

“BUT IT’S THEIR HOME, SIR,”
OR WHY WE SHOULD ABANDON SOME NEWISH EVANGELISTIC TERMS
Dr. Mitchel Modine, Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary

“But it’s their home, sir. Why would they leave?”

—Unidentified White House Reporter, 4 February 2025¹

New naming, changes in language, are, however, no minor matters, for if one believes that language and “world” are coterminous, then changes in the one will involve changes in the other, and such changes are often revolutionary. The current resistance to inclusive or unbiased language, for instance, both at the social and religious level, indicates that people know instinctively that a revolution in language means a revolution in one’s world.

—Sallie McFague²

Introduction

The Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20, along with the lesser-known and textually problematic version in Mark 16:15–16,³ provide the biblical prescription for Christianity’s missionary impulse. The most common interpretation of this text is that Jesus calls Christians to disperse themselves throughout the world convincing people to become Christians. This impulse sets Christianity apart from nearly every major modern religion. Notably, Islam also follows a similar impulse, typified by the Arabic word *da’wa*. One must apply this shared characteristic only with caution. On the one hand, this shared characteristic likely accounts for Christianity and Islam having the highest and second-highest number of worldwide adherents.⁴ On the other hand, it is important methodologically to remember that similarity does not mean sameness. In the words of Ayman Ibrahim, “Still, there is a difference between *da’wa* in Islam and evangelism in Christianity. While the *da’wa* emphasizes submission to Allah and his laws, evangelism stresses the Good News of the reconciliation with God through Christ’s redemptive act.”⁵

¹ This question was shouted at US President Donald Trump on 4 February 2025, in reference to Gaza and the people living there. Trump ignored the question. See Stephen Collinson, “Analysis: Trump’s Gaza ‘Riviera’ Plan Is the Most Outlandish Idea in the History of US Middle East Peacemaking | CNN Politics,” *CNN*, 5 February 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/05/politics/trump-gaza-takeover-analysis>.

² Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 9.

³ Critical editions of the New Testament indicate with a high degree of confidence that Mark’s Gospel ended with 16:8, leaving out the resurrection appearances, the Great Commission, and the biblical foundation for “snake-handling” churches in Mark 16:18a.

⁴ See Conrad Hackett et al., “How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020,” *Pew Research Center*, 9 June 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/how-the-global-religious-landscape-changed-from-2010-to-2020/>.

⁵ Ayman S. Ibrahim, “Proselytizing in Islam,” *Fuller Studio*, 11 October 2018, <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/proselytizing-in-islam/>.

Secular society may provide some cover for these impulses. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”⁶

Statement of the Problem

Evangelism—the fancier term is proselytization⁷—sharing the good news about Jesus, is thus central to Christianity. However, many parts of the world resist Christian proselytization. This resistance finds its source, in part, in Christian missionaries’ eagerness to function alongside or in tandem with efforts at political colonization, especially the centuries following the officialization of Christianity in the Roman Empire. In modern times, some places⁸ found their reason for being in opposing religion in general, and Christianity in particular. Second, in some places where a different majority religion felt threatened by the influx of Christianity, or in post-colonial nations in which Christianity continues to be viewed as a tool of outside, particularly Western, political and cultural influence and colonization.⁹

In recent decades, some Christians have responded to this resistance by inventing euphemisms for the various stages of the evangelization process. For example, “convert” (noun) and “convert” (verb), have fallen away in Islamic-majority contexts in favor of “follower of Isa.”¹⁰ In this paper, I suggest that changes in missiological terminology attempt to solve a genuine problem in precisely the wrong way. That is, while I am by no means questioning the seriousness of the situation, I subject two terms to logical and biblical scrutiny: “pre-believer” and “____-background believer.” Searches both on Ecosia and the Internet Archive suggest that these terms, employed in this way, are 21st-century innovations. Since they are new, they do not have the weight of history behind them, like “the Trinity” or “the Great Commission” do.

In terms of the theme of this consultation, my question concerns how we as Christian disciple-makers should best talk about the “home” of those whom we disciple as we invite them into Christianity, our “home.” I may restate this in more academic/theological language. Given the particularly Wesleyan assumption, founded in the Bible, that the love of God goes out to all people (prevenient grace), our job, as it were, as Christians in the Wesleyan tradition is to give as many people as possible the chance to respond positively to the love of God (repentance), to experience God’s acceptance (justifying grace), and to grow in the grace that comes with that

⁶ United Nations, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” *United Nations* (United Nations, 1948), art.18, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

⁷ I will use these terms interchangeably.

