

## Article

# Muslim–Christian Dialogues: The Dialogical Context of the Chinese Muslims and Missionaries from the West for the Well-Being of Fostering Healthy Relations

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## Abstract

The missionaries' agendas to meet South Asian had brutal effects on Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are pieces that have critiqued the roles of missionaries, dismantling the agendas of Western Christianity, introducing the South to Western Jesus. Despite this misconceived mission of some of the missionaries, this article argues for the role of missionaries in a positive way, on the one hand, discussing their role in Asia. Eastern Christianity and Chinese Muslims of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries met similar challenges; however, the efforts of missionaries such as George K. Harris (1887–1962) in the twentieth century played an important role in contextualizing literary content for the needs of Chinese Muslims. On the other hand, the role of Isaac Mason (1870–1939) in evangelizing Chinese Muslims and producing literary works promoting social welfare activities for the development of Chinese Muslims is also discussed. This article challenges theological discourses that emphasize the notion of Asian Christianity or Western Christianity of Christendom, as this confines missiological discourse to fostering the world's well-being. Rather than approaching the cases of George K. Harris and Isaac Mason as isolated studies, this study approaches the cases of both missionaries as analytical missiological discourse, not coerced for the local community but approached for the broader perspectives engaging with the Muslim community. Therefore, this study reflects not only the works of these missionaries but also their efforts in establishing relations for the prosperity and dignity of the well-being of the Chinese nation, especially the Muslim community in China. It also argues that the imagery of Western Christianity, through the role of missionaries in China, fosters dialogical relations between Chinese Muslims and Christians for the well-being of the Chinese nation.

**Keywords:** dialogue; Christians; Muslims; relationship; contextualization; literary work



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## 1. Introduction: Historical, Modern, and Contemporary Overview of Christianity and Islam in China

Islam has a strong bond with Christianity and Judaism. Academia from the West has often overlooked this relationship, labeling it as apologetics and as a debating contest with Christianity. This relational dimension of Christianity and Islam is insufficiently appreciated in Western scholarship because of its narrow scope; Western academics overlook it. In China, Christianity and Islam have remarkable and profound histories, with insights from historical, modern, and contemporary perspectives. Historically, China has been one of the countries in which the expansion of Christianity occurred in different phases. The Tang dynasty in the seventh century is regarded as marking the first arrival of Christianity

in China. This dynasty was one of the wealthiest, ruled by the strongest ruler of that time, Emperor Taizong (629–649 AD). Tang Emperor Taizong, born Li Shimin, became Emperor in 626 after a palace rebellion that executed his two brothers. Also, he pushed his father, the Tang Dynasty's founder, to abdicate. Taizong was portrayed in poetry and instructions about rulership as an open and diligent ruler who wanted to correct past mistakes and took officials' and the public's complaints seriously. He left two governance testaments at the beginning and end of his 23-year reign. In his *Golden Mirror (Jin jing)* from 628, he presented a brief manifesto on maintaining the largest empire he and his father had founded. A *Model for an Emperor (Di fan)* from 648 was a more extensive best-practices program (De Weerd 2023, p. 610). Christianity was introduced to China in 635 by Alopen, a Christian monk of the Church of the East. He was welcomed in China as a Persian missionary (Zhuo 2019, p. 203). The Emperor was happy with the missionary; he personally studied the scriptures and comprehended their relevance and veracity, and he in particular organized their preaching and dissemination (Egiguren Iraola 2007, p. 151). In light of the aforementioned, the Tang dynasty is celebrated for its welcoming reception of outsiders, including Arabs, Persians, and Syrians, to the degree that its capital, Chang'an (now Xi'an), evolved into an "international meeting place" along the Silk Road (Feng 2026, p. 54). Thus, on the one hand, knowledge of Christianity was foreign to the Chinese, despite the influx of Western foreigners. A prince from the Sasanian court allegedly sought asylum in China when Persia was invaded by the Arabs in the mid-7th century. Later, even the rulers of the Abbasid Empire, with Baghdad as its capital, where the Patriarch resided, engaged in diplomatic relations with China. A large population of non-Chinese individuals—including diplomats, merchants, tradesmen, and foreign priests and monks—lived in the capital cities such as Loyang and Chang-an. On the other hand, the Emperor's relationship with the Muslims was also remarkable. The Emperor was very kind to the Muslim community; he even allowed them to marry Chinese women and build mosques (Benite 2020, p. 206). Not only the Tang Dynasty but also the Song Dynasty was open to Muslims, and international trade with the Arab Empire was encouraged during these two eras. In other words, the Chinese Muslim community has roots in different waves of Islamic immigration and marriage to non-Muslim Chinese. Frankel (2008) observes that people from this group are officially recognized by the Communist government as a minority nationality in the People's Republic. Frankel further observes that they are called *Hui* and have a wide range of religious practices and ways of integrating into Han Chinese culture. Thus, the story of how different groups of people later came to be known as *Hui* is the story of how Islamic culture and faith became part of everyday life in China. This is how Islam in China changed into Chinese Islam (Frankel 2008, p. 425). *Han Kitab* represents the authentic form of Islam. The *Kitab* was the classical text of the holy Quran, and *Han Kitab*, the holy book translated into Chinese form (Thum 2025, p. 191), was the richest source of Muslims' understanding of Islam and its compatibility with the Chinese empire (Y. L. E. Lee 2019, p. 244). Islam among the *Hui* laid its strong foundation on Shari'a law, an organized system for maintaining its socio-political order, and Sufism as a path to spiritual progression (Y. L. E. Lee 2019, pp. 240, 251).

