. In order to protect the identity of individuals, all names used for interviewees and cross-cultural workers for the remainder of this paper are pseudonyms.

Steven, noting that they gave Bibles to her and to others. In addition, they talked about stories from the Bible. Although it is unclear whether or not the method was technically that of chronological Bible storying, stories were often told, both from the Old and New Testaments. Many individuals interviewed routinely referred to a story from the Bible during their conversation. Additionally, many respondents commonly began the interview by recalling Bible stories they knew or were taught.

The study of scripture in groups was also referred to as a method used. Aminah is a small business owner in a rural community. She remarked that several individuals would gather and study the Bible that Kevin (a cross-cultural worker) gave them.[26] Omar recalls both the method and content of communication used by Isak and Steven (a cross-cultural worker from another organization) with the following words,

> They called each group in order to explain. They explained that from before until now, all people have sinned. Before we heard news about Jesus, we all had sin. And regarding that sin, whoever does not receive this news about Jesus, they have to suffer/hang for their own sin…It means we have to solve that problem by ourselves. Our mistake has to be solved by ourselves. But after we have Jesus and the news that he came to sacrifice for everyone to save us from our sin, we follow him and escape from sin.

Isak and Steven organized people into groups, which met together for study.

The third method of communication was the use of print media such as diagrams, pictures, and other books. Tahira received a book containing illustrations and text while being treated at a Christian medical clinic. The community in which another woman named Kari lives was visited by Steven and Isak several times. Kari stated that Steven gave them a book. That book was not the Bible per se, but it contained Bible stories with accompanying illustrations.[27]

Electronic media is a final often-mentioned method used in communicating the Christian message. One category of media is audio recordings. Kari refers to an audio CD given to her. Isak, approximately fifty years old, recalls listening to an audio cassette tape many years ago. The cassette introduced the terms "the King Father and the King Son," which intrigued him. Based on this, he later asked Steven for an explanation. The instrumental discussion these two men had will be detailed in the upcoming contextualization section. Narin, in his late twenties, said he became a follower of Christ one month before our interview. He explained that he heard the gospel message from his brother and other relatives in his rural community. He also reported listening to a Cambodian Christian radio station as a source of information.

MP3 audio recordings were also employed in gospel communication. Minat, in her thirties, lives in the same general area as Narin. She said she was given a set of MP3 recordings in the Cham language by Kevin, which was stored on her cell phone. As she is not literate, she added that these recordings were all that she could access. Minat was quite pleased with the recordings, as evidenced by her not only energetically saying, "[I] like to listen" but also by her asking her relative to bring her phone to her during the interview and then proceeding to play several recording for me. For her, the MP3 recordings on her phone were more convenient than listening to a cassette recorder, which cannot be carried with her. Besides being used for initial communication of the gospel, these recordings have also been used for the teaching and encouragement of those who have already decided to follow Jesus.

The most common category of media described by interviewees was that of film. Several types of films and videos were referred to, some of them quite old and others recently produced. One specific film about the life of Jesus was completed in the Cham language approximately a decade ago.[28] The Khmer language is used for most of the other films and videos about Christianity. Tewi is middle-aged and, like nearly all those interviewed, resides in a village in which most

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[26] In this paper, I use the term "cross-cultural worker" to refer to a Christian NGO worker or missionary who is not from Cambodia.

[27] The illustrations used are ones which are considered appropriate for Muslims as they do not clearly depict the face of Jesus or of the prophets.

[28] John Krish and Peter Sykes, *Jesus* (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, The Genesis Project, 1979). Two interviewees spoke with pride about the role they had in the film. Their voices were recorded and used for specific characters in the movie.

inhabitants are Muslim. She recalled an event approximately twenty-five years ago when cross-cultural workers visited that village and publicly showed a film about Jesus. This event had a powerful impact on her, revealed in her statement, "Before they came here to play the movie, I did not yet believe. But after they played it, I started to believe." Tewi added that the cross-cultural workers did explain the message, but they did not ask if anyone wanted to believe or force people to follow Jesus. She stated that believing was an individual decision based on whether or not they were personally interested. Tewi and others pointed to the theme that there is freedom to choose to follow—or not to follow—Jesus.