⁸ I deliberately avoid the term “nation” here, because the term only took on its political meaning around 500 years ago in the 16th century.

⁹ For example, in the context of India, two master’s level treatments of the problem of persecution of Christians are Jivan Gaikwad, “Religious Intolerance and Rising Christian Persecution in India” (Capstone Project, Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, 2025); Sivagamasundari Renga Samy, “Imprecatory Psalms Are Relevant for the Psychological Relief of Persecuted Christians in India” (Thesis, Asia Graduate School of Theology, 2025).

¹⁰ Isa is the Arabic name for Jesus.

love (sanctifying grace). All of this is positive, whereas denigrating where people come from belongs, I think, more to capitalist advertising: describing the superiority Brand C through insisting on the awfulness of Brands M, H, B, S, etc. (let the listener understand).

My critique will have three stages. First, I will briefly examine a few sources that use each of the terms,¹¹ for use best determines meaning. Second, I will critique the terms based on what seem to be their unintended consequences, or in other words draw a distinction between what they to say and how they may be heard. Third, I will offer some alternatives which I believe mitigate the offensive impact and which find precedent in the Bible. Caution and humility provide the glue for the project, not only because I'm not "at home" in terms of my usual academic pursuits but because the critique (or sometimes acceptance) of potentially offensive language is often better when it comes from the person or group toward whom it points or against whom it is directed.

Pre-Believer

Coming first under the microscope is "pre-believer." Of the approximately 30 results on the Internet Archive, nearly all of them are contemporary evangelism guides. Sometimes the term appears without the hyphen, as in this guide for student ministry, which affirmed Campus Crusade for Christ's use of non-threatening, "non-churchy" activities to attract potential converts. Jeramy and Jerusha Clark write: "Typically a large meeting is held once a week to unite everyone involved and to offer opportunities to attract prebelievers. The meeting can include drama, music, and a speaker."¹² By contrast, Nazarene writer Bill Wiseman uses the hyphen, seemingly also less concerned to create a non-threatening environment: "Pre-believers must be led to look at their condition in relation to the holiness of God and the truth of God's Word."¹³

Richard Dobbins writes: "Generally speaking, pre-believers are agnostics who want to believe and believers who are not Christians."¹⁴ Positively, this term infuses evangelism with optimism, as if guaranteeing the result one seeks. This is in line with similar uses of the "pre-" prefix. A key example is pre-approval for a loan for a home mortgage or other large-balance loan: the borrower thus knows how much she can borrow without needing to have identified a specific property. "Pre-believer," then, assumes that the evangelized person desires to drop the "pre-" and become simply a believer and will soon do so. Carolyn Hyde, writing from a Messianic Jewish context, also likes the term: "we, the Body of Messiah, have mislabeled many who are hungry for something to fill that spiritual vacuum in their lives. When we refer to

¹¹ An exhaustive study of these terms is beyond both the scope of this paper and my own abilities. Therefore, I assume that the sources offered a reasonably representative.

¹² Jeramy Clark and Jerusha Clark, *After You Drop Them off: A Parent's Guide to Student Ministry*, 1st ed. (Colorado Springs, Colo: WaterBrook Press, 2005), 207.

¹³ Bill Wiesman, *A Holy Purpose: Five Strategies for Making Christlike Disciples* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2011), 24.

¹⁴ Richard D. Dobbins, "Sharing Your Faith with Pre-Believers," 1, *Apostolic Information Service*, 18 April 2008, <https://www.apostolic.edu/sharing-your-faith-with-pre-believers/>.

everyone who doesn't follow Yeshua as a "non-believer", that does not describe many potential seekers and it's a declaration I refuse to make!"¹⁵

Flipping this optimism over, however, uncovers some potential harm. Soo-Inn Tan, for example, suggests that "pre-believer" overrides people's free-decision:¹⁶

...the title sounds presumptuous. Are we assuming that the person will follow Christ at some point in the future? Do we view a person purely from the perspective of whether he or she accepts the gospel and not as a human being? Conversion remains a mystery and we cannot tell if a person will follow Christ. Maybe from the perspective of the Christian who uses the term, it is a statement of faith, a declaration of belief that a person will follow Christ one day, but how would a non-Christian feel if labelled as such?¹⁷

The sources are not only divided on whether this term constitutes an offense, but precisely what it means. Tan notes some of this ambiguity: "Sometimes it is used interchangeably with all non-believers. Then there are those who restrict the term to those who [have] already indicate[d] some interest in the Christian faith."¹⁸ Dobbins adds a further category: "Non-Christian believers are people who believe in Buddha, Mohammed, Moses and other faith systems."¹⁹ While it does not seem necessary for Christians to give up, in the "post-Christian era," their assumption of Christianity's superiority, perpetuating ignorance of other religions simply will not do. Buddhists do not worship the Buddha, nor Muslims Mohammed, nor Jews Moses. For that matter, not even an atheist can properly be said to be a "pre-believer." They may not believe in a divine being, but they believe there is no divine being.

