

# Becoming More Truly Christ's Followers and More Truly South Asian

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*“Tell me to what you pay attention and I will tell you who you are”*  
— Jose Ortega y Gasset

A welter of challenges faces the church in South Asia. Some are daunting, but each is an opportunity the Christian community can engage and use. The key challenge concerns *identity*.

Over the last decade, South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS), an evangelical mission-centered institute of theological studies in Bangalore, India, has every three years or so sought to discern the opportunities and threats in its sub-continental circumstances. These stakeholder consultations and faculty brainstorms have formed the prelude to the team setting its objectives.

Most recently, in September 2016, we brainstormed for two days about contemporary challenges facing SAIACS. My summary listed forty-one, including poverty, corruption, nominalism, the prosperity gospel, lack of cultural fit, and Hindutva religious fundamentalism. When we met again in April this year, we felt that recent political events had significantly raised the likelihood of persecution, and we adjusted our strategic plan accordingly. What could be seen from our list was that they came down to two main challenges: the church needed to live up to its calling, and the church needed a greater ability to contextualize the gospel without losing Christ.

In our strategic plan, we began to talk about how we needed to form students who were *“more truly Christian and more truly Indian.”* However, some colleagues pointed out several problems with this phrasing. SAIACS is a South Asian institution not just an Indian one. Furthermore, some of our constituency in Northeast India, where a secessionist insurgency has existed for several decades, don't feel Indian and would hardly resonate with the idea of “being truly

Indian.” With the first adjective, some pointed out that while some are coming to Christ, they remain within their cultural setting and don’t identify themselves as “Christian.” They perhaps see the traditions, political structure, and buildings of Christendom as colonial and oppressive, but they’re happy to be called Yesubaktha—devotees of Jesus. Many non-Christians in India count Christians as culturally alien, as those who have sold out on their nation. These various groups don’t resonate with the idea of “being truly Christian.” In view of these possible misunderstandings, for our strategic plan we have settled on the phrase, “**more truly Christ’s followers and more truly South Asian.**” It more closely captures what we are trying to do as an institution in forming students and guiding the church.

The key strategic goals in our strategic plan related to this phrase are:

1. Form leaders for the South Asian evangelical church, helping them become *more truly Christ’s followers and more truly South Asian.*
2. Guide the South Asian church, theologically and prophetically, towards confident South Asian Christian identity and humble missional engagement, addressing areas of minority complex, corruption, religious nationalism, and contextualization—and equipping the church for its ministry among Muslims and in emerging church growth.
3. Develop the faculty to be and form leaders to guide the church to be *more truly Christ’s followers and more truly South Asian.*

The following will unpack what we mean by this phrase and then give some examples of what it means in the life of our institution, SAIACS.

## What does it mean?

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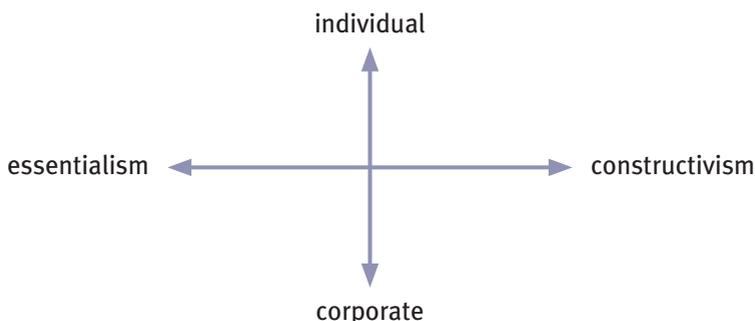
“More truly Christ’s followers and more truly South Asian.” It is immediately clear from the words “more truly” that we are talking about an ideal. Unfortunately, as with all Christ’s followers everywhere, the reality is that all too often his followers in South Asia have let Jesus down and that they strike compatriots as culturally strange. The central issue is *identity*. We mean an identity that is shaped by Christ and by the culture of the region. Sounds easy, for there is so much that is positive in the region’s culture and history. But it is not as easy as it sounds. What happens when there is conflict? What does it mean to be true?

In this article, I will briefly describe some of the tensions regarding identity globally and in South Asia and explore a missiological view of Christian identity formation and culture. Then we will be in a position to articulate the implications

of being more truly Christ's followers and more truly South Asian at SAIACS.

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## Cultural roots of identity



There is much argument over how identity is formed and over its pliability and usefulness. Am I who I am because of what I am? Or am I who I am because of my aspirations and behavior? Am I who I am because of some essence? Or can I construct myself into some new identity? Is identity something to be simply accepted or does it empower change? Identity politics, for instance, seek to focus on a marginalized identity in order to provoke change.