Contextualization of the Christian Message

Authentic evangelism requires the clear communication of the Christian message. In order to communicate the message clearly in Cambodia, modifications and adjustments were made in language and delivery. Some of these choices were deliberately decided; others occurred naturally and almost without thought. What adjustments were made in order to contextualize the message in Cambodia? Much of the information in the earlier section is evidence of contextualization. The use of the Bible, for instance, corresponds to the Muslim belief that certain portions of the Bible have divine origins.[29] Communicating stories from these books, including stories about characters such as Adam and Abraham, both of whom are known by Muslims, fits with their understandings and values. In addition, the use of pictures, diagrams, and media can be viewed as a method which takes into consideration the hearer and seeks to communicate the message in a way that is easily understood and remembered. Besides the above, the research revealed that the Christian message was contextualized primarily in three different ways: the choice of language, the use of experience-near terms and concepts, and communication within the framework of understanding of the listener.

Contextualization through Choice of Language

The Cham language is the mother tongue of most of the respondents. Because they live in Cambodia, interact with Khmer people, and receive public education in the Khmer language, they are also usually fluent in Khmer. In some cases, however, especially in rural areas or locations where there is a concentration of Muslim communities (and thus not as much interaction with Khmer people), some individuals are not very fluent in the Khmer language. Interviewees reported hearing the message in different languages, and with different effects. Some individuals heard the message in the Khmer language and experienced no difficulties in understanding. For others, hearing in a language other than Cham was confusing. Tahira, previously introduced, is middle-aged and lives in a rural area near the banks of the Mekong River. She discussed a video CD that some neighbors had recently viewed. That particular CD was produced in the Cham language. She was then asked if it was clearer for her to hear the story of Jesus in the Cham language as compared to the Khmer language. Her quick and simple response was, "Yes, when they use the Khmer language with deep words, I cannot understand. I can understand when they use the Cham language."

Rony is in his twenties and has been following Jesus for approximately four years. He heard the message from cross-cultural workers, who spoke and taught in Cham. When discussing his hearing of the message, he commented, "I do not look down on the Khmer language, but if he [the cross-cultural worker] had taught using the Khmer language, it would have been difficult for me to accept it." When asked why this was the case, he replied, "In the Khmer language, the message is understood in a similar way. But when they speak, I understand that they are talking about a different God, not the one and only God. Because in my heart I think that I have God [Allah] already. When we know more about who that God is, then we easily understand." Although he noted that it was a similar message discussed, regardless of the language used, Rony pointed out that the use of the Khmer language led him to feel the person was talking about a *different* God than the one

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[29] Specifically, the Bible portions are the Pentateuch (*Tawrāt*), the Psalms of David (*Zabūr*), and the Gospels of Jesus (*Injīl*). It is understood many Muslims believe that the New Testament used by Christians is incorrect or corrupted. At the same time, the *Tawrāt* has not been ignored by Muslims, Cyril Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 100. In Cambodia, I have observed a general respect for the *Tawrāt*, *Zabūr*, and *Injīl*.

he knows of. How this occurs was revealed later in the conversation, and it revolved around the use of a certain Khmer term, *preah. Preah* is the Khmer term for "God," but Rony pointed out it can have many meanings. Because in his mind it did not refer to the one true God, it led him to assume the speaker was talking about something far different than God (Allah). The term *preah* is commonly used in Cambodia, primarily by Buddhists but also by non-Buddhists. Although Christians use the term to refer to the Christian God, its range of meaning for others also includes lesser deities and spirits. It is thus not surprising that Rony interpreted the use of this Khmer term as referring to spirits or powers which were not all-powerful, and that this was not appealing to him, as he holds to a strong belief in one true God. In his case, the language used by cross-cultural workers affected his attitudes about and openness towards the message.