The treatment of the governors of Muslims was excellent, with great tolerance and love, and they referred to Muslims as foreign guests (*fanke*, where *fan* means foreign and *ke* means guests). Due to such politeness and respect, some Muslims preferred to stay in China for several years, but some never returned to their native lands. Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun Shui affirm that Muslims were free to build their schools and religious institutions and to implement their own legal systems. Along with these privileges, they held high positions in China during these dynasties. Those who were born to mixed marriages were called native-born foreigners (*tusheng*) and were allowed to participate in political roles.

To sum up, these Muslim men were treated peacefully, and their existence in China was peaceful as peaceful settlers under the diverse policy situation (Jaschok and Shui 2013, pp. 70–73).

A remarkable degree of tolerance toward other religions was accompanied by a great openness to foreigners during the early Tang period. However, this tolerance eventually gave way to proscriptions, persecutions, and the confiscation of churches and monasteries in the middle of the 9th century, specifically in 845 AD, when a decree was issued to secularize foreign religious authorities. Prior to this time period, numerous Western religions, including Christianity, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam, were prevalent in the major towns. The dialogical contributions were rich and diverse, fostering well-being. As mentioned above, these religions were from traditions not native to the area (Gilman and Klimkeit 2013, p. 268).

Contemporary China is home to hundreds of millions of religious adherents, encompassing most major world faiths, numerous new religious movements (e.g., Bahá'ís and Mormons), and a multitude of indigenous deities (such as the Monkey God and Mazu) worshipped by local communities (Chan and Lang 2016, p. 82). Despite its diverse population of millions of religious believers, China is not portrayed positively in the Western world. This is because, on the one hand, Western literature presented China as a land of idolatrous, backward, and uncivilized people (A. C. C. Lee 2023, p. 512). Not only this, but also in Western literature, Western readers imagine the picture of orientalism, especially China, as corruptible, politically repressed, under a party-controlled system, unjust, and with a total absence of freedom of speech. Such narrowness in Western literature misperceives and misinterprets the Chinese regime as authoritarian and presents an unfaithful representation of China in the Anglophone world (Qi 2022, pp. 34–35). On the one hand, the influence of Western Christianity is often perceived negatively in China; this portrays the negative image of Christianity in the sight of the Chinese and, consequently, due to the past role of missionaries in China. On the other hand, China restricted missionaries, resulting in a negative view of China in the Western world (Wang and Chu 2025, p. 37). However, amid these controversial issues, China's growing concern and an increasingly expansive international arena will lead to dynamic, evolving, and fruitful results for religious activities in China (Chan and Lang 2016, p. 96). This essay particularly refers to the presence of Muslims and Christians in China; the issue that scholars (in the subsequent sections) have already considered is not only to reveal the role of China from dynamic, evolving, and vast viewpoints but also to deconstruct the misperception of some Asian scholars to understand the role of relationality in theology. The place is not confined to Asia alone; it is also not a place to critique missionaries overall but to foster the Muslim–Christian relationship. As a result, this article challenges theological discourses that emphasize the notion of Asian Christianity or Western Christianity of Christendom as a missiological discourse. This piece argues that such misconstrued missiological discourse does not foster the world's well-being. Also, rather than treating the cases of George K. Harris and Isaac Mason as isolated studies, this essay frames both missionaries' cases as analytical missiological discourse, which is not coerced for the local community but for broader perspectives engaging with the Muslim community. This essay contends that “analytical missiological discourse” is not confined to one's culture, identity, and region but also impacts the world by fostering relationships with other religions and promoting global well-being. Its interdisciplinary approach lies at the heart of this discourse, resonating with the cross-cultural impact of theology across diverse settings.