Whether we are dealing with personal identity or social identity, there is a spectrum of approaches between *essentialism* and *constructivism*. Essentialism says “national identity is something more or less objective which is to be discovered or represented,” whereas constructivism sees national identity as “being actively and continuously produced by various agents” (Kaneva 2011, 129f).<sup>1</sup> Does my South Asian identity come from growing up or living in a particular geographic region? Or is it something that is fundamentally shaped by culturally distinctive behaviors? Am I Indian because of how I look? Or where I was born? Or because I have distinctive religious activities, sing “Vande Mataram,”<sup>2</sup> and vote in Indian elections? Is being Myanmar determined by my chanting Buddhist verses?

Certainly, in India, these are not merely theoretical questions. Two or three states harbor secessionist dreams. From their perspective, history has been unkind, even “unjust.” The result is some feel they are “accidental” Indians. Is the identity of Northeast Indians determined by this past and by their geographical origin? Or is it determined by their future, by their aspirations? Another challenge faces all religious minorities in India. Politicians in power who are committed to Hindutva ideology want to define citizenship of India on the basis of the location of one’s

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<sup>1</sup> Kaneva reviewed the approaches of 186 articles on nation branding and discerns this tension in viewpoints.

<sup>2</sup> India's national song.

spiritual “motherland.” If that is Mecca or Jerusalem, you are by definition non-Indian, or at least second class. There are alarming parallels between this ultimately fascist politics and Nazism. How I understand my identity is immensely important!

The truth seems to be found at neither extreme. If we overemphasize essence<sup>3</sup> we can become overly dogmatic and exclusive; or we can end up trapped with no possibility of change or improvement. If we overemphasize what we socially construct, we can lose our cohesion; or we can falter in the face of impossible aspirations.

Being true to my nation or region is more than balancing loyalty to origin and destiny. Identity is also colored by the cultural emphasis on the relative importance given to the group and the individual. Here, the contrast between the West and South Asia is rather clear. Stereotypically, in the West being true to your identity means being true to one’s self; in South Asia, it means being true to one’s family or tribe. Guilt in the West overshadows shame in South Asia. One of the strengths of South Asia is the high value it places on respect for one’s family and region. It is however also one of its weaknesses. In India, shame means a pregnant unmarried daughter or a handicapped son or a young widow is hidden from view. Loyalty to family and region often gives rise to nepotism and regionalism. This solidarity with the group even extends back into history. I was fascinated to learn from tribal students in my theology class of their concern about the salvation of their unbelieving ancestors—could it not be that the faith of the generation that welcomed the arrival of the gospel also benefits their ancestors who had no opportunity to hear the gospel? Still a part of the corporate identity, the ancestors were surely no more sinful than we.

The stereotypes are not entirely true if we scratch below the surface. Charles Taylor’s insightful analysis of late modernity in the West argues that “we are only individuals in so far as we are social.... Being authentic, being faithful to ourselves, is being faithful to something which was produced in collaboration with a lot of other people” (Rorty 1993, 3).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, South Asian social solidarity still expects

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<sup>3</sup> In the West, essentialism stems from Plato, while constructivism is more Aristotelian. Since the rise of post-modernism, essentialism has been suspected of covert hegemony (Fuchs 2009). Artificial intelligence is a frequent theme in recent films because it raises the question of identity. The more a robot looks like and behaves like a human, the more we feel it belongs and has human rights—but does it, if it is different in essence? With human identity, Karl Barth (1946) acknowledges there is a hidden essence that makes us a human (as opposed to a tortoise), but more importantly, humans act and stand in relationship with God (88). That is, what is revealed to us is relational not essential.

<sup>4</sup> Rorty goes on to say, “The core of Taylor’s argument is a vigorous and entirely successful criticism of two intertwined bad ideas: that you are wonderful just because you are you, and that ‘respect for difference’ requires you to respect every human being, and every human culture—no matter how vicious or stupid.”

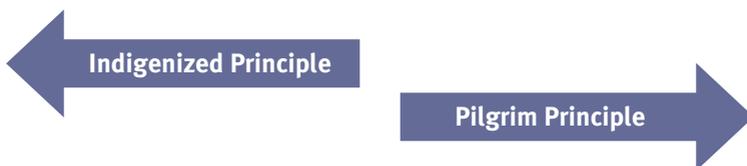
and respects individual action. For instance, in Tirunelveli Christian families a particular name is given to descendants to honor their first ancestor who converted to Christianity.