Thankfully, the Bible offers a ready-made alternative: "God-fearers." Within the context of Hellenistic Judaism, a God-fearer was someone "who was attracted to the Jewish faith but who had become a convert to Judaism."²⁰ This seems to contrast with Wiseman's insistence on "pre-believer:" "The prospects for intentional relationships in discipleship may include—Pre-believers who express an interest in church affiliation."²¹ Shimon Bakon notes that the concept of God-fearers stretched even as far back as the Psalms. Moreover, he suggests that Christian missionaries were more successful in reaching such people than were Jews, the latter making it

¹⁵ Carolyn Hyde, "How about Calling Them Pre-Believers?," *Kehila News Israel*, 22 April 2018, <https://news.kehila.org/how-about-calling-them-pre-believers/>. Note well the changes in other terms: Messiah instead of Christ, Yeshua instead of Jesus.

¹⁶ As noted above, this is a key point in the Wesleyan understanding of the *ordo salutis*: humans cannot choose God on their own, unempowered by grace (as the Pelagians maintain), but nevertheless they enter the Kingdom of God willingly, not by coercion.

¹⁷ Soo-Inn Tan, "Prebeliever?," *Graceworks*, 19 October 2017, <https://graceworks.com.sg/prebeliever/>.

¹⁸ Tan, "Prebeliever?" (brackets original).

¹⁹ Dobbins, "Sharing Your Faith with Pre-Believers."

²⁰ Arnold B. Rhodes, *The Mighty Acts of God* (Richmond, VA: The CLC Press, 1972), 332.

²¹ Wiesman, *A Holy Purpose*, 24.

more difficult in refusing to accept one who did not keep the whole law.²² The most prominent NT example is the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). Jesus employed the concept in his parable of the unjust judge: “There was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people” (Luke 18:2, NRSV). Other examples are Cornelius (Acts 10) and Paul’s audience in Antioch-Pisidia (Acts 13).

The book of Proverbs famously begins with the statement: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov 1:7, NRSV). Viewed in this way, it perhaps becomes clear that “God-fearers” is both more accurate and less offensive. It is more accurate because it assumes interest on the part of those with whom one shares the Gospel. Noting Tan’s objections earlier, Christian proselytization should deemphasize the coercive tactics that often characterized it in both the past and present. It is less offensive because it does not discount previous religious background where this exists. That is, worshipers of other faiths, even poly- or non-theistic ones, are treated with respect and dignity, even while Christian evangelists attempt to call them out to something different/more/better.

“ _____-Background Believers ”

The second popular term which we should abandon is “ _____-background believer,” the blank being filled by a previous religious commitment. Like “pre-believer,” this term is of recent origin, and seems to apply most often to those of Hindu and Islamic backgrounds. A blog from 2008 entitled, “My Experience at a Muslim Background Believer Conference”²³ proves helpful. This title seems to imply two things. First, like “pre-believer,” the use of the hyphen is inconsistent. Second and more substantially, that conferences of Muslim-Background Believers could be organized in 2008 suggests that the concept had been around for some time prior to then.

The Internet Archive initially returns more than 80 sources. Most of these concern so-called Muslim-Background Believers, often abbreviated as MBBs.²⁴ Neil Green, citing in his turn previous sources, uses an alternative: Believers of Muslim Background, with the acronym BMBs.²⁵ Interestingly, in Green’s survey instruments, he uses the phrase “Christian Background Believer” in contrast to MBB or BMB, though he neglects to define the difference between the term and, especially, why—contrary to expectations—“Christian” and “believer” should be set in opposition like this.