Therefore, this essay is based, on the one hand, on a positive discussion of the role of missionaries and, on the other, on a discussion of their role in Eastern Christianity, especially among Chinese Muslims in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The efforts of George

K. Harris (1887–1962), who played an important role in contextualizing literary content for the needs of the Muslim Chinese, will be discussed in the context of the twentieth century. Second, the role of Isaac Mason (1870–1939) in evangelizing Chinese Muslims and in producing literary works that promote social welfare and support their development will be discussed. The study primarily makes a historical argument about missionary engagement with Chinese Muslims. Further, this historical shift turns to missiological arguments about contextualized evangelism and to much larger claims about healthy relations in the well-being of every religion, regardless of its minority or majority, and well-being in the sense of existence for others. The essay shows that the conciliation approach of both Harris and Mason is well demonstrated among Chinese Muslims to build healthy Muslim–Christian relationships and national harmony.

Lastly, the study’s emphasis reflects not only the works of these missionaries but also their efforts to establish relations for the prosperity and dignity of the Chinese nation, especially the Muslim–Christian community in China. This will also raise the utmost concern that the imagery of Western Christianity about the role of missionaries in China fosters dialogical relations between Chinese Muslims and Christians for the well-being of the Chinese nation and the world.

## 2. Missionaries’ Engagement in Asia: Scholarly Perception Confined to Asian-Ness

Various scholars critique missionary ventures that introduce a Western Jesus to South and East Asia. For instance, Kōsuke Koyama, a Japanese scholar, critiqued the Western missionary journey into Asia through the gun and ointment treatment. By “gun”, Koyama meant the colonial gun and the grabbing of Asia’s culture and identity through Western missionaries in Asia, along with bringing modernization as an ointment. Here, “gun” specifically meant damaging one’s culture and identity in the Asian context, misconstruing the mission of Christianity as exhibiting damaging religious, political, and economic interests through Western hegemony. Ointment refers to the healing of wounds through the introduction of technological advancements in Asia. Both gun and ointment posed serious threats, beginning in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including ballistic missiles, resulting in Western strategies that have left long-lasting scars through the colonial mentality in Asia (Koyama 1999, pp. 35–36). One of the Asian gurus, a Taiwanese theologian, C.S. Song, argued that when Westerners brought Christianity to Asia, Asians perceived Christianity through a Western lens, believing that missionaries had brought enlightenment to Asia. Song emphasized that Western missionaries failed to recognize Asia’s religious diversity; they assumed their Gospel was universal, but unfortunately, they held a second-hand Gospel without realizing Asia had a pluralistic nature. Song affirmed that Asian theologians need to use their third eye, an eye that can see the pain of God’s heart to seek the lost ones in Asia, restoring the identity and Asian-ness of Asia. He highlighted the very important responsibility of an Asian theologian: “Theologians cannot begin to understand God’s pain and love in their search for the lost heart until they also turn their eyes beyond their self-imposed domain of Christianity” (Song 2002, p. xiii). Another theologian from Asia, Aloysius Pieris of Sri Lanka, wrote on the same issue of the genuineness of Asian-ness long before Koyama and Song, arguing that rediscovering Asia’s role and identity in the inalienable society (Pieris 1993, p. 106) is of utmost importance in the theological field. Apart from the above, Asian scholars have myriad ways of deconstructing the theological agendas of missionaries who came to South and East Asia.

In China in particular, scholars have traced these missionaries’ journey in four phases, arguing that these missionaries’ reinvention of China was based on Western ideologies rather than on understanding the Chinese cultural identity rooted in existing religiosity

(Zhang and Zhang 2024, pp. 500–1). Thus, the role of these missionaries in some studies is also critiqued from the eighth century to the nineteenth century, with the argument that they played a negative role in China (Tang 2014, p. 80). Scholars have also critiqued the missionaries' arrival in China in the nineteenth century from a technological perspective, arguing that they came not only to propagate their faith but also to disseminate the power of medical science and education (Yan et al. 2025, p. 2). Some have discussed the nineteenth-century era of missionary encounters with Confucianism, noting conflicting Chinese and Western cultural issues (Hu 2013, pp. 135–36). The studies share commonalities in their approaches to finding what is lost, especially through an Asian lens for restoring Asian identity and Christianity.

However, there are other Asian theologians who have deeply rooted their theological paradigms in their social contexts, not critiquing missionary service but rather finding novelty in Christian teachings.

#### *Holism in Theology: The Dialogical Engagement for the Well-Being of Religions*

The rigid frameworks developed to prioritize cultural, identity, and power dominance have not only misconstrued missiological discourse but they have also constrained theology for one's own benefit. This kind of intuitive theology governs one's affairs while neglecting the needs of others. One example of such rigid or intuitive theologies is already presented in this paper as a revival of Asian-ness. In contrast to these rigid frameworks, analytical missiological theology rejects the notion of Christendom gaining power and prioritizing one's culture and identity. Prioritizing one's culture and identity stagnates the missiological discourse. This holistic aspect in theology not only responds to the challenges of one's culture but also cares for the needs of others, fostering the well-being of the world. This vital image can be found in the dialogical engagement that deconstructs the intuitive theological paradigm.