Contextualization through Use of Experience-Near Terms and Concepts

The use of experience-near language was also an influential method of contextualization. The experience-near concept was described by anthropologist Clifford Geertz as one which people "naturally and effortlessly" use to define how they think or feel, and in which they easily understand when it is used by others. He contrasts this concept with that of "experience-distant," which is not familiar or naturally understood, but specific for the purposes of specialists such as ethnographers or priests who are often different than the general population.[30] Robert Priest draws on Geertz's writing and notes that experience-distant concepts are usually more abstract or theoretical than experience-near ones, which are often more concrete.[31] Priest's research among the Aguaruna-Jívaro ethnic group in Peru revealed that ordinary and commonly-used words from their own culture were used to describe deep personal realities such as a sense of sinfulness.[32] This terminology could be referred to as experience-near. The choice of language also affects the understanding of and potential interest in a given message. In the Aguarunan culture, when words which were not experience-near were used to describe morality and sin, and connections were not easily made between the message and the personal lives of the listener, then the message was not clearly understood and often was not compelling, but was rather "tasteless" (*sakam*).[33] Choosing easily understandable terminology which naturally connects with human experience assists in communicating the Christian message and in making it personally relevant.

Experience-Near Terms

Several terms were deliberately chosen in order to communicate the Christian message in a way that is understandable and meaningful. The most prominent term was that of Nabi Isa, which means the prophet Jesus. This term is a Cham one, with Arabic origins. The Khmer term for Jesus is Preah Yesu. Most Cambodian Cham speakers are also fluent in Khmer. Moreover, because the Christian Church among the Khmer is larger and more visible than the church of BMBs, Muslims often hear the term Preah Yesu. Those seeking to communicate the gospel to Muslims, therefore, have a choice to make regarding the use of Preah Yesu or Nabi Isa. Approximately one-fourth of those interviewed discussed this choice of words. For some respondents, both terms are easily used. Sofia says that both terms are good, because the Khmer word Preah Yesu is used when speaking with Khmer people, and the Cham term Nabi Isa is used when speaking to Cham. Tewi introduced the concept of bangii pang, translated as "sweet to listen to." Certain terms and phrases are more appealing and less offensive. The term bangii pang captures this concept. I thus often asked what terms were "sweet" to listen to. For Tewi, both terms were easy to use, although she did say that when she identifies her faith to others, she remarks that she believes in Nabi Isa.

The majority of those interviewed identified a clear preference about which term to use when talking to others about the Christian message. That preference was Nabi Isa. Hassad had previously discussed

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[30] Clifford Geertz, "'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," in *Meaning in Anthropology*, ed. Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby, 1st ed., School of American Research Advanced Seminar Series (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976), 223.
[31] Robert J. Priest, "'Experience-Near Theologizing' in Diverse Human Contexts," in *Globalizing Theology: Belief*

and Practice in an Era of World Christianity, ed. Craig Ott and Harold Netland (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 183.
[32] Priest, "I Discovered My Sin!," 96–97.
[33] Priest, "Experience-Near Theologizing," 189.

contextualization with another BMB and used the English term "context" to refer to this topic. He identified three terms he felt were important to use when explaining the Christian message to others: Isa (Jesus), Allah (God), and Roh Allah (God's Spirit). In his opinion, using these words established a better connection to the listener than if other terms were spoken. Kosal, living in a Cham village in central Cambodia, preferred the use of Nabi Isa for reasons of understandability. He clearly recognized that both terms referred to Jesus, but when speaking to others he noted that "I don't use the word Preah Yesu. I use the word Nabi Isa. People understand more when we talk about Nabi Isa."

For others interviewed, the choice of this term was connected to acceptability as well. Isak explained that Cham people know the term Isa and understand that he is in the line of the prophets they know of, from Moses to Abraham and onto Jesus. However, "if we talk and say Preah Yesu, Preah Yesu like that, they will not be interested even though they already know that Preah Yesu is Isa (Jesus). Preah Yesu is what the Khmer call him. If we use the Khmer word, people are not interested, not interested …". For Isak, the choice of words is not simply a matter of understanding. It affects one's sense of interest in Jesus. Even if one does understand that the Khmer term is referring to the Jesus they know about, the use of the Khmer term is not sweet to the ears. This is an example of contextualizing the message by using a term which is experience-near because it is familiar and easily understandable. There are parallels with other religious terms used, where the Cham or Arabic-based terms for God (Allah), and the Holy Spirit (Roh Allah) are used instead of the Khmer terms, which have often been influenced by Buddhism. Other examples of familiar terms used are those for sin (duhsa), heaven (sorga), hell (naraka), Satan/spirit (Iblih), and sacrifice (kurban). These words, deeply ingrained in the thoughts and common vocabulary of Cambodian Muslims, are instantly recognized and meaningful.

