COLONY, FRANCHISE, OUTPOST:
THREE MODELS OF RELIGIOUS EXPANSION

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Introduction

In *God is not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter*, Stephen Prothero writes: "What the world's religions share is not so much a finish line as a starting point. And where they begin is with this simple observation: something is wrong with the world" (Prothero 2010, 11). Prothero attempts, I think successfully, to avoid the problem that affected comparative religious studies as it was practiced up through approximately the middle of the twentieth century, namely, that "comparative religion is a product of a Western approach (with its intrinsic dualism) that first imports and then imposes it[s] categorization upon other traditions and then looks at that compartmentalization for points of similarity and contrast. This will never work" (Sanders 2012). The only points of comparison that appear to stand without qualification are the more-or-less "objective" criteria, among which are the historical context and physical location of the religions' founding—yet even these can be obscured, like the biography (-ies) of the key founder(s), by layers of hagiography and traditional teaching. Prothero suggests four categories that might be useful for religious comparison: a problem, a solution, a technique, and examples of people who applied the technique to solve the problem. He offers as examples from Christianity: sin, salvation, faith and good works, and the lives of the saints, both canonical and personal (Prothero 2010, 14).[1]

To these I will add a fifth: vitality. The eight major traditions Prothero identifies, not to mention innumerable smaller traditions, need three things to survive. First, they must attain and maintain historical endurance, including withstanding assault from other traditions, usually newer ones. Second, they must tolerate a certain amount of diversity. Third, they must expand beyond their traditional homeland or geographical origin point (e.g., India for Hinduism or Arabia for Islam). I focus here on the last of these three. Three models of religious expansion come to the surface in the Bible and in observation of major world religions. I call these the Colony, the Franchise, and the Outpost. In each section, I will briefly define each with model(s) from contemporary religions and from the Bible. In a fourth section, I will sketch out some implications that recognition of these three models may have for ongoing Christian evangelism, especially in so-called "creative access countries" and other places where proselytization finds less of a welcome or even downright hostility

Before proceeding, I offer this important preliminary note. I place the different world religions within the models only with hesitancy. I hesitate not only because of my lack of deep knowledge of the traditions, which is enough, but I also hesitate because of the first two factors of vitality noted above: religions that endure a long time must necessarily be diverse. That is, while Christianity and Islam are predominantly Colony models, other models may be found. For example, archaeologist Nelson Glueck (d. 1971) used the term "Outposts of Christendom" to describe one of the factors in the end of the Nabataeans, a culture that flourished in the southern

[1] Prothero includes among his eight major religions "in order of influence" (17), Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoruba Religion, Judaism, and Daoism.

Levant from the fourth century BCE to the second century CE (Glueck 1965, 519). James O'Donnell, by contrast, seems to acknowledge Christianity as Colony when he argues that the rise of Christianity hastened the obsolescence of paganism (O'Donnell 2015). By contrast, whether Judaism conforms to the definition of Franchise or Buddhism to Outpost remains open to correction. Space prohibits their full justification. Nevertheless, I think the contemporary examples highlight something of the range of possibilities for being religious in the world of 2026 CE and beyond.

The Three Models

I distinguish among the models with two questions. First, what relationship does the newly established community have to the "homeland?" I will argue that the Colony seeks most directly to "copy" what is found in the homeland; the Franchise allows for some local variations; and the Outpost contents itself with establishing the tiniest slice of the familiar in a land of strangeness. Second, what is the apparent stance of adherents toward potential new members?[2] The Colony directly aims to increase membership; the Franchise neither seeks out nor immediately rejects them; the Outpost generally has no interest in them, though they may engage in "passive" or "attractional" evangelism. The overlap between the two questions also deserves mention: the closeness of the new community to the homeland goes hand-in-hand with the level of respect for native religious traditions. O'Donnell summarizes this well: "Christian conquerors and missionaries would…read the religious practices of newfound peoples as extensions of the familiar story of credulous primitives and Christian exceptionalism. Examples among such missionaries of respect, curiosity, and a willingness to learn are few on the ground. The Jesuits in China are the most notable exception" (O'Donnell 2015, 237).