Despite the literature reviewed being confined to reviving Asian-ness, there are also studies, as discussed above, that appraised the role of missionaries from a technological perspective, bringing cameras and films and helping provide modernist ways for missionary work in the 1920s to 1930s to develop in China, which is an important feature to discuss. Apart from evangelizing the Chinese, these missionaries came to prioritize human needs, introducing the Gospel in a way that works for humanity. This was a sharp contrast to the "no-win situation" (Ho 2021, p. 29), in which early missionaries sought to win souls merely for Christendom (Catholics and Protestants). Choong Chee Pang argues that the Chinese context of Mesopotamian Christianity, from the seventh century through the Catholic missionaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries until the modern age of Protestant missionaries, faced cultural challenges in China. However, in the new age, the new Chinese era has embraced Christianity not because of its unique Chinese culture, indigenized teachings, and contextual literary works by scholars but rather because of Christianity's foreignness. The new Chinese are interested in new things, and Christianity, in its foreignness to the Chinese ethical system embedded in Confucianism, is old from religious and socio-ethical perspectives. They need novelty in their Chinese traditions and cultures from religious and socio-ethical perspectives (Pang 2008, pp. 100–1). This study raised another challenge to the novelty of Chinese cultural identity and integrity. From the literature reviewed, there is no doubt that Asian identity and integrity matter, but Asian-ness is not everything. Whether we limit our studies to restoring Asia's identity and integrity is a question to ponder.

Thus, the point is raised in light of the following: Did every missionary come with the intention of misconstruing God's mission? How far do the misconceived missionaries' agendas influence Chinese Christianity and other religions? Does the Asian-ness of Asia

in theology matter much in rediscovering its identity and the plurality of religions, or are there other specific areas of exploration to focus on, such as the dialogical contributions of Islam and Christianity to fostering relationships from a global perspective? How far was the service of missionaries fruitful in the engagement of the Muslim and Christian communities in South and East Asia? Numerous respectable scholars have also argued from this relational standpoint, especially from South Asia, that Christians and Muslims are the two majority religions in the whole world, and both religions' commitments are for worldly peace with communities existing together through tolerance, respecting one another, helping widows and the needy, cooperating with one another, and facing challenges of the existing world (Channan 2000, p. 23). The sustainability of global peace through mutuality and cooperation is the concern of the dialogical engagement between these two religions. Peace and prosperity start with a specific point in mind in any geographical space, however, with numerous goals and ambitions for the world pursued through action. Since this essay is on the religious harmony of Christian and Muslims in China, the following question arises: Does the Asian-ness of Asia in theology matter much in rediscovering its identity and the plurality of religions, or does accepting the existence of others for mutuality and cooperation matter most to worldly existence? The hermeneutical circle<sup>1</sup> witnessed from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth (Acts 1:8) requires dialogical engagement with existing religions, not doctrinal fights or wars. Before proceeding further, the consistent claim of this essay is that the case studies of George K. Harris and Isaac Mason are approached in light of Christian practice, with a focus on the non-confrontational approach to dialogue with Muslims. This is where the approach of rigid frameworks is deconstructed, as this aligns with the almost traditional approach of gaining power and prioritizing cultures and identities. Therefore, this study claims that these cases are not isolated in the historical sense; rather, it presents them to make past events a living reality in the present context while understanding the missiological discourse. And the subsequent sections discuss the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing on two missionaries, George K. Harris and Isaac Mason, in China.

### 3. From Polemic to Conciliation: George K. Harris, Isaac Mason, and Christian Missionary Literature Among Chinese Muslims

The literary efforts of George K. Harris and Isaac Mason, through their evangelism and understanding of cultural and contextual needs, made a remarkable contribution to missionary work in China. Before elaborating further, one may ask, how did Harris and Mason adapt Christian missionary literature for Chinese Muslim audiences, and how did Chinese Muslims respond? To elaborate, one needs to understand that these missionaries were aware not only of the challenges of the past but also of the cultural and linguistic barriers; however, their interest in literature and languages led them to make outstanding efforts in their service as missionaries. Although Harris and Mason did not enter an empty field, there were rich traditions of Han Kitab, Sufism, and Muslim publishing platforms. To put it another way, they entered a world already thick with Islamic learning. However, despite such rich traditions, the Muslim community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was influenced by Western ideas in civil law, economics, government, international affairs, and politics, which were adopted as modern tools; this influence was not confined to scholars but extended to leaders as well. With this spirit of learning, Imam Hu Songshan, a prominent leader, vigorously advocated for the instruction of Chinese, contemporary themes, and patriotism into Muslim educational institutions (Mao 2011, pp. 152–53).