In this study, contextualization was also accomplished through the use of simple and commonly-used language. Respondents spoke of both hearing and communicating the message through the use of simple and easily understood language. This practice dovetails with the findings of Adams, Allen, and Fish who conducted a survey to investigate fruitful practices for those working in Muslim contexts. They asked three hundred practitioners to respond to the statement, "When communicating the gospel, I intentionally use terms that local Muslims will understand from their own culture, language, or religious background."[34] The results of their survey suggested that the use of these understandable terms had a positive impact on the number of fellowships started.

Experience-near Concepts

In any culture, there are topics and concepts that are close to the hearts and minds of many of that group. Those topics are often ones which people are familiar with and concerned about. In the present Cambodian study, the gospel message was seen to address several topics important to Muslims. Four of them will be briefly discussed: spirits, heaven, sin, and good deeds.

Approximately twenty-five percent of interviewees talked specifically about spiritual forces. Nida, a young adult, spoke for many when she said, "…most Cham people believe in *cay* [a type of spirit] or believe in those things which we cannot see: spirits, evil spirits …"[35] One way in which the Christian message was presented to Nida was through telling the Bible story of a person who was demon-possessed and who trembled with fear before Jesus. Amir related how he was exposed, both through reading and through watching a film, to the story of Jesus in the Bible. Remembering the story and the teaching that if there is any problem, one can call on Jesus, Amir specifically requested help from Jesus during a time of spiritual attack. He clearly felt that teachings he received about Jesus related to the spirit world, of which he was already aware.

The concept of heaven is personally important to many Cambodian Muslims. Hamat described how the

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[34] Eric Adams, Don Allen, and Bob Fish, "Seven Themes of Fruitfulness," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 26, no. 2 (April 2009): 79.

[35] Trankell and Ovesen note that belief in the *cay* exists among the smaller *Jahed* subgroup of Cham, and explain that "The *cay* spirits are the royal spirits of their ancestors in

Champa," Ing-Britt Trankell and Jan Ovesen, "Muslim Minorities in Cambodia," *NIASnytt*, no. 4 (December 2004): 23. Nida belongs to the *Jahed* group. The other types of spirits she identifies are also referred to by the other groups of Cham in Cambodia.

BMB who shared the gospel message with him spoke about two things: sin and heaven. He was told that believing in Jesus would save him from sin, which Jesus accomplished through being hung on the cross. In addition, this hanging on the cross and shedding his blood was to "help us go to heaven." Hamat stated that Muslims who pray five times per day are not sure if they can go to heaven or not. They are not brave enough to say they will enter heaven, though this is their desire. This illustrates that the concept of heaven is familiar to Cambodian Muslims, and for some, heaven is longed for. Messengers frequently included the topic of heaven in the conversation when communicating the Christian message.

Those explaining the gospel message also discussed the topic of sin. The general concept of sin is understood by many Cambodian Muslims. Sukry is in his thirties and lives in a remote community in western Cambodia. He described experiences in which he learned about some aspects of sin,

> Older people in this village always talked about the story of Eve and Adam. When I was a child, I always went to play around the older people's homes. Sometimes when I go … I went to listen to them talk about Eve and Adam. They talked about the story of Eve and Adam, but they just talked about sin. They do not talk about the topic of being freed from sin … They talked about Eve and Adam having sin when they committed wrong towards God, but they did not talk about the topic of being freed from sin.