At issue, again, is contextualization of the Gospel within the societal structure and, often, traditional homeland of other world religions. Missiological anthropologist Darrell Whiteman points out that becoming a disciple of Jesus does not necessarily mean leaving one’s prior socio-cultural context. This is a new paradigm, and one that might cause a drastic change to something like church statistics offices. Whiteman argues that such people are not “Muslim-background

²² Shimon Bakon, “Who Were the ‘Fearers of the LORD’ (Yir’ei Hashem) in Psalms?,” *Jewish Biblical Quarterly* 42.4 (2014): 250–54.

²³ Ben, “My Experience at a Muslim Background Believers Conference.”

²⁴ M. T. C., “Developing Healthy MBB Community.”

²⁵ Neil Green, “Cultural and Spiritual Ministry Needs of Believers of Muslim Background in North American Churches” (Directed Research Project, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2010).

believers,” but they are “Muslim-background followers of Jesus.” Whiteman writes: “Do we Western, evangelical Christians also need to be converted from our cultural, religious, and ecclesial centrism in order to affirm and welcome new disciples of Jesus from other religious traditions? Can we affirm ways of becoming disciples of Jesus that are very different from that with which we are familiar and feel comfortable? Surely, we must. We also need to trust the Holy Spirit car more than we do, to lead others in following Jesus in ways that are appropriate for their cultural contexts, but different from ours.”²⁶ “Non-believer” is rightfully rejected, as Hyde points out above. However, to say “___-background believer” implies that someone is only a believer if they are a Christian.

Other sources discuss some of the issues relevant to “Hindu-background believers.” Ashok Kumar, for example, using the expected acronym HBBs, writes: “Although Hindus form the major religious group in Kerala, there are only a handful of Hindu-background believers in the church.”²⁷ In a footnote on the same page, Kumar writes that HBB is the preferred term among his subjects of his study: “There are different terms used to describe people who find new faith in Christ... Most of the believers from Hindu background prefer using the term ‘Hindu Background Believers’ to using converts or new believers.”²⁸ On first glance, this statement seems a definitive mark against the point I advance here. On the one hand, as I noted in the introduction, the offended or potentially offended communities’ witness should be prominent; in other words, neither I, nor any other white American, should be the final authority on the question. On the other hand, I humbly suggest that Ashok has shot wide of the target. He apparently fails to see that “Hindu-background believer” pays for removing the problematic language of convert by suggesting that only Christians believe. As a thought experiment, consider the possibility that I would convert to Hinduism, or you to Islam. How would we feel if the evangelists who successfully won us over to our new faiths were to refer to us as “Christian-background believers?” If such a hypothetical term offends us, should we be surprised when its factual opposite offends them?

In other words, using “Christian” and “believer” interchangeably is as culturally *insensitive* as using “Christianity” and “civilization” interchangeably. It does no good to discard this issue as simple linguistic performance or “political correctness,” the latter term usually only appearing in those who have been caught being culturally insensitive. In keeping with Kumar’s suggestion that HBBs may prefer to be called HBBs, finding a solution is more difficult here. Understanding, again, that both “convert” and “Christian” create problems particularly in certain contexts, two biblical terms suggest themselves. The first is “God-fearers,” as mentioned above. This has the advantages previously mentioned. However, using “God-fearers” to describe both those both those who have not and those who have become Christians from a different socio-cultural context probably introduces an unacceptable level of ambiguity.

²⁶ Darrell L Whiteman, “Missiological Anthropology and the New Disciple of Jesus,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 40.3–4 (2023): 175.

²⁷ Ashok Kumar, “Methods and Practices of Evangelism and Discipleship among Hindu Communities in Malabar” (Doctor of Ministry Dissertation, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2011), 7.

²⁸ Kumar, “Methods and Practices,” 7, n. 20.

Thankfully, the book of Acts offers a second, and better, replacement term in “followers of the Way” (Acts 9:2). This term originally describes those whom Saul of Tarsus determined to persecute (see also Acts 19:9; 22:24)—until, that is, he discovered that he really persecuted Jesus (Acts 9:5). Later, it becomes a more positive term. Most important for the present purpose, this term describes a Jew named Apollos who was enthusiastic about sharing the Gospel but needed further training (Acts 18:25), received at the hands of Prisca and Aquila. The Book of Acts regularly describes controversy the Way generated (see 19:23). Given this, and that it marks both Saul/Paul and Apollos (not to mention everyone in at least the first two or three generations of Christians) as Jews who became followers of Jesus (Acts 24:14), this may serve as a suitable replacement for the more problematic terms.