One of the concerns associated with highlighting their services is that they were not merely evangelizing Christianity but also learning about Islam for societal benefits

and welfare. This is how the literary approaches of both missionaries were understood: not only as fostering a relationship but also as contributing to national harmony and to understanding the very existence of Christianity, not to condemn or hate, but for peaceful coexistence. For instance, on the one hand, Harris' learning Islam as a student made his services tremendous in the view of Islam (Bradshaw 1965, p. 137), a literary method with a non-controversial approach. On the other hand, Isaac Mason's conciliatory approach provided Muslim Chinese with literature in the Chinese context, aiming to foster Muslim–Christian relationships (Liu 2022, p. 361).

### 3.1. George K. Harris (1887–1962): A Literary Method with a Non-Controversial Approach

George Kaufelt Harris (1887–1962), an American missionary born in Winona, Minnesota, spent ten successive years in Sining and Kansu (Behn 2006, p. 31). Harris, upon completing his studies at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, became affiliated with the China Inland Mission in 1916 and was assigned to the northwestern, predominantly Muslim region of Xining. In 1917, Samuel Zwemer traveled to China to promote missionary efforts among Chinese Muslims. Consequent to Zwemer's visit, Harris emerged as one of the few missionaries in China to cultivate an interest in Islam and in the evangelization of Muslims (Bennett 1998, pp. 280–81). Harris' grasp of Muslim literature was one of his contributions to the development of Arabic literature in China. He was a learned man, and one of his efforts to develop a literary atmosphere among Muslims in China came from an interest in learning about others' cultures and languages.

Harris joined China Inland Mission (CIM) in 1916. He was a pioneer worker who persevered despite great adversity but refrained from pursuing fruitless techniques in the mission (Ma 2021). In other words, his innovative strategies in the Muslim context were not based on the traditional norms of past Protestant missionaries treating adherents to other religions as half-barbarians and devils. Even the Protestant missionaries perceived the translation of the Bible as culturally and theologically alien to other cultures (Lai 2019, p. 38). Despite these persistent challenges in China, Harris' literary contribution in Arabic innovatively incorporated Arabic calligraphy into evangelistic materials, making a significant impact on his missionary work. His examination of the specialized *Hui* language (*huihua*) laid the groundwork for a contextualized *Hui* translation of the Bible into Chinese over fifty years later. Nevertheless, despite Harris' substantial contributions to mission strategy, his most profound legacy was his enduring suffering (Ma 2021). Harris' strategy in presenting the profound truths of scriptures in ways that appealed to Muslims due to the artistic mastery of Arabic letters was remarkable in contextualizing the literary pieces.

The most significant book, *Torch for Islam: a biography of George K. Harris, missionary to Muslims*, by Malcolm R. Bradshaw (Bradshaw 1965), is a valuable resource for understanding Harris' literary work. Bradshaw recalls the missionary journey of Harris, recognizing the novelty of literary work developed in China. He observes that one of his most renowned designs was the first formally printed calendar, which displayed the Chinese, Muslim, and Western date systems concurrently. He further notes that in the time of Harris in the twentieth century, Muslims were highly beneficial and prominently displayed Scriptural truths on the walls of Muslim residences and establishments. In Islam, worldwide, fine art is not represented by pictures of individuals or natural landscapes, which, for Muslims, verge on idolatry; rather, the pinnacle of art is reflected in exquisitely crafted Arabic calligraphy. And Harris employed the technique of Arabic calligraphy, which was considered a valuable art form in the sight of Muslims (Bradshaw 1965, p. 61). Harris' appropriation of delivering work according to China's cultural roots, including the Gospel, for the needs of the Muslim community in China (Bennett 1998, p. 281) prepared tremendous ground to foster Christian and Muslim relationships. To sum up, on the one hand, the literary contribution of Harris

left a valuable impact on Muslim readers due to the rejection of polemics, debates, and apologetics. On the other hand, his heart for literary development, aligned with the cultural and contextual needs of Muslims in Sining, China, proved a successful approach for the Muslim community. To put it in other words, he did not convert Muslims as missionaries in the past did to confront other religions; rather, his richly engaged literary work laid a solid ground for future missionaries through the literary techniques in the manual he published, *How to Lead Moslems to Christ* (Harris 1946), which made a significant contribution in China towards understanding Muslims not as enemies but as friends.