Sukry has clear memories of hearing about sin, through the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God. "Sin" appears to be an experience-near concept in Cambodian Muslim culture. The topic of sin is central to the content of the Christian message, and by recognizing the experience-near nature of this concept for Cambodians, gospel messengers were able to make the message more relevant and understandable.

The topic of being good and carrying out good deeds was also discussed by Christian messengers. The concept of doing good deeds is valued in Cambodia.[36] The term "good" is often used in common speech. Respondents spoke of how those who communicated the gospel couched the message in these terms. Narin, when describing his decision to follow Jesus, used the term "good" and its concept many times, "I think that [this teaching] is true because Jesus taught people to do good [deeds], not to walk in the wrong path, but to walk in the good path. The people who believe in Jesus are kind, do not do bad things, and also help other people. So I decided that I would walk this path, the true path, the good path." Although there are many reasons for his decision to believe in Jesus, the terminology he used revealed that the words and concepts of "good" and "doing good deeds" are experience-near for him. Communicating the Christian message using concepts such as these illustrates that Christianity values many of the things that Cambodians already consider important. Honoring and following Christ is therefore not as foreign as one may have expected.

Contextualization through Communication within the Framework of Understanding of the Listener

Cambodian Muslims have complex pre-existing frameworks of understanding,[37] which include current beliefs and values held. Those seeking to present the Christian message to them utilized and honored this pre-existing framework of understanding. This method enhanced communication and made the message more personally relevant and acceptable.

For some, the Christian message was communicated in a way that honored and acknowledged current beliefs and perspectives instead of quickly dismissing them. This approach, while certainly not agreeing with all the person's beliefs, was meaningful to many and prompted increasing openness to the message. It allowed the gospel message to fit into their current understandings about the things of Allah, and add to them. The Christian message was not presented as something totally foreign to one's current understanding but rather built upon previously existing beliefs. This phenomenon is seen in the life and words of Isak. His lengthy quote will be

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[36] There is a common understanding in Cambodia of reward and punished resulting from good and bad deeds. A saying illustrating this and known by virtually all Cambodians (Buddhists, Muslims, etc.) is literally translated as "Do good, receive good; do bad, receive bad."

[37] It is understood there is not a simple, singular "framework" of understanding. Many beliefs and factors are at play, which vary by individual or group. For the remainder of this paper, however, the less cumbersome term "framework" will be used, with the understanding that it describes dynamic and very complex beliefs and values.

included below as it provides details about his perceptions and experience.[38] Early in his interview, Isak spoke about previously feeling that "Christians were wrong" because they believed that Jesus is Lord. He related his interactions with Steven, a cross-cultural worker who was known as a Christian and who he was suspicious of. Isak and Steven worked together on a development project but did not normally talk about religion. Isak described a conversation with Steven:

> One time we were driving together in a car and we spoke about Jesus. I had listened to a cassette player and heard the words, "the King Father and the King Son," [God the Father and God the Son]. "I was thinking at that time that if he immediately told me that Jesus [*Isa*] was God [Allah], then I would not believe him." I asked, "Who is the King Father?" Steven said, "The King Father is Allah [God]." I asked him if he believed that Allah or a Lord exists, and he said "yes." When I asked about the King Son, he began to talk about Jesus. So I was interested when he said that the King Father was Allah. These people who follow Jesus, they also believe and accept that there is Allah. Because of these things, I began to be interested in following Jesus, and I began to research this, but I did not yet believe in Jesus. "If he had told me immediately that the King Father was Jesus, I would not have believed him. But he told me that the King Father was Allah, and the King Son was Jesus." I asked him if he believed there was a Lord [Allah], and he said "There is. The Lord created the sky and the land." Because of this, I began to be interested in the story of Jesus. If we talk to Muslims and say that Jesus was the one who created the sky and the land, they would not believe us and will refuse us. Before, when I was in the car with Steven, I thought he was walking in the wrong way. But it was not like that. He believed that Allah exists. And when I asked him if he believed that God [Allah] created everything in the world, he said yes. I then became interested because of that topic.