Colony

The preeminent biblical model for the Colony is surely Matthew 28:18–20. Mark's gospel has a similar text in 16:15–16. Setting aside the secondary nature of the Markan text, a comparison between them yields some interesting results. Both begin with a command to go into the world, using the Greek aorist participle πορευθέντες (*poreuthéntes*). The two versions immediately diverge, for Matthew says, "disciple all nations,"[3] while Mark 16:15 emphasizes preaching the Gospel "to every creature" (or to all creation). In addition, whereas Matthew (28:19) includes baptism and teaching in the commands Jesus gives, Mark 16:16 promises that belief and baptism will lead to salvation and warns that not believing will lead to condemnation.

The most common interpretation of the Great Commission sees it as a command to convert the world's population into followers of Jesus. This interpretation, in turn, rests theologically on a conviction of Christianity's superiority to all other religions. Known as proselytizing, this desire sets Christianity apart from most of the world's major religious traditions, whose holy writings or teaching traditions do not carry a similar imperative. Importantly, it seems that Jesus told his disciples *what* to do, but not *how* to do it.

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[2] I use "new members" here in place of the word "convert," which has generated some amount of controversy, especially in recent decades and within so-called "creative access areas."

[3] All biblical translations in this article are the author's own.

Islam also includes a missional imperative, known by the Arabic word *da'wa*, or "an act of declaration of the supremacy of Islam and how it surpassed and replaced previous revelations" (Ibrahim 2018). Two implications seem to flow from this. First, that Christianity and Islam share this characteristic is the likeliest explanation for these two religions having the most adherents worldwide: 2.3 billion and 2.0 billion, respectively (Hackett et al. 2025). Second, Christianity and Islam are the best examples of the Colony model. This remains the case even though one must always remember that apparently similar elements in different religious traditions should not count as evidence of congruence.

I intentionally adopt the word "colony" even though both Christianity and Islam have combined evangelism or *da'wa* with political colonialism to damaging effects. This combination is popularly known as "conversion by the point of a sword," or, in updated parlance, "gun-barrel conversion." Miroslav Volf argued in 2011 that Christians and Muslims worship the same God in different ways. He suggests that, if one grants this premise, a particular implication flows from it: "a joint affirmation that God is a loving God and that God enjoins people to love their neighbors as they love themselves is critical, for it provides a basis to work out a *common code of conduct* as Christians engage in evangelism and Muslims in *da'wa"* (Volf 2011, 211, emphasis original). Volf goes on to suggest three negatives for this code of conduct: Christians and Muslims should avoid coercion (i.e., forced conversions, such as under torture); bribery (i.e., extrinsic rewards vs. intrinsic value); and uneven comparison (i.e., comparing the best of Islam with the worst of Christianity or *vice versa*; Volf 2011, 211–212).

Stated in the simplest possible terms, the Colony's *raison d'etre* is conversion of the "pre-believers," and they use such a term without caring how offensive it may be, or perhaps because it may be offensive. Elsewhere, I argue that this term should be replaced by the solidly biblical "God-fearers," or those who are interested in Judaism (or Christianity or Islam) who have not yet committed to change in religion (Modine 2025). The Colony answers the first fundamental question by going out expressly to convert unbelievers. In terms of Christianity, this resolves the often seen and, in my thinking, ill-conceived idea that Jesus and Paul were at odds concerning the nature of Christianity. According to this line of thinking, Paul, not Jesus, is the originator of Christianity—quite aside from neither of them apparently intending to establish a new religion, at least according to the New Testament. Though disagreements, some of them quite sharp, existed between the earliest generations of Christians, it does not follow that our faith is only Christianity in name when it really should be Paulinity or something ("Did Paul 'Invent' Christianity? : R/AcademicBiblical" 2023; Berding 2019; *Wikipedia* 2025, "Pauline Christianity").