Thus, in response to the artistic work and friendly evangelization that engaged Muslims in China, a literature committee was established, and its members began deliberations on the types of tracts that might resonate with them. Harris advised that the initial three tracts should include carefully selected Scriptural narratives of various miracles performed by Christ, specifically recommending the accounts of the man born blind, the healing of lepers, and the resuscitation of the dead, all of which are referenced in the Quran. The infant Jesus appears to have declared, “I will restore sight to the blind, cleanse lepers, and resurrect dead people (Qur’an, Surah Al-Mā’idah 5:110).” Harris incorporated a portion of this Koranic verse in Arabic on the cover of his pamphlets, confident that the caption would promptly attract Muslim readers’ attention (p. 124). Thus, in his literary technique, he incorporated truths from the Quran to present the reality of Christianity through the truths mentioned in the Bible.

### 3.2. Isaac Mason (1870–1939): A Literary Method Towards a Conciliatory Approach

Another name that appeared in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was Isaac Mason (1870–1939). He was an expert not only in Arabic but also in the Chinese language (Israeli 2018, p. 79). During the Republican Era, Christian missionaries recognized that Hui Chinese Muslim intellectuals contested and critiqued the Chinese-language Christian literature, prompting the missionaries to continually adapt their methods to strengthen ties with Chinese Muslims. During this period of his missionary services in China, Mason, referred to as “the apostle to the Moslems in China,” explicitly endorsed a missionary strategy of textual “conciliation,” arguing for the end of apologetics and confrontational criticism in favor of more moderate approaches (Liu 2022, p. 364). In other words, Mason’s goal was to spread the Christian understanding of Islam and to eliminate the content of hatred and apologetically developed literature that had no connection with being relational to the Muslim community. Thus, the strategic understanding of the conciliatory approach towards understanding one another was the way for Mason to make Muslim friends. One of the classic books on Mason’s understanding of Islam, *The Mohammedans of China* (Mason 1922), was an extensive work by him in the field. He wrote,

It is a simple matter for anyone to read about Mohammedanism in the excellent books available in English; but for our present purpose of learning more of this religion as it is found in China, it will be of interest to mention some things contained in Chinese works, written by Chinese Moslems. The conception of God, as to His Unity and His attributes, is much the same as in the Jewish or Christian faiths. No single article of faith is more insisted upon by the Moslem than that God is One and only One. . . He is without peer or mate, the Only One most honorable. He is not restricted to certain religions; there are no traces of His form. He cannot be said to be above or below, to be near or distant. He is without likeness, and there is nothing to which he can be compared. (Mason 1922, pp. 10–11)

Despite this clarification, one may ask whether Mason’s writings remained evangelistic and apologetic or were shaped by Christian judgments about Islam. To respond to this, yes,

Mason's work was evangelistic, shaped by Christian judgment about Islam, and tended to end the use of apologetics, resulting in the establishment of the platform for building peaceful relations with Muslims in China (Liu 2022, p. 364). The way Mason responded to the inaccuracies of knowing Christianity and Islam, particularly the doctrinal similarities to prophets, almsgiving, and fasting (Mason 1922, pp. 15–16), was not argumentative but was used to foster a dialogical relationship. Thus, Mason's way of removing historical inaccuracies and presenting commonalities to improve the relationship was a literary approach for fostering dialogical relationships.

It is unfortunate that a few scholars, such as Stuart Vogel, critically view the conciliatory approach of Mason deconstructing his friendly perception towards Muslims, arguing that in his book, Mason "reached a negative conclusion about the Muslim community in China" (Vogel 2018, p. 66), whereas in Mason's book, no such negative perception is made. Rather, his approach was to understand the diverse sects in the Muslim community. As already stated above, the coined framework of "analytical missiological discourse" is not confined to prioritizing one's culture, identity, and region but also impacts the world by fostering relationships with other religions and promoting global well-being. Its interdisciplinary approach lies at the heart of this discourse, which resonates with the cross-cultural impact of theology in diverse settings. The endeavors of numerous British missionary societies were intertwined with what scholars refer to as "imperial idealism" or "imperial theology"; specifically, overseas missions were perceived as a demonstration of Britain's moral and divine duty, rooted in the providential endowment of colonial governance. Whereas analytical missiological theology rejects the notion of Christendom, it also rejects the elements of gaining power and prioritizing one's culture and identity. This is because prioritizing one's culture and identity stagnates the missiological discourse. The holistic aspect of theology not only responds to the challenges of one's culture but also cares for the needs of others, fostering the well-being of the world. This vital image could be found in the dialogical engagement that deconstructs the intuitive theological paradigm.