At the beginning of the discussion, Isak said he was prepared to reject Steven's message if Steven quickly pointed to Jesus being God. Isak was surprised by Steven's response that the King Father was Allah, whom Isak was familiar with. Contrary to Isak's expectations, Steven did not simply reject his belief in Allah and speak only about Jesus. Isak did not know Steven's exact beliefs about the God of the Bible as compared to Allah, but he interpreted Steven's words as acknowledging Allah and respecting his personal beliefs. Isak also clearly stated his response to this interaction: "Because of this, I began to be interested in the story of Jesus." Reading the Qur'an later, Isak discovered more about Jesus, whom he saw was not outside Islamic teachings but rather is included in the Qur'an. Steven's approach can be seen as presenting the Christian message within the framework of understanding of the listener. He acknowledged that Isak had beliefs in one almighty God he called Allah. Instead of rejecting that framework, Steven worked within it and added further information, including clarifying details about Jesus.

Daniel Hoskins identifies seven research findings from his study of BMBs living in post-Soviet Central Asia. Finding number two, significant for the Cambodian study, is stated as, "For many Central Asian Muslims, Jesus is inaccessible until he, as *Isa*, enters into their culturally-constructed metaphysical landscape. The primary example of this linguistic phenomenon is the change of the Russian religious figure *Yesus Christos* into *Isa Masih*."[39] Hoskins explains that the term *Jesus* was seen by Muslims to refer to the Russian god. As such, it is inconceivable one would believe in him, even if one were attracted to him.[40] However, when the one presenting the Christian message used the Muslim-background term *Isa* instead of *Yesus Christos*, the reception was much different.

The Cambodian use of the Khmer term *Preah Yesu* has similarities with the *Yesus Kristos* phrase in the Central Asian study. Both terms refer to the "god" of the majority people and are in the language used by the majority people. Both terms communicate a sense of distance and foreignness and are not experience-near for the Muslims living in those locations. It is thus not surprising that these terms illicit little interest in the

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[38] The words used are often summaries of what was said in the interview. Exact quotes, however, will be noted with quotation marks.

[39] Daniel Gene Hoskins, "Conversion Narratives in Context: Muslims Turning to Christ in Post-Soviet Central Asia" (PhD diss., University of South Africa, 2014), 194.
[40] Hoskins, 117.

minds of Muslims and do not resonate in their hearts. However, the use of familiar Muslim-background terms such as *Isa* does foster a sense of closeness and openness to the message. Hoskins's statement that Jesus must enter the Muslims "culturally-constructed metaphysical landscape" in order to be seen as accessible has connections to the principle of communicating within a framework of understanding. Hoskins describes Jesus entering into an existing framework, and as *Isa*, he is known and accepted. Similarly, communicating the Christian message within the existing framework of Cambodian Muslims allowed Jesus to be seriously considered. He was already known to them as *Isa*. Thus the message was not foreign. Although not fully understood, it was already within their metaphysical landscape. Hoskin's research connects to this Cambodian study and reinforces the previous discussion about the preference of the use of the term *Nabi Isa* for Jesus over the Khmer term *Preah Yesu.*

The preceding information focuses primarily on how the message was communicated to those interviewed, who have now chosen to believe in and follow Christ. One set of interview questions specifically addressed how the BMBs themselves communicated the message. Towards the end of the interview, they were asked "Do you tell this message to others and, if so, how do you communicate it in a way which is easily understood?" Based on interview data, BMBs described nine methods of evangelism: communicating in a natural and non-threatening manner, using experience-near terms and concepts within the existing framework of understanding, inviting others to meetings, inviting others to request help from Jesus, teaching from the Bible, telling stories, using metaphors and illustrations, giving and using contextualized materials, and demonstrating love.[41] While not discussed in detail here, the results contain many parallels to the above findings.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has examined both methods used in the evangelism of Cambodian BMBs and also the manner in which the Christian message was contextualized. In summary, the message was communicated primarily by Cambodian BMBs and cross-cultural workers from other countries, but also by Khmer Christians. Old Testament Bible stories and teachings about Jesus were often focused on and accompanied by the challenge to believe in and follow him. A variety of methods were used in the communication of the gospel, prominent among them being the use of the Bible, discussion in groups, and utilizing multimedia tools such as MP3 recordings and films. In many cases, the message was contextualized in order to make it more understandable and relevant. Various adjustments were made, such as choosing what language to communicate in and using experience-near terms and concepts. In addition, the message was commonly communicated within the framework of understanding of those hearing it.[42]