Moreover, the Colony model seeks most directly to "copy" what is found in the homeland or geographical origin point. The officialization of Christianity in the Roman Empire tied the spread of the faith to the spread of "civilization." In recent decades, theory has recognized how large a shadow this tie casts over Christian mission. In other words, a Colony sometimes, in its desire to be connected to the "homeland," ignores local factors too much. For example, the historian Kenneth S. Latourette lamented that the "anemia of the Roman Catholic Church [observable] in Latin America and the Philippines arose from a number of factors. Prominent was the failure to produce an adequate indigenous ministry. Another, fully as potent, was the domination of the Church by the state" (Latourette 1965, 333).

Franchise

In contrast to the Colony model, the Franchise model generally involves new locations set up with some measure of identification with an originating point. This ensures that the Franchise, while not a copy, is reasonably identifiable as part of its community. McDonald's provides an instructive example. McDonald's restaurants throughout the world evince a significant degree of local variation. For example, McDonald's Philippines offers menu items that are very popular locally but unknown in the brand's USA homeland: fried chicken, rice, and spaghetti, among others. However, familiar items such as the trademark golden arches, the red-and-yellow color scheme, the Big Mac, and more cannot be left off the menu for the identification to retain credibility. In terms of evangelism, John Drane used the metaphor of McDonald's to criticize "fast-food spirituality," or the apparent attempt to offer the same thing everywhere, irrespective of the needs of a community: "Previous generations had done a good job of contextualizing the gospel into the culture of their day, but we somehow seemed to have become disconnected from their vision and enthusiasm" (Drane 2001, v).

The identification of the Franchise with the origin need not be controlling, oppressive, or even active. That is, the Franchise could follow a written model, as is the case with what is probably the best contemporary example, Judaism. Judaism's development into its recognizable modern forms came through a series of crises. Preeminent among these were the destructions of the First and Second Temples. The first, in 587–586 BCE, began a change from a religion based on sacrifice in a single legitimate place to one based on prayer and study of traditions, first oral and later written. Though briefly, and partially, reversed after the Babylonian Exile, this change became permanent when the Second Temple met its end in 70 CE. Though identification with the homeland remains on the ideological or idealistic level, Jews do not have anything like the *hajj* pilgrimage, one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

The Franchise has both more extensive and more ambiguous biblical evidence than the Colony. One text from each testament contributes to the definition. First, Genesis 18:22–33 records Abraham's discussion with God over how many righteous people needed to be in Sodom for God not to destroy it. They settled on ten, establishing the biblical precedent for the *minyan*, or the quorum of ten adult Jews[4] "required for certain religious obligations," like prayer (Millgram, n.d.). Jewish communities draw on a common tradition, while generally making a great deal of allowance for local customs, language, dress, etc. Second, the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15 holds prominence, with the consensus reached regarding how much (indeed, how little) Jewish law Gentile converts should follow. This consensus illustrates the principle that, despite local variation, some minimum standard proves the Franchise's connection with the origin.

In contrast to the Colony, the Franchise appears rather less interested in making new members. That is, the Franchise does not by definition engage in active evangelism. Furthermore, it evinces an ambiguous stance toward those who might be attracted to it. Biblical models evidence some diversity. For example, after the return from the Exile, the community rejected the applications of some potential franchisees. Pointedly, Ezra 4 calls these people

[4] In more conservative traditions, the requirement is ten adult men.

"adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" (צרי יהודה ובנימן, *tsarei Yehudah uBenyamin*), an odd designation given what they suggest: "they came to Zerubbabel and the heads of the ancestral houses and said, 'Let us build with you, for we seek your God like you do, and we have been sacrificing to him[5] since way back when the Assyrian King Esarhaddon made us come here" (Ezra 4:2). The Jewish leaders did not permit this Franchise, however. This rejection has been linked to the supposed disagreements between Jews and Samaritans observable in the New Testament, though this has recently been called into question (Chalmers 2020).