On the one hand, it is very unfortunate that during the nineteenth century, missionary publications disseminated knowledge about the non-European world to diverse audiences in imperial cities, in nations uninvolved in imperialism, and to individuals at mission stations and in non-European territories. The information presented was redacted and modified to influence audiences and in accordance with political standards. The delegates of the Liverpool missionary conference in 1860 were aware of the significance of missionary periodicals as a propaganda tool. So, the articles in this forum, published a century and a half after the conference, demonstrate the continued significance of missionary periodicals for understanding the contribution of religious organizations to Western hegemonic ideals and to the Western understanding of the self (Jensz and Acke 2013, pp. 369–73). This was a common tool that some Westerners used to influence people in Asia through Western techniques and moderations.

On the other hand, one common practice of missionaries was to compare the distribution of literature, criticizing and polemically engaging with other religions. Despite these past challenges, a similar approach was adopted in the twentieth century, introducing a conventional, confrontational method that relied on established Western academic texts to inform their understanding of Islam. They criticized Islam while praising Christianity through comparative religious analysis, asserting the intrinsic superiority of Christianity and deeming Islam a "distorted" faith that impeded the progress of Muslim society (Liu 2022, p. 365). However, Mason's understanding of the work of Chinese Muslims and his study of the apologetic literature, which he affirmed, could not bring fruitful results. Mason's welfare work for the Chinese Muslims and his approach of refuting Christianity's criticism of Islam resulted in his membership in the Society of Friends, which promoted

religious tolerance as well as a conciliatory approach for the well-being of the religions (Liu 2022, p. 372). Mason was also a member of the “Royal Asiatic Society and Secretary of the China branch” (Zwemer 1929, p. 220). These were the steps that Mason took towards Chinese Muslims, rejecting the polemical nature of dissemination that only propagates oneself, denouncing the claim that other believers are not fit in the sight of God, and advocating tolerance and nonaggressive behaviors towards other religions.

#### **4. Unity in Reconciled Diversity Among Pluralism: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities to Foster Relationships**

Since this essay focuses on the religious harmony between Christians and Muslims in China, a question arises again. Does the Asian-ness of Asia in theology matter much in rediscovering its identity and the diversity of religions, or is accepting the existence of others for mutual understanding and cooperation more important for worldly existence? The hermeneutical circle, i.e., witnessing from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth, requires dialogical engagement with existing religions rather than doctrinal conflict or war. As noted above, the literary efforts of Harris and Mason, through their evangelism and understanding of cultural and contextual needs, demonstrate a notable missionary contribution in China.

As a result, at first, Harris and Mason developed less confrontational and more culturally sensitive missionary literature, and their work remained primarily missionary and evangelistic. This evangelistic approach does not mean a contextual evangelistic approach; rather, this study shifts the historical observation into claims about modern interreligious dialogue, national harmony, global peace, or the well-being of the Chinese nation, within the analytic missiological discourse, towards a transformative dialogue from exclusive to inclusive. Second, the analytic missiological discourse, as God’s holistic mission for the world, does not believe in Western hegemony or Asian-ness as the core objective of God’s mission but focuses on a non-confrontational approach to dialogue with Muslims and other religions for the well-being of the world. Third, this refutes the purpose of a rigid shift to reviving Asian-ness or gaining Western hegemony alone. Rather, this shifts it towards God’s purpose of the well-being of the world, fostering relationships with the entire universe, including humans and non-humans.

As mentioned above, these missionaries were not only aware of the challenges posed by previous missionaries regarding Western hegemony but also consciously ignored the cultural and linguistic barriers. And despite these difficult circumstances, these missionaries’ interest in literature and languages led them to make a significant shift in serving God’s mission, deconstructing the traditional approach of Westernization. One of the reasons for emphasizing their contributions was that they were not solely focused on evangelizing Christianity but also keen on learning about Islam to benefit society and welfare activities. Harris’ study of Islam enhanced his service in the eyes of Muslims. Mason’s strategy of reconciliation involves providing Muslim Chinese with literature tailored to the Chinese context, aiming to foster better Muslim–Christian relationships. Fourth, Mason’s holism in theology not only responded to the challenges of Chinese culture but also demonstrated care for the needs of others, fostering the well-being of the world.

Misconceptions about the majority of religions in the West and Asia, stemming from the power structure, remained the dominant ideology for centuries. The conflict between Catholic and Protestant missionaries for their own gain had caused too much damage. The holy wars and the Crusades are the worst episodes of the Middle Ages. The conservative approaches of Christendom and the Post-Constantine era had a brutal effect on Christianity, especially where Christianity was a minority. The traditional models of underestimating the minority not only persecute minorities but also undervalue their contribution to the country.