According to Taylor (1989), our identity depends on orientation within a framework. “My identity,” he says, “is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand” (27). One of the tasks of education, then, is helping students learn and behave their way into lifelong commitments and identifications which orient them to what is good and valuable. But how do we discern what makes their framework Christian? How are the cultural roots of identity affected by the arrival of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

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## Christ and Identity

In his landmark 1982 essay, “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture,” missiologist Andrew Walls helpfully identifies two competing forces in the lives of people who have welcomed the gospel. This is a dialectic that comes from the gospel itself.



God takes people as they are, by grace. He doesn’t wait until they are good enough to save. They are accepted as they are, conditioned as they are in their particular culture, time, and place, including the various ways relatives and non-relatives are valued within their culture. This leads, he says, to “one unvarying feature in Christian history: the desire to ‘indigenize,’ to live as a Christian and also as a member of one’s society, to make the Church ... *A Place to Feel at Home*” (Walls 1996, 19f). Conversely, God takes people “in order to transform them into what He wants them to be.” This pilgrim principle “whispers to him that he has no abiding city and that warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society” (21). There is no Christian culture, but Christ is Lord of all, and no culture is immune to his call to be transformed into his likeness.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A quick biblical check in Galatians confirms these twin forces at work: Christian identity is God’s **gift** (the gospel is not earned, nor inherited [ch.1]; circumcision or non-circumcision don’t count [ch.2]; it is available by faith, and this relativizes all human categories [ch. 3]); and Christian identity is God’s **call** (we ought not live according to the flesh, we ought to walk like Christ by the Spirit [ch.5]).

The indigenizing principle affirms the particularity of any culture. The pilgrim principle affirms something more universal about the Church. The indigenizing principle reflects God's committedness to humans; the pilgrim principle reflects God's openness to them, his claim on their lives (for these categories, see Payne 2014). Every Christian thus has dual identity. In the vision of the vast crowd thronging the throne of the Lamb (Rev 7:9), our Christward ambitions are fulfilled, but our cultural particularity will remain. Strikingly, Walls (1992) shows how the Christian is given "an adoptive past" (21). The Christian is linked to the people of God in all generations; even the history of Israel and of Abraham becomes his/her own!

Christians from South Asian cultures will feel these twin forces at work. It means it is a Christian struggle and the fruit of the gospel that we be *truly Christ's followers and truly South Asian*. The close connection between the spread of Christianity and colonial domination requires significant examination in order to discern what is going on. In the last several centuries, India has been overrun by intruders, the Mughals and then the British. While a tiny Christian presence has existed since the early Christian centuries, today's Indian church stems primarily from colonial missionary efforts over the last 250 years. The frequent jibe that Christianity is alien to India suggests that the indigenizing principle has not yet been fully worked out.<sup>6</sup>

Kwame Bediako (1992) speaks for African Christians whose culture and past they felt was demeaned by the cultural arrogance of the colonizers and missionaries alike (cf. Ferdinando 2007).<sup>7</sup> If the gospel is to be truly at home in African or South Asian culture then those Christians must discern what God has been doing in their history even prior to the coming of the gospel. Not everything is trashed.

Nevertheless, good as this cultural re-appropriation is, the Christian has been given an adoptive past. South Asian Christians, just as New Zealand Christians, ought to find themselves looking gratefully backwards beyond our national heroes

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<sup>6</sup> Timothy Tennent (2010) identifies three periods in relation to the arrival of the gospel and culture: preparation, reception, and assimilation. God is at work in the culture prior to the arrival of the missionaries to prepare for its reception.

<sup>7</sup> I endorse Bediako's impulse to find value in his pre-Christian African culture and religion. However, like Ferdinando, I cannot agree with Bediako's implication that pre-Christian African religions might have been the source of salvation for some. On the vexed question about being exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist in regard to truth in other religions, I think the Bible is very clear: there is no salvation in any other name but Jesus. In terms of salvation, this is exclusivist. However, in terms of (non-salvific) knowledge of God I am inclusivist. God has not left himself without a witness in any culture. There is much to value in many cultures and religions, and we can discern that by the light of Scripture. This means there may be values, metaphors, and stories within South Asian cultures which can be bridges or windows for non-Christian South Asians. As Barth puts it: there can be many "creaturely lights" but only one Light of the world (1961, 136–65).

of the faith to the disciples of Jesus, to David, Moses, and Abraham himself. We are the people of God. We have been grafted into the vine (Rom 11). To complain about having lost one's pre-Christian culture leads to a legitimate enquiry, but to deny this adoptive past is to yield to a temptation. It is part of the "scandal of particularity": Jesus was not a South Asian. God chose Abraham not Ashoka.<sup>8</sup>