In contrast, a Franchise application earlier in the overarching narrative met with the approval of the biblical editors. Second Kings 5 relates the healing of Na'aman, the Aramean general cured of a skin disease—not necessarily leprosy, as Shurpin argues (Shurpin, n.d.)—by dipping himself in the Jordan River. According to the story, Na'aman devoted himself to Yhwh, asking for a load of soil from Judah so that he could maintain the connection between Yhwh and the land (or dirt; v 17). Given Na'aman's devotion, the next verse is interesting. Speaking to the man of God (Elisha), he said, "May Yhwh simply forgive your servant for this small matter: when my boss goes into the house of Rimmon [an Aramaean deity] to worship there, leaning on my arm for support, and your servant pretends to bow in the house of Rimmon, may Yhwh grant me this small indulgence" (v 18). Elisha responded succinctly, and apparently positively, "Go in peace."

For the present purposes, the story asks an important question: how much change is necessary in one's life when one makes a change in religion? Na'aman's request to keep up appearances as a follower of Rimmon may perhaps be echoed in a proposal from missiological anthropologist Darrell Whiteman:

> 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 far more than we do, to lead others in following Jesus in ways that are appropriate for their cultural contexts, but different from ours (Whiteman 2023, 175).

Whiteman goes on to argue for an important distinction, which may be lost on the unsuspecting. He affirms that becoming a follower of Jesus is indispensable: "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" (Whiteman 2023, 175).

As it happens, the New Testament also has both disapproved and approved Franchises. Like the Old Testament examples, the disapproval comes later in the canon than the approval. Third John 1–7 suggests that the nascent Christian community needed to support each other and not seek help from outside. Specifically interesting are vv 5–7: "Beloved, whatever you do for the community, do it faithfully, even though you do not know them well. They have testified about your love before the church. You will do well, having sent them on in a manner worthy of

[5] A textual error reads: "We have not been sacrificing."

God. For the sake of the Name they went on, *accepting no help from the Gentiles*" (emphasis added). Translations are divided on this verse. The NRSV has "non-believers" here, an odd choice. Better, but still pejorative, is "pagans" (NET, NIV2011). The KJV, NASB, and the Tagalog *ang Biblia* accurately say "Gentiles." Whatever the term, the refusal of the others' help reflects Ezra 4.

The book of Acts, by contrast, is filled with Franchise approvals: the pilgrims on Pentecost (Acts 2); the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8); Cornelius and his household (Acts 10); the Philippian jailer (Acts 16); and the Ephesians (Acts 19). Notably, Acts also has a revoked Franchise: Simon the magician, who first "believed" (the name Christian had not yet been invented; see Acts 11:36), but later wanted to buy the power of the Holy Spirit: "But Peter said to him, 'Bury your silver in your own grave, since you thought you could buy God's gift! You have no part or share in this, since your heart is not right with God" (Acts 8:19–20). Simon's story ends on an ambiguous note, redemption still possible but not yet accomplished.

Outpost

I argued above that Christianity's preferred model seems to be the Colony. As noted above, James O'Donnell seems to agree, but Nelson Glueck seems to disagree. However, as further noted above, communities that endure long, without fail, develop some. The development of Christian monasticism, especially hermetic monasticism, illustrates Outpost thinking. One may further understand the Outpost model as a diaspora population setting up what is familiar from the old country. For the most part, Outpost religionists are not interested in making converts. Like the Franchise, the Outpost is not interested in making converts in the first instance. Unlike the Franchise, the Outpost probably would turn away interested persons, though in some of the biblical models appearing below, it apparently does win converts through its dedication to the old country norms.

Recalling the diffidence expressed in the introduction, Buddhism seems a good example of an Outpost religion. Opinions seem to vary among Buddhists about whether their faith needs communities to thrive. The term *sangha*, originally denoting only a community of Buddhist monks or nuns, now refers to a Buddhist community of all four classes of people—monks, nuns, lay women, lay men (Domyo 2017). Another writer suggested: "As for community…we mustn't be shortsighted in our definition of community. Just because there isn't anyone in your particular geographical area doesn't mean that there aren't countless beings all over the world who are practicing at this very moment" (Buddhadharma, n.d.)