The ideology of dominance is still prevalent, and this aggressive approach of subordinating people as slaves was not only common in Africa but is still common in modern forms of slavery, such as feudalism, class systems, excessive wealth gain, and nepotism.

These power-structure ideologies ignored the power of unity in diversity among pluralistic subjects. The collectivistic agency of the different religions in the West and the East, despite their minority status, is not a weakness but a strength of the country. From a historical point of view, the power of ethno-religion was a remarkable contribution in Romania, Serbia, and Poland in the early twentieth century (Martin 2016, p. 103). Solidarity with humanity is made difficult when one prioritizes individualistic concerns rather than collective concerns. As discussed above, the majority of missionaries who came with other purposes, rather than collectivistic ones, banned the entry of Christianity into different regions and countries. There are countries that still consider Christianity a Western influence. This is not because they have international links but because of misconceived missionary policies. This has a huge impact on Christianity, from the religions' and nations' points of view, so those religions and countries that only tried to work for their own favor not only opposed the people of the particular country but also opposed the world.

To sum up the above, this essay argues that engagement in Muslim–Christian relations requires a global perspective, not the pursuit of particular aims, but rather the overall concerns of humanity. Although, as indicated in the study above, it does have an initiating point, and in this study, it has China to foster this relationship, it is not confined to China alone; rather, the hermeneutical circle of this conception expands beyond borders. However, concerns arise: How does Christianity hold this concern in mind alongside the overall concern for the well-being of all humanity? How does Islam refute the past conflicts of missionaries and contribute to the renewal of humanity's overall concern? Last but not least, the sustainability of global peace through mutuality and cooperation is the concern of the dialogical engagement between these two religions. Peace and prosperity start with a specific point in any geographical space and continually expand, with numerous goals and ambitions for the world's well-being pursued through proper action in love.

## 5. Conclusions

The sustainability of global peace, on the one hand, through mutuality and cooperation, is the concern of the dialogical engagement between Christianity and Islam. On the other hand, peace and prosperity start with a specific point in mind in any geographical space, pursued through numerous goals and ambitions for the world. The essay consistently argued that the case studies of Harris and Mason are examined in light of Christian practice, with a focus on the non-confrontational approach of dialogue with Muslims. This is where rigid frameworks are dismantled, as they align with the traditional approach of gaining power and prioritizing their cultures and identities. Thus, this study contended that these cases are not isolated in a historical sense; rather, it presents them to make past events a living reality in the present context within the missiological discourse.

This essay addressed misconceptions about the majority of religions in the West and Asia, rooted in the power structure that remained the dominant ideology for centuries. Thus, Harris' literary contributions left a valuable impact on Muslim readers by rejecting polemics, debates, and apologetics. On the other hand, his heart for literary development, according to the cultural and contextual needs of Muslims in Sining, China, embodied the successive method of working for the Muslim community. Harris did not, as past missionaries did, confront other religions before the conversion of Muslims. Rather, his richly engaged literary work laid a solid groundwork for future missionaries, who made a significant contribution to China's understanding of Islam, not as an enemy but as a friend. Along similar lines, Mason understood the work of Chinese Muslims, along with

his study of apologetic literature, which he affirmed could not yield fruitful results because of missionaries' limited development of comparative literature for Islam. His approach to refuting criticism of such Christianity directed toward Islam led him to join the Society of Friends, which promoted religious tolerance and a conciliatory approach to the well-being of adherents to religions. These were Mason's steps toward Chinese Muslims, rejecting the polemical nature of dissemination that only propagates oneself, denouncing the idea that other believers are not fit in the sight of God, and advocating tolerance and nonaggressive behavior toward other religions.

Therefore, this essay argued that engagement in Muslim–Christian relationships requires global concerns, not the pursuit of particular purposes, but rather the overall concerns of humanity.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> There are different scholarly conceptions of the term “hermeneutical circle”. For instance, Yang Huilin believes that the term dates back to ancient times (Yang 2014, p. 151). Some relate this term to Western traditions, connecting it with the biblical exegesis of Greco-Roman classics and emphasizing closeness to understanding, canonization, adequacy, and the validity of the interpretation of the Bible. Some relate this term to the German theologian of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Friedrich Schleiermacher (Zhang 2018, p. 118). In any case, this study introduces the term in the conception of an Indian theologian, Michael Amaladoss, who originated the inclusive-pluralism paradigm, emphasizing the horizon of faith in a dialogical way with other faiths; thus, he refutes such praxis as a scientific and rational approach. He therefore approaches the hermeneutical circle as an approach that begins at the local, national, and international levels (Amaladoss 1993, pp. 87–88). The importance of context is that the significance of biblical text disclosed in one context is not confined to one's possession or limited to one context; its significance extends from one context to another and around the world.

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