To sum up this section, let us return to Whiteman and his call for a certain flexibility in the terms we use and the concepts in which they participate:

One often hears the question, “Can one remain a Muslim or a Hindu after becoming Christian?” I think that question needs to be reframed. Perhaps a more accurate way to pose the question is to ask, “Can someone enter the kingdom of God without becoming a follower of Jesus?” To maintain fidelity to the Bible, the answer is unequivocally “No!” (Acts 4:12; John 14:6). To enter the kingdom of God from any religious tradition requires that people repent of their sins and believe in who Jesus is. But if we ask, “Can someone enter the kingdom of God without becoming a Christian?” then that is a more complicated question and deserves a more nuanced response.²⁹

Conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested that the elimination of terms like “convert” and “Christian,” which pose significant problems in certain proselytization contexts, is a good thing. As with all presentations of this type, this is not meant to be the final word on the matter, not least because I judge myself unqualified to deliver such a final word. However, I believe that two terms in particular: “pre-believer” and “_____background believer” introduce more problems than they solve. I have suggested to replace them with “God-fearers” and “followers of the Way,” expressing much more confidence in the former than the latter. Despite the difficulties they themselves create, they have the advantage of more directly reflecting biblical usage.

This is not a matter of making it too easy to join Christianity or a simple matter of linguistic correction. Rather, it is about removing the barriers that people may have, whatever their source, that prevent them from coming into the land flowing with milk and honey. To use another biblical metaphor:

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:
 These are the words of the holy one, the true one,
 who has the key of David,
 who opens and no one will shut,
 who shuts and no one opens:

²⁹ Whiteman, “Missiological Anthropology and the New Disciple of Jesus,” 175.

“I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name” (Revelation 3:7-8 NRSV).

Bibliography

- Bakon, Shimon. “Who Were the ‘Fearers of the LORD’ (Yir’ei Hashem) in Psalms?” *Jewish Biblical Quarterly* 42.4 (2014): 250–54.
- Clark, Jeremy, and Jerusha Clark. *After You Drop Them off: A Parent’s Guide to Student Ministry*. 1st ed. Colorado Springs, Colo: WaterBrook Press, 2005.
- Collinson, Stephen. “Analysis: Trump’s Gaza ‘Riviera’ Plan Is the Most Outlandish Idea in the History of US Middle East Peacemaking | CNN Politics.” *CNN*, 5 February 2025. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/05/politics/trump-gaza-takeover-analysis>.
- Dobbins, Richard D. “Sharing Your Faith with Pre-Believers.” 1. *Apostolic Information Service*, 18 April 2008. <https://www.apostolic.edu/sharing-your-faith-with-pre-believers/>.
- Gaikwad, Jivan. “Religious Intolerance and Rising Christian Persecution in India.” Capstone Project, Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, 2025.
- Green, Neil. “Cultural and Spiritual Ministry Needs of Believers of Muslim Background in North American Churches.” Directed Research Project, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2010.
- Hackett, Conrad, Martin Stonawski, Yunping Tong, Stephanie Kramer, Anne Shi, and Dalia Fahmy. “How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020.” *Pew Research Center*, 9 June 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/how-the-global-religious-landscape-changed-from-2010-to-2020/>.
- Hyde, Carolyn. “How about Calling Them Pre-Believers?” *Kehila News Israel*, 22 April 2018. <https://news.kehila.org/how-about-calling-them-pre-believers/>.
- Ibrahim, Ayman S. “Proselytizing in Islam.” *Fuller Studio*, 11 October 2018. <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/proselytizing-in-islam/>.
- Kumar, Ashok. “Methods and Practices of Evangelism and Discipleship among Hindu Communities in Malabar.” Doctor of Ministry Dissertation, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2011.
- McFague, Sallie. *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982.
- Nations, United. “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” *United Nations*. United Nations, 1948. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.
- Rhodes, Arnold B. *The Mighty Acts of God*. Richmond, VA: The CLC Press, 1972.
- Samy, Sivagamasundari Renga. “Imprecatory Psalms Are Relevant for the Psychological Relief of Persecuted Christians in India.” Thesis, Asia Graduate School of Theology, 2025.
- Tan, Soo-Inn. “Prebeliever?” *Graceworks*, 19 October 2017. <https://graceworks.com.sg/prebeliever/>.
- Whiteman, Darrell L. “Missiological Anthropology and the New Disciple of Jesus.” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 40.3–4 (2023): 171–81.
- Wiesman, Bill. *A Holy Purpose: Five Strategies for Making Christlike Disciples*. Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2011.