Perhaps the most striking recent demonstration of Buddhism's Outpost orientation is the so-called "Bernike Buddha." The city of Bernike apparently carried on trade with India and other areas through its port on the Red Sea, being the southernmost port in Roman-era Egypt. Jo Marchant describes it as "a crucial entry point for mind-boggling riches brought across the sea from eastern Africa, southern Arabia, India and beyond" (Marchant 2024). Archaeologists unearthed parts of an approximately 60 centimeter (2 foot) tall Buddha statue during excavations accomplished in 2018 and 2022. This find may potentially revolutionize understanding of trade in the Roman period, as it was "the first ever found anywhere in the ancient Western world (Marchant 2024). More importantly for the present project, stylistic features suggest that the

statue may not have been imported from India but instead was made in Egypt, in the more famous Mediterranean port city of Alexandria (Parker 2023).

The most important biblical exponents of the Outpost model fit into the literary motif of the "Wise Courtier" (See, for example, Ron 2011). The Hebrew Bible has several examples. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers but rose to a prominent position in Egypt and contributed to saving even his tormentors' lives when famine struck the area. Daniel remained faithful to his God even in the face of enormous pressure to conform to the religious structures of Babylon—a cipher for the Seleucid Empire in the second century BCE (esp. Daniel chs. 1; 5; 6). By contrast, Esther hid her Jewish identity in Persia until an opportune time to reveal it, resulting in saving her people from destruction borne out of personal envy. Though, at least in Daniel, seeing the faithfulness of the Jews led the authorities to swear a kind of allegiance to Yhwh, compared with the others, the Outpost is generally less interested in converts than the Franchise and the Colony.

Implications for Evangelism in 2026 CE and Beyond

I have argued that while one or another of the models seems to rise to prominence in different religious traditions, part of a community's vibrancy is its ability to embrace a certain amount of diversity. This diversity becomes noticeable when one sees all three models appearing to different degrees within a particular religious community. To take Christianity as an example, Colony certainly takes the preeminent position. However, Christianity also exhibits both the Franchise and Outpost models. Christian Franchises appear even as early as the New Testament, as I have demonstrated. Christian Outposts have also operated for many centuries, not just in monasticism, as noted in the previous section, but also in intentionally isolated communities such as the Amish. Donald Kraybill notes that the Amish have been quite successful in maintaining their distinctiveness against the onslaught of modernity. He writes: "What is remarkable…is that the Amish have been able to preserve…common badges of separation without a centralized national structure to link the more than 900 congregations across more than 230 different geographic settlements in North America" (Kraybill 1994, 4).

What are the implications for Christianity in its wildly diverse manifestations? This question shows its importance, especially because this diversity includes even those who are not consciously involved in, or perhaps even actively opposed to, making converts. For that matter, even in actively evangelistic communities, not everyone actively devotes herself to evangelism. For example, my wife and I have been commissioned as Global Missionaries for the Church of the Nazarene, serving the Asia-Pacific Region. However, I am a seminary professor, and she is dean of administration. We do not actively engage in evangelism *per se,* but instead, contribute to the training of others who do so, more often with a Franchise orientation as opposed to a Colony. That our students should adopt a hybrid Franchise/Colony mindset is especially true in so-called "creative access areas," where outright Christian proselytization is against the law. It will not do to copy old ways of doing things or to fight with other Christians, because the world has changed.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that both the Bible and modern religions display three general models of religious spread. I have called these Colony, Franchise, and Outpost. The differences between them have mainly to do with the relationship of new communities to the origin point and the stance of the new communities toward converts. The Colony most directly copies what prevailed in the homeland and most actively seeks converts. The Franchise allows a certain amount of diversity while still maintaining minimum standards of identification, and neither actively seeks nor refuses new converts. The Outpost seeks to establish a bare minimum of the origin's characteristics and does not seek new converts at all. Vibrant religious traditions exhibit some amount of diversity as to their models of spread, even if one of them might be more prominent, as is the case with Christianity and the Colony model, whose origins are put into the very mouth of the Savior.

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