What role, if any, did the contextualization of the message play in clearly understanding it, and in the decision to follow Jesus? Few respondents explained the connection to contextualization as clearly as Isak, who stated that this interest was piqued when Steven acknowledged the existence of Allah and placed teachings about Jesus within his understanding of Allah's story. The evidence suggests that the contextualization of the message did contribute to three results: the message was better understood by the listener, it was seen as somewhat familiar, and it was viewed as personally relevant to their circumstances. Data about how the message was contextualized and how it was communicated by BMBs themselves demonstrates that contextualization was used, precisely because it was helpful. While the importance of contextualization is broadly understood, this study provided more insight about the contextualization of the gospel message among a Muslim-background population in a specific context.

Based on the above study, I propose four recommendations for evangelism and the communication of the Christian message. The first recommendation is foundational, as most of the other recommendations are based on this one. It is deliberately to seek to understand deeply those to whom one wants

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[41] For a specific discussion of these methods, see Author, "Experiencing the Gospel: An Examination of Muslim Conversion to Christianity in Cambodia" (PhD diss., Trinity International University, 2018), 87-99.

[42] Although not discussed in this paper, this research revealed several types of contextualized materials used in evangelism.

The materials include a contextualized Bible, a film about Jesus, a tract about the Christian message, and a printed cloth containing illustrations of Bible stories. For a specific discussion of these materials, see Seckler, 82–87.

to communicate the gospel message. In instances where one is communicating the message to someone of their own background, much is already tacitly understood. However, humans are individuals, and each individual has their own thoughts, hopes, beliefs, experiences, and perspectives. Communicators of the Christian message should seek to understand these nuanced feeling and perspectives of others, as even those living in similar circumstances and locations may demonstrate widely varied mindsets and beliefs. For the person seeking to communicate the message cross-culturally, it is even more important to learn about the "other," as lack of understanding of them can hinder the communication of the message to them. Another application for cross-cultural workers is to study the mother tongue language in the location where one works. This type of language study, while extremely time consuming, promotes both better communication and a deeper understanding of the people's culture and thoughts. The findings of this study support the importance and impact of mother tongue language study for cross-cultural workers.

A second recommendation is to communicate using familiar terms, ideas, and language. The use of experience-near terms and concepts assists in creating connections and a quicker recognition of what is being communicated. Many Cambodian respondents reported that the use of mother tongue language contributed toward the message being better understood and also viewed as personally relevant. Related to the above is the use of illustrations, metaphors, stories, and proverbs which are readily understood and which resonate with one's lived experience.

Third, communicators should seek to convey the message within the existing framework of understanding of the listener. When people view a particular message as being part of or contributing to their previous understanding, they are less likely to immediately label it as foreign or personally irrelevant. Of course, this recommendation pre-supposes that the one communicating the message is knowledgeable about the recipient's existing framework of understanding. This framework is not limited to the formal religious teachings followed by many in a particular area. Other religious practices or beliefs not associated with that religion may be a foundational part of the mindset and activities of individuals there.

A fourth recommendation is to develop and use contextualized materials in order to communicate the Christian message in a particular location or among a group of people. Cambodian respondents noted that various contextualized materials were utilized and that they contributed to the message being understood and seen as personally meaningful. Materials such as films, audio recordings, and illustrations can be used.

Communicating the gospel message to those from a Muslim background is complex and challenging. Although there is wide interest regarding Muslim evangelization across the world, there are few contemporary empirical studies on this topic. While focusing on a specific group of people in a specific country, this recent study reveals insights about how the gospel is communicated in ways that are understandable and relevant. Its findings encourage reflection about other contexts where the Christian message is being communicated to those from Muslim backgrounds.

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