The task is not only to help South Asian students feel more at home in their cultural identity but also to equip them to confidently navigate cross-culturally with the gospel message. Sadhu Sundar Singh spoke of giving "the water of life in an Indian cup." One of my colleagues emphasizes the diversity of the more than 4,500 cultural communities that make up India—we need "the water of life in Indian cups" (Vedhamanickam 2011; cf. Bharati 2004).<sup>9</sup> Finding "bridges" for the gospel and metaphors that are vivid in the new culture along with affirming aspects of culture—these are all consistent with the indigenizing principle. We will have to guard against simplistic solutions. Historically, Indian Christian theology has most often sought to appeal to the *advaitic* thinking of the Brahmins. However, metaphors which work for high-caste Indians may offend people from middle and low castes.

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### What does this mean at SAIACS?

How will we form leaders for the South Asian evangelical church, helping them become more truly Christ's followers and more truly South Asian? A few illustrative examples will have to do. We will strengthen our missions focus through the Centre for Inter-Cultural Studies (CICS), ensuring students engage with real contexts through field trips and have the ability to understand culture and contextualize the gospel faithfully. We will seek to expose students to visiting missional change agents who model a confident Christian approach. We will continue to emphasize worship as a community discipline and uphold South Asian styles. Bhajans and satsangs will find a place as well as Hillsong-inspired music.

How will we guide the Indian church, theologically and prophetically, towards confident Indian Christian identity and humble missional engagement? We will grow students' ability to contextualize the gospel by improving their understanding of a whole-Bible theology, pursuing a better understanding of anthropology and culture, and practicing skills of application and contextualization. Faculty will model engagement in the South Asian public square, and studies will address areas of minority complex, corruption, religious nationalism, and contextualization. We will also equip students for ministry among

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<sup>8</sup> King Ashoka was one of India's most remarkable kings, ruling almost all the sub-continent from 262 to 232 BCE.

<sup>9</sup> Another important reason for recognizing the plurality of cultures in India today is to resist the idea of a hegemonic, homogenized "Hindu" India as envisaged by Hindu nationalists.

Muslims and for disciple making in contexts with emerging church growth. Our Centre for Islam Studies (CIS) and CICS will engage in research to strengthen knowledge of Hindu and Muslim communities and develop resources to spark motivation for mission.

How will we develop the faculty to model and form leaders to better guide the church to be more truly Christ-followers and more truly South Asian? We will continue to build a faculty team that mostly comprises South Asian doctoral degree holders with a passion for serving the church. One source of new faculty will be those developed from our faculty-in-training program, with a preference for split-site PhDs. Our faculty forays are aimed at keeping faculty in touch with the needs of field churches and ministry. Our annual faculty pedagogy workshops will keep us developing teaching skills for interactive and transformational learning, including online programs. We are encouraging some of our faculty who are writing for publication in ways that intentionally attempt to be Christian and South Asian. Some departments consciously encourage thesis-writing students to engage with South Asian realities, whether through field research or literary comparison.

In summary, then, SAIACS has set for itself the theologically coherent and biblical goal of graduating students who are more truly Christ's followers and more truly South Asian. It will involve confidently locating ourselves amidst the tensions, looking back and looking forward with Christian hope and prayer. We are God's children; we will be like Christ (1 Jn 3:1f). The aim is Christian worship and obedience at home in South Asia. The aim is also aspirational. Our identity is ultimately shaped by what we pay attention to. A night watching the stars doesn't make you an astronomer; but a lifetime does. So too, SAIACS's task is to embed for a lifetime the aspiration to grow more like Christ as his follower and grow more at home in South Asian culture. N. V. Tilak's hymn (quoted in Boyd 2011, 117) sums up what it will take:

“Of all I have, O Saviour sweet, —  
All gifts, all skill, all thoughts of mine, —  
A living garland I entwine,  
And offer at Thy lotus feet.”

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### Dr. Ian Payne

Dr Ian Payne was brought up in Kerala where his New Zealand parents George and Bettie Payne were Christian workers until 1967. After beginning his career in architecture, he returned to India in 1994 to study at SAIACS. He was a SAIACS faculty member for four years and then visited SAIACS annually teaching theology. Building on a study of Karl Barth, his PhD was on parallels between God's love and human knowing. His research interests are epistemology, the Trinity and mission. Since 2003, he was Principal of Pathways Bible and Mission College in Auckland, New Zealand. He joined SAIACS faculty as Principal in 2008. He is author of *Wouldn't You Love to Know? Trinitarian Epistemology and Pedagogy*.